

## Production Protocols in the Current Practice of Instilling Traditional Values in Malay *Kuih*

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<https://doi.org/10.61211/mjqr090105>

### ABSTRACT

Traditional food is unique to every country and can act as one of the catalysts for the nation's economy, especially through gastronomic tourism activities. However, the qualities of traditional food are now challenged by globalization-imposed modernization innovations. The change in methods and techniques in producing traditional food has altered the traditional values of the delicacies. This study explored the disciplines within the production of traditional Malay *kuih* that instilled the traditional value in the current practices. A qualitative research design was utilised in this study using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. There were 21 informants involved in the data collection, out of which 14 were traditional Malay *kuih* producers, while 7 were loyal consumers, all of whom were within the data saturation point gathered from sessions. All the interview sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to extract themes for the research question "How can the traditional quality of Malay *kuih* be reproduced in current practice?" Four themes were discovered where protocols were applied in the production of traditional Malay *kuih*. The protocols are; using Malay's conventional cooking techniques, controlling ingredient substitutions in original recipes, controlling technical enhancement in production, and retaining the common flavour of the traditional Malay *kuih*. These findings not only covered the integrity of traditional methods while adapting to modern technology but also contributed to an in-depth discovery of practices and limitations set upon the production of traditional Malay *kuih* from the informants' experiences. Producers of the traditional Malay *kuih* can then better organize their productions while still conforming to instill traditional values in their products. Consequently, this confers well-identified and true-to-origin tourism products to attract the locals as well as foreign tourists to enjoy the delicacies. With the findings of this study, the specification of the traditional Malay *kuih* can further be rekindled and expand on possibilities for its resurgence.

**Keywords:** Traditional Malay *kuih*; Traditional food; Traditional values; Modernisation; Innovation; Production protocol, Malaysia's heritage food

#### Article Info:

Received 3 May 2023

Accepted 28 May 2023

Published 30 May 2023

### INTRODUCTION

Food, as defined by the European Commission, is said to be traditional if the usage is proven to be transmitted between generations considering that one human generation of at least 25 years (European Union, Official Journal

European Union, 2006). Traditional foods may have historical sentiments attached and are expressions of culture, identity, heritage, and lifestyle. In Malaysia, traditional food can be categorised into several types and varieties including main dishes, or smaller portioned delicacies like snacks and sweets. A traditional main dish could be a one-meal dish, or it could be one that is eaten with other traditional food items alongside rice being the main food on the plate. A traditional Malay *kuih*, on the other hand, is usually a bite-sized snack or dessert food that is either savoury or sweet, usually made from flour, rice, santan (coconut cream or milk), and sugar. It can be consumed throughout the day either for breakfast, desserts, or in between meals for snacking.

The definition of traditional foods is also applied to traditional ingredients and traditional preparation methods. From the literature, a traditional food must be linked to a territory (Bertozzi, 1998; Jordana, 2000). According to Guerrero et al. (2009), the quality level of traditional foods (i.e. safety, processing and preparation, and health) is key to securing and expanding the market share. Over the years, the production of traditional food encounters several challenges due to the increasing difficulty in obtaining special ingredients and the modernisation of apparatus used in the preparation of the food. Despite these challenges, traditional food is getting more attention due to its rarity (Barska & Wojciechowska-Solis, 2018). It is appreciated as one of the intangible cultural heritage with distinct antiquities portraying the identity of the community that invented it and consumed it as a norm (Abidin et al., 2020; Pieniak, et al., 2009).

The issue of traditional food sustainability has been one of the most researched topics (Zeng et al., 2014). There is much research that defends, argues and suggests ways to make traditional food sustained in the local diet (Barska & Wojciechowska-Solis, 2018; Zeng et al., 2014) Malaysia included. The Malay traditional food in Malaysia is reportedly one of the vulnerable delicacies that are facing the possible risk of extinction. While sustainability issues correlate to environmental concerns about where the food is derived and replenished from, the Malaysian context of traditional food revolves around making the food exist and constant (Kamaruzaman et al., 2022). The changes brought by globalisation change the traditions as well as the diet that led the traditional Malay food away from local consumption. This was further explained by Boussaa (2021) who opined that the world is getting more equal between communities, and regions, and leading towards modern and standardized cultures everywhere.

Other aspects issued include the fundamental and inground elements of the food itself which are the image representation, symbolism and its birthplace (Barska and Wojciechowska-Solis, 2018; Pieniak et al., 2009). Such research surfaced as globalisation brought the world to a standardisation that commoditisation of locally untraditional foods like instants, ready-to-eat, and other related convenience foods gained their relevance against traditional food (Casini et al., 2015; Creel et al., 2008; **Zahari et al., 2013; Sharif et al., 2013;**). Besides that, the food industry nowadays caters to creativity through innovations in the food of our daily diet (Trichopoulou et al., 2006; Kavitha, Souji and Prabhu, 2011; Ramphal and Nicolaidis, 2014; Geyzen et al., 2019). The convenience of having innovative foods nowadays is making people purchase instead of making or even learning the basics from the elders. The neglect of traditional practices suggestively implies to a lessened idea of how the traditional food should be like (Sharif et al., 2017).

There have been few scholarly articles elucidating the practised adaptation of traditional food in the modern era, which most argued on keeping the old ways as they are a means to sustain existence. The traditional Malay *kuih*, as part of the Malaysian heritage collection, has possibly gone through serious negligence and possible changes. Seeing that few of the traditional Malay *kuih* still persist in its existence despite changes of time, how is it produced currently, yet still able to instill the traditional values?

The purpose of this study is to explore the inherent protocols, and highlight the current practices within the production of traditional Malay *kuih* with regards to protocols considered to instill traditional values. How can the traditional quality of Malay *kuih* be reproduced in current practice? This is to strengthen the Malay ethnic's treasure as part of Malaysia's food heritage conservation. Although different regions in the country will have different traditional *kuih*, this study focuses on the traditional *kuih* from the district of Mersing, in the north-eastern part of the southern-most state of Johor.

## **BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

### **Traditional Food of Malay Ethnic**

Traditional food is considered one of the instances of intangible heritage. Although physically apparent and sensorially sensed, the knowledge, ideas, recipes, tips and tricks, and methods of making remain as abstract. Traditional foods are also argued to be embedded with nostalgia and culture, thus evoked as traditions for groups of communities (Muhammad et al., Ahmad, 2013). Accordingly, traditional food will have characteristics that

are mutual to the community it is inherited (Wahid & Mudor, 2016). The Malays in Malaysia have historically acquired and accustomed to diverse cultures over the years (Nor et. al., 2012). This is because Malaya (now Malaysia) was established as a strategic point for traders, thus proving the enrichment of the Malay culture assimilation over the last eight decades (Braddell, 1935). The welcoming nature of the Malays and their open arms evolved their cuisine immensely (Abidin et al., 2020; Mardatillah et. al., 2019; Ting et. al., 2016)

As a result, traditional Malay food can be categorized into several aspects including region throughout Malaysia, the culture of the Malay sub-ethnicities, or even those served during festivities (Kamaruzaman et. al; 2022; Raji et. al., 2017; Sharif et.al., 2017; Sharif et. al., 2015). Regionally, Malaysia is made up of West Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia) and East Malaysia (part of the Bornean Island). Both are surrounded by the sea which suggests that the coastal area consumes more seafood as their traditional food (Laderman, 1984). The flavours may also vary, where food from the northern region was influenced by Thai cuisine leaning towards a spicy sweet palate in comparison to the spicy salty southern region (Kamaruzaman et. al., 2022; Raji et al., 2017;).

The method of food preparation would also differ, from enlisting various dry-heat and moist-heat techniques that would include frying, boiling, and steaming. In addition, there are also the *petua*, traditional Malay cooking tips and tricks, that are passed down from generation to the next between the womenfolk of the family. The *petua* may be different from one house to another but the inheritance showed the traditions of keep making the food to the best of quality. Certain traditional food is closely related to traditions and cultural events like *cukur jambul anak* (baby shower), *bacaan Yasin* (recitation of surah ya-seen), and even weddings (Aziz & Pawi, 2016).

### **Traditional Malay Kuih**

As part of the Malay traditional food, the Malay *kuih* is known as a group of usually small-portioned foods in differing textures and flavours (Hamid, 2017; Raji et al., 2017). Some locals would call them the Malay answers for the Western desserts (Hamzah, H. et. al., 2015). The variety of the traditional Malay *kuih* was coined by Omar and Omar (2018) to be diverse and knows no time to be enjoyed and found throughout Malaysia. Given the fact that Malaysia was one of the prominent trading centres in its historic years, other neighbouring countries may also have similar delicacies (Nor et al., 2012).

Traditional Malay *kuih* has become a staple for Malaysians across all races and the inclusion of it was always in social or cultural events (Shamsudin et. al., 2014). It is noteworthy that different regions may be practising different versions of the traditional Malay *kuih* as local ingredients availability is concerned (Mardatillah et al., 2019; Miele & Murdoch, 2002).

### **Traditional Malay Kuih Production**

In general, any traditional food would have been associated with traditional methods of production. According to Ahmad (2019), the production of the traditional Malay *kuih* involves a series of complicated steps and rules, especially those that are practised in rural settlements (Muhammad et al., 2013; Zahari et al., 2013). Mardatillah et al. (2019) also observed that the traditional way of making food has always been associated with the womenfolk of the family. In addition, Omar et al. (2011) have found that those in rural settlements are likely to follow traditional *kuih* making because the natural ingredients are easily obtainable. There are several methods of producing the traditional Malay *kuih*. These would include steaming, boiling, frying, baking, and grilling (Mok, 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework: Traditional Food Product Concept**

The theoretical framework used for this study is actually a concept by Guerrero et al. (2012) namely the Traditional Food Product Concept (TFPC). While it is understood to be a rounded concept to determine a traditional food product, the use of the concept is not entirely fitting to the research question of this study. Guerrero et al. (2012) enlisted four features in making a food product traditional, namely (i) habits and nature, implying to natural behaviour or norm of a particular food to the tradition; (ii) origin and locality, arguing the place and embeddedness of the food to its local birthplace; (iii) processing and elaboration, contending intricacy or art of making the food as close to the old fashion route; and (iv) sensory properties, inferring to the common or known flavours to the locals. Related to the research question, the TFPC was used strictly in the manner of making the traditional Malay *kuih*.

## METHOD

### Qualitative Research Design

The aim of this study is to disinter the practice of informants in instilling traditional values in the Malay *kuih*. A qualitative research design was used because the data needed was narrated lived experiences of the informants and the study was executed in a real setting to acquire first-hand empirical exploration of the experiences of informants in the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenological study governs the path of this study which involves the narrated experiences of the informants as main data. The data derived would be from the 'what' and 'how' questions with regard to the lived experience in the study phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, the phenomenological study was seen fit as the affection and emotions (Merriam, 2009) of the informants towards producing traditional Malay *kuih* according to its traditional values upholds the most important in this study.

### Setting

The Mersing district in the southern state of Johor, Malaysia was chosen for the study setting. One of the reasons is that it is observed as the phenomenon of persistent production of traditional Malay *kuih* vindicated by its titles of representation of Malay culture by Samsudin, et. al. (2010) and Thukiman (2011). The locals and nearby districts are also known to refer to Mersing as "Mini Terengganu" insinuating the resemblance of Mersing traditional food to the ones served in Terengganu. A study conducted by Ahmad et al. (2011) has referred to Terengganu as one of the states coined to be the "cradle of Malay culture" (Ahmad, Rahman, & Ismail, 2011, p. 223). This implies that despite the uncommonness of Mersing being a traditional food setting, the local appreciation and labelling of "Mini Terengganu" echo remarkable practices and cultures in its traditional Malay *kuih* offerings. Noting the persistent existence of traditional Malay *kuih* in the Mersing district, the phenomenon deserves an exploration. Another reason why Mersing was chosen for the setting of this study was that it is relatively less well-known among tourists, unlike Terengganu. It is possible that the Malay *kuih* that are prepared here are not mass-produced and more likely to adhere to the traditional protocols of *kuih*-making.

### Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to reach eligible informants according to the criteria. Two sets of criteria were made for experts' in-depth face-to-face interviews and loyal consumers' FGD sessions. The experts' criteria were (1) those who have acquired at least 10 years of experience in producing traditional Malay *kuih*; (2) prominent experts of traditional Malay *kuih* known to locals; and (3) willing to share their experience. Meanwhile, the loyal consumers' criteria were (1) individuals between the age of 18 to 59 years old, (2) loyal customers or consumers of traditional Malay *kuih*, and (3) willing to share their experiences. Criteria-based sample selection was considered for this study to explore the specific phenomenon and its mutual subjects as suggested by Silverman (2018). In doing so, the snowball technique was also used starting with the help of the Mersing District Council. Potential informants were contacted and screened for criteria conformity before the data collection proceeded. The data saturation point was met at the twenty-first informant with a total of fourteen (14) informants who were interviewed face-to-face and seven (7) in a focus group discussion.

## DATA COLLECTION

The main data for this study was gained from face-to-face interviews between the researchers (two lecturers from a local university) and each of the informants who are experts in traditional Malay *kuih*. The rapport between the two was built prior to data collection as it helps in gaining the informants' trust and their openness to share their experiences in the production of traditional Malay *kuih*. The researchers first approached them by being friendly and casual, displaying utmost respect and acknowledgment for their seniority and the elderly age group. The researchers were very mindful not to appear intimidating as this could intimidate and restrict the informants' willingness to share information. The interviews were conducted at each of the informant's houses or production kitchens in a relaxed environment to make the informant feel comfortable to share their experiences. Each interview session took an average of an hour to an hour and thirty minutes.

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness within the qualitative study concerns the aptness of the findings in comparison to the crude data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study performed data triangulation in which the FGD data was used to support the main data from in-depth face-to-face interviews. It is worth mentioning that the FGD also took the Malay *kuih* consumers' side in order to compare and verify the data from the Malay *kuih* experts. Besides that, peer reviews involved all the research committees doing constant checks and discussions after each step of data collection and analysis to avoid steering away from the research question. Another strategy to ensure trustworthiness was through member checking. The transcribed interviews were verified by the respective informants for accuracy before they were analysed. Each of the transcripts included a form enlisting details such as comments, names, and signatures

of the informants to read through the transcripts and verified during a second meeting with the informants. Lastly, the audit trail was also employed to ensure careful and strict steps within the research processes are documented. This was to facilitate the researchers to take steps back at the processes where revisions and re-evaluation might be needed to ensure an accurate trajectory between data collection, analysis, and trustworthy findings. The strategies used in this study adhered to the recommendations made by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Neuman (2002), Seidman (2006), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Creswell and Poth (2018) to ensure the accurateness of narrated experiences from the interview sessions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study is a phenomenological study with the discipline of Transcendental Phenomenology. The data and findings of this study are reflective of the actual phenomenon in the study and interpretations. The main ethical conduct that the researchers practiced throughout the study was *epoche*, which is to refrain from injecting personal views or past ideas and connotations into the data set. Throughout the length of the study, interactions were apparent between the researchers and the informants as reported by Fraenkel et. al. (2016) and Creswell and Poth (2018). The informants were made aware and understood of the study content, intent, and other possible risks by attaining their consent to participate and being open to sharing their experiences (Silverman, 2013). Accordingly, a consent letter was designed containing the details of the study and assurance of confidentiality to the informants' personal information as suggested by Fraenkel et al. (2016). Within the data reports, pseudonyms are used to conceal the identity of each informant (Creswell, 2013).

For triangulation purposes, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was also conducted between the researchers and the loyal consumers of traditional Malay *kuih*. It was held at a local hotel's meeting room to accommodate seven informants at once. Both the face-to-face interviews as well as the FGD sessions were guided by two sets of interview protocols which were designed and semi-structured for each group of informants; the Malay *kuih* experts and the consumers. All the interview sessions were recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Once the interviews have been transcribed, thematic analysis was done aided by the NVivo 10 software for systematic data management and analysis. In the thematic analysis, the constant comparative technique was performed to extract the breadth of codes from narrated experiences. Similar cues between informants were grouped together to make up codes, which were then grouped into categories before being grouped into themes to elucidate findings for the study question. The analytical process was done inductively.

## **FINDINGS and DISCUSSION**

### **Informant Profiles**

This study involved a total of twenty-one (21) informants who were divided into two groups: Fourteen (14) traditional Malay *kuih* experts for in-depth face-to-face interviews, and seven (7) loyal consumers for FGD sessions. Informants came from different expertise and backgrounds as shown in Table 1. The fourteen (14) informants are the locally known experts of traditional Malay *kuih* ranging from eleven (11) to fifty-two (52) years of experience in the making of traditional Malay *kuih*. Out of this cohort of fourteen (14), ten (10) were full-time experts of traditional Malay *kuih* producers while four (4) of them only produce the Malay *kuih* occasionally.

These Malay *kuih* expert makers were identified by approaching the Mersing District Council after an event organised by the government involved the serving of traditional Malay *kuih*. Upon obtaining some of the contact details, the experts were contacted through telephone calls as well as Whatsapp messaging applications to initiate the agreement of participation. Getting the trust and confidence of the experts was also aided with the help of the locally recognised personnel from the Mersing District Council. This then led to more experts being identified through snowballing technique

The seven (7) informants from the group of loyal consumers of traditional Malay *kuih* were entirely identified by the Malay *kuih* expert makers themselves as they were the ones who knew their own. While years of experience in producing traditional Malay *kuih* is important to determine the experts' eligibility for data collection, the loyal consumers were weighed enough for their constant repurchases of the traditional Malay *kuih* from these experts. Pseudonyms were given to each of the informants to protect their identity and ensure security.

**Table 1: Informant Profiles**

<b>Experts of traditional Malay <i>kuih</i></b>			
<b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Notes</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Current Occupation</b>
Ex 1	Expert for <i>kuih pepudak</i>	11	Restaurant Waitress
Ex 2	Expert for various <i>kuih</i>	30	Full time <i>kuih</i> entrepreneur
Ex 3	Expert of various <i>kuih</i>	40	Restaurateur
Ex 4	Expert for <i>kuih jemput pisang</i>	21	Cleaner
Ex 5	Expert for <i>kuih pulut panggang</i>	52	Housewife/Retiree
Ex 6	Expert for <i>kuih Melayu pulau</i>	12	Full time <i>kuih</i> entrepreneur
Ex 7	Expert for <i>kuih asam gumpal</i>	15	Full time <i>kuih</i> entrepreneur
Ex 8	Expert of various <i>kuih talam</i>	34	Caterer
Ex 9	Expert of <i>kuih roti jala</i>	44	Housewife/Retiree
Ex 10	Expert of various <i>kuih</i>	14	Full time <i>kuih</i> entrepreneur
Ex 11	Expert of <i>satar</i>	15	School teacher
Ex 12	Expert for various <i>kuih</i>	14	Full time <i>kuih</i> entrepreneur
Ex 13	Expert for <i>kuih bahulu bakar sabut</i>	14	Full time <i>kuih</i> entrepreneur
Ex 14	Expert for <i>kuih bakar pandan</i>	12	Full time <i>kuih</i> entrepreneur
<b>Loyal Consumers of Traditional Malay <i>kuih</i></b>			
<b>Informants</b>	<b>Current Occupation</b>	<b>Notes</b>	
Con 1	Housewife	Local of Mersing	
Con 2	Housewife	Local of Mersing	
Con 3	Housewife	Migrated to Mersing for 20 years	
Con 4	Housewife	Migrated to Mersing for 6 years	
Con 5	Government Servant	Local of Mersing	
Con 6	Private Sector	Work in hospitality industry in Melaka	
Con 7	Housewife	Local of Mersing	

## RESULTS

### How can the traditional quality of Malay *kuih* be reproduced in current practice?

From the analysis, four themes emerged conferring the means or protocols practised in the production of traditional quality Malay *kuih*. They are: (1) using conventional Malay cooking techniques, (2) controlling ingredient substitutions in original recipes, (3) controlling technical enhancement in production, and (4) retaining the common flavour of the traditional Malay *kuih*. Figure 1 illustrates the findings of this study of the themes and individual categories.

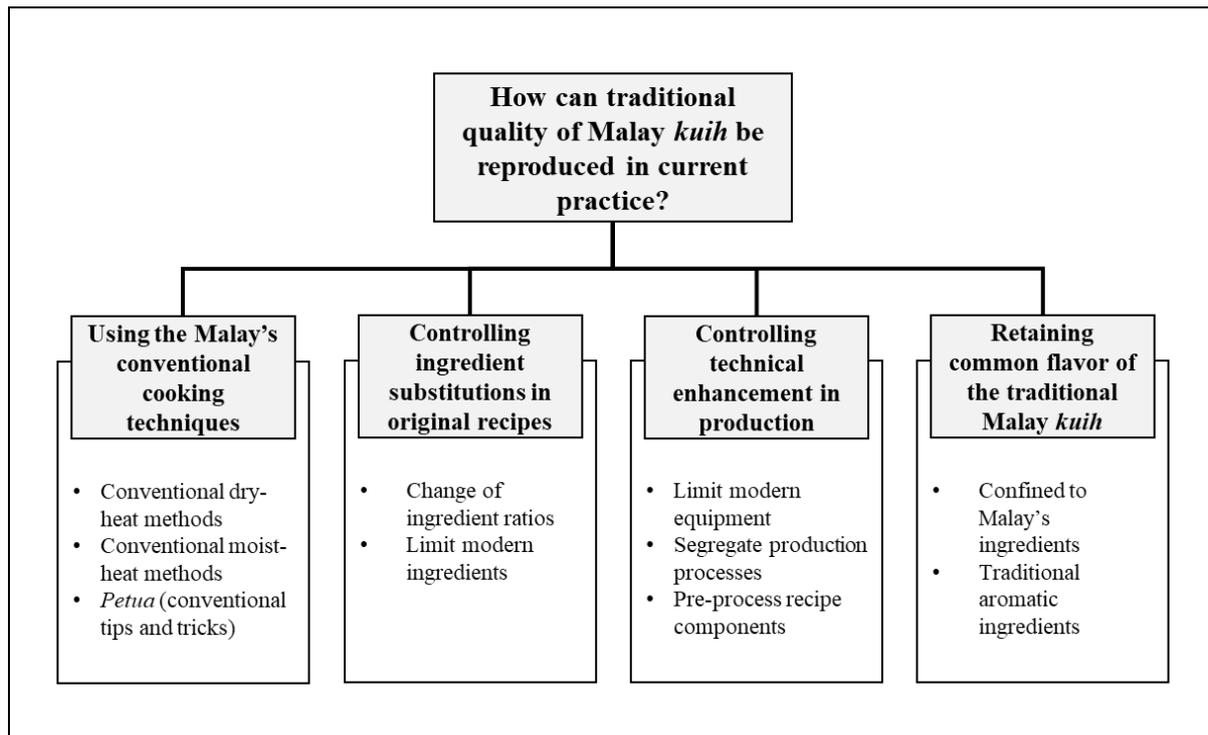


Figure 1: Themes and respective categories

**Theme 1: Using Malay’s conventional cooking techniques**

The result from this study revealed a pattern in which the informants deduced the usage of conventional Malay cooking methods. Within the conventional cooking methods, there are dry and moist cooking method instances repetitively mentioned across all informants. Deep-frying and baking are amongst the most mentioned dry-cooking methods in interviews. *Kuih penderam* (deep-fried rice flour and jaggery powder rings) and *pau goreng* (deep-fried spicy fish-filled bread) are some of the *kuih* varieties that use the deep-frying cooking method. On the other hand, *kuih bakar pandan* (dense-textured *pandan*-flavoured cake) was mentioned to be using the baking method. However, the technique of baking the *kuih bakar pandan* did not benefit from the use of an oven. In fact, the traditional method of using coconut husk as a heating element on the lid of *acuan* (*kuih bakar* mould) while using a gas stove on the bottom, was used. Accordingly, two informants deduced:

*“I make ‘kuih bakar pandan’ applying traditional baking cooking method, where the baking process using coconut husk instead of using gas oven. The traditional ‘kuih penderam’ is cooked using deep frying cooking method”*. Ex 14

*“I don’t make a lot of types of kuih ... like ‘pau roti naik’, it’s coconut filled ... there’ll be plain ones too (no filling). Then there is ‘pau goreng’, fish filled ... because nobody does it with fish filling here ... roti naik we bake with coconut husk ... if it’s pau, we deep-fry them, but the filling ... is fish”*. Ex 6

Other dry-cooking methods were also found in the analysis like frying, dry-roasting, and grilling. This is consistent with a study conducted by Zakaria (2019) that elucidated the same conventional cooking methods that are synonymous with the Malays. However, the variety of traditional Malay *kuih* that uses these methods is suggestively drier in texture. Given the fact that the traditional Malay *kuih* is diverse in terms of its variety, the moist-cooking methods were analysed to be prevalent as well. The interesting findings with the moist-cooking methods were, the informants mentioned the use of interchangeable techniques of both steaming and boiling. Although slight differences in the end product may be accounted to alternative techniques used, both techniques are practised for a certain variety of traditional Malay *kuih*. Two informants explained:

*“I make ‘pepudak’ with coconut milk, sugar, salt ... but few people make it in different way ... they mix the mixture (on heat source) ... until it is thickened. Then only they wrap it in banana l*

leaf. Yeah! ... there are two ways, as far as I know that is ... not that I know if there are any other way. The liquid batter is the traditional way though ... (and it should be) boiled ... some people would steam! But that is the thickened-batter way! After wrapping, then they'll steam." Ex 1

"... I boil my 'kuih' ... like this ('kuih asam gumpal'), it is boiled ... there are two methods; it can be steamed, it can be boiled ... If it is steamed it will get flattened and not round ... when the steam rises, the kuih flattens. If it is boiled ...when the water is running boil, I put the kuih in ... it'll be suspended and keeps its round shape ... meaning that the roundness form isn't changing ..." Ex 12

Moist-cooking methods in general are common to the Malays since the old times (Sharif, et. al., 2016, Musa, 2019). The persistence of using the common technique of boiling and steaming by the informants was to make sure of the accuracy and quality of the traditional Malay *kuih* reproduction. Additionally, the informants mentioned that they use conventional tools and equipment like stoves, pots, and colanders, and they avoided modern electronic steamers or specific boilers to make traditional Malay *kuih*.

Besides the conventional cooking methods, the continuous practice of the Malay's *petua* in the production of traditional Malay *kuih* was analysed to be important in practice. *Petua* means the tips and tricks in traditional Malay kitchens that ensure success in preparing food. The skill to make traditional Malay *kuih*'s wrappers or moulds from banana or coconut leaves can be meticulous yet essential for certain varieties like *kuih pepudak* (boiled cylindrical wheat and rice flour logs). As the traditional way of making the *kuih pepudak* is dealing with runny batter, the mould to contain the batter before boiling should ensure a secure enclosure to avoid spillages. This is further explained as follows:

"... people are not able to make it ... it's ... it's ... the problem with 'pepudak' s actually on the leaves (mould). Try to do it, you'll fail ... Yes! The ingredient is rice flour, but the batter is runny ... so when the leaves are formed wrong, it'll leak ... we pour it in, and it'll leak out ... Because a lot have asked for recipe. I gave them but ... I showed the method ... forming the leaves but still ... they can't make it ... lots have tried it ..." Ex 1

Another example of Malay *petua* was highlighted by another informant who pre-prepare his wheat flour by sun-drying it before use. *Kuih bahulu* (small-sized sponge cakes) is promised to have a softer and lighter texture if the flour is sun-dried prior to production.

"... So, if we want soft and lighter bahulu, we should dry the (wheat) flour first! ... if not, the bahulu will be heavy! I don't use any machine to dry the flour, just the sun! it's free! I just spread the flour in large baking pan ... and just lay it in the sun. from time to time, I fluff the flour around to ensure thorough drying." Ex 13

Synonymous with any traditional food, traditional Malay *kuih* has established specific methods and techniques in its production (Hamzah et. al., 2015; Sharif et al., 2013). According to Sharif et al. (2013), the more traditional methods are used, the more traditional values will be reproduced in the Malay *kuih*. The determination of the informants to persist in using these methods shows the dedication of the Malays to their crafts.

## Theme 2: Controlling ingredient substitutions in original recipes

Besides the cooking methods, traditional Malay *kuih* is bounded to the use of its traditional ingredients to ensure quality as well as traditional reproduction. However, the ratio of ingredients within original recipes is subject to the maker's personal expectations. Tried and adjusted recipes were found to be practised across all informants although no inclusion of other ingredients other than the ones found in a Malay kitchen. From getting to the right seasoning to perfecting the balance of flavour, the use of traditional ingredients is not changed. Two informants stated:

"... hmmm ... I need to keep an eye for the taste ... meaning that ... to maintain the taste, we need to try ... try ... and try! ... meaning to say, for example ... we make satar for 10 kilos ... I put in 300 grams of salt ... for example ... we taste it ... if it is way too salty then we reduce the salt. So, when we achieve to a perfect tasting ... we just follow! Follow the measurement ... so then we will maintain ... we got to have R&D ..." Ex 11

"It ('otak-otak') uses 'kerisik' (blended dry-fried desiccated coconut), ginger, galangal ... lemongrass, chilies ... next is the spices ... curry spice mix is fine, Adabi's curry spice mix. But I use extensively

*Adabi's curry spice mix ... then just mix all ... but I don't make it like how my mother-in-law does ... in making otak-otak, she uses less kerisik ... I use more ... so, it's different with mine ...*  
Ex 5

In the discussion of getting the balance of flavour through ratio enhancements, the production of traditional Malay *kuih* is also supported by the use of modern ingredients. Although it is debatable whether to keep the value of traditions in the Malay *kuih*, the precision in the selection of modern ingredients is also suggested. From a well-known brand to pre-prepared ingredients were suggested to be used for ingredients. Two informants explained:

*"Traditional Malay kuih is actually a lot of them ... satar ... pulut panggang ... kuih bakar ... ha ... kuih bakar actually ... according to its pure traditional recipe ... the batter is mixed with coconut cream ... thick coconut cream ... not really thin coconut milk ... if it ever needs to use packed coconut cream ... even if it's for convenience, KARA brand is the best ..."* Ex 11

*"... like 'kuih putu kacang' (mung bean cookies) ... long ago people would pre-prepare the (mung) beans ... they mill the beans themselves ... they first dry roast the mung beans ... then grind them ... but now, we don't even have the machine! should we want to do that, ... so, we just buy the already prepared one. But if we acquired the prepared powder, we first need to dry-roast the powder so that the aroma blooms! If not, then it'll be smelling like just regular flour ..."* Ex 8

Changes or innovations in traditional Malay *kuih* may suggest deviation from the values of traditional. This is true should the product itself tastes, looks, and smells different from the original version. As this study revealed, there were only limited changes being posed to the production, which was with the intention of enhancement from original recipes. Given the fact that there was no one official recipe for each variety of the traditional Malay *kuih*, adjustments within limits helped in making the traditional delicacies substantial in their traditions to survive the globalization in the food market and diet (Ahmad, 2019; Kühne et. al., 2010; Lefebvre et. al., 2015).

### **Theme 3: Controlling technical enhancement in production**

Besides the formulation enhancement in ingredient ratios and substitution, the traditional Malay *kuih* itself improved in terms of its practicality in production. However, the inclusion of modern machinery is equally controlled as the ingredients. The use of a standing mixer for example helped in mixing *kuih bahulu* batter in larger batches to fulfill customers' demands. Although traditionally the ingredients in the original recipe would be whipped together manually, the mixer helped in conserving time and energy to the production while at the same time improving the quality.

*"... this (referring to traditional wire whip for whipping up kuih bahulu batter) but it can be changed! ... nowadays we can use the electric powered mixer! even softer, the modern one. Because manual hand whipping can take too long ... out of exhaustion, we would take breaks. If it is electric powered, no breaks as long as the power is turned on ... let it whip away for as long ... the old way is too time consuming. If we are using electric mixer, it'll be soft inside out."* Ex 12

Another informant expressed the same attitude towards improving practicality in the traditional Malay *kuih* production with a non-destructive innovation. The change of technique in making *kuih seri muka* for example was mentioned to be better in terms of a fool-proof technique. Determining the uncertain outcome of the old technique, one informant stated that the newly improved technique did help in better production processes as well as promising better quality *kuih seri muka*.

*"Okay ... take 'kuih talam' for example ... 'seri muka'! ... okay! ... the process of making it, according to the olden time, the top mixture is not double-boiled ... meaning to say that it was not heated to thicken! ... that was before! But the new way ... we need to heat the mixture through by using double-boiling technique ... then pour the (slightly) thickened mixture onto the prepared bed of cooked glutinous rice and then steaming it. But to compare the taste, the new technique of making ensures better result. Using the old way ... it can be tough, and if we try to make it softer ... it can go even mushier!"* Ex 2

In the words of Guerrero et al. (2012), traditional food holds its relevance in benefiting the modern and improved technicality in its production to ensure its sustainability. This is evident in the findings that this study revealed the inclusion of machinery of having practical production and quality products at the end. As the traditional Malay

*kuih* is known as tedious and elaborative in its production, the use of modern technology within these reasons offers positive hopes for survival moving along the globalisation.

#### **Theme 4: Retaining common flavor of the traditional Malay *kuih***

The flavour makes up the most important feature of good food in general, thus traditional Malay *kuih* in Mersing stressed the accuracy of flavour in the production. Similar to the ingredient substitution, the use of ingredients within the production of traditional Malay *kuih* was further analysed to be restricted to the common and traditional ingredients there are in the traditional Malay kitchen. In fact, one informant admitted that the use of chicken eggs in her *kuih bahulu* was a substitution for the old recipe that calls for duck eggs instead. He added that with the use of duck eggs, the end product would have crispy crusts that last for two to three days. That, according to this informant, is supposedly how true traditional *kuih bahulu* should be. But, due to scarcity and cost, alternate chicken eggs are more accessible.

“... if there are duck eggs, I mixed them in ... if there are none ...then chicken eggs it'll be ... but the difference is that we have accustomed to the use of chicken eggs. The difference if we combine the chicken eggs and duck eggs, the crust will be different ... store it for two to three days and the crust will be brittle and crumbly ... if it's just chicken eggs, store it for sometimes and nothing will change like the other ... there are people producing duck eggs, but they wouldn't sell to us because they'll be making them into salted eggs ... the price would be 50 to 60 cents per egg, slightly higher than the chicken eggs ...” Ex 13

In another example, ingredients like *tapai nasi* (fermented rice) are synonymous with the making of *apam beras* (individual-portioned steamed rice sponge). However, this ingredient can be substituted with *tapai ubi* (fermented tapioca) instead. It is claimed to be equally effective in the production of *apam beras*, where both ingredients are traditional and common in Malay cooking ingredients.

“*Actually, the version of apam beras now as compared to the olden version, they are not the same ... even the flavor is different. Now ... we can use ...tapai ubi to make apam beras! Use tapai ubi ... it worked, it gives the burst crack on top, but the flavour isn't the same with the one made from ragi and also ... rice ...*” Ex 2

Despite changes in the production of traditional Malay *kuih*, data findings from this study revealed that the end products are of similar flavour as the originals. Flavour denotes the mouthfeel that encapsulates all four human senses from taste, sight, smell, and sound. It also includes the fact that the traditional Malay *kuih* produced is familiar to the Malays. In certain varieties of traditional Malay *kuih* like the *pulut panggang*, the use of fresh and natural ingredients is deemed to be important to get the right flavour. As coconut is known as one of the essential ingredients in the Malay kitchen, the use of freshly squeezed coconut cream is essential in producing a *pulut panggang* that is creamy in aroma, taste, and texture.

“*The special thing about Mersing? ... I give an example of pulut panggang ... easy ... the specialty about it is the glutinous rice used ... got to use fresh coconut (cream) for its pure flavor ... the creaminess, right? ... but if we use the packed coconut cream, how do I say this ... it's thin ... meaning to say it is not creamy ...*” Ex 4

Another aspect of common Malay flavours is the aromatic ingredients used. The pandan leaf is a staple ingredient in most sweet-tasting traditional Malay *kuih* varieties. The use of pandan leaves imparts a familiar aroma to the Malays thus deemed to be an essential aspect of traditional Malay *kuih*. An informant shared that besides the aroma of pandan, she also insists on using coconut husk as to bake her *kuih bakar pandan*. The smoke that the coconut husk creates infused in the *kuih bakar pandan* enhances the traditional flavour of the *kuih*.

“... there's another example, the 'kuih bakar pandan' ... we need to prepare the pandan juice ... the leaves needed to be blended with water and then strained out the pulp ... then it is mixed with wheat flour and bake using coconut husk coals ... traditionally ... that smokey aroma makes it fragrant ...” Ex 3

The individuality and uniqueness of the Malays are portrayed in their traditional food which inevitably suggests the use of common ingredients. Given the fact that the traditional Malay *kuih* in itself is a range of varying varieties, each variety may evoke a sense of nostalgia as the familiar flavour is to be reproduced accordingly in current production. This is equally considered a quality of the traditional Malay *kuih* (Mohammad & Chan, 2011).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the protocols within the current practice of producing traditional Malay *kuih* with its intrinsic traditional values. It reflected the effort of keeping the traditional Malay *kuih* relevant in the current era and adapted to modernization in a controlled manner. The study showed that most of the informants tried to keep as many traditional practices while incorporating new machinery and technique into the production, which in turn helped in effectively reproducing quality products of its traditions while being practical in the processes. Nonetheless, the efforts put in by the traditional Malay *kuih* experts proved to be effective in terms of keeping the traditional Malay *kuih* products viable and relevant in the current time, thus sustained to the next generation.

Thus, this study offers valuable findings not only to the local district or state government agencies but also to related organisations that can benefit from the documentation of efforts instilling traditional values within the traditional Malay *kuih*. The synergy of controlled innovations within means to keep the values of tradition intact in the production showed an effective effort in preserving the production of traditional Malay *kuih*. This merits the recognition and the worth of unique traditional Malay delicacies. The findings of this study also outlined the practical inputs that can be included in the production strategy of entrepreneurs or producers of traditional food. This will further help in echoing the force of multiplying the production of traditional Malay *kuih* to revive its importance in consumption and heritage preservation. Consequently, this will heighten the viability of traditional Malay *kuih* as an asset to the nation portraying precise images and pleasures for tourists.

In terms of the body of knowledge, this study contributes insights and rediscovering of traditional Malay *kuih* of its current practice that is still considered the traditional quality. The negligence over practice and reproduction of traditional Malay *kuih* is now frequently reported which is feared to come to its demise should it be taken lightly. People nowadays are moving forward abreast of technological advances, so the old ways of preparing traditional Malay *kuih* may be deemed as tedious and irrelevant to be practised. Controlled innovation can adapt the technologies in synergy with the traditional ways of making traditional Malay *kuih*, thus, staying abreast through time while having the traditional values intact including the memories, traditions, and cultures (Muhammad et. al., 2013).

This current study took an in-depth insight into the current practice of traditional Malay *kuih* production. Despite this study's valuable findings, this study lacks generalizability which is benign to the qualitative research methodology. The findings are bounded to the setting alone and do not represent to population. Accordingly, this study limits its findings to a phenomenon rather than to the subject of the study.

Within the practice, protocols were taken into account in ensuring traditional values are still reproduced and represented by the end products. This proved that the traditional Malay *kuih* is still viable in demand as this study revealed, that continuous productions were generated by demand. Future studies can look more into the other side of the spectrum which is the consumers. Perceptions of the traditional Malay *kuih* and willingness towards consumption are worth to be explored in in-depth to understand the phenomenon of loyal consumption. In addition, the settings of future studies may be of different regions in Malaysia considering traditional food is also a region-specific diet. Suggestively, this will eventually ensure a thorough exploration of traditional Malay *kuih* throughout Malaysia.

### Authors' Contributions

All authors have responsibly contributed to the idea, draft, construction, and the materialization of this manuscript. All authors have reviewed and unanimously agreed on the final manuscript.

## STATEMENT OF DECLARATION

All data and materials are used in accordance with the guideline of the Heritage & Society as listed in the reference section. Images are owned and provided by the authors. The authors also confirm that the data used in this manuscript are available both in the article and its supplementary materials.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors acknowledge Universiti Putra Malaysia for the encouragement and consent to engage in studies relating to food heritage. This work was a partial section of a study project supported by the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia funded by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS/1/2020/WAB12/UPM/02/1), Project Code: 07-01-20-2334FR.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this manuscript declared no conflicts of interest.

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