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Naga Pelangi The Enigma Of Malay Ship Building Tradition
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KUALA TERENGGANU, (Bernama) -- The remarkable skills of the dying breed of Malay boat builders in Pulau Duyong once again received international recognition when a German sailor took delivery of a large pinnace boat named Naga Pelangi II.

The boat costing RM2 million was made for Christoph Swoboda, 57, by master boat builder Hasni Che Ali.

Swoboda is no stranger to boat builders in Pulau Duyong as he had his first boat, the Naga Pelangi I, made by the same boat builder about 30 years ago. This seasoned seaman is so impressed with the remarkable skills and the intricate details employed by boat builders in Pulau Duyong.

Swoboda used the Naga Pelangi I that cost him RM30,000 then to successfully circumnavigate the globe and after more than two decades he sold the boat and came back here to get the second one - Naga Pelangi II.

This seafarer has even picked up the Terengganu dialect as he had put up in the island since 2004 to see to every detail of his boat that was being built.

The writer met Swoboda in Pulau Duyong when the Naga Pelangi II was to make its maiden voyage to Langkawi. During the voyage the German sailor was accompanied by six friends from Switzerland, Norway and Denmark.

OBSSESSED WITH THE BEAUTY OF THE pinnace BOAT

The Naga Pelangi II is 95 feet by 19 feet and looks like a smaller version of a galleon. It took six years to complete and is made of the cengal hardwood that is difficult to source now.

The boat making process involves intricate work starting with the wood curing process that takes up to two years to complete before the construction of the boat itself can take place.

"It involves master craftsmanship, no nails are used and instead locks and mortise join the wooden parts.

"As it involves detailed work it takes very long to complete. And it is for the same reason why I'm so impressed and obsessed with this type of boat," says Swoboda.

NAGA PELANGI II'S BEAUTY

Though the Naga Pelangi II exudes a traditional wooden boat look complete with its mast from the outside, inside it is quite advanced with a 250 horsepower Volvo engines and electricity derived using solar power.

The boat can accommodate up to 30 people and inside there are four sleeping compartments, apart from compartments for the crew.

Meanwhile, Hasni, 56, noted that around 1950s and 1960s, the pinnace boats played an important role in Terengganu as they sailed up to Thailand and Indochina to trade.

"At one time these pinnace boats ferried salt and other necessities from Narathiwat (Thailand) to Terengganu.

"However, modernity spelled doom for these boats as the new generation of people were no longer keen to use them," said Hasni in a sad note.

BOATS AND BOAT MAKING TRADITION ON EXTINCTION

Hasni's concern was also shared by Swoboda who was shocked to see the dwindling number of boat builders in the island, where their number today is a far cry compared when he first came to Pulau Duyong some 30 years ago.

"There was about 30 boat builders in Pulau Duyong then, now there is only three left," said Swoboda in the Terengganu dialect.

"What a waste it will be if this boat making heritage goes into oblivion as there is no one there to inherit the skills," he said adding that the relevant parties should consider training local youths in boat making.

ROPING IN THE YOUTHS

On the same note, Hasni hopes that the steps taken by the National Handicraft Corporation (Kraftangan) and Majlis Amanah Rakyat (Mara) to train youths in boat building will ensure the perpetuity of the boat building tradition in the island.

"We hope that the youths who are all from Pulau Duyong will help preserve this trade for posteriori," says Hasni who has been working as a boat maker since the age of 13 starting as an apprentice with other boat makers.

He has six employees that includes his children and younger brother, and over the past year has been working on a trawler costing RM1 million and is expected to be ready by next year.

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