

**SOCIAL AND CULTURAL  
PRACTICES  
IN MALAYSIAN SOCIETY**

(SECOND SERIES)





**RUKUNEGARA**  
**(NATIONAL IDEOLOGY)**

OUR NATION, MALAYSIA, being dedicated:

- to achieving a greater unity of all her peoples;
- to maintaining a democratic way of life;
- to creating a just society in which the wealth of the nation shall be equitably shared;
- to ensuring a liberal approach to her rich and diverse cultural traditions;
- to building a progressive society which shall be oriented to modern science and technology;

WE, her peoples, pledge our united efforts to attain these ends guided by these principles:

**BELIEF IN GOD**

**LOYALTY TO KING AND COUNTRY**

**UPHOLDING THE CONSTITUTION**

**RULE OF LAW**

**GOOD BEHAVIOUR AND MORALITY**

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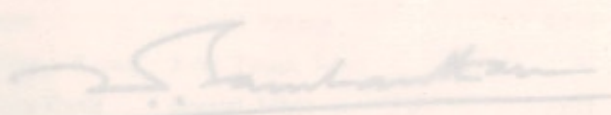
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(Tun V. T. Sambanthan)

14th June, 1977

Adviser

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Back Keng How Kooi

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"We are dedicated to ensuring the existence and growth of a liberal society in which its members are free to practise and profess their own religions, customs and cultures consistent with the requirements of national unity."

Back E. C. Holloway

Back John Joseph Augustin

**Rukunegara**

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Puan Zawiah Chik

Puan Zainah Alias

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JABATAN PERPADUAN NEGARA  
JABATAN PERDANA MENTERI

Foreword

We are glad to present the second Booklet in our series on "Social and Cultural Practices in Malaysian Society".

Whilst they are not meant to be comprehensive the series will provide some useful information about the various practices amongst Malaysians.

The first Book related to some of the Customs and Practices of the Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic groups of Malaysia.

This Booklet relates to the Orang Asli, Eurasian and Thai ethnic groups of Malaysia.

Knowledge of the cultural practices of the various ethnic groups would help promote better understanding amongst the people in our country.

I would like to thank and congratulate the editorial board for providing the material for this publication and the artist for his sketches.

(Tun V. T. Sambanthan)

14th June, 1977

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## Orang Asli

According to the 1974 census conducted by the Department of Orang Asli Affairs, the Orang Asli population of Malaysia numbers 56,927. The population is divided into three major ethno-linguistic groups. Each of the major groupings are in turn further divided into smaller tribal units as follows:

### A. THE SENOIS

<i>Group Names</i>	<i>Geographical Distribution</i>	<i>Total Population</i>
1. Semai ... ..	Southern Perak and Northwest Pahang ... ..	16,497
2. Temiar ... ..	Northern Perak and Southern Kelantan ... ..	10,586
3. Che Wong ... ..	Central Pahang ... ..	215
4. Jahut ... ..	Central Pahang ... ..	2,280
5. Seiq Beri ... ..	Central Pahang/Trengganu ... ..	1,699
6. Mah Meri ... ..	Coastal Selangor ... ..	1,356
	<b>Total ... ..</b>	<b>32,633</b>

### B. THE PROTO-MALAYS

1. Temuan ... ..	Selangor and Negeri Sembilan	8,698
2. Semelai ... ..	Central Pahang and Negeri Sembilan ... ..	2,874
3. Jakun ... ..	Coastal Pahang ... ..	8,719
4. Orang Kanaq	Kota Tinggi, Johor ... ..	36
5. Orang Kuala ... ..	Coastal Johor ... ..	1,612
6. Orang Seletar	Coastal Johor ... ..	374
	<b>Total ... ..</b>	<b>22,313</b>

Some Malaysian Thais still maintain close ties with their kin in Thailand but many, however, have lost contact with their ancestral origin there. The customs, traditions and religious festivals practised and observed by Malaysian Thais today may originate from those parts of Thailand where their ancestors came. Hence variations exist in the customs practised by Malaysian Thais in different locality.

However such variations would not be covered in this booklet. The materials presented merely serve to provide a general picture for the Malaysian public to better understand the way of life of Malaysians of Thai origin.

## 2. VISITS

### Orang Asli

Mutual visits, especially among friends and close relatives is a very common feature in the social lives of the Orang Asli. This is to be expected within a society where face-to-face contacts and relationships are emphasized.

Casual visits to one's neighbours and friends are normally done in the evenings when most of the Orang Asli are just back from their various occupations. Being mostly farmers, they are seldom home during the day.

Upon arriving, the visitor normally makes a small coughing noise as a means to inform the host that he is just outside the house. It is most impolite to enter without prior approval of the host. The visitor may also indicate his presence by calling out the head of the household as the "father of so and so," rather than referring to the person by his actual name. ("so and so" is the eldest child in the family). Thus a visitor may call out "Is Alang's father at home?" if the host's eldest child is Alang.

Among the Orang Asli, evenings and the early part of the night are for resting and relaxation. They are happy to receive visitors at this time. If a family is in the midst of a meal when visitors arrive, the visitors are expected to join in. To abstain would be bad manners.

Visits of this nature are usually for the purpose of sharing recent experiences as well as for reminiscences. These visits are sometimes turned into learning/transmitting magico-religious rites sessions.

Apart from the usual and normal visits, the Orang Asli actively encourage visits during specific periods such as:

- (i) Village ceremonies;
- (ii) Fruit season;
- (iii) Harvesting season;
- (iv) End of Taboo celebrations etc.

There are, nevertheless, occasions and times when visits and visitors are definitely forbidden. These unsuitable times are:

- (i) The period before the Harvest Ceremony (The arrival of "outsiders" at this time would anger the Rice Spirit);
- (ii) Outsiders and visitors are not allowed to enter a house while the "Sewang" is in session;
- (iii) Outsiders are not allowed to enter a village while the "Puja kampung" ceremony is in session. This is to prevent the possibility of bringing in new ghosts and spirits into the village;
- (iv) Outsiders are not allowed to enter a house where a person is gravely ill. The fear is that outsiders might bring in new ghosts and spirits with him.

In general, there are signs indicating that visitors are not welcome. For example, leaves hung across a doorway or strung around the house would indicate that someone in the house is gravely ill and strangers or visitors are therefore not allowed in.

### **The Malaysian Eurasian**

Malaysian Eurasians, like their fellow-Malaysians of other races, visit one another especially during festive seasons. The form of greeting is normally by handshake. Among members

of the family and very close friends, it is very often a kiss on the cheek. Conversation normally takes place in a sitting room in which men and women participate freely. There is no segregation of the sexes. If drinks are served it is the host who attends to this. The hostess sees to the food, sweet meats or titbits. Children who accompany their elders do not take part in the conversation but are directed to play with the host's children in another part of the house or in the garden. It is not unusual for guests to bring a gift to the family or the children when the families have not seen each other for a long time.

### **The Malaysian Thai**

Like other Malaysians, the Malaysian Thais also practise and encourage mutual visits among friends, relatives and neighbours.

When meeting or visiting, guests and hosts exchange greetings with the word "Sawaddi" while the two hands are placed together as in an attitude of prayer just under the chin, and there is a little bow of the head. When greeting elders, hands are clasped a little higher up. However, non-Thai visitors may just politely call out the host's name.

Before entering the house, visitors should leave their shoes outside; either at the door or at the steps unless they are allowed to do otherwise.

When there are other guests in the house, fellow visitors should exchange greetings and get acquainted with one another. If the new arrivals have to walk past the seated guests, it would be polite to incline their heads while passing, and apologise for having to ask for a way.

It is considered impolite for a person seated in a chair to cross his legs so as to expose his soles, particularly in the company of elders. While seated on the floor or a mat, men normally sit with legs inter-crossed while ladies should sit with their legs folded backwards and to the side. Children should sit at places lower than the elders.

The host and hostess must see to drinks or tit-bits immediately on the guest's arrival. It would be impolite to refuse. To taste each kind of food served is a gesture that is very much appreciated.

On departure, greetings are again exchanged, with the host and hostess wishing the visitors a safe journey and extending their welcome for future visits while the latter respond and reaffirm their desire to return.

### 3. BIRTH

#### Orang Asli

A husband usually informs the whole village when his wife is due to give birth. After receiving such news, the women-folk in the village normally visit her and render every possible assistance necessary.

The Orang Asli, as a rule, do not like visitors to overtly praise a new-born baby. It is believed that expressions such as ". . . . . what a beautiful, bouncy baby . . . . ." invite the evil spirits to "take away" the baby. This "taking away" is manifested through fever, illness or ultimately, death.

While a wife is pregnant, the couple would have to observe certain taboos. Generally the taboos centre on actions that might make delivery of the baby difficult. A husband should not use a casting net to catch fish during this period, and the couple cannot hunt and eat certain jungle animals such as the deer. The Orang Asli believe that if these taboos are violated, the child would be born with certain physical features resembling those of the animals hunted.

#### The Malaysian Eurasian

The arrival of a baby in a family is always a joyful event. There would be constant visits from relatives and friends to congratulate both the parents and to admire the baby. Bouquets of flowers are sometimes sent to the mother.

As many Malaysian Eurasians are Christians, mainly of the Roman Catholic faith, a religious ceremony known as Baptism takes place about a fortnight after the birth of the child. The baby is taken to a church by its God-parents. God-parents are chosen by the parents, and in most cases are either relatives or very close friends. It is common practice for the mother to be "churched" immediately after the baptismal rite.

The baptismal or "christening" robe of the first child is usually made out of the mother's wedding veil, and this robe is subsequently used for the baptism of the other children born into the family. The baptism ceremony is celebrated at the parents' house in the form of a tea party or a dinner. It is common practice to take photographs as a record of the occasion. At the party, a christening cake and wine are served. It is customary for well-wishers to bring gifts for the baby. Sometimes the party ends with singing, dancing and merry-making.

### **The Malaysian Thai**

At the birth of a baby, relatives and friends would visit the family and normally bring presents for the new-born.

Dusk is considered a bad time for such visits. New-born babies are not taken outdoors at dusk and parents ensure that babies do not cry at such time. Malaysian Thais dislike their babies to be praised with words like "pretty, cute, lovely, etc." or with description like heavy, if the baby is plump. Instead words of indirect praise like "what an ugly one" or "what a sight" can be accepted.

Seven days after birth, a "cradling" ceremony is usually held. Saffron rice would be prepared and distributed to friends and relatives to mark the occasion. The baby's head is shaved and another ceremony called "earth-stepping" ceremony is also performed. However, such ceremonies are no longer undertaken fully by some parents.

Expectant mothers have certain taboos to observe. It is important for them to avoid from being frightened and from doing bad deeds so that they would be free from bad influence.

#### 4. MARRIAGE

##### **Orang Asli**

The Orang Asli always associate wedding ceremonies with celebrations and happiness. Wedding rites and ceremonies, however, differ from group to group. The ceremonies range from the highly formalised affair among the Temuans of Negeri Sembilan to the most simple ritual of the Temiars in Kelantan. Among the Orang Asli in Selangor, the newly-married couple is subjected to hours of advice-giving by most of the elderly relatives present. The advice centres on how to be good spouses, parents and other related matters.

Most Orang Asli groups seldom issue formal invitations to wedding ceremonies. Everybody in the village is expected to join and help in the merry-making. Food would be served to all until the supply is exhausted.

##### **The Malaysian Eurasian**

As many Malaysian Eurasians are Christians, most marriages are solemnised in church. Prior to the marriage, there is an engagement ceremony when a ring is presented by the groom-to-be to his betrothed. The engagement ceremony is not essential but where it is practised, it is simple in form and is witnessed by members of the family of both parties. The simple ceremony is then followed by a small party in the form of a dinner or tea.

When the date for the wedding has been fixed, invitations are sent out. It was the practice in the past for the bride's parents to make all the arrangements for the wedding and to bear the expenses of the ceremony. Invitations, therefore, are sent out in their names. The common practice today, however, is for both parties to jointly bear the wedding expenses and the invitations are sent out in the names of both the bride's and groom's parents. It is usual for the groom to pay for the bride's trousseau.

Wedding ceremonies conducted in a church are either held in the evening or morning. At the wedding ceremony, attention is centred on the bride and the groom. Besides the gentleman and lady sponsors, who stand as witnesses of the

marriage, a bridesmaid, a flower girl and pageboy make up the wedding "group". The number of bridesmaid, flower-girls and pageboys vary according to the wishes of the wedding couple.

The bride and groom, according to old fashioned belief and superstition, are not permitted to see each other the whole day and night preceding the wedding ceremony. Elders believe that if this practice is observed, it will bring happiness and long life to the couple. On the wedding day, the groom arrives at the church at an agreed time to await the bride. He is accompanied by the bestman as well as his family and relatives. The bestman keeps the rings until they are required at the ceremony.

After the bride is dressed in her wedding gown, her mother places a crown of orange blossoms on her head and covers her face with a veil. This act symbolises her innocence. The bride arrives at the church with her father who proudly walks down the aisle of the church with his daughter on his right arm. He then hands her over to the bridegroom while the sponsors, bestman, bridesmaids, flowergirls and guests rise. The priest then begins the nuptial service with prayers and blessings at the end of which the couple vows to accept each other for better or for worse to the end of their lives. The rings are then blessed and exchanged, placing the ring on the third pronounced finger of the left hand. They are then man and wife.

After the church ceremony a reception is held. At the entrance of the reception hall or home the guests are received by the parents of the couple.

When guests have assembled, the bridal couple and party arrive. The wedding cake is cut and served with wine. A speech is made by the gentleman sponsor or by an elder of the community who refers to the outstanding qualities of the couple or their parents, and calls upon the guests to drink to the health and happiness of the couple. The bridegroom then thanks relatives and friends for their attendance and gifts. This is followed by a speech by the bestman who speaks on behalf of the bridesmaid and calls upon the guests to drink to the health of the bridesmaid. If the reception is in the evening a buffet dinner is normally served. This

is followed by music and dancing. The bride and groom then leave for their honeymoon. On leaving the reception hall they are showered with confetti and the bride throws her bouquet over her shoulder to the gathering. It is said that the maiden who catches it is the lucky one. She will be a bride next.

### **The Malaysian Thai**

According to the Malaysian Thai custom, before a marriage is solemnised, ceremonies of betrothal, exchanging of rings and sending of dowry are performed on dates preceding the wedding day. It is customary for the groom to refrain from bargaining the amount of dowry quoted by the bride's family. The preliminaries and negotiations for a marriage are normally entrusted to an experienced intermediary.

The Malaysian Thais are very particular about the day and time for a marriage ceremony. The auspicious date is decided upon in accordance with the Thai Calendar after consultation with priests, medicine-men or experienced elders. The choice of a good day is believed to be instrumental in bringing good luck and happiness to the couple.

Marriage ceremonies vary from place to place. The following is the general procedure practised.

A marriage ceremony is normally conducted in the bride's house under the charge of a medicine-man.

On commencement of the ceremony, the bridal couple offers prayers to Lord Buddha before a special altar asking for blessing, and praying for Him to bear witness to the union. The couple then bend forward while kneeling, placing their forearms or heads on low stools or pillows, with their palms placed together in an attitude of prayers.

The medicine-man then places a silken cord girdle around the couple's heads and join both girdles together. This symbolises their union as man and wife. After pronouncing the marriage, the medicine-man expounds on the golden rules of a lasting and happy marriage and advises the couple to abide by such rules in order to lead a happy married life.

After the marriage rites, priests who have been invited for the occasion chant prayers of blessing and sprinkle holy water with flower petals on the kneeling couple.

Elders and guests, led by parents from both sides, then pour lustral water filled in a conch shell over the hands of the couple. While doing so they wish the couple good luck and happiness.

To wind up the ceremony, a mass prayer would be conducted with the guests and priests participating in chanting holy verses.

A wedding dinner is held in the evening.

## 5. DEATH

### Orang Asli

When death occurs in a village, everyone would cease to work. It is believed that bad luck would befall a person who continues with his work such as hunting, farming or building a house after being told that a fellow villager has died.

Everyone, especially children need to be protected against ghosts and spirits during this period. "Protection" is normally provided for by putting charcoal ash on the eye brows, chest and soles of feet, and "kapor" on the ears. By so doing, the person would be protected from the ghosts and spirits believed to be present in large numbers in the village during such time.

The burial ceremony would be witnessed by the majority of the villagers. For six consecutive days after the burial, the family of the deceased would light a fire and place a constant supply of food by the grave-side.

Fire is also kept burning in the house of the deceased. Fine sand is sprayed all over the house especially along the walls. The fine sand is thrown with the objective of chasing away ghosts. It is believed that ghosts fear the possibility of fine sand getting into their eyes. This operation

continues for six days. After the sixth day, the Orang Asli believe that the ghosts and spirits will no longer remain within the vicinity.

### **The Malaysian Eurasian**

A death is always a sad occasion in a family and in the community. When a person dies the body is cleansed and dressed in the best clothing. If a maiden dies, she is dressed in a bridal outfit, complete with crown, veil and a bridal bouquet. The body is laid to rest in the hall of the house either on a specially erected platform or in a coffin. After the body has been laid to rest, prayers are said by the relatives and friends for the repose of the soul of the dead. Before the body is taken to a church, a priest and those present also pray for the repose of the soul of the dead. The body is then blessed and the coffin closed. In some families, when a bachelor or spinster dies, cake and wine are served before the body is removed to the church. This signifies that had the deceased lived a normal life span, the cake and wine would have been served at his/her wedding.

The body is taken to the church in a hearse followed in procession by the immediate members of the deceased's family, relatives and friends. At the church, prayers are again said for the dead as well as for the family of the deceased. Normally the priest speaks of the deceased as well as of the family. After the church service, the body is taken to the cemetery for burial. Before the body is lowered into the grave, the grave is blessed; more prayers are said, and the coffin is lowered into the grave. Before the grave is filled, all present throw in some earth, signifying the saying "Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return".

After the burial, prayers are said for seven continuous days at the home of the deceased. On the seventh day, a church service is normally held for the dead person. It is common practice today for this service to be held at the home of the deceased. On this day, relatives and friends would visit the grave where flowers are placed, candles are lit, and prayers said.

### **The Malaysian Thai**

On receiving the news about a death, relatives and friends are encouraged to pay respect to the deceased and to offer condolences to the bereaved family.

The Malaysian Thai community has its own customs and procedure in funeral arrangements. Funeral rites can be performed either at the house of the deceased or at a Buddhist temple (hereafter referred to as "wat"). However, for unnatural deaths (e.g. deaths from accident or killing) funeral rites are performed at the "wat" and not at the house.

When a person dies, the body is washed. It is then dressed in a manner such that the front of the dress is worn at the back and vice versa. The toes and thumbs are tied with raw threads. The palms are placed on the chest in an attitude of prayers with fingers interwoven. A bunch containing a candle, three joss-stick and a flower is placed in between the palms. This acts as a "road-opener" when the dead goes to the next world. Priests are invited to chant prayers after the body is put in a coffin.

The Malaysian Thais believe that when a body is cremated the soul is released. However, the corpses of pregnant mothers, young children and those of unnatural deaths are buried.

Cremation is normally done in the "wat" compound or at the cemetery. Relatives and friends are encouraged to accompany the coffin to the cremation site.

The cremation pyre is arranged in seven layers with the coffin placed on top. Before the pyre is lighted, priests would chant prayers of blessing for the soul. After the prayers, the medicine-man initiates the lighting after walking round the pyre three times. Family members, relatives and friends then follow, using candle, joss-stick and pieces of fragrant wood as fuel.

On the day of cremation, those returning from the site should do so quietly by not inviting others to join them. Things forgotten or inadvertently left at the site must not be retrieved. On reaching home they are to wash their faces, hands and feet before entering.

Three days after cremation, members of the deceased's family return to the site to collect any unburnt pieces of bone. The bones are cleaned and sprinkled with perfume and fragrant powder and then stored in an earthen urn. The urn is placed in a special structure known as "bua" in the "wat" compound where the family can pay homage to the soul of the dead.

The same night, priests are invited to the house for prayers and to "cleanse" it.

## 6. CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

### Orang Asli

The great majority of the Orang Asli are animists. Supernatural beings such as ghosts, spirits and others have a central role in the daily life of the Orang Asli. Their world view and cultural ethos are greatly influenced by their physical environment in which they live. In other words, hills and mountains, forests and jungles, thunder and lightnings, and other natural phenomena all have special functions within the Orang Asli society and culture. That being the case, most ceremonies celebrated by the Orang Asli centre around such matters or situations. Among the more important ceremonies are:

#### (i) *Genggulang Day*

The Orang Asli in South Perak believe that spirits, ghosts and other deities are instrumental and responsible for their health and general well-being. To ensure peace in the village, "genggulang day" is held at the beginning of every new year. On this day there would be a general merry-making and plenty of food would be served both for the spirits and deities as well as for the villagers. The ceremony normally lasts some 24 hours. During the ceremony special rites and rituals are carried out.

#### (ii) *Rice harvesting ceremony*

A big ceremony involving feasting and dancing is always held in each village at the start of the harvesting period. All

work not connected to the feast has to cease. Preparation for the large scale feasting and merry-making involves everyone in the village.

(iii) *Berlancang (Beach Festival)*

All Orang Asli groups living on the coasts spend one day a year making peace with the sea-spirits and Gods. The ceremony involves bathing and feasting on the beach. The climax of the festival is the launching of small model boats laden with food and other titbits into the sea as offerings.

(iv) *Opening of new farming areas*

Being mainly agriculturalists, the opening of new farming areas is regarded as an important ceremonial occasion. Opening up new areas must be done with great care and ceremony, in order not to antagonise the spirits and deities that might be living within these areas. Offerings, burning of incense and related rituals are performed.

(v) *Kelarai Ceremony*

This is a ceremony similar to the "genggulang". Whereas the "genggulang" belongs to the Semais of Perak, the "Kelarai ceremony" is celebrated by the Orang Asli of South Pahang. It is normally held in the middle of the year.

(vi) *Sekoi Ceremony*

Sekoi or millet is the staple diet of the Orang Asli of Kelantan and Northern Perak. Every year, at the beginning of the Sekoi season, this group celebrates by having mass-cooking, feasting and ceremonial dancing.

(vii) *Mareg Ceremony*

Once a year, around the month of July, the Orang Asli of Pahang organise a major fishing drive. Everyone would be involved. The catch is brought back to the village to be cooked and consumed on a communal basis. This is another occasion for merry-making.

### (viii) *Fruit-gathering Season*

During the fruit season the Orang Asli normally leave their villages for a few days and proceed to the jungle to collect fruits.

### (ix) *Circumcision Ceremony*

Circumcision is a rite which many Orang Asli youths in Southern Pahang (the Semelais) have to undergo. The ceremony is normally done for groups of youths who have attained a certain age grade. Feasting, merry-making and dancing following the actual circumcision ceremony.

### (x) *Tampoi Ceremony*

Tampoi is a type of jungle fruit. The Orang Asli associates the fruit with the souls of tigers. They believe that the fruit season needs to be celebrated in order to ensure that tigers do not disturb the villagers. Hence the need for a special ceremony. The tampoi fruit is normally fermented to become a rather potent drink which is consumed in large quantity during the ceremony. Tampoi ceremonies normally last for three whole days.

### (xi) *Berjerom Ceremony*

Being largely animists, a "Medicine-man" still plays a very important role and has an important function in Orang Asli communities. The initiation of a new "Medicine-man" is therefore an important occasion in the ceremonial life of a village. "Berjerom" is the initiation ceremony whereby a new "Medicine-man" is officially declared and announced to the community.

### (xii) *Burung Rakit Ceremony*

"Burung Rakit" is a type of bird that migrates from the sea into the interior during certain season of the years. When this season comes, the whole village becomes a "hunting-unit" and goes out to hunt these birds. All other activities cease and everyone treats the occasion as a time for enjoyment.

## The Malaysian Eurasian

The Malaysian Eurasian, being of mixed origin, has a mixed culture. Their basic culture however stems from the oldest type of Malaysian Eurasians, particularly the Portuguese of Malacca. The culture is very much influenced by their religion.

Based on the fact that most Malaysian Eurasians are Christians by religion, most of their festivals are related to Christianity. The four major festivals celebrated are as follows:

- (i) Christmas
- (ii) Feast of St. Peter
- (iii) Feast of St. Francis Xavier
- (iv) Good Friday.

### (i) Christmas

Christmas is the most joyful festival celebrated by the community. Prior to Christmas Day (December 25th) homes are decorated, and one of the essential decorations is the Christmas tree. Parcelled gifts for relatives and members of the family are placed at the foot of the tree. These are opened only at the break of Christmas day.

Food is prepared for the occasion and comprises various traditional dishes such as stuffed turkey, "team", "feng", devil curry, mixed vegetables and pickled chilies. Other sweet food like fruit cake, "sujee" cake, pineapple jam tarts, sea weed and other delicacies are also prepared for the occasion.

It is not unusual for the whole family to gather at their parents' home to celebrate Christmas. Among Catholics, the highlight of Christmas celebrations is the attending of a church service at midnight on the eve of Christmas day. On returning home after this service greetings are exchanged, after which the family sits for a midnight supper. Gifts are then exchanged. It is customary in some homes to continue the celebrations with singing and dancing. At times carolers who visit homes to sing the joy of Christmas, also join in the celebration.

For the younger children who are asleep, "Santa Claus" brings presents which they had requested. For them the joy of unpacking their gifts the next morning is something they look forward to with great excitement.

Christmas day is an "open day" whereby the Christian members of the community play hosts to their fellow Malaysians.

### (ii) *Feast of St. Peter*

This festival is celebrated in Malacca as it is associated closely with persons who depend on fishing for their livelihood. In the "Portugese Settlement", along the Bandar Hilir coast where several Eurasians are fisherman, this festival is celebrated on a grand scale. The boats of the fishermen are blessed and prayers are offered for a good season and for the safety of the fishermen. Gaily decorated boats leave Bandar Hilir coast and sail to the settlement where the ceremony is held. After the religious part of the ceremony is over, the settlers display their cultural dances, music and hold a fair at which home-cooked food is sold.

### (iii) *Feast of St. Francis Xavier*

This feast is celebrated not only by Eurasians but also by other Malaysian Christian. The celebrations are held in Malacca at the ruins of the church of St. Paul situated on a hillock overlooking the sea where the body of St. Francis Xavier was buried before it was taken to Goa in India for permanent burial.

The ceremony begins with a procession from the Church of St. Francis Xavier in town. A relic of the saint which is kept in the church is carried to St. Paul's Hill where a high mass is celebrated and the congregation is given an opportunity to kiss the relic of the saint.

It is not unusual to see food and drinks served without charge outside the church as these are forms of repayment which the pilgrims offer for the favours they have received.

Many Malaysians from all parts of the country and from all walks of life attend the festival. Though the feast officially falls on the 3rd of December, the celebration is at times held on the Sunday before or after the actual date.

#### (iv) *Good Friday*

Good Friday is the anniversary of the death of Jesus Christ. It is a day for fasting and abstinence. Prayers and very solemn services begin in all churches at 3.00 p.m.

In Malacca, after the 3.00 p.m. service at St. Peter's Church the ceremony of the "Death of Christ" is performed and this is followed by a candle-light procession with live size statues of the "Dead Christ" and his sorrowing Mother.

The "Good Friday" ceremonies in Malacca draw a large crowd of people from all walks of life and of different religious beliefs.

After the procession the statues are returned to the sanctuary of the church.

#### **The Malaysian Thai**

Thai temples, commonly known as "wats" play an important role in the Malaysian Thai community. They not only act as a place for religious obligations to be performed but also a centre for all religious and cultural festivals of the community.

Malaysian Thais may visit the "wat" anytime they wish but they are encouraged to avail themselves on festive as well as praying days.

The calculation of festival days for the community is based on the Thai calendar which consists of twelve months. Each month is divided into two halves: the first half (1st to 15th day) known as the period of enlarging moon and the second half (16th to 29th or 30th day) the period of waning moon.

The eighth and fifteenth days of the two halves are known as "priest days" and are considered holy by the Malaysian Thais. Besides attending prayers which are conducted in the morning or in the evening on these days, they may also bring offerings for the priests.

Besides performing the religious obligation in "wats" Malaysian Thais are also required to pray twice daily; once in the morning and again at night at a special altar in the house.

An important aspect of the religious life of the Malaysian Thais is that every son is required to be ordained as a priest at least once in his lifetime. According to the belief, a son who has done so will clean all his sins and the sins committed by his parents. It is also a way of repaying the parents for bringing them up.

Thai priests are of two categories. "Nein" is the rank for priests between the ages of 12-20. On reaching 21, they are accepted as "Phrak" after fulfilling certain conditions in Buddhism. However laymen above 21 may be ordained direct as a "Phrak" without having to be a "Nein".

There is no time limit in which a person can serve as a priest. The duration may last three to fourteen days for those fulfilling a vow but under normal circumstances, the minimum period is three months. Malaysian Thais are very particular about the date and time of their ordination as a priest. The date, according to the Thai calendar, is decided upon after consulting the head priest or medicine-man. Special ordination ceremonies are observed and this is presided by a head priest (known as "Upacha").

The common features of Thai priests are that their heads and eyebrows are cleanly shaven and they are required to wear special yellow robes. They have certain rules and prohibitions to observe. They are prohibited from marrying, having bodily contact with the opposite sex, handling money or putting on ornaments like rings, watches and others. They are also prohibited from consuming any food after noon except drinks.

The important festivals observed by Malaysian Thais are as follows:

- (i) Songkran
- (ii) Visakhak Bucha
- (iii) Khao Phansa and Ork Phansa
- (iv) Thod Kathin
- (v) Thod Phapa
- (vi) Soul Praying
- (vii) Loy Krathong.

(i) *Songkran*

The Thai term "Songkran" means a change or a transition. By computation, "Songkran" is the traditional New Year of the Thais and it normally falls in April. "Songkran" which is popularly known as the "Water Festival" is merrily celebrated by the Thai community in Malaysia especially in the "wats". On that day, birds and fish are released. Buddha images, head priests and elders, and even parents are bathed and sprinkled with perfume and powder by worshippers or their children as a sign of reverence and respect. The release of birds and fish symbolises the release of bad luck through such animals.

(ii) *Visakhak Bucha*

"Visakhak Bucha" or Wesak Day which falls on the 15th day of the 6th month (normally in May) is one of the most important festivals in Buddhism. It commemorates three important events in the life of Lord Buddha. He was born on Wesak Day at Lumbini Garden of the ancient nation of Kapilavatthu (approximately near the present Nepal border). Thirty five years later on the same day, he achieved Enlightenment in his meditation to seek a way of overcoming sufferings in this world and finally at the age of eighty, he met Nirwana or died, also on Wesak Day. The festival is celebrated on a large scale in all "wats" in the country with prayers and lectures on Buddhism being conducted throughout the day. In the evening, there would be a candle procession going round the Major Chapel known as "bot" of the "Wat" three times, each time symbolising each of the event described above.

### (iii) *Khao Pharnsa*

During Lord Buddha's time, his followers constantly wandered from place to place preaching and spreading the teachings of Buddha to the people. It was only when the rainy season started that they returned to the "Wats" to rest. "Khao" literally means the entry while "Pharnsa" means the rainy season. "Khao Pharnsa" which lasts three months commences on the 16th day of the 8th month. During the "Pharnsa", priests are required to stay in the "wat" to meditate and to further their knowledge of Buddhism. They are only allowed to leave their "wat" for a maximum period of seven days during "Pharnsa".

For the first three or seven days after the commencement of "Pharnsa", priests are required to beg for rice from the homes of worshippers. They carry a special receptacle known as "bat". Buddhists who offer rice to the priests are believed to have their own livelihood as well as those of their ancestors secured in the next world.

A mass prayer is usually held at the end of the three-month period to mark the closing of "Pharnsa". "Ork Pharnsa" means the exit of "Pharnsa" or rainy season.

### (iv) *Thod Kathin*

"Thod Kathin" lasts a month. It commences on the 16th day of the 11th month, i.e. immediately after the "Pharnsa". "Thod" is to present and "Kathin" is the term used to denote all the necessities of a priest. "Thod Kathin" is a practice whereby priests undergoing "Pharnsa" are presented with such gifts like vestments or the yellow robes that they are required to wear. It is believed that those who donate "Kathin" to priests will be blessed and will enjoy a comfortable life in the next world.

### (v) *Thod Phapa*

"Thod Phapa" is a practice with similar objective as "Thod Kathin" except that it can be held any time. Things presented in "Thod Phapa" are similar to those in "Thod Kathin".

#### (vi) *Soul Praying*

Malaysian Thais start the festival of soul-praying for their ancestors on the 16th day of the 10th month by having a "Soul welcoming" ceremony in the "wat". This is based on the belief that the souls of the ancestors are released in order that they can be fed by their living descendants. The "sending off" ceremony is held on the 30th day of the same month. On both the welcoming and sending-off days, large varieties of offerings are prepared to appease the souls. This is followed by the blessings of the soul by priests.

#### (vii) *Loy Krathong*

A "Krathong" is literally a small tray or dish made of banana leaves or matting, which will float or "loy". Hence "Loy Krathong". These little trays bearing lighted candles, "joss sticks", flowers and offerings are floated in rivers, ponds or lakes on the "Loy Krathong" day which falls on the 15th day of the 12th month. There are two beliefs on the festival. One is that the Thais extend their gratitude to "Mother Water" for providing the essential element in their daily life and wish to ask for forgiveness for every act by which the waters are rendered impure. Another is that the "Krathong" would convey the worship of all followers of Buddha towards the footprints of Lord Buddha, believed to be embedded on the beach of Nammada River in Northern India.