

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exploring Food Cultural Heritage Practices at Kampong Bharu, Kuala Lumpur: a Case Study of Local Foods Business Owners of Kampong Bharu

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Traditional and local foods have been recognized as an intangible heritage and serve as a core element or supporting attraction to the particular tourist destinations. Thus, food cultural heritage has become a substantial part within the life of society and tourism sector which encompasses numerous aspects. Hence, this study has been conducted to discover in depth the cultural heritage of food in tourism destination at Kampong Bharu, Kuala Lumpur and the challenges faced to preserve the food cultural heritage. **Methods:** In-depth, semi structure interviews were conducted among five local food providers and a local authority to obtain the data for this study. **Results:** There are three main characteristics or issue involving the food cultural heritage in Kampong Bharu that have been highlighted which include the foods available in Kampong Bharu, standard preparation method of the foods, and facilitating factors and barriers in maintaining the heritage practice of the food. **Conclusion:** The findings showed that most of the local food provider in Kampong Bharu served Malay cuisine. They prefer to use their hereditary recipe to serve the foods in view it has been the main attraction to the people who are visiting Kampong Bharu. Different food preferences and increasing cost of the raw ingredient has become the main challenges to preserve the cultural food heritage in Kampong Bharu.

Keywords: Food cultural heritage, Tourism, Kampong bharu, Local food

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is the third highest source of foreign exchange income to Malaysia's economy which comprises of RM81.1 billion to the Gross National Income (GNI) as stated in the Economic Transformation Program (ETP) annual report 2017 (1). Additionally, recent data has shown that Malaysia's domestic tourism in 2019 continue to grow up to 8.1% from previous year (7.7%) which encompasses of 239.1 million domestic visitors in 2019 (2). Kuala Lumpur is the second most visited state by domestic visitors in 2019 which accounted for 22.6 million visitors (2). Furthermore, Kuala Lumpur has been nominated by the World Travel and Tourism Chamber (WTTC) as the world's topmost 10 cities in the field of tourism development (1).

Kampong Bharu is a Kuala Lumpur Malay's enclave which is famous not only for their preserved cultural heritage but also lushed with variety of food choices. Kampong Bharu is known as preserved old-fashioned and simple Malay-styled village located in the middle of the hectic city, surrounded with concrete tall buildings. Initially, Kampong Bharu is a reserved land granted for the Malays who met the criteria stated by Sultan of Selangor, DYMM Sultan Abdul Samad in the early 1900s (3). Nowadays, Kampong Bharu is managed under the Kampong Bharu Development Corporation (KBCORP) administration which cover both the Malay Agricultural Settlement (M.A.S) area and the outer M.A.S. area. Kampong Bharu has 1,353 lot with total land area of 300.73 acres and there are 6,971 registered landowners (4). The M.A.S area covers total of 219.91 acres lot areas which (879 lots). It has seven villages with different population origins including Kampung Atas A and Kampung Atas B (Melaka, Mandeling, and Minang origins settlers), Kampung Masjid (Melaka origin settlers), Kampung Hujung Pasir (Melaka origin people),

Kampung Periok (Melaka origin people), Kampung Paya (Rawa and Minang origins settlers), and Kampung Pindah (Java origin settlers). On the other hand, the outer M.A.S. area covers total of 80.82 acres lot areas (474 lots). For this region, it has four villages or locations which include Kampung Raja Bot, Perbadanan Kemajuan Negeri Selangor (PKNS) Flat, *Pasar Minggu* (Weekly Market), and Kampong Bharu Flat. Strategic location of Kampong Bharu at the north city center and surrounded by few main roads in Kuala Lumpur with massive public transportation made available has opened more job opportunity to the people and provide good economic source to Malaysia. Kampong Bharu have the potential to be established as a tourist attraction in view it is rich with customs, culture, and historical significance, hence measures to preserve Kampong Bharu's features has been taken. The *Kajian Pelan Induk Kampung Baru* (PIKB), under the designation of the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) was first initiated in 2002. The key goal of PIKB is to incorporate the Kampong Bharu into the state's growth process in terms of physical, social, economic, and political aspects (5). As a result, Kampong Bharu is currently undergoing the urbanisation process due to the development occurred surrounding. Kampong Bharu also tend to be the sites of Small and Medium Industries (SMIs) and retail activities which usually complement the needs and requirements of the industries and economic functions of surrounding urban centres (5).

According to recent statistic, food and beverages are the third highest expenditure components among the domestic visitors in 2019 (2). Food is considered as part of the cultural heritage in every aspect including its cultivation, preparation, and end products for community consumption. Food can represent the identity of various aspects which include differences in geographic, community, and politics which can distinguish the populations (6). Food identity clearly contribute to a country's wealth, global identification and reputation as well as can give a good impact in the sector of economy (7). Additionally, in most of multi-cultural countries, it is important to have a commonly recognized food identity to indicate the nation's authenticity and tradition. Increasing number of populations, vast growth, and rise in consumer demand in most part of the world has affected the environment, natural resources, and society. Thus, most individuals face external pressures on their tradition and culture, including the fear that their food heritage or identity will be lost. In all of these gastronomic relationships, it reveals that the cultural heritage of the region's cuisine is an important attribute for its people, of which food reflects not only physical necessity, but also local culture and traditions (8). Kampong Bharu is rich with its historical background, making Kampong Bharu as a unique place to be explored. Thus, this study has been conducted to explore in depth the cultural heritage of food in Kampong Bharu, Kuala Lumpur and the challenges faced by its people to maintain the food cultural heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of food heritage

Food heritage is defined as a combination of food cultures' material and non-material components that are widely considered to be a shared inheritance (9). The food heritage encompasses of agricultural, ingredients, recipes, skills, dishes, and food tradition. This includes table manners, the food's symbol and its material aspects, and the setting of cooking and table covering both utensils and dishware used (6,9). Food heritage, in Malaysia perspective has been linked to the traditional as well as classical foods that are continuously cooked and eaten without any significant alteration in the original flavours by people of all generations (6). The heritage of food signified by the environmental history, conviction, and philosophy and the society's food technology within the era. Former Heritage Commissioner, Professor Datuk Zuraina Majid classified heritage foods into two classifications (10). The first classification implies the typical or synonymous foods that form part of our lives, meanwhile the next classification refers to the foods that once were part of our society, but they are gradually facing extinction.

Meanwhile, Tibere and Aloysius (2013) associate the heritage of food with the society's richness of cultural significance and historical perceptions (11). This can be discovered through their food trails, precisely the recipe they used and the preparation methods. The sense of 'belonginess' can be created by the richness of the cultural value. This can help to enhance the people's pride which in turns making them to willingly protect and sustain their own food cultural heritage. On the other hand, historical perceptions belonging to a society will provide the knowledge of the previous time. Eventually, it can be seen as one of the attempts to impart the national spirits of people that can be created by the sense of 'togetherness' within the people. This will help to increase the people's knowledge, particularly among people living in a multicultural state such as Malaysia (6). The knowledge will also allow them to understand and to continue to cope and accept with their cultural differences. As a result, the heterogeneity of food culture has become a valued commodity of a country. Since the heritage of food has been the valuable commodity, attention and interests were greatly provided to preserve the traditional cuisine as it is strongly associated to the method of preparation, raw ingredients, dishes, and eating etiquette. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has accepted and included foods in their list of Intangible Cultural Heritage to describe and recognise the food culture heritage across the world (12,13). For example, South Korea's kimchi has been listed as one of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. This is because kimchi plays an important role in Korean cuisine, transcending social divisions and geographic boundaries. Kimchi is the culmination of a

long social history in South Korea. Another example of food heritage acknowledged by UNESCO was Turkish coffee from Turkey. It symbolized the coffee-sitting ritual practiced by the Turkish and a sign of hospitality, fellowship, sophistication, and entertainment, according to UNESCO. On the other hand, Mediterranean diet which mostly practiced by the people from Portugal, Spain, Morocco, Italy, Croatia, Cyprus, and Greece also has been listed as one of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. While the variety of ingredients used in this diet is acknowledged, the title was also won by the symbols and traditions associated with the process (12,13). The cultural tradition goes beyond food and serves as a foundation for cultural activities that include sitting together and emphasise hospitality and closeness. From these examples, it can be seen that the definition of food cultural heritage does not only describe the common food found in a country, but it goes beyond it (12,13).

However, preserving and measuring food cultural heritage is very challenging effort because it was correlated with the societies' beliefs, values, actions, and regulations. In the face of homogenizing burdens from the outside, the need for the continuation and preservation of food heritage is seen as a competitive advantage in preserving the local food culture (6,14).

The United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) indicated that food heritage is one of the leading sectors of the global cultural tourism market. Looking at the dynamic identity of the global cultural tourism industry and the importance of Malaysia to preserve its competitiveness as a food haven destination in the region, it is therefore important for the government to provide a proactive policy and prepare a system that is convenient for them to sustain their food heritage as the product of cultural tourism (6,14). Besides, food heritage was used by many countries, societies, and communities as a symbolic boundary for the taste convergence. Therefore, food heritage can be seen as one of the country's ideal characteristic, recognition, and nation buildings tools (11). Furthermore, the importance of Malaysian food culture as the country's unique identity needs further investigation, as the cuisine has yet to gain international recognition. Even though Malaysia is renowned for serving a diverse variety of local and international cuisines, heritage foods from each region or ethnic group in Malaysia must conserve their uniqueness in order to maintain food quality over time (15).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study applied qualitative research approach to explore the food cultural heritage in Kampong Bharu, Kuala Lumpur. Qualitative method is appropriate to be used in this study in view it focuses on exploratory and in-depth understanding about the food cultural heritage

in Kampong Bharu. A qualitative research is designed to explain uncertain and build an in-depth understanding about a particular phenomenon (16). Since there are limited studies that explain the characteristics of food cultural heritage in Kampong Bharu, a qualitative approach was believed as the best method to be used in this study.

Semi-structured interviews

Purposive sampling technique was used in this study which involved six informants comprising of five local food providers and one local authority. Silverman (2013) emphasizes that the purposive sampling technique involves selecting the informant on the basis of a given purpose rather than arbitrarily (17). The selection of local food providers in this study were based on the list given by the local authority from M.A.S (Fig. 1). They were selected in this study in view their food stalls or restaurants have been operated more than 50 years in Kampong Bharu. These restaurants had been known

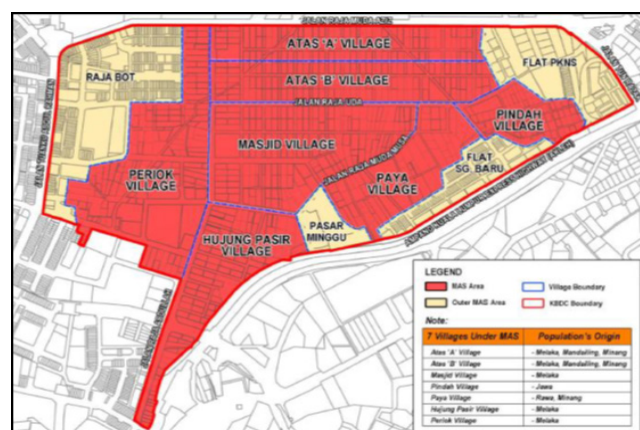


Fig. 1 Kampong Bharu Malay Agriculture Settlement (M.A.S.) villages and outer MAS sub-areas (4).

to be significant in representing the cultural heritage of this place. The food premises' owner at Kampong Bharu and the local authority were interviewed semi-structurally. The interview lead towards information on the foods available in Kampong Bharu, standard preparation method of the food, and facilitating factors and barriers in maintaining the heritage practice has also been identified. The data for in-depth interview were analyzed based on thematic analysis. Thematic analysis provides guides in identifying important themes emerging from the data. Thematic analysis consists of two characteristics; iterative process and use of coding.

The process of iteration and use of coding are as below:

1. Collecting data and ongoing analysis
2. Indexing and sorting the data through reading.
3. Refining codes
4. Data were managed accordingly based on the categories and themes.
5. Searching for new categories or themes if any
6. Deciding on key finding and writing these up

Validity of data

Triangulation technique has been employed to ensure validity of the qualitative data. Triangulation refers to an approach of comparing findings from several methods, theory or data sources to strengthen a research. Present study used in-depth interview, focus group, discussion, publications, and field notes to cross check the consistency of findings across different methods of data collection.

RESULTS

Based on the interview sessions and participants' observation, there are three main characteristics or issue involving the food cultural heritage in Kampong Bharu that can be highlighted. The findings for Kampong Bharu local food cultural heritage of Kampong Bharu is discussed as follows

a) *The foods available in Kampong Bharu*

Most of the local food providers served Malay cuisine such as nasi lemak, bubur lambuk, and roti canai with chicken feet curry. Some of the food provider as well sold traditional kueh such as curry puff and fried banana (pisang goreng). There were varieties of food available in Kampong Bharu, mainly comprises of Malay foods.

"...Our signature dish is nasi lemak where we use steaming process to cook the rice. This has made our nasi lemak different with others whereby we believed the rice is much fluffier. This is our signature dish in addition to the sambal anchovies that blends well with the rice..." (local food provider 1).

"...I have sold this bubur lambuk for a while now and currently I am the fourth generation who is in charge of making bubur lambuk..." (local food provider 2).

"...My signature dish is not only referring to roti canai but the side dish, chicken feet curry which complement the taste of roti canai sold here. The main ingredient of our chicken feet curry are the chicken feet itself, curry powder, coconut milk, dried chilli paste, green chilli and others..." (local food provider 3).

"...We sell satay which is made with the best quality cuts of meat, usually tenderloin and the satay were made freshly and handmade using our own recipe to marinate the meat..." (local food provider 4).

Nasi lemak, roti canai, bubur lambuk (fig. 2), and satay are among the famous foods available in Kampong Bharu. The local food providers mostly prefer to prepare their dishes using the hereditary or traditional method to maintain the food texture and taste.

b) *Standard preparation method of the food in Kampong Bharu*

The culture in Kampong Bharu is different with previous days including the food selling activities. From the interview session with the local authority, it is known



Fig. 2 Bubur lambuk sold in Kampong Bharu. Photo taken by Malay Agricultural Settlement (M.A.S.).

that previous food sellers prefer to bring their foods to the people directly, unlike nowadays where people will need to come to the food stalls to buy foods in Kampong Bharu.

"... Many things have changed in Kampong Bharu throughout the years due to modernisation. Even the method of selling foods in Kampong Bharu is differ with current. For example, the owner of one of the food sellers in previous days, Mamat sold his signature dish Rojak Mamak by bringing the foods to the people, from house



Fig. 3 Mamat sold his signature dish to the people in Kampong Bharu. Photo taken by Malay Agricultural Settlement (M.A.S.)



Fig. 4. People need to bring their own utensils to buy Mamat's Rojak Mamak. Photo taken by Malay Agricultural Settlement (M.A.S.)

to house (as shown in the figure 3 and figure 4). People who want to buy Mamat's food has to bring their own utensils, unlike now which usually packed with plastic bag. There were also food sellers in previous days used

bicycle to sell their foods to the people here (as shown in figure 5) ...” (local authority).

Food providers also take advantages from the advance technology available nowadays whereby they use delivery services for example ‘GrabFood’ or ‘Foodpanda’ to deliver their foods to the customer such as practiced by local food provider 5. Even so, most of the local food



Fig. 5 Some food seller used bicycle to sell their foods. Photo taken by Malay Agricultural Settlement (M.A.S.).

providers will always try to preserve their food values by using their inherited food preparation and use traditional cooking utensils such as wooden barrel (figure 6 and 7). This is important to ensure the taste and quality of the food is maintained. Methods, skills, and timing are important aspects in preparing the signature food.

“...The special thing about our nasi lemak are the rice is steamed to give better texture, served with one whole boiled egg unlike other seller who may serve half of it or less, and the special variety of side dishes served in our food stall. It took two hours per wooden barrel of rice and it is not an easy process but to maintain our food quality, we have to do this process. The rice will become fluffy in texture and people love it. This has been the main attraction of our customer since long time ago and we try to maintain it...” (local food provider 1).



Fig. 6 One of the local food providers during previous days using wooden food barrel to steam the rice of nasi lemak. Photo taken by Malay Agricultural Settlement (M.A.S.).



Fig. 7 Current wooden barrel used to steam the rice for making the steamed nasi lemak.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings obtained, there are three points to highlight on the food cultural heritage in Kampong Bharu; the food available in Kampong Bharu, practicing food culture by preserving its hereditary recipe and method of preparation, and challenges that the local food providers had to face in the effort to preserve the food cultural heritage in Kampong Bharu.

From the findings, the local food providers interviewed in this study mostly served Malay cuisines (nasi lemak, roti canai with chicken feet curry, bubur lambuk, and traditional kueh). This is because the settlers in Kampong Bharu are mainly among the Malays. On top of that, these local food providers were also have been operating more than 50 years in Kampong Bharu and they were still using their hereditary recipe and cooking method without altering the original recipe. A review done by Abdul Raji, Ab Karim, Che Ishak, and Arshad (2017) stated that Malay folks that live in village still maintained their traditional beliefs and knowledge (18). Synonyms with the Malays styled food cultural heritage, the cook uses herbs and spices. Some food stall owners also used special traditional equipment and cooking method to maintain the cultural value and taste of the food they served. Eventually, these practices can preserve the uniqueness of their meals. Interestingly, this has made some of the food stalls to become famous among the settlers and visitors in Kampong Bharu.

In theory, Malay cuisine is halal (food or product that is permissible or acceptable in accordance with Islamic law) and the cooking method always has been integrated with other influences including Indonesian, Arab, Thai, Chinese, and Indian (18). Malay food can be identified through five characteristics which are coconut milk as the main ingredient, contain ample quantity of herbs and spices, the food normally tastes spicy, the meat is typically stewed with thick gravy, and turmeric powder is used as seasoning for fried fish and seafood (18,19).

All of these characteristics can be seen in many of the food sold in Kampong Bharu such as nasi lemak served with spicy condiment (sambal), roti canai served with chicken feet curry, and bubur lambuk.

Modernisation surrounded Kampong Bharu has resulted in many jobs offers to the people from different background which in turn made more people coming to Kampong Bharu every day. Kampong Bharu is located in the middle of the city of Kuala Lumpur, surrounded and occupied with many types of public transportation including Light Rail Transit (LRT), buses, and taxi. Thus, Kampong Bharu is reachable by people regardless of the locals or visitors. Kampong Bharu has been the point of attraction in view it has the classical and traditional 'kampung' (village) environment in the middle of a busy city. Accordingly, to enjoy this view, the food stalls at the roadside of Kampong Bharu mainly prefer and practices outdoor dining using table and tools, or chairs made of plastic. To support this, most of the local food provider also prefer to practice traditional cooking method even though the process is lengthy compared to the normal cooking procedure, just to preserve the quality of the food products served to their customer from time to time.

The iconic dishes, for example nasi lemak are made by using wooden barrel to steam the rice for hours to obtain the fluffy texture of the rice. This cooking method has been practiced since previous days until now. As a result, people keep on coming to the restaurant in Kampong Bharu to indulge this steamed nasi lemak in which they might not be able to get this dish in another place. This shows that it is important to preserve the food cultural heritage in view it can attract more people to visit Kampong Bharu. The ingredients used and skills acquired from previous generations to prepare the foods as well were being maintained to ensure the taste of the food is good all the time. The customer satisfaction was important to them while enjoying their time in Kampong Bharu. The local food provider plays an important role in preserving and conserving their food cultural heritage and promote the foods in Kampong Bharu.

On top of that, this effort also can help in creating national image as well as preserving the traditional food and national identity (20). Nevertheless, the effort of preserving the food cultural heritage will be useless if the culture and tradition is not passed down to the next generation as some of the local food provider was too restrictive in sharing the traditional recipe and food preparation. To conserve food heritage, it important for the young people to be involved in the preparation of traditional foods with the help of older people, particularly in terms of knowledge acquisition and continuous practise (21,22).

It is, however a very challenging process for the local food provider in Kampong Bharu to maintain their food cultural heritage due to several barriers such as different

people preference in taste and increasing cost of the raw ingredients to make the food. This is not something new in view a study by Omar and Omar (2018) also found that it is a challenging effort to preserve the food cultural heritage due to the globalisation. The social transformations due to urbanisation and globalisation had caused the demand for Malaysian heritage food decreased and has threatened the Malaysian heritage food authenticity (15). Nonetheless, the local food providers overcome these challenges positively and negotiate with their customers with regards to the increasing price of the food without altering the cultural value of the food they prepared.

These information are beneficial to the state government, local authorities, and related agencies to include the local food with existing tourism resource so that more people from different background are attracted to visit Kampong Bharu. Furthermore, the findings also can be used by the local food provider and homestay owners to suggest authentic local food to the tourists that can signify the identity and culinary image of Kampong Bharu. From the findings as well, the respective authorities can provide ways to handle the issue of food pricing in Kampong Bharu. Guideline of the food pricing can be made available to both, the food provider and customer so that people coming to Kampong Bharu will be aware of this matter.

Limitation and future research

The interviews of this study mainly involved some of the local food providers and a local authority. For future study, it is recommended to involve the travellers who have visited and experienced the local food at Kampong Bharu to obtain a more comprehensive view.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the characteristics of food cultural heritage in Kampong Bharu, Kuala Lumpur and challenges that the local food providers need to face to preserve their food cultural heritage. It showed that the practice of local food culture as found in Kampong Bharu successfully preserve the culture of Malay cuisine by using their hereditary recipe and food preparation. This study also concluded that Kampong Bharu has been able to conserve its food cultural heritage despite being surrounded by rapid growth.

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