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Determinants of Traditional Food Sustainability: Nasi Ambeng practices in Malaysia

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Abstract

The Javanese and Malays have undergone distinct evolutionary transformations, notably seen in culinary practices like Nasi Ambeng, which has endured across generations. With limited research on the sustainability of traditional foods in Malaysia and the decline of culinary practices, this study aims to explore the perpetuation of Nasi Ambeng among the Javanese-Malay community. Employing ethnographic and netnographic approaches, the study identifies intergenerational knowledge transfer, adoption, adaptations, and demand in the food business as key factors supporting the sustainability of Nasi Ambeng. This study enriches Malaysia's gastronomy studies, benefiting tourism authorities, culinary heritage bodies, and ethnic representatives for preserving traditional foods.

Keywords: Traditional Food; Nasi Ambeng; Food Practice; Sustainability

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1.0 Introduction

Traditional foods embody a way of life, preserving historical narratives and cultural identities. Guerrero et al., (2009) affirmed that these foods are commonly enjoyed during specific occasions or seasons, often passed down from one generation to generation. However, scholars have expressed concerns about the potential loss of traditional foods due to inadequate practices. Nor et al., (2012) averred young Malaysian individuals, tend to neglect traditional culinary customs. Plus, societies continuously evolve, and this transformation is evident in food and eating habits, as well as advancements in food production and technology (Sharif et al., 2021). Furthermore, convenient food emergence provides quick outcomes (Sharif et al., 2013); hence, society's inability to independently acquire traditional food practices leads them to disregard them. Inadequate familial support and limited skills and knowledge concerning Malay traditional foods impede the younger generation's engagement with Malay traditional festive cuisine (Sharif et al., 2013), subsequent to prevailing lifestyle trends among millennials indicate a shift towards modernization and urbanization, leading to a disregard for the significance and value of traditional foods, mainly Malay traditional cuisine (Md Nor & Kamaruddin, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the

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production of non-perishable and processed foods due to changing consumer preferences and a growing demand for innovative options like freeze-dried ready meals (Galanakis et al., 2021). This trend is expected to continue (Askew, 2020), raising concerns about society's reliance on convenient foods and its impact on current food practices.

Numerous studies have explored the decline of traditional foods among young generations due to fast food, convenience options, and technology. However, it is essential to acknowledge that certain traditional foods persist in various settings, such as stalls, restaurants, and special occasions. Examples include *pulut kuning*, (Noor et al., 2013), *nasi dagang* (Arshad et al., 2019), rice-based dishes like *ketupat*, *lontong*, and *lemang* (Sharif et al., 2015), and *nasi lemak* (Yusoff et al., 2019).

Despite recognizing issues with traditional food practices, there is a lack of comprehensive research exploring the underlying causes of their sustainability. Therefore, it is crucial to understand why traditional foods continue to exist, considering the wide variety of traditional dishes. The researcher examines explicitly Nasi Ambeng, a significant traditional dish among the Javanese-Malay community in Malaysia that has been passed down through generations.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Sustainability

Sustainability, as defined by Becker, (2011), refers to the ability of something to continue, maintain, and persist over time. It can be understood in two ways: the capacity of a system, entity, or process to perpetuate itself and the capacity of humans to preserve a particular system, entity, or process. Sustainability encompasses stability and enduring factors in the face of dynamics and change. Hence, traditional foods associated with a specific region and ingrained within a set of traditions inherently guarantee their long-term sustainability (Galanakis, 2019).

2.2 Food Knowledge Transfer

The transfer of cooking skills and the process of familiarizing younger generations with culinary practices in a domestic environment is commonly referred to as food knowledge transfer, as defined by Chenhall (2011). This transfer encompasses a range of gastronomy knowledge, including fundamental cooking skills, ingredient selection, recipes, preparation methods, and cooking tips. The transfer of food knowledge, which plays a vital role in safeguarding culinary traditions, is a responsibility shouldered by communities and ethnic groups that are charged with the important duty of imparting this knowledge to younger generations, fostering interactions that span across individuals, groups, and organizations (Sharif, et al., 2018).

2.3 Food Adoption

According to Chenhall, (2011), the concept of adoption in the context of food pertains to the acquisition of culinary knowledge that is consistently applied and practiced without any significant modifications. It typically pertains to dishes that resist simplification or cannot be easily altered through food preparation methods (Sharif et al., 2018). Muhammad et al., (2015) argue that food knowledge adoption encompasses more than just following recipes; it also involves the consideration of raw materials and ingredients, which can be altered and modified, subsequently influencing the taste and presentation of the dish.

2.4 Food Adaptation

Food adaptation involves the practical application of knowledge, requiring adjustments and improvements based on the availability of materials, ingredients, equipment, and facilities to ensure convenience and time efficiency (Kwik, 2008). Numerous factors, encompassing gender, age, location, socioeconomic status, behavior, environment, preference, food choice, and mass media, contribute to the adaptation of food knowledge. Yet, the family unit significantly influences an individual's lifelong development of food knowledge and behavior, starting from birth (Sharif et al., 2018).

3.0 Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilizing both an ethnographic and netnographic approach to investigate the factors contributing to the sustainability of Nasi Ambeng within the Javanese community across districts in Johor and Selangor, including Tangkak, Muar, Kuala Selangor, and Sabak Bernam which involve three different settings of Nasi Ambeng practices (familial consumption, business, and feasts). Observation served as the primary research instrument. The ethnographic approach was utilized during an extended participant observation period to explore the practices and traditions of Nasi Ambeng in the identified locations. Furthermore, the netnographic approach (non-participant observation) was employed to analyze social media content focusing on Nasi Ambeng. Still pictures provide evidence to support and enhance the observations. The narrative analysis will facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the sustainability of Nasi Ambeng within the Javanese community in Malaysia.

4.0 Findings

The persistent practice of Nasi Ambeng within the Malaysian community, particularly among the Javanese, is supported by various factors contributing to its sustainability. These factors include intergenerational food knowledge transfer, Nasi Ambeng adoptions, adaptations, and the demand for Nasi Ambeng in the food business.

4.1 Intergenerational food knowledge transfer

4.1.1 Cooking pre-preparation of Nasi Ambeng

Cooking pre-preparation is the initial step in the culinary process, involving the joint effort of a mother and her daughter in handling raw ingredients. It entails the shared knowledge of identifying and recognizing the raw materials required for Nasi Ambeng, with the mother taking responsibility for imparting this knowledge. She guides her daughter in selecting, gathering, and measuring fresh or dry ingredients and subsequent tasks like peeling, cutting, and portioning. Raw ingredients can be sourced from two places: the household garden and the market. The former reflects a traditional approach, where ingredients were obtained from home gardens, including rhizome plants, vegetables, and potatoes. Alternatively, fresh ingredients are easily procured from various marketplaces such as wet markets, farmer markets, supermarkets, night markets, and grocery stores in villages. This process facilitates the transfer of knowledge between the mother and daughter on selecting and purchasing the ingredients, ensuring the best quality and quantity for Nasi Ambeng.



Fig. 1: The gathering of raw ingredients from the house lawn, including lemongrass, turmeric, and galangal.



Fig. 2: The ingredient selection process for Nasi Ambeng at the agricultural market.

4.1.2 Nasi Ambeng's cooking techniques

Transmitting the knowledge of specific cooking techniques to the younger generation holds significant importance. These techniques and methods form the fundamental framework of the cooking process, bringing together all ingredients to create the desired taste, texture, and preferences. While there are various cooking techniques involving the application of heat, categorized as dry-heat methods and moist-heat methods, only a select few traditional cooking techniques are employed in the preparation of Nasi Ambeng, including sautéing, deep-frying, pan-frying, braising, and boiling. During the observation, the informant demonstrated the use of distinct cooking

techniques for different elements of the dish, such as sautéing to enhance the aroma of the mixed spices and ingredients in *sambal goreng jawa*, involving sliced onions, garlic, shallots, chillies, blended anchovies, and other ingredients, which are sautéed in vegetable oil before incorporating black soy sauce and vermicelli.



Fig. 3: Techniques of sauteing and *menyangai*.

4.1.3 Cooking skills of Nasi Ambeng

Developing cooking skills encompasses various methods, including observation, hands-on learning, consistent practice, and informal learning activities. Mastering these skills takes time and cannot be acquired quickly. The traditional preparation techniques involved in cooking Nasi Ambeng require specific culinary expertise, ensuring that the dish maintains its traditional appearance, aroma, and texture across generations. Knowledge transfer occurs through observation, hands-on experience, instructions, assistance, and the enhancement of cooking skills indirectly. During the cooking sessions between the mother and daughter, the exchange of cooking skills occurs, such as estimating ingredient quantities, perceiving the readiness of heated food items, evaluating taste, extending the shelf life of elements like *serondeng kelapa*, planning time allocation, and multitasking, practicing hygiene, employing kitchen utensils and equipment correctly and safely, and more. Alongside skill transfer, the mother imparts cooking tips and prohibitions specific to Nasi Ambeng, such as reducing the amount of salt in *sambal goreng jawa* due to the sufficient saltiness provided by black soy sauce.



Fig. 4: The daughter acquired the skill of ingredient estimation from her mother in the preparation of Nasi Ambeng.

4.1.4 Nasi Ambeng's food decorum

The consumption of Nasi Ambeng embodies the significance of familial, friendship, and community bonds within the Javanese community in Malaysia. Traditionally, Nasi Ambeng was served in large enamel trays known as *dulang ayan*, lined with banana leaves and filled with all the dish's elements. This practice was reserved for special occasions like *kenduri tahlil*, where individuals would sit together on the floor surrounding the Nasi Ambeng. The informant had the opportunity to observe and partake in this customary Nasi Ambeng eating decorum during her teenage years, as she assisted her mother in its preparation for *kenduri* events and participated in village activities. While the traditional decorum was observed during specific occasions and family meals, there have been slight modifications influenced by modernization. Nasi Ambeng is now commonly consumed at dining tables rather than on the floor, yet interestingly, individuals continue to eat it using their right hands instead of utensils. Additionally, the serving style has evolved, with each element of Nasi Ambeng being placed separately in individual bowls or plates, deviating from the traditional presentation.



Fig.5: The decorum of Nasi Ambeng during a kenduri tahlil.



Fig.6: The etiquette of Nasi Ambeng during family lunch

4.2 Nasi Ambeng adoptions

4.2.1 Elements of Nasi Ambeng

The 2022 "Bengkel Meja Bulat: Nasi Ambeng Sebagai Gastronomi Makanan Tradisi Selangor" event defined the essential components of a complete Nasi Ambeng. Representatives from Selangor Malay Customs and Heritage Corporations (PADAT), the Department of National Heritage (JWN), and the National Department of Culture and Arts (JKKN) reached a definitive agreement. Selangor Nasi Ambeng must include white rice, *ayam semur*, *sambal goreng jawa*, *mi goreng*, *serondeng kelapa*, fried salted fish, and optionally, *rempeyek*. Chicken remains a crucial element alongside these components. Across various business settings, including night markets, online platforms, catering services, and eateries, Nasi Ambeng offerings consistently feature white rice, chicken, *sambal goreng jawa*,

fried noodles, fried salted fish, and *serondeng kelapa*. However, the chicken component presents diverse dishes, including fried chicken, *ayam masak kicap*, chicken *rendang*, and *ayam masak merah*. Food traders offer multiple chicken options to cater to individual customer preferences.



Fig.7: The showcased Nasi Ambeng from various Selangor districts exhibits shared resemblances.



Fig.8: Assorted chicken dishes.

4.2.2 The recipe and taste of Nasi Ambeng

The adoption process in Nasi Ambeng involves meticulous adherence to recipe and cooking methods, ensuring precise ingredient selection and measurement, and using traditional techniques passed down through generations. During the observation, the informant proudly shared her diligently acquired collection of Nasi Ambeng recipes, inherited from her mother and transcribed in a dedicated notebook. These treasured recipes include *sambal goreng jawa*, fried noodles, *serondeng kelapa*, *ayam semur*, *ayam ungkep*, and *ayam masak merah*. The informant emphasized the oral transmission of the recipe and cooking techniques from her mother, with her active participation in the process. While occasional memory lapses could occur, the recipe notebook serves as a reliable reference, resolving any uncertainties regarding ingredient types, quantities, and cooking procedures. Preserving the distinct flavor of Nasi Ambeng relies on faithfully following the recipe, ensuring its traditional essence endures and continues to be cherished by successive generations.

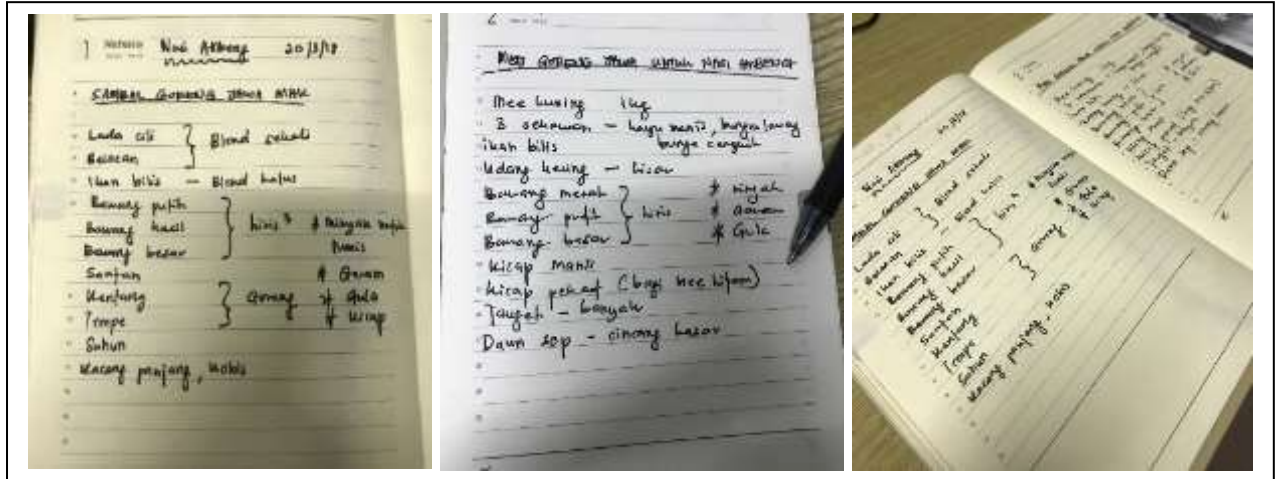


Fig. 9: The recipe for sambal goreng jawa.



Fig. 10: The informant consults the recipe book.

4.3 Nasi Ambeng adaptations

4.3.1 Convenience ingredients

Convenience ingredients play a vital role in the preparation of Nasi Ambeng, as observed in this study. They streamline the complex and labor-intensive ingredient preparation process while maintaining the dish's taste and presentation. Pre-peeled garlic, tamarind paste, pre-cubed anchovies, chicken essence, turmeric powder, and ready-made pastes like *rendang* and *ungkep* are among the convenience ingredients used. Clean processed chicken, either as a whole bird or in various cuts at the wet market, is also included as a convenience ingredient, whereby one does not need to arduously process it from the beginning. Additionally, readily available raw paste ingredients, such as chili, ginger, garlic, onion, and dried chili pastes, obtained from online platforms like Shopee and Lazada, expedite the cooking process. This streamlined approach saves time, enhances efficiency, and creates a cleaner and more organized kitchen workspace.



Fig. 11: Ingredients employed in the preparation of Nasi Ambeng.



Fig. 12: An assortment of chicken cuts.

4.3.2 Modern equipment

The emergence of technology has brought forth a wide array of convenient foods and modern cooking equipment, revolutionizing the cooking process. Through the conducted observations, it was found that cooking stoves are the primary and widely utilized equipment. The prevalent types of cooking stoves utilize liquid petroleum gas (LPG) as fuel, generating high-heat blue flames. Additionally, built-in and portable electric stoves were observed in household settings. It is worth noting that the traditional cooking method of Nasi Ambeng does not require advanced modern appliances like microwaves, air-fryers, or sous vide machines, as stoves serve as the primary heat source. Alongside cooking stoves, various electrical appliances are employed in the preparation of Nasi Ambeng. Modern equipment, such as electric blenders and coconut graters, substitutes traditional tools like *lesung batu*, *batu giling*, and *kukur kelapa*. Although food blenders are commonly used, mortar and pestle retain their significance in certain aspects of Nasi Ambeng cooking, such as grinding anchovies and bird's eye chillies to create sambal goreng jawa. According to the informant, using mortar and pestle enhances the overall flavor and texture, resulting in a more delightful dish.



Fig. 13: Various modern cooktops, including built-in cooking stoves and induction stoves.



Fig. 14: Traditional and modern coconut graters, used for grating coconut to make serondeng kelapa or extract fresh coconut milk.



Fig. 15: The pestle and mortar (*lesung batu*) and food blender.

4.3.3 Food packaging

During Javanese feasts like kenduri slametan and kenduri tahlil, the preparation of Nasi Ambeng known as *nasi berkat* involves meticulous assembly. Over time, the packaging of Nasi Ambeng during feasts has undergone minimal changes, primarily shifting from newspaper to waterproof food wrappers for food safety reasons. However, food packaging has become more prevalent in the business context, especially for food traders offering takeaway services. These sellers utilize various packaging methods, combining waterproof food wrappers with banana leaves or plastic sheets as liners. Packaging options include food wrappers, plastic sheets, plastic containers, round plastic trays, and food boxes, which are easily accessible at supermarkets or obtained in bulk from manufacturers.



Fig. 16: Newspaper is substituted with food-grade wrappers.



Fig. 17: In the food business, sellers used a variety of food packaging for the Nasi Ambeng.

4.4 Nasi Ambeng demand in the food business

4.4.1 The social media influence

Nasi Ambeng entrepreneurs and sellers have adeptly capitalized on this opportunity by leveraging popular social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram to market and promote their Nasi Ambeng ventures. The use of Facebook, in particular, has emerged as a valuable promotional tool for restaurants, with viral content attracting a substantial number of patrons from different regions. This surge in demand has necessitated an increase in the production of Nasi Ambeng portions to meet the growing market needs. Similarly, caterers have successfully utilized Facebook as a platform to promote their catering services, resulting in high engagement levels from followers who express interest in ordering Nasi Ambeng for various occasions. Customer feedback indicates that their desire to try and savor Nasi Ambeng from these specific vendors stems from viral posts circulating on social media platforms, accompanied by numerous positive reviews highlighting the dish's deliciousness and authenticity. Despite geographical distances, customers willingly make the journey to personally experience Nasi Ambeng, emphasizing the influential role of social media in capturing attention and generating enthusiasm for popular food products or services. Furthermore, the unfamiliarity of Nasi Ambeng among some customers, coupled with intriguing social media posts and positive reviews, piques their curiosity and prompts them to explore this culinary novelty. The exceptional taste of Nasi Ambeng, with its harmonious combination of elements, solidifies their newfound appreciation for this dish.

4.4.2 People's current lifestyle and willingness to spend

In today's fast-paced society, individuals are increasingly embracing busy lifestyles, leaving little time for meal preparation. As a result, the rise of dining establishments, night markets, catering services, and online ventures reflects the prevalent trend of opting for ready-made Nasi Ambeng rather than homemade meals. One customer, a white-collar professional with a hectic schedule, shared that her demanding work life prevented her from dedicating time to cooking Nasi Ambeng. Instead, she relied on restaurant purchases and takeaways for family dinners. Furthermore, the affordability of Nasi Ambeng at the night market was noted by customers, who willingly visited to indulge in this dish despite rising ingredient costs. Prices at the night market ranged from RM7.00 to RM15.00 per serving, making it accessible to a wide audience. From a catering perspective, choosing Nasi Ambeng from a catering service proved convenient and time-efficient, eliminating the need to source ingredients individually and reducing costs. The feast's host also highlighted the added benefit of relieving their family from post-event cleaning responsibilities and other logistical arrangements, such as providing tables, chairs, chafing dishes, and waitstaff.

5.0 Discussion

The study found that mothers primarily taught their daughters various aspects of intergenerational food knowledge, aligning with Chenhall (2011)'s assertion that women serve as cultural transmitters of food traditions and cooking skills, especially in traditional cuisines. The intergenerational transfer of food knowledge regarding Nasi Ambeng serves as a crucial foundation for its long-term sustainability, ensuring its preservation for future generations. Without a deep understanding and extensive knowledge of this specific traditional food, such as Nasi Ambeng, there is a risk of it being forgotten and gradually falling into disuse, ultimately leading to its extinction. This knowledge must be consistently practiced and imparted to the younger generation.

The adoption of Nasi Ambeng highlights the importance of maintaining the authenticity and traditional value of Nasi Ambeng without any adjustments or modifications. Acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the essential elements of Nasi Ambeng, such as white rice, *sambal goreng jawa*, *mi goreng*, *serondeng kelapa*, and fried salted fish, is imperative for sustaining its authenticity. The government's initiative to officially define the elements of Nasi Ambeng represents a significant step towards preserving its true essence. Additionally, without possessing accurate knowledge of its traditional preparation, it raises concerns about the dissemination of misinformation, particularly to younger generations. Hence, relying on authentic recipes and flavors passed down through generations becomes essential as a benchmark for preparing Nasi Ambeng.

Kwik, (2008) asserts that food adaptation entails applying knowledge to enhance ingredients, equipment, and facilities for convenience and time-saving purposes. Convenience ingredients expedite the cooking process and reduce pre-preparation time. Sharif et al., (2021) further supports the beneficial nature of convenience ingredients in contemporary cooking, as they reduce overall food preparation time. Moreover, the use of modern equipment like blenders and food processors are commonly used, along with pestle and mortar, believed to enhance the unique taste of ingredients, as suggested by Raji et al., (2017). Also, Nasi Ambeng's food packaging has been adapted to the business settings that offer Nasi Ambeng takeaways and delivery; food-grade lunch containers and waterproof food wrappers are preferred, which provide practicality and convenience for Nasi Ambeng sellers.

The demand for Nasi Ambeng is crucial for its sustainability. Promoting Nasi Ambeng on social media caused the patronization of business premises and a higher production volume. Engaging customer interactions on Facebook posts has resulted in purchases, enhancing consumer engagement (Dhaoui & Webster, 2021; Gkikas et al., 2022). The demand also depicts the current lifestyle characterized by a hectic schedule, willingness to spend, and the use of convenient food catering services. These align with the impact of modernization, which has significantly altered food preparation habits (Muhammad et al., 2013). Customers are willing to pay for Nasi Ambeng despite rising ingredient prices, considering it an affordable option. Furthermore, catering services for Nasi Ambeng offer convenience by eliminating the need for extensive food preparation, serving, and cleaning. These services fulfill customers' physical needs and provide budget-friendly options for quality food and drink (Górka-Chowaniec, 2018).

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

In summary, this study successfully identifies the critical factors contributing to the sustainability of Nasi Ambeng. Despite the decline of many traditional foods, Nasi Ambeng remains popular and widely consumed due to intergenerational knowledge transfer, adoption, adaptation, and demand in the food businesses. Preserving traditional foods like Nasi Ambeng is vital in maintaining cultural heritage, symbolizing community vibrancy and ethnic identity. The study's findings support community leaders and the government in recognizing the importance of preserving ethnic food treasures and exposing the younger generation to traditional foods for cultural continuity. Furthermore, the study provides a solid foundation for future research on Javanese-Malay traditional delicacies, offering avenues to enrich gastronomic studies and expand the existing body of literature on Malaysian cuisine. Future research endeavors can explore other captivating Javanese-Malay delicacies like *bubur merah* and *pecel jawa*, enhancing our understanding of traditional food culture.

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