

Tithe in exhibition

The mechanics of zakat, one of the five pillars of Islam, is made clear in the Islamic Arts Museum exhibition *Az-Zakah*, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

MOST of us have a vague understanding of what zakat (tithe) is. For instance, we know that it is one of the five obligations of Islam. But how is the revenue collected? How is it distributed? To whom? Who are the recipients of zakat?

These issues are the subject matter of an exhibition titled *Az-Zakah: Spirit, Realisation and Obligation* (Achievement of Lembaga Zakat Selangor or Mais), launched by Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah of Selangor recently at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM).

The exhibition is aimed at educating the public on the fundamental nature of zakat and the role of Lembaga Zakat Selangor (LZS) in streamlining zakat management.

"In Islamic jurisprudence, zakat refers to the portion of wealth that Allah has ordered to be distributed among the rightful recipients, referred to as *asnaf*," says Assim Zuhair Qisho, 39, a junior curator at IAMM.

"Fulfilling the obligation of zakat is something personal. For instance, a person buys gold jewellery as an investment. However, because you don't want to pay zakat on this, you say you will wear it and wear it

only once a year. No one from zakat department is going to hound you for not paying zakat. But you know you've bought it more as an investment and should, therefore, fulfil the obligation of paying zakat. This is between you and Allah."

Before explaining how the money is distributed effectively here, Assim says it is necessary to understand just who is deserving of zakat. In accordance with Islam, there are eight groups of people who may qualify for zakat. They include "the poor, needy, administrator, those who 'revert', slaves, travellers, debtors and those who strive in the cause of Allah."

The challenge is to find those genuinely in need of assistance. He adds: "There are cases of people who beg as a business. They pretend they are needy. They can get up to RM200 a day. Add this up, and they may earn between RM5,000 and RM6,000 a month."

Naturally, there is potential for mismanagement if there is a surplus. "Ideally," Assim says, "if there is proper management, there should be no poor people in a Muslim state. Take a country like Saudi Arabia. You would think that in one of the richest countries in the world there would be no beggars. But there are still people who have no money to buy food. They have no houses to live in. They don't have thick clothes and it can get very cold in the

desert at night. Many of them die."

The proper management of zakat, then, hinges on proper leadership. Assim then narrates a story: "This was during the reign of Caliph Umar bin Abdul Aziz, who ruled from 717-719 AD/99-101 AH. He only ruled for two years. Apparently, so much money had been collected for zakat and distributed that there were no longer any poor in Egypt. So he used the money to build houses for the homeless, improve the transportation system, bear the cost of marriage for young couples and paid people's debts."



Interviewing potential recipients of zakat. PICTURES BY MOHD KHAIRUL HELMY



A gold necklace from Kerala. Muslims are required to pay zakat or tithe on valuables (jewellery) if they're clearly not wearing them.

HISTORY OF ZAKAT

Locally, the history of zakat can be divided into three phases: Before British colonisation, during British administration and after Independence of the Malay Federation.

In the first phase, explains Assim, among the earliest surviving legal codes related to zakat in the Malay peninsula was the Kedah Legal Code written in 1667 AD/1075 AH. Accordingly, zakat was paid in the form of rice or livestock directly to the imam (religious leader) or religious

teachers who then distributed what they collected to the *asnaf*.

Once the British arrived, all laws and matters pertaining to Islam were placed under the Council Of Religion And Custom, led by the Sultan or the head of State while the State administration was placed under British control. The first State in the peninsula that started collecting zakat in 1915 was Kelantan, followed by Perlis, Kedah, Perak, Selangor and Johor. After Independence, according to the Federal Constitution, all matters related Islam and the Malay culture came under the State administration which was led by the Sultan or head of State.

One challenge in managing and administering the money collected effectively was the shortage of knowledgeable staff. There were also no specialists who understood how to distribute this money properly. In addition, the collection of zakat only focused on zakat fitrah (which is the obligation to pay a requisite sum on oneself annually during Ramadan) and zakat on wealth. Other types of zakat, such as that on gold, investments and livestock, which are also obligatory, were overlooked.

In 2004, the central government established the Department Of Wakaf, Zakat, and Hajj under the Prime Minister's Department to



Umar-Bin-Abdul-Aziz (academy. comumar-bin-abdul-aziz-ra).

coordinate the different zakat management which came under the supervision of zakat institutions and the Islamic State Council. This, Assim asserts, has led to a more professional management of zakat throughout the country, using the services of professionals in various fields such as religion, economy and management. An example of an institution that has used innovative measures and technology to better manage zakat is LZS, which has become the benchmark for other zakat offices in the country. "In the last 20 years, it has successfully managed zakat collection and distributed it throughout Selangor," says Assim.

An example would be the proprietors of a business who have the knowledge and skills to start a business but not the capital to do so. In such cases, it may be appropriate for the LZS to assist them. There is a "mentoring" of these business owners where they are provided other skills in managing a business like exposure and marketing. LZS works with other agencies like Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute, Majlis Amanah Rakyat and the Small And Medium Industries Development Corp.

Assim sums up the aim of zakat succinctly: It is a noble form of social welfare where a levy is imposed on wealthier Muslims to purify them from the sin of greed and help poorer ones. In so doing, it is hoped that a form of social justice is achieved.

THE A-LIST

BY INTAN MAIZURA AHMAD KAMAL

THE ART OF GOH AH ANG — A 60-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION

Where: Soka Exhibition Hall Ground Floor, Wisma Kebudayaan, Soka Gakkai Malaysia, 243, Jalan Bukit Bintang, KL **When:** Ends today, 11am to 6pm

Admission: Free
GOH Ah Ang's mastery of Chinese brushstrokes feature fragile insects, misty landscapes and painted words. His works are in the National Art Gallery, Malaysian Institute of Art and Maybank Art Gallery.

GRANDE

Where: Core Design Gallery, 87 Jalan SS15/2A, Subang, Selangor.

When: Until Aug 22, Mon to Fri, 10am to 7pm. Weekends by appointment only.

Details at www.coredesigngallery.com

Admission: Free
THIRTEEN emerging and established local contemporary artists express diversity in the Great Art and Design exhibition of paint-



Equilibrium

ings, sculptures and interactive installations.

EQUILIBRIUM

Where: Richard Koh Fine Art, 2F-3

Level 2, Bangsar Village II, Jalan Telawi, Bangsar, KL

When: Until Aug 27.

Admission: Free

ABSTRACT art by Wong Perng Fey featuring thick textures drawn from living in bustling Beijing.

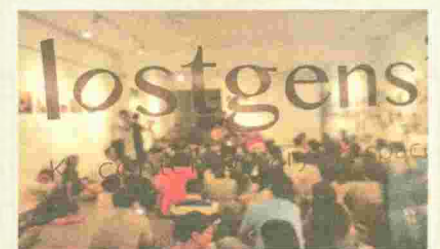
PULAU MELAYU — LOST AND FOUND

Where: 8c Jalan Panggong, Petaling Street, KL

When: Until Aug 30, Mon-Fri, 5pm-9pm; Sat-Sun, 1pm-8pm

Details at www.facebook.com/events/1431397830477193

Admission: Free



Pulau Melayu