

Understanding Youth Knowledge and Cultural Values in the Preservation of Nasi Ambeng: A Study of Javanese Food Heritage in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper examines the significance of nasi ambeng for young Malaysians, as it is rooted in a traditional Javanese dish that embodies communal and cultural values. It discusses how the manner of presentation, sensitivity to local cuisine, and actual cooking know-how influence their knowledge of this heritage food. The data of 219 respondents was collected by a structured questionnaire of quantitative methods. The survey results indicate there are still young Malaysians who know what nasi ambeng is, fewer of them participate in the making of it and understand its symbolism. It is very important to disclose the method of preparing the food, presenting the food and serve the food. From older generations to younger generations, keeping the traditional food is inherited by Malay-Javanese people. Such perceptions indicate the erosion of traditional food knowledge to the young generation and the importance of fostering cultural appreciation in educational, family and community contexts.

Keywords: Javanese Traditional Food, Nasi Ambeng, Food Heritage, Knowledge, Cultural Transmission

Introduction

Food heritage plays a strong role in shaping cultural identity. Its apprehensions the spirit of a community, connects generations, and tells stories that go beyond taste. Nasi ambeng is a symbol of Javanese-Malay culinary tradition which it is one of the traditional foods in Malaysia. The food is usually served on a large tray and shared among family or guests during special occasions such as kenduri. The way the food being prepared and presented indicates the harmonization of the people tied to the values of unity, humility, and togetherness.

Urban life and global food trends are reshaping how Malaysian youth eat. Restaurants that offer quick service and app-based delivery often replace the time and care once spent in the kitchen. With fewer evenings cooking beside parents or grandparents, recipes and techniques are passed on less often. Not only that matters but other factors such as living in

a small apartment with small kitchens and schedules packed with study and work, fast food and international menus are the most common choice for the young generation to consume their meals.

The connection between Malaysian youth and nasi ambeng, focusing on how its presentation, symbolism, and preparation reflect their changing relationship with tradition. Nasi ambeng becomes a mirror through which broader shifts in values, lifestyles, and collective memory are revealed.

Doing this research is like a quiet call to consciousness. It reminds us that traditions survive only when the young are part of them. Culture cannot be inherited by observation alone; it must be lived, cooked, and shared. Food, especially, carries meaning when it is made with hands that remember and passed to hands that will continue the story. By exploring where modern life senses away from tradition and where it still finds its way back, this research hopes to show that heritage lives are not in memory, but in practice.

Review Of Literature

Traditional Food as Identity

Traditional dishes do more than feed us; they carry a community's memory and moral code. Nasi ambeng, for example, is woven into Javanese–Malay life not just a meal, but a shared tray that signals cooperation, respect, and togetherness. Mentioned by Ahmad, Barakbah, and Fauzi's (2021) study of cultural tourism in Kampung Sungai Dua Besar, Negeri Sembilan, how food works strengthens with social ties and keeps local values alive only can be found around Malay weddings when comes to planning the menu, sourcing ingredients, cooking in groups.

Even so, global taste and new food trends are pulling many young Malaysians toward fast food and international menus. The shift is more than a change in flavor, it risks sidelining the skills, stories, and shared meanings wrapped up in traditional cooking. As Suleiman et al. (2023) highlight, heritage dishes help hold cultural identity together yet changing preferences among youth make that role harder to sustain.

Food Knowledge and Cultural Transfer

Families and community interactions have made them historically occur through transmission of traditional food knowledge. However, the current generation experiences a disconnect due to urbanization and lifestyle changes. Sharif et al. (2018) found that when youth actively join in cooking during festivals, they learn more about their food traditions, strengthening their cultural understanding. Similarly, the study by Aris et al. (2022) identified the need for structured programs to bridge the knowledge gap and encourage youth engagement in traditional culinary practices.

Presentation and Meaning

Nasi ambeng works because it feels like home. One big tray in the middle. Everyone reaching in, sharing rice and side dishes, talking as they eat. That simple act says, "we belong to each other." It is a reminder that tradition does not have to disappear in a modern life when see through the Malay–Javanese foodways. The food can travel together with the people and would appear just in new forms in presenting and preserving it.

Additionally, young people often notice the look of the dish and the neat arrangement on the plate, the colors that appeal to the eyes before the photos is worth to be posting onto the social media platform. Stories, rituals, and meanings behind the dish before moving from surface interest to real appreciation is the real meaning for the young generation. That is the step from pretty to meaningful, as Sa'min et al. (2024) suggest.

Cultural Values in Cuisine

Showing respect for elders, keeping a modest table, and bringing people together is what the traditional cooking lessons. When families prep and share these meals, those values are practiced, not just preached. In recent times, young people stopped cooking and eating together which are the everyday lessons which disappear and no longer inherit and avoid the closeness among family members.

The study by Suleiman et al. (2023) explained the loss of these values due to the diminishing practice of common cooking and the rise of individualistic eating habits that occurred in recent life. On another study reveal by Azhari et al. (2023) indicated that places like Kuala Kubu Bharu, beloved local stalls (e.g. Cendol Pak Samad or Kedai Kak Kiah) serve as public anchors, they support local livings and pride, even becoming 'viral' lures that link tradition with contemporary tourism. This rallies how local food inheritance remains to function as bonding and preserving the local dishes, cultural and economic.

Cooking Skills Matter

Special skills and knowledge that elders pass down through generations is really significant in preparing the traditional dishes. Many young people have not learned these cooking techniques, and this makes it tougher for them when they prepare the traditional food. In simple understanding, traditional dishes often require details for attention in order to keep traditional cuisine alive. Reason for this skills gap absent is that younger generations have not had much exposure to cooking these heritage recipes or opportunities to practice them at home. Without this hands-on experience, it is hard for them to master the methods that their parents or grandparents took years to learn. In view of the statement, Gazette (2020) highlighted young people constrained the ability to cook traditional dishes in large amounts due to not being exposed to those practices early on. This gap underlines the need for initiatives that provide hands-on learning opportunities to equip young people with the necessary culinary skills.

Methodology

Research Design

Quantitative approach has been used in this study to explore how well Malaysian youth understand *nasi ambeng*, a traditional Javanese dish with deep cultural roots. By a structured questionnaire, the study is guided with three key factors: how the food is presented, the cultural values associated with it, and the cooking skills involved. The three key factors are to assess how the young generation influences the knowledge of traditional food. Descriptive correlational design has been used to examine relationships among the variables. This approach allowed researchers to assess patterns in respondents' awareness and perceptions.

A five-point Likert scale ranging from **1 (Strongly Disagree)** to **5 (Strongly Agree)** was employed to quantify respondent attitudes and knowledge levels.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study used the primary and secondary information which link to address the research questions. Gathering these two types of data is to help the researcher achieve the objectives and give more information regarding this study. The study focused on Malaysian youth between the ages of 18 and 25. Out of 220 questionnaires distributed, researchers surveyed 219 respondents. This number is considered sufficient for exploratory research that applies correlation and regression analysis. Respondents came from multiple states across Malaysia and reflected a mix of educational levels and work backgrounds, contributing to a more diverse snapshot of the youth population.

Research Instrument

In the questionnaire, it has been divided into four sections:

- **Section A:** Demographic profile (e.g., age, gender, education, ethnicity, occupation)
- **Section B:** Knowledge of Javanese traditional food (dependent variable)
- **Section C:** Perceptions of *nasi ambeng* in terms of food presentation, values, and cooking skills (independent variables)
- **Section D:** Open-ended responses for qualitative insights and recommendations

Results and Discussion

Respondents' Demographic Profile

The demographic analysis shows that the majority of respondents were female (52.5%), aged 21–23 years (52.5%), and predominantly Malay (90%). Most held a degree-level qualification (49.8%), and nearly 47% were full-time students. This demographic distribution supports the relevance of the study, as it targets the youth segment most likely affected by cultural and dietary transitions.

Descriptive Analysis of Independent Variables

Analysis of the Food Presentation

There are three sub-dimensions for the independent variable food presentation. It is size, shape and colour. Food presentation is important in the food industry. It is the first impression of people about the presentation of food that is being served. In this study, there were 2 items used for survey that reflect to the food presentation sub-dimensions.

Table 1

Number, Mean and Standard Deviation for Food Presentation

Item	n	Mean	Standard Deviation
It served on a tray (dulang) and can be eaten for 4-5 people.	219	4.19	0.913
The uniqueness of nasi ambeng is on the arrangements of the dishes and the way it is being served.	219	4.17	0.831

Based on table 4.2, it shows that most of the respondents know about the food presentation of nasi ambeng on both items. Because the mean score for every two items is more than 4.00

mean score and the standard deviation is below 1.00. Item 3 (n=219, mean=4.19, Std Deviation=0.913) and item 11 (n=219, mean=4.17, Std Deviation=0.831)

According to the table, it seems that most of the respondents of the young generation agree and know about the food presentation of nasi ambeng. Most of the young generations agree that nasi ambeng traditionally served in a tray (dulang) and can be eaten for 4-5 people based on the questions. Besides, they also agree that the uniqueness of nasi ambeng is in the arrangements of the dishes and also the way it is served.

Analysis of the Values

Table 2

Number, Mean and Standard Deviation for Values

Item	n	Mean	Standard Deviation
Nasi Ambeng is the signature dish of Javanese traditional food.	219	4.13	0.948
Nasi ambeng usually being served during festival or cultural events.	219	4.05	0.975
Nasi ambeng represent symbolized of unity in family and community.	219	4.33	0.730
The best way of eating nasi ambeng is by using hand.	219	4.43	0.795
Nasi ambeng is influenced by some elements of food from Indonesia.	219	4.08	0.933
Being cooperated among each other is the important elements in making the nasi ambeng.	219	4.04	0.689
The balance of nasi ambeng that not being served/consumed will be gives to the guest and this is known as 'berkat'.	219	4.18	0.879

Based on table 2, it shows the mean and the standard deviation for values. The highest Scored for the mean is item number 6 (m=4.43, Std =0.795). The lowest is item number 10 with score of 4.04 with standard deviation of 0.689.

Based on the tables, most of the questionnaires about values were scored 4 and above, it means that most of the respondents know about the values of the nasi ambeng. Basically, nasi ambeng is known for its values itself. According to the table above, most of the young generations agree on all of the questions. It shows that most of the young generations have knowledge of the values of nasi ambeng.

Analysis of the Cooking Skills

Table 3

Number, Mean and Standard Deviation for Cooking Skills

Item	n	Mean	Standard Deviation
Nasi ambeng comprises of white rice, chicken stewed with soy sauce or deep fry, sambal jawa (bean curd, long bean and tempe), fried noodles, serunding kelapa (fried coconut flesh) and salted fish.	219	4.34	0.769
Traditionally, there were 6 – 10 different dishes in the tray (dulang) and the taste flavourful from spices, but they were just mild and well balanced without any spice being overpowering.	219	4.05	0.828
In nasi ambeng, there are various types cooking methods used, steaming for rice, deep-fried chicken, sauté without oil for serunding kelapa (fried coconut flesh), and sauté vegetables.	219	4.12	0.861
The composition of nasi ambeng contributed to the healthy dish.	219	3.94	1.00

Based on table 3, it shows the mean and the standard deviation for cooking skills. The highest Scored for the mean is item number 4 ($m=4.34$, $Std.=0.769$). The lowest is item number 13 with score of mean 3.94 with standard deviation of 1.00. As stated in the table above, item number 4, 8 and 9 scored more than 4 on the mean. It seems that most of the young generations have knowledge of cooking skills as they agree to all of items in the table. Meanwhile, item number 13 scored below 4, which is 3.94 and as mentioned above it was the lowest. Item number 13, the composition of nasi ambeng contributed to the healthy dish', most of the respondents slightly agree that nasi ambeng contributed to the healthy dish.

Analysis of the Javanese Traditional Food

In this section, the statistic result indicated the mean score and standard deviation that was applied in the knowledge of the respondents towards the Javanese traditional food.

Table 4

Number, Mean and Standard Deviation for Traditional Food

Item	n	Mean	Standard Deviation
The ingredients of Javanese traditional food are easy to find and purchase in the market.	219	3.80	0.989
Javanese traditional food is influenced by Indonesia.	219	3.96	1.011
Most of the Javanese traditional food using grated coconut, coconut milk, ulam-ulaman and ground nuts.	219	4.21	0.787
There are a lot of Javanese traditional foods such as nasi ambeng, lemper, ketewel, pecal, ayam ungkep and sambal goreng jawa.	219	4.38	0.789
The uniqueness of Javanese traditional food is the way how it is being served to the guest.	219	4.11	0.887
To enrich the taste and aroma of Javanese traditional foods, banana and coconut leaves are being used for wrapping.	219	4.13	0.894
The uniqueness of making Javanese traditional food is the rewang (mingle sociable with others) during festival or cultural events.	219	4.26	0.873

Based on table 4, it shows the mean and the standard deviation for the dependent variable, traditional food. The highest Scored for the mean is item number 4 ($m=4.38$, $Std=0.789$). The lowest is item number 1 with score of mean 3.80 with standard deviation of 0.989. According to the table, the respondents agreed to item 3 until item 7 because it showed that the mean's items scored more than 4.00. it means that most of the respondents know about traditional Javanese foods. We can conclude that the young generation has a knowledge of Javanese traditional food.

Meanwhile, item number 1, the ingredients of Javanese traditional food are easy to find and purchase in the market' scored 3.80, it shows that the respondents were slightly agree that the ingredient of the Javanese traditional food is NOT easy to find in the market. Based on the questions on the knowledge of Javanese traditional foods, it can be concluded that most of the respondents or young generations know about Javanese traditional food.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The key findings of the study, highlights its theoretical and practical contributions, discusses limitations, and offers actionable recommendations for sustaining traditional food knowledge among the younger generation in Malaysia. The focus is placed on culinary heritage which is the nasi ambeng as a case study of Javanese.

With a particular focus on nasi ambeng, this study aimed to examine how much Malaysian youth know about this traditional food. Hence, three main factors were being investigated to see how each one might shape or influence their understanding of this Javanese heritage dish: food presentation, cultural values, and cooking skills.

The overall of the key findings:

- Respondents exhibited a high level of awareness regarding food presentation and symbolic elements of nasi ambeng.
- Cultural values demonstrated the strongest influence on youth knowledge, as confirmed by regression analysis.
- While cooking skills and food presentation were positively correlated with knowledge, they did not significantly predict knowledge in the regression model.
- Open-ended responses confirm that family influence, particularly from elders, remains central in transmitting food knowledge.

These insights underscore the importance of intergenerational learning and cultural immersion in heritage preservation.

Implications

The findings would offer treasured direction for educators, policymakers, and cultural advocates working to realm traditional food knowledge among youth. One method is to fit in tradition cuisine into school and university programs, predominantly through elective courses or extracurricular activities that combine hands-on cooking with storytelling rooted in cultural identity. While at home, families play a dynamic role whereby parents and grandparents pass on traditions by involving younger generations in meal preparation, especially during festivals or cultural celebrations.

In another way, to involve with the community, local councils and non-governmental organizations. The involvement in hosting heritage food festivals or organizing *rewang*-style gatherings teaches young people through active involvement. These insights underscore a generational gap in practical knowledge for today's youth which they may recognize traditional foods like nasi ambeng knowing of the dish rather than knowing how to prepare it.

Theoretical and Contextual Contribution

In this contemporary life speeds ahead and global influences grow stronger, traditional dishes like nasi ambeng are at risk of being forgotten. In this study, the findings suggest that many young Malaysians feel a connection to their cultural root especially when those values are nurtured at home, shared within communities, and reinforced through education.

Conserving food traditions is not just about holding onto old recipes, but it is about keeping stories, identities, and a sense of belonging alive. To ensure these traditions remain relevant, passing on food knowledge must be done with care, sincerity, and an inclination to adapt. When shared with intention, meals like nasi ambeng would continue to bring people together and remind future generations of who they are and where they come from.

The theoretical contribution is the transmission of the cultural and also the social identity in the young generation as a medium through which cultural continuity and

communal values are sustained. The findings from this study demonstrate that traditional Javanese food such as nasi ambeng not only symbolizes togetherness and modesty but also preserves intergenerational learning, memory, and moral values.

On the other hand, contextually exploring the modernization influences in the life of young generations, how do they engage between modern lifestyle with traditional culinary practices. The findings of the research provide empirical insight into the absolute variables such as food presentation, values, and cooking skills. Each of the factors contributes to the understanding and preservation of nasi ambeng as a cultural item.

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