

TEPAK SIRIH: INTERPRETATION AND PERCEPTION IN MALAY WEDDING CUSTOMS

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Abstrak

Ramuan makan sirih biasanya diletakkan dalam kotak khas atau bekas yang dikhaskan untuk makan sirih. Tepak sirih mencerminkan kehidupan dan nilai-nilai, terutama dalam adat tradisi dan tingkah laku masyarakat Melayu. Di sini menunjukkan bahawa tepak sirih memainkan peranan yang sangat penting dalam kehidupan sehari-hari masyarakat Melayu. Walau bagaimanapun perubahan masa menyaksikan kepentingan tepak sirih kini hanya digunakan dalam majlis tertentu, upacara dan acara tradisional. Hanya tepak sirih bertekak digunakan dalam upacara seperti adat merisik, adat meminang dan adat bertunang. Kajian ini mengenal pasti dan menganalisis peranan tepak sirih dalam komunikasi bukan lisan dalam adat perkahwinan masyarakat Melayu. Kajian telah dijalankan di Kampung Seri Kedah, Sungai Leman, Sekinchan, Selangor. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa tepak sirih yang digunakan dalam perkahwinan Melayu dilihat sebagai simbol memulakan perbualan, simbol pertanyaan, simbol penerimaan, simbol penolakan dan simbol penyatuan. Tepak sirih diletakkan di hadapan barangan hantaran perkahwinan. Dalam perkahwinan Melayu, hanya tepak sirih yang diperbuat daripada kayu, dibaluti dengan kain baldu dan bertekak benang emas digunakan. Tepak sirih mengandungi bekas kecil yang berbentuk separuh bulat dikenali sebagai cembul yang diisi di dalamnya hirisan pinang masak, kapur, gambir dan bunga cengkih. Semua cembul perlu disusun pada kedudukan yang telah ditetapkan oleh adat Melayu. Hal ini

demikian kerana masyarakat Melayu percaya bahawa sesuatu yang tidak baik akan berlaku sekiranya adat ini tidak diikuti. Selain itu susunan tepak sirih di dalam tepak melambangkan simbol mendidik masyarakat tentang kepentingan mematuhi peraturan. Semasa adat bertunang, tepak sirih dilihat sebagai simbol penerimaan untuk meletakkan asas-asas untuk memulakan perkahwinan yang bahagia dan hidup bahagia bersama-sama. Pertunangan merupakan perjanjian rasmi antara lelaki dan wanita sebagai permulaan hubungan antara mereka sebelum perancangan perkahwinan yang sebenar. Majlis pertunangan Melayu melibatkan penggunaan semua peralatan adat dan merupakan simbol penghormatan warisan adat yang diwarisi daripada generasi terdahulu.

Kata kunci: tepak sirih, adat, komunikasi bukan lisan.

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 bertekak 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.

Keynotes: *Tepak sirih, customs, nonverbal communication.*

Introduction

Malay betel leaf container sets come in three main forms. The first form is a round or polygonal open box known as *puan sirih* (Sheppard, 1972). According to Brownrigg (1992:39) *puan sirih* is related to the Thai *paan* or pedestal tray. The second form, possibly of Sumatran origin (Brownrigg 1992:39), takes the form of a rectangular lidded box tapering inwards towards the top. Sheppard (1972) found in his research that in Malay customs, the rectangular style of Malay betel sets is known as *tepak sirih*. This type of betel set which is covered with gold embroidered red velvet (*tepak sirih bertekat*) is used in Malay wedding customs or ceremonies such as proposal (*meminang*), engagement (*bertunang*) and sitting-in-stage (*bersanding*).

Another style of Malay betel set is either an open round or oval tray (*cerana*) tapering outwards towards the top and resting on small feet (Winstedt, 1969). However, the most common form is an open rectangular tray (*tempat sirih*) tapering outwards towards the top and resting on small feet (Brownrigg, 1992:39).

The *tempat sirih* may be of silver, brass, wood, lacquer or even tortoiseshell, and is around 25 cm long, 12.5 cm wide and 6 to 12 cm high. The interior partition creates a rectangular space for the betel cutter (*kacip*) and an L-shape for four brass, silver or other metal receptacles containing the ingredients. Underneath the tray, there is a drawer for the betel leaves. The *tepak sirih* is the first betel set among those described to have a betel cutter as an integral part.

A betel set is used to store the ingredients of a betel chew consisting of a dark green fleshy betel leaf, lime, thin shavings of areca nut (known as *pinang* in Malay; its scientific name is *Areca Catechu*; the

areca nut palm), gambier (scientific name is *Uncaria gambier*; decoction from the leaves of the gambier tree), cloves and tobacco. A betel quid (*sepiak sirih*) consists of a dark green leaf, down the centre of which a very thin layer of slaked lime is spread with the forefinger. A thin shaving of areca nut and a fragment of gambier are placed together with the lime, and the leaf is folded inwards, first two sides, then the base and finally the pointed tip.

This neat little packet is placed in the mouth and chewed slowly and before long the saliva turns orange red (the saliva turns orange red after the slaked lime has come in contact with the gambier). Tobacco does not form part of a betel quid but some shreds may be rolled into a little ball and slipped under the upper lip to provide a change of flavor in the mouth after a betel chew has been swallowed.

Tepak sirih bertekat which is used in Malay wedding customs is a rectangular lidded box, about 25 cm long, 12.5 cm wide at the base, but a little narrower at the top and about 6 cm high. These boxes have a metal tray which can be removed so that the rice can be stored under it. The tray is divided into five compartments: four of these are on one side of the tray and are occupied by small round boxes (*chembul or cembul* in Malay), 5 cm high. A nut slicer or betel cutter (*kacip* in Malay) and a few betel leaves occupy the other half of the tray. The nut slicer looks like an ornate pair of nail scissors and often has handles shaped like a mythical winged horse (*Kuda Semberani* or Pegasus). Three of the small boxes are spherical, standing on a rimmed base, and have rounded lids: the fourth box is cylindrical with a flat top and is a little shorter than the others. The first round box usually contains thin slices of areca nut; the second contains lime paste, the third gambier and the fourth shredded tobacco. Sheppard (1972) defines *tepak sirih* as a special box, which has a partition made from gold, brass or wood carving to keep betel leaves and the ingredients of the betel chew. The materials used range from gold or silver to white metal, brass, fine grained wood or woven fibre.

In Malaysia, the tradition of chewing betel leaf may have begun before any foreign influences. The fact that betel leaf chewing became a popular leisure time pursuit during the glory days of the Malacca Sultanate clearly illustrates the fact that this diverse practise was a home grown activity. The Malay Annals describes an incident where a duel between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat was halted in mid-fight for the two opponents to recover from exhaustion. Hang Tuah chewed on a betel leaf bundle from Sultan Mahmud's betel box before he was ready to continue. As was

with Jebat when he was severely wounded after being stabbed by Tuah, he asked for betel leaf and lime to eat.

“...at this request, the Admiral of the Fleet (Laksamana) prepared a betel leaf bundle for the wounded Hang Jebat who eagerly accepted and chewed on it. Having finished eating the betel leaf, Hang Jebat asked for the bandages over his wounds to be loosened...” (Kassim Ahmad, 2008:367-368)

The tradition of betel, whether for consumption or its many other applications as an ancient cultural legacy has been around in this region for what is assumed to be over 3000 years. It is used by all levels of society. It is very likely that eating betel originated from a remote Malay island of Indonesia and then spread to the rest of the Malay Archipelago before moving on to other continents through trade and commerce. This is based on a theory proposed by Mubin Sheppard (former Keeper of Public Records and Director of the National Museum) in his book *Taman Indera: Malay Decorative and Past Time* (1972:164). He says that Malay traders introduced the practice of chewing betel leaf to Indian, Arab and Filipino traders over a thousand years ago.

Rationale of study

This research was carried out in order to analyse the interpretation and perception of *tepak sirih* in Malay wedding customs. This research will enable the community to realize the need for more researches and local studies of Malay culture. Until now, no complete research material has been documented regarding the interpretation and perception towards *tepak sirih* in Malay wedding customs.

There are literature revisions only in short articles and a few working papers which are too simple and considered as insignificant research. Lack on research, portrays that Malay society itself is unconscious of their very own culture and a tradition which has been established since quite a long time ago.

Significance of study

Tepak sirih has a lot of significance to the Malay community such as a symbol of social communication, friendship and accompanying gift in the marriage ceremony. *Tepak sirih* reflects Malay life as a whole and the values placed by the Malay community upon traditional customs (*adat*) and codes of conduct, the offering of *tepak sirih* indicates the strong values placed upon the need to have respect for others and upon refined behaviour. The offering as well as the acceptance of *tepak sirih* has had a tremendous significance for both the giver and receiver while much time is spent by the owner in the application of beauty and intricacy into the making of the whole *tepak sirih* to be presentable. Hence, it is clearly noted that each of the elements that goes into the making of *tepak sirih* has its own symbolic value.

The *tepak sirih* has traditionally found a place in almost every ceremonial institution of the Malays as well as social gatherings. It is obvious that *tepak sirih* plays an important role in the everyday life of the Malays. But as time passes, the importance of *tepak sirih* has been confined to ceremonial, traditional events and activities. Even the *sirih* plants are quite rare and seldom seen growing in Malay compounds and in modern Malay homes.

Problem statement

Tepak sirih has been used since a thousand years ago. Sheppard (1972) in his research of Malay wedding customs found that the *tepak sirih* has been used during engagements (*adat meminang*) and on the first night of the wedding (*malam pertama*). In his work, Sheppard explains the use of the *tepak sirih* as a symbol to express the meaning behind the customs performed in both of these events (*meminang* and *malam pertama*). These symbols can be found during when the entire ceremony is conducted. Furthermore, Syed Alwi Alhady (1962 & 1986) and Amran Kasimin (2002) state that the *tepak sirih* is placed in front of all other items during Malay weddings. They call the *tepak sirih* as a *kepala adat*. The ceremony will not take place until the *tepak sirih* is ready. The Malay community believe that if the ceremony does not carry out the *tepak sirih*, the people concerned do not know their customs and they call this type of people as '*tidak tahu adat*' (people who do not follow traditions).

This study needs to figure out why the *tepak sirih* is so important and why it is part and parcel of the Malay wedding customs. The Malay community call people who do not bring the *tepak sirih* during the

ceremony as '*orang tidak tahu adat*'. There could be a hidden meaning that the Malay community has a special bond with the *tepak sirih*. So this study tried to gather as much information from custom experts such as the '*mak andam*' (make-up person), traditional arts and customs performers and people from the older generation. The most important part is what exactly is the role of *tepak sirih* that it is so important in Malay weddings especially in engagements?

Research Objective

This study is to analyze upon interpretation and perceptions of the *tepak sirih* in the Malay wedding customs.

Research Methodology

Analysis from past literature was used to get the data. In this case secondary data are used as references and to retrieve information about the topic. This type of data includes previous studies, press releases, websites, magazines, published journals, handbooks and other related published materials. Primary data such as in depth semi-structured interviews, direct and personal interviews were carried out in which respondents were probed to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes and personal feelings on the topic. The researcher had an opportunity to interview Hajjah Piah, an 85 year old lady as a *Mak Andam* (make up person, traditional customs practitioner), Arpah Abdul Manap, 65 years old and Haji Mat Zain, 80 all old are village people of Kampung Seri Kedah.

The researcher was also involved in a few wedding ceremonies which included an engagement ceremony to carry out observations. The research was conducted during July and December 2012 at Kampung Seri Kedah, Sungai Leman, Sekinchan in Selangor Malaysia. The village consisted of over 400 hundred people. Interviews were conducted during the ceremony and was recorded and transcribed. Thematic technique was used to gather the information.

Literature Review

Embroidered *tepak sirih* are used to ask permission (*merisik*) when seeking to procure the hand of a maiden for marriage and is a must in all Malay engagement traditions. Betel leaves and ingredients of the betel chew such as sliced areca nut, lime, clove, gambier and tobacco would be arranged accordingly in a little cylindrical container called *cembul*. Sheppard (1972:164), in his work, found that the word for ‘to ask in marriage’ is *meminang* derived from *pinang* – the areca nut. Sheppard's (1972) analysis was similar with A. Samad Ahmad (1996) which stated in the Malay Annals (*Sejarah Melayu*) that the areca nut represented a man who is strong and brave same like the areca nut tree, straight and tall.

Furthermore A.Samad Ahmad (1996), explained that the King of Cham’s adopted son named Pau Gelang derived from a bunch of areca nut leaf (*mayang pinang*). Pau Gelang was crowned as the new King of Champa after His Majesty died. His Majesty Pau Gelang was a very heroic king. The *Tepak sirih* is to be carried out to the house of the girl’s family together with the engagement ring and other gifts in the engagement ceremony. *Merisik* (to ask permission) was to take part if a girl and a man never knew each other before. The ring may be placed in a separate receptacle or in a decorated betel bowl or tray, resting on a fan of betel leaves. Sheppard (1972), stated that *tepak sirih* was also placed next to the *khadi* in the *akad nikah* (wedding vows) ceremony. Unfortunately Sheppard does not explain the function of the *tepak sirih* being placed next to the *kadhi*. *Tepak sirih* also plays an important role in a sitting-on-stage ceremony.

According to Sheppard (1972), the *tepak sirih* is placed in front (centre) of the bride and groom. Usually the *tepak sirih* made from silver will be placed at the dias. There is no reason stated by Sheppard (1972), why the *tepak sirih* must be placed or has to be used in the sitting-on-stage ceremony. Sheppard (1972) also explained in his research that the *tepak sirih* was placed outside the bride and groom’s room (in the middle of the door of the room) on the first night. The *Tepak sirih* is a medium in Malay culture used as a communication tool to inform about the virginity of the bride. If on that first night the groom finds that his wife is not a virgin, he will turn the *tepak sirih* upside down the next morning. All these actions will take place instead of verbal communication. In Malay culture, they find that sometimes, actions can speak clearer than words.

Concept and Theoretical Framework: Marriage, Customs, Nonverbal Communication

Marriage is important in the formation of the family which later forms the society in a village, district, state and country. In Islam, marriage is common and occurs as a *Sunnatullah* in all of Allah S.W.T Creation, whether in humans, animals or plants. It is a manner chosen by Allah S.W.T as a way for His Creations to flourish and live a happy life.

Linton (1976:173), a member of the Western sociology defines marriage as:

“...marriage is a socially recognized union between persons of opposite sex. Marriage and family are really distinct institutions and must be considered separately..”.

Linton in the statement above reiterates that marriage is a consolidation between two people of the opposite sex. Based on marriage, it will create a relationship according to the rules of the spouses or physical bonding, the moral law between a man and a woman to the perfect life that eventually forms a family. Marriage is a legal process customary in the Malay community.

Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala reveals in (*Al-Quran Tajwid dan Terjemahan*, 2012) surah al-Baqarah, chapter 2 verse 187, Holy Qur'an which means:

“It has been made permissible for you the night preceding fasting to go to your wives [for sexual relations]. They are clothing for you and you are clothing for them. Allah knows that you used to deceive yourselves, so He accepted your repentance and forgave you. So now, have relations with them and seek that which Allah has decreed for you. And eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct to you from the black thread [of night]. Then complete the fast until the sunset. And do not have relations with them as long as you are staying for worship in the mosques. These are the limits [set by] Allah, so do not approach them. Thus does Allah make clear His ordinances to the people that they may become righteous.”

According to Tamar Djaja (1980:49), marriage for men is one aspect of life from which they would be able to release their pent up sexual desires, to get good descendants, to find peace and order, to build and develop the world. Marriage customs functions as a guide to proper

behaviour in performing wedding ceremonies. The first criterion is giving priority to the religion. This is measured through their creed and how they practice Islam. Do they perform their *solat*, their attitude and other similar thing? This is based on the following Hadith:

“When those whom you approve of their faith and their good morals come to propose, you ought to get them married. If you do not do so, verily it will undoubtedly give rise to defamation and mischief on the Earth”.
(Narrated by at-Tirmidhi: 2011)

The first marriage was between Our Father, the Prophet Adam A.S and Our Mother, Sayyidatina Hawwa R.A. Their marriage took place in Jannahtul Firdaus, the highest Paradise where Allah the Almighty married off Sayyidatina Hawwa (Radhiallahu Anha) to Prophet Adam A.S in the presence of the Angels (*Malaikats*) with the Mahar of Knowledge that Adam promised to teach Hawwa. Hawwa was created by Allah to complete Adam’s creation by giving him a mate to ensure Mankind’s continuity on Earth. Allah reveals in *Al-Quran Tajwid dan Terjemahan*(2012) *surah an-Nisa*, chapter 4 verse 1:

“O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and the wombs. Indeed Allah is ever, over you, an Observer.”

The *tepak sireh* (betel leaf container) is a Malay traditional symbol of officially seeking the consent and approval of the intended party to enter into a legal union of marriage between an eligible man and an equally acceptable woman as sanctioned by the dictates of the law and conditions by the Islamic religious authorities. Marriage customs function as a guide on how to behave in performing wedding ceremonies. The first criterion is giving priority to their religion. Prophet Muhammad S.A.W recommended Muslims to select those partners who priorities religion (Deen) and have good character.

“A woman may be married for four reasons: for her property, for her rank, for her beauty, and for her religion (and character), so marry the one who is best in the religion and character and prosper.” (Bukhari and Muslim: 2011)

Prophet Muhammad S.A.W assured the bounty of Allah to those who wish to get married and live a pure and clean life.

“Three groups of people Allah obliged Himself to help them: Mujahid in the cause of Allah, a worker to pay his debt, and the one who wants to marry to live a chaste life.”
(at-Tirmidhi: 2011)

Marriage is a natural institution commanded upon us by Allah the Almighty. It is the essence of the continuation of the survival of Mankind which began with the union of Our Father Adam Alaihis Salam and Our Mother Hawwa (may peace be upon them both). Marriage (*Nikah*) is an official, authorized, loving, lifelong partnership between a couple of consenting man and woman, based upon their mutual agreement to enter into such a socially recognized and approved union. It provides for the welfare of the couple and the lawful procreation of their children ensuring the continuation of future generations.

Each differing human society has their own rules, laws and customs of their own. Thus, the Malay community makes marriage as a family bonding in this world and in the Hereafter. The bond of the family is based on marriage carried out according to Islamic law and traditional customs of the Malay community. Islamic law and time honored traditions and customs are the main fundamentals in the Malay wedding. The process of the wedding must follow customary rules from start to finish.

Regulatory set communications in the Malay community are used during the process of the wedding. Each process involves customary practices starting from to seek permission (*adat merisik*) which shows the intention of the man to ask for the hand of the woman in marriage by officially sending his representatives to talk to the intended bride's family and see if they are accepting of his proposal. If the intended party is agreeable to such a proposal, they will then confirm on a suitable date and time to discuss further the initial betrothal ceremony. This second meeting is attended by both families in which matters like price of the dowry to be given to the bride and wedding expenses to be borne by both parties are settled. During each customary event, the Malays conduct their rituals and traditions using their rich legacy of flowery language and rhyming verses called *pantun* to convey their intentions.

The expressions used are usually worded in such a way that is able to convey their real desires to the intended party depending on the prevailing situations. In a positive situation where both parties are agreeable to the proposed union, beautiful pleasing *pantuns* are first started by the intending male's representatives who will be received in the appropriate manner by the female's family members or their spokesperson. This adds culture and value to the lives of the Malay people as a community. Even when the receiving parties are not agreeable to the proposal coming from the intending suitor, the Malays use their *pantuns* in a delicately worded refusal that might be offensive if said in a straight forward manner. The Malay community uses these methods in their daily lives, namely poetic verbal communication and nonverbal communication to express what they really mean.

For example if the father-in-law wants to give an advice to the son-in-law, the advice will be passed on to the children through phrases such as *pukul anak sindir menantu* which carries the meaning of a parent in law admonishing his or her own son or daughter when in actuality they meant to chastise their daughter or son in law! It's part and parcel of the Malay community's nonverbal form of communication. There is a lot of symbolism that is kept alive through the Malay wedding process and ceremonies.

Non-verbal communication is the intercession of the emblems or symbols such as betel, kris, food, music, scent. Furthermore verbal and nonverbal communication is part of the communication process. Knapp (2006), defines communication "*as encompassing almost all of human communication except the spoken or written word*".

Tepak sirih is an object of verbal and nonverbal communication. Without either verbal or nonverbal communication in wedding customs, the interpretation and perception of *tepak sirih* do not have a meaning. As stated by Matsumoto, G. Frank & Hwang (2011), nonverbal communication have three functions namely define, regulate and be the message. The Malay community uses lots of symbols as a part of nonverbal communication in their wedding customs. Unfortunately this research only covered the interpretation and perception of *tepak sirih* in Malay wedding customs. In the broader concept of customs, it can be defined to be as an encompassing way of life and culture in social, economic, political and religious beliefs. Customs is a traditional rule that society stands by in the revision of their lives. There are no documented customs to follow. Tradition is something to learn from the previous

generations in the community. It is provided through experience and by individuals in the community without much objection or inquiry.

Many researchers earlier have given the definitions or meanings of the custom that can be concluded as a lifestyle that has become a norm. He and Josselin de Jong (Hooker, 1970:3) classify custom to six parts which are: (a) Ancient Custom, (b) Created Custom, (c) Inherited Lore, (d) Decisions of Common Accord, (e) Ancient Law that awaits ratification (f) Decisions to be reached by later deliberation (Hooker, 1970:3). This concept is not limited to Muslim Malays only. According to Zainal Kling (2004), there is a broadened and in depth concept of custom which was recognised during the rule of the Netherlands in Indonesia. In addition, according to Hornby & Parnwell (1972), tradition is also the conduct and behaviour that is accepted by a society.

In addition Wan Abdul Kadir Wan Yusoff (2000:68), said that tradition is a social rule that contains a code of ethics and morality based on social values. The view is then explained by Noriati A.Rashid (2007:22) who discloses that the conduct of the community should meet the customs that has been found in the communal practice. If the situation is not the case, then the individual's contradictory views and opinions about all relevant customs will be eliminated. Obviously a custom is a form of tradition that has obtained the consent of the whole society in the community. For traditional Malay society, the concept of custom is often discerned by several different levels. Intrinsic customs are unchangeable for they are laws of nature such as 'the essence of fire is that it burns, water wets or dampens' the young get older'. All these are decided by Allah the Almighty as the Creator of the world. To the Malays, such intrinsic customs are always observed and made into guidelines of life as per the Malay proverb *alam terkembang jadikan guru* meaning "Let Nature teach you!"

The Malay society often study in detail and interpret nature that is connected with life. Therefore, it can be said that overall, the way of life or human culture in the real world also connects Mankind with the realm of the cosmic world and entirety that is symbolic. Custom becomes an aspect of life not only for Mankind in their natural life circle but also for the entire creation such as animals and plants. In fact, such customary aspects exist in the movements of Mother Nature itself via natural disasters such as typhoons, thunder and lightning and everything else in the cosmos is in accordance to the customs of nature. So, it can be said that the law of nature is also a custom.

In a broader concept, communication occurs when the meaning or message is conveyed through various ways and forms. This means that communication is not just explicit symbols but also contains embedded aspects, such as behaviour, signs or symbols that carry meaning and these have to be thoroughly interpreted. In this regard, communications are categorized into two, which are verbal and nonverbal communications.

Barker & Gaut (2001), define human communication as a biologically and culturally based, complex, continuing, and interactive process in which two or more people use verbal and nonverbal symbols to shape, reinforce, or change one another's behaviors, either immediately or over time, for the purpose of satisfying their respective needs and, in turn, ensuring the survival of both the species and the individuals. This definition has been redefined from previous version which was developed by Larry Lee Barker (1984). Knapp & Hall (2002), define communication generally as having both a verbal and nonverbal component. Verbal communication, often refers to the words we use in communication. Nonverbal communication refers to communication that is produced by some means other than words (eye contact, body language, or vocal cues, for example).

Argyle (1988), states that nonverbal behaviours have five primary functions: expression of emotions which are emotions expressed mainly through the face, body, and voice; communication of interpersonal attitudes that is the establishment and maintenance of relationships which is often done through nonverbal signals (tone of voice, gaze, and such like); accompany and support speech which is vocalization and nonverbal behaviors are synchronized with speech in conversation (nodding one's head or using phrases like "uh-huh" when another is talking; self-presentation which is presenting oneself to another through nonverbal attributes like appearance and rituals which is the use of greetings, handshakes or other rituals. But then Seiler, Beall, & Mazer (2013), define nonverbal communication as all conducts, acts, or properties of an object (except words) which have messages with social meanings. This means that nonverbal communication involves all forms of conduct, objects, properties, message or symbol, part of words or the use of languages, either in the form of speech or writing. Nonverbal communication can be divided into several categories: communication that involves the facial expressions, gestures, body movements, glances of the eye, physical properties, haptics, olfactics, proxemics, territoriality and artefacts.

To analyze the role of *tepak sirih* as a nonverbal communication in Malay engagement, the semiotic theory is applied. Linguistic and culture where both review about signs and symbols (including human beings talk, write, sing, smell, body gestures, images, music, arts and so on) in which humans express their feelings, thoughts, ideas and ideologies. It includes the study of how meaning is translated through a system of signs and symbols that exist and are understood during perception and interpretation of the situation that occurred. Semiotic analysis focuses on cultural and psychological patterns that underlie languages, arts and other cultural expressions that are used as tools for representing and interpreting a phenomenon. Among famous semioticians are Ferdinand de Saussure, 1857-1913 (the father of modern linguistics), Charles Sanders Peirce, 1839-1914 (the founder of the doctrine of pragmatism doctrine) and Ronald Barthers (1915 -1980). Semiotics and communications have a lot in common because they share concepts such as coding, symbol, meaning, decoding, perception and interpretation. Although the emphasis may differ, a semiotic study may be applied to a broad range of other disciplines, including linguistics, art, literature, anthropology and sociology.

Findings and Discussion

Embroidered tepak sirih which is a betel leaf container covered with gold embroidered red velvet is still being used in Malay wedding customs. The type of *tepak sirih* is still the same as what Sheppard (1972) mentioned. It can be said that the Malay community in the area of the research still preserves and practices the customs that they have been taught since a thousand years ago. These research findings are similar to previous research, such as Sheppard (1972).

Furthermore the meaning of using *tepak sirih* in wedding customs such as in bethrotal (meminang) ceremony is still the same which is to start a conversation, to ask permission, to agree, to inform and to unite. On to inform for instance, the *tepak sirih* symbolises a formality of relationship between a man and a woman towards their marriage.

Engagement customs in Malay community in Kampung Seri Kedah, Sungai Leman, Sekinchan, Selangor are slightly similar to the engagement customs of the Malay communities in other parts of Malaysia. They used nonverbal communication to inform the public that the couple was ready to get married according to the Malay traditional customs. The ceremony starts with both parties (male and female representatives) taking

their seats, placing the *tepak sirih* in front of them (center), giving the customary Salam (greetings) and usually the female's side will ask the visiting party as to what are their intentions in coming to their home or residence using the traditional poetic Malay *pantun*.

The representative from the male suitor's side will reply using an appropriate *pantun* as well giving the hint such as 'We find a fragrant flower blossoming in your garden. Is the flower spoken for? If not, we would like to pluck it to decorate our home.'



Photo 1: To seek permission ceremony.

If the receiving party is willing to accept the suitor's intention and if their daughter is agreeable to such an intended union, the female's representative would reply in the affirmative response by saying 'Yes. We do have a blossoming fragrant flower in our garden and yes it is still available. May we enquire as to which bee is interested?' Such is the beauty of traditional Malay heritage and customs where prose and rhymes make up their cultured way of life and every insinuation, every symbolic gesture or usage of items such as the *tepak sirih* hold much meanings and if delivered in the appropriate and adequate manner following time honored methods and procedures, their objectives will always be met and achieved. That is the cultural significance of the *tepak sirih*.

After such an exchange, the visiting suitor's side will state as to who is the potential groom and confirm each other's identities and state of readiness to proceed further with the preliminaries of conducting a time honored, much cherished and still kept alive of the Malay wedding ceremonies. The receiving party will offer their guests drinks and invite them to refreshments whilst their conversation then will proceed to the

setting of a date where the male suitor's family will come to negotiate the costs sought by the potential bride's family in agreeing on the *Mas Kahwin* (dowry) that the groom will pay to the bride as stated by the religious rulings and the presentation of gifts to the intended bride in the form of *hantaran*.

Representatives from the male's side would bring a few items as gifts to accompany the *tepak sirih* and a ring for the engagement ceremony. Exchanging gifts from two sides (male and female) was conducted after the representatives of both party were satisfied with the discussion. The discussion during the engagement ceremony would be related to the bride's dowry, date and time of wedding ceremony and also the *mahar* (in Islam this is a compulsory gift from the groom to the bride). Implicitly engagement customs symbolize that the man and the woman would become husband and wife within the period of time that was agreed to in a family organized ceremony.



Photo 2: *Tepak Sirih* covered with gold embroidered velvet are used during the ceremony.

The engagement ceremony also informs the community that after a certain period of time, they would have a wedding ceremony. This ceremony also informs the public that the man and the woman are officially having a serious relationship. The ceremony also shows that the Malay community accomplish things together and help each other in their community. It's the moment of *esprit de corps* (feelings of loyalty, enthusiasm, and devotion to a group among people who are members of the group), where everyone would rally together to help make the union a success.

A rectangular shape of *tepak sirih* was used in the ceremony. Only *tepak sirih* covered with gold embroidered velvet are used during the ceremony. The ingredients of the *tepak sirih* have to be placed accordingly as per figure 1 (below). According to Hajah Piah (80 years old) the arrangement of the ingredients in the *tepak sirih* symbolizes the rules in the Malay community. Furthermore the *tepak sirih* with the *cembuls* symbolise a house in the Malay engagement customs.

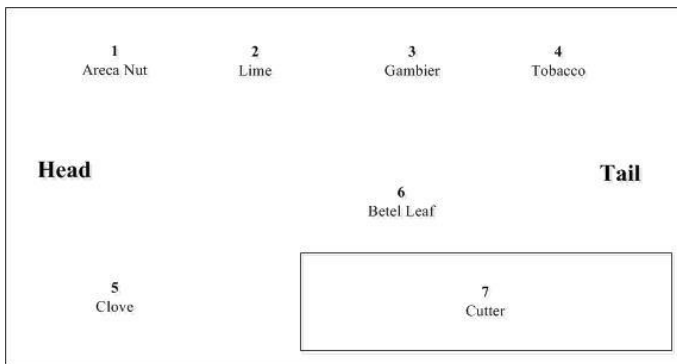


Figure 1: The arrangement of *cembuls* containing the items in a *tepak sirih* (Source: Fieldwork, 2012)

The *cembul* (small brass containers) in the *tepak* hold areca nut slices, lime, gambier, tobacco, cloves and betel leaves. All these must be put in correctly and in order. This is the rule that a traditional Malay customs practitioner needs to follow as per what the Malay proverbs say *mengaji dari alif* (learn from the first alphabet)'. This also shows the uniqueness of the Malay community. Everything they do must follow the ancestral rules and regulations. *Tepak sirih* in the engagement customs in Malay community plays an important role to start a conversation, to agree, to accept or to reject as well as a symbol of nonverbal communication. As time passes and the Malay community in the research area has been exposed to other popular culture, the *tepak sirih* still remains as the most important item in the Malay wedding custom. This shows that Malays still believe and practice their customs according to what they have been taught from their ancestors.

Conclusion

Tepak sirih is still an important item in the engagement custom in the Malay communities until present. At this stage, it is to get a certain answer whether the 'request' by the man is accepted by the woman. Communication (verbal and nonverbal) in using the *tepak sirih* as a symbolic intermediary is very harmonious when carried out in this prescribed manner. The study shows that each culture created by society actually shows the harmonious nature of the people who created it.

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