

QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FOOD CHOICE DURING CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Festival food plays an important role as a medium of unity in multicultural country like Malaysia. It is normally served during open house of cultural or religious festivals which attended by people from different background. Some people especially Muslims feel doubtful to eat the food because of religiosity factor. This study tried to gather information on the type of food that is served during Christian festival days. Before that this study tried to get information from the followers of Christian themselves whether each of the Christian festival is categorized as religious festival or cultural festival. **Method:** This qualitative study used purposive sampling method where 11 participants among Christian followers were interviewed through phone call based on the semi-structured questions specifically created by the researcher. The interview sessions were recorded using an audio recorder and the data data were transcribed verbatim in Malay which then the transcription were translated into English. The transcribed data were analysed using qualitative data analysis software; Atlas.ti version 9 for Windows. A thematic framework by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to assist the analysis. The data were then identified, analysed and organized according to the key themes. **Results:** The study revealed that there are at least six Christian festivals celebrated by Christians in Malaysia. Almost all of the festivals are religious festivals or contain religious elements. Even though most of the food that are served during the Christian festivals were informed as halal but some of them were informed as non-halal. **Conclusion:** Muslim people are allowed to attend the Christian festivals if the celebration are not mix with ritual activity and they can only choose the halal food. Sharing of halal festival food by people in the community can be a medium of unity.

KEYWORDS: Qualitative Study, Christian Celebration Day, Festival Food.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multi-religious country. People from different religion live together peacefully. This uniqueness inherited since long time ago. Nowadays, many religions exist in Malaysia including Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and others. Department of Statistics Malaysia (2019) stated that Islam is the most widely professed religion in Malaysia with a percentage of 61.3%. Meanwhile, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism comprise of 19.8%, 9.2% and 6.3% respectively. Malaysia is a federation of states in which Islam has been declared in Clause 1 of Article 3, Constitution of Malaysia (1957) as the religion of the federation while other religions may be practised in peace and harmony (Andrew Harding, 2012).

Sometimes, sensitive issues aroused among different religious citizens including food issue. Food does not only sustain health, but also portrays the culture of specific ethnic and religion, especially in the believe of food permissibility and prohibition. Therefore, it is crucial to understand about foods of other religions. Ignorance is surely not a bliss because a small matter can create a big misunderstanding.

According to Rosmaliza Muhammad *et al.* (2009), celebration of ethnic festivals are not only important as a basis of mutual respect among Malaysians, but also serve as identity and heritage of the country. In Malaysia, some festivals are celebrated by all people from different races and religions. During the festival, foods are served and shared together. Some people feel doubtful to eat the food because of religiosity factor. Muslim people adhere to what Allah SWT said in Al-Quran (3:85) "*and whoever seeks a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), it shall not be accepted from him, and in the Hereafter he shall be of the losers*".

This study tried to gather information on the type of food that is served during Christian festivals. Before that this study tried to get information from the followers of Christian themselves whether each of the Christian festival is categorized as religious festival or cultural festival.

METHOD

This research was a qualitative exploratory case study which use purposive sampling method. Research ethical approval was obtained from IIUM Research Ethics Committee (IREC) and all respondents were asked to give response based on voluntary basis.

Respondent

In total, 11 respondents (male and female) participated in this study. All of them are Christians from east coast and peninsular of Malaysia. Every respondent was given a designated code such as C1, C2 and C3 to ensure the keeping of information anonymous. For respondent size determination, data saturation method was applied when there is no new information obtained through the interview or when there is a redundancy in terms of the information from the respondents.

Data Collection

Data collection was done using interview method where respondents are interviewed through phone call based on the semi-structured questions created by the researcher. The interview session was recorded using an audio recorder. It took approximately 30 to 40 minutes for each of the subject to complete the session. After the interview session, the data were transcribed verbatim in Malay which then the transcription were translated into English.

Data Analysis

The information from the interview (audio-recorded and field notes) was transcribed into text within the same day of the interview to prevent any loss of verbal or non-verbal data. The transcript was read a few times before the analysis begin to ensure its accuracy. The transcribed data was analysed using qualitative data analysis software; Atlas.ti version 8 for Windows. A thematic framework by Braun and Clarke (2006) as shows in Table 1 was used to assist the analysis. The data was then identified, analysed and organized according to key themes.

Table 1: Braun & Clarke’s Six Phase Framework for Conducting A Thematic Analysis

Step	Framework
1	Become familiar with the data
2	Generate initial code
3	Search for themes
4	Review themes
5	Define and name themes
6	Write-up

RESULTS

Demographic Data

Table 2 shows demographic data of the respondents that participated in this study. There were 11 respondents as data saturation was achieved.

Table 2: Summary of Demographic Data of the Respondents

Respondent	Gender	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	State	Denomination
C1	Female	24	Indian	Selangor	Protestant
C2	Male	31	Chinese	Sabah	Evangelical
C3	Female	22	Chinese	Terengganu	Catholic
C4	Female	22	Kayan	Sarawak	Evangelical
C5	Male	23	Iban	Sarawak	Catholic
C6	Female	23	Chinese	Perak	Charismatic
C7	Female	23	Indian	Perak	Catholic
C8	Female	21	Chinese	Pahang	Catholic
C9	Female	23	Iban	Sarawak	Baptists
C10	Male	38	Bidayuh	Sarawak	Catholic
C11	Female	24	Iban	Sarawak	Anglican

Christian Festival

Among festivals celebrated by Christians are Christmas, Easter Sunday, Good Friday, Ash Wednesday, Ascension Day or Holy Thursday and Eucharist or Last Supper.

All participants stated that the festival that is celebrated by all Christians is Christmas. Some respondents uttered that Christmas is celebrated religiously as the following statements illustrated:

“Christmas is the day to remember Jesus, son of God being born” (C3, C5).

“Christmas is to remember the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem” (C9).

Meanwhile, some respondents had different opinions regarding Christmas. They celebrated Christmas culturally as the following assertion depicted:

“For certain denominations they do not celebrate Christmas because they do not accept the significance behind it, so they won’t celebrate it” (C7).

"We do not celebrate it religiously, but culturally because we do not believe that as a special day. In Bible, it is recorded about Jesus birth, but it did not state the specific date" (C8).

Another festival that is celebrated by all Christians religiously is Easter Sunday. All participants shared the same opinions regarding Easter Sunday as the greatest religious festival as the following proclamations revealed:

"The greatest of Christian festival is Easter Sunday" (C1, C3, C7).

"We celebrate the day when Jesus has risen again and is now seated on the throne" (C6).

Easter Sunday was celebrated religiously as its significance was accepted by most churches regardless of their denominations as the utterances represented:

"In the Bible, Jesus was resurrected 3 days after Friday, which is why that Sunday is called Easter Sunday" (C1).

"We celebrate the day when Jesus has risen again and is now seated on the throne" (C6).

Good Friday is another festival that is celebrated by Christians. As Easter Sunday, Good Friday is also celebrated religiously. This is because these two festivals share similar significance and history according to the Bible. The statements of the respondents were as followed:

"Good Friday is when Jesus died" (C1).

"Good Friday is a day where Jesus is crucified on the cross. For us, this day is a day where we remember and thank God for what He has done for us" (C6).

Aside from these three festivals, the respondents also portrayed other minor festivals that are celebrate by Christians as follow;

"We (Catholic) celebrate Ash Wednesday that put ash at forehead" (C10).

"We (Catholic) have Ascension Day or Holy Thursday which involves foot-washing of Catholics" (C3)

There is also another celebration day observed by Catholics, which is called Eucharist or Last Supper. Christians do not celebrate it annually as the respondents depicted as:

"Every first Sunday of the month, my church will give Holy Communion. It is before the death of Jesus" (C1).

"Holy Communion which is usually done on Sunday to remember the body of Christ that is crucified on the cross for us" (C6).

About the location of the festival, all participants stated that the location of festivals is not restricted.

"After we have done our prayer at church, we will organize an open house" (C3).

"It's like we finish the celebration at church first, and then we celebrate it at home" (C7).

Festival Food Selection

For Christians, food practice involves food prohibition according to their biblical teaching. However, most respondents stated that there is no food prohibition as the assertion depicted:

"According to Bible, we are commanded not to abstain from food which God created as all food should be received with thanksgiving" (C2).

"In the New Testament, Marcus Chapter 7, verse 17-19, Jesus stated that all food is clean to eat and there is no restriction of food" (C3).

Some respondents added some exceptions of food prohibition as the statements illustrate:

"There is one prohibited rule in the Bible which is you are not allowed to drink blood" (C1).

"We can eat whatever we want as long as the food does not cause harm to our health" (C3).

In terms of festival food, all the participants reported that there is no specific food for all the celebration day as the statements illustrated:

"Festival food in my church is mostly Malaysian food like meehoon, curry puff" (C1).

"During Christmas, my family prepared food that are commonly prepared by Malay during 'Hari Raya' such as 'lemang', 'rendang', all sort of curry, 'pulut kuning' and the most important delicacy of Sarawak, 'Laksa' Sarawak for sure" (C5).

Some respondents also gave these statements:

"We buy the food from Halal caterer, so Muslims can eat it. And all the dishes and glasses are Halal" (C1, C9, C11).

"If my family make an open house, we will order from Muslim caterer or asked our Muslim relatives to cook and prepare it" (C4, C10).

Festival Food as a Tool of Unity

Nine participants agreed that sharing festival food could contribute to unity among people from different races and religions as the statement illustrated:

"If there is anyone who does not eat a certain food, then take a little bit of effort in preparing the food" (C1).

"Keep the food served generally acceptable to the majority of society, national dishes such as 'Nasi Lemak' are always appetizing and comes with little to no complains" (C2).

Two respondents who disagreed about food as a tool for unity stated as followed:

"I believe it's not the food itself that unites us but, the love in us that unites us all" (C6).

"Festival food probably unites all Malaysians, but only for a short period. I think it's more towards how your parents teach you, your teaching plays a part rather than food" (C8).

DISCUSSION

Festival Celebrations among Christians

From the data, all respondents stated that the three main festivals that are celebrated by all Christians are Christmas, Easter Sunday and Good Friday. This is also aligned with research that stated those three celebrations are major festivals for Christians (Gin, 2017). The participants also shared a similar point of view in which they will celebrate Christmas both at church and at home. For festival that is celebrated religiously which includes rituals, it is normally held at church. Then, they continue celebrating it at home.

Some Christians also observed the Lent season. The findings showed that Catholics observe Lent prior to Easter Sunday. Lent season starts on Ash Wednesday in which the Catholic participants stated that the priest will make a sign of the cross with ash on the forehead during this day. This statement is aligned as Colledge (2017) depicted that the ritual serves as a symbol of repentance and the symbol of dependence of Christians towards their God and His grace.

There is also Holy Week celebration which is during the last week of Lent. In Holy Week, there is another important celebration day which is Good Friday. The

significance of the celebration is to commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus (McGrath, 2016). However, different church has a different way to celebrate it. For Malaysian Christians, they marked the day by attending mass gathering at Church. Some Christians may also fast during the day.

The most important celebration for all Christians is Easter Sunday. All participants shared the same opinion about Easter Sunday as the greatest festival for all Christians. The assertions aligned with several studies that depicted the celebration for the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday morning from the dead (McGrath, 2016).

Catholics also celebrate another festival which is Ascension Day. This day is also known as Holy Thursday or Maundy Thursday. The significance of the celebration is that Jesus was raised from death early on Easter Sunday and then he spent forty days in and around Palestine before leaving the earth (Toon, 2020). During this special day, the respondents illustrated a ritual that involves the foot-washing of Catholics by the priest that aligned with current research in which foot-washing is a metaphor for what Christ asks the Christians to do for communal (Kappelle, 2014).

The findings also stated that another significant event that is celebrated by Christians is Eucharist. During the event, there is a ritual that involves foods which are bread and wine. Ali and Nizar (2018) also added that the wine represents the blood of Jesus, while the bread is specially prepared to commemorate a significant event that occurred before his death.

This study found that almost all Christian celebration days are religious celebration days or contain element of religiosity even though some of the respondents have different opinion. Jabatan Agama Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) (2010) stated that Muslims are allowed to attend other religious festival with conditions. Basri Ibrahim *et al.* (2016) said Muslims are strictly forbidden to participate in a festival that involves the faith practice of the non-Muslims but are allowed to participate if it involves the aspects of culture and tradition only such as attending an open house.

Food Selection during Christian Festivals

Food selection is closely intertwined with religious adherence. Most Christians accept the general food permissibility as Jesus declared that all food is clean to eat and there is no restriction. However, there are some exceptions with regards to prohibited food as Blidstein (2017) portrayed that two foods that are prohibited for Christians are animal blood and food sacrificed for idols as they are impure. However, it is stated that some of the respondents avoided the food that is

sacrificed for idols as it is served as proof for their greater dedication to God (Blidstein, 2017).

The finding stated that beside Eucharist, there is no other food that is significant during any celebration. In other words, no food can be called as 'festival food'. This is because, from the beginning, all participants agreed that Christians do not have any food prohibition in most of their days based on their biblical teaching of food.

Besides, all participants declared that food preparation is based on family tradition or ethnicity. This is also aligned with a study stated that festival food is strongly associated with ethnic groups (Rosmaliza Muhammad *et al.*, 2018). The findings also clearly show that Christians in Malaysia will prepare typical dishes in Malaysia for festival as aligned with current research (Mayberry, 2019). For instance, 'ketupat', 'rendang' and 'nasi lemak'. If they are Chinese, they will prepare Chinese dishes such as 'Bak Kut Teh' or noodles. Some respondents also expressed their opinion to prepare food that other guests from different religion can experience the speciality of the food.

Office of Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan (2020) explained that it is allowed for Muslim to eat any festival food if the food is *halal* even though the food is prepared by non-Muslim. If the food or drink is haram like food for idol or wine, it is not allowed for Muslim to select it. The halal food also cannot be served or prepared using similar equipment or utensil with non-halal food. The finding of this study shows that almost food that served during the Christian festival day are ordinary Malaysian food which are almost halal but still some of them are non-halal. Muslim people should select only halal food when attending the Christian festivals.

Festival food as a Tool for Unity

Based on the findings, most participants do agree that festival food can bring unity between people from different races and religions. Perry (2017) also illustrated food as a perfect example to foster unity among people from different races and religions, especially during celebrations.

Nevertheless, some respondents disagreed on how festivals and festival food can bring unity. They claimed that other important factors should be considered such as teaching from parents and understanding between each other.

Dar Al-Ifta (2020) said according to Islamic law, there is no objection to attend non-Muslims religious occasions that do not violate the fundamentals of Islam,

especially if they are family members, relatives, neighbours or colleagues especially if there is a good intention such as to unite the community.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study can be simplified as:

1. Almost all Christian festivals in Malaysia are considered as religious festivals from the views of Christian respondents.
2. The food served during the Christian festivals are not restricted to any type of food. Normally the food selection are ordinary Malaysian food which depending on the race or ethnic of the host or family. Even though almost of the food are halal but still exist some of them are non halal.
3. Muslim people are allowed to attend the Christian festival day if the celebration are not mix with ritual activity and they can only select the halal food.
4. Sharing of festival food by people in the community can be a medium of unity.

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