

# THE REMAKING OF MALAYSIAN CUSTOMS & ETIQUETTE

**Passionate about good manners and proper decorum, Dato' Paduka Noor Aini Abdullah finds satisfaction after updating her etiquette handbook which was launched recently.**

What is often said about the differences between creating from scratch and adapting or altering from an already completed product is absolutely true. Often, I hear the lament of friends in the thread industry whereby they swear upon the thimble they worship, that cutting an unblemished cloth is miles easier than adjusting certain buttons to fit into an already-tight sleeve or, worse still, add fixtures. But the reward gained through all this stress and headache is when the re-completed product turns out to be a masterpiece of nod-worthy quantity.

This is not to say that I think my latest, updated and expanded version of *Malaysian Customs & Etiquette* is a masterpiece of Dior-like proportions in its relative form, but I would have to say I was highly satisfied with the additions and adaptations I decided to make seeing as they seemed pertinent and relevant within the contemporary environment. And I say this with no sense of arrogant pride at all, but with the sincerity that I tried my best to adapt and include appropriately.

On another level, it was actually the first time in four long years that I had completed what I had set out to do just a few months before I lost my late father. Yes, it took three full years of grieving



(the only valid reason I had to procrastinate) and a whole bunch of other excuses to get me back in front of my PC in 2010 to face a forlornly half-done manuscript. Meanwhile I had written of cabbages and kings, of castles in the air, of witches with a "b", of expanding through spirituality, and of the longing of days, people and places gone by...

When I looked upon all these things, I asked myself what exactly was it that kept me going through caffeine-highs and insomniac-lows, through rainy days and Mondays, and through scorpion-infested terrain that suddenly bloomed into gardens with endless rows of roses.

The answer was very clear: Good manners.

My inherent need to be behave appropriately under all circumstances has perhaps been the most significant motive upholding and sustaining everything I do. Admittedly, I continue to stumble and fall; like once when I fibbed to a friend that I was in the wilds of Borneo when I was actually wondering the treacherous topography of KLCC and she actually caught me by surprise when she came from behind and said "Boo!" But for the most part, I try to remain on this side of decent demeanour.



## Impeccable Manners

To this end, my little handbook, which had always included basic tips and guidelines on all major norms and cultural practices in Malaysia, now gives details on some less-well known aspects. For instance, in one of the two new chapters I've added, I caution the visitor who decides to climb Mount Kinabalu of the sort of etiquette and appropriate conduct one ought to be mindful of. I point out that according to local myth and legend, a mountain is one's ancestors' eternal "resting place". Consequently, what belongs to the mountain should not be taken away, not even the unique stones we might come across as this would tantamount to stealing from the home of our revered forebears.

By the same token, I bring to the reader's attention that in Sarawak the feet are perceived as particularly "unclean" therefore under no circumstances should one point with one's foot or show its sole to a local as this would be considered a huge insult. In the event that this can't be helped, I suggest the same

mode of behavior as for the rest of Malaysia, that is, apologise profusely for this unavoidable show of bad manners.

In the second of the two chapters, called *Corporate Protocol*, I bring to the fore that my attempts remain among the first to list down and codify certain essential dos and don'ts to abide by within what might be applicable in a business environment.

Unlike the clear-cut order of precedence instilled by royal and official protocol, whereby it is a written given that a person's authorised office is what designates his rank and seniority, this isn't always the case in the private sector. For example the Governor of, say, Penang is undisputedly the most senior dignitary of that state. By virtue of this appointment, he is automatically entitled the styling of *Tuan Yang Terutama* (His Excellency) irrespective of whether or not he has been decorated with a Tun-, Tan Sri-, or Datukship.

In comparison, who designates which CEO is more senior than the other? Is this derived by the

I SUGGEST THAT WHAT OFTEN STARTS AS POPULAR USAGE HABITUALLY EVOLVES INTO SOMETHING READILY ACCEPTED AS APPROPRIATE AND, IN MANY INSTANCES, WILL GO ON TO BE OFFICIALLY RECORDED AS A RECOGNISED FORM OF PROPER STYLING AND ADDRESS.

size of the company he heads, the length of time he has been in this position or how important the company in question is to the hosting party? When confronted with such huge and potentially-sensitive grey areas, the rule of thumb I always suggest is that one resorts to an order of precedence determined by alphabetical order; though after I say this, I pray very hard that my suggestion works! I also recommend to readers that it would only work in their favour if they took some time and trouble to understand the highly-structured and stringently-hierarchical nature of Malaysian society. Someone you'd smack on the shoulder and call out to with a friendly, "Hey Matt, how's it going my man?" may be acceptable on the golf course, but is certainly a no-no in the boardroom. Here, if he is a Tan Sri, then one addresses him as such. No two ways about it.

In its wider picture, this remains true under all circumstances – royal, official and corporate alike. A sister of a friend of mine enquired over Facebook recently about the proper etiquette expected when being presented to the official consort of a reigning monarch, who apparently was gracious enough to allow the former to call her by the familiar term "Auntie". My reply was simple: We don't forget who we are, which means that in the presence of others, we continue to call her Tuanku. What we do in private is a different matter, but even so I would strongly caution anyone from being overly familiar unless one belonged to the family in question, or was married into it.

WHILE ALLOWANCES SHOULD OF COURSE BE EXTENDED TO THOSE WHO SLIP-UP WITHOUT MEANING TO, STILL AND ALL ON THE PART OF THE PERSON WHO HAD MADE THIS MISTAKE, THE APPROPRIATE ACTION WOULD BE TO APOLOGISE IMMEDIATELY AND MAKE IT A POINT FROM THEN ON NOT TO REPEAT WHATEVER CAUSED OFFENCE.

## Popular Usage

What I have also expanded on are tips and guidelines in terms of appropriate gifts and dress code for ceremonies marking a birth, birthdays, important anniversaries, weddings and funerals. I continue to alert readers in terms of what action to resort to during embarrassing situations, and I add relevant terms of address and proper styling, especially those which were once courteous references that have now been accepted as official (albeit of sorts, in some instances).

In these, I refer with slightly more emphasis to the term of address Che/Cik Puan. In recent times, I have noticed with consistent regularity that women not of royal heritage who marry into, for instance, the royal houses of Kelantan, Kedah and Negeri Sembilan, are automatically accorded this title, irrespective of whether her husband is construed as "senior" in the sense that he may not be the son of a reigning monarch. But that's not the point I am trying to get at. What I attempt to explain is that precisely in this example lies the dynamic nature of protocol. By citing the above case in point, I suggest that what often starts as popular usage habitually evolves into something readily accepted as appropriate and, in many instances, will go on to be officially recorded as a recognised form of proper styling and address.

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## Attire Code

At all times mindful of readers who may be restricted by budget concerns, wherever I bring up the question of appropriate attire, I am always attentive of the need to minimise digging into one's pocket more than what may be necessary. In view of certain socio-religious considerations, the overall suggestion I offer is that women include in their travelling wardrobe a full-length skirt, sarong or loose trousers to be worn with a long(ish) top with sleeves that cover her elbows or, better still, her wrists.

As for men, I do request they include a pair of long trousers that are not denim jeans and, if possible, a batik shirt preferably with long sleeves.

To live a blunder-free existence may not be possible all the time but to be aware of the importance of basic yet good manners cannot be shoved aside. While allowances should of course be extended to those who slip-up without meaning to, still and all on the part of the person who had made this mistake, the appropriate action would

be to apologise immediately and make it a point from then on not to repeat whatever caused offence. But to offend with full intention is of course totally unacceptable. Having heard the case from both sides of the fence, whenever there is a crumbling of proper decorum for whatever reasons, I would imagine that some form of compromise would be in order. What comes to mind is that it may be best if relevant parties concerned agree not to turn up at any event or function to which they are invited.

However, do you honestly think there are those among us who would listen? If you shook your head you would be right. There was one occasion when Wife One and Wife Two were both included on the guest list of the unsuspecting hostess. By the time she realised it, the invitations had already gone out. Those of us in the know advised both women to desist from bad manners by RSVP-ing in the negative. But would they listen?

And so it came to pass that when Missus One and Two walked in, we all froze in our tracks because they had turned up in the exact same outfit! 📺

