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Celebrating with GONGS



By ANNA VIVIENNE

Julinis Gondikol, 44, from the Sabah State Museum with 10 other staff will be exhibiting the Tambunan Gongs at a celebration to commemorate the International Museum Day at Langkawi today.

"The gongs are only part of the exhibition. We will also be showcasing other feature of our Museum, especially the costumes. We are also very proud to be able to show a little of our culture such as the gong beating and the sumazau," he says.

According to him, the type of gongs being exhibited is from the Tambunan district.

"Actually, this type gong is just like any other gong, however instead of the normal seven gongs and a drum, the Tambunan district use eight gongs and a drum."

"The beating and sounds of the gongs is also different in each district. If you listen carefully, you could identify and differentiate the distinctive resonance of each district. For example, if you tell a gong maker that you require gong sound from the Tambunan district, he will adjust the sound accordingly. He will do likewise if you say you want a set of Penampang gong or a Rungus gong."

According to him, the Tambunan gongs are known by certain names that actually depict their sound. They start with the Sarak-sarakan, to the Lambatang, Kuribadoi, Tongtongon, and two During, the Tatawag and the Polombusan. These gongs are accompanied with one gandang or drum.

Gongs play a great part in the life of the people, since its introduction to this part of the world by the Chinese a long time ago. Julinis shares, "A long time ago, gongs were very difficult to get. They were made by the Chinese who came here as barter traders. I believe that to buy a set of gong then was near to impossible. People at that time had to buy them one by one. I was informed that some people had to exchange a buffalo for a gong." When a family has a set of gong, that family is then regarded as 'well-to-do'. The gongs are then considered precious heirlooms.

Gongs are used in many functions. In weddings the gong are beaten to celebrate the event. The energetic sounds from the

beating of the gongs usually influence people to dance.

Gong beating is also done all through the Harvest Festival. Usually during this time the beating of the gong will be accompanied by piercing screams or pangkis and joyous shouts of laughter.

Visiting dignitaries are also treated to the beating of the gong.

The gong is also used in less joyous occasions. In the past, when a death occurs, a full set of gong was beaten. Presently, however only three of them are used. The sound is sombre and rather disturbing as the cadence is different. This is especially true for people who have lived with such norms all their life. The beating of this gong rhythm called 'dunsai' occurs several times a day until the deceased is buried. The first beating starts at 6am, then at 12noon, followed by the third beating 3pm, then 6pm, the next one will be at 12midnight, then at 3am. On the day of the burial the funeral procession will be accompanied by gong beating, until the coffin is lowered to the ground. As soon as the grave is covered, the cadence of the gong will change into the normal ones. This means that the living is going home and that any 'spirits' of those still alive but have followed the procession will know and follow home.

The usage of Dunsai is vanishing nowadays as most people believe it to be 'pagan' practise. Gongs are also beaten during the eclipses. In the olden days, people believed that, a dragon (Tarob) was actually swallowing the moon when a moon eclipse occurred. To discourage the dragon from eating the whole moon, they beat the gongs. In my community we hit the drum and one gong. If we did not have gongs or drums we hit empty cans or our paddy container (tadang). We would eventually be rewarded with the wan moon coming out of the darkness we believed to be the dragon's jaws.

Julinis says that gongs are also used as a sort of 'siren' to neighbours should there be any emergency in the village.

"When fire occurs the gong is beaten, so the whole village will come and help. In fact the beatings of the gongs cause people to look up and listen. Be it a celebration, a death or an emergency the gong is always handy and useful," he says.

The gongs, which is of great and various use to us, will be shown by Julinis and his group to the people of Langkawi and indeed the international community today.

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