When a large new building is completed in the Malaysian capital today, an ‘Opening Ceremony’ is often held, at which speeches are made in the presence of a select audience, and a distinguished person cuts a silk ribbon or opens a door with a gilded key.

A century ago, when a new palace or Audience Hall was completed in Kelantan, an ‘Opening Ceremony’ was also held, but it took a different form.

When the spacious new stage in the Great Hall of the University of Malaya was ready for its first performance recently, the Vice Chancellor, Professor Ungku Aziz, decided to revive the old tradition, and sent an invitation to the senior Bomor-Di-Raja of Kelantan, Nik Abdul Rahman bin Nik Abdul Kadir, to come to Kuala Lumpur and to seek the cooperation of the spirits of Drama, Music and the Arts and many others hovering in the firmament.

The ritual and the lengthy incantation followed closely those which had been repeated by earlier Bomor-Di-Raja at the opening of Royal Audience Halls for at least a hundred and fifty years, and probably for much longer.
When Sultan Muhammad II of Kelantan (1837 – 1886) (who was also known, after his death, as Marhum Mulut Merah or Marhum Tua) moved his official residence from Pulau Sabar in the centre of the Kelantan river to a flat but unoccupied stretch of land on the river bank in about 1840, the same ritual was observed. The new site was originally known as ‘Padung Kelumpang’ presumably after a tree of that species which grew on the site, and at first the Raja’s new residence was known as ‘Istana Kota Bharu’, and a new town grew up round the palace which was known as ‘Kota Bharu’. The new palace was of a most unusual design, and had an exceptionally spacious Audience Hall, but at first it had a floor on two levels only, and the Raja received members of the public seated on a yellow cushion on the upper level.

Sultan Ismail (1920 – 1944) added one more level and introduced a carved and gilded throne during his reign. The name of the palace was changed some years earlier to ‘Istana Balai Besar’ – the palace with the great audience hall.

When the Audience Hall in the ‘Istana Kota Bharu’ was completed, the ceremony which was performed was called ‘Achara Menyambut Semangat Pancha Persada’, which may be translated to read ‘a ceremony to welcome the spirits of the great stage’.

The ceremony was repeated on many subsequent occasions, when other Audience Halls in Kelantan were ready for use, such as the ‘Balai’ in the front portion of ‘Istana Tengku Seri Akar’, the ‘Balai’ at Istana Jahar and the ‘Balai’ at the

An assistant lights the candles while Nik Abdul Rahman scattered yellow rice grains.
Istana Tengku Bendahara. The last recorded occasion on which it was performed was when Dato Perdana Mentri, Dato Haji Nik Mahmud, built a new ‘Balai’, which was called ‘Balai Gambang’ at Jembar in about 1930. That ceremony was conducted by ‘Pa Ku Soh’ (an abbreviation of the name Tengku Yusof) who was one of the Bomor-Di-Raja and was descended from the ancient royal house of Jembar. Nik Abdul Rahman studied under Tengku Yusof before he himself became one of the Bomor-Di-Raja.

The ritual objects which must be offered to the spirits on an occasion like this are various and numerous. Nik Abdul Rahman arrived from Kota Bharu by air, carrying a large cardboard box, filled with small packages, and when he drove to the University, two friends accompanied him, with arms and hands full of brass pedestal trays and bowls. Most of the objects were placed on a low mat-covered platform, which was to be sited near the front of the new stage, but a china plate, supported by a three strand framework of rattan was ready to be hung from the ceiling, a little to the rear of the platform. This was called ‘Linja Nasi Guru’. The plate rested on a coiled layer of raw cotton and held a heap of yellow glutinous rice (nasi kunyit), on which was embedded a hard boiled egg, with a small brown candle standing erect on top.

The arrangement of objects on the low platform was as follows: there were two pandan mats, both woven in several colours, one large, covering the whole platform, the other small, covering the centre. A yellow cushion was placed near

Nik Abdul Rahman bathes the Kris in the smoke of incense.
Nik Abdul Rahman recites prayers to Allah for the success of the new stage.

the centre of the small mat, awaiting the arrival of the Bomor’s Kris, which would rest there during the ceremony.

Numerous brass trays and bowls were arranged round the outer edge of the platform, leaving space in the centre for the Bomor to move, but making it possible for him to take any of the contents without rising, once he had taken his seat.

Starting from the left side, if we face the front of the stage, there was a large bronze ‘Buyong’, a water jar with a broad base, a narrow neck and a wide mouth: it contained a selection of croton leaves of different shades of green, yellow and dark red, and certain other green leaves. Next to it stood an ornamental brass kettle on a brass tray. Both these were at the left side. There were four brass containers along the front of the platform: first a decorative brass bowl with a low stand (bekas tembaga) containing shreds of a species of jungle wood called ‘Beluru’ and half a fresh Lime, ‘Limau Purut’, both of which have special cooling properties: they stood in a little water. Next came a large brass pedestal tray (called ‘Pahar’), standing left of centre, containing four saucers with special offerings (‘Kenduri’) for the spirits. The first saucer held yellow cooked rice and a little portion of fried egg (‘nasi kuning dan lauk telor’), the second was full of parched rice (‘berteh’), the third held segments of rice cake (‘Dadar’) made from rice flour, and the fourth was covered with coiled strands of raw cotton, some dyed red, some dyed yellow and some of natural off-white. A rolled leaf and strands of tobacco and a betel chew rested on the cotton thread. The contents of this saucer was called ‘Benang Pengkeras Tiga’.
In the centre, at the front of the low platform, stood another brass pedestal tray, on which seven saucers were arranged, each containing miniature offerings. This tray and its contents was known as 'Pahar Gandom Tu Joh', and the offerings were intended for the seven senior celestial beings, — (Dewa Tu Joh). Each saucer contained seven tiny objects, — a betel chew, (Sireh pinang); a small banana (pisang lemak manis); a tiny cake made with pulut rice, egg and wheat flour (Gandom Tu Joh); a leaf rolled round a shred of tobacco (rokok daun); a small coin (Pengkeras Dewa Tu Joh); a short string of jasmine buds (bunga melor) and a brown candle made from bees wax.

A round split bamboo winnowing tray (badang nyiru) stood on the third pedestal tray, to the right of centre. Its contents were quite different. There was half a mature coconut with a white pulp growth inside (nyior tua yang ada tumbuh); a section of palm sugar resting in a dry half coconut shell; a coconut shell water carrier, half full of water, and another half coconut shell half full of parched rice (berih). In a second row, parallel with the brass water kettle, but in the centre of the platform, a small brass incense burner emitted whisps of fragrant smoke, and on its right, just to the rear of the winnowing tray, a rectangular wooden Betel box stood with its lid closed. On the right, to the rear of the Betel box stood two small brass bowls, one containing watery white paste ('Tepong Tawar') in which a small bunch of dark green leaves stood ready for use, and the other bowl containing dry yellow rice grains (beras kunyiit).

a general view of the ritual objects used in the ceremony.
Nik Abdul Rahman invokes the cooperation of celestial beings.

(All photos by the Straits Times)

A short brown candle made from beeswax (Lilin Sambang) stood on each of the different trays and ritual objects, with the exception of the incense burner and the kris, and these were lit just before Nik Abdul Rahman entered. He wore the traditional dress of a Kelantan palace Bomor: a low silk headcloth, a short sleeved yellow silk tunic, a knee length dark red silk sarong, worn over black silk trousers, and a tightly folded dark red silk waistcloth. A broad band of raw cotton was wound round his right wrist. He carried an ivory headed kris in his right hand, but after bathing it in incense smoke he laid it on the yellow cushion, and only took it up again just before he withdrew.

Before sitting cross legged behind the row of offerings, Nik Abdul Rahman called on some of the major spirits, scattering parched rice to the four sides of the stage. He followed this with a lengthy prayer to Allah for his blessings on the new stage, the Vice Chancellor and all who would use the stage in future. His voice, which had been gentle and reverent then changed, and he recited an ancient incantation, invoking celestial beings, in a voice which rang through the hall. Each tray was touched in turn, and every offering was formally conveyed in spirit fashion to the invisible guests.

The Candyan Dancers, who were waiting to appear on the new stage, immediately after the ceremony ended, gave a faultless display, and provided a happy augury for the future.