

A Study on Gastrodiplomacy through Food Themed Mural in Lorong Seni, Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the convergence of gastrodiplomacy and public art, namely a traditional food-themed mural located in Lorong Seni, Seremban, Negeri Sembilan. Gastrodiplomacy utilises traditional cuisine as a strategic instrument to merge diplomacy and culture, examined in relation to how this mural may honour the culinary traditions of Negeri Sembilan and facilitate the promotion of this gastronomic legacy through a visual medium. This research employs qualitative approaches, including a site visit for mural location selection and a comprehensive analysis of the mural by using art criticism theoretical framework developed by Feldman. Feldman proposed four primary processes in art criticism concerning visual components, artistic methods, and cultural narratives included in food-themed murals: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgement. This study's findings are anticipated to demonstrate how the generated murals may serve as a significant element in cultural promotion, tourist enhancement, and as an innovative platform for visual gastrodiplomacy.

Keywords: Gastrodiplomacy, Public Art, Mural, Food, Art Criticism

INTRODUCTION

Public art and gastro diplomacy are vital in advancing a community's historical narrative and cultural identity. Various meanings, views, and artistic works, including objects, acts, and events, define public art. The predominant inclination in valuing public art is prioritizing the artistic element as the foremost component. According to Sharp et al. (2005), public art shares similarities with art in general; both are deeply rooted in taste and preference.

Meanwhile, gastro diplomacy enhances public art by utilizing traditional cuisine to promote cultural comprehension and cultivate a sense of community. Tara et al. (2016) mentioned that the interplay between gastro diplomacy and public art fosters a dynamic synergy that supports identity, culture, and tradition while enriching culturally related experiences and augmenting heritage values.

Tara et al. (2016) also asserted that traditional cuisine embodies cultural symbols and serves as a potent diplomatic instrument. This form of gastro diplomacy is extensively employed worldwide by nations such as Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea, and Peru, which use traditional foods to enhance cultural understanding as integral components of national branding



Fig. 1 Exhibition of *Palet Budaya - Interaksi Seni & Gastronomi*

An example in Malaysia is the revolutionary art show, "*Cultural Palette: Interaction of Art & gastronomy*," held at the National Visual Arts Gallery. An exhibition showcasing the intricate link of art, culture, society, tradition, and economics. This exhibition integrates curated artworks with thoughts illustrating the intricate link among art, culture, society, tradition, and economics. This ongoing exhibition examines social interaction through food and its societal implications. By incorporating cultural and communicative elements, it investigates gastronomic needs as a fundamental aspect of social bonding while inviting the audience to reflect on the connection between food and individual identity, which is inextricably linked to the social structure of contemporary society. The inclusion of this show underscores that culinary culture mirrors a community's history and identity, with the artworks representing the quotidian experiences of cultural absorption and alteration. The artist emphasizes the conventional method of addressing food relationships in social interactions (Dewan Budaya, 2024).

Beyond the recent exhibition, *Lorong Seni* in Negeri Sembilan, an initiative by the Seremban Municipal Council (MPS), features 20 murals depicting the state's heritage, culture, traditional cuisine, and history. However, some aspects of the state's traditional cuisine, such as *masak lemak cili api*, are not consistently represented in the visual art along the *Lorong seni*.



Fig. 2 Ayam masak lemak

This approach enhances the cultural narrative emphasized in the art corridor, boosts tourism appeal, and fortifies Negeri Sembilan's identity. Negeri Sembilan shares cultural, linguistic, and culinary similarities with Padang in Indonesia, thereby facilitating its recognition on a global scale.

Research Objective

- i. To study mural paintings based on gastrodiplomacy at *Lorong Seni*, Seremban using Feldman's Art Criticism theory.
- ii. To examine the potential impact of integrating traditional food elements into public murals in fostering greater cultural understanding, appreciation, and tourism for Negeri Sembilan

Problem Statement

Public art plays a vital role in showing a community's cultural identity and history. The initiative by the Seremban Municipal Council (MPS) in *Lorong Seni*, Seremban, Negeri Sembilan has incorporated heritage elements such as history and culture in the aspect of Negeri Sembilan cultural identity. Negeri Sembilan is renowned for its culinary heritage, such as *masak lemak cili api*, a symbol of cultural wealth; however, this traditional food does not have a narrative representation in the visual arts at *Lorong Seni*. Integrating these culinary elements into public art can serve as a gastro-diplomacy tool to share Negeri Sembilan's heritage while strengthening its cultural identity. The absence of this representation limits the potential of public art to present a comprehensive picture of the state culture. It will risk promoting its culture and recognition at the regional and international levels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Economist (2002) indirectly popularised gastro diplomacy, introducing Thailand's ambitious project known as "Global Thai." This initiative aimed to increase the number of Thai restaurants worldwide serving authentic Thai cuisine. Later renamed "Thai Cuisine to the World," the program implemented business funding mechanisms to support companies in establishing their legitimacy within the international community. It also certified authentic Thai restaurants abroad to encourage their expansion. Thailand is widely recognized as the first country to engage in gastro-diplomatic activities to strengthen its cultural influence on a global scale.

The discourse on gastrodiplomacy has since expanded, gaining prominence through the work of Rockower (2012), who provided a comprehensive explanation of the concept. His writings have become widely referenced and appreciated among scholars of international relations. According to Nye (2004), international relations involve two primary approaches: hard power and soft power. Gastrodiplomacy is situated within the realm of soft power, which eschews threats or military instruments to foster engagement with other nations through cultural means. In gastro diplomacy, traditional or local cuisine is the "weapon" of choice to build connections and influence.

As Rockower (2012) succinctly puts it, gastro diplomacy wins hearts and minds through the stomach, emphasizing affective relationships where food becomes the primary medium for inter-nation communication. Gastrodiplomacy links food with foreign policy by showcasing how countries can communicate their culture, history, and heritage through cuisine. By adopting a dialogical approach, a country shares its culinary heritage with others, allowing foreign audiences to experience a range of flavors, with food acting as the central vehicle for cultural exchange. Gastrodiplomacy also offers a practical means of enabling individuals who may have yet to have the opportunity to travel to experience and learn about other cultures through the sense of taste.

Pham (2013) further argues that gastro diplomacy enables governments to introduce their nation's culinary wealth to foster national identity, stimulate economic investment, and promote international trade. Rockower provides a more abstract yet practical perspective on gastro diplomacy, while Pham elaborates in greater detail, focusing on the state as the central actor in these initiatives. While governments often initiate, direct, and fund gastro-diplomatic efforts, private organizations, businesses, and civil society also play significant roles in supporting the diplomatic process.

Governments act as the primary drivers, creating and implementing policies and funding programs to promote their national cuisine globally. Private organizations and businesses, including restaurant owners and food brands, contribute by marketing and engaging in culinary activities that align with gastro-diplomatic goals. Domestic society, comprising citizens, influences the success of gastro diplomacy through their support and public opinion, which can shape government actions. Meanwhile, foreign societies represent the target audiences who experience the cuisine of another nation, forming perceptions and fostering intercultural understanding through their culinary experiences.

Solleh (2015) defines gastro diplomacy as utilizing cuisine to promote cultural heritage and influence international audiences. One notable example is Malaysia's Malaysia Kitchen Programme (MKP) initiative, launched by the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE). As a multicultural nation, Malaysia's cuisine reflects its cultural plurality, blending Malay, Chinese, and Indian influences. This program aims to showcase Malaysian culinary traditions globally by hosting food festivals, supporting Malaysian restaurants abroad, and engaging in public campaigns like the Malaysian Night Market at Trafalgar Square. The program highlights iconic dishes such as nasi lemak, laksa, and rendang to position Malaysia as a culinary destination.

Furthermore, these efforts underscore the potential of food as a medium for projecting cultural narratives and fostering national pride. These activities introduce Malaysian cuisine to broader audiences and serve as tools for promoting cultural understanding and boosting tourism. Solleh (2015) argues that Malaysia's gastro-diplomacy initiatives highlight its multicultural identity through its diverse cuisine. Moreover, the study identifies the economic benefits of gastro diplomacy, including increased trade in Malaysian food products and higher tourist arrivals. By framing food as a symbol of cultural pride and a tool for international engagement,

Malaysia demonstrates how cuisine can be a powerful instrument for soft power and public diplomacy. Similarly, Nahar et al. (2018) emphasize Malaysia's nation-branding efforts and the strategic importance of gastro diplomacy in showcasing Malaysia's cultural identity and economic potential. It shows how food can be transformed into a compelling medium for advancing soft power and public diplomacy initiatives.

In related literature, Borghini and Baldini (2014) conceptualize cooking and dining as forms of public art, describing them as creative, participatory, and cultural activities that reflect the values and identities of individuals and communities. They highlight how culinary traditions function as cultural storytelling, conveying a nation's history, customs, and social values. By positioning food within the framework of public art, culinary practices can shape public perceptions and influence global cultural dynamics.

This conceptualization of food practices, particularly cooking and dining as cultural expressions, aligns closely with Rockower's (2012) notion of gastro diplomacy. Rockower posits that food is a powerful tool for strengthening international relations and enhancing a nation's global image. By using food as a medium for cultural engagement, nations can communicate their identity, foster positive relationships, and promote cross-cultural understanding. This perspective reinforces the principles of gastro diplomacy, demonstrating how food can serve as both a bridge for cultural exchange and a strategic element of public diplomacy.

Collectively, gastro diplomacy is an innovative soft power strategy that uses cuisine to foster cultural exchange, enhance national identity, and build international relationships. It is also a strategic tool for nation branding and international diplomacy. Initiatives such as Thailand's Global Thai and Malaysia's Malaysia Kitchen Programme (MKP) illustrate how food can be leveraged to project cultural narratives, boost tourism, and stimulate economic growth.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses the art criticism model framework introduced by Feldman (1970) to explore the relationship between public art and gastro-diplomacy elements in public art centered in *Lorong Seni*, Seremban, and Negeri Sembilan. According to Alashari (2021), Feldman's art criticism model has four main stages: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment; this method provides a more systematic and structured approach to interpreting and evaluating works of art through their cultural significance and context. This model used in this study aims to analyze public art more critically and in-depth while interacting with gastro-diplomacy elements to strengthen the understanding of cultural identity. This approach is used as a medium of cultural diplomacy to support preserving and promoting Negeri Sembilan traditions. Integrating gastro-diplomacy elements into public art provides a comprehensive view of the role of public art in fostering cultural assimilation into the general public.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A few findings have been disclosed from the study based on the data collected through visual analysis and site visits to the place where the research was conducted. The following is an overview of the findings that emerged as a direct result of the methods used in this study. The researcher has labeled and categorized the mural themes discovered in *Lorong Seni Seremban* by reviewing this study and putting them into specific groups. It has been determined that there are several recurring themes, and a representation of them may be found in the following Table 1.

Table 1 List of Mural Art in *Lorong Seni*, Seremban, Negeri Sembilan

Art Name	Theme
<i>Harimau Malaya</i>	Animal
<i>Benteng Walk</i>	Local Symbols
<i>Nostalgia Zaman Kanak-Kanak</i>	Local Symbols
<i>Kobau Den</i>	Local Symbols
<i>Babu Roti</i>	Local Symbols
<i>Ilusi Optik</i>	Local Symbols

<i>Baboo Corner</i>	Local Symbols
<i>Gotong Royong Memasak Dodol</i>	Local Food
<i>Kuih Tradisional</i>	Local Food
<i>Tarian Tradisional Piring</i>	History
<i>Dr Sheikh Muzaphar</i>	History
<i>Perlombongan Biji Timah</i>	History
<i>Masjid Jamek</i>	History
<i>Malayan Railway</i>	History
<i>Sarjan Hassan</i>	History
<i>Askar Gurkha</i>	History
<i>Aci Labu</i>	Culture
<i>Tarian Singa dan Naga</i>	Culture
<i>Chinese Lantern</i>	Culture
<i>Rumah Tradisional Negeri Sembilan</i>	Culture

According to the researcher's findings, twenty murals have been commissioned by the Seremban Municipal Council. The implementation of this mural project is intended to revitalize the alley's function as a Negeri Sembilan-themed tourism product. It is readily apparent that the twenty murals were created by incorporating culture, heritage, and even history. Based on the observations from the particular group, the researcher has determined that two murals reflect gastro diplomacy, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Two mural specific in gastrodiplomacy element

Mural Art Name	Theme
<i>Gotong Royong Memasak Dodol</i>	Local Food
<i>Kuih Muih Tradisional</i>	Local Food



Fig. 3 Gotong Royong Memasak Dodol

a) Description

The mural known as *Gotong Royong Memasak Dodol* represents the vibrant and highly nostalgic mood of a family that is participating in the preparation of the traditional cuisine of *dodol*. This can be noticed based on the enormous cauldron known as Kawah and the visible fire on the mural. A girl sees an adult male and an adult female stirring the *dodol* with entire interest, and in fact, a boy is seen standing near the crater holding a bowl to wait for his turn to get the *dodol*. This mural image features four individuals: an adult man stirring the *dodol* mixture in a pan while a woman is pouring ingredients to cook *dodol*; a girl sees all these individuals together.

The mural, created in a rural setting, has components such as clay, firewood, and stone and includes animals such as roosters as a backdrop. A cultural background is shown in the adults' clothing, namely ladies and men. This is because they wear traditional attire such as baju malay, sarong, and tudung (traditional clothing). The color palette used for this mural is comprised of warm tones.

Additionally, orange, red, and brown colors predominate in this mural, reflecting warmth, welcome, and celebration. The expression of the family members implies that they participate in activities and celebrate in a joyful environment.

b) Analysis

The mural highlights the concept of preparing *dodol* to celebrate a ceremony closely related to Malay culture. It is often associated with celebrations in Islamic society, namely the celebration of Eid and wedding ceremonies. The production of *dodol* is seen as a process that requires great patience, strength, and collaboration, symbolizing togetherness and cooperation within the community and family. The composition demonstrates a harmonic balance, with a circular arrangement of family members around the cauldron, which captivates attention owing to their joint involvement in the *dodol* cooking process. The composition of characters in the mural conveys the theme of collaboration in creating traditional cuisine since the depicted individuals actively participate in the process.

Warm and earthy tones accentuate the notions of tradition and community. The orange backdrop and the flame create a more dynamic environment and evoke a sense of cultural identity in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. In addition, the landscape seen on this mural and natural elements such as chickens increase a state's cultural and historical elements.

This mural emphasizes cultural and symbolic aspects related to preparing traditional cuisine. *Dodol* serves not only as a culinary meal but also as a cultural artifact. This mural employs lines, colors, and forms to communicate its ideals to the broader audience via a visual art viewpoint.

c) Interpretation

Based on the interpretation of this mural, the audience can see that it embodies the preservation of cultural heritage. It is not only focused on Seremban, Negeri Sembilan but also serves as a representation of the broader cultural landscape of Malaysia. The storytelling through this mural evokes a profound sense of unity between the older and younger generations.

Every character on this mural has a particular responsibility that contributes to a team effort that captures the essence of family ties. The way the old woman is pouring the ingredients to make the *dodol* highlights her great expertise and shows her ability to create the mixture.

On the other hand, the older man's painstakingly cooking the *dodol* highlights his diligence. Concurrently, the way women are portrayed in that setting reflects how cultural knowledge is passed on to the next generation, helping preserve a legacy.

The mural functions as a metaphor that encourages collaboration across generations while also striving to safeguard the cultural heritage of the Malay society in Malaysia. It represents intergenerational collaboration and preserving Malaysia's Malay cultural heritage. The visuals and activities invite viewers to think about historical and cultural narratives, teaching present and future generations about the lasting value of togetherness.

d) Judgment

This artwork successfully conveys a message by emphasizing the significance of traditional values. The warm colors on this mural can attract viewers who see the mural to evoke a good emotion; hues such as orange and red can create a nostalgic and cheerful atmosphere. Looking at the mural's position emphasizes the interaction between several layers of generations while also providing lessons about cultural heritage.

Technically, profound care is evident in the facial expression of the person, as well as in the traditional features of the mural, including dodol cooking implements and traditional attire, which strengthen the portrayal of legacy in this artwork. It also emphasizes aesthetic components and incorporates cultural and social themes. This mural has successfully conveyed significant cultural and social importance.

It showcases appealing visual features and conveys significant cultural and social values since its creation encourages the community to recognize and preserve historical traditions for their continued existence.

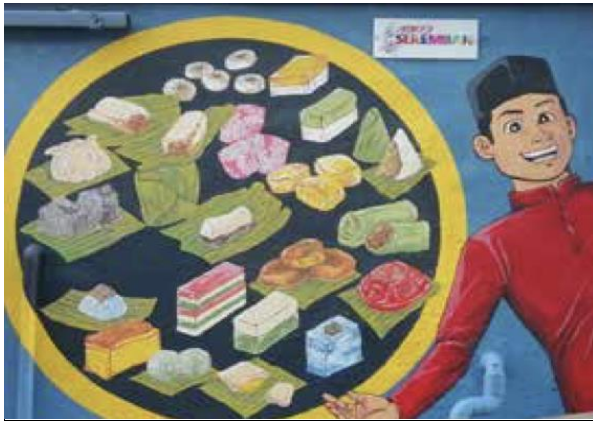


Fig. 4 Kuih Muih Tradisional

a) Description

The mural that has been produced features a male figure wearing a red Malay shirt and a songkok, with both elements of traditional clothing highlighting the identity of the Malay race. The male figure that has been produced looks cheerful and has a smile, and the way he poses in the mural invites the audience to taste the various traditional kuih-muih displayed in the mural.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the mural, there is a large yellow circle, and the background is filled with black that displays various traditional *kuih-muih* of the Malay community. The kuih-muih available in the mural are, *kuih lapis*, *kuih seri muka*, *lepat pisang*, *kuih talam*, *karipap*, *ketayap* and many more. The kuih-muih painted on this mural combines various bright colors such as yellow, green, white, and red. Various colors create diversity in terms of taste and texture, which exists in traditional Malay food.

In adding traditional elements, each *kuih-muih* that has been produced is carefully painted and placed on banana leaves to further create natural elements on the mural. The elements highlighted through this mural show the audience the synergy between traditional and natural elements. On the surface of this mural that has been produced, there is also the writing “*Selamat Datang*” in the upper right corner of the mural, and at the same time, it gives a very friendly atmosphere overall; this mural has been produced gives an emphasis more traditional food and Malay culture.

b) Analysis

The yellow circle in the mural serves as a focal point to draw the audience's attention to the classic confections. The circle on the mural creates a more structured composition and accentuates the assortment of traditional confections on its surface. The dark backdrop creates a contrasting environment, allowing the kuih-muih shown in the mural to be seen more clearly and vividly.

In addition, the arrangement of colors on the mural is essential. Using colors such as yellow, green, white, brown, and red provides an aesthetically pleasing atmosphere with various confections and brings out a joyful essence. The representation of a man clad in a baju Melayu on the right side of the mural serves as a visual guide, leading the audience's attention to the circle of kuih-muih, thus establishing a link between the human figure and the objects inside the mural. The mural's composition is balanced, with the circular arrangement of kuih-muih positioned centrally and the figure of the guy situated to the side, resulting in a dynamic impact.

c) Interpretation

This traditional *kuih-muih* painting communicates a profound message on the values of the Malay community's history and heritage using elements of traditional food. Traditional meals beyond basic nourishment represent the Malay identity's symbolic core. The mural tells the audience about the need to preserve traditions, especially in contemporary life.

The depiction of a guy in a Malay costume adorned with red not only symbolises a Malay person but also conveys the warmth, friendliness, and openness inherent in Malay culture via the colour red.

Meanwhile, using banana leaves as a foundation for these traditional *kuih-muih* signifies the intimate connection between nature and cultural practices. This emphasised feature introduces a notion centred on sustainability, whereby the natural components shown in the mural are used daily.

Furthermore, the mural in *Lorong Seni*, Seremban serves to promote traditional Malay cuisine to both foreign and domestic tourists visiting Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, by showcasing lesser-known *kuih-muih*, thereby stimulating tourists' curiosity to explore these traditional delicacies.

d) Judgment

The creation of this mural has effectively integrated beauty, education, and culture into a cohesive artwork. The mural's primary power lies in its message since it emphasizes visual aspects like composition, color, and symbolism to underscore the significance of traditional Malay *kuih-muih*.

The impact seen through the production of this mural is that it can attract interest and allow the audience to appreciate Malaysia's cultural heritage. The artist's capacity to create these classic cakes with more detail demonstrates advanced technical abilities in mural production that incorporate components of this history.

Nevertheless, this mural requires enhancement and greater detail; artists should incorporate labels or names for each *kuih-muih* depicted. This enhancement would augment the educational significance of the mural, aiding visitors and the youth in comprehending the several sorts of *kuih-muih* obtainable. The improvisation will make this artwork more interactive and educational. This approach beautifies an area, promotes existing culture, and increases economic resources in the Seremban area.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Lorong Seni* in Seremban is a booming project by the Seremban Municipal Council (MPS), actually showcasing the artistic, cultural, and historical legacy of Negeri Sembilan. Nevertheless, a significant deficiency exists when the murals created depend mainly on broad subjects like cultural emblems and local history alone. The absence of integration of traditional food, a component of gastro diplomacy, presents an underexploited potential for establishing a state's cultural identity.

Traditional food, exemplified as *masak lemak cili api*, is an accompaniment and a substantial means for conveying tradition via visual art. The variance in its presentation is a significant and complex problem in offering this traditional cuisine. This *Lorong Seni* initiative must adopt a bolder approach to promoting traditional cuisine to enhance its relevance. This integration elucidates the story of visual art in Seremban and enhances cultural diplomacy prospects for Negeri Sembilan worldwide.

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