

PERCEPTIONS AMONG YOUNG BUDHIST ADULTS ON FESTIVAL FOOD AS A TOOL FOR UNITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Malaysians create bond among them by sharing festival foods. However, some misunderstandings happen within the races and religious circle while attending the festivals. As each celebration and festival foods have their own uniqueness, it is important to be respectful to one's tradition and accept the differences. The objectives of this study were to explore the nature of Buddhist festivals and festival foods and to assess the opinion regarding festival food as a tool of unity. **Methods:** This study was conducted as a qualitative study where data were collected through telephone call interview to twelve respondents who are selected using purposive sampling. **Results:** The finding of the study presented the elements of Buddhist festivals and their festival food and highlighted how knowledge of cultures could influence attitude and practice in tolerating other races and religions. Five themes emerged from this study were 1) Buddhist festivals, 2) the variation in food selection during festival, 3) festival food integration, 4) perception of festival food as a tool of unity and 5) tolerance towards other races or religions. **Conclusion:** This study highlighted that it is important to be well-educated about others' traditions and cultures to reach a better understanding and maintain the harmony of the community.

KEYWORDS: Buddhist, Festival Food, Multi-cultural, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is known as a multi-cultural and multi-religious country. To manage the diversity of the community, the unity among them must be achieved. One of the way to live in harmony and togetherness in multi-cultural country is by interacting each other through cultural or religious festivals. During the celebration, people can create bond by sharing the same festival foods. It is crucial for citizens to stand together for better development of the country.

According to Faizah Idrus (2015), a study on Malaysian identity and the Third Space (hybrid spaces that bring people together) revealed that most of the respondents agreed with the claim that Malaysian food can build a shared Malaysian identity and create togetherness among citizens regardless of their religious and cultural background. Perry (2017) said that sharing food can create opportunity to promote a sense of community belonging among people.

However, some misunderstandings arise within certain races, ethnic and religion groups while attending the festivals. It is unclear whether everyone can attend all the festivals especially religious celebrations. Some of the festival food cannot be eaten by all people as every religion has its own prohibition and restriction. It is an important thing that must be stressed during festivals or gathering as it might cause a misunderstanding and bring sensitivity issues to many religions and races. Both the guest and the organizer of the celebration should notice on the food served during the event, the preparation and the ingredient of food when attending and organizing the event. Other than that, the lack of knowledge about others' practices and belief also can bring sensitivities if there is a crossing of the religious boundaries.

This study was conducted to explore the nature of Buddhist festivals and their festival food. Detailed information regarding the festivals, the purpose of the celebration, the activity during the festivals and the permissibility of the food to be eaten by invited guests especially from other religious were explored. Besides, the goal of this research was to explore in-depth on Buddhist opinion and understanding regarding unity through festival foods that have been prepared, served and shared during the celebration. This research will help more people to learn about other races and religions' matters, hence strengthen the relationship and bring unity among them. The information also can be used by the authorities to generate ideas on how to strengthen the bond of the multi-races community in other ways.

METHODS

Research Design

The research design used in this study was a qualitative exploratory study. It is used to explore a problem that is not clearly defined. In addition, this study was conducted to provide a better understanding of the existing problem, but it will not give conclusive results.

Study Area

A qualitative study was conducted among Buddhists in Malaysia from various states with inclusion and exclusion criteria as in Table 1.

Table 1. Criteria for sources of population

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Buddhist	Muslim, Christian, Hindus
Able to speak Malay or English	Unable to speak Malay or English

Sample Size Calculation

There is no firm establishment or rule in determining the sample size in qualitative study. The sampling continues until researcher sense data saturation, as in little or no new information has emerged from the data collection. It occurs when redundancy is reached in data analysis and signals to researchers that they may stop data collection as mentioned by Guest *et al.* (2006).

Sampling Method

The sampling method that was used to conduct this study is purposive sampling. It is known as judging sampling and respondents were carefully selected to achieve the specific objectives.

Data Collection

Data collection for this research was conducted through telephone call interview by asking open-ended question based on semi-structured questionnaire. The participants were explained briefly on the purpose of the interview and were assured that their participation was completely voluntary and guaranteed the confidentiality.

The interview was conducted in Malay or English, depending on the participants' fluency. The session was recorded using voice recorder with the permission obtained

from participants. The respondents were coded with specific codes such as C1, C2 and C3 for anonymity. The questions for the interview are about (1) understanding the nature of Buddhist festival, (2) providing the information regarding the nature of Buddhist festival food and (3) assessing the opinion of Buddhist about unity through festival food.

Data analysis

The recorded audio from the interview was transcribed into text within the same day of interview to get all the verbal and non-verbal data. Then, the transcription was analyzed using Atlas.ti version 8 software. A thematic framework by Braun and Clark (2006) was used to classify and organize the data according to key themes. The flow of thematic framework analysis is shown in Figure 1.

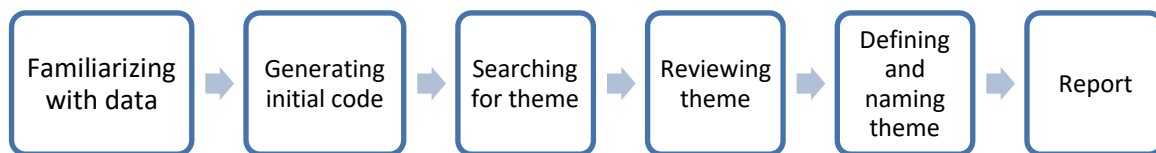


Figure 1. Thematic Framework

According to the framework, the first step is to get familiar with the data by rereading the transcript and jot down the early impression and thought. Then, the data is organized in systematic way by generating initial codes. Any parts of the interview that relevant to the research questions are coded. The next step is by searching for theme. The codes are examined and grouped into the specific themes. The initial themes are reviewed to check if there are enough data to support them. After that, the themes are defined and finalized at the final step. A thematic map is illustrated to show the correlation between the themes. Lastly, a report is written to explain the overall data gathered from the interview.

RESULTS

This section focused on the main themes and the results that obtained from the interview and data analysis. The themes emerged from the data analysis based on buddhist festival, the variation in food selection during festival, festival food integration, perception of festival food as a tool of unity, tolerance towards other races or religions.

Respondent

Twelve respondents consisted of Buddhist males and females from different states of Malaysia have participated voluntarily in this study. They were either vegetarian or non-vegetarian and were given a brief explanation on the interview procedure. All of

them were selected among the researcher's acquaintances and contacted through telephone calls due to the different locations. The interview time was varied and been scheduled according to the respondents' and researcher's availability. The conversation during the telephone call interview was recorded and transcribed on the same day using software Atlas.ti version 8. All interviews were conducted starting from March 2020 to July 2020. Table 2 below shows the demographic data of participants.

Table 2. Participants of the study

Name	Age	States	Sex
Respondent 1	22	Sarawak	Male
Respondent 2	24	Kedah	Male
Respondent 3	21	Johor	Male
Respondent 4	20	Kelantan	Male
Respondent 5	22	Kelantan	Female
Respondent 6	22	Johor	Female
Respondent 7	23	Pulau Pinang	Female
Respondent 8	22	Sabah	Male
Respondent 9	22	Johor	Female
Respondent 10	23	Kuala Lumpur	Female
Respondent 11	21	Sarawak	Male
Respondent 12	20	Kelantan	Male

Key Theme

Buddhist festivals

The respondents were asked about the classification of the Buddhist festival, whether it is major or minor festival. Majority of the respondents (7 out of 12), stated that Wesak Day and Chinese New Year (CNY) were classified as Buddhist major festivals. Some of the quotations from the participants are:

"The major festivals that celebrated by Buddhists in Malaysia is Wesak Day"
(Respondent 1).

"Chinese New Year is the major festival" (Respondent 3).

Other than that, they were also asked if those mentioned festivals are under religious, cultural or mixed festival. Five respondents categorized CNY as cultural festival while few participants classified Wesak Day as religious festivals. The examples of their responses are:

"I think it (Chinese New Year) can be considered as cultural festival" (Respondent 7).

"Wesak Day is religious festival" (Respondent 7).

Another important part for this theme is respondents were asked about the purpose of celebrating Buddhist festivals. Two of the subjects described Wesak Day as a day to celebrate the Buddha. During the celebration, there were some activities or ritual done to the Buddha.

"We also give bath to the Buddha statue. At the temple, we will queue and take turn to give bath to the Buddha. There will be a pile of water mixed with flower provided there and everyone will bath the Buddha." (Respondent 7)

The variation in food selection during festival

From the interview, it is discovered that the type and preparation of Buddhist festival food can be influenced by several factors such as sub-ethnic and location. Three participants stated that Buddhist festival food comes in varieties due to the Chinese sub-ethnic groups in Malaysia.

"Food preparation is varies depending on the Chinese dialect. For example, yusheng is more preferred to have in Cantonese families" (Respondent 2)

"It is depends if you are Hokkien or Hakka. From what I know, Hakka group will have steamboat as the common dishes during festival. For Hokkien, there is sea cucumber." (Respondent 9)

In addition, one participant noted that people from different states also served different kind of festival food. The excerpt from the participant is:

"My Terengganu and Kelantan friends, their dishes are more to Thai food. There will be Nasi Kerabu, Thai food. As for me, in Penang, we don't have any Thai food or Nasi Kerabu. We only served authentic Chinese food. No Thai-Malay mixed dishes." (Respondent 6)

Festival food selection is also varied as it depends on the person's food belief. Respondent 8 reported that vegetarian use vegan products in cooking and preparing their festival foods.

"They will use the oyster sauce with vegetarians sign into their cooking." (Respondent 8)

Some respondents named few Buddhist festival foods that held different symbolic meanings such as unity and good wishes.

"Fish can increase in prosperity, tangyuan symbolized a family togetherness and mandarin orange symbolized fullness and wealth." (Respondent 2)

"When we want to eat it (Yeesang), we will say ooo! And pray for good fortune and good luck. We also say thankful wishes. Yeesang is for blessing and good wishes" (Respondent 7)

Festival food integration

Four out of ten respondents stated that attitude and environment are the factors that can affect festival food integration. They believed that an individual mindset and surrounding can become either a barrier or an opportunity to achieve unity through food. The quotes from the respondents are:

"It could be very hard (to unite through food) since it is very hard to change a person mindset especially the older generation that not willing to try out other religious festival food." (Respondent 2)

"If you are born in a good environment (used to multi-racial food sharing neighbourhood, it would be much easier to influence other people as it has become part of your habits." (Respondent 5)

From the excerpts, it can be seen that younger generation did not observe the culture and festive thoroughly. Hence it is important to educate them to accept the difference and uniqueness of the races.

Perception of festival food as a tool of unity

Participants were asked on their opinion regarding uniting community through festival food. Six out of ten respondents agreed that festival food can be a tool of unity for Malaysians. They stated that sharing food together can make people learn each other more. Some excerpts from the participants are:

"Of course (it can be a tool of unity). We can share the festival food or the menu but with the ingredients is suitable to them." (Respondent 4)

"Yes. While eating, we also talk (in Malay) and held conversation together with other races. From that, we get to learn each other better and know their lifestyle." (Respondent 7)

On the other hand, the rest of the participants had different thoughts on the festival food as a tool of unity. They disagreed with the statement as they believed that festival food can only give minor changes on the unison of community.

"I don't think festival food can unite all the Malaysians but it can let them learn more or understand more culture and tradition between different religions." (Respondent 1)

Tolerance towards other religions or races

Few participants shared opinion that they look on the other religions' food restriction if there are non-Buddhists attended their festivals. They stated that there were changes in terms of the food preparation and ingredients used in cooking. Some of their quotes are:

"If the festivals is going to be attended by non-Buddhist, normally we will consider and make sure all the food prepared are halal." (Respondent 2)

"Since Malay can't eat pork and Indian and some Chinese can't eat beef, so the food preparation will depend on the attendees". (Respondent 3)

This showed that they have tolerated toward other religions as the food preparation are taken into consideration to make sure that everyone can enjoy the celebration in a good way.

DISCUSSION

Buddhist festival

The findings showed that CNY and Wesak Day are classified as major Buddhists festivals due to the norm in Malaysia in which they are celebrated as huge festivals compared to other Buddhist festivals. CNY is stated as one of the biggest celebrations in Malaysia (Mayberry, 2019). It had been celebrated by multi-races and many open houses are held during the festival. Meanwhile, few minor festivals identified from the interview are Dragon Boat Festival, Lantern Festival and Dongzhi Festival. Some people might rarely celebrating and experiencing those celebrations due to factor such as family tradition (Choo, 2014). Author stated that celebration such as Dongzhi Festival is only celebrated in large scale by certain family. Plus, the younger generation also did no longer observe the tradition that associated with the celebration. Choo (2014) reported that some families in Malaysia believed Dongzhi Festival is more important than the CNY reunion dinner.

Buddhist festivals also can be classified into a cultural and religious festival. The common cultural festival is CNY. Some of the activities during the festivals are gathering together with families and pray to their ancestors. Even though some might spend time visiting the temple, CNY is considered as cultural rather than a religious festival as the celebration is a time for them to eat, drink and having fun together (Mayberry, 2019). As for Wesak Day, the majority of the participants identified it as a religious festival as it is a celebration in which Buddhists show their devotion to Buddha.

Interestingly, few respondents have different views regarding the classification of festivals for Wesak Day. The different classification can happen as the way of celebration is varied according to tradition (Yip and Low, 2011). It is reported that the Wesak Day celebration can also be influenced by the school of Buddhism such as Theravada and Mahayana. Yip and Low (2011) also mentioned that some teachings from the school of Buddhism incorporated certain rituals as a part of the celebration hence it explained the difference of opinion from the respondents.

The variation in food selection during festival

From the finding, it is reported that foods served during the Buddhist festivals were varied depending on sub-ethnic group, geographical and food belief factor. Geographical factor can influence the food preference during the festival. A respondent mentioned Buddhists from Kelantan and Terengganu prepared Nasi Kerabu and Thai-Malay fusion food while Buddhist from Penang only served authentic Chinese food when celebrating CNY. In addition, sub-ethnic groups such as Hakka, Hokkien and Cantonese also have different kind of festival food. Some dishes will come in many ways of preparation and ingredient according to the Chinese group (Yip and Low, 2011). This shows the diversity of culture in Malaysia as a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country.

Other than that, food belief and practice also contribute to the variety of festival food as Buddhist can be either vegetarian or non-vegetarians. Few respondents mentioned about the usage of vegetarian-based ingredients in preparing their festival food. Besides, they only served vegetarian food during the celebration. In this case, Muslims can celebrate the festival while enjoying the food without any worry since there is no meat-based food prepared by them. However, even though the ingredients of the food might be halal, the food preparation especially the usage of cooking tools and serving plate should be concerned. It is important to know and check if the appliance is used only specifically for halal or vegetarian food. Both parties (guest and organizer) need to be educated on this matter to prevent any misunderstanding.

Festival food integration

Participants stated that individual's surroundings and attitude could be the challenges in achieving festival food integration. The results showed that one's surroundings can have a significant impact in uniting a community through festival food. Person that used to live with people from different races has more exposure to other cultures. They have interacted with each other and get to know more about themselves. Ezhar Tamam (2009) mentioned that process of interaction between races can improve one's knowledge about other culture. Moreover, it also builds a better and accurate perception on the races. Thus, the acceptance towards other festival food is also expected

to be higher than one who did not interact much with other races. In short, surroundings can affect the individual's understanding of other races and religions' matters.

However, festival food integration is also depending on the individual itself. Some people tend to be close-minded and judgmental on other races and religions' festival food. They might think that it is difficult to accept other festival food as it is quite unusual in their perspective. This mindset should be erased from the society as it can bring sensitivity among the races and left a bad impression on each other. This situation is aligned with statements by Nigosian (2008) that emphasized the significance of understanding more about other religions as it can prevent negative pre-assumption, bias and prejudice.

Perception of festival food as a tool of unity

From the data analysis, it can be concluded that festival food can partially become a tool in uniting people. Food alone cannot bring a peaceful and harmonious community without any cooperation and tolerance. Tolerance is one of the keys that can bring the good environment within cultural diversity. Furthermore, everyone needs to educate themselves about other culture and accept the differences and uniqueness of each of them. Other than that, unity also can be achieved with the assistance of another element such as education and social aspects. By implementing those elements, it can help in creating the togetherness among the citizens.

Tolerance towards other religions or races

Lastly, the key theme showed a notable result that most of the participants have a good attitude and knowledge of other religions' matters. They are aware of the food restriction and consider preparing their non-Buddhist guest with food appropriate to their religions. Few respondents stated that they took the initiative to order packed food from Muslim catering when inviting their Muslim friends to the celebration. In that way, it is easier for them to serve food to the Muslim guests. The same preparation goes when they are inviting Hindus or vegan. They considered serving vegetarian food as a way to respect the guest's preference. This consideration and tolerance can bond people together as it showed how an individual concerned about other religions' perspectives.

Conceptual framework of the themes

A framework was developed to summarize the five themes emerged from this study. Understanding about other religions' matter by acknowledging the details of the festivals and festival food is very crucial as it can prevent any misunderstanding and sensitivities. Having a good knowledge also can create a good environment within the

community and change one's perspective towards other culture. Thus, it helped in building an opportunity to achieve festival food integration and lead to a better perception of festival food as a tool of unity. Lastly, all of these can be reflected by showing tolerance towards other races and religions. The conceptual framework was illustrated as below:

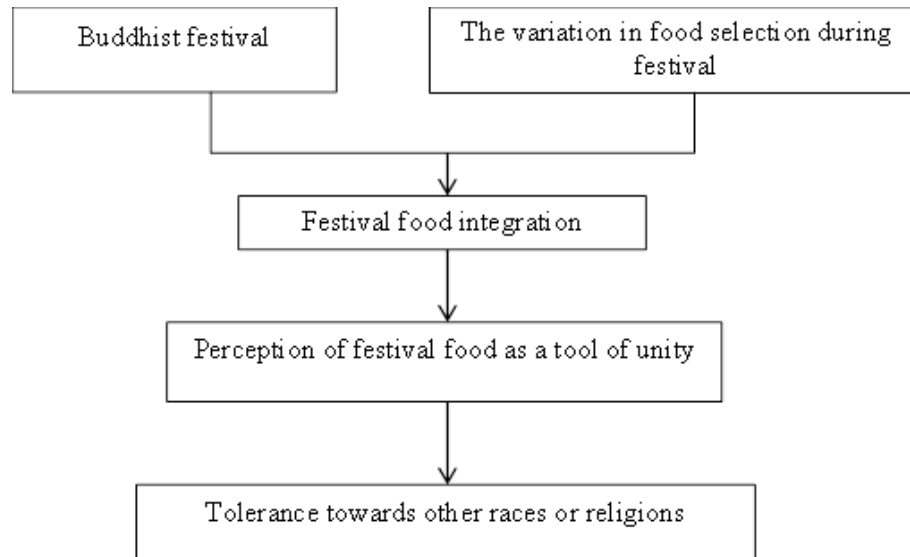


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has presented the elements of the festival and festival food and showed the importance of acknowledging other culture's practice as it can educate us to respect the uniqueness of the tradition. This study also highlighted how understanding those matters can reflect our attitude in tolerating other races and religions. Knowing other cultures definitely help a person to behave accordingly to the culture's practice and beliefs. Further studies should be carried out to explore the perspective of festival food and unity from different age group.

ACKNOWLEDMENT

All praise to Allah S.W.T for giving me the countless blessing and strength to complete this study. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my family for the endless support and prayer during my study. Special thanks to my supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ibrahim Abu Bakar for the guidance and advice during the completion of my research. All the feedbacks and insightful comments are truly appreciated. Lastly, deepest appreciation goes to my friends for giving support and encouragement during this study.

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