

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BEB-16a
Krishan Jit's Pinning

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Lembah Keramat
Ulu Kelang, Selangor
Malaysia
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Wheelock House
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Dear Peter,

Many Malaysians have no doubt long wondered how the Agung manages to pin medals on his subjects so quickly. This is the Agung, mind you. The Duli Yang Maha Mulia Seri Paduka Baginda Yang Di Pertuan Agung. The King of Malaysia. In ceremony after ceremony, year after year, the monarch manages to attach the various Malaysian medals of honor and service in a few quick moments. Last week a handful of the nation's citizens found out the secret.

As you may recall, I mentioned a few letters ago that I was to attend the "pinning" of my playwright friend, Krishan Jit -- his receipt of the Kesatrian Mangku Negara or KMN (National Service Medal), the highest award that can be bestowed on an arts person in this country. The KMN is also the most prestigious of medals that an ordinary Malaysian can get. From this one must leap to a Datukship, the lowest rung of the country's titles.

(Moving up this more auspicious ladder, one can receive the title of Tan Seri and finally Tun. In Perak there is also the title of Datuk Seri, as in Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, the nation's Prime Minister.)

All such awards are decided through nomination by Ministries and organizations such as the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Language and Literature Authority). The Dewan nominated Krishan, much to his chagrin. Once the nomination is sent to the Prime Minister's Department and the nominee receives a letter confirming the nomination, there is no turning back. The award cannot be turned down. Krishan was informed of the Dewan's nomination last June, but it was only this March 12 that the ceremony finally took place.

Krishan doesn't drive, and as he was allowed to take one guest and I had access to a car (Halim's), he turned up at the Istana Negara (National Palace) as the only nominee with a Mat Salleh

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(driver).

(Having a driver is a big deal here, denoting high status. Some folks would prefer a driver to a raise in salary, the former being a more showy form of rank than a fat paycheck. Whenever Halim and I are driving a friend somewhere and I happen to be in the back seat, I immediately hop into the front seat once the friend disembarks so that no one will misconstrue Halim as my chauffeur.)

Malaysia had no king at independence. The post, protocol and regalia had to be created for the occasion, along with the palace. The Istana is a converted Chinese millionaire's residence, where each of Malaysia's five-year monarchs spends his days. The other accoutrements of office could not too closely resemble those of any single Malaysian state, else some of the Sultans might get offended. A solution, however, was easily found. The Malacca Sultanate, wiped out by Portuguese invaders in the 16th Century, is popularly accepted here as the "cradle" of the Malay sultanates, the original tradition from which all the other sultanates are derived. It is from here that the government historians, artisans and protocol officers created the office of Yangadi Pertuan Aguna.

To be king in Malaysia is to have position without power. The office is the highest in the land, full of pomp and ceremony, a special royal language, and the (theoretical) devotion of all Malaysians. Power, however, is wielded by the Prime Minister, sans ceremony. Though perhaps at one time Malays understood the intricacies of royal etiquette, few today know more than a handful of royal words (menjujung kasih instead of terima kasih for "thank you," the former indicating receipt of something from above, rather than from an equal; patet instead of saya for "I"; santan instead of makan for "eat," etc.) and the rudiments of behavior. Non-Malays don't even know the latter; thus, they must be taught.

In our case the palace invited us to a rehearsal the day before the actual ceremony so that the recipients could learn how to sembah (genuflect), when to sembah, and how many times to sembah (six). They were told what to say upon receiving their award ("menjujung kasih, tuanku"), how to walk, how to sit, what to wear (Malay dress for the Malays, "dark lounge suits" for the rest of the men, formal dresses for the women. No bare shoulders, please!). The sembah, incidentally, is performed with palms together, at forehead level, with the head slightly inclined. (Indians and Chinese are both used to this type of gesture but tend to hold their hands at chest level, as they do in their temples. Only gods usually get an over-the-head salute.) The palace protocol officer ran the rehearsal.

The day of the ceremony we appeared in all our finery, but as Halim had a previous engagement and needed his more impressive car, our conveyance was a mere Morris Mini (ever discreet, we parked out of sight beyond the palace gates), borrowed for the occasion. We and 200 other recipients and guests sat in our

velvet and wood chairs (designated by numbers and letters) and waited for a half-hour or so in the throne room for the sovereign to show up. Spacious and high-ceilinged (about 50 x 50 meters in area and 10 meters high), the throne room is paneled in teak, carved with floral patterns in the traditional Malay style. Yellow velvet curtains hang at the front of the chamber, shaped and tasseled in an attractive, symmetrical arrangement. The ceiling is white, the plaster heavily molded and beamed in a sort of modern Islamic version of Versailles. Air conditioning ducts and recessed lighting mar this effect somewhat. European-style, multi-tiered chandeliers hang from two recessed rectangular areas of the ceiling, complemented by globular, dual carriage lamps along the walls. The upper fourth of each of the walls is devoted to mirrors (one- or two-way?), some arranged into Islamic stars, or into arches. Islamic patterns dominate the decor, from the design of the red wall-to-wall carpet to the Kufic script above the dais. The dais itself is crafted of teak, carved and gilded with floral patterns and the seals of each of the Malaysian states. It is a seven-stepped affair, with a three-tiered roof surmounted by an oversize gold or bronze crown embossed with the Seal of State.

The ceremony went like clockwork. The police band played the Negara Ku, the King and Queen (Raja Permaisuri Agung) walked up the aisle, seated themselves, and received the greetings of the protocol officer. The King then dismounted and, standing, handed out the medals to the nominees, who sembah-ed their way up to the throne and back to their seats in groups of six. But pity the King! This was only one ceremony for 150 medal recipients; he awarded some 600 last June, and it's already March. He'll just barely finish the 1982 batch by June '83, time to begin a new round of medal winners. Worse, pity the Queen. She has to sit through each of these affairs doing little more than sit. She, like the King, looked a trifle bored.

Afterwards (after the ceremony, after the ritual Islamic prayer, after the departure of the King and Queen) we partook of coffee, tea and traditional Malay cakes. We were then told to form a semicircle around the Royal Portal. This Agung, unlike his predecessors, likes to mingle with his rakyat (subjects). Once we had been properly arranged, the royal couple reappeared and, as the cine cameras whirred, chatted with a grateful citizenry, shaking hands here, cracking a joke there, all in common Bahasa Malaysia. This is a popular Agung.

And the secret of the pin? Upon arrival, each recipient is given a small, hooked piece of metal, to be pinned over the left breast pocket or the same region of a woman's blouse. This small hook fits neatly through the medal-pin, supporting it as a wall-peg does a coat. Thus, the king has to do little but hit the target -- and, 99 times out of a hundred, the medal catches. No muss, no fuss, no unwieldy safety pins, no adhesive strips.

Such a simple stage device, yet without it this elaborate piece of theater would no doubt have left quite a few Malaysians with minor flesh wounds, and the television audience helpless with

laughter.

On March 26 I head for Jakarta. Unilever has finally sent me a letter of confirmation, the document I needed to get a business-visit visa. I am supposed to begin consulting at Unilever on the 28th of March. Although originally I'd hoped to leave earlier, Krishan Jit's play, Tikam-Tikam, opens on the 25th (a two-day run). He decided against a poster, but still needs a Tikam -- a giant wheel of fortune, a task delegated to me. A local Ulu Kelang woodshop is producing the wheel and stand to my specifications, and a local metal shop the axle and ball bearings needed so that the contraption will turn.

After completion, I will paint an adaptation of a traditional Kelantanese design onto the Tikam, and affix the nails and tin needed for the characteristic clacka-clacka-clacka sound that wheels of fortune make when they turn. I hope it works. I'll let you know soon.

Cheers,

A stylized handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several horizontal strokes and a vertical line extending downwards.

received in Hanover 4/21/83