

Tepak sirih : interpretation and perception in Malay wedding customs

ABSTRACT

The ingredients of a betel chew are usually kept in a special box or bowl used exclusively for betel chewing. The Tepak sirih reflects the life and values of the Malay community especially on traditional customs and codes of conduct. It is obvious that the Tepak sirih plays an important role in the everyday lives of the Malays. However, as time passes, the importance of the Tepak sirih is now only confined to ceremonial, traditional events and activities. Only decorated and embroidered Tepak sirih are used in ceremonies such as to ask permission (adat merisik), to ask in marriage ceremony (adat meminang) and betrothal ceremony (adat bertunang). This study identifies and examines the role of the Tepak sirih as a non verbal form of communication in the marriage customs of the Malay community. This study was conducted at Kampung Seri Kedah, Sungai Leman, Sekinchan Selangor. The finding has shown that the Tepak sirih used in a Malay wedding is seen as a symbol of starting a conversation, a symbol of asking, symbol of accepting, symbol of rejecting and as a symbol of unity. Tepak sirih is placed in front of all other items used in a wedding. In a Malay wedding, only the Tepak sirih bertekat which is made from wood, covered with fine velvet cloth and embroidered with golden thread is used. The interior of the Tepak sirih holds small globular covered little cylindrical containers called (cembul), for sliced areca nut, lime, gambier and cloves. All the cembul must then be placed according to the Malay customs. Furthermore, the Malay community believe that something bad may occur if the customs are not followed. In addition, arranging the cembul in the tepak is seen as a sign to educate the Malay community about the importance of following the rules. During an engagement ceremony @ 'adat bertunang', the Tepak sirih is seen as a symbol of acceptance to lay down the foundations to start a happy marriage and live blissfully together. An engagement is a formal agreement between a man and a woman to start an initial relationship between them as they plan for the actual wedding. The Malay engagement ceremony involves the usage of all customary objects and symbols from their time honored customary heritage inherited from their ancestors.