

Brief Introduction to Brunei Culture, Lifestyle & Work Ethics

Philosophy

Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) translates into Malay Islamic Monarchy; it is uniquely Bruneian in that it blends the best traditions of the Malay culture with the religious teachings of Islam, loyalty to the state and a mutual respect between ruler and subjects. This national custom is aimed at forging a stronger sense of identity among Bruneians as well as to foster unity and stability. With His Majesty the Sultan being the head of the Adat Istiadat (customs and tradition), MIB has thus been enshrined in the constitution.

Culture

A Culture Influenced by Islam

Brunei Darussalam has a history that stretches far back to the Old Malay World. It is thus bestowed with a heritage of traditions and customs – influenced by Islam as that is the main religion of the Malay Archipelago – behavioural traits and forms of address. Being an Islamic monarchy, religious rites and rituals are devoutly observed by all Muslims. Non-Muslims who live in the country or who are visiting are expected to give their due respect. Brunei's great royal mosque, the Jame Asr Hassanil Bolkuah, is one of the wonders of Islam.

A gift to the nation from His Majesty, its pure magnificence is unequalled. Equally impressive is the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque, built by the Sultan's father in the 1950's. Together, the two royal mosques symbolise the role of Islam in the very heart of Bruneian life and culture. Brunei stresses upon the importance of upholding the nation's heritage in the form of titles and royal regalia, carvings and the architectural design of buildings to ensure that the legacy is passed down from one generation to the next without losing its essence in modernisation.

By holding this tradition, His Majesty introduces his kingdom to the world as the oldest Malay state on the island of Borneo, like a pearl cultured in an oyster of traditions kept intact. One only has to attend a Bruneian wedding ceremony and celebration to see the elaborate customs in a three or four-day affair draped in rituals.

Customs and lifestyle

Special rites and customs have been woven into the culture and lifestyle of all Bruneian Malays to inculcate a sense of spiritual and communal belonging. According to the firm belief in modesty, Malay women should not expose any part of their bodies except the face and hands. Therefore, casual western clothing can often seem immodest to Muslims, and attire that is revealing should not be worn in religious places. Shorts are appropriate at the swimming pools and beaches but not shopping centres, public places and offices. Both pork and alcohol are forbidden to Muslims by the laws of Islam. Any meat consumed by Muslims must be Halal.

Bruneian Society and Culture

The Family

The family is the focal point of the social structure. The Bruneian family is the extended family and includes aunts, uncles, and cousins as well as close friends.

- Members of the extended family are expected to remain loyal to each other and the family.
- As a result of this Brunei is a hierarchical culture. Age and position are revered.
- From a young age, children are taught to subjugate their own desires for the good of the entire family and to respect elders without question. In addition they also learn that it is through family support that they accomplish goals.
- In Brunei most families have a close-knit relationship. This normally extends beyond the immediate family members to include aunts, uncles, cousins, in laws, etc.
- It is a norm in Brunei for young married couple to live with their parents or in laws.
- The Bruneian families thrive on family gatherings and most of their free time is spent with family and close friends.

Religion / The Bruneian Lifestyle

Most Bruneians are Muslims and as such their lives revolve around the duties afforded to them by Islam.

Religious Practice

- Bruneians practice a devout but tolerant brand of Islam, which includes devotion, yet allows other faiths and beliefs.
- Muslims must pray five times a day – at dawn (Subuh prayers), noon (Zuhur prayers), afternoon (Asar prayers), sunset (Maghrib prayers), and evening (Isha prayers). There is a specific time allocation for each prayer and Muslims are encouraged to pray on time and within the allocated time.
- The start and end time for each prayer changes daily. This is dependent on the time the sun rises and sets each day.
- Before conducting each prayer, a Muslim will carry out ‘ablution’ also known as ‘wudhu’. This is a ritual of cleansing the body by performing ‘wudhu’ which includes washing the hands, rinsing the mouth and nose, washing the face, washing the arms up to the elbows, wiping the head, washing the ears, including behind the ears and washing the feet up to and including the ankle.
- Friday is the Muslim holy day. Restaurants are closed and Bruneians are not allowed to work during Friday prayer times. The Friday prayer is mandatory for all Muslim males.
- The Sultan encourages the recital of the Quran each morning prior to the start of work to obtain Allah’s blessing and guidance.
- Muslims regard the month of Ramadan as a holy and sacred month. During that month, Muslims devote their time to spiritual and religious activities such as reading the Holy Quran, engaging in extra prayers, giving to charity and conducting the nightly “Taraweeh” prayers for 30 days.

- During the fasting month of Ramadan, working hours are reduced to a six-hour day and entertainment and sporting activities are suspended. This is done to be considerate to the Muslims who are observing Ramadan.
- Fasting during Ramadan is mandatory for all Muslims (male and female). Exemptions are made for the sick, children, the elderly and pregnant or breastfeeding women.

Hygiene Etiquette

- In Islam, it is said that “cleanliness is half of faith”. Not only should a Muslim purify himself before turning to God in prayers but they must pay attention to the cleanliness of their bodies and their surroundings at all times.
- Muslims begin every task or action by mentioning the name of God, and eating is no exception.
- It is obligatory for Muslims to eat with their right hands unless there is an excuse such as illness or injury. The left hand is usually used to clean the body of filth and impurities while the right hand is used for eating, passing objects from one person to another and for shaking hands.
- Etiquettes of eating also include washing your hands before eating, eating with three fingers, licking the remains of the food off your fingers before washing them, not reclining while eating, and refraining from spitting or blowing your nose whilst eating. It is also part of Islamic good manners to praise the food. It is wrong to criticise food, rather it is better to refrain from eating anything you do not like.
- Muslims are advised to wash hands before and after eating. It is preferable to use soap or a cleaning liquid with water. It is also recommended to rinse the mouth after eating. Great importance is also placed on oral cleanliness.
- In Brunei, Muslims also practice the Islamic etiquette of using the toilet such as:
 - stepping into the toilet area with the left foot first
 - no eating/drinking inside the toilet
 - To urinate while sitting and not standing. This is healthier for the body and because there is less chance of urine splashing onto one's body or clothes. Great care must be taken to avoid the splatter of urine on oneself, since urine is something impure.
 - It is forbidden to use the right hand in order to clean oneself from the impurities of urine and feces. The right hand is used for eating and drinking and should always be kept clean.
 - The private parts should be cleaned with water after urinating and defaecating.
 - To clean both hands with soap and water after using the toilet.

Etiquette and Work Ethics in Brunei

Meeting Etiquette

- The common greeting depends upon the ethnic origin and the age of the person.
- In general, many men you meet will have adopted the western concept of shaking hands, although this is not always the case with older Bruneians or with women.
- Ethnic Malay men shake hands with one another, but men and women do not traditionally shake hands.
- Younger Bruneians may shake hands with foreign women or they may merely bow their head in greeting.
- It is considered respectful to bow your head when someone who is senior to yourself in age or position.
- It is considered disrespectful and rude to stare into another person's eyes, particularly those of a person who is senior to you in age or status.

Gift Giving Etiquette

- If invited to someone's home for dinner bring good quality chocolates or fruit.
- Do not give toy dogs to children.
- Do not give anything made of pigskin.
- If giving foodstuff ensure there is no gelatine or any other ingredient which is not 'halal'. Also, ensure that food wrappings do not include any images which might be Islamically offensive.
- Offer gifts with the right hand only or both hands if the item is large.
- Gifts are generally not opened when received.

Dining Etiquette

- For the most part, Bruneians do not invite foreigners into their homes.
- If you are invited to a Bruneian home, consider it a great honour and testament to your personal relationship.
- Shoes are generally removed before entering a house.
- Greet the eldest person first.
- Wait to be told where to sit.
- It is considered good manners to accept an offer of food or a beverage.
- Wait to be invited to eat before starting.
- Food is often served buffet style or on a revolving tray in the centre of the table.
- The guest of honor may be served first or the eldest person may.

- Do not eat with the left hand, as it is considered unclean.
- Eat or pass food with your right hand only.
- Many Malays eat with their fingers. Alternatively, they may serve cutlery for foreign guests, usually a fork and a tablespoon.
- If passing a plate that is heavy, you may use your left hand to support your right wrist.
- When you are finished eating, place your fork facing downward on your plate with your spoon, also facing downward, crossed over the fork.

Bruneian Business Etiquette and Protocol

Meeting and Greeting

- Greetings should be formal and demonstrate respect and deference.
- It is important to introduce the most important person on your team first.
- Handshakes tend to be light. Bruneian men often raise their hands to the heart after shaking hands. Most Bruneians do not shake hands with members of the opposite sex.
- Foreign businesswomen should nod their head in greeting.
- Foreign businessmen should wait to see if a Bruneian woman extends her hand first.
- Titles are important and can be confusing. Bruneians can have as many as 20 words in their title. It is acceptable to address someone with a title by their title alone.
- Honorific titles are “Awang” for a man and “Dayang” for a woman. The abbreviations for these titles are “Awg” and “Dyg” respectively.
- Business cards are typically exchanged after introductions and handshakes.
- Present the card with both hands or with the right hand and the left hand supporting the right hand.
- Give a business card to each person you meet.
- Examine any business card you receive before putting it in your business card case.
- The respect you show someone's business card is considered to be indicative of the respect you will show the person in business.
- It is considered a breach of etiquette to write on a person's business card in their presence.

Communication Style

- Bruneian communication is formal and respectful, especially to those senior in age or position. Hierarchy is revered, so older businesspeople should be greeted before younger ones.
- As in much of Asia, group harmony is vital. Therefore, the communication style tends to be indirect and somewhat ambiguous. This is done to avoid embarrassing someone or causing either party to lose face. If you are from a more direct culture, you may find the use of evasive responses or insincere yeses frustrating.
- Most Bruneians find emotions such as impatience, anger, or irritation embarrassing and try to avoid them. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the foreigner to refrain from showing his/her inner feelings.
- Bruneians commonly ask what would be considered intrusive personal questions such as about wages or the like. If you are uncomfortable discussing such matters, it is important to handle

the matter diplomatically so neither party loses face. Such conversations are meant to get to know you as a person, they are not meant to make you uncomfortable.

- Tone of voice, body language, eye contact and facial expression can often be more important than what is actually said. Therefore, it is important to observe the person as they speak.

Business Meetings

- It is important to advise Bruneian counterparts in advance of who will be attending the meeting. This allows them to organize counterparts at the same level. It is also a good idea to send a brief business biography of each person.
- When entering a room it is important that the most senior person on your team to enter the room first. Doing so gives face to both parties since it demonstrates respect towards the Bruneian culture.
- It is quite common for the most senior person from each side to sit opposite each other at the table.
- Typically, the most senior Bruneian will offer a brief welcoming speech. Although you need not do the same, having a few welcoming words will brand you as a competent leader.
- Once the introductions are complete and everyone is seated, there will be a period of small talk to enable all parties to become more comfortable with each other. It will end when the most senior Bruneian feels comfortable discussing business. Do not rush the process or you risk permanently harming your business relationship.
- At the first meeting between two companies, Bruneians often do not get into in-depth discussions. They prefer to use the first meeting as an opportunity to get to know the other side and build a rapport, which is essential to them.
- Meetings may extend into business meals, although business will generally not be discussed. Nonetheless, this getting-to-know you time is vital in developing and fostering a good working relationship and therefore it is important that you remain professional.
- Similar to most Asian cultures, Bruneians are indirect communicators who are equally concerned with the message as with the manner in which it is delivered. They will attempt to avoid communicating anything directly that would hurt or offend another since doing so would cause a loss of "face". They will gently push their ideas forward and wait for others to respond. If they disagree with an idea, they will generally remain silent rather than speak up. Therefore, it is important to watch for silences and body language.
- Given the reluctance in saying "no", it is a good idea to phrase questions so that an affirmative response can be given. If you are unsure what an answer means or think that it may be a non-committal agreement, ask the question in another fashion to see what response you receive.
- It is important to remember that nodding the head does not always indicate agreement; it may simply be an acknowledgement that you have spoken. This can be disconcerting for people from more western cultures who translate the gesture differently.

Simple Malay words to get by in Brunei

Most people in Brunei speaks or at least understand English. The official language is both Bahasa Melayu (Malay) and English. However there are some of the older generation or those in living in the more remote areas who may interact better in (Brunei) Malay.

Here are some useful Bruneian phrases:

Yes: Awu

No: Inda

Me: Aku

You: Kau

I don't want: Inda ku mau

How are you?: Apa khabar

Fine/ very well: Khabar Baik

Thank you: Terima Kasih

You're welcome: Sama-sama

My name is...: Nama saya....

What is your name? : Apa nama kamu/ kita?

*'kita' is used in Brunei as the polite form of 'you', only for adults, not used for children * 'kita' in Malaysia/ Indonesia means ' we '

I am from..../ Saya berasal dari....

Greetings:

- Good morning: Selamat Pagi

- Good afternoon: Selamat Petang

- Good evening/night: Selamat malam

Others:

How much (price)? : Berapa harganya?

Help: Tolong