

# The influence of Baba Nyonya acculturation on the Malacca food identity

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## Abstract

Migration has been part of the process that shapes the constituent of a particular nation or place. The movement of different people from various ethnicities and cultural background into a place has enabled the process of acculturation to occur. Such process would open up the opportunity for each ethnic to adapt or adopt certain trait of culture from other ethnic and thus producing a cultural mixture that is unique. Within the scope of this study, the acculturation of Baba Nyonya from the mixture of Malay and Chinese food culture and tradition is argued has helped to shape the Malacca food identity. However, the extent to which the phenomenon is occurring is not known, as there is no particular study has been looking into this subject. Thus, this study is designed to examine the process of Baba Nyonya food acculturation and their influence on the Malacca state food identity formation.

## Keywords:

Acculturation, Baba Nyonya, food identity, food identity formation

## **1 Introduction**

The human being has been known for a long period of time to be one of the species that embrace the practice of migration. The movement of humans across other places or through established political boundary has always been the normal definition of migration (Rose, 2011). Migrations have occurred throughout human history, beginning with the movements of the first human groups from their origins in East Africa to their current location in the world. Migration as argued by many scholars can be either semi-permanent or permanent (Rose, 2011; Kok, 1999). A semi-permanent migration would be the seasonal movement of migrant farm laborers while permanent migration is pronounced when someone moves from one place to another and has no plans to return to their original home or country and become a citizen of the migrated country. As this study closely dealing with permanent migration, the subsequent paragraph is centrally focused on this type of migration.

Various factors have been identified as the sources of the spark that trigger the intention of migrant to establish a permanent migration in other place, namely colonization, economic, politic and few others (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006). Owing to its huge geographical location, the United States of America has the largest permanent migration in the globe. In year 1920 alone, this country was having approximately 24 million of permanent migration (Water & Jimenez, 2005). This number considerably increased afterward and the similar phenomenon also occurred in other countries in the world. As the migration process occurs throughout the world, the immigrants are bound to be in contact with the surrounding environment which includes the local culture within the migrated territories. Schwartz and Zamboanga (2008) contended that such encounter would result in the process of cross culturing and acculturation (Berry, 2005 & 1997; Fries, 2009). These processes are not only involving with the economy, education, and lifestyle, social but also the culture and food without an exception.

Within the confines of this study, the process of cross culturing is regarded as the process of interaction between an individual from different country and region which introduce a different set of values through various forms of interactivity between members of distinctively dissimilar cultural groups (Howes, 1996). Meanwhile, the acculturation is an exchange of cultural features that results when groups of individuals with different cultures come into continuous contact thus the original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be altered, but the groups remain distinct. However, Mendoza (1989) and Rudmin (2003) refer it as a process of learning the practices and customs of a new culture and acquiring the capability to function within the dominant culture while retaining one's original culture. Additionally, there has been some studies that insist on the capability of the acculturation process to be occurring more commonly within a pluralistic society and nation. Such acculturation typically revolves around the elements of the economy, education, politics and culture, including food and it is argued

that in the long run such interaction would eventually pave the way to identity formation (Berg, 1997; Schierup, 1988).

### **1.1 Issues in contextual study setting**

Many available studies on the acculturation look at the general cultural perspectives with less focus on the food acculturation in the formation of food identity (Kawangit, 2015; Kim, 2008; Sun, 1973). Berg (1997); Schierup (1988); and Esser (1998) accentuate that food is another significant badge of identity and having a well-formed food identity is important for pluralistic nations (Mintz, 1996). In line with this, during the pre-independence era, each ethnic group in Malaysia, particularly the Malay, Chinese and Indian had distinctive and diverse types of food or culinary treasures. Each ethnic group was very individualistic in cultural practices and food in particular (Othman et al, 2005). The cuisines and food cultures were largely confined within the respective communities and ethnocentric attitudes toward another ethnic groups food were very obvious. Food habits in each ethnic group were seen as a culturally standardized set of behaviours within the individual's tradition. In fact, each ethnic restaurant only catered for its own ethnic community (Mead, 1943).

Through government initiatives and other efforts since 1970s or, to be exact, after the racial tension, these ethnic groups have gradually united politically, culturally and economically. The integration process undertaken created a dynamic growth of cross culture and acculturation of food through the preparation and consumption across ethnic groups. Through continuous contact, an exchange of food cultural features is believed to occur not only among the major ethnic group like Malays, Chinese and Indian but also goes to other minority groups including the Baba Nyonya in Malacca as a central focus of this study. Based on the literature, Cleveland (2009) argues that food acculturation in a multicultural nation is believed to not only contributes to acceptance of food commonalities, but in the long run creates the process of food identity formation. The precursor of the process of constructing a nation's food identity within ethnic groups in multicultural countries is in fact reflected through sharing the common acceptable foods and cuisines (Appadurai, 1988).

Kifleysus (2004) posits that the concept of common acceptable food can be achieved through the understanding of each ethnic belief, skills, ethical norms, and the social attitudes that are practiced within their cultural settings. As previously mentioned, acculturation is an exchange of cultural features that results when groups of individuals with different cultures come into continuous contact. The original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be altered, but the groups remain distinct. In line with the aforementioned statement, Malacca Baba Nyonya cuisine through continuous contacts with Malay and Chinese ethnic in particular is believed to be adjusted and adapted thus longitudinally contribute to Malacca's food identity formation. The extent of this process is not known as none of the literature specifically looks at this issue to date.

With the highlighted issues and gaps of the study, an empirical investigation on the acculturation process is worth to be undertaken.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Ethnic food**

Generally, the concept of ethnic food is associated with the national food and the culinary ingredients that belong to a specific culture whose consumption goes beyond the original culture or geographical boundaries (Camarena & Sanjuan, 2009). The food itself, not only the individual ingredients used mostly by each culture, but also to a particular way of seasoning, preparing, cooking or consuming makes the outcome dish distinctive of a particular ethnic group. In this sense, food becomes ethnic when contemplated from the perspective of a market and/or consumer alien to the cultural group of reference (Camarena & Sanjuan, 2009). Utami (2004) on the other hand notes that ethnic food can be described as cuisine of the minority in multicultural societies which can be differentiated between the types of foods, method of cooking, the ingredients used and eating decorum.

### **2.2 Development of Baba Nyonya food**

Baba Nyonya and Peranakan Chinese is a term used for the descendants of late 15th and 16th-century Chinese immigrants to Malaysia and Indonesia. In Malaysia, members of this community in Malacca address themselves as "Baba Nyonya". Baba is a term for the men and Nyonya for the women. According to Tan (1988), the Babas may be one of the most talked about communities in Malaysia, but it is also one of the most misunderstood. The culture practices of Baba language or Baba Malay is the mixture of Malay language with certain words borrowed from the Chinese, especially Hokkien, Portuguese, Dutch, Tamil and English. He argues that the characteristic of the Baba Nyonya culture can be identified through their language, customs, dress and cuisine.

In relation to the cuisine, the Peranakan food is a delightful fusion food of Malay and Chinese with little influence of Indonesian, Siamese, Indian, Dutch, Portuguese and English (Tan, 1993). Through the adaptation of Malay and Chinese cuisines, the Peranakan food or cuisine can be differentiated through their type of food (Ayam Pongteh, Itik Tim, Masak Lemak Udang Nenas), methods of cooking (dry or moist heat), the ingredients used (Buah Keluak, Tau Cheow, Belacan), and eating decorum (use their fingers as the Malay do).

### **2.3 Acculturation**

The term acculturation is used to describe a multidimensional process consists of the convergence among the heritage-culture and receiving-cultural practices, values, and identifications (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). The concept of acculturation as highlighted by Berry (2005) is a learning process of custom and practices

of a new culture that acquiring the ability to function within the dominant culture while retaining one's original culture. Acculturation also refers to the process of exchange in cultural features that occurs when the different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact while the original culture patterns or both groups may be altered but the groups remain divergent (Kottak, 2007). The final result of the process may depend on the factors such as the initial centrality of the individual of the particular values and attitudes, the significance of the family as a reinforcer of the traditional values and as a change agent, and the importance and strength of the societal change agents such as media, language, knowledge, friendships and laws (Marin, 1993).

## **2.4 Type of foods**

Foods, including its various types, however like a living organism that is subjected to alteration or adaptation. In this sense, Boyd and Richerson (2006) refer adaptation as a process of an individual or individuals to either remain, modifies or altered the existing types of foods to fit into the current trends and demand or new culture. Lee (2008) in her book entitled "The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food" illustrates that the process of adaptation of foods without a doubt enhances understanding of different cultures.

Similarly, in Malaysia, the acculturation, assimilation, adaptation and racial intermingling among the Malay, Chinese, and Indian since the early 1970s have added to the potpourri of the local foods and have created a Malaysian cultural and gastronomic heritage. The obvious examples are char kway teow, spring roll, otak-otak, yong tau foo and pau which were originally mild in taste as originally prepared by Chinese chefs but the taste has been 'localised'; or more appropriately Malaysianised from the influences of the other races down the years. Nowadays, char kway teow for instance is currently prepared in Chinese, Malay and Indian styles.

## **2.5 Methods of cooking**

Cooking is the practice to make food more edible and digestible, improve or enhance the flavor, make it safe to eat, develop the visual appeal and increase variety to the diet (Lydon, 2011). Since the olden days, there are various methods of cooking foods which is normally involving the process of heating. Methods of cooking were created or developed based on the availability of the resources. Wood, stones and charcoal were the popular resources that reflect the cooking methods like roasting, boiling, smoking, frying and grilling to cook the food (Miglio, et al 2008).

Kwik (2008) contended that the traditional food and its methods of cooking may be interpreted as describing a process that does not change. Others argue that daily and traditional foods, including methods of cooking have experienced a modification and alteration, although they still play an important role in cultural identity and reflect the history of a country or a region (Sharif et al, 2012; Kamaruddin et al, 2010; Langgat et al, 2011). In this sense, the modification, alteration and adaptation of the traditional foods

and methods of cooking have been influenced by many factors such as the availability of raw materials, convenience food products, modern food cooking equipment and many others (Sharif et. al., 2012). This is also occurring across ethnic groups, particularly in the multi-cultural/ethnic countries.

## **2.6 Ingredients**

Food ingredients refer to the any edible elements that are used in preparing a particular dish (Yee, 2003). The ways people use ingredients in their cooking preparation convey a great deal of information about their cultural and historical backgrounds (Neely, 2010). People easily associate certain food ingredients, with a particular culture. The usage of noodles for instance is popular among the Chinese culture, despite the globalization of Chinese communities throughout the globe. Different groups have different style of food preparation (Senauer et. al., 1991) and it depends on the availability of the ingredients and resources (Wyke & Landman, 1997). For instance, rice, wheat, meat, fish and other agriculture resources are the main ingredients of creating foods. In fact, these items now are the most important staple ingredients in many foods of the world. Middle East peoples eat bread, soup and porridge from wheat and barley. Meats from wild animal become the main dishes for European and African. Western Asian used tomatoes for the sauce of dishes.

Martinez (1998) argues that the food ingredients are sensitive as it involves modification and alteration and modernization through the industrialization and commercialization to have a major impact on the food ingredients (Cwiertka, 2000). According to Gillette (1997), some behavioral shifts are occurring in the food ingredients and this largely associated with the commercialization. Food ingredients modification, adaptation or changes are influenced by the new trends in the consumption which Mieli (1999) described as the emergence of a post-modern circuit of food and the rise of a new culture of consumption among the consumers. Again, Chenhall (2011) states that an increase in availability of food commodities (basic/raw and processed) influences the culture of cooking and food preparation practices within the home, domestic, communities and ethnic groups.

## **2.7 Eating decorum**

Eating decorum or etiquette is also an important part of any ethnics and nations. Eating decorum or etiquette refers to the cultural manner of eating involving what are used and how the food was eaten (Suhaimi et. al., 2014). Malaysia is also rich with the traditional eating manners which continuously inherit and practices from one generation to another. The most popular method of eating is to pile the rice onto a plate with other side dishes heaped on top and tuck in heartily using the fingers of the right hand among the Malays and the Indian whilst the Chinese eat their food by using chopsticks (Syed Amir, 1991; Hutton, 2000; Jalis, 2010). All those are the symbols of magnanimity or nobility in their culture.

Fairchild (2008) argues that eating decorum has long been a customary practice in ethnic groups and being transferred from generation to generation. Similar to food ingredients, method of cooking and types of food that have been discussed before, the adaptation or alteration on the eating decorum is also happened owing to the modern lifestyles and modernization (Kuhnlein, Erasmus, & Spigelski, 2009; Milburn, 2004; Turner, Harvey, Burgess, & Kuhnlein, 2009). As stated by Neely (2010), no matter how trivial it may seem, manners in eating do altered over time and the adaptation is likely to be a sign of a significant shift in the social changes.

## **2.8 Concept of identity formation**

Identity is a complex concept related to a person's internal knowledge of their self and their external social role (Erikson 1969). Adam and Marshall (2000) define identity as a social-psychological construction that reflects social influences through imitation and identification processes and active self-construction in the creation of what is important to self and others. Identity carries out several functions in humans, such as the structure for understanding who one is, providing a sense of personal control and free will, providing consistency, coherence, and harmony between values, beliefs and commitments and, lastly, providing the ability to recognize potential in the form of future possibilities and alternative choices (Serafini & Adams, 2002).

## **2.9 Food identity formation**

Food is observed as a medium for interaction, it performs as a focal point of, and for social contact as a symbol of social bonding, bringing meaning, beliefs and identities. Further, foods are an expression of culture, history and lifestyle (Trichopoulou, Soukara, & Vasilopoulou, 2007) and memory and nostalgia (Kierans & Haeney, 2010). Therefore, foods are important in connecting peoples and are a cultural showcase. This research study is grounded in the understanding that type of food, methods of cooking, ingredients and eating decorum which is presumed to play an essential role in the formation of the state food identity. This is in line with Choi et al. (2013) that identity can be communicated through food in unique, dynamic, and meaningful ways, rooted in our everyday lives, food informs us of whom we are and how we believe and we are perceived by others. Furthermore, we use food to express ourselves and our desired identities and to communicate to others how we wish to be perceived. What we choose to eat, how we eat, who prepares our food, and what we choose to eat with which people are deeply intertwined issues that are making sense of in relation to others. Exploring the relationship between food and identity reinforces the notion that identity is a relational process, a kind of "psychosocial relativity" embedded in social, historical, and developmental contexts.

### 3 Conceptual Study Framework

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) is synthesized based on the past literature which display the construct and dimension that is adapted as the foundation for the present study. The independent variable is represented by the acculturation of Baba Nyonya cuisine attributes which consisted of four dimensions (types of food, methods of cooking, ingredients, eating decorum). The acculturation is theorized to have an influence over the Malacca food identity which acts as the dependent variable.

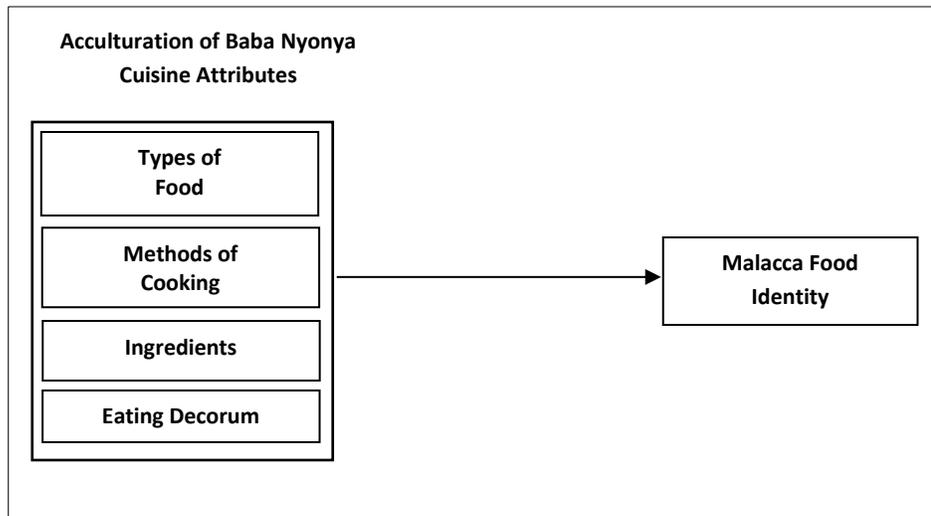


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

### 4 Methodology

#### 4.1 Study design

The design is dependent upon the nature of the study. Since this study is to empirically investigate the influence of acculturation of Baba Nyonya cuisine attributes towards the Malacca food identity formation, a causal research design using a quantitative through cross sectional approach will be used for data collection as it is able to explain the relevant attributes (Sekaran & Bougies, 2013). In the context of this study, the older generation of the Baba Nyonya ethnic group with an age range of 50-year-old and above will be chosen as sample and the study setting will be in the non-contrived setting as it's dealing with the psychological changes. The reason of choosing the older generation is due to fact that the acculturation processes are believed to be happening or occurring during their time. Ochoa (2004) noted that it is important to gain the first-hand information from the early generation as they experienced the acculturation process. Therefore, this sample can provide relevant information on a particular subject that will be investigated.

## **4.2 Instrumentation**

This study is utilizing the quantitative methodology in its data collection. Survey questionnaire is developed to gather the response from the respondents and it consisted of three sections. Each of the section is developed to measure the construct and dimension used in the study with the exception of section A which primarily deal with the demographic profile. Most of the items in the survey questionnaire are adapted from the previous research that dwells on the topic and a couple of modifications are made to the questions to achieve the objective of the study. The first section deals with the demographic information of the samples, including gender, age, marital status and education. Section B is created to examine the independent variable which is food acculturation attributes (type of food, methods of cooking, ingredients and eating decorum). The last section C is dedicated to measuring the food identity formation. Five points Likert scale is used to gather the response from the samples with 1 represent “strongly disagree” and 5 represents “strongly agree”. Considering the respondent profiles, questions use will be simple and understandable with the least reading and writing. In other words, the respondents should be able to read all items quickly and select an answer without any difficulties. In addition, all items will be formulated as clearly as possible with simple words and language to reduce any possible ambiguities and dual language (Malay and English) version of the questionnaire will be used.

## **5 Conclusion**

Since the current study is still in its initial stage, there is no meaningful data or result that can be shown. However, from the academic perspective it is hoped that the study of food identity formation will be able to expand the existing knowledge on the subject since it is regarded as one of the new important area worth to be explored (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Caplan, 1997; Counihan & Caplan, 1998; Bernand, 2000). Furthermore, there are still less empirical investigation or available studies undertaken looking into the role of acculturation of the minority ethnic food toward state identity formation. In fact, to date, there is no states’ food identity formation study in the Malaysian context. With this scarcity, the originality of this study will create new evidence or contributes to a new body of knowledge and add to the existing literature.

From the practical perspective, as multiethnic and multicultural county is shaped and molded by the background of its people, their languages, beliefs together with uniqueness of each ethnic culture, it is therefore essential to have an in-depth understanding what are the other elements besides education, politics and economy that contribute the country image. With that, it is hoped that the outcome of this study will create awareness among the ethnic groups, the community leaders and government on the importance of recognizing the contribution of minority ethnic food toward a symbol of social bonding, expression of culture and states or even nation food identify formation.

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