

**UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA**

**EXPLORATION OF THE CHETTI  
CULINARY HERITAGE AND  
PRACTICES: THE PERANAKAN  
INDIAN CUISINE OF MALAYSIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Chetti or Peranakan Indian cuisine is a hybrid of South Indian immigrants and Malay cuisines. The historical inter-cultural marriage between Indian traders and Malays, mainly local women during the 15th century and the Malacca Sultanate era has prompted the initial kickstart to the formation of the uniqueness of Chetti cuisine. This research focuses on identifying Chetti ethnic cuisine and to scrutinise the significance of its culinary heritage within the Chetti culture. The qualitative exploratory investigation was conducted mainly at the Chetti Village, Gajah Berang in Melaka through semi-structured interviews involving three different categories of Chetti informants: a sample of older Chettis, younger Chetti generations, and a mix of experts in Chetti culture from various backgrounds. A total of seven themes including three sub-themes were identified through thematic analysis. In essence, there are three major findings in this research. First, Chetti culinary heritage is an important cultural element of the various Chetti ceremonial events and festivals. Hence, it is an effective identity marker of the Chetti community. Second, the continuous social interaction with other ethnic groups particularly the Malays that went beyond the initial historical intercultural marriage has further infused the elements of Malay cuisine into the unique flavour and characteristics of the Chetti cuisine. Third, it was found that while the younger Chettis are proud and familiar with their ethnic cuisine, they are mostly unskilled in producing Chetti culinary heritage. The findings from this research will hopefully contribute to the scientific knowledge on minority ethnic cuisine particularly the Chetti cuisine as an important genetic code of Malaysian cuisine that mirrors the nation's multicultural background. From a practical perspective, given the circumstances that Chetti cuisine is on the brink of extinction due to the dwindling of its population, it is crucial for the Chetti association and local government to continuously raise awareness about the hybrid cuisine. The findings indicate that cultural events involving exhibition of culinary heritage is effective in transmitting traditional food knowledge to the younger generation and subsequently assist in the preservation of traditional cuisines.

Keywords: Chetti, Culinary heritage, Cuisine, Peranakan Indian, Acculturation

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of Study

Malaysia is an incredibly diverse nation as it embodies such a multi-racial society, culture, lifestyle and history (Ong, Liaw, Chung, Azmi, Zainol, Wong, Loong, Inderjit, Faezah, Talib and Moiden, 2020; Majzub, Hashim and Johannes, 2011 as cited in Ahmad, Abd Aziz, Sulaiman, Abdul Mutalib and Rose, 2018). According to Hun (2016), the existence of a particular social amalgam that results from non-native and native ethnic groups' interaction began its history in the Malay Archipelago since pre-colonial times. This minority amalgamated society is locally known as Peranakan and it is clearly singular from the dominant ethnic groups. There are several groups of Peranakan in Malaysia which include Peranakan Chinese or Nyonya, Kristang, and Chetti or also known as Peranakan Indian (Moorthy, 2021; Hun, 2016). Each community holds its own unique ethnic cuisine that showcases an age-old culinary interaction between foreign and local ethnic flavours. However, unlike the Nyonya cuisine, the Chetti is considered a minority cuisine despite being analogously significant in reflecting the journey of a social amalgamation of the non-native and native ethnic group in Malaysia. It has not been given similar acknowledgment. Interestingly, Chetti has strived for a long existence in Malaysia. The long-standing presence of the Chetti descendants over the centuries in the country has evolved into a distinctive culture that has made them a unique hybrid community (Durai, 2019).

It all began in the 15th century when the South Indian traders migrated to the shores of Malacca to trade spices and other items (Moorthy, 2021; Malaysia Traveller, 2011; Dhoraisingam, 2006). The identity of Chetti cuisine was invented through the inter-marriage between Indian traders with the local community in Malacca which contributed to the unique blending of foreign and local ethnic flavours. This particular trait is prominent in Chetti cuisine where it reflects the familiarisation of Chetti in combining both South Indian and Malay cooking ingredients and cooking style (Fikri, Rahman and Noh, 2021; Malaysian Delicacies, 2013). However, it is important to note that Chetti cuisine also carries some features of Chinese cuisine (Sankar, 2013). Not