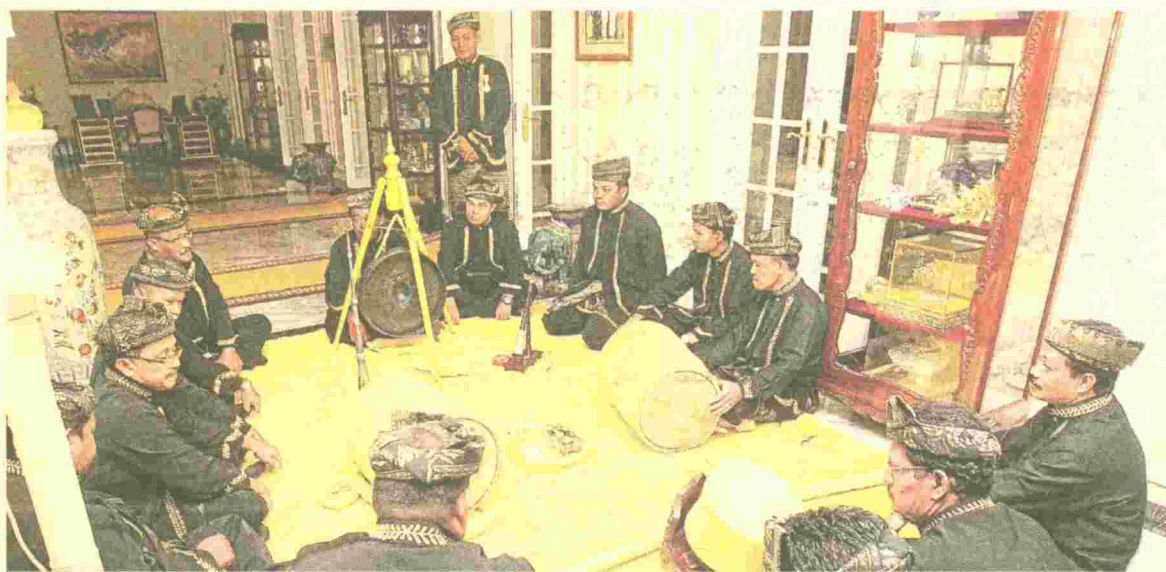


LIFE&TIMES **HERITAGE**

The royal sounds of Nobat

They are not ordinary musical instruments. Steeped in tradition and custom, the Nobat is only played during special occasions, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**



The Nobat that was played when Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah left Alor Setar to ascend the throne

OBERVE the accompanying music, the musical instruments and musicians during the coronation of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah this Wednesday. The ensemble, steeped in tradition and custom, will probably be the Kedah Nobat.

Datuk Dr Wan Shamsudin Mohd Yusof, an expert in Kedah history and the chairman of the History Association of Malaysia, Kedah branch, says that while other states in the country—Terengganu, Perak and Selangor—also have a Nobat, Kedah's is the oldest.

"The word Nobat is derived from a Sanskrit or Persian word 'nau', which means nine, and 'dat', which means musical instruments," he says.

There are three stories as to how the Nobat arrived in Kedah. In the first tale, Nobat existed during the time of the Prophet Abraham. It was brought to Kedah by the Maharajah Derba Raja of Persia who ruled Kedah from as long ago as 630 A.D.

The second story tells of two princes from Java who came in search of their relative some 800 years ago. They arrived at the mouth of Sungai Muda, near the foot of Gunung Jerai. From some rattan lying nearby, they heard a sound. They took one stick of rattan (calling it Semambu) and used it as a guide to find their relative. By the time they found their relative, one of his sons died. In their grief, they made the musical instruments of the Nobat.

Perhaps, the most plausible

story is this: When Sultan Mohamad Jiwa visited India, he heard the Nobat being performed in one of the palaces. He instantly fell in love with the sound and, upon his return to Kedah, saw to it that the Nobat was formed. He did not retain three of the instruments (the long Serunai and two Hindu Gongs). As such, today, whenever the Nobat is played, there are only six instruments.

There is no doubt that the Kedah Nobat has been respected and honoured by generations of the Kedah Royal Family. It has also been featured in numerous historical events, namely the coronation of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong, when Malaysia was formed and when Masjid Negara was officiated.

The musicians are called Orang Nobat. Mohamad Nadzri Omar, 50, is a Nobat musician who plays the serunai. "The songs, *Lagu Perang*, *Raja Burung*, *Belayar*, *Perang*, *Mambang Berkayuh*, *Seratan* and *Dewa Raja* are all recorded in Jawi. Each note is called a 'dai'. My father taught me how to play the serunai," says Mohamad Nadzri, adding that the art is passed from father to son.

According to convention, a father cannot teach all the songs he knows to his son. Mohamad Nadzri says that this has resulted in the present generation of musicians knowing fewer songs than Orang Nobat of the past.

The materials used to make these instruments range from rattan, deer skin and tiger skin to leather and silver. Datuk Dr Wan Shamsudin tells

an intriguing story about one of the instruments being lined with the skin of a pregnant woman. Indeed, in an article called Nobat Kedah (link to the story is: http://www.mykedah2.com/10heritage/105_12_p2.htm#sub1), Saad Taib writes about this unfortunate story. Nevertheless, Mohamad Nadzri insists that this is nothing more than a folk tale.

The Kedah Nobat is housed in a beautiful building in the heart of Alor Star called Balai Nobat. The public is not allowed to view these instruments or touch them. Mohamad Nadzri explains some of the conditions which must be adhered to when dealing with the instruments. For instance, the musicians have to perform in the palace, the order in which they have to proceed out of Balai Nobat is fixed. The Mahaguru (leader) will always be the first in line and no one can cross his path at any time.

"Once, when the Nobat was being transported by train to Kuala Lumpur, a child was playing with the instruments. Halfway, he lost his senses and only recovered when the Orang Nobat poured holy water on his face and menjampi," says Mohamad Nadzri.

The Orang Nobat, in full ceremonial attire, looks resplendent. "We have to wear a black shirt, trousers, kain sampang, songket and tengkolok. Everything has to be in black," he says, before concluding: "The Kedah Nobat has its own status and identity. It is a symbol of our heritage and culture. When you are performing, it's a different feeling. No other music is playing at the time and all the focus will be on us. This makes me so proud to be one of the Orang Nobat Kedah."

THE INSTRUMENTS

Tongkat Cokmar Diraja: This is made of semambu rattan and measures 1.8m. The Nobat can only be played when the Mahaguru is holding this instrument. This instrument is wrapped in yellow velvet. Each time this piece of velvet becomes tattered, it's not replaced. Instead, a new one is sewn on top of it.

Nahara: This small drum is made from selected wood and deer skin.

Gendang Ibu and Gendang

Anak: These medium-sized drums are made using either tiger or goat skin. The stick used to beat the drum is made from Kemuning wood.

Nafiri: This trumpet is made from pure silver and is less than 1m long.

Serunai: This flute is made from the chilli plant and has seven holes on the surface and one hole at the bottom.

Gong: This is made from red brass.



Part of the instruments that make up a Nobat ensemble



OCCASIONS WHEN THE KEDAH NOBAT IS PLAYED

On normal days, the Nobat is played at dawn and during prayer times. On special occasions, the Nobat can only be performed with the express permission of the Sultan of Kedah. Some of the more memorable occasions are:

- During the installation of a new Sultan.
- On the Sultan's birthday.
- During a royal wedding.
- On the demise of the Sultan or his consort, the Raja Muda, princes, princesses and other members of the Royal Family.
- Upon the arrival of a state guest.
- To announce the day for Hari Raya Puasa, Hari Raya Haji and other Muslim festivals.