

MAK YONG

challenge



Veteran performer Mek Jah Idris is helping to keep mak yong alive. In conjunction with International Women's Day, she tells SEAN AUGUSTIN and ILI IZLIN HANIM OTHMAN about her role in this ancient dance theatre

MEK Jah Idris, 64, moves her hands gracefully to a tune audible only to her. Seconds later, upon request, she sings in a thick Kelantanese accent.

Wearing a black tanjak (headgear decorated with beads) and a la (necklace resembling a dreamcatcher), she was giving an impromptu performance in her wooden house in Kampung Batu Tambah.

Mek Jah was drawn to the ancient dance-theatre form when she was just 18, fascinated by the ritual, stylised dance movements and acting, vocal and instrumental music, formal as well as improvised speech.

"I used to observe my cousin teaching it and I became interested," she recalls. It began as a hobby but it wasn't long before her potential shone through.

"Within a week of joining the 12-member troupe, I attempted to sing the songs and in three days, I had convinced them that I could lead the performances," she says.

of a traditional medicine woman.

"We could cure those who had low angin or bio-rhythm. Those afflicted would be entertained with the *Dewa Muda* performance and it would lift their spirits," she explains.

Her biggest challenge was memorising the 12 different stories. These days, she laments, performers use a prepared script.

Some of the stories take three days to perform while others, like the famous *Anak Raja Gondang*, take three months to complete the unabridged version.

The story is about a woman who gives birth to a gondang (a kind of snail) that later turns into a handsome man. *Anak Raja Gondang* was popular with audiences, says Mek Jah, who was thrilled to be able to perform for a new audience two years ago, when the Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage Ministry took her to France. It was her first trip out of the country.

"I had never had so many people take pictures



Mek Jah's passion for mak yong grew with support from her family, especially her husband who was part of a mak yong comedy troupe.

But encouragement from the rest of her family dimmed as the mother of three grew older. In her heyday, she practised four hours every night and when she was not training, she would be performing.

Today, she is worried that the art of mak yong is almost extinct. The younger generation, including her own children, shows little interest in it. Performed mainly in Kelantan, mak yong has its roots in animism and shamanism.

Because it was also believed to be a healing art form, Mek Jah sometimes took on the role

of us," she says excitedly. "It was something we never got used to."

Back home, Mek Jah is doing her best to generate the same enthusiasm among Malaysians. She coaches the Medang Gemulai Tiong Mas group in mak yong songs and dances. The group comes under the in-situ mak yong rehabilitation programme under the Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage Ministry.

She also performs for television and research students — for a fee. Her last performance was at Kuala Besut recently for Universiti Malaya students.

But although Mek Jah is often referred to as payung or the king of mak yong, she still has to supplement her income by selling cakes.