



# **Nurturing Common Acceptable Food through Acculturation**

Noriza Ishak \*, Mohd Salehuddin Mohd. Zahari,  
Roslina Ahmad, Shahariah Ibrahim

Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM),  
Kampus Puncak Alam, 42300 Selangor, Malaysia

[noriz267@salam.uitm.edu.my](mailto:noriz267@salam.uitm.edu.my)

## **Abstract**

This paper reveals the impact of acculturation through education, social interaction and media on the nurturing of foodways among three Malaysian ethnic groups. It assists one to understand other ethnic food traditions, be accustomed to different ingredients and recipes, and get to know other's preferred eating and serving practices. Acculturation catalyzes the use of a wide variety of food in the community and introduces new eating and cooking practices. The practices of other ethnic food help create a strong confidence in the formation of a common acceptable food.

**Keywords:** Acculturation; foodways; ethnic; common acceptable food

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## 1.0 Introduction

Food preparation and consumption or popularly known as foodways create community affiliation on a variety of levels and in a variety of ways. They provide valuable insights of the people that perform the acts (Bentley, 2008), symbolizing an individual's ethnic connections and beliefs. Food that is common to a cultural group acts as a bonding mechanism between the individual and community. What, where, when and how we eat, and sharing of foodways in everyday activities shape personal and cultural identities (Lyons, 2007). When two or more ethnic groups share foods together, they become closer and will longitudinally share a common food in the future (Cook, 2008). Sharing of foodways has been happening for a long time within individual groups and between ethnic groups (Smith, 2006), and these progressions are especially noticeable in multi-racial countries. On the same note, acculturation of education, social interaction and media are also believed to catalyze the sharing of various ethnic foods

## 2.0 Literature Review

### Acculturation and Foodways

Acculturation refers to the learning of practices and customs of a new culture and acquiring the capability to function within the main culture while preserving the original culture (Newman & Sahak, 2012). It involves the interaction of at least two cultures or more by which a person learns and accepts the norms and values of a different culture (Gharaei, Rafieian, & Jalalkamali, 2012). It also signifies an act in which part of a culture adopts the beliefs and behaviors of another culture. Acculturation explains the process of cultural and psychological change or alteration that results following a meeting between cultures (Sam & Berry, 2010). It is regard as a multi-dimensional process in which individuals and groups undergo stages of adjustment and changes in several domains such as language, socioeconomic and cultural values (Lopez-Class, Castro, & Ramirez, 2011). Through acculturation, various elements in ethnic cultures are increasing or lessening while participating in a larger identity (Jennings, Forbes, McDermott, & Hulse, 2006). Although acculturation engages the minority to adopt habits and language patterns of the dominant group, it can also be the opposite (Berry, 2005).

Education, language, media, and social interaction contribute to food cultural adaptation among different ethnic groups (Kim, 2006). Foodways in every culture constitute an organized system or a language that through its structure and components convey meaning and contribute to the organization of the natural world (Keane & Willetts, 1994). Foodways refer to an act or behavior involved in the preparation, presentation, and consumption of food that is characterized by individuals and society (Kemmer, 2000). It is related to the culture of foods, the tools, techniques and ingredients for which food is prepared and its customs (Germann Molz, 2007). Food consumed at the individual and community level is influenced by availability and the cultural environment. Different foods often consumed by individuals with distinct statuses and roles are important in maintaining social positions.

The third par Some major ethnic foods in multiracial countries are believed to have been adjusted and adapted by ethnic groups through foodways that involve preparation and consumption. Foodways are conditioned by meaning according to types of food we eat, the

manner in which we preserve, prepare and serve (Angulo, 1988). It indicates a person's ethnic connections and competence (Crouch & O'Neill, 2000) and is a significant element in creating commonly acceptable food as well as food identity formation in the society (Keane & Willetts, 1994). Cleveland, Laroche, Pons, & Kastoun, (2009) posited that acculturation through knowledge, media, and social gatherings contributes to food cultural adaptation and gradually creates a commonly acceptable food and identity (Kline & Liu, 2005). Important principles, values, and realities of the new culture get intertwined through the process of acculturation and adaptation (Côté, 2006). In the context of this study, education, social interaction, and media form part of acculturation attributes believed to influence the preparation and consumption of food of the three major ethnic groups namely Malay, Chinese and Indian. It is most likely that these attributes contribute to commonly acceptable food among the ethnic groups.

### **3.0 Methodology**

A questionnaire survey was designed to measure the influence of acculturation on the preparation and consumption of major ethnic food through education, social interaction, and media. It was conducted on a population of individuals who already had experience preparing and consuming food from the three major ethnic groups. They were restaurant customers at several popular supermarkets like Giant, Tesco, and Carrefour and shopping complexes such as SACC Mall, PKNS complex, Sunway Pyramid, The Store Pacific, Jaya Jusco, and Sogo Mall. All these places are in the Klang Valley, which included Kuala Lumpur, Shah Alam, Petaling Jaya, and Klang and are the most highly visited places, especially during the weekend. Respondents were randomly approached before entering the shopping mall with a screening question on whether they had experienced preparing and consuming all three major ethnic foods. Those who met the criteria were invited to take part in the study. The survey was undertaken over five weekends with 392 questionnaires successfully collected.

### **4.0 Results and Discussion**

#### **Characteristics of the sample**

Malay respondents made up 42.34 percent (n=166) of the total compared to 31.88 percent (n=125) Chinese, and 25.76 percent (n=101) Indian. This proportion is considered a reasonable representation of the ethnic ratio in Malaysia, which consists of 60:30:10 (Malay, Chinese and Indians). 42.34 percent (n=166) of the respondents were Muslims, followed by 22.70 percent (n=89) Buddhists, 17.85 percent (n=70) Hindus and 817.09 percent (n=67) Christians (Table 1).

#### **4.1 Comparison between ethnic groups: influence of education on foodways**

The One-Way ANOVA and Scheffe post hoc multiple comparisons evaluated the different responses on the impact of foodways through education. The majority of the respondents shared the same perception of how education contributed to the following: their understanding of each other's ethnic food (Malay, M=5.85, Indian, M=5.67 and Chinese,

M=5.63,  $p = .256$ ); their understanding of the ingredients of each popular ethnic food (Malay, M=5.65, Indian, M=5.74 and Chinese, M=5.59,  $p = .829$ ); their familiarity with some of the ethnic food recipes (Malay, M=5.61, Indian, M=5.63 and Chinese, M=5.66,  $p = .211$ ); their understanding of how some of the popular ethnic food is served and consumed (Malay, M=5.62, Indian, M=5.69 and Chinese, M=5.71,  $p = .363$ ); and that education catalyzed the sharing of each other's ethnic food (Malay, M=5.90, Chinese, M=5.55 and Indian, M=5.70,  $p = .376$ ).

The impact of education on a person's ability to at least prepare some of the other ethnic group's food is therefore statistically significant (Malay M=5.82, Indian M=5.02 and Chinese (M=4.98,  $p < .05$ ). With small differences, the three ethnic groups in this sample perceived that the education plays a role in the acculturation process and influences the preparation and consumption of one another's ethnic food. In other words, foods cross culturing, or the sharing of each other's food occurs among the three ethnic groups.

#### **4.2 Comparison between ethnic groups: influence of social interaction on foodways**

Based One-Way ANOVA and Scheffe post hoc multiple comparisons, four out of six items showed no statistically significant differences between ethnic group responses. Ethnic groups strongly agreed that social events, gatherings, and festivals contributed to the following: understanding of each other's ethnic food culture (Malay, M=6.55, Indian, M=6.52 and Chinese, M=6.52,  $p = .868$ ), understanding of ethnic food recipes (Malay, M=5.56, Indian, M=5.59 and Chinese, M=5.60,  $p = .152$ ); understanding of how some of the ethnic food is served and consumed (Malay, M=5.82, Indian, M=5.68 and Chinese, M=5.63,  $p = .610$ ), and that social events, gatherings, and festivals catalyzed the sharing of the each other ethnic food (Malay, M=6.14, Indian, M=6.29 and Chinese, M=6.28,  $p = .371$ ).

Differences appeared in the view that social events, gatherings, and festivals contributed to an understanding of the ingredients of some popular ethnic food. Malays inclined towards agreeing (Malay; M=5.54) compared to less agreement from Indians (M=5.27) and Chinese (M=5.13,  $p < .01$ ). A different perception was also received on the item that social events, gatherings, and festivals gave exposure and ability to at least prepare two major ethnic foods whereby Malays agreed (M=5.82) compared to Chinese (M=5.38) and Indians (M=5.33,  $p < .000$ ) who disagreed. The difference could be because the Malays in comparison seemed to organize or attend a lot more social gatherings. With only two minor differences, it could be said that social interaction through events plays a role in the acculturation process and influences foodways of each other's ethnic food. In other words, social interaction through events creates the sharing of ethnic food.

#### **4.3 Comparison between ethnic groups: influence of media on foodways**

Based on similar tests conducted earlier, statistically, significant differences appeared on four items. These mostly occurred between the Malay and Chinese respondents. On the item that newspapers, magazines, and books contributed to the understanding of each other's ethnic recipes, Malays, (M=5.77) and Indians (M=5.55) agreed compared to the Chinese (M=5.35,  $p < .001$ ). Malays, (M=5.62) and Indians (M=5.53) also perceived the reading of newspapers, magazines, and books as contributing to their understanding of how some popular ethnic

food is served and consumed. This was opposed slightly by the Chinese ( $M=5.24$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Again, Malays, ( $M=5.66$ ) and Indians ( $M=5.54$ ) had a greater level of agreement than the Chinese ( $M=5.30$ ,  $p<.01$ ) on how a reading of newspapers, magazines and books gave them the exposure and the ability to at least prepare some of the other ethnic group's food. Similarly, Malays, ( $M=6.68$ ) and Indians ( $M=6.43$ ) agreed that reading of newspapers, magazines and books catalyzed the sharing of ethnic foods, but that was not the case with the Chinese respondents ( $M=5.30$ ,  $p<.01$ ). The same result could also be seen if reading newspapers, magazines and books could create a better understanding of the ingredients in some of the popular ethnic food (Malay,  $M=5.77$ , Indian,  $M=5.69$  compared to Chinese,  $M=5.62$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Finally, differences appeared when the question on whether reading newspapers, magazines and books had an impact on their understanding of the differences in the food of each ethnic group (Malay,  $M=5.84$ , Indian,  $M=5.64$  and Chinese,  $M=5.71$ ,  $p=5.14$ ). These findings suggest that although some respondents were not familiar and did not understand how each ethnic food is prepared and served, overall reading of newspapers, magazines and books is part acculturation that influences foodways though perhaps to a lesser extent.

#### 4.4 Comparison between ethnic groups: impact of adaptation on foodways

This analysis is on the level of adaptation toward preparation and consumption of ethnic food among the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. It predicted that when the items were modified and developed, there would be small differences between the three ethnic groups. This assumption holds true as no statistically significant difference appeared in any of the eight items used either for ANOVA or the Scheffe post hoc multiple comparisons. Ethnic respondents had the same view on all the items.

Respondents from the three ethnic groups clearly felt attached to some of the other ethnic group's food after preparing (Malay,  $M=5.54$ , Indian,  $M=5.57$  and Chinese,  $M=5.53$   $p=.174$ ) and consuming it (Malay,  $M=5.81$ , Indian,  $M=5.69$  and Chinese,  $M=5.62$   $p=.476$ ). They felt comfortable using each other's method of cooking (Malay,  $M=5.66$ , Indian,  $M=5.79$  and Chinese,  $M=5.60$ ,  $p=.473$ ) and were comfortable using each other's recipes (Malay,  $M=6.12$ , Indian  $M=6.31$  and Chinese,  $M=6.29$ ,  $p=.117$ ). This is evident when they accepted each other's ethnic food as long it was not against their religious beliefs (Malay,  $M=6.03$ , Indian,  $M=6.02$  and Chinese,  $M=6.00$ ,  $p=.720$ ) and as such easily adapted each other's ethnic methods of cooking (Malay,  $M=6.80$ , Indian,  $M=6.77$  and Chinese,  $M=6.82$ ,  $p=.721$ ). Most importantly, all ethnic groups believe that the adaptation of each other's ethnic type of food contributes to a commonly acceptable food for Malaysians (Malay,  $M=6.79$ , Indian,  $M=6.73$  and Chinese,  $M=6.82$ ,  $p=.752$ ). This analysis clearly indicates that cross-culturing processes and adaptation of ethnic food occur among multi-ethnic Malaysians.

Table 1: Participants' Ethnicity and Religion

Ethnic	n	Percentage
Malay	166	42.34

Indian	101	25.76
Chinese	125	31.88
<b>Total</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Table 1. continued...</b>		
<b>Religion</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Islam	166	42.34
Buddhist	89	22.70
Hindus	70	17.85
Christian	67	17.09
<b>Total</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 5.0 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that education, social interaction, and media are acculturation attributes that provide an understanding of food cultures and nurture familiarity and a liking for food of different ethnic origins. The findings reflect that food cross culturing in a multiracial country like Malaysia gradually evolves through education, social interaction, and media. In fact, acculturation attributes play a significant role in influencing foodways or the preparation and consumption of food from other ethnic groups. The most important and remarkable finding is that adaptation of another group's ethnic food through preparation and consumption creates a strong belief in the formation of commonly acceptable food. This strengthens the notion that adaptations of various ethnic foods by different ethnic groups in a multicultural/ethnic nation will lead to commonly acceptable food and longitudinally forming what could be called national food identity (Fox & Ward, 2008). Not only that, but food can also be a strengthening and an integrative force enhancing solidarity, social bonding and alliances among communities and ethnic groups. In sum, these optimistic reflections provide an elementary basis for us to further investigate the issue and replicate the study in other multiracial contextual settings.

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