

## Local Customs of Insular Southeast Asian

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### I. Introduction

- A. *Grade level:* Junior High
- B. *Subject:* World cultures class, social sciences
- C. *Topic:* To see the importance of local customs in each insular Southeast Asian country
- D. *Objectives:*
  - 1. Students will learn the basic geography of each country in insular Southeast Asia.
  - 2. Students will gain a basic understanding of each insular Southeast Asian country.
  - 3. Student will be able to explore and appreciate the differences of each country's customs.
- E. *Materials:*
  - 1. [Map of Southeast Asia](#)
  - 2. [Worksheet Sheet](#)

### II. Overview of Insular Southeast Asian Countries

#### **Indonesia**

- A. *Background*

Indonesia is the largest archipelago in the world. Indonesia's 201 million people make it the world's fourth most populous nation. It is thus appropriate that the country's motto is *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which means "Unity in Diversity." The island of Java is one of the most densely populated areas in the world with more than 107 million people living in an area the size of the state of New York. The one unique characteristic about Indonesia is its diversity. Indonesia includes numerous related, but distinct cultural and linguistic groups, many of which are ethnically Malay. Since Indonesia's independence, Bahasa Indonesia (the national language) has spread throughout the archipelago and has become the language of most written communication, education, government, and business. However, many local languages are still important in many regions of Indonesia. English is the most widely spoken foreign language.
- B. *Local Customs*
  - 1. *Hand Gestures*

It is considered disrespectful to use the left hand to give or receive. Also, crooking your finger to call someone is impolite. Handshaking is customary for both men and women for introductions and greetings.
  - 2. *Greetings*

Greetings are usually conducted in a slow and deliberate manner. It is considered disrespectful if done in a fast way. If greeting an Indonesian Chinese, it is normal

to greet with handshakes. Another way to greet is by bowing the head, lowering the eyes, and saying “*Selamat*” meaning peace.”

3. *Public behavior*

No public displays of affection are allowed between people of the opposite sex. Hugging and kissing between a husband and wife is even forbidden. The only public contact allowed is shaking hands. When passing superiors or an older person, most Indonesians lower their heads or drop their shoulders because the head may not be held higher than elders or superiors. Chewing gum in public is discouraged.

4. *Questions*

“Have you eaten?” is similar to “How are you?” in North America. Even if you haven’t eaten, answer “Yes.” The question “Where are you going?” is the equivalent of “How are you?” Do not go into detail. Instead, answer “down the street” or “for a walk.”

C. *Links*

1. <http://asiatravel.com/indoinfo.html>
2. <http://executiveplanet.com/business-etiquette/Indonesia.html>

## **Singapore**

A. *Background*

Singapore prides itself as being one of the most corruption-free states in Asia. In addition, Singapore is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. The annual growth rate for 2003 was 3.42 %. Singapore has a varied linguistic, cultural, and religious heritage. Malay is the national language, but Chinese, English and Tamil are also official languages. English is widely used in professions, businesses, and schools.

B. *Local Customs*

1. *Salutations.*

Do not use first names unless asked to do so. Instead use Miss, Mr. or Mrs.

2. *Visiting people.*

When entering a Singaporean’s house or a mosque, remember to take off your shoes.

3. *Other.*

It is common courtesy to ask permission to take pictures of people, mosques or temples.

4. *Rules.*

Obey the laws, as they are strictly enforced. There are fines for things like selling chewing gum, littering, smoking, spitting in public, disposing of chewing gum in public, failing to flush a toilet, failing to give a pedestrian the right of way, and jaywalking.

5. *Public behavior.*

There is no public contact between the sexes in Singapore. Hugging and kissing, even between husbands and wives, is forbidden in public. On the other hand, it is acceptable for people of the same sex to show physical contact. You will likely observe men holding hands with men or even walking with their arms around each other. These actions are interpreted strictly as gestures of friendship. The

comfortable standing distance between two people in Singapore varies, depending on culture. As a general rule, you should stand as far apart as you would if you were about to shake hands [about 2 to 3 feet]. Indians tend to sit slightly further apart [3 to 3 ½ feet].

6. *Gestures.*

Do not eat or offer anything with your left hand when with Muslims. In addition, feet are also believed to be unclean; never move or touch anything with your feet. Try to avoid touching or patting another person. This is usually perceived as a patronizing gesture. Do not point with the forefinger for it is considered rude. Pointing with the forefinger is used for pointing at animals. If one needs to point, it is best to do it with an open hand.

7. *Business.*

Singaporeans are always on time for business meetings. Never leave them waiting. On the other hand, most Singaporeans arrive at social events on time or slightly late. According to certain customary beliefs, a visitor who arrives on time for a meal gives the impression of being greedy and impatient.

8. *Gift-giving.*

Do not unwrap a gift in front of the giver. This action implies that the recipient is greedy and impatient. Moreover, if the gift turns out to be a poor choice, “loss of face” will result. Instead say “thank-you”, set aside the gift, and then open it only after you leave. Avoid bringing gifts of food with you to a dinner party unless it has been agreed upon beforehand. To bring food may imply that the hospitality is inadequate—a terrible insult to a Singaporean host.

C. *Links*

[http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/south\\_east\\_asia/singapore/culture.htm](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/south_east_asia/singapore/culture.htm)  
<http://executiveplanet.com/business-etiquette/Singapore.html>

**Malaysia**

A. *Background*

Malaysia’s population comprises many ethnic groups, with the politically dominant Malays comprising a plurality. By Constitutional definition, all Malays are Muslim. More than a quarter of the population is Chinese. They have historically played an important role in trade and business.

Malaysians of Indian descent comprise about 7% of the population and include Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians. About 85% of the Indian community is Tamil. Non–Malay indigenous groups make up more than half of Sarawak’s population and about 66% of Sabah’s population. They are divided into dozens of ethnic groups but they share some general patterns of living and culture. Until the 20th century, most practiced traditional beliefs, but many have become Christian or Muslim.

The “other” category includes Malaysians of, inter alia, European and Middle Eastern descent.

- B. *Local customs*
1. *Greetings*  
In Malaysia, a handshake is only reciprocated if a lady offers her hand first. But if not, it is best for a lady to nod her head or smile when being introduced to a man. Also, a greeting of “salam” resembles a handshake with both hands but without the grasp. This happens when the person offers both hands and touches his friend’s outstretched hands, then brings his hands to his chest. This literally means “I greet you from the heart.” In return, the visitor reciprocates with “salam.”
  2. *Visiting homes*  
It is best to call before going to someone’s home. In addition, shoes must be removed. The same should be done when visiting a mosque or an Indian temple. Women are required to cover their heads and not to show their knee or arms in the mosque.
  3. *Other.*  
It is best to use the right hand when receiving and giving objects. Never point your right forefinger at places, objects, or persons. Instead, the thumb of the right hand with the four fingers can be used.
  4. *Drinking.*  
Since the country’s population is primarily Muslim, and drinking alcohol is prohibited, it is not a common practice to toast.
  5. *Business.*  
Malaysians are usually late for appointments but expect others to be on time. Meetings are usually held during lunch or dinner.
  6. *Gift giving.*  
Do not give liquor because alcohol is forbidden in the Muslim religion. Do not give white flowers, clocks, watches or knives to a Chinese person. White flowers, clocks, knives are associated with death.
- C. *Links*
- <http://www.asiatravel.com/>  
<http://www.virtualtourist.com/>

## **Philippines**

- A. *Background*  
The majority of Philippine people are of Malay background, descendants of Indonesians and Malays who migrated to the island long before the Christian era. The most significant ethnic minority group is the Chinese, who have played an important role in commerce since the ninth century, when they first came to the island for trade. As a result of intermarriage, many Filipinos have some Chinese and Spanish ancestry. Americans and Spaniards constitute the next largest foreign minorities in the country.
- B. *Local Customs*
1. *Hand Gestures.*  
Showing respect is very important to Filipinos. One local way of doing this is to take their hand when you meet them, and bring it up to your forehead, with a very small bow. This is a sign of respect. Pointing a middle finger at a person or thing

is considered the most obscene gesture in the Philippines. Instead, they indicate with a glance or by pursing their lips.

2. *Food.*

When offered food or drinks, you have to take at least a bite or a sip. It is considered rude not to accept these offers.

3. *Visiting people.*

Upon entering most Filipino houses, one should knock on the door first. Other homes require removing your shoes upon entering. It is best to arrive 15 to 20 minutes after the time given in the invitation. You will be perceived as overanxious if you arrive early or on time, and perhaps even inconsiderate if you cause your hosts to feel rushed.

C. *Links*

<http://www.virtuالتourist.com/vt/702/a/>

<http://www.executiveplanet.com/business-etiquette/Philippines.html>

## **Brunei**

A. *Background*

Brunei means “adobe of peace” with its capital of Bandar Seri Begawan. This primarily Muslim country is known mostly for its wealth. It is a subsidized society where there are no taxes. As a matter of fact, Brunei’s 280,000 people enjoy one of the world’s highest per capita incomes. Although Brunei may be a rich country, most of the country still remains undeveloped. About 70% of its land is covered by a tropical rainforest. A sultan rules the country. Malay is the official language spoken due to the fact that about 70% of the people living in Brunei are Malay.

B. *Customs*

1. *Hand gestures.*

Bruneians shake hands by only lightly touching hands and then bringing the hand back to the chest; it is not customary to shake hands with members of the opposite sex. You should not point your finger. Instead use the thumb of your right hand with the four fingers folded beneath it.

2. *Gifts.*

Gifts and particularly food should only be passed with the right hand, although it is acceptable to use the left hand under the right wrist for support.

3. *Salutation.*

An appropriate form of address for an older man is ‘tengah’ and ‘babu’ for a woman.

4. *Other*

To call a taxi or attract someone’s attention, wave the whole hand with the palm facing downwards. Do not smack the fist of your right hand into your left palm, because it has a different meaning in Brunei to that of Western countries. When visiting a mosque, you should always remove your shoes first and you should not pass in front of a person at prayer or touch the Koran.

C. *Links*

<http://www.asiarecipe.com/bruculture.html>

[http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/south\\_east\\_asia/brunei/culture.htm](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/south_east_asia/brunei/culture.htm)

### III. Procedures

#### A. *Strategies*

##### 1. *Day 1*

The teacher will first go over the basics about each country in insular Southeast Asia. They will talk about the location of each country and describe the background in each country. A map will be used to show where each country is in respect to the rest of the world. At the end of the day, the teacher will then hand out a map and the students are to return the map with the area filled in the next class period.

##### 2. *Day 2*

The teacher will discuss about each country's customs for one class period. At the end of the discussion, they will hand out a worksheet to be due next class.

##### 3. *Day 3*

The teacher will divide the students into groups of 4 to 5 depending on the class size. The teacher will then assign the students one of the five insular Southeast Asian countries discussed. Students will prepare a skit demonstrating the local customs of their given country.

As a fun learning activity, the teacher can assign the countries secretly to each group. When each group is ready to perform their skit, the other groups can guess which country's customs they are performing.

#### B. *Closure*

When this lesson has been conducted, the students will be able to understand how other countries work, especially insular Southeast Asian countries.

#### C. *Evaluation*

The worksheet will help the teacher judge the amount of knowledge learned from this activity.