



**DISINTERRING THE MOVEMENT OF TRADITIONAL MALAY *KUIH* IN
MERSING, JOHOR TOWARDS VIABILITY OF MALAYSIA'S HERITAGE
FOOD**

By

MOHD YUSOF BIN KAMARUZAMAN

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
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Doctor of Philosophy**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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December 2022

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Food is an important and distinct heritage to different communities. Especially to Malaysia, its multiethnicity population bestowed with dynamic food heritage. The traditional Malay kuih for example, offers tremendous flavors, textures, and colors. Yet, numerous reports on its negligence in the local diet is increasing due to the globalization, standardization, and commodification of foreign influence in local heritage food. Despite that, this study aimed to explore the movement of traditional Malay kuih in Mersing, Johor for its persistent existence conferring viability. Accordingly, the understanding of this phenomenon guided with four research questions: 1) what is the meaning of traditional Malay kuih in Mersing?; 2) how does traditional Malay kuih produced in Mersing?; 3) how motivations affect to the production of traditional Malay kuih?; and 4) how can traditional Malay kuih be a viable intangible heritage in Mersing?

Qualitative research method with phenomenological case study approach was used as the study design. The traditional food product concept, Vroom's expectancy theory and transactional communication model assemblage theorized the phenomenon. The primary data were gathered from in-depth interviews with experts of traditional Malay kuih in Mersing and supplementary data from focus group discussion (FGD) with the consumers also included. Data saturation point was achieved by the 21st informant. Audio-visual materials, participant observations, and document analysis were used for multiple triangulation strategies. Thematic analysis was performed with constant comparative technique to generate themes as answers to the research questions. Accordingly, the meaning of traditional Malay kuih in Mersing is analyzed to be construed by three characteristics namely: 1) the use of local

crops as main ingredients; 2) major inculturation of East Coast traditions in product offerings; and 3) the mix of traditions from complex sub-ethnicities of Malay. Etiquettes of production are applied in the making of traditional Malay kuih including: 1) practicing the traditional Malay cooking methods; 2) enhancing traditional recipes' formulation; 3) attuning affective technicality in the production; 4) optimizing attentiveness in clean production; and 5) maintaining the traditional Malay flavor. As the essence of the phenomenon, the structural meaning of traditional Malay kuih movement revealed motivational construction built upon: 1) receiving external supports for production; 2) admitting to the responsibility to preserve traditions; 3) committing to the sustenance of traditions; 4) utilizing potential business opportunities; and 5) attaining personal actualization. Lastly, the actual practices of the movement towards viability are normalized by: 1) strengthening the knowledge of traditional Malay kuih; 2) organizing kuih production systematically; 3) developing signature menu; 4) expanding business channels; and 5) strengthening mutual networking.

This study revealed and documented an in-depth comprehension to the phenomenon of the traditional Malay kuih viability in Mersing as one of the Malay cultures and traditions in Malaysia's food heritage. The affiliated transactional communication model with traditional food product concept and Vroom's expectancy theory extended their uses within the heritage food viability context. It can help boosting the persistence of traditional Malay kuih production where entrepreneurs can benefit the movement that this research revealed. The persistent existence of the traditional Malay kuih equates to its viability which confers to sustainability. Aside all, the viability framework developed can also be used in similar subjects where viability is an issue towards sustaining the existence.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PENEROKAAN GERAK AKTIVITI KUIH TRADISIONAL MELAYU DI
MERSING, JOHOR DALAM MENDAYA MAJUKAN MAKANAN WARISAN
MALAYSIA**

Oleh

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Makanan adalah warisan penting dan tersendiri mengikut komuniti tertentu. Istimewanya kepada Malaysia, status kepelbagaian etniknya membuahakan warisan makanan yang dinamik. Kuih tradisional Melayu sebagai contoh, menyajikan pelbagai rasa, tekstur dan warna untuk dinikmati. Akan tetapi, ianya makin kerap dilaporkan akan pengabaianannya. Dengan itu, tujuan penyelidikan ini adalah untuk meneroka gerak aktiviti kuih tradisional Melayu di Mersing, Johor, kerana ia dilihat berdaya maju melalui penghasilannya yang berterusan. Untuk mendalami pemahaman terhadap fenomena tersebut, empat persoalan penyelidikan diwujudkan sebagai panduan kepada penyelidikan ini iaitu: 1) apakah maksud kuih tradisional Melayu di Mersing?; 2) bagaimanakah kuih tradisional Melayu di Mersing dihasilkan?; 3) bagaimanakah motivasi mempengaruhi kepada produksi kuih tradisional Melayu?; dan 4) bagaimanakah kuih tradisional Melayu boleh berdaya maju sebagai warisan tidak ketara di Mersing?

Kaedah penyelidikan kualitatif dengan pendekatan kajian kes fenomenologi digunakan sebagai reka bentuk penyelidikan ini. *Traditional food product concept*, *Vroom's expectancy theory* dan *transactional communication model* digunakan sebagai teori untuk merungkai fenomena yang diselidik. Data primer diperoleh dari temu bual mendalam dengan pakar kuih tradisional Melayu di Mersing dan data tambahan daripada pengguna melalui perbincangan kumpulan berfokus juga disertakan. Titik ketepuan data dicapai pada informan ke-21. Bahan audio-visual, pemerhatian turut serta, dan analisis dokumen digunakan sebagai triangulasi. Analisis tematik dijalankan dengan teknik *constant comparative* untuk menjana tema-tema sebagai jawapan kepada persoalan penyelidikan. Lantas, hasil analisis untuk maksud kepada kuih

tradisional Melayu di Mersing mendapatkan tiga ciri iaitu; 1) penggunaan hasil pertanian tempatan sebagai bahan utama; 2) pembudayaan majoriti oleh tradisi pantai timur dalam produk dan 3) percampuran tradisi dari subetnik Melayu. Etika produksi pula dipraktikkan dalam penghasilan kuih tradisional Melayu seperti: 1) menggunakan kaedah memasak tradisional Melayu; 2) menambahbaik formulasi resipi tradisional; 3) menyesuaikan teknikaliti yang afektif dalam produksi; 4) mengoptimumkan perhatian terhadap produksi yang bersih; dan 5) mengekalkan rasa tradisional Melayu. Sebagai inti pati fenomena yang di selidik, maksud struktural kepada gerak aktiviti kuih tradisional Melayu di Mersing adalah dipandu oleh motivasi dengan: 1) menerima sokongan produksi dari luar; 2) memperakui tanggungjawab memelihara tradisi; 3) mempraktik usaha mengekalkan tradisi; 4) memanfaatkan peluang perniagaan; dan 5) mencapai aktualisasi diri. Akhirnya, amalan gerak aktiviti untuk daya maju dipraktikkan dengan: 1) menguatkan pengetahuan tentang kuih tradisional Melayu; 2) menyusun produksi kuih secara sistematik; 3) membangunkan menu tersendiri; 4) mempelbagaikan saluran perniagaan; dan 5) menguatkan jaringan perniagaan yang mesra.

Penyelidikan ini bukan sahaja mendedahkan, malah mendokumenkan kefahaman mendalam tentang fenomena daya maju kuih tradisional Melayu di Mersing kerana ianya adalah salah satu budaya dan tradisi Melayu dalam warisan Malaysia. Gabungan *transactional communication model*, *traditional food product concept*, dan *Vroom's expectancy theory* mengembangkan lagi penggunaannya ke dalam konteks daya maju makanan warisan. Ianya dapat memangkin kepada produksi berterusan kuih tradisional Melayu di mana pengusaha dapat memanfaatkan gerak aktiviti seperti yang didedahkan oleh penyelidikan ini. Produksi kuih tradisional Melayu yang berterusan adalah ditakrif sebagai wujudnya daya maju yang juga akan membawa kepada kelestarian. Selain dari itu, kerangka daya maju yang dibangunkan dari penyelidikan ini dapat digunakan untuk subjek yang setaraf dimana fenomena daya maju yang menuju kepada kelestarian dijadikan isu penyelidikan.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the backbone of this research, aiming to disinter and explore the movement of traditional Malay kuih production and its consumption regarding its viability. Sub-sections of this chapter discuss the background of the research, research problem, problem statement, research questions, and the corresponding objectives. Although research objectives are not traditionally given rigid submission in qualitative research, they are included for a general perspective. Other sub-sections include the significance of the research, research scope and limitation, and the definition of the terms used throughout the research.

1.2 Background of Research

Heritage is the essence of the past that can be both tangible (buildings, artifacts, monuments, and such) and intangible (knowledge, social norms, beliefs, and such), inherited continuously from one generation to another (Kim, 2014). Timothy (2016) listed that heritage may be used for three purposes: (1) as an encouragement for the unity of a nation, (2) as an educational insight for foreigners, and (3) as an elusive history to cover up past unfortunate events. All three purposes are vital in identifying and distinguishing one community from another. Mardatillah, Raharja, Hermanto, and Herawaty (2019) and Pflieger, Seifried, and Soebbing (2013) stated that heritage should be acknowledged and celebrated as the underlying essence of identity standards owned and practiced within an individual group of community. It must be preserved for as long as the particular community exists to celebrate the uniqueness of these identities (Timothy, 2016). Pflieger et al. (2013) highlighted that community itself should be internally realized and morally motivated to preserve the heritage. Through preservation, the continuity of self-identity and pride of one's origin is strengthened and secured and be confidently presented to the public with distinction.

The tourism industry has benefited from heritage antiquities due to the different specialties of each community, contributing to the nation's economy (Choe & Kim, 2018; Leong, Othman, Adzahan, & Karim, 2012). Moreover, identity is one of the most important features of any nation (Pflieger et al., 2013). Historical events in Malaysia bestowed the land with many influences and became a union rich in culture and heritage (Perry, 2017). This union imparts the Malaysian image as a proud multi-ethnicity nation (Jalis, Che, & Markwell, 2014). Furthermore, the geographical location of Malaysia offers a varying degree of distinct cultural regions. Kim and Ellis (2015) acknowledged the degrees of differences between regions in all instances of cultures and heritage. An

example of a prominent region in Malaysia would be the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, comprising the states of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang. Aside from Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu are the most apparent states continuously practicing traditional Malay cultures and traditions, hence named the “Cradle of Malay Cultures” (Hamzah, Karim, Othman, Hamzah, & Muhammad, 2015, p. 473). Although, according to history, the initiation of Malay civilization began in Melaka of the Peninsular Malaysia, the spread of the civilization went through across the land, and only Terengganu and Kelantan, to date, are acknowledged to persistently adopt the traditional Malay culture, custom, and heritage.

It is worth mentioning that history has also penned the migration of some of the people from Terengganu to the southern region of Peninsular Malaysia, namely Mersing district in the state of Johor (Heritagemalaysia, 2014). Ideally, these people have brought their culture from their place of origin. Yunus (2019) reported that the popular Terengganu’s *keropok lekor* (fish sausages) is also produced in Mersing and is getting more attention from the locals. This shows how heritage products possess the potential to represent the community as well as gain economic benefits. In this context, Timothy and Ron (2013) conferred heritage products as one of the catalysts for tourism activities. This is supported by a statistical increment done in research which found that consumers’ attention has gravitated toward heritage products by the progressive growth of demands and sales (Vanhonacker, Lengard, Hersleth, & Verbeke, 2010).

Deemed one of the many facets of heritage inherited, the topic of food is momentum in research. Som, Nordin, and Ghazali (2020, p. 377) acknowledged that heritage food is an “effective promotional and positioning tool for a destination.” Likewise, Timothy (2016, p. 1) implies that food is an “important part of cultural heritage,” making it one of the most connected axes to other cultural elements, including behavioral, material, and social or “cultural artefact” (Kim & Ellis, 2015, p. 152). Heritage food is inferred to initiate tourist arrivals, especially among food enthusiasts (Leong et al., 2012). it is always depicted in tourism commercials as initial feast for the eyes to bring forth local identities to foreigners (Mohammad & Chan, 2011). Correspondingly, Muhammad et al. (2016) and Stajcic (2013) mentioned that the utter uniqueness of heritage food acts as a powerful language to convey one’s identity to the rest and vice versa. Timothy (2016) argued that heritage foods have been through developments in the past and have been perfected to represent the distinct particularity of a community. After all, the history of the exploration of East Asia and the Mediterranean has long been written as initiators to gastronomic trades ranging from materials and knowledge (Timothy, 2016).

1.3 Background of Problem

Globalization has brought standardization and commodification of foods in varying degrees. This has caused compromised viability of traditional Malay foods by losing their uniqueness and competitiveness (Muhammad et al., 2013).

The food consumption pattern also greatly feeds the concern as the inevitable exposure of youths to urbanization causes reluctance in the consumption of traditional foods (Hamzah et al., 2015). However, this diet choice seems more prominent in the urban areas than the rural areas, considering that these areas are rarely exploited for industrialization (Muhammad et al., 2013; Zakariya, Kamarudin, & Harun, 2016).

The wide array of modern foods available may also be alternated with the traditional food to a worrying degree. A prominent phenomenon was revealed by Sukalakamala and Boyce (2007), who claimed that consumers are confused with the traditional values, and their distinction as alterations made by adapting the foreign cooking style had become more prevalent in traditional food making. Nonetheless, Omar et al. (2011) reported that consumers responded well to the newly innovated flavor of Malaysian classic keropok lekor. Despite being accepted as a favorable outcome, relevant and parallel to the current market demands, Aziz and Pawi (2016) contended that alterations to these foods also affected their traditional value, which can progressively be jeopardized over time. Moreover, they added that Malay cuisine generally struggles to position itself in the local market, subject to the unclear concept and lack of consumer appeal (Aziz & Pawi, 2016). This situation is feared to worsen soon when new generations cannot recognize Malay traditional food due to its lack of characteristic representation and availability.

Considering the circumstances, it is not surprising that the concern over the extinction of Malay's traditional foods has been discussed lately. Numerous reports in local media on such matters arose consistently from time to time, as mentioned by Dolhamid (2015) about the importance of preserving traditional delicacies through times. The author stressed the need for integrity and morals to preserve traditional delicacies to be relevant and viable in the future. Similarly, scholarly studies around Malay heritage food topics are increasing, discussing the undesirable impacts of globalization on Malay heritage foods (Ismail, Karim, Othman, & Halim, 2013; Lambden, Receveur, & Kuhnlein, 2007; Sharif, Nor, Rahman, & Abdullah, 2016; Zahari, Salleh, Sharif, Noor, & Ishak, 2013), struggles of heritage food survival through a persistent lifestyle change (Casini, Contini, Romano, & Scozzafava, 2015; Vanhonacker et al., 2010; Zahari et al., 2013), and the rife ignorance of the importance of heritage food sustainability (Hamzah et al., 2015; Zahari et al., 2013). While these studies orbit around the factual importance of looking into the matters and possible consequences due to ignorance, not many stressed asserting specific product dimensions. Additionally, a missing link is observed between the awareness, locals' diet, and the traditional Malay cuisine market.

To date, victimized dishes like *nasi lemak* (coconut milk rice with condiments) were once pointed out by Malaysia's celebrity chef, Chef Wan, like *nasi lemak telanjang* (naked nasi lemak) (Chan, 2014), signifying an incomplete set of nasi lemak of its condiments. Regardless of the publicized reasons for the incomplete condiments of the nasi lemak, the presentation of the traditional foods was unquestionably at stake. One should have foreseen such circumstances and be

ready for measures to fix it beforehand instead of creating excuses as the scene happened. On the other hand, apart from the desperate measures, creativity has altered certain foods to another level with easily and readily available over-the-shelf modern ingredients to as pre-mixes and convenient products (Mardatillah et al., 2019; Timothy, 2016). Now that modern ingredients are readily available, the sense of tradition may be at stake. Reported by Karim (2018), together with the scarcity of traditional ingredients, ignorance of the *petua* (Malay traditional cooking tips and tricks), the lack of practice and tedious preparations, traditional Malay food may be at the risk of extinction.

Zooming into the Malay heritage food offerings, one dish can be more prone to the said risk than another. However, the existence is perplexed by uncertain production and consumption. Despite the risk imparted to the Malay heritage food, Ahmad (2019) and Rosniyana, Hazila, Hashifah, Norin and Zain (2011) noted that there have been increasing demands for traditional homemade kuih in Malaysia. This implied that the demands promisingly suggest the viable potential of the traditional Malay kuih through production and consumption. However, even though there are numbers of registered businesses of rural expertise where traditional kuih is concerned, only a few entrepreneurs are dedicated to producing traditional kuih.

Figure 1.1 highlights the underwhelming number of traditional kuih businesses within selected rural areas in Malaysia. The discrepancy between limited availability and increased demands poses another threat to the traditions that suggestively impose industrialization of the traditional Malay kuih production. Ideally, industrialization strives for a larger output capacity to meet the surplus demands. This could then inevitably contradict the traditional preparation route that is acknowledged as tedious and time-consuming. Leman (2016) reported that a traditional Malay kuih entrepreneur, Mohamad Ezwan, agrees and defends that the traditional route to kuih production is essential to ensure quality traditional Malay kuih production. Arsad (2018) also reported that an entrepreneur in Johor contended that the kuih's traditional characteristics have brought success to her business and claimed the reason consumers keep coming back to her delicacies. On the other hand, industrialization is disciplined through efficiency and timely production as the general standard. This has often altered the original principles of traditional delicacies.

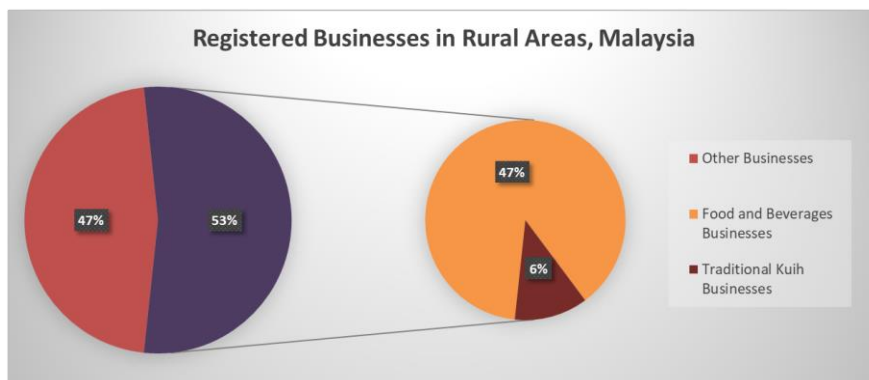


Figure 1.1 : Registered businesses in rural area, Malaysia
(Ministry of Rural Development, 2019)

1.4 Problem Statement

Traditional Malay kuih has long been in the diet of Malaysians. Nowadays, kuih generally denotes several delicacies sold by street food vendors, *pasar malam* (night market), and is always associated with less than luxury matters to Malaysians (Omar & Omar, 2018). Nonetheless, the potential of these delicacies is not limited to their norm concerning general consumption, vendors, and current status. Timothy (2016, p. 7) argued that “indigenous and peasant foods have long formed the foundations of modern-day gastronomy and haute cuisine.” This can infer that underneath the commonness of traditional Malay kuih lies a uniqueness that may elevate it to more than just common delicacies. The uniqueness in question allegedly exudes the identity of the colorful culture embedded within the nation (Hamzah et al., 2015; Mohammad & Chan, 2011). The array of variety is a feast for the eyes of foreigners to experience (Mohammad & Chan, 2011). Submitting the phrase “you are what you eat,” traditional Malay kuih conveys the Malay identity to others (Muhammad et al., 2016; Stajic, 2013).

Because of its multiethnicity and historical events, Malaysia holds abundant opportunities for explorations, and traditional Malay kuih is included indefinitely. It has been stated that separate regions within any country have standardized differences from each other (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). This multilayer of differences is mentioned by Mardatillah et al. (2019) as the growing interest in research in food heritage. Focusing on the region of Mersing, in the southern state of Peninsular Malaysia, Johor, the extent of traditional Malay kuih is astounding because the people of Mersing are known to historically originate from Terengganu (Majlis Daerah Mersing, 2019), situated on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. One can assume that the traditional Malay gastronomic expertise may have been brought along due to the claim of Terengganu as one of the Cradles of Malay Culture. Assuming that the origin stays embedded in these people, the practice of their traditional diets resumes to reminisce and

emotionally rejoin them to their former land (Ng, Karim, & Karim, 2016). Inevitable, the possible degree of assimilation of the migrating individuals to the new settings is expected, according to Muhammad et al. (2016). This further suggests forming a new food identity for the Mersing, apart from its former mainland, Terengganu. The availability of Mersing sources and mix of cultures from other sub-ethnicities of Malays also, imparts slight changes to the delicacies.

Despite the presumed assimilation, the negligence of this heritage is becoming more apparent these days Hamzah et al. (2015). An example is the alarm of more traditional Malay kuih on the verge of extinction (Dolhamid, 2015; Hasan, 2019). However, taking a step back, few documents could ascertain the existence, degree of changes and the breadth of traditional Malay kuih variety instilled or broadened to date. Scholarly articles on traditional Malay kuih are limited, mostly including the traditional Malay kuih in brief sentences or paragraphs under a broader topic of traditional food or heritage food writings. This implies a gap for academics to accurately define and elaborate on the term and the product itself. On top of that, some scholars may have summed different definitions of traditional Malay kuih as desserts, cakes, and *bubur* (sweet porridge or mud pudding-like desserts) (Daud, 2012; Ramli, Zahari, Halim, & Aris, 2016; Rosniyana et al., 2011; Rusli, Omar, & Noh, 2018; Shahar, Earland, & Rahman, 2000; Yoshino, 2010). With the plethora of definitions and assumptions of traditional Malay kuih, how can it be accurately defined to strict features or characteristics in Mersing?

Along with the definition of traditional Malay kuih, the advancement brought by globalization is no doubt affecting the movement of the said heritage. Although globalization has helped humans face everyday life in standardized, organized, and assisted ways (Nahar, Karim, Karim, Ghazali, & Krauss, 2018; Sharif, Nor, Zahari, & Muhammad, 2015), modernization led by globalization has always been reported imparting adverse effects to traditions (Mardatillah et al., 2019; Omar & Omar, 2018; Trichopoulou, 2012). The standardization brought over by globalization may have commoditized the traditional Malay kuih and, worse, led to its extinction (Ramli, Zahari, Suhaimi, & Talib, 2016). The common traditional Malay kuih that we see nowadays is most probably just a small portion of the great collection it was. Reiterating that Mersing has a historical evolution from a prominent Malay culture place of origin, not many documents exist to ascertain the survival of traditional Malay kuih in the said setting. Given the polar opposition debate on globalization and traditions, how has traditional Malay kuih production in Mersing been practiced in terms of its traditional value concerns?

Information sharing is also heightened in parallel to modernization and alongside technological advances. The spread of information across the globe reached an even faster pace and had become more interactive. Social media like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and more have become some of the referential bases, especially for youngsters (Hamzah et al., 2015). The diet of the locals has subsequently changed tremendously as the internet opened possibilities for locals to information about foreign gastronomies. Hence, the rapid growth of

international cuisine eateries (Akbaruddin, Zahari, Hadi, Suhaimi, & Ramli, 2018) as part of the positive growth rate of 36.3% in second quarter of 2022 and estimated to increase to 44.6% in the third quarter of the same year (Malaysia Retailers Association, 2022, as cited by Malaysia Retailer Chain Association, 2022). This is even more echoed by the overwhelming acceptance of the youngsters of foreign cuisine and the hybridized version is what Omar and Omar (2018, p. 3) coined as “glocalized” local food. The ease of eating out and the popularity of convenient domesticated food (Thomé-Ortiz, 2018) are of the utmost appreciation these days. Opposing to the modernized gastronomic experiences lured by the food trend in the market, how did motivation put upon the persistent production of the traditional Malay kuih in Mersing?

The constant availability of traditional Malay kuih through production and consumption leads to its relevance in the diet. This also confers to viability status within the ever-changing market and local diet. However, only an underwhelming number of traditional kuih entrepreneurs are registered in Mersing. In a recent report, the Mersing District Office (2019) enlisted only 14% of *dodol* and traditional kuih entrepreneurs registered businesses in the district of Mersing. The statistics evoke a weak force to sustain the production of the traditional Malay kuih (Figure 1.2). With the small number of *dodol* and traditional kuih entrepreneurs, the intention of The East Coast Economic Region Development Council (ECERDC) to promote traditional food products for Mersing (East Coast Economic Region Development Council, 2019b) is suggestively impaired.

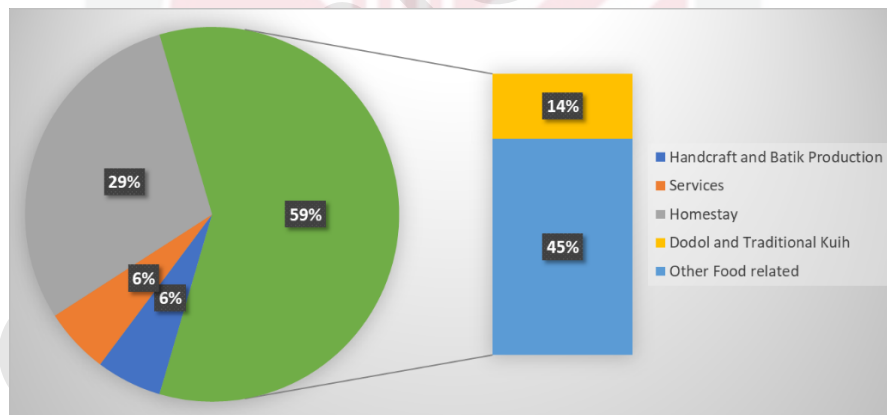


Figure 1.2 : Small Medium Enterprises categories in Mersing
(Mersing District Office, 2019)

Heritagemalaysia (2014) nominated Mersing as one of the underexposed heritage sites that deserve more attention. Thus, the potential of the traditional Malay kuih is abundant in Mersing, as observed by Yoshino (2010), who reported that such treasures exist in the rural and underexposed settings. It is worth mentioning that the expertise of the traditional Malay kuih making generally lies within the womenfolk of the community (Ahmad, Rahman, & Ismail,

2011; Ng et al., 2016), with the elderly as experts (Joe, Yoong, & Patel, 2013). They may be involved in the informal sector whereby micro-scale businesses of traditional Malay kuih are operationalized at a home-based scale and within the circle of friends (Ahmad et al., 2011). Nonetheless, Zainol, Mamun, Hassan, and Muniady (2017) and Ahmad et al. (2011) acknowledged that it is an essential sector for rural communities and the nation's economy. With the landscape of traditional Malay kuih production in Mersing, the extent of reach to consumers may have been hindered despite the best quality and rarity of available traditional Malay kuih. Acknowledging this and with the help of Transactional Communication Model, how can the movement of traditional Malay kuih evoke its viability in Mersing and thus preserved for future generations?

1.5 Research Objectives

As mentioned earlier, this research explores the viability of the traditional Malay kuih in Mersing. Thus, these objectives are to assist the set aim:

1. To define the meaning of traditional Malay kuih in a regional context in Mersing.
2. To explore the current practices in producing traditional Malay kuih in Mersing.
3. To determine the motivations exuding the production of traditional Malay kuih in Mersing.
4. To explore the efforts regarding the viability of traditional Malay kuih in the food market of Mersing.

1.6 Research Questions

In the pursuit of reaching the aims of this research and corresponding to the research objectives, the following research questions are constructed as the main guide:

1. What is the meaning of traditional Malay kuih in Mersing?
2. How do traditional Malay kuih produced in Mersing?
3. How do motivations affect the production of traditional Malay kuih?
4. How can traditional Malay kuih be a viable intangible heritage in Mersing?

1.7 Significance of Research

This research investigates the Malay heritage food of traditional Malay kuih in Mersing in the pursuit of ensuring its continuous production and understanding its viability. The experiences of experts supported by the consumers are believed to impulse the insights of what traditional Malay kuih is and build towards affective dissemination of sustainability importance. Furthermore, the expected continuity of traditional Malay kuih in the market will ensure its sustainability by pinning down its availability and variability. Consequently, traditional Malay kuih can also be marketed as a tourism product, bringing the Malay identity and ultimately Malaysia upfront to foreign tourists while promoting healthy economic growth in the nation.

Past studies have mostly revolved around the research of heritage food and general traditional food like the undesirable impacts of globalization on Malay heritage foods (Ismail et al., 2013; Lambden et al., 2007; Sharif et al., 2016; Zahari et al., 2013), the struggles of heritage food surviving through a persistent change of lifestyle (Casini et al., 2015; Vanhonacker et al., 2010; Zahari et al., 2013), and also the rife ignorance towards the importance of heritage foods sustainability (Hamzah et al., 2015; Zahari et al., 2013). While these studies orbit around the factual importance of looking into the general heritage food, not many nominate traditional Malay kuih as specifically important by itself. Therefore, this research embarked on the collective traditional Malay kuih as a substantial sub-genre in Malay food heritage by empirically investigating the true meaning of Mersing's traditional Malay kuih, practices, motivations, potential, and importance as a means to explore its viability.

Essentially, this research provides valuable insights into the supply side, i.e., the experts. This is regarding the considerations to persevere a persistent production through globalized food trends. These insights provide a better understanding and effective practical illustrations for traditional Malay kuih producers as intangible heritage to survive the food market amongst the nature of trend-dependent food products that can include; 1) knowledge (Artese & Gagliardi, 2022; Kumar & Singh, 2022); 2) practices in productions (Kumar & Singh, 2022; Li, 2022; Tajkarimi, Ibrahim, & Fraser, 2013); 3) motivations (Kumar & Singh, 2022; Li, 2022), as well as: 4) efforts (Li, 2022; Littaye, 2016; Luo, 2021; Ramazanova et al., 2022) to actually making the existence persistent between the stakeholders. The persistent availability and variability of traditional Malay kuih will ensure excitement from the consumers and evoke the continued viability of the traditional Malay kuih itself. This can elevate the dignity of traditional Malay kuih locally and thus internationally, ensuring the survival of traditional Malay kuih in the globalized markets. Further, it could also triumph as one of the tourism products representing the Malay's identity to an international acknowledgment. Besides, this research empirically provides comprehension of the experts' knowledge, practices, and efforts in keeping intangible heritage treasures surviving the ever-changing environment due to standardization waved through globalization.

While materializing the traditional Malay kuih of its physical forms implies its existence in this research, the motivation, and efforts in disseminating the traditional Malay kuih are equally as important. Communication in rhetoric instances of the intangible heritage and the awareness of its importance underlined the effort in exploration. The use of the Transactional Model of Communication illustrated by Wood (2018) as a means to understand and explain the phenomenon further enriched the theoretical context of heritage preservation efforts. Accordingly, the involvement of stakeholders (Abdul Aziz, 2017) especially the experts who actually make the delicacies materialized is deemed to be important. Further, combining the Traditional Food Product Concept, Vroom's Expectancy Theory, and the Transactional Model of Communication will help bridge the gap in theoretical understanding of the phenomenon cohesively.

1.8 Research Scope and Limitations

The context of the present research is the continuous production of traditional Malay kuih to ensure its availability. The experiences of the proposed informants on intangible heritage are limited to their historical encounters in asserting the interaction of experts and other parties in sustaining the production and consumption. This may be through their involvement in the traditional Malay kuih practices or business to the current state. The experts of traditional Malay kuih are the main informants in excerpting valuable data. These experts include chefs, entrepreneurs, and elderlies who make traditional Malay kuih for a substantial period and are acknowledged as traditional Malay kuih experts. Data-rich feedback is needed from the experts to ensure a thorough reporting of the matter and quality findings.

As the main focus of the research is to look into the viability of traditional Malay kuih, experts were approached purposively, and in-depth interviews were used as the main data collection technique. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were specified for the experts due to confidentiality or trade secrecy that those who fall under the category of entrepreneurs may be concerned about. It is also meant for the other experts from different backgrounds. Focus group discussion (FGD) was executed for the consumers as the group of informants is easily gathered for discussion. This also imparted additional and supportive triangulation data from the demand-side point of view through in-depth interviews.

Owing to the nature of the proposed research design being a qualitative that gathered and analyzed from narrated data, the experiences of these entrepreneurs are not generalizable. However, this research is unique and personal to the research setting as locality-precision, and in-depth data only gathered across the proposed setting. Given that qualitative research's exclusivity of its data results in a lack of generalizability, it is otherwise weighted by its in-depth conquest and findings. It is more about the "adequacy" of the data set collected rather than its generalizability (Bowen, 2008).

1.9 Definition of Terms

This research will revolve around specific terms that are about practices in the making of traditional Malay kuih. The terms are as follows:

1.9.1 Heritage

According to Bessi re (1998) and Westering (1999), heritage can be defined as tangible and intangible features specific to a certain group of community identities. While tangible heritage is concrete physical artifacts of the past that lived through to the present, intangible heritage is known as collective knowledge that is continuously practiced through to the present (Kim, 2014; Ramli, Zahari, Suhaimi, & Talib, 2015).

1.9.2 Heritage food

Hamzah et al. (2015) and Ramli et al. (2015) documented that heritage food comprises delicacies related to a certain group of people by its culture and individuality. The same food (knowledge) is being passed down from generation to the newer generation in the hope of its continuity and self-image representation.

1.9.3 Traditional food

Omar et al. (2011) contend that traditional food is regional-specific delicacies and historically set within that local community, including the specific local materials of ingredients, tools and equipment, and knowledge of food preparation methods.

1.9.4 Traditional Malay kuih

Traditional Malay kuih is defined as desserts or snacks in bite-size portions (Raji, Karim, Ishak, & Arshad, 2017). It ranges from sweet to savory and wet to dry kuih, historically made popular by the Malays in Malaysia (Hamid, 2017; Raji et al., 2017). For this study, traditional Malay kuih implies delicacies produced and consumed in the Mersing, Johor, Malaysia.

1.9.5 Movement

Garud, Kumaraswamy, Roberts, and Xu, (2022), Huang, Chau, Iqbal, and Fatima, (2022), and Rotemberg and Woodford (1996) report that the movements are efforts of getting the expected outcome in business successes thus, this

research implies movements as the efforts or activities done by the experts in keeping the traditional Malay kuih persist in existence.

1.9.6 Viability

Viability is understood as the force of survival that ensures successfulness of something (McKercher, Okumus, & Okumus, 2008). This research uses the term viability as survival force of traditional Malay kuih in its persistent existence through production and consumption.

1.9.7 Food identity

Ramli, Zahari, Halim, and Aris (2017) and Lin, Pearson, and Cai (2011) concluded that food identity is a basis of a brand in which a strong collective set of characteristics are underpinned within the foodways of a specific community, eliminating the vague and conflicting idea of representation in global identification and honor from other community groups.

1.9.8 Globalization

Şimşek (2008) argued that globalization is the global wave of change that global standardization through industrialization took place, which made anything to be familiarized worldwide.

1.9.9 Modernization

Modernization connotes the changes in life advancement in various facets (Ismail et al., 2013; Sharif et al., 2016). This includes “standardization, stabilization and revision” of the past (Karaosmanoglu, 2012, p. 441).

1.9.10 Traditional Malay kuih experts

Experts denote individuals with “diverse understanding, skills and experience” within the subject in the picture (Hamzah, Karim, Othman, & Hamzah, 2013, p. 369). For this research, the experts include chefs, entrepreneurs, and the elderly as they are believed to be well versed in the subject of traditional Malay kuih and have at least 10 years of experience within the said disciplines (Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007).

1.9.11 Rhetoric communication

Rhetoric communication is understood as a sender-centered communication, explained by Foss (2012) as an effective way of communication. It is more persuasive in that the sender communicates messages bound to a set of disciplines to convey them effectively. The metaphor of rhetoric communication used in this research is not restricted to spoken words but more towards the efforts practiced about continuous traditional Malay kuih productions that garnered feedback in the form of consumption

1.9.12 Micro sector

The micro sector, or the informal sector, is where any micro-businesses exist in the community without legal documentation. This implies simple and little organization, which no registration for the business set up and no declaration required to be made to the authority (Ahmad et al., 2011). For this research, the micro sector is understood as the scale of traditional Malay kuih business synonymous among the experts in Mersing, Johor, Malaysia.

1.10 Overview of the Chapter

This chapter discusses the background of research, background of problem, the problem statement, research objectives and corresponding research questions, significance of research, scope and limitations of research, and the definition of terms used throughout this thesis. As the opening chapter, Chapter One provides the face of the research with justifications to conduct the research.

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