

A Study Of Sarawak Ethnic Food “Tuak” As Means Of Communication In Understanding Culture

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Abstract: At present, food is more than just a means or an imperative element of survival. Some food is related to society, religions, continuity, culture and identity. Iban, Bidayuh, Malay, Melanau, Chinese, Sebob and Orang Ulu are among the natives' groups of who populates the largest state of Malaysia and each group owned their uniqueness of ethnic natives' food identity and cultures. Sarawak is culturally rich in terms of its various races, religions, languages, and celebrations. Therefore, present study aims to study on the Sarawak ethnic natives' traditional food “Tuak” as means to communicate in the Iban culture. Other researches study has been reviewed in filling the gap of understanding Sarawak culture through food communication. “Tuak” (alcoholic beverage made from rice wine) is one of the most cultural identities associated with the Iban ethnic and is very popular during the Gawai Dayak festive. Gawai relies on Tuak as an offer of thanksgiving to rice spirit for a bountiful harvest and also as a sign of gratitude and in requesting Petara for more blessings, long life and prosperity. In conclusion, this study highlighted the importance of the Sarawak ethnic food Tuak towards food symbolism as it represents an image of Iban culture, religions and festival which needed to be well protected and maintained and if it is not done so, it will not make a distinction or faded among the society.

Keyword: Culture, Food, Iban, Sarawak, Tuak

Introduction

As a part of the integral component in cultural and heritage, traditional food is recognized as being one of the medium to express the identity of the cuisine (Norazmir et al., 2012) because authenticity considered as a value, a motivational force (Cohen, 1988; Naoi, 2004; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006), a ‘claim’ or belonging (Peterson, 2005), and perception (Cohen, 1988) as cited in Kolar and Zabka (2010). Food is essentially ways in defining a culture's ethnic identity (Whitt, 2011). The knowledge of a traditional food is crucial for young generation to retain and apply the traditional food (Mohd Salehuddin et al., 2011) for it will lose the existence of the cultural food if it is not retained and apply the traditional food. Cuisine with multi-racial ethnic like in Malaysia including Sabah and Sarawak do have its own diversity to distinguish flavors that create uniqueness towards experiencing the genuine or real taste of ethnic natives traditional or origin food.

As argued by many researchers, cultures, identities and society can be understood by examining food (Derkas, 2015). In this sense, food is one of the most cultural identities for natives group in Sarawak with each ethnic has their own delicacies. The Iban is popular with “tubu” (stems), “tuak” (alcoholic beverage made from rice wine) and “pansuh” (meat cooked with bamboo), the Melanau with “tebaloi” (Sago palm crackers), “sagu” (extracted from Sago palm) and “umai” (raw fish mixed with lime juice) and Orang Ulu is well known with “garam barrio” (Highlands salt), “kikid” (broth), “tengayen” (local young leaves), and “urum giruq” (pudding) (Mohd Salehuddin et al., 2011) and as for the Malay “kek lapis Sarawak” (layered cake of Sarawak). All the foods mention above is popular in their culture and during the festive. These food treasures in turn have contributed to the uniqueness of Sarawak gastronomic culture.

In line with the above notion, despite the acceptance of the Sarawak food, they are still uncertain and unfamiliar or recognizing of Sarawak ethnic natives' traditional food symbolizing as means of communication in understanding the culture of vast Sarawak ethnic natives' groups. One of the ethnic food that are often misjudged is “Tuak”, because practically Tuak is considered as mere alcoholic drink

or just a liquor. It is a traditional treasure and it is sacred and it portrays such a symbolic in the Iban culture.

Literature Review

Ethnic, Cultural and Festival Food

According to Counihan & Esterik (2008) to know the meaning of a culture, communication and identity, food and food behavior can give a look at as a symbolic in food. Tuak or a rice wine is Dayak traditional liquor made from Rice wine, is a Sarawak ethnic native's group traditional drink during the Gawai festive. While Kim et al. (2010) and Organ et al. (2015) states that festival in food had brought in a multi-stimuli of environment to console an exploration, curiosity and entertainment. In Malaysia it is known that every celebration of festive like Hari Raya, a Muslims festive that are celebrated by preparing and serving the special traditional dishes, where else in Sarawak, the celebration of Hari Gawai whereby the Ibans will gather in their longhouses and Tuak (a rice wine) is served to the guest as welcoming drink as they entered the Iban longhouses and will also be served on the several rounds in a ceremony. As Holt & Amilien (2007) stresses out that by continuing on food practices and traditions, it will give potential in joining and stabilizing ethnicities.

Food Symbolism

Food shows love and affection, makes links and stimulates positive nostalgia of family, home and friendships. Food is also used as recognition, tokens of appreciation and is a central part of celebrations. Additionally, family and cultural legacies and heritage are preserved by food. Food is used to express generosity and reconciliation. Other than that, food functions as identity and cultural capital and as an agent of interculturalization at the community level. Food also produces multicultural communities and contributes a national identity (Perry, 2017). Food symbolism or food identity or food reflects show the cultural identity of each culture contains around the globe. As Shing (2007) said, where Buddhist has ritual ceremonies that celebrates during Buddha's birthday, there's a food name Pibimbap that is made by vegetables and spices as one of the food that symbolizes their ritual while for the Jewish, their food symbolism is known as potato pancake. Food also symbolizes on explaining the traditional behavior towards a society (DiPiazza, 2004). M. Noor (2012) stated that for Malay community, their special dish is pulut kuning as it is one of the dishes for feasts. Normally, this special dish is served in meaningful Malay ceremonies and events like berkhatan, khatam Quran, cukur jambul for baby, wedding or engagement events. To support the above notion, the most associated example for Pulut kuning that portray a symbolic food in the traditional ceremonies in a Malay society, is also stated by Wijaya (2011).

Food Culture

Kittler et al. (2012) coined the term food habits (also known as food culture or foodways) to describe the manner in which humans use food, including everything from how it is chosen, acquired, and distributed to whom that prepares, serves, and eats it. Food is quintessential symbol of identity through words "we are what we eat" culturally as well as individually (Lewis, 2006). Myth and legend in a culture frequently deal with food and without doubt, behind the cuisines of any culture lays an entire set of cultural meaning (Dougherty, 2002). Therefore, food play a central role in every culture. They further noted food not only reflects and expresses personal identity in life and in literature it also mirrors cultural identity and can create boundaries and differences between cultures (M. Noor, 2012). In addition, the relationship between culture and communication is a multifaceted and intimate one. Culture is created, shaped, transmitted and learned through communication, and communication practices are mostly created, shaped and transmitted by culture (Stajcic, 2013).

Materials and Methods

This research is conducted to determine the relevant of food as means of communication in understanding culture. This study was intended to discuss the emphasis of the acceptance and knowledge of Sarawak ethnic tradition food "Tuak". The intention to use secondary data as the research method tools on the study of Tuak as means of food communication in understanding culture from

previous research and also other documented data which related to these matters. Therefore, the academic journals and several books in the field of hospitality and tourism were selected for analysis. They are including; European Journal of Cultural Studies, Food and Communication, International Business and Cultural Studies, Humanities and Social Science, and Multicultural Education. All of these authors have been referred in collecting the data.

Result and Discussion

Tuak is a type of wine made from the rice called “beras pulut” and is offered during the festive of Gawai as welcome drink to people who came to the Iban longhouse. There is always Tuak during Gawai. Tuak is important during Gawai because everything relies on tuak. Gawai Taun Baru is celebrated to offer thanksgiving to rice spirit for a bountiful harvest and Tuak is symbolical of that. When the Ibans gathered during the Gawai, they would pray for God’s blessings before drinking Tuak. The occasion is marked by plentiful of food and Tuak. The Dayaks believed that this ritual blesses the visitors while at the same time to get rid of evil spirits. Dayak is a collective name for the tribes of Iban, Bidayuh, Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Murut and more.

Expectation from the host, as we know the drink Tuak will be served to those who visit the longhouse however, not all that Ngabang in Iban language or visit to longhouse can drink Tuak as some of them are Muslims who are prohibited and as for the pregnant women are also not encouraged to have Tuak. Therefore it is understandable and accepted for the host if the guest rejects the drinks when entering the longhouse but instead they will pour the Tuak to the ground as a sign of gratitude and ask Petara for more blessings, long life and prosperity. There is no coercion or an act of insulting even though it is part of the Iban culture.

Table 1 Similarity of Tuak and Pulut Kuning as Symbolic food

Tuak	Pulut kuning
Symbolic food of Iban society	Symbolic food of Malay society
A type of wine made from rice or glutinous rice “beras pulut”.	A yellow steamed glutinous rice made from rice. Also known as ‘beras pulut’ in Malay terminology.
Offered during the festive of Gawai as welcome drinks to people who came to the longhouse and also for event like weddings.	Offered during the special festive or serve in meaningful Malay ceremonies and events like berkhatan, khatam Quran, cukur jambul (shaving hair for baby) or weddings.
As an offering to thank the rice Spirit for a bountiful harvest.	Token of appreciation and gratitude from the host to guest who attend and celebrate the ceremonies for cooperation received on those occasions.
As a sign of friendship, in sync with the open house concept, traditional food and drinks will be offered to visitors. “Ngabang” in local Iban language where they will visit their relatives and friends.	As a sign of friendship, visiting relatives and giving blessings. Special bond or strengthening the relationship among society.

The table shows the similarities of Tuak and Pulut Kuning. This shows that food is relevant as means of communication in understanding culture. Pulut Kuning or yellow steamed glutinous rice is an important feature as it symbolized cultural practices, ritual, traditions and customs in the Malay society (Wijaya, 2011). Furthermore, food can be identified as a kind of symbolism because it relates with

ritualistic and beliefs as it remains traditional in a society in a culture (Mat Noor, 2012). Therefore, Tuak is a symbolic food of Iban culture as it relates to the ritual and ever since Tuak has involved from the ancient times, it is considered as traditional food of their ethnic.

Visiting each other during festive occasions is an essential part that already been practiced since before regardless of race or ethnic group and very popular practice among the Malaysian. This unique concept is an expression of friendship and united image of in the Malaysian communities and often called as "Open House." While, during the Gawai Dayak festive they will also have the same unique concept commonly called as "Ngabang" in local Iban language where they will visit their relatives and friends and "Tuak" will be served as welcome drink when they entered the longhouse besides other foods. The celebration starts on the 31st May of every year.

Tuak represent quality of the year's yield and hard work. It is a fruit of labor for that community thus it is considered as sacred. According to Rearick (2009), for some societies, symbolism applies in their culture is to be preserved or sustained from loss. For some others, only a few part of the traditional food is being consumed and prepared and are visible to their identity. Therefore, Tuak is prepared for celebration of Gawai and it is rarely available in the market as the process of making Tuak generally takes an average of two months and they will be using the rice that they have harvested and the culture of making and preparing the drink for Gawai festive always forwarded from time to time. As Kittler & Sucher (2001) explained that culture is practices through beliefs, values and attitude that been accepted by ethnic group of people.

As argued by Ali & Abdullah (2012), in Malaysian communities, there is an involvement of variation towards food and culture. It is true because during Gawai there will be Tuak served and other traditional delicacies. During any of the Malaysian "Open House", people regardless of races will come and visit and mostly the host will served varieties of traditional food like lemang, ketupat and rendang for Eid Fitri while Pulut Kuning which also be considered as a special dish is usually served during special occasions and ceremonies such as weddings, majlis berkhatan (circumcision), majlis khatam Qur'an (complete reciting the whole Quran among young kids), majlis cukur jambul (shaving an infant hair) or engagement ceremony.

Therefore, traditional food like lemang, ketupat, rendang, Pulut Kuning and Tuak is often served during festive occasion and is part of the culture and with traditional dances and music the celebrations turns merrier. Additionally, this visiting culture among the various communities is the concrete foundation to promote and build strong esprit de corp and cooperation.

Conclusion

Therefore, the extension of this study will fill the gap of understanding Sarawak food cultures through food. Thus it will give good impact if the information and knowledge is delivered effectively through the foods which act as a means of communication. The purpose we should view food as a form of communication is because it is directly linked to both culture and ritual.

This study will also help to preserve our races identity and culture by sustaining our tradition even the world is now experiencing evolution and modernization therefore it is important for us to appreciate our traditional food also tradition by preserving and sustaining it from extinguish for the next future generation and if it is not preserve well we will lose our culture and the identity of races will slowly extinct from the face of the earth.

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