



# The Suap Gula Ceremony &

## the Sugar Connection

Sugar is an ever present condiment in most kitchens. Common types of sugar found in Malaysia are granulated sugar, caster sugar, icing sugar, brown sugar, *gula melaka* (sugar made from the saps of coconut palm) and *gula apong* (sugar processed from nipa palm).

By Nazima  
Versay Kuchus

Sugar or 'gula' in Malay, has important references in the Malay culture. For instance, in the Jawi Peranakan culture (refers to locally born, Malay-speaking Muslims of South Asian or Arab and Malay ancestry during the British Colonial Administration in Malaya), the engagement ceremony (*meminang*) is called the *suap gula*. Some of their descendents today still practise this tradition which literally means 'feeding some sugar' to the lady. This is usually done by the elder women in the man's family: his mother or grandmother will *suap gula* the fiancée-to-be and then slip the engagement ring onto her finger. Sugar is used to symbolise a 'sweet' and happy relationship. These actions marked an engagement between the man and women, and they are now a fiancé and a fiancée.



Perhaps the idea of 'sweetening' a relationship comes from the positive usage of sugar (and honey) in Malay proverbs. **Hitam-hitam gula Jawa** (as dark as Javanese coconut sugar) describes a woman who has dark skin tone and is pleasant and 'sweet' in appearance. **Bagai susu dengan sahar, dibuat tengguli** (like milk and sugar made into sugar syrup) shows a matching couple, compatible in all matters or are in agreement. **Laksana gula derawa** (like sugar syrup), a simile with a nearly identical connotation, suggests two equally good-looking husband and wife. **Madu satu tong, jikalau rembes,**

**rembesnya pun madu** (A barrel of honey, if it seeps, the seepage is honey) makes reference to a person descending from a good bloodline.

Overall, the *suap gula* ceremony is a beautiful and meaningful tradition that reflects the family's *dua* (in Islam 'prayer') for the engagement to be 'sweet'. When in a marriage later, the couples themselves must find ways to 'sweeten' their union. However, consumption of real sugar must be used sparingly; lack of consumption will cause hypoglycemia, while too much would lead to diabetes.