

HINDU FESTIVALS IN MALAYSIA AND THEIR FOOD AS UNITY TOOLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Individuals who do not really understand about the religion diversification lead to poor religion intolerance. The objective of this study was to attain information regarding the nature of Hindu festivals and their food. **Methods:** A qualitative exploratory study using semi-structured interviews was conducted. In total, five Hindu respondents volunteered to participated in this study. **Results:** This study found inconclusive to classify Hindu festivals as major and minor festival as well as to determine whether each of Hindu festival is religious, cultural or mix of religious and cultural. These are due to many inconsistent data found in this study. On the other hand, this study stated significant perception on the Hindu festival food in Malaysia where there are no specific food being served during the festivals except during Pongal in which sweet rice is served. The preparation of the festival food is almost similar with what Hindus usually prepare their food outside of the festivals. A few ingredients for Indian heritage food maybe different, plus a few way of their preparation using ground clay pot, pan and banana leaf. While for the prohibition of food, respondents stated that beef is not allowed for Hindus to consume and some Hindus also avoid from eating pork and drinking alcohol. Pertaining to opinions of festival food as a tool of unity, respondents agree that by knowing other religion festivals people can understand each other, and religious tension can be prevented. **Conclusion:** This study can be a source of reference on Hindu festivals and their food in Malaysia for the use of relevant authorities.

KEYWORDS: Hindu festivals, festivals food, Unity, Perception.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia can be described as a multiracial, multicultural and multireligious country as there are many different races, ethnics, cultures and religions exist in Malaysia. It is quite hard for the government to manage the diversity and they need to take long period to uphold the unity among citizens. There were many religious tolerance issues aroused in the country where the government need to handle them carefully. If people do not truly understand about religion diversity in Malaysia, it will create religious tension.

Creating a solution of religious misunderstanding is vital. For instance, understanding each religious festivals and their food might lead to unity. Perry (2017) said that food is a fundamental factor in bringing citizens together. Hence, information regarding the nature of Hindu festivals and their food that can be shared by all citizen as well as discovering opinion of Hindus about unity are crucial. This research was tried to explore how festival food can create unity among Malaysian as well as to clear all the misunderstanding related to food preparation and food restriction issues.

METHODS

Subjects

In total, five respondents among Hindus aged between 20 to 50 years old.in Peninsular Malaysia participated in this study. The limited number of respondents was due to restricted research activity during the period of Covid-19 movement control order which suddenly implemented in Malaysia in Mac 2020.

Data collection

Data collection for this research was carried out using a semi-structured interview. Participants were briefed before the interview regarding the purpose of the interview. The interview was carried out in Malay and the interview guide was used. Participants were also labelled with a specific code such as I1, I2, I3 to secure anonymity. The interviews were transcribed verbatim in Malay and followed by the transcription translated in English.

The interview questions cover the key phrases as: (1) what are the nature of Hindu festivals?, (2) what are the nature of Hindu festival food?, (3) what are the attitude towards people of other religion regarding festival food? and (4) what are the opinion of Hindus about unity through festival food?

Data Analysis

Data from the transcribed interviews were put into computer program Atlas.ti version 8 software for Windows. The software was used to analyze qualitative data which are from the interviews. The interviews were transcribed into text to collect all verbal and non-verbal data during the day of the interviews. Not only that, a thematic framework analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used to identify themes of qualitative data.

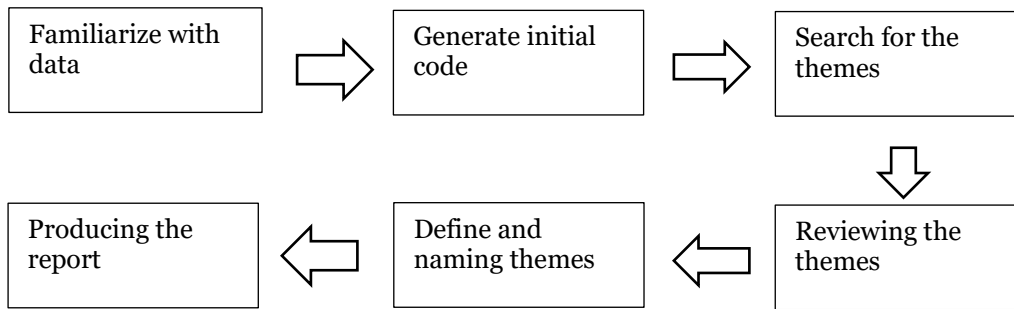


Figure 1: Six-step thematic analysis procedure

RESULTS

Four distinct themes emerged and detected from the analysis. The major themes of this study include:

1. Hindu festival celebration
2. Festival food selection
3. Attitude towards other’s religion food
4. Festival food as tool of unity

Theme 1: Hindu festival celebration

This theme described about the nature of Hindu festivals where the participants were asked about all festivals celebrated by Hindus that are categorized into major or minor festival and described whether each of the festivals is religious, cultural or mix of religious and cultural festival (Table 1).

Table 1: The Nature of Hindu Festivals

Theme	Subtheme	Summary
Hindu festival celebration	Festivals in Hindu society	Deepavali, Thaipusam, Ponggal and Tamil New Year
	Major and minor festival	Major festival - Deepavali Other festival - Inconclusive
	Religious, cultural, mixture of religious and cultural festival	Inconclusive

Theme 2: Festival food selection

This theme described about nature of Hindu festival food as during the interview, questions have been asked which are related to festival food that are prepared during the festivals and all the food/ingredients of the festival food are involved during the preparation as well as prohibited food that Hindu cannot consume during festival (Table 2).

Table 2: The Nature of Hindu Festivals Foods

Theme	Subtheme	Sub-subtheme	Summary
Festival food selection	Food belief and preference	Prohibited food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prohibited to consume beef. • Pork should be prohibited to consume but some of Hindus still consume it. • Consuming alcohol depends on individual belief whether to drink or not.
		Festival food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common traditional food that will be served during festival. • No specific food during festival is served <p>Deepavali</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepared Thosei and Idlli and eat them with Dhal or Curry. • ‘Nasi Briyani’ was prepared for lunch during Deepavali • A tradition to eat Muruku during Deepavali <p>Thaipusam</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veggie food is encourage to be consume and usually temple will prepare the food as this festival is held at temple <p>Ponggal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veggie dish is prepared. • The specific dish which is being served during this festival is Sweet Rice. <p>Tamil New Year</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veggie food is cooked and prepared.
	Preparation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All food preparations are almost similar with food preparation outside the festival seasons but for Sweet Rice there are a few differences in terms of ingredients • Indian foods are rich with spices and ghee is put into the dish • Banana leaf used as the serving style and using a special pot to cook sweet rice and pan to cook Thosei

Theme 3: Attitude towards other’s religion food

Through this theme, participants have been asked during the interview about what is their action when they served food to people of other religions during Hindu festivals and what is their attitude towards other religion’s festival food (Table 3).

Table 3: Attitude toward Other Religious Food

Theme	Subtheme	Summary
Attitude	Serving food to people of other religions during Hindu festivals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hindu people do not serve pork and alcohol to Muslim. • Hindu devotee bought chicken from Muslim seller. • For Chinese people, they would not serve spicy food.
	Other religion’s festival food	Observe food at other religion festival as they need to be aware of what they consume as Hindu is prohibited to consume beef.

Theme 4: Festival Food as tool of unity

In this theme, there are a few questions asked to the participants on how festival food can install harmony among Malaysians (Table 4).

Table 4: Festival Food as Tool of Unity

Theme	Subtheme	Summary
Favouring Festival Food as tool of unity	Better understanding	Learning about other religion festival food lead to better understanding
	Concerning	Concern about what other religion’s prohibited food as a way to install harmony
	Strengthening bond	A platform to strengthen the bonding and influence unity.

DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Hindu festivals

The data shows that all participants listed same answer which are Deepavali, Thaipusam, Ponggal and Tamil New Year. The statements were stated as these are festivals that are commonly celebrated by Malaysian Hindu. According to Soh (2012), Deepavali and Thaipusam are festivals that mostly major Hindu festivals in Malaysia that are celebrated by not only Hindu but other races. Not only that, Ponggal is a festival that has long been celebrated in Malaysia. In addition to that, Tamil New Year is a festival that is usually celebrated in a big scale and merrier across the Malaysia as the sign of new beginning for the Indian people (Bernama, 2020). Prahbu Gowda (2019) stated that actually there are more than ten Hindu festivals namely Diwali

or Deepavali, Holi, Onam, Maha Shivaratri, Krishna Janmashtami, Mahar Sankranti, Ganesh Chaturthi, Navatri, Rama Navami and Ugadi. But many of them only celebrated in certain countries especially India.

Major and minor festival

From the data, only Deepavali has been agreed by all the participants as the major festival celebrated by Hindu. However, there is inconsistent result regarding to the other three festivals whether there are categorized as major or minor festivals. According to Harshananda (2016), it is difficult to categorize Hindu festivals as major or minor. However, classification of a particular festival as a major one has been done based on popularity and huge celebration. It is all depend on belief of individuals on defining it. The federal government of Malaysia only consider Deepavali day as a public holyday, while other five state governments also consider Thaipusam as a public holiday that are Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Perak, Penang and Selangor.

Religious or cultural or mix of religious and cultural festival

Based on the data, all festivals are stated inconsistently whether it is religious, cultural or mix of religious and cultural festival. The participants only mentioned the type but the description and classification of the festival whether it is religious, cultural or mix of religious and cultural need to be further detail such as need to include whether the festival has any religious ritual or cultural activities before categorize them. Categorization of these festivals may be changed from time to time.

According to Soh (2012), procedures of festival celebrations may further be changed with respect to the changing of time and situation and this may change the status of a festival whether it is religious, cultural or mix of religious and cultural festival. Mohd Shuhaimi bin Haji Ishak (2010) wrote that both Deepavali and Thaipusam have elements of religiosity.

Theme 2: Festival food

Based on the results, it can be summarized that only during Deepavali, non-vegetarian food can be served but however some Hindu families still serve only vegetarian food. According to The Food Journal (2016), there is no restriction on consuming meat for particular festival. Nevertheless, consuming vegetarian food is a common practice during Deepavali. From the result, it also depends on the family itself whether the belief must eat vegetarian food or not during Deepavali. Hence, it can be concluded that there is no restriction code written during Deepavali but there is Deepavali dietary restriction for many families based on own belief and faith respectively.

Tamil New Year's festival food

Based on the results, it can be summarized that during this festival, vegetarian food is served. To support this, traditional vegetarian meals are cooked during this festival (BERNAMA, 2020).

Deepavali's festival food

From the results, it can be summarized that there is no specific dish being served during Deepavali and usually common traditional Indian dish is prepared. To support this, Ministry of Health Singapore (2012) reported that food preparation during Deepavali relies on the traditional choices of individual families. However, from the data, most of participants shared similar dishes that are prepared during the festival which includes Thosei, Idlii, Biryani Rice, Curry Dhal, Muruku and Coconut Candy. These food mentioned during the interview are also stated by Ministry of Health Singapore (2012) where common food eaten during Deepavali includes Idli , Thosai , Idi Appam (string hoppers), Paal Appam (crepes with coconut milk topping), Biryani Rice, Sambhar (lentil and vegetable soup) and curries prepared with chicken and mutton.

Thaipusam's festival food

Based on the results, it can be summarized that usually the food will be prepared by temple as Thaipusam is being held and celebrated at temple. During this festival, only vegetarian food is prepared and served. To support this fact, Dewi (2009) said Thaipusam devotees having vegetarian lunch at temple.

Pongal's festival food

Based on the results, it can be summarized that during Ponggal, sweet is prepared and served. To support this fact, Nation (2020) had said during Ponggal, Tamil community usually prepare sweet rice and offer thanksgiving prayers to the Sun God and also to the earth and cow.

Food preparation

From the results, it can be summarized that the preparation of Thosei and Idlii are similar whether for festival day or not. However, for Ponggal (sweet rice), there are a few differences in term of ingredients. Some of it use different type of sugar. Not only that, Indian food are rich with spices and ghee which are put into the dish which resulting in exciting absorption of Indian food culture for community of Malaysia's taste buds. To support this fact, Siti Radhiah and Siti Nazirah (2018) said many of Indian dishes contain heavy spices and ghee.

In term of utensil, majority mentioned of using banana leaf as the serving style and using a special pot to cook sweet rice and pan is used during making Thosei. According to Siti Radhiah and Siti Nazirah (2018), to cook Indian food, utensils that

are used are including banana leaf, clay pot on the ground and also pan. In addition to that, these culture has shaped the food of Indian heritage's image in Malaysia.

Prohibition food

From the results, it can be summarized that prohibition food by Hindus are beef but all participants also stated that they do not consume pork and alcohol. According to Patience (2016), Hindu devotees always avoided from consuming beef as cow is regarded as a holy animal but dairy products are allowed to be consumed. However, some Hindus do not ingest ghee, eggs, coconut, milk, domestic fowl, salted pork, garlic and onion. Besides that, alcohol is commonly avoided by Hindus

Theme 3: Attitude when serving food towards people of other religions during Hindu festival

From the results, it can be summarized that Hindus are aware of what other religion's prohibition food as Hindu people do not serve pork and alcohol to Muslim. Not only that, all of the participants stated that chicken they served to Muslim must be slaughtered and they bought from Muslim seller. Apart from that, for Chinese people, they would not serve spicy food. It can be seemed that Hindu devotees are knowledgeable and aware about other religion prohibition food. To support this, according to a study reported that respondents portrayed high religious tolerance practices in Malaysia. This is because via respondents' background showed that they are familiar with multi-racial environment (Khadijah *et al.*, 2018).

Attitude towards other religion's festival food

From the results, it can be summarized that Hindu devotees will observe food at other religion festival as they need to aware what they consume as Hindu is prohibited to take. To support this, since Hindus mostly vegetarian and do not consume beef as well as many variations in custom, they usually will ask whether the food contain beef or not (COPFS, 2009).

Theme 4: Festival Food as tool of unity

Based on the result regarding to the opinion of favouring festival food as tool of unity, three point has been detected includes better understanding, concerning and strengthening bond.

Better understanding

From the results it can be summarized that it is important for us to know other religion culture and tradition. By knowing other religion's festival, all Malaysian can understand each other and religion issue will not be aroused. For example, there has been an issued whether Ponggal involved religious ritual and cannot be celebrated by non-Hindus, so it is a must to explore about other religion's festival so that Malaysian

can have better understanding. Culture and customs between races must be known, learnt and respected by all parties, including the school management, teachers, and students (Nation, 2020).

Concerning

Based on the result, it can be summarized that it is important to concern about what other religion's prohibited food as it a way to install harmony as food is one of the sensitive issue related to religion. According to Ashgar Ali (2017), touching sensitive aspects of the religious beliefs and cultural traditions of other is inappropriate, because it may disrupt cohesion between people. In context of society, sensitive issues concerning other religions should be resolved immediately. Discrimination based on different religions and races are against the Federal Constitution.

Article 3(1) of the Constitution states that Islam is the Federation's religion but provides that "other religions in any part of the Federation may be practised in peace and harmony". Article 8(1) provides for all persons equal before the law equality before the law for all persons and Article 11(1) gives every person the right to profess and practise his or her religion. Thus, people should respect these constitutional provisions.

Strengthening bond

Based on the results, since Malaysia are rich with many festivals of different races, food is said to be a platform to strengthen the bonding and influence unity.

Malaysia is paradise of food lovers and Malaysians enjoy the rich culinary heritage of their multicultural community in general. Although divided by religion, culture and creed, Malaysians are united in their love for multicultural cuisine in nation level. Food is an important factor in bringing together the Malaysians allowing them to learn about each other's cultures and traditions. The love of a specific cuisine, a dish or any food can bring people together as it can be a cause in establishing bonds and relationships for life (Perry, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows about the nature of Hindu festival and festival food as well as the opinion of festival food as a tool of unity. Regarding the classification of Hindu festivals as major and minor is still inconclusive as there is a lack of evidence required. Not only that, determining whether Hindu festival as religious, cultural or mix of religious and cultural festival is uncertain as too many inconsistent data through this study and also previous study. Besides that, in aspect of festival food, no specific dishes are being served during festive season except during Ponggal which serve sweet rice. However, based on results, during Deepavali there is similar pattern of

dish being served which includes Idlii, Thosei, Nasi Biryani and Muruku. The preparation of festival food is almost similar but only a few ingredients is not same. Plus, the Indian heritage foods are mainly prepared using clay pot on the ground, pan, and banana leaf. While for the prohibition food, in the study stated that beef is not allowed to consume and some Hindus avoid from eating pork and alcohol. Regarding the opinion of festival food as a tool of unity, by knowing other religion's festival, all Malaysian can understand each other, and problems due to misunderstanding of other religion will not arise. So it is everyone's responsibility to be concerned about other's religion, culture and food to improve unity. Last but not least, since Malaysia is rich with many festival of different races, food is said to be a platform to strengthen the bonding which influence unity and lead to lifelong friendship and relationship. Further studies should be done to explore the nature of Hindu festival regarding major and minor Hindu festival, where more data is needed to categorize it. Apart from that, determining whether Hindu festival as religious, cultural or mix of religious and cultural festival, more data need to be taken before categorizing those festivals including info on the ritual and also the activities conducted during the festivals.

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