

## The Issues and Challenges Faced by Malay Cuisine in the Foreign Market

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### ABSTRACT

*The traditional food of a culture in a society is continuously inherited from the old generation to the new generation. The traditional element is an in-depth understanding of the function of each material, techniques of preparation, and the practice in our daily cooking. This understanding in the form of preparation, meal preparation, tips, use of certain equipment, and raw materials are mysteries difficult to be unravelled. The Malay cultural heritage food is an integral asset among Malaysians in general and the Malay race in particular. Malay cuisine is one of the special and unique blended of many traditions from around the region. However, when Malay culture and cuisine are introduced to other countries, they faced certain hurdles and challenges. This study investigates the issues and challenges faced by Malay cuisine in the foreign market. The points in question are, 1) Why are Malay cuisine difficult to be exported to other countries? 2) Why Malay cuisine is less popular than cuisines from other countries? 3) What are the factors that make foods from a country of origin can be successfully exported? These issues and challenges will be parsed and discussed based on the existing written collection. Recommendations will be made on the mechanisms that enable the success of Malay cuisine food to be commercialized abroad, as well as future research examining the success factors of traditional food exported abroad.*

**Keywords:** Assimilation, Cuisine, Food, Heritage, Malay Cuisine

### INTRODUCTION

The human body requires food as nourishment and sustenance (Perry, 2017). Food significantly influences human looks, health, emotion, attitude, interest, source of life, social group, communication, races or nation's identity, and self-identification with tradition. Barthes (2008) mentioned food is a mechanism for communication, an identity, a norm, a situation and an attitude. Gunkel (2016) defines food as "a way of communication, a language, whereas we associate ourselves with a race, nation, festivities, and culture. Food is often used as a medium to reflect upon our culture, tradition, history, and someone's origin (Barthes, 2008).

Malaysia consists of multiracial ethnic that is enriched with a multitude of traditions and cultures, with an estimated population of 32.7 million in 2020 compared to 32.5 million in 2019 with an annual growth rate of 0.4 per cent. The Bumiputera and the Malays consist of up 69.6% of the total population. This is followed by the Chinese (22.6%), Indians (6.8%) and the rest of the minority (1%). The Bumiputera in Peninsular Malaysia are Malays, and the Bumiputera in Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan are ethnic groups of Malays, Melanau, Dayak (including Iban, Bidayuh, & Orang Ulu), Kadazan, Dusun, Bajau and other ethnic groups that are acknowledged as Bumiputera (Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2020).

The Malays are the most dominant ethnic group in Malaysia, which represents more than half of the total Malaysian population. In general, the Malays are Muslim, speaks the Malay language, and practice Malay culture and tradition in their daily life. Their tradition and culture could be traced from their food culture. Traditionally, Malay food is defined as food that is produced by Malays, using local ingredients and local equipment, using recipes that have been handed down through many generations (Mason & Omar, 2003).

The traditional Malay cuisine is an asset in the form of knowledge and skills passed down from previous generations of Malay ancestors to their grandchildren continuously. It is a great practice by almost every culture, which is to hand over culinary knowledge to the next generations. However, while we are proud of Malay cuisine and tradition, questions arise as to why Malay cuisine is not as popular and in demand as cuisines from Italy, United States, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Korea and China? Besides competing with other cuisines, Omar and Omar (2018) reported other factors such as acculturation that always mislead the understanding of Malaysian cuisine with other neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore. In addition to that, the cuisine between the countries can be seen as similar in terms of basic ingredients, tastes and flavours, cooking techniques, and preparation methods which lead travellers to have a misperception of Malay cuisine. At this point, it is important to identify and establish a firm stand of Malaysian food as one unique identity which represents the identity of Malaysian cuisine.

Therefore, this study will present an early-stage debate to see the reliability and marketability of traditional Malay cuisine competing as a source of cultural export for Malaysia. The latter discussion will be focused based on the research questions as follows:

1. Why Malay cuisine is difficult to be exported to other countries?
2. Why Malay cuisine is less popular than cuisines from other countries?
3. What are the factors that make food from a country of origin be successfully exported?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Introduction to Malay Cuisine

The cooking method and the traditional Malay food differ extended from north to south. At the same time, there is a plethora of differences and similarities which makes it much more interesting to uncover. Malay food is largely influenced by different traditions and cultures, such as the Arabs, Indians, Chinese, Siamese, Javanese, Minangkabau and much more. The influence derives from historical moments in Malaysia's history when most of these cultures intertwined, during trades, feasts, or daily social meet, thus enriching the existing traditions and cultures. Most places in Malaysia are identified by their unique meals such as *Rendang Daging*, *Laksa*, *Nasi Lemak*, *Tapai* and much more. Likewise, most Malay food share similar usage of spices and ingredients, which can be seen extending with many grown local ingredients of different spices, and herbs (Raji, Karim, Ishak, Arshad, 2017). Moreover, the Malay food can be described in five (5) characters; first, it is rich with herbs and spices; secondly, fresh coconut milk is used in their cooking; third, it is usually spicy and hot; fourth, the meat

is usually cooked in thick gravy; and fifth, fried fish or seafood is usually marinated with turmeric powder (Ainudin, 2013).

Brissenden (2003) stated that Malay food starts to appear in historical writing in the 13th century and it develops extensively when trades are progressing during that time. The major influence during this time comes largely from Indonesia and Thailand. Based on Malaysia's history, states in the north such as Penang, Perlis, and Kedah (close to Thailand) are influenced by the hot, spicy, sour taste (Hutton & Tettoni, 2005). On the other hand, in Penang, tamarind, limes, and sour star fruit are used for fragrance, tanginess, and sourness. Bird's eye chillies are used for their hot taste which comes from the Thai's influence (Tan, 2004). In East Malaysia, the states of Kelantan and Terengganu possess the Thais influence as well. It can be seen in *Nasi Kerabu*, one of the special dishes popular on the east coast, which uses Kaffir lime leaves, mint leaves, Kantan flowers, wild chillies, basil leaves, and Kesum leaves are examples of the Thai's influence. The states of Kelantan and Terengganu possess many similarities, however, the meals from Kelantan are much sweeter than in Terengganu (Sharif, et al., 2008). Most experts in Malay food agreed that the states of Kelantan and Terengganu use fresh coconut milk, which makes their food much creamier, thick, and fatty, especially in their gravy and curries. As for desserts, most of them are sweet with a small variety of hot and spicy flavours (Brissenden, 2003).

The influence of Indonesian cuisine can also be seen in all the states in Malaysia, especially in the South. In the southern region, most Javanese who have lived in the state of Johor for the past few centuries, have influenced the state's cuisines through assimilation of Javanese cooking techniques, a mixture of ingredients and tastebuds (Raji, et al., 2017). The influence of Javanese cuisine, which has the characteristics of sour, sweet and spicy and a little Minangkabau influence from West Sumatra (Mohd Zahari, et al., 2013) whose descendants can now be traced in Negeri Sembilan is known for popular dishes such as *Rendang Minang and Masak Lemak Cili Api* which use fresh coconut milk, bird's eye chillies and spices (Brissenden, 2003). The state of Melaka also offers the diversity of Chinese and Malay culture which resulted in the Baba Nyonya culture and cuisine, a blend of Malay culture and Portuguese (Zainal, Zali & Kassim, 2010) and a combination of Malay and Indian culture, which creates Chitti cuisine by the Chitti community. In the states of Perak and Pahang, Rahman (2010) stated that *Gulai Tempoyak* and *Rendang* are among the famous dishes and are commonly served at celebrations such as weddings and during the festive season. As a result, Malay cuisine is a blend and mixture of many cultures, races, ethnic and nationalities. These rich blends of cuisines identified as Malay cuisine would not be possible if the Malays persist to maintain the original cuisine, which they possessed in the first place, many centuries ago.

Traditional Malay cuisine such as *Nasi Lemak, Nasi Minyak, Serunding, Nasi Impit, Ketupat, Lemang, Nasi Tomato, Asam Pedas, Rendang, Masak Lemak, Sambal, Pais*, and several traditional snacks or kuihs such as *Akok, Seri Muka, Lompat Tikam, Bahulu, Keropok Ikan, Cucur* and many more are traditional Malay cuisine passed down from generation to generation. However, these foods are only popular in Malaysia, in comparison to other cuisines such as pasta, pizza and various types of bread from Italy, French cuisine, fast food from the United States, Japanese dishes, Indonesian cuisine, Thai dishes and dishes from China and India as well as the latest dishes from Korea that successfully captured the hearts of many Malaysians. The popularity of many other nation's cuisines in comparison to Malaysian cuisine food is further supported by Waldfogel (2019) as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Cuisine Net Exports**

NO	COUNTRY	EXPORT	IMPORT	NET EXPORT	NO	COUNTRY	EXPORT	IMPORT	NET EXPORT
1	Argentina	4,206	6,119	-1,913	23	Malaysia	2,990	4,855	-1,865
2	Australia	1,394	16,463	-15,069	24	Mexico	29,251	12,276	16,975
3	Austria	1,392	8,304	-6,912	25	Morocco	2,561	1,419	1,143
4	Belgium	1,922	5,715	-3,793	26	New Zealand	172	3,653	-3,481
5	Brazil	7,243	46,138	-38,895	27	Norway	1,869	3,444	-1,575

6	Canada	295	15,510	-15,215	28	Peru	2,202	2,322	-119
7	Chile	1,241	1,396	-155	29	Poland	2,852	4,057	-1,204
8	China	114,822	110,351	4,471	30	Portugal	3,131	4,043	-912
9	Colombia	2,127	5,038	-2,911	31	Russia	11,740	6,292	5,448
10	Czech Rep.	3,467	3,070	397	32	South Korea	18,048	32,739	-14,691
11	Denmark	1,265	3,417	-2,152	33	Spain	21,358	41,649	-20,290
12	Egypt	7,971	1,934	6,038	34	Sweden	1,926	7,754	-5,828
13	France	40,353	21,391	18,962	35	Switzerland	1,739	7,978	-6,239
14	Germany	12,208	22,483	-10,276	36	Taiwan	5,287	9,551	-4,264
15	Greece	9,772	4,096	5,676	37	Thailand	21,409	10,309	11,101
16	Hungary	2,614	1,619	995	38	The Netherlands	2,498	5,688	-3,190
17	India	46,607	50,841	-4,233	39	Turkey	18,676	2,021	16,655
18	Indonesia	8,335	18,462	-10,127	40	Ukraine	1,398	1,716	-319
19	Ireland	2,035	3,703	-1,669	41	United Kingdom	9,928	30,064	-20,137
20	Israel	3,337	2,038	1,300	42	United States	26,919	160,698	-133,778
21	Italy	176,219	17,945	158,274	43	Venezuela	1,785	236	1,549
22	Japan	91,447	47,564	43,883	44	Vietnam	10,282	8,957	1,325

Notes: Estimates for 2017, in millions of dollars. Estimation is taken from restaurants' sales that serve the country's cuisine as well as Tripadvisor (Waldfogel, 2019).

## The Export of Malay Cuisine in Foreign Market

The idea of Malay cuisine as an export commodity is rarely discussed. This is because traditional dishes can be produced in foreign countries using existing materials in the country without giving any return to the country of origin of the traditional dish. Examples of Malay cuisine such as *Nasi Lemak*, *Nasi Minyak*, *Serunding*, *Nasi Impit*, *Ketupat*, *Lemang*, *Nasi Kandar*, *Nasi Tomato*, dishes such as *Asam Pedas*, *Rendang*, *Masak Lemak*, *Sambal*, *Pais*, traditional cakes such as *Akok*, *Seri Muka*, *Lompat Tikam*, *Bahulu*, *Keropok Ikan*, and *Cucur*. Is it possible to produce similar tasting, original Malay cuisines in the foreign market successfully?

Many Malaysians who have tried their fate in trading this traditional cuisine abroad are successful in their mission. For example, in Paris, France, honey chicken rice (*Nasi Ayam Madu*) has received a very good response among the locals, while in Seoul, Korea, "*Nasi Lemak*" has become a food sought not only by Malaysians but also by the Korean community there. In Melbourne, Australia, the establishment of Sarawak Kitchen has laid a solid foundation to sell dishes such as "*Laksa Sarawak*" which received a good response. In Edinburgh, Scotland, Kelantan's "*Nasi Kerabu*" has made it closer to the hearts of the locals, and Malaysians who reside there. "*Keropok lekor*", a type of traditional food which originates from Terengganu, has now been in the city of London under the brand name Chicken Cottage and will be marketed in 6 other nations namely Dubai, Algeria, Germany, and other locations in the United Kingdom. Hong Kong's Café Malacca that serves cuisine such as fish head curry and Chili Crab are also an example of traditional cuisine that are successfully marketed overseas. Other examples of successful Malay cuisine can be seen significantly with the establishment of Malay cuisine restaurants in London as shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: List of Successful Malaysian Restaurants Located in London**

Restaurant	Dishes Offered in the Restaurant
Rasa Sayang Restaurant, Macclesfield Street London	<i>Roti Canai, Nasi Lemak, Rendang, Nasi Ayam, Nasi Goreng, Laksa Singapore</i>
Satay House, Paddington	<i>Satay, Nasi Lemak, Nasi Beriani, Fried Noodles, Mee Bandung, Nasi Ayam, Kari Laksa, Rendang, Ayam Percik, Sago Gula Melaka</i>
Melur Malaysian Restaurant, Paddington	<i>Tom Yum, Soto Ayam, Satay, Ayam Goreng Berempah, Gado-Gado, Rendang, Ayam Percik, Asam Pedas, Dendeng Berlado, Nasi Lemak, Mee Goreng Mamak</i>
Roti King, Doric Way	<i>Roti Canai, Kuah Dhal, Murtabak, Nasi Lemak, Rendang Daging, Nasi Goreng, Mee Goreng Mamak, Kari Laksa, Teh Tarik</i>

Dapur, Lamb's Conduit Passage	<i>Lontong Muo with Satay, Kacang Pol, Soto Ayam, Nasi Kukus Ayam Bakar, Mee Rebus Johor, Rendang Daging</i>
Cafe Rasa Malaysia, Westfield, Stratford	<i>Mee Goreng Mamak, Nasi Lemak, Roti Canai, Satay, Char Koeay Teow, Murtabak, Karipap</i>
Tukdin Flavors of Malaysian Restaurant, Bayswater	<i>Sup Ekor, Popiah, Ikan Bakar, Sambal Tumis Udang, Rendang Daging, Daging Salai Masak Lemak, Nasi Lemak, Pajeri Terung</i>

## The Challenges Faced by Malay Cuisines in Foreign Market

Even though there have been many successful outlets selling Malay cuisine outside Malaysia, the statistics by the National Bureau of Economic Research which shows cuisines that are popular around the world indicates Malay foods are not very popular in the foreign market. The study looked at the food served in restaurants and also the number of restaurants serving food from the original country. In the same report, Malaysian cuisine occupies 25th place, while Indonesia, occupies the 17th position out of 44 countries that are listed (Waldfoegel, 2019). This information indicates that although Malaysian entrepreneurs have successfully brought, marketed and sold Malay cuisine abroad, the influence of Malay cuisine is still low globally. By comparison, Italian cuisine ranked first, followed by China, Japan, India and France (Waldfoegel, 2019).

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative content analysis of past literature review and newspaper articles were used in the study. The sample of the study was Malaysia's Kitchen Programme articles conducted in association with MATRADE in many foreign countries to market Malaysia's local cuisines. Keywords of Malay local cuisine export were searched through the Online Library of Congress and UiTM online database. A total of 45 newspaper articles and journal articles highlighting the importance and success of Malay local cuisine being exported were identified. Text analysis was conducted on the content of each article. The majority of the newspaper's text comes from an interview of established and experienced hospitality and culinary industry practitioners and past literature of journal articles. The results from the literature analysis among hospitality, culinary and industry practitioners, which were interviewed by journalists and published were used as the first source of analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Analysis of several publications consisting of interviews of chefs, commentaries and facts of previous research is being performed to answer the research questions.

### Research Question 1: Why Malay cuisine is difficult to be exported/produced in other countries?

According to Strohl (2019), authentic food could not be replicated since it will create 2 things, a fixed structure and a rigid limit, which is the opposite of cuisines. In his own words:

*"To define authenticity as replicability is a conceptual misunderstanding about the nature of the cuisine. To understand the genuineness of cuisine as identicalness is to treat it as having fixed essences and rigid borders—two things no cuisine has ever possessed. Cuisines are not Platonic forms: they are loose collections of culinary projects, all porous, malleable, permeable and changeable to varying degrees. Relatedly, to valorise the pursuit of replicability is to encourage rigidity, inappropriate (even bizarre) standards of "purity," and an essentializing of ethnic others. It freezes cultures in amber, as it were, demanding adherence to a standard that is impossible in practice and principle both"*

In this comment by Strohl (2019), he mentioned the idea of trying to keep food authentic while being produced in other markets will only promote rigidity, kills creativity and promotes monotonous cuisines. Instead, it should be assimilated, celebrated and enjoyed as these are the methods to keep the cuisines alive and enjoyed by many generations across borders in many years ahead. There are at least five categories of reasons that people have for valuing culinary authenticity. Here is a list, with several potentially objectionable reasons.

- Aesthetic reasons: cultural taste preferences, alignment with cultural taste preferences, setting a baseline for comparison, used as a basis for creative deviation, category-dependent aesthetic features, excessive rigidity
- Personal reasons: nostalgia, personal attachment
- Educational reasons: curiosity, independent interest in the culture or context
- Cultural reasons: pride indistinctness, community bonding, tradition, nativism, nationalism
- Social reasons: social signalling, friendship, otherness fetishism (Strohl, 2019)

Essentially, the idea of Malay cuisine could be replicated is highly debatable since it is against the idea of cuisine, which allows flexibility, variety and creative touch. However, the idea to recreate Malay cuisine in other countries due to the five reasons mentioned above is plausible. However, Malay cuisine is not difficult to be exported, if the cuisine produced could be assimilated, according to the taste of the foreign market. As an example, a very spicy and hot dishes from Malay cuisines should reduce its spice and chillies if it wants to be sold in the European and American market. In terms of ingredients and special equipment/utensils, due to globalization (Pinstrup-Andersen 2002; Feenstra & Taylor 2008), many of these ingredients are readily available in the foreign market, and much modern equipment could be used in place to produce Malay cuisines.

Although “physically” Malay cuisines could be produced in the foreign market using readily available ingredients and equipment/utensils, the debate of either it is the original Malay cuisines will always be there due to the 5 reasons for valuing culinary authenticity mentioned above.

## **Research Question 2: Why Malay cuisine is less popular than cuisines from other countries?**

According to an international agency report of YouGov, which has studied 25,000 respondents in 24 countries on dishes from 34 countries, Malaysia ranked 20 of the 34 countries surveyed. This is calculated as lower index popularity whereas Singapore occupies a better position than Malaysia (Smith, 2019). However, Malaysian Celebrity Chef and Food Ambassador, Datuk Redzuawan Ismail or also known as Chef Wan, disagree with this statement. He mentioned Malay cuisine is not popular globally due to a small number of Malay’s cuisine restaurants in foreign countries. However, food lovers will choose Malay cuisine when given due to its unique taste, texture and diversity (The Star Press Reader, 2019).

MasterChef Malaysia Jury, Chef Johari Edrus, stated that there is a misunderstanding between Malaysia and Singapore regarding their traditional food with most of Singapore's traditional food originated from Malaysia. This was certainly not a surprise because Singapore was at one time a part of Malaysia, and before that was part of Malaya and part of the Nusantara land (The Star Press Reader, 2019).

The deliciousness and popularity of Malay cuisine are undeniable with the announcement of the Channel News Network (CNN) regarding the world's top 50 dishes, where *Assam Laksa* from Penang, Malaysia ranks number 7 in the list (Culinary Journeys, 2020). Apart from that, the latest success of Malay traditional dishes namely “Nasi Lemak”, at the 2020 Irish Chef Culinary Competition (Ireland Chef Culinary Competition), by Chef Siti Safura Mohd Tawil also proves that the traditional

Malay/Malaysian cuisine has a taste, texture and aroma that gains a place among the international community (Mamat, 2020). This was further supported by the victory of Ping Coombes, the natives of Ipoh, Perak at the MasterChef United Kingdom competition, serving Malay traditional cuisine, “*Nasi Lemak*” (Malaymail, 2014).

Thus, Malay cuisines are very tasty, acceptable and well celebrated in the international markets. However, the lack of Malay restaurants, or restaurants serving Malay cuisines, plus the misunderstanding between Malay cuisines with Singapore, Thailand, Indonesian cuisines makes Malay food not as popular in comparison with the other countries mentioned.

### **Research Question 3: What are the factors that make food from a country of origin can be successfully exported?**

Firstly, countries such as Italy, China, India, France and Korea practices 'Place Branding', which is to brand their traditional dishes with their country. Malaysia also underwent this, but the advantages of the first and large-scale world countries are in terms of marketing their brands (Florek & Conejo, 2007). According to them, the lack of resources to market and brand, the country's traditional cuisine such as Malaysia is a big challenge. Global marketing skills, energy and capital resources, and government's priorities play a big role in branding traditional food. 'Place Branding' is critical as we can see countries such as the United States, a developed and high-tech country concentrating on their food culture through the 'Chefs Corps' program in 2012, Thailand, which is indeed synonymous with food and culture consistently sending their chefs abroad promoting their meals through the 'Global Thai Program', and South Korea through their overseas program 'Kimchi Diplomacy' introduced their meals and tradition in many countries. At the same time, many small countries that lack resources and preferences, sell their traditional dishes in the form of a 'Niche' market. Here we can see the capabilities of Malaysian entrepreneurs and traders who successfully produce, market, and sell traditional Malay dishes in South Korea, Scotland, the United Kingdom, and other countries as discussed earlier in the academic literature.

Secondly, food acculturation is known to be a bi-directional process (Satia-Abouta, 2003; Wahlqvist, 2002). That is, ethnic food culture and host food culture affect each other. As a result, the food acculturation process is dynamic and complicated because a mixture of positive and negative consequences of food acculturation coexists when different cultures encounter each other. Many countries attempt to successfully globalize and localize their national dishes and base such attempts on investigations of customer preferences. Japanese food globalization dates back to the 1960s. The Japanese Government developed “Japanese-style grilled food” for Western consumers when Japan hosted the 1964 Summer Olympics. At that time, Western people viewed eating sushi as a barbaric practice, much like eating raw meat (Issenberg, 2007). However, in the 1980s, in the context of the new, global popularity of Japanese products, Japanese cuisine and Japanese restaurants were introduced all over the world. At that time, Japanese ingredients, sauces, cooking utensils and interiors were all introduced and Japanese restaurants were promoted as providing an all-around experience of Japanese dining culture (Ceccarini, 2010). This acculturation process is mainly conducted by the government to introduce their culture, way of working, and cuisines of the world. Although it is time-consuming, given time and pace, traditional cuisine will reach global height and recognition through proper branding, food acculturation process and steady continuous support from the governing bodies of the country.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the literature and discussions above, it makes us understand that for any traditional cuisine food to be successful in foreign markets, it must go through the assimilation process so that it can be produced in the most cost-efficient, safe, and convenient manner. Assimilation is a word that is closely related to traditional cuisine since it allows creativity, flexibility, and openness, while standardization and rigid limits are the opposite of traditional cuisines. After all, the idea of bringing a traditional cuisine

to other countries is so that people of other races, countries or religions, would be able to enjoy the meal according to their taste buds and preferences.

Meanwhile, at the same time, producers who re-produced traditional cuisine should be concerned with maintaining the taste, texture, appearance and aromas which are well suited to the foreign market for the cuisines to last. There is an advantage when Malay cuisine is successfully being commercialized in other countries, as it can promote culture and country through the food itself. The number of foreigners that would likely to travel to Malaysia will increase and experience by themselves the original taste of *Nasi Lemak*, *Roti Canai* or *Laksa*. In addition, cultural understanding, affirmation of Malaysian's rich culture and diversity in the international marketplace will certainly help Malaysian business endeavour, either in the food business or not.

As a recommendation, any department responsible for conserving Malay cuisine should take proactive steps in searching for traditional Malay cuisines all over states in Malaysia, record the preparation and ingredients, preserving and maintaining the traditional cuisines whether in visual or written forms as it can be used as references in the future. In terms of its originality and the debates around it, there is no doubt that the original Malay Cuisine must be produced and consumed in its native land, Malaysia, for it to be called, inarguably traditional.

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