

From Ethnic to National: Performing and Negotiating Malaysian Identity in *Mamak* Restaurants

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ABSTRACT

Using *Mamak* restaurants as empirical field, this article examines how Malaysian identity is performed and negotiated in everyday food spaces. The construction of national identity in the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia remains a contestation between the authority-defined approach, which aims for a singular unified identity, and the everyday-defined approach, where a pluralist multicultural identity is aspired to. This article aims to shift the analytic lens of national identity formation from state-led initiatives to mundane everyday food practices. Using data from fieldwork observations and interviews, this study analyses how *Mamak* food practices transformed from an ethnic Indian Muslim food tradition into a significant representation of Malaysian cuisine. The findings reveal that four key practices: adaptation of taste and ingredients to suit local environment; culinary diversification incorporating other ethnic cuisines; expansion of *Mamak* cuisine by other ethnic communities; and internationalization of *Mamak* cuisine as part of Malaysian cuisine, have collectively shown how *Mamak* cuisine has been de-ethnicized and transcends ethnic boundaries, contributing to development of a shared Malaysian identity. This article posits that everyday food spaces like *Mamak* restaurants can serve as empirical sites for examining how national identity is performed and negotiated. By analysing identity formation via the lens of everyday food practices, this study contributes to broader discussions on food, identity, and belonging in multi-ethnic societies.

Keywords: Ethnic boundaries, everyday food spaces, *Mamak* restaurants, Malaysia, national identity

INTRODUCTION

Food is one of the most significant resources in the construction of individual and collective identities (Caplan, 1997; Fischler, 1988; Mintz & DuBois, 2002). Beyond its role as biological sustenance, food functions as a socially embedded medium through which identities are expressed, negotiated, and contested. In the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia, where ethnicity, religion, and culture are deeply intertwined, food becomes a significant site for the continuous negotiation and production of ethnic and national identities, manifested through everyday food practices of production and consumption.

This study examines how Malaysian identity is performed and negotiated in *Mamak* restaurants, iconic everyday food spaces operated by the ethnic Indian Muslim community. While Malaysia's rich and diverse culinary heritage is often celebrated as emblematic of its multi-ethnic society, constructing a shared Malaysian food identity remains a challenge. This reflects the complexities inherent in developing a unified national identity in Malaysia, as the tension between an authority-defined, singular national identity and an everyday-defined, pluralistic identity persists and continues to influence how Malaysians conceive of themselves and others. Using *Mamak* restaurants as an empirical field, this study seeks to address the gap in shifting the examination of national identity formation from an authority-defined approach to an everyday-defined perspective.

Originating from the Indian Muslim community in Malaysia, *Mamak* restaurants have become an indispensable part of Malaysian urban everyday life. The *halal* nature of *Mamak* food, as well as its accessibility in terms of location and business hours, allow commensality among people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds and accommodate social interaction that eases the rigid ethnic silos in many aspects of Malaysian public life. By analyzing the changing food practices in *Mamak* restaurants, this article explores the transformation of an ethnic minority cuisine into a widely accepted Malaysian food culture and the broader process of ethnic accommodation and negotiation that shapes the dynamics of identity formation within a multi-ethnic society.

This article is structured into four sections. It begins with a conceptual discussion on the negotiation of ethnic and national identities via the lens of food in Malaysia, followed by an outline of the research design and methodology. The third section presents the findings and discussion, focusing on the adaptation of taste and ingredients, the incorporation of multi-ethnic culinary elements, the expansion of *Mamak* cuisine beyond the Indian Muslim community, and the internationalization of *Mamak* cuisine as part of Malaysian cuisine. The final section summarizes the key findings and presents the study's contributions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food and Identity: Between Ethnic Boundaries and National Narratives

Anthropologists have long acknowledged that food serves a dual purpose. It functions not only as a source of nutritional sustenance but also a powerful tool for cultural expression and communication, given its capacity to convey complex social meanings (Appadurai, 1981; van Esterik & Counihan, 1997; Douglas, 2019; Mintz, 2019). The inherent nature of food as a fundamental necessity compels individuals to engage with food preparation and consumption regularly thus positioning it as a potent means for embedding and conveying social discourse. The capacity of food, when imbued with layers of meanings and social messages, can signal status and hierarchy, oneness and otherness, inclusion and exclusion, solidarity and community. What people eat, how they eat and where they eat can therefore express both personal and collective identities while simultaneously marking social boundaries and differences.

Given its symbolic capacity to articulate social meanings, food can be regarded as a particularly powerful tool to define identity, be it social status, ethnicity, nationality, or gender (Caplan, 1997; Mintz & DuBois, 2002). The intricate links between food and identity formation testifies to the significant role food plays in the cultural fabric of any society. Food, including the acts of cooking and eating, embodies shared histories, traditions and values of a society, is usually passed down from generation to generation. It encompasses not only the narratives of collective memory, struggles, celebration and everyday life, but also allows individuals to connect with their roots as well as with one another. Through food practices and shared culinary experiences, a sense of belonging and collective identity can be forged among individuals and communities.

The process of identity construction in the context of Malaysia has always been inextricably intertwined with ethnicity and vice versa (Shamsul & Athi, 2014). Within the complicated ethnic fabrics emerged historically as consequences of trade, colonization, and migration, the quest for a unified national identity and the desire to preserve respective ethnic identities have always been an ideological struggle between the various ethnic communities in Malaysia. The debates continue and there is no straightforward answer to this constant oscillation of identity pendulum between the perspective of authority-defined *Bumiputera* (son of the soil)-dominated national identity and the perspective of everyday-defined pluralized national identity led by the non-Muslim *Bumiputera* and the non-*Bumiputera* communities (Shamsul, 1996). The *Bumiputera*-dominated national identity has been perceived by other ethnic communities who called for a more accommodative pluralized nation as being imbued with strong assimilationist elements (Ishak, 2002; Ting, 2014). The division of the “authority-defined” and “everyday-defined” social realities of national identity has profound implications in all aspects of Malaysian society, from the prominent political and economic agendas to the mundane everyday activities.

As nations are imagined communities, so are their associated cuisines. Although national cuisine does not necessarily reflect the everyday food practices of all members of a nation, they play a crucial role in establishing concreteness related to national identity (Mintz & DuBois, 2002). Situated within a complex and quintessentially

multi-ethnic and multicultural context of a relatively young nation, the construction of a national food identity reflects broader processes of identity formation in Malaysia. The state plays a significant role in institutionalizing and promoting Malaysian cuisine across various platforms, whether as part of a nation-building project or for tourism development, hence actively shaping how Malaysian cuisine is represented and understood from authority-defined narratives. However, the notion of a singular national cuisine becomes particularly complex due to its diverse ethnic fabrics and the prevalence of ethnically divided food spaces, rendering a unified food identity both challenging and contested.

Mirroring the broader sociocultural realities, food traditions in Malaysia are heavily influenced by its ethnic and religious ideologies. Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other minority communities each maintain distinct culinary practices and identities such as Malay *Warong*, Hainanese *Kopitiams*, *Mamak* stalls, and so on. However, these traditions are not static but constantly evolve through processes of adaptation, borrowing, and acculturation that occur in everyday interactions and these have led to the formation of commonly accepted cuisines among the diverse ethnic communities in Malaysia. Studies indicate that commonly accepted cuisines emerge through the acculturation and mutual adaptation of ethnic foodways, serving as antecedents to and contributing factors in the formation of Malaysian national food identity (Noriza et al., 2012; Suhaimi & Mohd Zahari, 2014). This demonstrated that national food identity, therefore, is not solely shaped by state discourses but is also produced through everyday culinary practices.

From Ethnic Boundaries to Foodscapes: *Mamak* Restaurants in Malaysia

Ethnic division in Malaysia is largely a product of colonial practices (Abdul Khalid, 2014; Hoffstaedter, 2011; Hirschman, 1986), which resulted in a large-scale influx of Chinese and Indian labor in nineteenth century. There was no effort on the part of the colonial administration to assimilate these immigrant communities into the indigenous social system, instead these new immigrants were segregated geographically, economically and socially from the local population (Abdul Khalid, 2014; Hirschman, 1986). In addition, colonial government's definition and classification of population, primarily based on religion and racial categories, namely Malays being Muslims, Indians predominantly Hindu, and Chinese either Buddhist or Christian, was employed to "define and rule" the plural society. The divisive, ethnicized political and social system has become deeply entrenched in the everyday life and remained influential in shaping the space people live in Malaysia (Hoffstaedter, 2011).

Reflecting this plurality, Malaysian food spaces, by and large, are "ethnic bound configuration" as described by Olmedo (2015). However, the predicament is not only ethnicity but the dichotomy of *halal* and *haram*, which regulates Muslim dietary practices and consumption. While non-Muslim communities navigate with ease between halal and non-halal eateries, the Muslim community will only patronize and consume ethnic cuisines that have been adapted to meet halal requirements. Duruz and Khoo (2014) posit that the rise of Islamic consciousness has witnessed the shrinking of cosmopolitan space, thus limiting "eating together in difference". While the taboo existed long before, heightened religious sensitivity reinforces the social identity and behavior of Muslims in public sphere. In response, non-Muslim food providers have increasingly adapted their practices to accommodate halal requirements, reflecting processes of cultural negotiation and accommodation in everyday life.

In addition to religious regulation, Malaysian food spaces are also largely driven by economic and commercial interests. According to Lee (2017), the cultural and religious boundaries in Malaysia are accommodative and tolerant enough to include non-Muslim food businesses provided they observe the *Shariah* requirements. For non-Muslim food businesses who wish to access the Muslim market could make an appropriate application to the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) to be *halal* certified. This has facilitated the growth of inclusive food spaces and created business opportunities for many ethnic restaurants and international food chains such as fast-food establishments and hotel restaurants, as there is demand from the Muslim community. Furthermore, the sale and consumption of pork and alcohol are not prohibited if these activities are carried out with thoughtfulness of the Muslims' feelings. As such, Lee (2017) posits that the notion of *halal* in the context of Malaysia does not totally exclude non-Muslim culinary practices but instead allows the commodification of ethnic food businesses through the *halal* certification process. Within these inclusive food spaces, food

consumption becomes a medium through which Malaysians negotiate shared belonging and identity while maintaining cultural distinctiveness. These dynamics produce a fluid foodscape in which national and ethnic identities are articulated and continuously negotiated. Given the fact that *Mamak* restaurants are inclusive food spaces, they can serve as significant empirical sites to illustrate how the *ethnoscape*, a term coined by Appadurai (1996), of the diasporic South Indian Muslim community has been transformed, through food practices, into a distinctly Malaysian foodscape.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an ethnographically informed qualitative approach, incorporating fieldwork observation and semi-structured interviews to analyze the changing food practices in *Mamak* restaurants. While fieldwork observation was engaged to document everyday food practices, interactions and culinary offerings in *Mamak* restaurants, interviews were used to gain insights into the perspectives of *Mamak* operators and patrons. These methods facilitated a comprehensive understanding of key transformations in *Mamak* cuisine, including changes in food preparation and menu composition, the increasing offering of *Mamak* food by other ethnic communities, and the international promotion of *Mamak* cuisine as part of Malaysian national food. Combining observed practices and participants' interpretations, the study highlights how *Mamak* cuisine has transformed from an ethnic cuisine rooted in Indian Muslim tradition into a widely accepted Malaysian food culture.

Data Collection

There are three stages of data collection in this study: initial exploratory fieldwork, non-participant observation and interviews. Exploratory fieldwork was conducted across several neighbourhoods in Klang Valley to understand the geographical distribution and social settings of *Mamak* restaurants, which led to the selection of the research site for non-participant observation. Observation was then carried out from May to September 2019 in a purposively selected branch of a prominent *Mamak* restaurant chain in an integrated township in Kuala Lumpur. The site was chosen for its diverse clientele and extensive menu offering, making it an information-rich case for examining interethnic interactions and culinary adaptation. This aligned with Patton's (1990) argument that qualitative research relies on small, purposefully selected, information-rich cases to enable in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to triangulate observational data through perspectives obtained from *Mamak* restaurant operators and their patrons. Interviewees were selected through purposive sampling based on their knowledge and ability to provide rich insights into *Mamak* food practices. This enabled a deeper understanding of how food practices have evolved. A total of seventeen participants, whose profiles are presented in Table 1, were interviewed between June 2019 and August 2023. The extended period of data collection was partly due to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted physical access to fieldwork sites during the various Movement Control Operations in Malaysia. As a result, data collection was conducted intermittently and resumed when restrictions were eased.

Table 1 Summary of Interview Respondents' Profiles

Respondent	Ethnicity	Profession	Gender	Age Range
1	Indian-Muslim	Owner	Male	30s
2	Indian-Muslim	Restaurant Manager	Male	40s
3	Indian-Muslim	Owner	Male	40s
4	Indian	Chef	Male	40s

5	Malay	Student	Male	20s
6	Indian	Lecturer	Female	50s
7	Chinese	Student	Male	20s
8	Chinese	Customer Service Agent	Male	20s
9	Malay	Academician	Female	60s
10	Malay	Freelance	Male	30s
11	Malay	Grab Driver	Male	60s
12	Chinese-Indian	Student	Male	20s
13	Chinese	Management Trainee	Female	20s
14	Malay	Retiree	Male	60s
15	Malay	Contractor	Male	40s
16	Chinese	Finance	Female	50s
17	Indian	Student	Female	20s

Source: Authors' own work

Data Analysis

In this study, interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its flexibility in identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within the data set. To ensure analytical rigor, the researcher familiarized herself with the interview data during the transcription process, followed by repeated reading of interview transcripts to develop general impressions of food practices in *Mamak* restaurants. Initial coding was generated inductively to allow themes to emerge from the data rather than being predetermined. Codes were generated to highlight key findings related to the transformation of food practices including staple foods, adaptation of taste and flavor, menu diversification and business expansion. These codes were then reviewed and grouped into various themes that reflected the evolving dynamics of *Mamak* food culture. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, interview data were triangulated with observation field notes. This process allowed the researcher to compare and corroborate participants' interpretations with changing food practices observed in *Mamak* restaurants.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, fieldwork observation was conducted in visibly accessible *Mamak* restaurants where everyday food practices can be observed in their natural setting without researcher intervention. Official permission for fieldwork observation was not required as it was conducted in public spaces; however, ethical principles of non-intrusiveness and confidentiality were strictly observed. As the fieldwork observation focused on general patterns of food consumption, interactions, business operations and menu offerings, identities of *Mamak* restaurants and its patrons were not revealed to ensure confidentiality. For the semi-structured interviews, informed consent was obtained from all interviewees prior to their participation. They had been briefed on the purpose and process of the interview, and the right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Additionally, they were assured of their anonymity, and all data collected would be reported in a manner that ensures their identities remain confidential.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four key themes emerged from the analysis of the observational and interview data, and they are related to the changing food practices in *Mamak* restaurants: the adaptation of taste and ingredients, the culinary diversification beyond traditional *Mamak* cuisine, the expansion of *Mamak* cuisine beyond the *Mamak* community, and the internationalization of *Mamak* cuisine as part of Malaysian cuisine. Each of these themes is discussed in the following sections.

Adaptation of Taste and Ingredients

Staple dishes such as *Nasi Kandar*, *Roti Canai*, and *Teh Tarik* are considered traditional *Mamak* food that has its roots in Indian Muslim culinary traditions. The findings reveal that they have undergone substantial adaptation as a result of cultural interaction with Malaysia's multicultural foodscape. To suit Malaysian taste preferences, the adaptations manifested not only in the modification of taste but also in the incorporation of ingredients and cooking practices drawn from other ethnic communities.

Findings from *Mamak* operators and chefs indicate that a significant aspect of this adaptation is the requirement to train cooks recruited from India to reproduce the localized taste expected in *Mamak* restaurants. Although these cooks have work experience related to food preparation in India, they must undergo further training to acquire the specific techniques required to produce the taste associated with *Mamak* cuisine. Respondents mentioned that the Malaysian Indian Muslim Restaurant Owners Association (PRESMA) helps organize training for newly recruited workers. As one restaurant owner explained:

"So we take the workers from various areas in Tamil Nadu,not everyone knows how to cook *Mamak* food in Malaysia, so must give coaching for the taste. The taste must be *turun-temurun* (from generation to generation)so you bring the labor from India, their taste is from India, not the local one." (R3, Indian Muslim, Male, *Mamak* owner, 40s)

Similarly, an Indian chef also observed:

"You know nowadays even *Mamak* have their own schools like teaching the newcomers. I was working in a place that they cook Indian food the Malaysian way. So you can cook similar like in India, but it must have a touch of Malaysian taste." (R4, Indian, Male, Chef, 40s)

These accounts suggest that the authenticity of *Mamak* cuisine is no longer characterized solely by its South Indian origins, but rather by an adapted taste that has been well accepted by the local population. The adaptation of taste is particularly evident when comparing Indian and *Mamak* curries, where interviewees highlighted that *Mamak* curries are generally less spicy, and that *Mamak* food has incorporated stronger sweet and sour notes, with fewer spices used to suit local taste palates. One chef described this balance as the integration of *tiga rasa* (three tastes):

"We must have some sweet, sour, and spicy like *tiga rasa*.... In India, you don't find the *tiga rasa*, the sweetness is not there, even the sour is so so. (R4, Indian, Male, Chef, 40s)

Another informant explained that this adaptation reflects the multicultural clientele served by *Mamak* restaurants:

"I think the fish curry is also very nice, it's got a nice sourness, a nice tanginess to it.... I think it's more to cater to that mix of people who come to *Mamak*.... I think there's more infusion of Malay flavors." (R6, Indian, Female, Academic, 50s)

These findings indicate that sweetness and sourness, achieved through ingredients such as sugar, coconut milk, tamarind and lime, have enabled *Mamak* cuisine to develop a distinctive taste and identity.

The localization of *Mamak* cuisine is also reflected in the inclusion of local ingredients and those associated with

other ethnic groups, particularly Malay and Chinese communities. For example, *sambal*, a dish strongly associated with Malay cuisine, is often served together with dhal curry for *Roti* and has been incorporated into dishes such as *sambal* prawn and *sambal* chicken in *Nasi Kandar*. Two informants remarked:

“*Sambal Cili Udang* (prawn) I bring to India, suka makan (like to eat) *sambal* is not Indian. (R3, Indian Muslim, Male, *Mamak* owner, 40s)

There's no *sambal* like we have here, there is no *sambal* in India. (R6, Indian, Female, Academic, 50s)

Likewise, soy-based ingredients such as soy sauce and tofu, commonly associated with Chinese food culture, have been integrated into *Mamak* dishes. This was illustrated by interviewees who explained:

“*Ayam kicap* (soy sauce chicken) is supposed to be one of the dishes found in Chinese economy rice... We take the recipe from there and we put our *rempah* (spice mix), a bit of change.” (R3, Indian Muslim, Male, *Mamak* owner, 40s)

“You won't find *Ayam masak kicap*, you don't really find it in Indian household, *kicap* is not something we use extensively, it's not part of our flavor profile.... It's a rarity to have *telur masin* (salted egg). It's not one of my favorites.” (R6, Indian, Female, Academic, 50s)

The inclusion of ethnic ingredients demonstrates that *Mamak* cuisine has evolved into a hybridized cuisine through selective appropriation and reinterpretation of culinary elements from other ethnic communities arising from cultural interaction and exchange.

Overall, the findings show that the adaptation of taste and ingredients is pivotal in the evolution of *Mamak* cuisine. Through taste modification and incorporation of other ethnic ingredients, *Mamak* cuisine has developed a distinct culinary identity shaped by intercultural interaction. Similar to the development of *Nyonya* cuisine as described by Tan (2007), this process can be understood as a form of culinary localization, in which cultural borrowing and adaptation give rise to new culinary forms and identity.

Culinary Diversification Beyond Traditional *Mamak* Cuisine

In addition to offering traditional *Mamak* dishes, *Mamak* restaurants have diversified their menus. Fieldwork observations revealed that a wide range of non-*Mamak* food items are offered; among these are Malay-Thai dishes such as *Tom Yam* and assorted fried rice, which are typically prepared fresh upon order and are especially in great demand for dinner. Reflecting the colonial past and global influence, Western-style offerings, including English breakfast sets, burgers, and steaks, have become increasingly available. Chinese menu items have also gained popularity, with dishes such as Hainanese signatures and halal *dim sum* menus.

The expansion of *Mamak* menu offerings seems to be primarily driven by business considerations, as there is a need to compete for a wider client base. The Indian Muslim community is relatively small, and hence it cannot depend solely on the internal market. Furthermore, it is also a strategic effort to position themselves as inclusive dining spaces within Malaysia's multicultural food landscape. However, customer responses to this diversification were mixed. Some informants felt that the addition of other ethnic cuisines did not align with their expectations of *Mamak* food. As one participant commented:

“They started the Thai food menu and all that, but it just doesn't jive.... No, I wouldn't order.” (R9, Malay, Female, Academic, 60s)

Similarly, another interviewee remarked:

“I won't go to *Mamak* for a burger... I guess people go to the *Mamak* for the food that they originally offered.” (R7, Chinese, Male, Student, 20s)

These responses indicate that although *Mamak* restaurants expand their menu options, some customers continue to associate these establishments with their traditional offerings, indicating the symbolic identity of *Mamak* food

remains important. However, other customers viewed these menu additions positively and were willing to try them out:

“Sometimes yes, I just want to try it out, I just want to know how they make it, how nice is it, just try out.” (R12, Chinese-Indian, Male, Student, 20s)

Fieldwork observations also revealed that these ethnic food items are mainly ordered by customers across ethnic boundaries, with Malay customers, for example, ordering *Dim Sum* and Western dishes.

The offering of a diverse array of ethnic cuisines within a single *Mamak* establishment demonstrates the resilience of the *Mamak* food businesses in trying to appeal to the palates of Malaysia’s multicultural population. This reflects what Duruz and Khoo (2014:93) describe as “self-foodcourtization”. Through “self-foodcourtization” these ethnic dishes are effectively *Mamakfied*, regardless of their ethnic origins.

Expansion of *Mamak* Cuisine Beyond the *Mamak* Community

Despite the ubiquity of *Mamak* restaurants in Malaysian urban and suburban areas, fieldwork observations revealed that they are relatively uncommon in Malay-dominated neighborhoods such as Kampong Baru and Kampong Datuk Keramat. Traditionally, the land on which these *kampongs* (Malay villages) are located is Malay reserved land; hence, it is legally impossible for other ethnic communities to acquire it. Furthermore, these areas are used predominantly for residential purposes with limited commercial space, except those hawker spaces or food courts provided by the City Council. Nevertheless, *Mamak* food items such as *Roti Canai* are frequently seen being sold by Malay vendors in street stalls and hawker centers. This suggests that while *Mamak*-owned businesses may not be able to access these neighborhoods, *Mamak* cuisine itself has already been integrated into local food practices.

In addition, this is also reflected in the growing number of businesses operated by non-Indian Muslim communities that imitate the concept or market themselves as *Mamak* restaurants. Fieldwork observations identified, for example, a restaurant labelled as a *Mamak* restaurant but operated by a Malay family. Although the owner was not Indian Muslim, they retained Indian Muslim cooks to prepare the food. In another instance, a Chinese coffee shop located in a predominantly Chinese neighborhood has gained popularity for its *Nasi Kandar*. Interview responses further support this observation. One respondent noted that there are now two types of *Mamak* restaurants, those operated by Indian Muslims and those that merely adopt the *Mamak* identity:

“There are two types of *Mamak*....one that is typical Indian Muslim *Mamak*, but there’s one that is actually claimed to be *Mamak* but they're not really *Mamak*....” (R9, Malay, Female, Academic, 60s)

Another respondent linked this trend to the profitability of the business model:

“They just get into the band wagon because business model is so profitable....” (R15, Malay, Male, Contractor, 50s)

Observations of these cases suggest that *Mamak* cuisine has been embedded into the local culinary practices and become part of Malaysia’s broader culinary repertoire. The commercial success and widespread popularity of *Mamak* cuisine have enabled it to transcend its origins into other ethnic communities. It has become increasingly mainstreamed within Malaysia’s multicultural foodscape through the process of imitation, reproduction, and commercial appropriation. This evolution suggests a gradual transformation of *Mamak* cuisine from an ethnically rooted culinary tradition into a shared and commercially valuable component of Malaysian food culture.

Internationalization of *Mamak* Cuisine as part of Malaysian cuisine

The phenomenon of *Mamak* cuisine being offered by both Indian Muslim and other ethnic communities is not confined to Malaysia but is also evident internationally. During fieldwork, a waiter mentioned with enthusiasm that the chain he works for is expanding to Dubai. Beyond this, *Nasi Kandar* restaurant chains such as Pelita

have also exported the Malaysian *Mamak* food concept back to India by opening an outlet in Chennai, India. In addition to *Nasi Kandar*, Pelita offers Malaysian delicacies such as *Satay* (char-grilled meat served with peanut sauce) and *Ais Kacang* (shaved ice dessert) to their Indian customers, thus presenting *Mamak* cuisine as a distinct Malaysian culinary experience. This demonstrates that *Mamak* food has evolved sufficiently to be exported back to its region of origin as Malaysian food rather than as an ethnic Indian Muslim cuisine. This development is comparable to the cases of pizza and hot dog, both of which originated in Europe, but acquired an American identity before being re-exported globally, including their places of origin (van den Berghe 1984).

A survey of overseas *Mamak* restaurants revealed their presence in locations such as Australia and Taiwan. In addition to offering *Mamak* dishes, these establishments also promote other Malaysian dishes and often brand themselves as Malaysian restaurants, using slogans such as “*Mamak*, authentic Malaysian flavor” and “*Mamak*, Malaysian *Roti* and *Satay*”. I was also rather surprised to have been told by the staff of the *Mamak* restaurant in Taipei that they serve pork items during one of my personal visits. These findings suggest that cultural and religious meanings traditionally attached to *Mamak* cuisine may have been selectively reappropriated due to commercial reasons.

For international consumers, *Mamak* cuisine is synonymous with Malaysian food. This is probably driven by the branding and promotion of *Mamak* cuisine as well as the offering of other Malaysian cuisines by the *Mamak* restaurant operators in international locations. One could argue that the term *Mamak* functions more as a brand label than as a reflection of Indian Muslim food culture. As suggested by Narayan (1995), even though the pleasure of enjoying the food of “Others” promotes appreciation for “ethnic Others”, people may not have full knowledge and cultural understanding of what they are eating. Hence, it is easy and convenient to amalgamate and promote the diverse ethnic cuisines of Malaysia under the umbrella of Malaysian cuisine without acknowledging their distinct origins. Therefore, through international marketing and branding, *Mamak* cuisine has moved beyond its origins to become a symbolic representation of Malaysian cuisine and has been redefined as a national food symbol.

DISCUSSION

The transformation of *Mamak* cuisine, as discussed earlier, can be regarded as a process in which culinary localization and commercial adaptation gradually de-ethnicize an originally ethnic cuisine, allowing it to become an indispensable element of Malaysia’s food heritage. Despite its roots in South India, the development of *Mamak* cuisine in Malaysia has undergone significant changes to align with local social, cultural, and economic contexts. This transformation demonstrates how ethnic cuisines evolve through interaction with local multicultural environments and changing market demands, resulting in the emergence of new forms of shared culinary identity.

Though started by Indian Muslim migrants, *Mamak* dishes such as *Nasi Kandar* are products of local innovation rather than static originals of South Indian cuisine. As Duruz and Khoo (2014) note, although the practice of hawking rice and curries using bamboo poles began during the colonial era in Penang, *Nasi Kandar* itself does not exist in India. When Indian Muslims migrated to Malaya, they reterritorialized their food traditions within the local context. Over time, these culinary practices underwent adaptation and transformation through processes of cultural localization. As Tan (1997:103) argues, cultural localization involves “the process of becoming local, which involves cultural adjustment to a local geographical and social environment, and identifying with the locality”. In culinary terms, localization occurs through cross-cultural interaction and ecological influences, leading to modifications in food preparation to suit the changing taste of migrant communities as they acclimatize to the local living condition, while also appealing to other ethnic communities when food is offered as a commodity. According to Tan (2012), this process may involve borrowing culinary knowledge from other ethnic communities as well as the innovative use of local ingredients. In the case of *Mamak* cuisine, this is evident in the modification of flavour profiles, including the incorporation of sweeter and tangier tastes, as well as the borrowing culinary elements from other ethnic groups, such as *sambal* and soy-based products. More than a fixed ethnic culinary tradition, *Mamak* cuisine has evolved into a hybrid food culture that is continuously reconstructed through everyday interactions with Malaysia’s multicultural food environment.

In addition to the adaptation in taste and ingredients, *Mamak* restaurants have diversified their food offerings by incorporating other ethnic cuisines. This strategy demonstrates the resilience of *Mamak* restaurants in responding to diverse consumer preferences and reflects the business realities of operating within Malaysia's multicultural food economy, where food businesses must appeal to customers across communities to remain competitive. In this regard, *Mamak* culinary practices are not shaped solely by cultural interaction but also by entrepreneurial adaptation. Furthermore, *Mamak* cuisine has expanded beyond the Indian Muslim community and is increasingly reproduced and commercialized by other ethnic communities, both locally and internationally. These transformations are attributed to the commercial appeal of *Mamak* cuisine, which has enhanced its accessibility and acceptability across ethnic and geographic boundaries.

As argued by van den Berghe (1984), ethnic cuisine becomes de-ethnicized when it is widely accepted in the mainstream market. In a similar vein, Douglas (1984) also posits that distinctive ethnic food identities weaken when ethnic boundaries become less evident. The de-ethnicization of *Mamak* cuisine is attributed to the processes of culinary localization, commercial adaptation, and expansion over time. It is now a quintessential feature of the Malaysian foodscape. Just as *Chicken Tikka Masala* now represents a British national dish (Arvela, 2013) and Chinese and Italian food have been Americanized in the United States (van den Berghe, 1984), *Mamak* cuisine has been de-ethnicized and *Malaysianized*, integrating into the local food culture and evolving into a new iconic Malaysian cuisine.

The transformation of *Mamak* cuisine into a national food symbol highlights the significant role of food in the ongoing construction of national identity in Malaysia's multicultural society. It demonstrates how an ethnic culinary tradition can evolve into a diversified, mainstreamed, and well-accepted component of Malaysian food culture through processes of cultural localization and commercialization, bridging ethnic boundaries and foster a collective sense of *Malaysian-ness*.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the transformation process of *Mamak* cuisine from an ethnic Indian Muslim culinary tradition into a mainstream and significant component of Malaysian national food culture. *Mamak* cuisine has been continually reshaped through cultural interaction and localization, market adaptation and commercialization, and these have shifted *Mamak* cuisine from serving primarily as an ethnic marker of the Indian Muslim community to becoming a shared symbol of Malaysian food identity, transforming "Others" to "Ours". The consumption of food associated with ethnic "Other" becomes a meaningful act that reflects the porosity of ethnic boundaries and the contestation of individual and collective identities.

Consequently, *Mamak* restaurants function as social sites where ethnic boundaries and identities are continually shifted, negotiated, and reconstructed through everyday encounters and interactions. The adaptation, tensions, and persistence observed in these spaces mirror the broader trajectory of social transformation within the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia.

This study contributes to broader discussions in studies related to food and identity by illustrating how ethnic cuisines can serve as empirical fields where ethnic boundaries are negotiated and national identities are constructed. It highlights the significant role of ethnic cuisine in mediating relationships between ethnicity and identity, while fostering intercultural interaction, social cohesion, and a shared sense of belonging.

Just as van den Berghe (1984:394) states, "ethnic cuisine is the easiest and most pleasant way to cross ethnic boundaries" and it is the "ultimate reconciliation between diversity". As such, *Mamak* restaurants represent more than popular food businesses; they exemplify how food practices can transcend ethnic boundaries and contribute meaningfully to building shared belonging and identity, an antecedent of integration and nation-building in a multi-ethnic society.

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