

# Timely adaptation: Traditional values survival within current Malay *kuih* production

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## ABSTRACT

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Malay kuih is known for its myriads of flavours and long has been in the staples of Malaysia's gastronomic heritage. Especially to the east coast states namely, Kelantan and Terengganu, Malay kuih is abundance among other heritage making both states crowned as the most preserved Malay heritage and culture. Despite its unique identity and cultural significance, the production of Malay kuih surrendered to the wave of modernization, letting trend of preferences shift amongst consumers. This study sets the journey to explore the production of Malay kuih in contemporary practices that steered to instil the traditional values. Qualitative research design was set and employed to carry out the study using the case study approach. In-depth interviews are the main data collection technique excerpting insights of Malay kuih experts in the production of Malay kuih. Seven in-depth interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo14. Thematic analysis revealed three interrelated themes: (1) keeping Malay kuih authenticity of familial inheritance, (2) restricting innovation for larger capacity production, and (3) adapting new operational means for awareness and education. In tandem with that, method triangulations were also employed enlisting participative observations for strengthened rigor. Findings indicate that while traditional values are highly prioritized by experts, modernization shed some hope for the continuity of the delicacies through minimal adaptations. These adaptive strategies must start with firm adherence to original recipes and move forward with small enhancements to its mechanical aspect of making. This also reflected to the overall operational decisions including packaging, marketing, and product variety. This study provides preliminary insights for policymakers, and the food industry on sustaining Malay kuih as both a cultural legacy and a viability.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Food equates sustenance for living things, especially human beings. Through time, patterns of food consumption including ingredient selections, combination of flavors, rituals and cultures associated with it, displays unique identity, diversity, and collective memory to a group as well as at national level. By looking at it broadly, heritage in general acts as cultural artefacts that holds local traditional, knowledge transmission as well as communal belonging (Chen, 2018; Gao & Jones, 2020; Guerrero et al., 2012, 2009; Kamaruzaman et al., 2023; Mallik et al., 2011). Malaysia for example, known for its rich gastronomy collection with dynamic flavors and colors, and cultural symbolisms. However in general, the tangible counterparts of it is what manifested as the survival of its cultural continuity (Chen, 2018; Mardatillah et al., 2019). An array of varieties of heritage foods can be found across all ethnicities there are in Malaysia namely Malay, Chinese, and Indian as the three major ethnicities (Som et al., 2020). Above all, Malay is statistically accounts for the majority of the Malaysia's citizenship and needless to say being the prominent gastronomic bases of Malaysia's food. Apart from the different types of food that the Malays own, the depth of variety that one type of food offers is tremendous. The Malay *kuih* for instance, though claims depicted bite-sized traditional delicacies, served during festivities, communal gatherings, or everyday treats (Kamaruzaman et al., 2022), it houses a lot more stories and experiences than those.

In spite of that, it seems like the wave of new lifestyle and boundless communication of current modernization threatened the Malay *kuih* in every angle. The rise of liberate innovations to date has birthed hybridized cuisine, new food, as well as compromised integrity of food witnessed across the globe via social media. Hence the complications upon setting the boundaries between authenticity and its adaptations (Guerrero et al., 2009; Mardatillah et al., 2019; Ting et al., 2016). Needless to say, younger generations have progressively opted for fast food and convenience food-based diets. This pattern led to the demise of heritage foods that once were the reliance for the locals' sustenance. It affects the landscape of foodways in a way that native ingredients started to scarce due to the decreasing demands of such ingredients in the current pace of life. This in return raises the costs of obtaining the necessities to reproduce the Malay *kuih*. Paired with demotivation and reluctance to inherit and practice the traditional skill set of making traditional Malay *kuih* (Ali & Abdullah, 2012; Hamzah et al., 2015; Ismail et al., 2013), Malaysia is putting its assets at stake.

Having said that, there are evidence that in places like Terengganu and Kelantan near the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia popularized and commoditized Malay *kuih* successfully. Awarded the name of "Cradle of Malay Culture" (Hamzah et al., 2015, p. 473), both states uphold Malay cultures the best where traditional values continue to manifest in everyday life especially in gastronomic practices. Malay *kuih* in these settings is known for their artisanal grade of quality. Such examples include *kuih akok* (small, molded cakes made from duck eggs with pandan aroma), *kuih jala mas* (bundles of sweet egg yolk threads), *kuih buah tanjung* (sweet egg yolk dumplings in small tear-drop shape), *kuih tahi itik* (soft egg white and wheat cakes) and *tepung pelita* (two-layer soft pudding of pandan and coconut in pandan leaf cups). Fig. 1 shows common varieties of Malay *kuih* from Kelantan. The Malay *kuih* is also encapsulate the culture of Malay poetry in which ingredients or folk tales associated with the *kuih* believed to have symbolic meanings thus the names (Ahmad, 2019; Mallik et al., 2011).



Fig. 1. An array of Kelantan's Malay *Kuih* (Clockwise from top: *kuih akok*, *kuih jala mas*, *kuih buah tanjung*, and *kuih tahi itik*)

Source: Author's own data

All the uniqueness mentioned may have been given away to the modernization wave of life advancements. It is prominent that the way of Malay *kuih* production may have been tainted with modern adjustments and innovations parallel to the technological advancements. While anecdotal claims casually insist on the fact that Malay *kuih* is best produced traditionally all the way through, only limited empirical academic attempts investigated the extent of how Malay *kuih* producers make their *kuih* in the context of timely adaptations. Whether it is operating in rural or otherwise settings, decisions made onto the subject of Malay *kuih* traditional values and the extent of adaptations to modern life and consumers preference is still in debate (Hamzah et al., 2015; Mardatillah et al., 2019; Saidi, 2018). To date, most of the existing literatures overlooked the survival of Malay *kuih* producers of their methods and techniques in preserving heritage food integrity.

This study pulls this gap closer by exploring the lived experiences of Malay *kuih* producers in Kelantan dan Terengganu. Specifically, it investigates the strategies they practice in current time to preserve the traditional values within the Malay *kuih* against disruptive modernization. This study set a research question of how does Malay *kuih* produced while keeping the traditional value intact? This research is envisioned and executed to contribute to food heritage sustainability through documentation of preservation practices of the traditional values within Malay *kuih*. This can be translated to broader debates on tradition values continuity through time with the help of controlled adaptations. It offers empirical insights for potential policymakers, heritage advocates, as well as education sector to venture further specific rhetor. as this current research is still in its adolescence, this study helps in developing foundation for the researchers and research projection to deepen the knowledge of heritage food scene in Malaysia.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Benign Intangibility of heritage

Heritage is a wide topic covering all sorts of assets or possessions passed between generations (Del Soldato & Massari, 2024; Gao & Jones, 2020; Timothy, 2021) that were collectively made as norm instead of just simply existed within groups of communities (Chang & Mah, 2021) and even coined as matters regarded as “habit” (Amilien & Hegnes, 2013, p. 3458). Generally divided into two: (1) tangible heritage, and (2) intangible heritage (Som et al., 2020), the first manifest themselves as physically in existence and can be apparent to senses, meanwhile the intangible heritage is a benign absence to our senses. It is abstract and traditionally transmitted orally or documented. In the context of heritage foods where traditional foods belong, Malay *kuih* itself cease to exist only when produced. That is then a combination of both tangible (physically existing Malay *kuih* from production) and intangible (ideas, recipes, tips and tricks of making). It is therefore acknowledged that heritage food serves as a prime example of knowledge and practices succession between generations embedding emotional attachment and cultural memoirs (Mardatillah et al., 2019). These two components can also be translated into two player parts in the effort of sustaining the existence where the consumption of (having the tangible) and the production of (materializing the intangible) Malay *kuih*. Not only does it persist but it also strengthens preservation through familiarity and routine. However, the intangible part of it lies in the elderly that deemed to be pivotal in the effort of embedding traditions in younger generations (Hamzah et al., 2015). Supported by Yana and Yew (2017) this is important to keep the legacy of Malay *kuih* going on into the future. On the consumption part however, the awareness, acknowledgement, and appreciation of Malay *kuih* among youths are significantly declining due to current trends and diets (Hamzah et al., 2015; Saidi, 2018) thus, stirs the concerns about the sustainability force of the Malay *kuih* in the contemporary era (Arsad, 2018).

### 2.2 Malaysia’s Malay *kuih* taxonomy and sustainability

Malaysia’s Malay *kuih* taxonomize a multitude of delicacies with dynamic range of hedonic pleasures from sweet to savoury, wet to dry, soft textured to crispy and crunchy textured (Hamid, 2017; Raji et al., 2017). Not just that, there are regional preferences where sweeter *kuih* is preferred in northern states such as Kedah, Perlis, Terengganu, and Kelantan, and savoury types dominate the south, including Selangor, Melaka, and Negeri Sembilan. Another layer of its taxonomy, east coast Malay *kuih* is often coloured yellow due to higher egg content, while green coloured Malay *kuih* that is heavy on the use of pandan leaves is more common across the west coast region (Ahmad, 2019). Apart from those, Malay *kuih* is symbolically embedded in Malay culture, with wet *kuih* synonymously served every day or at religious gatherings, and dry *kuih* associated with Eid celebration due to longer shelf life withstanding the length of Eid month. Sustainability on Malay *kuih* depends on younger generations as custodians; however, their interest and participation remain limited (Hamzah et al., 2015). In addition, globalization and modernization have weakened kitchen practices, increased dependence on convenience foods, and reduced intergenerational transmission (Ali & Abdullah, 2012; Nor et al., 2012). Modern substitutions and technological advances compromise authenticity, while deskilling through machine-based production further erodes traditional *petua* (traditional cooking tips and tricks) (Ismail et al., 2013; Sharif et al., 2016)

### 2.3 Modernization, Consumer Preferences, and Intergenerational Issues

Modernization, often associated with advanced and assisted lifestyles and career progression, has significantly hindered domestic practices in general. This is evident by the trend of having takeouts and dining out at restaurants that is said to be led by time constraints (Ali & Abdullah, 2012). The ease of getting food served with just ordering and waiting has for long now justified its relevance and suitability in the current time. The laborious tasks of home cooking ignored without realizing that the lack of practice blunts the skills. Same can be applied to the Malay *kuih* as the time-consuming intricate processes of making Malay *kuih* (Hamzah et al., 2015; Saidi, 2018) are argued to be the excuse for the neglects thus, staking the casual transmission of knowledge and skills of making Malay *kuih* between generation. Without transmission of knowledge and skills, younger generations are prone to have low awareness and appreciation of Malay *kuih*. This also led to the time-appropriate choice of creative and modern desserts.

Traditional food knowledge and skills are intangible and can only be witnessed through practice and materialization of the products. It easily the matters that can be extinguished right under everybody's nose should it be ignored any further. Ideally, the classical methods and techniques would revive the Malay *kuih* in its traditional quality but the least number of businesses that produce Malay *kuih* overlooked and substituted ingredients and methods with modern convenience. Consequently, Malay *kuih* has always been synonymous with the claim of compromised authenticity (Ismail et al., 2013; Leman, 2016). Modern technological advances and rapid production are without a doubt the catalyst of profitable businesses, but such industrializations alter the core quality of Malay *kuih* which is the traditional flavors or value. The reliance on machines diminishes traditional craftsmanship and *petua* (traditional tips and tricks), leading to declining of skill but increasing of the Malay *kuih* sustainability issues (Sharif et al., 2016). A similar incident had been reported in Chef Wan's (Malaysia's well-known chef) criticism of even professional chefs are lacking mastery in Malay *kuih* making (Chu, 2018).

Mardatillah et al. (2019) highlighted that commodification of traditional delicacies erodes its traditional value, arguing that traditional knowledge and skills remain the foundation for sustaining traditional delicacies. This argument seconded by Amilien and Hegnes (2013) where modernization steers traditional into something new and unrecognizable. They also noted that any changes are subjected to only a limited extent. This can be a ground to anticipate controlled adaptations that allow heritage food to survive with contemporary trends while retaining its integrity (Ting et al., 2016). Additionally, sustaining local food traditions requires maintaining the ecosystem of local resources, which plays a vital role in ensuring continuity and resilience.

### 2.4 Theoretical reference to phenomena in study

In order to explore and deepen the understanding of traditional Malay *kuih* production survival in Malaysia today, the Traditional Food Product Concept introduced by Guerrero et al. (2009) was used. Taking traditional Malay *kuih* as the subject in question, traditional food concept is where this study relied on its theoretical exploration. Guerrero et al. (2009) established four dimensions with regards to instilling traditional values within traditional food which are: (i) habits and natural, (ii) origin and locality, (iii) processing and elaboration, and (iv) sensory properties as depicted in Fig. 2. The dimension of habits and nature argues the use of native crops and conventional cooking methods in making traditional foods which imparts sense of belonging and familiarity of the food to its source (Amilien & Hegnes, 2013; Kamaruzaman et al., 2023; Rocillo-Aquino et al., 2021; Timothy, 2021). The dimension origin and locality

resonate similarly with highlighting the mutual origin of these delicacies signifying special features or uniqueness mutual to its place of origin. Amilien and Hegnes (2013) and Timothy (2021) mentioned that geographical aspect also implies how traditional can a food be. The processing and elaboration dimension is where the actual technical and mechanical aspect of producing traditional food is largely argued. While it is simply the methods and techniques traditionally practiced to make the food, some would argue that changes in these aspects denote potential changes in the traditional value of the food at the end (Amilien & Hegnes, 2013; Kamaruzaman et al., 2023; Rocillo-Aquino et al., 2021). Kubontubuh and Martokusumo (2020) and Rocillo-Aquino et al., (2021) argued that while preservation of any traditions might need adjustments to fit into present preferences, there should be a limit to avoid changing it completely. The degree of changes that allowed to be inculcated in current practice or methods in reproduction of Malay kuih should disregards and limits destructive innovations (Kamaruzaman et al., 2023) to the traditional values. Ideally, these three dimensions project to the last dimension which is the sensory properties. Typically, traditional food has its own unique sensory properties that include all five senses experience (Kamaruzaman et al., 2023). Combining all first three dimensions of the Traditional Food Product Concept, the sensory properties of the traditional food are likely to represent its own birth, culture, familiarity, and unique identity (Kubontubuh & Martokusumo, 2020; Timothy, 2021).

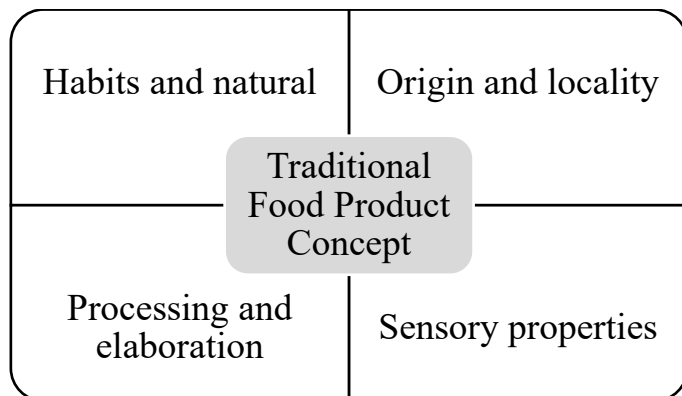


Fig. 2. Theoretical framework: Traditional Food Product Concept (Guerrero et al., 2009)

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the sustainability of Malay *kuih* heritage in the Malaysia's most referenced Malay culture states which are Terengganu and Kelantan. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that qualitative research design helps in gaining deeper understanding of a phenomenon by answering a set of research questions instead of getting to a set objective. The phenomenon of current practice performed by the Malay *kuih* although anecdotally can be predictable, only a little research has underwent the discipline of qualitative research methodology to uncover the real situation without any preconceived notions (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The pure and raw data from the actual setting and subjects are vital for this research to unearth the strategy of Malay *kuih* experts in keeping traditional value intact in their products through inductively construct the understanding as argued

by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). This eliminates biases from previously existed and established strategies of other food productions.

Case study approach was deemed appropriate for this study as it enables an in-depth understanding of practices and strategies of the informants within the phenomenon in study (Yin, 2014). This is also aligned to the idea that study is clearly defined by boundaries and the case only about empirical findings therein (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Although there are two separate states involved as settings, both are treated equally and considered to be a single case study as both states bestowed the “Cradle of Malay Culture” (Hamzah et al., 2015, p. 473). This setting was chosen due to its persistent production and being the exemplary of Malay *kuih* quality benchmark. It is also worth mentioning that no differences are meant to be highlighted as findings for the research question. Therefore, both states are acknowledged as a setting unit in this study.

### 3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected to answer the research question with specification to current practices of making Malay *kuih* from the expert. This is crucial in excerpting accurate data to avoid misleading and overwhelming variances that could exhaust unnecessarily the researchers as well as the informants. Main data collection was obtained through semi-structured interviews as the typical data collection technique for better control and administration in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interview protocol was created as initial guide for the interview questions based on the theory used, and emerged new valuable data later included as new interview questions for the next informants (Seidman, 2006). Patton (2015) argued that emergence comes natural in qualitative research as exploration of the phenomenon in study is not supposed by researchers’ preconceived expectation but rather learned and constructed after the fact. Each interview lasted for 45–60 minutes, all conducted in Malay language and later transcribed verbatim and kept the same through to analysis. Supported by participant observations and field notes, this research acknowledges valuable data from triangulation technique (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focusing on the production processes, and tools, observation protocol has also been created as a guide for each observation. While field notes complemented the interviews to triangulate findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### 3.3 Sampling and participant

Purposive sampling is the core of data collection sources as specific case study accounts only people effected therein who possess valuable data of the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Silverman, 2018). S Malay *kuih* experts are the eligible informants for this study, and they are identified through a gatekeeper that is familiar with the setting and prominent individuals who meet the informant criteria set for this study as listed in Table 1. Accordingly, the informant criteria are set to ensure the aptness of data to the phenomenon in study (Oppong, 2013), and to answer the research question (Neuman, 2007). The data was collected continuously from one informant to another criteria-fitted informant using the snowball technique (Bowen, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1. Informant criteria

| No. | Criteria |
|-----|----------|
|-----|----------|

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|   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | Experts who practiced making Malay <i>kuih</i> for a minimum of 10 years of experience. |
| 2 | Knowledgeable prominent local citizen in Malay <i>kuih</i> making.                      |
| 3 | In good health and goodwill in sharing experiences verbally.                            |

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### 3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis started with the groundwork of qualitative research ethics which is to set epoché in the researchers. Bearing the meaning of refraining oneself from injecting personal judgement or preconceived views, epoché ensures that the data collected, analysed, and reported is true to the phenomenon in study (Cypress, 2017). The recorded interviews underwent verbatim transcription on Microsoft word documents and only translated into English language post analysis to ensure aptness in the process of thematic analysis within the narrated language with its original meaning (Ho et al., 2019). Following the Creswell and Poth (2018) flow, the transcripts later imported to NVivo 14 software for systematic data management and to perform the thematic analysis. In thematic analysis, the data base was re-read to allocate the pattern of keywords and narrative of similarity to be coded, categorized, and themed performing constant comparative technique throughout the processes (Merriam, 2009).

### 3.5 Research rigor

Qualitative research rigor can be justified through validity and reliability. However, both instances bear the meaning and purpose differently as compared to the quantitative research method. While validity in qualitative research means the correctness in representation of data to the actual phenomenon, reliability argues the consistency of the same data generated from different sources (Cypress, 2017). To enhance this study's rigor, justified suggestions such as audit trail by Nowell et al., (2017), member check by Kresting (1991), and peer review by Merriam (2009) were performed throughout the study. Audit trail was used to minimize mistakes in decisions along the research processes that allow the researchers to easily recheck, spot, step back, and redo any processes deemed mistakenly done prior. Member check reaffirms and validates the data and analysis between the researchers with the informants to ensure accuracy and consistency of narrated, analyzed, and interpreted data. Besides those, participant observation serves as a method triangulation strategy in a way that it obtained data from a different method than the interview (Denzin, 2015). These strategies increase credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## 4. FINDINGS

This study ended with 7 informants in total reaching the data saturation point. Across all informants, diverse expertise and backgrounds analysed as shown in Table 2. Three of them are from Kelantan and four from Terengganu with total three males and four females with all ranging from 10 to 32 years of experience in making Malay *kuih*. The youngest informant (MK 6) has the minimum year of qualification based on the informant criteria and he is a successor to his family's food-related business revolving around traditional food of Terengganu. He is family-trained and has now fully work with his family post-secondary school. All informants are experts who own a food production business from home-based business to restaurants, catering, as well as small food manufacturing business.

Table 2. Informants' background

| No. | Informant | State      | Sex    | Age<br>(Years Old) | Experience (Years) |
|-----|-----------|------------|--------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1   | MK 1      | Kelantan   | Male   | 65                 | 31                 |
| 2   | MK 2      | Kelantan   | Female | 30                 | 11                 |
| 3   | MK 3      | Kelantan   | Female | 59                 | 30                 |
| 4   | MK 4      | Terengganu | Female | 59                 | 30                 |
| 5   | MK 5      | Terengganu | Female | 59                 | 29                 |
| 6   | MK 6      | Terengganu | Male   | 27                 | 10                 |
| 7   | MK 7      | Terengganu | Male   | 62                 | 31                 |

Source: Author's own data

Three themes analysed to answer the research question of how experts keep traditional value in current Malay *kuih* making? Although the themes seemingly opposing or contradictory to each other, the discussions on their relevance are presented according to Table 3 and the following section.

Table 3. Themes and categories to answer research questions

| Themes   | Categories   |
|--|--|
| Keeping Malay <i>kuih</i> authenticity of familial Inheritance | Basing on family's heirloom recipes                            |
|  | Preserving original characteristics                            |
| Restricting innovation for larger capacity production          | Keeping the use of only natural ingredients                    |
|  | Keeping technicality in the method of making Malay <i>kuih</i> |
|  | Enhancing mechanical part of making Malay <i>kuih</i>          |
| Adapting new operational means for awareness and education     | Integration of social media as advertisement channels          |
|  | Using personalized labelling and packaging                     |
|  | Introducing frozen Malay <i>kuih</i>                           |

Source: Author's own data

#### 4.1 Keeping Malay kuih authenticity of familial inheritance

Authenticity may invite debates from a lot of angles and this study revealed that one family can claim their inherited recipes of Malay *kuih* the authentic ones, and so will a few other families. The preservation of authenticity analysed to be the most prominent narratives that the informants keep repeating. This shows that the informants strongly adhere to the recipes taught to them by their earlier generations and kept dearly like a cultural legacy that are deemed consistent must not be altered and should remain unchanged throughout generations. This stand depicts the responsibility felt by the informants to uphold heritage food's traditional value integrity that their ancestors have bestowed them up to the current time. As MK 1 explained,

*We got to use rice flour (of a Malay kuih recipe calling for rice flour) ... if we were to use wheat flour, we use wheat flour (of a Malay kuih recipe calling for wheat flour) ... we can't use custard powder instead. I mean... we keep that as how it was made. Old recipe shouldn't be changed... [MK 1]*

MK 4 also with the same stand saying that she could never change the recipe she was taught by her mother. Besides that, few changes that she has tried to the recipes she inherited resulted in a completely different product. MK 4 humorously shared,

*I got my recipes from my mother... I started with helping my mother when I was little... I got to say that I did try to change here and there, because you know... sometimes you got tired of going through all the traditional steps, right?... but nope! It turned out a different kuih altogether!... [MK 4]*

In line with the virtue of keeping the authentic recipes, the effort to keep the authenticity also accounts for preserving the original characteristics of the Malay *kuih* defined as the traditional values in this study. Emphasis on physical characteristics of Malay *kuih* analyzed to be as important as referring to the heirloom recipes. This research unearthed the fact that maintaining physical characteristics of Malay *kuih* within the experts' production correlates to preserving its authenticity. This includes the names that identify cultural characteristics and precisions and of each individual Malay *kuih*, colors and textures as indicators of proper technique used on making Malay *kuih*. This precision reflects the physically accurate dimension of Malay *kuih* where visual cues materialize the intangible idea of heritage food and reinforce collective memory. For instance, MK 1 stressed that despite the unconventional food name of *kuih tahi itik* (literally translated duck's dropping), his new customers have always come looking for *kuih tahi itik*. MK 1 deduced,

*Even if someone stop by (his shop), they will always ask for tahi itik... however else you want to call it, it will always remain tahi itik... it's famous for what it is... [MK 1]*

Supported by MK 7, he mentioned that even if *kuih bom* (deep fried glutinous rice balls with savory fish filling) may have a few different names associated with the *kuih* but, community near his place always know the *kuih* as *kuih bom* (literally translated bomb) due to its tendency to explode while deep-frying. The name precedes the characteristics of the *kuih*. MK 7 enthusiastically mentioned,

*This is kuih bom!... ha!... the name... the name is because this thing explodes in hot oil. While we're deep-frying them, they will explode! Seriously!... I do have some scars from hot oil splatters... [Mk 7]*

Other than names associated with the characteristics like *kuih bom*, the shape of it also represents a bomb in a way of it being spherical. Few informants also mentioned shapes and colors of the Malay *kuih* are significant cues for authenticity. Both are as important as the existence of the *kuih* itself where

historically correct color or combinations of colors have to be evident. It is said to be one of the first characteristics that a human senses. MK 3 highlighted,

*[Of identifying an authentic Malay kuih] ... kuih must be visually appealing. The colours have to be correct... not pale or oily... [MK 3]*

Such perspectives show that Malay *kuih* authenticity enlists varying unique sensory as well as symbolic meaning to the Malay community. This inheritance of ancestral knowledge and skills within the old recipes ensures discipline and adherence to common or known authenticity as argued by Amilien and Hegnes (2013, p. 3457) as “gastronomic inheritance”. This enlightens the hopes and tangible reproduction of Malay *kuih* to its traditional values or characteristics that equates quality (Mohammad & Chan, 2011) even in contemporary production.

#### 4.2 Restricting innovation for larger capacity production

Traditional value in Malay *kuih* may be associated with the use of specific ingredients and as traditions always implied, natural and fresh ingredients are the usual ingredients in question. Palm sugar and coconut milk for example are two of the natural ingredients excerpted from informants that are considered important in making Malay *kuih*. Naturally, the informants insisted that the originality and freshness of natural ingredients would help maintain the traditional value of Malay *kuih*. The ingredient selection can also be seen as a cultural instance adducing the perceptions of quality. MK 2 briefly affirms,

*Traditional kuih must use authentic [original to recipe] ingredients, such as palm sugar [MK 2]*

This is also supported by MK 3 saying that despite the original recipe call for coconut milk, the freshness of it is equally as important in ensuring a quality *lompat tikam* (a dessert of different textures of steamed glutinous rice, wheat cake, served with coconut milk and palm sugar syrup). MK 3 explained,

*For lompat tikam, coconut milk is the most important (original and freshly obtained) ... If it smells even slightly, it will surely taste unpleasant (to the lompat tikam [MK 3]*

These data prove that to seek preserved traditional value in Malay *kuih* making, the building elements of recipes, being the ingredients, must be respectfully chosen. There is a saying that goes quality in, quality out, and intending a good traditional Malay *kuih* at the end would require one to invest in traditional and fresh ingredients. All the fresh and specific ingredients, however, could mean less to the product should the methods of making strayed too far from the original. Having the ingredients is only half the battle and traditional methods such as manual techniques and the use of traditional tools were analysed to be essential in ensuring Malay *kuih* produced with traditional value intact. Informants deduced that skill set such as stirring by hand, and baking with coconut husks and stirring using wooden sticks or bamboo skewer are still practiced today. Such practices perceived as manifesting cultural memory through physical actions. MK 2 shared,

*[Responding to the idea of changing methods of making] ... No, akok we make here is still made manually... we still use coconut husks to cook the akok... [MK 2]*

Another informant added that the making of *kuih puteri mandi* (chewy glutinous flour morsels coated with thick palm sugar syrup as depicted in Fig. 3), the glutinous flour morsels needed to be shaped manually by hands. MK 4 explained,

*The way we shape the dough into small morsels (for kuih puteri mandi) ... is that... we must pinch a little bit from the big batch... then round it between two palms. And then...right before we toss it into boiling water, we make an indentation, so it gets flatter with slightly concaved centre... the more we practice this, the easier for us to get all morsels to be of the same size... [MK 4]*



Fig. 3. *Kuih puteri mandi*

Source: Author's own data

The insist of informants in explaining the methods or techniques to make certain Malay *kuih* imparts another dimension to the strengthening of traditional value within the *kuih*. Looking at the data set, it suggests that technicality of making something to be accurately representing the original. However, despite the details explained by the informants, it is analysed that the crucial part of this result lies in the technicality which said to be a guarantee to traditional reproduction of the Malay *kuih*. This can be proven by the idea and experience of the informants who have a certain degree of enhancement to the overall methods and technique of making the Malay *kuih*. While technicality of making is part of the integral assurance to traditional value in Malay *kuih*, informants admitted that enhancement in the mechanical aspect of the methods and techniques took its role. For example, MK 1 explained that he uses a customed stainless steel cones with small opening at the tip to make *kuih jala mas* (bundles of sweet egg yolk threads). MK 1 explained,

*This is the cone, we use this to make the kuih jala mas... to shape it. You just put your finger on the opening tip to stop the filled batter from dripping. Then you just drizzle the batter into a boiling sugar syrup like fine threads... oh! The cones were ordered to be custom-made. We used to use just rolled up banana leaves before this, but it can't hold up for larger batch kuih jala mas... [MK 1]*

Data from participant observation support the interview data showing that the stainless- steel cone was practically used while making the *kuih jala mas* as shown in Fig. 4.



Fig. 4. Stainless-steel cone used to create threads of egg yolk batter for *kuih jala mas*

Source: Author's own data

This shows that although the technicality of shaping the thread is still practice, the mechanical aspect of it is changed from using natural banana leaves that easily torn and damaged into stainless steel cones that can be reused and easily cleaned. Small custom-made tools can be nondisruptive to the intention of keeping traditional value within Malay *kuih*. However, larger machinery or equipment can impact greatly and threaten the traditional value. This issue emerged a finding that informant restrict the use of larger equipment that does not impart any traditional value to the Malay *kuih*. MK 6 shared that he includes the use of high-pressure stove to make *kuih baulu* (pandan or rose flavoured small individual sponge cake) but still incorporate the use of coconut husks as another heating element. MK 6 admitted,

*Nowadays, I can't rely (method of cooking baulu) on strictly only the old way. That is way too much hassle to cook the baulu...top and bottom with coconut husks coal. It's just hard to control the heat and the evenness of cooking. What I do instead is using that stove... erm... how do I say this... the one that has rings of opening for the fire... oh yes! High pressure stove! So, I use that for the bottom heating, and on top of the lid (of baulu cooking mold) I will use the coconut husk coal. You see? I cut the hassle by half, but still have the smoke aroma in the baulu... [MK 6]*

It is clear that despite the discipline and perceived adherence to all traditional instances, these informants admittedly change the mechanical aspect of the methods and techniques. Enhancements or

innovation have taken place and without jeopardizing the technicality of the traditional recipe, the products still produced to instill as much traditional value as possible. This includes the flavors including taste, texture, aroma, as well as the visual. Visual can be said to be the first that sells any food, thus making Malay kuih appealing and reflective of its traditional shape could help in boosting the awareness for youngsters especially when these Malay *kuih* pictures or reviews being posted or shared on social media.

### 4.3 Adapting new operational means for awareness and education

The current consumer situation in the world has shifted from manual information seeking through papers, to internet search assisted with electronic devices. Information is at the fingertips of all and can be obtained anytime and anywhere. Social media usage and relevance is at large nowadays, and this study found that informants are benefiting from the larger coverage of advertising and easier communication to potential buyers. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp have helped boost informants' sales as well as heightened their visibility and brand-building. Visuals play an important role on social media and the adaptation and inclusion of these platforms reaffirmed the relevance of Malay *kuih* being embedded into contemporary consumer ecosystems. As one informant admitted,

*For kuih, I use... usually people just texted me through phone... WhatsApp group... not really a kuih related group... just any group like my ex-schoolmate group or such... they can just say there what kuih they want... I think from one person ordering kuih from me, the others can see right? Plus, I do share pictures if they wanted to see... and... also... WhatsApp status! I update there too. I think WhatsApp did helped me getting more orders... [MK 5]*

A platform that connects more than two people at once has proven to be effective in faster dissemination of information and sales advertisements. The interactive and visual centric social media also could potentially attract more potential buyers as MK 2 briefly and concisely said, *we just post it on social media, and people will notice [MK 2]*.

Such practices demonstrated effective information dissemination and sharing. Digitalization supports educational reintroduction to foster awareness of the Malay *kuih* especially to how it should be in terms of the traditional value. In other words, the survival of Malay *kuih* has seen a new potential to be reintroduced through the social media users of Malay *kuih*.

On the topic of reintroduction and making aware of Malay *kuih*, social media are not the only discovery for this study. A number of informants shared that they have started making personalized labelling or packaging for their Malay *kuih*. MK 1 for example, uses informative labelling and packaging design for his breadth Malay *kuih*. Modern hygienic packaging like food-grade plastics is also mentioned to be taken into accounts for the security of food safety. Malay *kuih* also mentioned to be versatile to be decoratively arranged like the *kuih buah tanjung* MK 1 explained,

*Our kuih now are all in plastic packaging (food grade) ... and in boxes... yes, it's modern of course. Exactly like what you see in front (decorated kuih buah tanjung in box) just now... makes it easier for me to sell [handling and transportation] ... [MK 1]*

Packaging that said to be making handling and transportation easier lies in its ability to still keep the Malay *kuih* free from physical damage like crushed, deformed, and flattened. This can be evident and unavoidable when using packaging materials that have no substantial structure like plastic bags. However, considering that only a few of the informants have properly officially designed the labels and packaging,

there are also another way of making the best out of what is available and innovated by the informants' creativity. MK 5 expressed that despite the idea of aesthetic presentation becoming an integral part to consumer perceptions, the quality and physical integrity of the Malay *kuih* is also said to be important. MK 5 expressed,

*I don't have any labels for right now, I think I need to invest much more for that... maybe not yet for the moment. But... erm... yes... maybe I don't have, like you said... erm... proper packaging but, for kuih lompat tikam... I put it in plastic bags and tie (close the bags shut using rubber bands) without letting the air out. It will look like pillow... why I do it like that?... so, when we pack and display them for sale, the kuih will not get crushed by each other... [MK 5]*

This may imply an insignificant small strategy on the surface but proven to be an impactful effort by the informants to make the most out of what is available. These suggest that while the recipes and preparation methods remain anchored in traditional value reproduction in Malay *kuih*, thoughtful packaging strategies serve as a complementary adaptation that preserves the quality intended for Malay *kuih* and strengthens its competitiveness. Besides creative and effective use of packaging for traditional value resilience in the competitive market, another finding shed light for Malay *kuih* in a way to mitigate wastages of current fluctuation of consumer demands. A few types of properly packaged Malay *kuih* tested to be stable for freezing, making them last for longer thus maximizing a business' profitability. MK 7 testified that out of accident; he ended up making larger batch of *kuih che abas demam* (gelatinized sago flour served with savory coconut milk sauce as depicted in Fig. 5). Although the coconut milk sauce is sensitive to splitting (separation of coconut fat and water content) once frozen, he freezes surplus of the gelatinized sago flour for future sale. MK 7 humorously explained,

*I'm old... let's just not pretend... sometimes I mistakenly cook for too much flour (sago flour) ... lucky me that's the first thing I did... if I make the sauce first... oh no! I can't freeze that. It will spoil. The flour is fine though... I can use it for next batch. [MK 7]*



Fig. 5. *Kuih che abas demam*

Source: Author's own data

The incident made a discovery for MK 7 to benefit from the freezing some Malay *kuih* for better production capacity and management. For more established businesses, selling frozen Malay *kuih* has been part of MK 1 business. It started out as a strategy to minimize spoilage in unsold Malay *kuih* if displayed on the shelf for a long time. He would spare some to be frozen for buyers that travel long distances to my place. MK 1 noted,

*Our strategy is to observe... cause it is an everyday routine. We monitor daily production... excess kuih... we spare them for frozen products... [MK 1]*

Data from participant observation revealed that the Malay *kuih* is indeed sold as frozen food products for consumers that require longer shelf life out of the Malay *kuih*. Fig. 6 depicts the freezer stock up for frozen Malay *kuih*.



Fig. 6. Frozen Malay *kuih* for sale

Source: Author's own data

Beyond efficiency, frozen products also allowed large scale distribution across states, demonstrating how traditional *kuih* could reach new markets. Together, these strategies safeguard the traditional value of Malay *kuih* presented to the public either as reintroduction or assurance of quality, both acknowledged as a step to garner awareness. The innovations that are considerably minimal in the production and sale operations provide a viable pathway for assured traditional value integrity in Malay *kuih* that can foster heritage foods sustainability in modern consumer economies.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study reveals that preserving Malay *kuih* relies heavily on sustaining authenticity through inheritance of recipes and more of artisanal methods than heavy reliance on modern technologies, especially in states such as Kelantan and Terengganu. These findings affirmed a research done by Chen (2018), who argued that food heritage extends beyond mere recipes of ingredients and methods but also the rituals, and cultural practices summing the arguments of authenticity. Similarly, the use of manual tools and techniques mirrored the review made by Omar and Omar (2018), highlighting that traditional preparation serves as cultural expressions strengthening authenticity in Malay gastronomy. Thus, authenticity emerges as a vital requirement in Malay *kuih* conveying the traditional value that tells the identity of the Malay culture. Accordingly, this helps in preserving Malay food heritage with its unique characteristics.

Despite strong adherence to traditional value within the Malay kuih, the era advancements pose threats to traditions surviving through the modern world. The familial inheritance of recipes and methods of making Malay *kuih* analysed to be the core integrity of the Malay *kuih* made as the first introduction of Malay *kuih* to its successors. It further expands to adapt permissible changes to enhance market viability and visibility without jeopardizing the first priority. This might sound easy at first glance until one is about to commit to it. Ali and Abdullah (2012) asserted that the changes brought along by the world advancement to technologies cause domestic practices to submit to the convenience lifestyle, reducing traditional kitchen practices. Considering that Malay *kuih* is synonymous to the home-style cooking where traditional values are at its core, scarcity of materials and the rising costs compounded onto them burden the Malay *kuih* survival (Ishak et al., 2021; Ismail et al., 2013; Leman, 2016). In response to the pressure, informants adapted fast and direct channels through social media to get to potential buyers. This aligns with contemporary findings that innovations in food marketing and distribution can enhance visibility and survival of traditional foods in competitive markets (Hamzah et al., 2015). Additionally, the introduction of frozen Malay *kuih* and modern packaging extends shelf life and improves presentation, providing convenience while maintaining traditional value. Such practices coherently summarize the study by Mardatillah et al. (2019) and Ting et al. (2016), who stressed the importance of balancing traditions with modernization, where despite potential disruption of innovations, limited allowance if it can help ensuring the survival of traditional food without. Overall, the sustainability of traditional value in Malay *kuih* depends on negotiating between continuity and change where authenticity plays the cultural anchor, while adaptation ensures resilience in volatile current markets.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights how various aspects of traditional Malay kuih serve as important traditional values that represent Malay culture. Yet, it is apparent that a degree of changes has made their way into the production of Malay *kuih* in the present. While it is deemed and insisted to instil the traditional values even at current time, this study found that it can adapt to changes that discovered to be otherwise, a catalyst towards Malay *kuih* sustainability. In this case, the traditional values such as the names, colours, and physical features persist their importance as tangible representation of its cultural uniqueness, while practices in reproduction such as methods, techniques, and tips and tricks can be adapted to modern instances to foster product continuity.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes deep understanding of how Malay *kuih* can remain traditional amidst the modernization and culinary experiments. Scholarly research dedicated specifically to Malay *kuih* remains limited. This study places Malay *kuih* at the centre of discussion by recognizing its cultural, social, and economic significance. Malay *kuih* represents a rich diversity of products, each carrying distinctive identity, craftsmanship, and traditional value that collectively reflect the identity of the Malay community. This study documents empirical evident as to how the etiquette and discipline involved in the preparation of Malay *kuih* towards its continued production to sustain its traditional values in the contemporary markets. The findings demonstrate that the relationship between familial inheritance of recipes, skills, and deemed original characteristics of the Malay *kuih* and the decision to adapt modern changes in making it plays a decisive role in ensuring the continued traditional values across all of its delicacies. Such precise decisions strengthens both production practices and the intangible heritage

embodied in traditional Malay kuih, allowing present acknowledgement and enjoyments as well as ensuring the future generations to understand, enjoy, and value this cultural heritage.

Practically, this study highlights the importance of knowing and preserving the traditional value in practice to uphold its importance locally and internationally. The findings can help Malay *kuih* makers to benefit from their strategies that have proven to be effective thus far. For stakeholders, these findings help to highlight the need to treat Malay *kuih* as a living cultural asset that accounts for responsibility for both preservation and adaptive innovation to remain relevant in the contemporary market.

This current study's findings from the Malaysia's Cradle of Malay Culture should set a reference point for other similar study or as foundational justification for extended study. The themes and categories analyzed from this study are recommended also to be extended and testify through quantitative research design for varied methodology and approach. Other than extending horizontally, it is also recommended that similar study be carried out but looking into comparisons of different states situations or appointing just a single Malay *kuih* and comparing differences between states or regions. This can further enrich this current study's vertical depth and equip the Malaysia's food heritage documentations to much deeper level details and thus strengthening its existence or resurgence.

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## 8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

**Mohd Yusof Kamaruzaman:** Conceptualisation, methodology, data curation, investigation, formal analysis, investigation, project administration, and writing-original draft; **Muhammad Shahrin Ab Karim:** Conceptualisation, methodology, supervision, writing-original draft, writing- review and editing, and validation; **Mohd Nazri Abdul Raji:** Conceptualisation, data curation, investigation, writing- review and editing, and validation; **Mohd Amirul Hussain:** Conceptualisation, data curation, investigation, writing- review and editing, and validation; **Norsyahidah Ismail:** Data curation, investigation, writing-original draft.

## 9. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT in order to initially translate the text from Malay to English. After using this app, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

## 10. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY ATERIALS

All data and materials are used in accordance with the guidelines of the Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Culinary Arts as listed in the reference section. Images and diagrams are owned and contributed by the authors.

## 11. ETHIC STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Informed consents were obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data anonymity was strictly maintained throughout the study and were used solely for academic purposes.

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