

## **Culinary Heritage and Cultural Sustainability: *Ketewel* among the Javanese Malaysians**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores cultural sustainability through Javanese culinary heritage, focusing on an almost-extinct traditional cassava flour dish, *Ketewel*. The research identifies the significance of *Ketewel* as a cultural symbol and investigates how evolving food practices can foster cultural sustainability. The qualitative study uses semi-structured interviews and cooking demonstrations conducted within a Malaysian Javanese community in Parit Kampung Seri Menanti, Batu Pahat, Johor. Findings from communal preparation, consumption, memories, and stories offer insights into cultivating cultural sustainability through culinary traditions, contributing to understanding how food heritage can advance Malaysian multiculturalism and cultural sustainability.

**Keywords:** Culinary heritage; Cultural Sustainability; *Ketewel*; Javanese Malaysian

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### **1.0 Introduction**

Malaysian multiculturalism is rich with diverse customs and traditions practiced by various ethnic groups, and one of these prominent communities, the Javanese Malaysians, has influenced the Malays' everyday habits and rituals, ceremonies, and observances, including culinary styles. However, sustaining and disseminating traditional culture and heritage is a challenge in these times. Food consumption and cooking practices are not just daily necessities but prominent markers of cultural identity, which can promote tourism and introduce cultural diplomacy. Thus, innovation in traditional cuisine is essential to keep pace with new developments without losing its intrinsic cultural essence (Sari et al., 2024). Heritage preservation plays a vital role in sustaining the cultural heritage of the entire community, especially the migrant communities.

Sustainability is a key concept widely discussed and integral to the 2030 United Nations Agenda. Sustainability meets the demands of the present without compromising the potential of future generations to meet their own needs (SDG Service, 2015-2020). It is termed as a living heritage passed down from generation to generation and contributes to community-based resilience (UNESCO, n.d). Therefore, preserving the culinary heritage of Javanese Malaysians should be aligned with the global sustainability goals of Agenda 2030. It is a continuous commitment that requires active participation from the community, which can ensure a sustained inculcation of a sense of identity, especially among the younger generation.

A recent study has claimed that young Malaysians are now so exposed to pre-packed and foreign foods that they have become disinterested in learning Malaysian heritage cuisine, mainly traditional sub-ethnic cuisine. Abdul Wafi Abdul Rahman et al. (2024) point

out that many areas of Javanese Malaysian culture, especially their culinary traditions, are still under-researched and these customs and traditions will disappear if it is neglected. Even though earlier studies often highlight signature cuisines such as *nasi ambeng* or *punten* (Muhammad Shahrul et al., 2023a) studies on lesser-known traditional Javanese Malaysian sweetmeat, such as *Ketewel*, is limited and almost non-existent. Therefore, this study proposes to document the preparation of *Ketewel* as it is practiced in Batu Pahat, Johor. *Ketewel*, or *Tiwol*, is made from tapioca flour mixed with grated coconut (Syuriana Ibrahim, 2024). Hence, this study is conducted to answer these pertinent questions:

- i) What cooking practices are associated with *Ketewel* in Batu Pahat?
- ii) How can the *Ketewel* cooking practices inculcate cultural sustainability in the Javanese Malaysian community?

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Cultural sustainability

Cultural sustainability is the preservation of cultural customs and heritage in a way that is consistent with sustainability principles. This includes preserving cultural sites, artifacts, and customs and maintaining cultural knowledge and skills. Ensuring that future generations' needs are taken seriously when preserving and using cultural resources is also considered a cultural sustainability effort (Jarvela, 2023). Therefore, cultural sustainability refers to preserving, continuing, and adapting cultural elements, including traditions, practices, and values, to ensure their survival for future generations (Pai et al., 2025). Culinary practices involve maintaining traditional food knowledge while adapting to modern societal and environmental changes (Knorr & Augustin, 2025). Sustainability also involves aspects of responsibility and ethical values that contribute to the well-being of society (SDG Services, 2015-2020).

Culinary practices and food heritage have enormous value in maintaining a society's identity and cultural diversity. To maintain cultural heritage, one must find ways to preserve traditional recipes, local food ingredients, and distinctive cooking techniques amidst the threats of globalization and modernization (Nagina et al., 2025). However, others believe culinary traditions must evolve to stay relevant, allowing fusion cuisine, modern reinterpretations, and adopting new technologies (Guiné et al., 2021). Culinary tourism and the food industry further complicate the issue. While they can promote food heritage and boost local economies, they may also lead to over-commercialization and cultural dilution (Surata et al., 2024). Therefore, cultural sustainability in food heritage requires a delicate balance, preserving tradition while allowing innovation to keep culinary culture alive and relevant (Yulistiyono et al., 2023).

### 2.2 Javanese migration to Malaysia

The century-old migration of Javanese people from Indonesia to Malaysia is important because it affects the country's diverse customs, traditions, culture, and practices. The economic, trade, political, and social factors can be ascertained from the maritime trade networks that connect the Indonesian archipelago with the Malay peninsula. Statistics indicated that because of Johor's geographic location, many Javanese immigrants who arrived before the 20th century were easily accessible from Singapore (Linda Sunarti & Teuku Reza Fadeli, 2021). One of the primary reasons for the migration of the Javanese community to the state of Johor is due to socioeconomic opportunities available through agricultural activities such as paddy plantation and horticulture.

The Javanese Malaysians are a community of full or partial Javanese descent who were born in or immigrated to Malaysia. Under Malaysian law, most of them were considered Malays (Khoo, 1998). Since they have lived in Malaysia for many generations, their fundamental traits and identity have blended with the Malay culture while progressively assimilating into the larger Malay and Malaysian cultures. Consequently, the Malays and Javanese are often referred to as "migrants of similarity," which is attributed to their linguistic and cultural proximity and shared Islamic background. The Javanese strive to sustain their customs and traditions that are commonly practiced back in Java, Indonesia, ultimately adapting to the lifestyle of the local community in Malaysia.

The continuation of Javanese culture in Johor has been further aided by the marriages between the Javanese community and Johor Malays (Nor Hashimah Jalaludin et al., 2020). The Javanese Malaysians have preserved many ancient Javanese practices and rituals, especially those associated with important life events such as birth, marriage, and death. They include traditional Javanese dance, music, clothing, and culinary practices such as language, food (*nasi ambeng*), clothing (*batik*), communal fests (*rewang*, *Pakatan*, *kondangan*) as well as integrating them into Malaysian society (Linda Sunarti & Teuku Reza Fadeli, 2021; Hendokumoro, 2023).

### 2.3 Culinary practices of the Javanese Malaysians

The Javanese culinary traditions have evolved significantly and indirectly contributed to the cuisine of Malaysians, especially Malays. However, Javanese Malaysian culture continues to be preserved in addition to maintaining its unique culinary heritage. Javanese cuisine is often associated with well-known dishes like *Nasi Ambeng*, *Pecal*, and *Sambal Jawa*; few are familiar with *punten*. Nur Falah Hashim et al. claim that *punten* in Sabak Bernam, Selangor, differs from those in Blitung and Pacitan in Jawa Timur, Indonesia (Nurul Falah Hashim et al., 2022). This demonstrates that transferring cooking techniques from one culture to another will undoubtedly require changes or adaptations, yet efforts are made to persevere with the cultural traditions.

*Nasi Ambeng* is among the most popular dishes in the Javanese and Malays communities (Muhammad Shahrul et al., 2023a). It plays a vital role in sustaining cultural heritage. *Nasi Ambeng* is served on various occasions, such as dinners, lunches, and business meetings. It is also served during *selamatan*, the thanksgiving ceremony that brings together relatives, friends, and neighbors. This ritual closely resembles the Malay *kenduri* feast tradition. *Nasi ambeng* consists of rice accompanied by side dishes on a *talam* (tray) which is shared by five people. On certain occasions, the Javanese people will use *ancak*, a type of woven leaf traditionally used for presenting

offerings to spirits, before placing the food on *talam* (Nur Fakhira Mohamad Zulkifli et al., 2023). While studies have been conducted on *Nasi Ambeng* and *Punten*, no research has specifically examined *Ketewol*, one of the traditional sweetmeats of Javanese Malaysians.

### 3.0 Methodology

This study uses qualitative research methods. It explores the Javanese Malaysian community's lived experiences and cultural and culinary practices in Kampung Seri Menanti, Batu Pahat, Johor, to examine how specific habits and customs signify identity formation and preservation, leading to cultural sustainability. A face-to-face semi-structured interview has been conducted with five (5) informants, with an age range between 40 and 60 years. The interview was conducted and video-recorded on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2024 as a conversation to allow us to explore the themes that emerged during the interview. Thematic analysis is employed to analyze the data collected from the interviews. Patterns and underlying meanings inherent in qualitative data can be identified and interpreted using these core methods (Christou, 2024). The analysis can provide a comprehensive understanding of the culinary heritage related to the community's cultural identity. Culinary heritage is deeply intertwined with cultural identity as food acts as a symbol of shared history, reflecting social status and a sense of belonging, fostering communal affiliation and cultural values. However, we acknowledge that a wider regional coverage and a larger sample size, particularly focusing on the younger generations' perspectives would have provided us with a more comprehensive understanding.

## 4.0 Findings

### 4.1 Preparation and cooking techniques of Ketewol

The preparation begins with peeling the cassava and soaking it for ten days in water in a covered container until it softens, then sun-drying them until they are dry. The dried cassava is then pounded and sifted so that it becomes flour which is called *gaplek*. The ingredients used to make *Ketewol* are cassava, coarsely grated coconut, water, and salt. To prepare one serving of *Ketewol*, four cups of *Ketewol* flour, a pinch of salt, and water are needed. Mix all three ingredients, place them into a container, and cover it with banana leaves to create a fragrant aroma and enhance its delicious taste. Steam the mixture for thirty minutes. Once it has cooked, move it to another container and add grated coconut, along with a pinch of salt, to the mixture.

### 4.2 Ketewol plating

Cooked *Ketewol* can be served with banana leaves as a substrate, creating a fragrant aroma. *Ketewol* can be scooped for individual servings and placed on a small plate. A small amount of white or brown sugar can be added to enhance the flavour. In the past, *Ketewol* was a staple food substitute for rice, but now *Ketewol* can be enjoyed as a snack or a sweet dessert and can be eaten for breakfast and afternoon tea.



Fig. 1. (a) Preparation of *Ketewol*; (b) *Ketewol* plating.  
(Source:) Authors

### 4.3 The uniqueness of Ketewol

The intricate and long preparation process, taking up to ten days, makes this *Ketewol* last long. This preparation and preservation technique is appropriate for times in the past when people faced difficulties and had no artificial food storage facilities like refrigerators. The deliciousness and uniqueness of *Ketewol* come from its chewy and soft texture. Besides being eaten as a sweet treat, *Ketewol* can also be diversified in its consumption, such as being used as a substitute for rice.

### 4.4 A taste of nostalgia

For the Javanese community in Johor, *Ketewol* is not just a traditional food preserved amidst modernization but also evokes meaningful nostalgia. *Ketewol*, which is made from cassava, symbolizes the hardships and struggles of the community before independence. Most informants shared experiences where, in the past, rice was categorized as a luxury food and was hard to obtain, therefore making *Ketewol* an alternative to rice. According to the informants, cassava is a survival food consumed day and night. Its leaves can also be eaten as *ulam-ulaman* (salad), while its tubers can be boiled or made into various simple foods like *lempeng* (pancakes) and chips. The cassava submerged for several days in a flood can be dried and processed into *Ketewol*.

#### 4.5 Knowledge transfer

The sustainability of traditional Javanese food is essential for the Javanese community in Malaysia as a continuation of the Javanese heritage and cultural legacy. All the informants agreed that traditional Javanese food, such as *Ketewel*, should be preserved through knowledge transfer within the family institution. Mothers usually educate their daughters on preparing traditional Javanese food as early as puberty. They also pass down traditional Javanese cooking knowledge to their daughters-in-law, who are not of Javanese descent, so their grandchildren can continue to enjoy these traditional cuisines.

#### 4.6 Heritage Preservation and Cultural Sustainability

Traditional Javanese cuisine is difficult to sustain and preserve in today's modern and increasingly sophisticated environment. According to the informants, most young people are less interested in traditional food and prefer Western-influenced fast food. However, the elder Javanese community continues to love and value traditional food and eats it as their main meal every day. In addition to passing down this culinary knowledge to the younger generation, Javanese mothers usually ensure that there is a must-have dish from their traditional cuisine on the table, especially during festive seasons like *Aidilfitri* and *Aidiladha*. According to the informants, while these young people prefer convenient meals daily, they nevertheless look forward to traditional dishes on special occasions to round out the celebration. Similarly, if an event, such as *Kenduri*, gathers all the family and relatives, traditional Javanese dishes like *Ketewel* also become the primary choice.

#### 4.7 Challenges and solutions

*Ketewel*, like other traditional foods, confronts issues of remaining relevant in an emerging progressive society. Young people are becoming increasingly disconnected from traditional Javanese cuisines such as *Ketewel* and do not know how to prepare them. Therefore, one of the initiatives taken by the local community to preserve this Javanese food tradition is conducting cooking classes. The researchers had the opportunity to participate in a *Ketewel* cooking lesson hosted by the local community. This class was led by a traditional cooking specialist, typically from an older generation. These cooking classes are usually conducted communally and held in selected houses. The houses are generally chosen for spaciousness and convenient access to basic amenities like water and electricity.

### 5.0 Discussion

Marbangun Hardjowigoro (1989) observes: "All Javanese share a single culture" (p.7), referring to their upholding of heritage and tradition all over the world as their life's principal philosophy. Although they have migrated to new places, and most of the Javanese descendants in Malaysia have never set foot in their ancestral homeland, the Javanese customs and culture are still cherished and continue to be passed down to this day. In Kampung Seri Menanti, the Javanese Malaysian community has brought the Javanese culture alive in their daily life, resulting in the assimilation and acculturation of cultures within the local community. The Malays and Javanese communities here live in harmony and celebrate the diversity of cultures, making it a unique society by preserving Javanese traditional identity while upholding Malay customs and culture. They continue to use Javanese language in daily conversations, engage in communal activities such as *Rewang* and *Kondangan* during festive days, present traditional arts, like *Barongan* and *Kuda Kepang* performances, and enjoy traditional foods such as *nasi ambeng*, *lontong*, *punten*, *ewel-ewel*, and *Ketewel*. Thus, this migrant community actively practices sustainability principles through dissemination of their cultural knowledge and practices to the future generations. *Ketewel* is not only one of the traditional foods, but it also brings back memories of the hardships and struggles faced by the Javanese community in the past. Considering the intricate preparation process, mainly the *Ketewel* flour, which takes days to prepare, there is now the option to buy *Ketewel* or *Gaplek* flour, which makes the preparation of *Ketewel* much easier. Food stalls and bazaars at night markets also sell *Ketewel*, making it more accessible to all Malaysians, regardless of race or ethnicity.

### 6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

*Ketewel*, as a symbol of Javanese culinary heritage, reflects the dynamic relationship between tradition and modernization. This study shows that the practice of communal food preparation of *Ketewel* maintain cultural identity of the Malaysian Javanese community. To preserve *Ketewel*, initiatives such as systematic documentation, cooking workshops, and community-based programs should be encouraged. Collaboration between government and private agencies, local communities, and policymakers can further support traditional food practices. In addition, awareness through education and digital platforms can also increase the appreciation of traditional Javanese food among the younger generation. In sum, protecting *Ketewel* contributes to more exhaustive cultural sustainability efforts, strengthening Malaysia's diverse cultural heritage while preserving Malaysian Javanese culinary traditions. Future research can examine how to develop effective strategies for inculcating increasing interest in traditional heritage cuisines among the younger generations. Diverse variations of *Ketewel* preparation practiced by different Javanese Malaysian communities can also be explored in the future.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Local Cultural/Heritage Environment (Food included)

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