

Celebrating Unity and Tradition: Eid al-Fitr in Malaysia



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At the end of Ramadan, Muslims all over the world celebrate Eid al-Fitr, a joyous occasion marking the successful completion of a month-long fast.

While the idea of the Eid al-Fitr celebration remains the same worldwide, the customary ways in which the day is celebrated vary across the globe. In this short article, I will explore the unique features of the Eid al-Fitr celebration in Malaysia.

Malaysia, nestled between Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore, is a democratic country that gained its independence from Britain in 1957. It is a multilingual, multireligious, and multicultural nation. As Muslims make up the majority of the population, Islam is the country's official religion.

As a nation consisting of many different racial groups, Malaysians have learned to live together in peace and harmony, accepting one another as fellow Malaysians. Ever since its birth as a nation, Malaysia has embraced the idea of coexistence. Up until now, Malaysia has been a good role model for many other nations when it comes to racial integration.

Though Malay is the official language of Malaysia, the country allows the freedom to speak other languages, including English, Chinese, and Tamil. Additionally, people are free to practice their customs and celebrate their religious festivals.

Among all the religious festivals celebrated in Malaysia, Eid al-Fitr is the grandest celebration. In Malaysia, Eid al-Fitr is more commonly known as Hari Raya Puasa or just Hari Raya.

Prior Preparation Before Eid

Many people in Malaysia do their Eid shopping before they start fasting or in the early days of Ramadhan. However, others delay their shopping until closer to the end of Ramadhan. It is natural for people of all religions to wear their best attire during a festive occasion.

In the olden days, during Malaysia's early years of independence, due to the country's poor economic status, most households used to make their own traditional delicacies. However, now that many people work in cosmopolitan cities with busy schedules, coupled with their involvement in Ramadhan rituals, most prefer to buy their favourite delicacies instead.

On Hari Raya Day

As customary in many parts of the Muslim world, Muslims in Malaysia begin their Eid al-Fitr celebration by performing a special prayer at the mosque of their choice. From predawn until the start of the Eid prayer around sunrise, one can hear the chanting of Allahu Akbar (Allah is the Greatest) from the minarets of mosques all over Malaysia. In addition, this chanting is broadcast on TV and radio stations.

After completing the Eid prayers, people visit the graves of their loved ones who have passed away. At the graveside, visitors offer prayers for the deceased, hoping that their souls will rest in peace and be among the righteous and closest to Allah, the Almighty.

After the grave visit, families return home for a hearty breakfast, enjoying their favourite dishes like Lemang (bamboo rice) and Ketupat (rice cake). These are typically served with Rendang (a thick gravy made with beef or chicken) and Kuah Kacang (peanut sauce). In addition to these dishes, families enjoy a variety of other Hari Raya delicacies.

The Tradition of Seeking Forgiveness

After breakfast, it is customary for people in Malaysia to seek forgiveness from one another. Young people usually ask for forgiveness from their elders, such as grandparents, parents, uncles, and aunts. Siblings in a household also seek forgiveness from each other.

This tradition of asking for forgiveness extends to visiting other people's homes during Hari Raya. The most famous phrase used when seeking forgiveness during the celebration is “Selamat Hari Raya-Maaf Zahir Batin” (Happy Hari Raya—Forgive me for my shortcomings).

For those on important duties, such as members of the armed forces, police officers, firefighters, doctors, nurses, and others who are unable to return to their families in the village or hometown, they typically try to convey their Hari Raya greetings and seek forgiveness through phone calls and other forms of technology-assisted communication.

The Capital City During Hari Raya

On a typical working day, Kuala Lumpur, like any other capital city, is a bustling hub with crowds of people in restaurants, fast food outlets, and railway and bus stations. However, during Hari Raya, a different atmosphere prevails.

Many people, both Muslims and non-Muslims, return to their hometowns for extended holidays, making Kuala Lumpur a quieter city for a few days. Interestingly, it is during the Hari Raya holidays that foreign workers, who also enjoy extended breaks, crowd shopping malls and tourist spots in Kuala Lumpur. If you are a local and find yourself in these places on a Hari Raya day, surrounded by people of other nationalities, it might feel like you are in a foreign country.

The Open House Tradition

In Malaysia, it is a common practice to hold an open house during festive days. For Muslims, this means inviting friends, neighbours, and family to their homes to enjoy meals and delicacies. Open houses are not only hosted by individuals but also by government ministers, the Prime Minister, directors of private companies, community leaders, and others.

A Month-Long Celebration

Although the Hari Raya celebration begins on the first day of Syawal (the tenth month of the Islamic calendar), the spirit of the celebration can last for an entire month. During this month, while things return to normal, government departments, offices, schools, and other organizations often organize open house gatherings for their staff. The open house concept in Malaysia fosters integration and allows people of different races and religions to come together in the spirit of being Malaysians.

Interstate Visits

During the month-long Hari Raya celebration, in addition to visiting family in the villages, people also travel between cities to seek forgiveness and catch up with distant relatives and friends. These visits usually happen on weekends when people are off work. As a result, highways can become busier during weekends.

Hari Raya, being the most popular festive celebration in Malaysia, reunites families, friends, and fellow citizens of the country most joyously. It provides an opportunity for people to forgive and forget each other's shortcomings.

The month-long celebration also offers an opportunity for businesses within the country to thrive. The extended festivities bring good income to food caterers and those in the cottage industry who manufacture biscuits, delicacies, and other items consumed during festive seasons.

Experts in the field of economics agree that sales, business, and people's movement during festive seasons greatly contribute to the circulation of money within the country. I believe that the economic activities during the Hari Raya celebration are beneficial for the internal economy, especially at a time when the global economy is struggling.

While each country and region in the Muslim world has unique features in its Eid celebration, the philosophy and core values behind the celebration should remain largely the same.

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