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Giving of coins for gifts is a British practice

Sitadewa

I REFER to the photograph showing the King presenting a gift of clothing and keris to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the explanation that Dr Mahathir paid the King 20 sen as it was a Malay custom (NST, Dec 22).

Gifts of clothing and keris (known as persalinan lengkap in Malay) have been the royal gesture in days of old when investitures and awards of medals had not been adopted yet.

No coins or money need be paid.

The coin given by the former Prime Minister for the keris given to him by the King is a recent adoption of British practice whereby a sharp object especially a weapon must not be treated as a gift but as an item to be purchased albeit symbolically.

One might still remember that such a practice had caused some embarrassment to the organisers of a Hong Kong event some 30 years ago. The Duchess of Kent was opening a public building by the usual cutting of a ribbon. For that the organisers had detailed a small Chinese girl to offer the Duchess a pair of scissors placed on a tray. The Duchess, following British custom, wanted to "pay" the little girl with a coin for the scissors.

The latter refused because by Eastern, especially Chinese etiquette, gifts of money must be properly wrapped, preferably in an ang pow packet.

In 1985, during the events following the installation of the present Sultan of Perak, a particular territorial chief (Orang Besar Negeri) had proudly told the other traditional chieftains that he alone had received a coin from the Sultan unlike the rest.

He kept quiet only after it was explained to him that there was nothing special about this as he alone had presented a Malay dagger to the Sultan and the latter was only following a Western custom.

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