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Remembering a master woodcarver

By Shukor Rahman

SHUKOR RAHMAN remembers Nik Rashiddin Nik Hussein, one of Malaysia's foremost traditional woodcarvers.

NORHAIZA Noordin, one of Malaysia's top traditional woodcarvers, wears a contented look these days. Despite the odds, he has fulfilled his dream of establishing a museum in Kampung Raja, Besut, after a delay of several years.

But if Norhaiza, or Ja as he is known to those close to him, is a trifle sad it is because his mentor and friend Nik Rashiddin Nik Hussein, or Nik Din, did not live to see the museum's completion.

Ja had planned the museum since his bachelor days. Today, at 41, he is married to Cik Rohayati and the couple has two children - a two-year-old boy named Mohamad Osman and a nine-month-old girl, Rabiatal Adawiah.

His fine collection of antiques and traditional Malay woodcarvings will be displayed in the gallery.

"I am also sad that Nik Din did not live to see the 'Spirit of Wood' exhibition - mainly featuring his works - which was held at the British Museum for two months beginning in January," he said. The exhibition was also a huge success in Singapore and will go on tour throughout Malaysia.

Ja attributed his success as a traditional Malay woodcarver to his long friendship with Nik Din. "He taught me a lot. Even on our trips to Patani or Bali, he would talk about nothing else except woodcarving," Ja recalled.

"Nik Din must have had a premonition of his death. One day he told me that he had passed on to me all that he knows about woodcarving and it was up to me to ensure that this art continues to flourish. Even today I feel he is still with me."

Ja said no one in Malaysia could match Nik Din's skill in carving the fine, elaborate ulu tajung (kingfisher) keris hilts.

I first met both Nik Din and Ja in 1987. They shared the same ideals and got along like a house on fire. But Nik Din was more serious and intense, and did not suffer fools gladly. However, he had a keen sense of humour in the company of close friends.

Over cups of black coffee, Nik Din could conduct animated discussions on the art of traditional woodcarving from the late evening to the early hours of morning while you stifled yawns and forced your eyelids to stay open.

Nik Din talked about his beginning as a traditional Malay woodcarver: "I was so fascinated by the ulu tajung keris hilt from Patani that I borrowed one to study and then tried to carve it. I remember people laughing at me, saying I must be gila (crazy)," he said.

But he went on to become the nation's foremost traditional wood carver and quite a few people had to eat their words.

Nik Din was also a man who enjoyed his food.

A few mutual friends and I once accompanied Nik Din in an old taxi to a kampung some distance from Patani where we stopped for lunch.

The small eatery offered many local dishes prepared traditionally, and happened to be one of Nik Din's favourite stops.

"Did you know that (Tun) Dr Mahathir was so impressed with their dishes that he invited them to set up business in Kuala Lumpur? They can even make the humble ikan kering (salted fish) into a special dish," said Nik Din.

After a hearty meal of delicious home-cooked dishes, we called at the kampung to visit Nik Din's friend, an old keris maker who demonstrated the ancient art of making the weapon.

Despite being something of a maverick, Nik Din had a healthy respect for tradition and custom and was always educating younger friends on why our forefathers did things a certain way.

Nik Din and Ja had ideals and principles and were contemptuous of other carvers who seemed to be more of a commercial turn of mind.

Both were highly critical of a Filem Negara trailer which showed the "art" of making a keris some years ago.

"Just look at that!" Nik Din fumed. "Anyone watching that would think that a keris hilt could be carved within minutes, and that just about anyone could produce a keris. Just what are we producing, keris kodi (cheap keris)?"

That was Nik Din for you.

The last time I saw him was a day after Hari Raya in 2001 when I visited Ja at his new home in Kampung Kandis in Bachok. He was then married and had a little boy.

Nik Din was more mellowed and seemed to have slowed down.

He did not look well but we knew nothing of the cancer ravaging the base of his spine then.

He was still full of ideas and told me of his future plans for a kampung seni in the vicinity. In August 2002 Nik Din finally lost his battle with the disease. The void will be hard to fill.

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