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The Transmission Modes of Malay Traditional Food Knowledge within Generations

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Abstract

Malay modern society especially the young generation has gradually ignored the practice of Malay traditional food. Social transition and unlimited information technology are believed to influence the changes of food intake and practices. This study empirically investigates the transmission modes of Malay traditional food knowledge within generation. Using Klang Valley as a contextual setting, 5 sets of respondents consist of mother and daughter was interviewed. Qualitative approaches are employed by using thematic analysis to understand the phenomena. Observation, be a helper, received instruction and task from the mothers are the modes of transmission in Malay families which influenced their practices.

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1. Introduction

Food is recognized as being expressive identity and integral component of cultural and heritage. Furthermore foods are seen as a midpoint of culture identity, which belongs to specific society or ethnic and some elements of food preparation and consumption are the visible badges of identity. Camp (2009) noted preparation and consumption is a combination and intersection of food and culture while Powell (2007) posit preparation and consumption food is mean to the identity of a community, age, ethnicity, gender, locale, occupation and religion. Some argue preparation and consumption closely related to cultural of foods, the tools, techniques and ingredients for which food is prepared and it customs (Verbeke & Lopez, 2005; Vu, 2009) and these is one of the best ways to understand a culture and ethnic identity (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012).

Many scholars urged on essential of preserving technique of preparation and skill by transmitting them to the next generation (Kwik, 2008; Yohannes, 2009) and this transferring can retain and sustain for future young generations. The above statement clearly indicates that preserving food practices including some traditional ones are crucial or important for every ethnic group. In other word, this is known as Traditional Food Knowledge (TFK). It is refers to the cultural tradition of sharing food provisioning skills, techniques and cultural beliefs which are being carried by generations through the cooking skills, techniques and recipes. Traditional food knowledge can be a means of asserting cultural identity, particularly for minority cultural groups; transmitting this knowledge may contribute to personal skills that relate to food security and personal nutrition and enhanced community capacity.

The United Nations through the International Workshop on Traditional Knowledge emphasized that traditional food knowledge should continuously be retained for future generation as they will carry out the profound spiritual and identity for self or as peoples (UNESCO, 2007). Some ethnics are reported not only facing the problem of deskilling issues related to domestic cooking skills but has started to lost the traditional food culture owing to weakening of old generation to past down the traditional cooking knowledge to the young generations (Bowen & Devine, 2011; Stringer, 2009). For instance, young generation are too embrace with pre-prepared, packaged and convenience foods, which lessen their interest in adopting the domestic and traditional cooking from their mothers.

In Malaysia, Malay modern society especially the young generation has gradually ignored the practice of Malay traditional food, which is being replaced with the commercial food products. In addition, social transition and unlimited information technology are believes to influence the changes of food intake and practices. This scenario has received greater concern among the Malay older generation, Malaysian Cultural association and The Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture as well as the others government agencies in order to preserve Malay traditional food knowledge. This is evident when the former Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage, Dato' Seri Utama Dr. Rais bin Yatim urged the Malaysia citizen to preserve their food heritage delicacies by passing down the knowledge and skill and practices to next generation (KEKKWA, 2008).

Despite that, the issue of preserving traditional food knowledge has also brought the concern of government leaders and academic scholars on the impact towards the traditional food knowledge if the practices does not being passed down to the future young generations. The concern of many parties on this problem raises critical questions of how Traditional Food Knowledge or transmission occur in Malay ethnic even related to common daily food and how it has been passed down? Thus, this study empirically investigates the transmission modes of Malay traditional food knowledge within generation specifically focused on the transferable process of Malay traditional food knowledge with regard to preparation, method and skills.

2. Literature Review

Malaysia known as a multicultural and multiracial country consists of various ethnics such as Malay, Chinese, Indian and others. As a major ethnic group, Malay is known to be descendants of the tribal proto-Malays, a mixture of modern Indian, Thai, Arab and Chinese ancestry. The pioneer settlement of Malay Peninsula, coastal Borneo and eastern islands were among the Malays from Sumatran coast and indigenous group from Java and Celebes (Hutton, 2000; Jalis, Zahari, Zulkifly, & Othman, 2009). It is believed the formation of Malay traditional foods occurred earlier and had continuously developed during the trading years received a great influence from neighbouring countries. This can be clearly seen through the influence of Thai in northern and eastern states of peninsular Malaysia while the south region states like Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Johor having significant influenced from Indonesia such as Minangkabau, Bugis and Javanese. Ling (2002) noted that despite the various Malay cuisine through its region from north to south, east to coast and East Malaysia including Sabah and Sarawak but they are identical in terms of the characteristic of the food itself which are strong, spicy and aromatic. This can be proven through the preparation, methods of cooking, availability and uses of the ingredients like ginger, turmeric, chillies, lemon grass and dried shrimp paste and many others (Evaland, 2011).

Rozin (2006) posited that there are three components of Malay traditional food that differentiates it from other ethnics like Chinese and Indian (a) the staple ingredients, (b) the flavour principles (lemon grass, ginger, chillies, dried herbs and spices) and (c) cooking methods. Mohamed, Mohamad, & Hussain (2010) and Evaland, (2011) further supported that Malay meals always revolves with staple food such as rice, accompanied curries, chicken or fish, vegetables dishes and small portion of condiments called *sambal* or *sambal belacan*, which made of pungent fermented shrimp paste. Furthermore Malay cooking is diversified through its dried and fresh ingredients where both ingredients are commonly used for spice paste in making *sambal* or adding hotness to the dish.

Ebster and Guist (2004) argued that the authenticity, the originality and the real taste of the Malay cuisine are well dependant those upon three elements plus culture ethnic origin. Traditional authenticity of food in fact expresses the actual meaning of unique internal originality through its taste. In addition, Mohamed et al., (2010) revealed that there are four characteristics of authenticity in Malay Kelantan cuisine which are known as (a) heritage and style persistence, (b) nostalgic, (c) freedom from alteration and (d) assurance.

Malay foods also identically acknowledge its trademark through hot and spicy taste (Wan Hafiz, W.Z.S., TOH, & Hamdin, 2008) For instance, traditional cuisine such as curry *rendang* (dry, dark, heavy coconut-based curry) has a combination of Indonesian and Thailand taste, blending ingredients such as ginger, turmeric, chillies, lemongrass, and dried shrimp paste (Bowen & Devine, 2011; Brisseden, 2003). Furthermore, Sharif, Supardi, Ishak, & Ahmad (2008) asserted that there are about 120 species of 'Ulam' or Malay's traditional herbs representing various families are largely served as fresh salad or cooked. Despite that, various local vegetables and herbs, *solok lada* (stuffed green chilli), *budu* (homemade fish sauce) and fish crackers are accompanied in *nasi kerabu*, one of the popular dishes in Kelantan, while *nasi dagang* is served with seafood dishes in Terengganu (Muhammad, Zahari, Othman, Jamaluddin, & Rashdi, 2009).

In line to the above notion, Malay food can also be categorized according to five zones. In northern region states such as Perlis, Kedah and Kelantan, are located near to boarder of Thailand with some similarity to fiery hot spicy and sour flavour to the food have some common in ingredients into their cuisine such as lemongrass, galangal, turmeric, chillies, fragrance leaf such as pandan leaf, kaffir lime leaf and the polygonum or *daun kesum* and *daun kemangi* (Ling, 2002).

Omar et al. (2011) and Sharif et al., (2008) noted that both regions from Kelantan and Terengganu have some similarities in their traditional foods however Kelantan's foods are sweeter than Terengganu.

In addition, scholars remarked that both states traditional curries are used coconut milk to promote rich thick creamy *rendang*. The traditional foods from these two regions normally used local main ingredients which can be easily found by the locals (Hassan, 2011). Furthermore, this scholar also defined traditional foods into four (4) different categories (a) snack (i.e. *Keropok lekor lonsong* made of fish and flour), (b) traditional Malay dessert (*akok*), (c) Malay Traditional noodle (*laksa*) and (d) rice (*nasi*) -based such as *nasi kerabu*, *nasi berlauk* and *nasi dagang*.

In the south state of Malaysia, Sharif et al., (2008) noted traditional cuisine in Selangor, Malacca and Johor has some elements of Javanese influence due to migrants of Javanese in the area during the 19th century. On the other hand, fish and seafood in south east and coast of Peninsular Malaysia, are rubbed with turmeric and deep fried; *rojak buah* and *tangy Acar* made from fresh vegetables and fruits and marinated fish, chicken or pieces of meat are grilled over charcoal 'panggang, percik and bakar'. *Masak asam pedas* or '*Gulai tumis*' is another version of Malay popular sour fish soup or stew. According to Brissenden (2003) Negeri Sembilan cuisine has great influence from Minangkabau, West Sumatera. Dishes such as '*rendang*' and '*masak lemak cili api*' both indicate features of heavy thick coconut milk and spicy are the perfect examples of culinary heritage.

In Perak, *Gulai Tempoyak* and *Rendang Tok* are a few of Perak signature traditional dishes commonly served for either for daily meals or during festive celebration such as Eid Mubarak and wedding ceremonies. In fact, *Gulai tempoyak* is made of local ingredients such as fermented durian, chillies, turmeric, lemon grass, salt to taste, fish and water (Sharif et al., 2008). *Rendang Tok* originated from Bukit Chandan and surrounding area in Perak. *Rendang Tok* is described as dried beef curry made of combination rich spices (cloves, star anise, cumin, and cinnamon), turmeric, chillies, cubed beef and coconut milk. In order to make it more tastier, *kerisik* (pan fried desiccated coconut) and small strip of fresh coconut flesh are added in *Rendang Tok*.

In general, the characteristics of Malay traditional foods are influenced based on the geographical region as mentioned above. On the other hand, the migrations of the ancestors or older generation which brought along and practice the traditional food knowledge also contribute to the notion of current food consumption (Bowen & Devine, 2011)

3. Methodology

The transmission of Malay traditional food knowledge among generation practices study applied qualitative methods to discover the transmission mode. The rationale of conducting qualitative study was because the findings provide an understanding of the process and the reasons for such behaviors rather than just to arrive at by means of statistical procedures. Berg (2004) contended that qualitative methods are particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery and inductive logic. Merriam (2009) argued that qualitative research basically provides an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives, and histories. This is in accordance with Sekaran & Bougie (2010) that qualitative approaches enable the researcher to carry out an in-depth investigation into the issues from fewer people and produce descriptions of situations, events, people, interactions and observed behaviors through direct quotations. The use of qualitative method is justifiable because the method enables for gaining an understanding on how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute their experiences (Merriam, 2009).

A qualitative approach through interviews was considered to be the most effective research method. A selection of semi structured interview was used to explore respondents experience in the phenomenal field related to Malay traditional food knowledge and transmission process. Salkind (2003) stated qualitative methods are particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery and inductive logic., Berg

(2004) noted face to face interviews allow in-depth exploration. Further, the interview method allows in-depth investigation about issues from fewer people and produces descriptions of situations, events, people, interactions and observed behaviour (Merriam, 2009). Berg, (2004) argued that qualitative investigation is more to open ended and less structures formats which between structured and unstructured that gives the researcher flexibility to gain the information.

A qualitative approach explores the transmission of Malay traditional food knowledge within the Malay women. The sample population for this study was split into two generations. On the transferable of traditional food knowledge women with age range between 50 – 70 years old women with married daughters were chosen. For the practices, the young generation women with age range from 20 to 40 were selected as a sample that was believed to have background experience related to pertaining study. In other words, a set of short interview questions was developed in order to gain more understanding on the experience between both generations.

Each focus group articulated different experiences with regards to the transmission food knowledge practices and food sharing. This study specifically focused on women with two generation in one family. Owing to the enormous of two generations (mothers with married daughters) in a family unit, the researcher had identified that it was difficult to catered desired information throughout entire group in this region with limited of time. Hair, Money, Samouel and Page (2008) affirmed that to gain the entire population generally will be costly and time constraint. While, Salkind (2003) argued that it would be practically impossible to collect data from, test, or examine every single element in the population, particularly when the investigation involves several hundreds or even thousands of elements. With that reason, it is noted that a study on a sample and group population will encourage more reliable and consistent results (Merriam, 2009). According to Berg (2004) a study of five to twenty individuals in a qualitative study is considered sufficient to accommodate the data. Meanwhile, Sekaran & Bougie (2010) argued that sample size of 15 to 30 respondents for interview series is believed to be an appropriate and acceptable. For this study, the target population is specifically as mentioned above spotlight on the two generations between mothers and daughters (Malay ethnic). Using Klang Valley as a contextual setting, 5 sets of respondents consists of mother and daughter were interviewed.

On the instruments, a set of questions designed and developed based on Kwik (2008), and with minor alteration to suit the study content for interview used. Focus group data collection was carried out to both generations to gain insights into the respondents' experience related to Malay traditional food knowledge transmission modes and the impact on practices. The structure of the question content was relied on the research objectives.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Informants Profiles

Five set of informants (a set of mother and daughter) were involved in the interviews. The informants were randomly selected within Klang valley. Majority of the mothers were housewife and age range from 54 to 64 years old while the daughters are working ladies and their age range are from 25 to 39 years old. Furthermore the daughters are all married with kids. Their profiles are simplified and presented in Table I. Majority of the daughters stayed separately with their mothers but still within the Klang Valley area.

Table 1. Informants' Profiles

| Informant | Age | Education level | Occupation | No. Of children | Upbringing state |
|-------------------|-----|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Group Informant 1 | | | | | |
| Mother | 59 | Standard 6 | Housewife | 3 | Kuala Lumpur |
| daughter | 37 | Diploma | Banker | 4 | Kuala Lumpur |
| Group Informant 2 | | | | | |
| Mother | 62 | Standard 6 | Housewife | 5 | Selangor |
| daughter | 39 | SPMV | Freelance | 2 | Kuala Lumpur |
| Group Informant 3 | | | | | |
| Mother | 54 | LCE | Retiree | 7 | Melaka |
| daughter | 29 | Diploma | Asst. Admin. | 1 | Kuala Lumpur |
| Group informant 4 | | | | | |
| Mother | 64 | Standard 6 | Housewife | 11 | Kuala Lumpur |
| daughter | 25 | STPM | Supervisor | 2 | Selangor |
| Group Informant 5 | | | | | |
| Mother | 64 | LCE | Retiree | 2 | Perak |
| daughter | 35 | Degree | Bank Officer | 5 | Kuala Lumpur |

4.2. Types of Knowledge Transferred

Information gathered through the interviewed with mothers revealed ingredients, preparation, methods of cooking, equipment and cooking skills are the attributes or knowledge transferred to the daughters. Despite this some mothers admitted transference were only involved some of the popular Malay dishes like *rendang*, *curry*, *masak asam pedas*, *masak lemak*, *sambal tumis* and few others. The processes normally started during their daughter adolescents' days while they were still staying with the mother and gradually occurring especially during school holidays and religious festival days like Hari Raya. Most of the daughters agreed with their mother statements. It is interesting to note that some daughters admitted transference of cooking knowledge which involved ingredients, preparation, methods of cooking, equipments were also occurs through telephone especially in the early years of their marriage and this knowledge were further strengthened when the daughters with their mothers during festive, holiday season, family gathering or when their mother visiting them. Below is a Table 2 which showing few answers obtained.

Table 2. Informants' Feedback

| Group Informant 1 | Answer |
|-------------------|--|
| <i>Mother</i> | <i>"Usually, I observed my mother cook. She cook traditional dish daily. By helping her in the kitchen, in directly I learned not only the ingredients but also the preparation techniques. She did not talk much except reprimand me if I make mistakes."</i> |
| <i>Daughter</i> | <i>"Yes, at home my mother taught me basic ingredients and familiar with the raw materials. Indeed, she explained to me how to use the four spices like cloves, star anise, cinnamon stick, cardamom in curry dish. Furthermore, she provides me with few tips like do not over used Curry leaves or else... the curry dish will taste bitter."</i> |
| Group Informant 3 | |
| <i>Mother</i> | <i>"My mother often asks me to cook. She would tell me today's menu and from there I started leaning various types of ingredients and cooking methods. She was a good chef."</i> |
| <i>Daughter</i> | <i>"A.... Aaa! (yes!) Mother would stay beside me and she will instruct me what to prepare. Then I start to cook, my mother will observe and advise me what to do. She said: "this is incorrect; you should cut the vegetables like this." She showed how to cut and clean then I will follow her style."</i> |
| Group Informant 5 | |
| <i>Mother</i> | <i>"Formerly there were 'pucuk ubi' and few others local vegetables available around the house. Besides of having Banana trees, we usually used 'Jantung pisang' in our dish. Most of the ingredients were used in our daily dishes and we seldom go to the market because it is too far. Sometimes, my mother asked me to get 'pucuk ubi' nearby the river."</i> |
| <i>Daughter</i> | <i>"I learned from both (mother and grandmother), definitely there were two dissimilar approaches. I like to observe and I observed properly or I will ask them. My mother teach me simple traditional dishes contrary to my grandmother, she taught me authenticity dishes in details such as how to prepare masak lemak daging salai using the right ingredients and methods."</i> |

4.3. Traditional Food Knowledge the Transferred

During the interview session, the informants were also asked on modes of knowledge transfer on the Malay traditional foods. In response to this question, mothers who involved in the interviewed posited that oral communication, observation and hands on were the ways of transferring the Malays food knowledge by their late mothers. The majority of them started their cooking lesson at the early age between 8 to 12 years old. This is the age range that they were normally learnt cooking from their mothers and continues after marriage and beyond. Some admitted that they had voluntarily helped their mother in the kitchen because they felt responsible and obedient to their mothers. This older generation (mothers) also claimed that cooking is a routine task in their everyday life. Learning from observation and follow what the mothers taught allowed the learning process more effectively. Unlike mothers, most of the daughters noted the transfer process did occurred however most of it were by forcing and that the reason why some of them admitted that their Malay traditional cooking skill improved after having their own family. Again, this process continually occurs during previous mentioned occasions.

Table 3. Informants' Feedback

| Group Informant 1 | Answer |
|-------------------|---|
| Mother | "It all started when I was 10 years old when I saw my mother cooked my favourite dish. I learnt through observing and pay full attention of what she did. Honestly..... my mother did not really teach me while she is cooking; It is all depends on my efforts and interest to learn." |
| Daughter | "My mother force and request me to help her in the kitchen... he he he he (giggle)... She said "you will only learn how to do when you are actually doing it." Again, she stressed "You will learn better from observing how other people cook, so that in the future you are able to cook the same dish".....she taught me a lot." |
| Group Informant 4 | |
| Mother | "I begin my cooking lesson when I was 10 years old when my mother taught me how to cook rice. Living as a kampong girl and becoming an eldest daughter in the family, I was responsible in helping my mother in the kitchen and household task. My journey life was uneasy as I had to cook for my family and obeyed my mother." |
| Daughter | "I remembered when I was 12 years old, when my mother in the kitchen, she usually calls me to help her doing simple kitchen task.....like washing vegetables, peel onion skin and so on. I observed what mother did and from that onwards, I started learning cutting the vegetables, cooked rice and boiled eggs. Later, I slowly developed my cooking knowledge and skills" |
| Group Informant 5 | |
| Mother | "From small my mother had taught me. You know.....When I was A teenage I had already known how to make bananas fritters and at age of 10 years old I knew how to prepare coffee and tea. Not to tell lies ... my mother was a strict lady." |
| Daughter | "When I was 12 years old. My mother calls me to help her in the kitchen. That was the first time my mother teach me how to cook rice." |

Overall, observation, be a helper, received instruction and receive task from the mothers are the majority modes of traditional food knowledge transmission in Malay families which influenced their practices of Malay traditional foods. The transferrable process of Malay traditional food is usually occurring between the mothers and daughters as declared by them. The ingredients, preparation, methods of cooking, equipment and cooking skills are the attributes or knowledge transferred. Oral communication, observation and hands on were the ways of transferring the Malays food knowledge. Without doubt, those mentioned methods are important in preserving traditional food which should be continuously shared, transferred, adapted and practiced by generations.

5. Conclusion

The transferrable process of Malay traditional food among the generations between the mothers and the daughters revealed that ingredients, preparation, methods of cooking, equipment and cooking skills are the attributes or knowledge transferred. Oral communication, observation and hands on were the ways of transferring the Malays food knowledge and the processes happened since adolescents' days and continually occurring by many means including telephone instruction, festive, holiday season and family gathering. Results also revealed that mothers in the 60's spare more time with the daughter compare mothers of 90's which indirectly reduced the practices of Malay traditional food in daily routine.

In line with this notion, the old generation mothers in particularly can play a significant role in preserving the practicing of Malay traditional foods among the young generation. This group hence

should continually encourage their young married daughters in practicing the preparation of home Malay cooking foods for their family especially during weekends or on leave period. Therefore, it is crucial and very important for every ethnic particularly the Malays to preserve their food practiced to the young generations in order to retain their ethnic culture identity.

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