



Can Traditional Food Knowledge Be Transferred?

Mohd Shazali Md. Sharif¹, Mohd Salehuddin Mohd Zahari¹,
Norazmir Md Nor², Rosmaliza Muhammad¹

¹ Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM),
Puncak Alam, 42300 Selangor, Malaysia

² Faculty of Health Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM),
Puncak Alam, 42300 Selangor, Malaysia

shazali@salam.uitm.edu.my

Abstract

This study attempts to identify and recognize the approach of food knowledge transfer that can be applied by the younger generation practices. The observation and ethnographic technique performed during the actual food preparation process of the Malay festive celebrations. Purchasing food ingredients, making an observation, hands-on cooking, regular practices, attending ceremonial events and consume the Malay traditional food were the behaviour that's been identified in introducing and passing the Malay traditional food knowledge to the younger generations. Family food tradition should be passed down and evolved along with the social and technological progress to retain the ethnic cultural identity.

Keywords: food knowledge, food practices, knowledge transfer, Malay food

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1.0 Introduction

The transfer of family food knowledge from one generation to the other is part of the informal education scenario. The processes generally occurred spontaneously and involve mothers and daughters. This practice has become traditions of the common families in all ethnics. Conversely young generations nowadays disclaim learning and practicing their traditional ethnic food. There is concern that the traditional food knowledge might vanish and difficult to reconstruct (Kwik, 2008; Md. Nor et al., 2012; UNESCO, 2007), once the new generations neglected to practice the family food tradition or the ethnic traditional food. This study attempts to identify and recognize the approach of the traditional food knowledge transfer to the younger generation practices of Malay ethnic in Malaysia.

2.0 Literature Review

Malay Ethnic

Malays are an ethnic group of Austronesia populace predominantly inhabiting the Malay Peninsula, including the southernmost parts of Thailand, the east coast of Sumatera, the coast of Borneo, and the smaller islands which lie between these locations (Nik Hassan Shuhaimi, 2011; Thomas, 2011, Mohamed, Mohamad, & Hussain, 2010). Malay ethnics are believed started from the west side near the east of Africa Continent namely the Madagascar Island and emerged to the Southeast Asia (Ishak, 2009). This ethnic group was further spread through Hawaii Islands, tiny islands around New Zealand, Easter Island far to the end of East Pacific Ocean, and Chatham Island which is located far at the South of Pacific Ocean. It also includes the north side of the Malay Region to the Taiwan Islands (Nik Hassan Suhaimi et al. , 2011).

Hutton (2000) argued the Malays ethnic group is distinct from the concept of a Malay race, which encompasses a wider group of peoples including the descendants of Indonesians, Philippines and people of Oceania and had a close identification with Islam and this religion remained ever since. (Mastor, Jin & Cooper, 2000). Malays are people who inhabit the Malayan Peninsula and some of the nearby islands including the east coast of Sumatra, the coast of Borneo and smaller islands in that vicinity. These tribal proto-Malays initially were a seafarer which trade and travel via South China sea which indirectly allowed them established new settlement and transit center.

Malay cultural realm involves the relationship between the combination of the Malay culture with the existence of a long tradition and strong Malay according to a relative path to the current changes (Nik Hassan Suhaimi et al., 2011). Zain (2009) emphasized that Malay culture involves with a layer of pre-history, the Hindu-Buddhist, and Islamic civilization. The three layers are shaping the nature of Malay culture which is very rich and unique. Each layer overwrite previous layer, also absorb a little bit that combined elements of various cultures through absorption and adaptation. Until finally the Malay cultural layer by layer wrapped Islam gives the most obvious character of the sense and meaning of the Malays. Malay civilization began to emerge as a concept represents a form of human grouping more structured (learned, rational) and adherence to acknowledge the One God. From here there

is a ruler or king, social hierarchy, country, city, law, life with all patterns, politeness culture, science, physics and metaphysical exploration and a significant and more meaningful life and existence of the Human-Nature-God (Omar, 1983).

The Malay Food Culture

The Malay food has its own history of existence and the origin of its food results in its characteristics that we could see in these days. Different regions in Malaysia have different types of food based on regional cultural. Due to the process of acculturation and assimilation with other countries, Malay food has undergone some modifications when compared to the earlier existence of it but still preserved its ancestry characteristics. Malay generations for many years and indicated by its staple ingredients, flavor principles and cooking method. The staple ingredients include rice, curry, chicken, fish; flavor principles such as the use of ginger, lemon grass, chilies, spices and herb; and cooking methods such as frying and sautéing (Md.Sharif et al., 2012) .

Talking about Malay cooking culture hallmarks, Md. Nor et al. (2012) stated that the main feature of traditional Malay food initially involved the use of cooking ingredients that are often found in the community living surrounding area such as tree shoots, tubers, cash crops, coconuts, herbs leave, seafood products, poultry products and eggs. This involves the forest, backyard farming, fishing in the streams and on the coast and breeding of domestic animals like chicken and ducks. Langgat et al. (2011) interjected that the large proportion of the ingredients or material acquired in the Malay cooking routine does not require the communities to purchase owing to limited grocery store available especially in the village area during that time. With that disparity the traditional Malay food creation initially lies with the individual families before spreading to the neighborhood then later becoming the signature food for the communities, districts or even states.

This can clearly be seen in *rendang*, *asam pedas*, *gulai* and *singgang* although still portraying Malay food culture but represent the various versions of it (Md.Sharif et al., 2012). For instance, there are so many versions of *rendang* and it usually influenced according to the state's like *rendang* in Perak were known as *rendang tok* while in the east coast are called *kerutup*. In principal a pattern or taste of the Malay food is actually subject to the creation and acceptance by the Malay communities of any particular states even though in principle structure or name of the dishes is the same or similar. Another example of a Malay favorite dish like *asam pedas* which are well known in Melaka, Johor, Negeri Sembilan and Selangor but in the north are known as *asam rebus* where the texture of the sauce was slightly thinner and less spicy. It also happens to *singgang* which are popular on the Kelantan and Terengganu but in Selangor, Melaka and Johor are called *pindang* where the texture are the same but the appearance are different, (*singgang* is a clear color and *pindang* is thin yellow in color) (Jalis et al., 2009).

Food Knowledge and the Transmission

Food knowledge is worked generated by communities and ethnic groups that usually pass the knowledge from one generation to the next through oral transmission that focused on the micro environment in which food is produced (Egeland et al., 2009; Kuhnlein, Erasmus, &

Spigelski, 2009; Turner et al., 2009; V.Kuhnlein et al., 2009). It also interconnected with ethnic tradition practices taught by one generation to the next, habitually through word of mouth, hands-on activities, observation and by consuming the foods. Food knowledge plays an important role in cultural identification especially when it regards to the traditional dishes and each culture, ethnic group or region has specific food traditions and practices. Some traditions reflect the custom of ethnic culture while other associated with religious ceremonies (Kwik, 2008). Weichselbaum, Benelam, & Costa, (2009) contended food knowledge can be learned in a number of different settings. Some young people may learn at home, others from community members. Ethnic communities might find out other food habits and food traditions in social occasions where they can exchange knowledge and experience of the foods and cultures. Food knowledge especially the traditional one is crucial in sustaining the food tradition for its development and utilizations. It is important for the ethnic communities to continue and practice the food knowledge in order to maintain the continuation of the ethnic identity (Ohiokpehai, 2003).

Food knowledge transmission is one of the central mechanisms leading to either continuity or change in human culture. The transfer of cognitive and social orientations and cultural knowledge from generation to generation may maintain a culture over longer time spans in addition to genetic transmission. Mothers were the most involved and influential as a food knowledge transfer mediator. The mothers involvements in food knowledge transfer is very significant in continuing the ethnic food traditions and identity (Schönpflug & Yan, 2013). Mothers involvement in transferring or sharing food knowledge to their children's especially to their daughter's are challenging due to the career commitment and demands reduce their involvement in practicing conventional or traditional cooking at home (Chenhall, 2011).

3.0 Methodology

This study applied an observation and ethnographic technique to tap on the actual food preparation process of the Malay festive celebrations. The observation process took place during the Malay festive and wedding ceremony food preparation process done in August and October 2012. Ten sets of Malay families within Klang valley engaged in the study with placing a research assistant to be involved in the cooking process to explore the experience. The observation is more emphasis on the younger generation participation in the preparation process of the Malay traditional food for the festive celebration. The approach employs in the process were chronicled in a log book before being analyzed further. The observation also infused with picture taking to enable the snaps used as an evidence for reporting and analysis.

4.0 Results and Discussions

It is interesting to note that the two different Malay festive celebration observation activities has produced an unexpected result in acquiring the information and feedback on Malay food knowledge transfer and practices for the festive celebration. Results from the observational

studies conducted found that the transfer of Malay traditional food knowledge was done in various forms of informal occasions for the purpose of exposing the young generation to the Malay traditional food. Purchasing food ingredients at the wet market, making an observation, hands-on cooking activities, regular practices, attending/ visiting family or cultural events and consume the Malay traditional foods were some of the nature of activities that have been identified in introducing and passing the Malay traditional food knowledge to the younger generations.

Purchasing Food Ingredients at Wet Market

Figure 1 showed the common environment in a local Malay community wet markets, it shows that most visitors are women specifically mothers and only a small group were accompanied by their daughter. It clearly demonstrates that the wet market nowadays was not only selling fresh raw ingredients, it also offers convenience food ingredients like fresh coconut milk, cooking paste and frozen foods. This scenario explains the need for convenience food ingredient gains more credence and demands among Malay community and now has become a necessity in the process of preparing the Malay dishes. Such facilities available have facilitated the mothers to practice traditional Malay dishes where the process of preparing the ingredients was complicated and time consumes.



Figure 1. Scenario of food material purchasing activities in a wet market.

Joining and accompanying mother or family members to purchase fresh cooking ingredients at wet market are despised by the young generations nowadays. It is because these activities are often carried out in the early morning as early as six and later before eight in the morning to avoid the sun rise higher which will wilted the fresh vegetables and avoid the poultry, meats and seafood got smells and rot easily. Furthermore the time spend with average between one to two hours have made it as not an attractive option. In actual facts following mother to wet market indirectly or coincidentally offers many benefits and experiences in purchasing and choosing the right quality and quantity cooking materials. It also practically helps in identifying ingredients for food preparation. Apart from the fact it could indirectly strengthen ties parents and children while exposing them to fresh and raw food purchasing techniques. These activities should be utilized by the younger generations as they could practice and used the knowledge and experienced gained. Results from the observational find the parents' lack of enforcing their teenage children especially the

daughters to participate in purchasing activities however, small children are often brought together and they look enjoyed.

Observations and Hands-on Activities

Figure 2 shows a scene which occurs spontaneously in a situation in the observation process on one of the Malay ceremonial food preparation activities and it then proceeds spontaneously with hands-on activity of a boy who display more interest with the cooking preparation activity compare to his friends. What's interesting here is that when the boys was given the space and opportunity to join and experience the process of preparing the cooking material along with an experienced cook. The scene has shown one of the best examples to be associated with the observation and hands-on process of learning the Malay cooking in one of the Malay ceremonial event. The experienced cook indirectly transferred food knowledge to the boys, in this way it will actually make the ethnic tradition food knowledge being practiced and continues to grow.



Figure 2. Scenario of food preparation and cooking process for Malay wedding ceremony

Learning of the situation, in fact observation and hands-on cooking can be practiced in domestic setting where food knowledge and family food traditions can be transferred to the children. The mother is the best mediator in transferring the food knowledge to the children as noted in Chenhall, (2011) study on improving cooking and food preparation skills in Canada. The approach actually able to provide basic exposure to the children on the cooking skill and knowledge especially when it refers to family food tradition. Efforts in fostering and

transfer food knowledge is not a complicated obligation to the parents because the children always under our control before they grow older. What is important in this situation is lies with the mother cooking efforts and capability. Results from the observation reveal that the daughters always abide heard the mother when they were called to assist in the food preparation. Therefore it is evidently shown that the observation and hands-on cooking approach can be applied to the young generation especially for the teenager, what is much more important is the mother need to participate and get involved with passing food knowledge to their children in order to continue the family food traditions and identity.

Regular Practice

Figure 3 demonstrates two different situations to show how the process of food preparation that can also be practiced by man/boy in two different settings. The interesting note about both scenes, it highlighted the boys' participation in food preparation practices. The first scene it shows the boys were in charge to grate five hundred coconuts to get coconut milk as ingredient for *rendang* and other dishes in a Malay ceremonial event while the second scene shows a boy participation in trimming and cleaning fish in preparation for making *laksam* sauce for Hari Raya Haji celebration. The boys' participation clearly explains that they seem to be familiar with the food preparation practices despite the difficult and dangerous dealing with coconut grater machine and knife. This also indicates that the boys had gone through the observation and hands-on processes until they can practice it alone without any supervision. Learning from the scene it clearly signifies that boys or man can also participate in food preparation processes for any occasion. It also demonstrates that when individuals who are exposed and given space to practice what they have learned will grant them confidence in the food knowledge practices. With impeccable exposure, it can nurture the young generation to recognize and be familiar with Malay food knowledge in line with recommendations of the study by Langgat et. al., (2011) that practice will always make things perfect and allow the knowledge to continue developed.



Figure 3. Scenario of food preparation activities for Malay wedding ceremony and Malay festive celebration

Attending Cultural Ceremonial and Consume the Malay Traditional Foods

Figure 4 demonstrates the Malay ceremonial events and show how does the foods are being served and consumed. In Malay culture practices, festive celebration (like *Hari Raya Aidil Fitri* and *Hari Raya Aidil Adha*) and wedding ceremony is an event that often gets the attention of the Malay community to attend and give blessing to the host. Although we have been in a modern-age, the image displayed clearly demonstrates eating cross-legged on the floor still sustained by the Malay especially those living in the village. Eating in this manner actually reflect the harmony and assent among the Malay communities. Attending such events in fact is a good platform for the young generation to get familiar with Malay traditional foods which often served along in the events. Indirectly it can introduce the traditional dishes to them and thus be able to feel the pleasure and unique experience consume the Malay traditional foods. This simple activity in reality creates opportunities and awareness for young generations to reach out as well as recognize various culinary traditions that may be forgotten and abandoned as presented by UNESCO in a conference that presented the issues on intangible food heritage on 2007 in New York. This also could attract and influence younger generations to practice and continue the ethnic food traditions for festive and ceremonial events.



Figure 4. Scenario of Malay wedding ceremony and how the food served in Malay feast.

5.0 Conclusion

Results from the observations illustrate that food knowledge transfer can actually occur spontaneously without intent thus with little encouragement and motivation from the surrounding societies like parents, family members, neighbours and senior communities actually could help the young generations to cultivate interest to acquire and practice Malay traditional food knowledge. Cooking along with mother and family members for festive celebration is one of the best techniques to transfer and gain food knowledge. The observation and hands-on process in the kitchen or cooking activities strengthens family warmth and compatibilities. Sharing food knowledge is more effective when there is two-way communication and hands-on cooking involved in the process. Cannot be denied participating in activities to the wet market, attend Malay feasts and wedding ceremony actually is an easy way in exposing the younger generation to the varieties of Malay food and indirectly the food knowledge were passed to them. However, parents are perceived to take stern efforts in passing the food knowledge particularly when it involves the family food tradition and preparations to their young generations.

In conclusion, regular practice and knowledge sharing through communication are the key elements in determining the sustainability of the Malay traditional food knowledge for future generations. Family food tradition should be preserved and evolved along with the social and technological progress. This study has focused on the Malay food knowledge transfer among the Malay ethnic generation's practices in Malaysia setting. The observations could indirectly extend and enhanced the academic contribution in gastronomic literature. Recognizing that this particular area has yet completely explored. Thus, research on ethnic gastronomic behaviour should be further addressed.

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