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## Cuisine as Cultural Heritage: Preserving Identity through Sarawak's Traditional Foods

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### ABSTRACT

Cuisine plays a central role in preserving cultural identity and heritage, yet globalisation and commercialisation increasingly threaten its authenticity. While Malaysian food heritage scholarship has primarily focused on Peninsular cuisines, Sarawak's diverse culinary traditions remain underexplored. This conceptual paper addresses the gap by examining how Sarawakian cuisine functions simultaneously as a cultural symbol and a social practice. Drawing on Cultural Identity Theory and Social Practice Theory, the study develops a conceptual framework that positions dishes such as Kolo mee, Sarawak laksa, and Manok Pansoh as carriers of memory, identity, and interethnic cohesion. At the same time, the analysis highlights the risk of commodification, misrepresentation, and appropriation arising from global visibility. Five propositions are advanced: (1) cuisine sustains identity across generations; (2) culinary practices operate as social rituals; (3) commercialisation risks authenticity; (4) local custodians play a pivotal role in preservation; and (5) policy and education are critical safeguards. The paper contributes theoretically by framing Sarawakian cuisine as intangible cultural heritage within multicultural contexts and practically by outlining strategies for policymakers, educators, and communities to safeguard culinary traditions. These insights underscore that preserving Sarawak's cuisine is not a static act of conservation but a dynamic process of negotiation between heritage, adaptation, and globalisation.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sarawak's cuisine is increasingly recognised not only for its gastronomic diversity but also for its cultural significance. Iconic dishes, such as *Sarawak laksa*, *kolo mee*, *manok pansoh* (chicken cooked in bamboo), and *kek lapis* (layered cake), are more than food items; they are markers of cultural identity, continuity, and interethnic exchange (Sageng et al., 2020; Perry, 2017). However, globalisation and commercialisation pose challenges, as traditional foods risk appropriation, commodification, and dilution. For example, simplified or altered versions of Sarawak dishes sold outside the state often detach the cuisine from its cultural roots.

Despite the growing recognition of Sarawak's cuisine, few studies have explicitly framed food heritage within established theories of cultural identity (Hall, 1990), social practice (Warde, 2005), and cultural appropriation (Linnekin, 1997). This creates a gap in understanding how cuisine functions simultaneously as a cultural symbol and a social practice, while also being threatened by globalisation.

This paper addresses that gap by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates these theories to examine Sarawak's cuisine as both cultural heritage and lived practice. Rather than employing empirical data collection, the study adopts a conceptual approach, synthesising recent literature (2017–2024) and advancing five propositions (P1–P5) aligned with three research objectives:

1. To investigate the role of cuisine in preserving culture and heritage in Sarawak,
2. To explore how culinary traditions shape identity and social practices across communities, and
3. To examine the role of language in representing and preserving culinary heritage across generations.

By situating Sarawak's cuisine within theoretical debates on identity, practice, and appropriation, the study makes a conceptual contribution to the literature on food heritage. It also provides a foundation for future empirical research and policy development aimed at safeguarding local culinary traditions.

### 1.1 Research Problem

This research problem examines the potential tension between celebrating Kuching's diverse culinary traditions and the risks of cultural appropriation that may arise from their commercialisation. As global demand for dishes like Kolo mee and Sarawak laksa increases, there is a tendency for these foods to undergo processes of misrepresentation, exploitation, and homogenisation. As noted by Hall et al. (2004), the commercialisation of traditional cuisines often distorts their original cultural context, undermining authenticity. In this context, misrepresentation occurs when traditional dishes are marketed outside of their cultural significance, often oversimplified for broader consumer appeal (Mak et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the exploitation of Kuching's culinary heritage is evident in how larger corporations and tourism actors profit from these dishes without fully recognising the local artisans who have preserved these recipes for generations. Research on food tourism shows that authenticity is a key factor shaping loyalty and cultural preservation, but globalisation often weakens these links by privileging mass production and homogenised recipes (Zhang et al., 2019). As global tourism and culinary markets continue to reshape the food landscape, local producers often struggle to maintain control over their cultural food practices (Dias & Posheliuznaia, 2025).

This research will therefore examine cultural appropriation within Kuching's cuisine, focusing on instances of misrepresentation, exploitation, and homogenisation. This includes non-local entities profiting from traditional recipes without proper acknowledgement, the disrespectful use of cultural ingredients or practices, and the creation of fusion dishes that lack a genuine understanding of cultural heritage. The study will also explore ways to mitigate these issues, ensuring the respectful preservation and promotion of Kuching's culinary heritage while balancing cultural respect with economic opportunities in food commercialisation.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Heritage and Identity**

Cuisine is central to the preservation of cultural heritage and identity. As Hall (1990) argues, cultural identity is not fixed but continually negotiated, with food serving as one of its most recognisable markers. Mintz and Du Bois (2002) similarly suggest that food practices embed collective memory and continuity, sustaining identity across generations. In the context of Sarawak, dishes such as Laksa, Kolo mee, Manok pansoh (chicken cooked in bamboo), and Kek lapis (layered cake) exemplify this role, functioning as tangible expressions of belonging and cultural pride (Sageng et al., 2020; Perry, 2017). These foods illustrate how cuisine operates as both a marker of heritage and a living archive of social history, linking present communities to ancestral traditions.

### **2.2 Food as Social Practice**

Beyond symbolism, cuisine operates as a lived practice embedded in rituals, celebrations, and everyday life. Warde (2005) conceptualises food as a social practice, highlighting its role in structuring daily routines and reinforcing collective values. In Sarawak, this perspective is evident in the preparation of Kek lapis during festive occasions such as Hari Raya and Christmas, where culinary rituals reinforce interethnic bonds and community identity (Perry, 2017). Similarly, the communal preparation of Manok pansoh in Iban gatherings demonstrates how cooking functions as a form of social cohesion, reproducing cultural values across generations. These practices demonstrate that cuisine is not merely consumed but enacted, positioning food as an essential vehicle of social continuity.

### **2.3 Globalisation and Appropriation**

While cuisine contributes to cultural identity and social practice, globalisation introduces risks of commodification and appropriation. Linnekin (1997) warns that cultural appropriation often arises when traditional foods are simplified or mass-produced for global consumption, leading to the dilution of authenticity. The misrepresentation of kolo mee in restaurants outside Kuching, where recipes are altered or key ingredients substituted, exemplifies this tension (Mohammad et al., 2022). At the same time, UNESCO's recognition of Kuching as a Creative City of Gastronomy has significantly elevated the global visibility of Sarawak's cuisine, creating both opportunities and challenges. While such recognition can enhance cultural pride, it may also accelerate commodification processes, where culinary heritage is repackaged and streamlined for tourist markets thus distancing it from its cultural roots (Xie, 2021; Consuming the Creative City research, 2023). This paradox highlights the fragility of food heritage in the face of market pressures.

### **2.4 Sarawak Context**

Sarawak's culinary landscape is uniquely shaped by the convergence of indigenous, Malay, Chinese, and migrant influences, producing a food culture that is diverse yet distinctly local. Dishes such as nasi lemak adapted to Sarawak's context, alongside Laksa, Kolo mee, and Kek lapis, reflect this hybridity and resilience. Recent studies emphasise the importance of local custodians, hawkers, chefs, and indigenous cooks in transmitting knowledge and safeguarding authenticity. Policy frameworks, including UNESCO Malaysia's (2021) designation of Kuching as a Creative City of Gastronomy, recognise these efforts but also highlight tensions between heritage preservation and the risks of culinary commodification in global markets (Sageng et al., 2024; Xie, 2021).

### **2.5 Identified Gap**

Existing scholarship demonstrates that Sarawak's cuisine embodies cultural identity, functions as a social practice, and faces challenges from globalisation and appropriation. However, few studies explicitly integrate Cultural Identity Theory (Hall, 1990), Social Practice Theory (Warde, 2005), and cultural

appropriation debates (Linnekin, 1997) to provide a coherent conceptual framework. Furthermore, while empirical studies document Sarawak's food culture, there is limited conceptual work that synthesises these perspectives to address the paradox of heritage preservation and global visibility. This paper addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual model and advancing propositions that connect cuisine, identity, and safeguarding practices in Sarawak.

### 3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper develops a conceptual research model that synthesises existing scholarship on food heritage, cultural identity, and social practices in Sarawak. Rather than employing empirical data collection, the study adopts a theory-building approach that integrates two key perspectives. First, Cultural Identity Theory (Hall, 1990) positions food as a symbolic marker of belonging and continuity. Second, Social Practice Theory (Warde, 2005) emphasises food-related practices as socially embedded rituals that reproduce values and traditions. Together, these frameworks provide the foundation for the proposed model (Figure 1), which conceptualises Sarawak's cuisine simultaneously as a cultural symbol embodying heritage, memory, and identity and as a social practice reproduced through rituals, community life, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. The model also highlights tensions introduced by globalisation and commercialisation, which create risks of cultural appropriation, misrepresentation, and loss of authenticity, while recognising the critical role of local custodians (hawkers, chefs, indigenous cooks) and policy interventions in safeguarding culinary heritage.

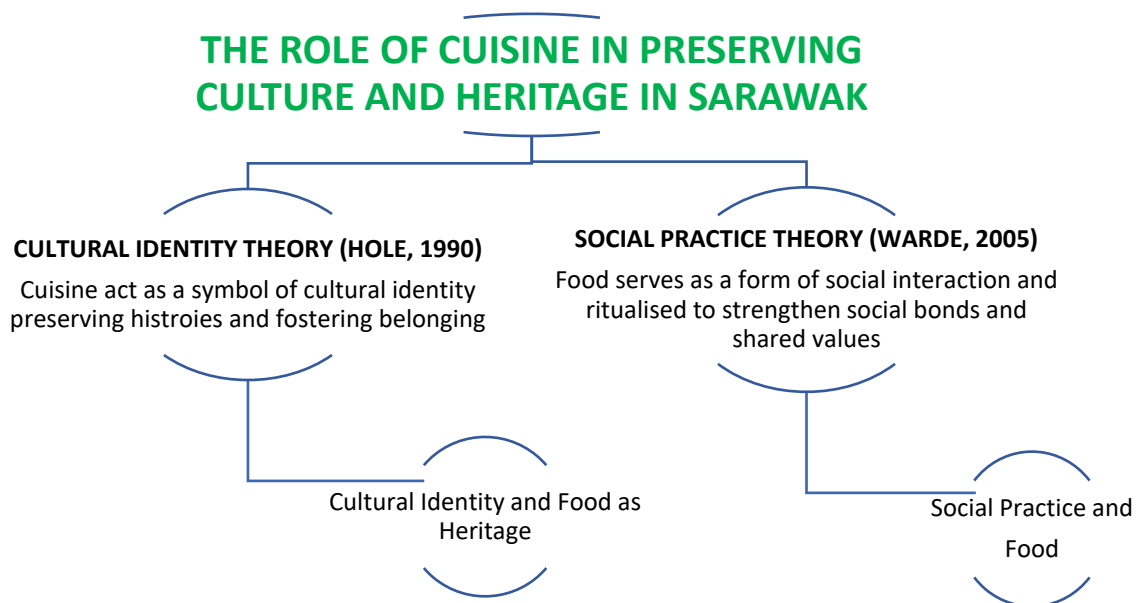


Fig. 1. Proposed Conceptual Model: The Role of Cuisine in Preserving Culture and Heritage in Sarawak

### 3.1 Conceptual Propositions

Instead of hypotheses tested through data, this study advances propositions that emerge from literature synthesis and theoretical integration. These propositions serve as guiding assumptions for the conceptual framework:

- **P1:** Traditional Sarawakian cuisine functions as a cultural symbol that sustains identity across generations.
- **P2:** Culinary practices operate as social rituals that reinforce interethnic cohesion and transmit cultural values.
- **P3:** The commercialisation of traditional foods increases risks of cultural appropriation and loss of authenticity.
- **P4:** Local custodians of cuisine (hawkers, chefs, indigenous cooks) play a pivotal role in preserving heritage.
- **P5:** Policy measures and consumer education are necessary to protect Sarawak's culinary heritage in the face of globalisation.

These propositions are not intended as testable hypotheses but as conceptual anchors that shape the discussion and highlight directions for future empirical research.

### 3.2 Conceptual Approach

Because this paper is conceptual in nature, it does not rely on focus groups, interviews, or other empirical methods. Instead, it follows a structured theory-building design composed of four elements. First, a literature synthesis was conducted, reviewing academic studies on food heritage, cultural appropriation, and Sarawak cuisine published between 2017 and 2025, as well as relevant policy documents such as UNESCO's designation of Kuching as a Creative City of Gastronomy.

Secondly, theoretical integration was applied by drawing on Cultural Identity Theory (Hall, 1990) to frame cuisine as a symbolic marker of belonging and continuity, and Social Practice Theory (Warde, 2005) to interpret cuisine as a set of embedded social practices. Third, these insights informed the development of a conceptual model that illustrates cuisine's dual role in preserving heritage while confronting risks of globalisation and commercialisation.

Finally, the study engaged in proposition building, deriving five conceptual propositions (P1–P5) that correspond to the research objectives: RO1, to investigate the role of cuisine in preserving culture and heritage in Sarawak; RO2, to explore how culinary traditions shape cultural identity and social practices; and RO3, to examine the role of language in representing and preserving culinary heritage. These steps ensure coherence between the conceptual framework and the study's objectives, while laying the groundwork for future empirical validation.

## 4.0 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Drawing on Cultural Identity Theory and Social Practice Theory, the conceptual analysis identifies five themes that align with the study's propositions (P1–P5).

**Cuisine as a Symbol of Identity (P1).** Cuisine embodies both collective memory and cultural identity. Dishes such as kolo mee, Sarawak laksa, and manok pansoh reflect centuries of interethnic coexistence and narrate stories of belonging. As Cultural Identity Theory suggests, food serves as a symbolic marker of pride that links individuals to their communities (Hall, 1990; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002; Sageng et al., 2024)

**Food as Social Practice and Ritual (P2).** Cuisine is also a lived practice embedded in rituals, festivals, and everyday gatherings. For example, *kek lapis* Sarawak is closely tied to festive celebrations such as Hari Raya and Christmas, reinforcing interethnic bonds. Social Practice Theory underscores the importance of such practices in sustaining cultural continuity (Warde, 2005; Perry, 2017).

**Risks of Commercialisation and Appropriation (P3).** At the same time, globalisation poses threats to authenticity. The misrepresentation of *kolo mee* in restaurants outside Kuching—where recipes are simplified or key ingredients replaced illustrates how cultural meaning can be diluted. Similarly, mass production often reduces artisanal practices to homogenised versions, reflecting Linnekin's (1997) warning that commodification frequently leads to cultural appropriation.

**Custodianship and Community Resilience (P4).** Local hawkers, chefs, and indigenous cooks act as custodians of heritage, ensuring that recipes and preparation techniques are transmitted across generations. Their role demonstrates that heritage is not static but continually reproduced in daily life (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). However, their survival is increasingly challenged by the rise of franchises and food chains.

**Policy and Consumer Education as Safeguards (P5).** Finally, effective policy and consumer education are critical for sustaining culinary heritage. Measures that protect local producers and promote authenticity, alongside awareness initiatives that highlight cultural value, are necessary safeguards (Bogle, 2017). UNESCO's recognition of Kuching as a Creative City of Gastronomy is a positive step, but further targeted interventions are required to ensure that local practitioners benefit directly (UNESCO Malaysia, 2021; Borneo Post, 2022).

Taken together, these themes show that Sarawak's cuisine is both a symbol and a practice of heritage, deeply connected to identity and community cohesion. Yet, its growing global recognition produces a paradox: while visibility elevates Sarawakian cuisine, it simultaneously risks eroding authenticity through appropriation and commercialisation. This tension underscores the need to balance the promotion of cuisine for economic growth with the imperative to safeguard it as intangible cultural heritage (Zhang et al., 2019; Mohammad et al., 2022).

## 5.0 DISCUSSION

The conceptual analysis demonstrates that Sarawak's cuisine functions both as a cultural symbol and a social practice, yet it faces increasing threats from commercialisation and appropriation. This resonates with Hall's (1990) view of cultural identity as fluid and contested, and with Warde's (2005) understanding of social practices as dynamic and responsive to broader societal pressures. Three interrelated arguments emerge from this analysis. First, Sarawakian heritage embodies both stability and negotiation. Dishes such as *Kolo mee* and *Manok pansoh* carry cultural continuity and collective memory, yet their meanings are constantly renegotiated as they adapt to new contexts. This illustrates the paradox of heritage, in which authenticity is prized, but adaptation is essential for ongoing relevance (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Secondly, globalisation operates as a double-edged sword. On one hand, global recognition exemplified by Kuching's designation as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy elevates Sarawakian cuisine onto the international stage. On the other hand, it creates pressures for commodification, misrepresentation, and dilution, reflecting the tensions between economic opportunity and cultural safeguarding. Third, the preservation of Sarawakian cuisine requires more than individual custodianship. While hawkers, chefs, and indigenous cooks play vital roles, they cannot safeguard culinary traditions in isolation. Institutional and policy interventions, supported by consumer education and protection frameworks, are necessary to ensure that ownership remains with local communities (Bogle, 2017). In whole, these arguments highlight that the preservation of Sarawak's cuisine is not a static act of conservation, but a dynamic process of negotiation shaped by tradition, global pressures, and governance.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Sarawak's cuisine as both a cultural symbol and a social practice, drawing on Cultural Identity Theory (Hall, 1990) and Social Practice Theory (Warde, 2005) to frame its significance. The analysis demonstrates that dishes such as Kolo mee, Manok pansoh, and Kek lapis embody continuity and collective memory. However, their meanings are constantly renegotiated in response to globalisation and commercialisation. This paradox underscores that authenticity and adaptation coexist as essential dynamics of culinary heritage.

The proposed conceptual model contributes to scholarship by advancing five propositions (P1–P5) that explain how cuisine sustains identity, functions as ritual, faces risks of appropriation, depends on custodianship, and requires policy support. These propositions form a foundation for future empirical studies and provide a framework for understanding the evolving relationship between food, culture, and identity.

At a practical level, the study highlights the need for protective policies, consumer education, and community-driven safeguarding measures to ensure that ownership of Sarawak's cuisine remains with local practitioners. More broadly, the paper calls for a balance between cultural promotion and heritage safeguarding, recognising that global visibility can simultaneously elevate and endanger authenticity.

In conclusion, the preservation of Sarawak's cuisine should not be seen as a static act of conservation but as a dynamic, collaborative process involving communities, policymakers, and consumers. Future empirical research through interviews, ethnographies, or surveys will be crucial in testing these conceptual propositions and strengthening strategies for safeguarding culinary heritage in Malaysia and beyond.

## 7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper proposes several recommendations to safeguard Sarawak's culinary heritage while ensuring its continued relevance. At the policy level, heritage protection measures such as geographical indication (GI) status should be considered for signature dishes like *Kolo mee* and *Sarawak laksa*, mirroring the protections granted to European food products (Sageng et al., 2020). Licensing frameworks could also be enhanced to prioritise local practitioners and reduce the risks of dilution, as demonstrated by Penang's decision to restrict foreign cooks in its hawker centres. In addition, financial and training incentives for small-scale producers would ensure the sustainability of artisanal practices that might otherwise be displaced by commercial food chains.

Consumer education is equally important in raising awareness of the cultural significance of Sarawak's cuisine. As Sageng, Kasa, Pudun, and Ramli (2020) note, traditional dishes such as Kek lapis and Manok Pansoh represent not only culinary practices but also cultural identity and pride. Public campaigns, school programmes, and tourism initiatives can therefore play a crucial role in safeguarding these dishes by fostering appreciation among younger generations and visitors alike (Sageng et al., 2020). Digital storytelling platforms and gastronomic tourism events can further reinforce authentic narratives around Sarawak's food heritage (UNESCO Malaysia, 2021; Borneo Post, 2022). Finally, community-based safeguarding efforts should be encouraged through festivals, local documentation projects, and collaborations between universities, cultural institutions, and food associations. These measures would empower indigenous and local communities to co-define what constitutes authenticity, ensuring that Sarawakian cuisine is preserved in ways that respect cultural ownership (Radzuan et al., 2024).

## **8.0 IMPLICATIONS**

The conceptual framework developed in this study carries important implications for theory, practice, and society. Theoretically, it advances scholarship by integrating Cultural Identity Theory (Hall, 1990) and Social Practice Theory (Warde, 2005), positioning cuisine simultaneously as a symbolic marker of belonging and as an embodied practice reproduced in everyday life. In doing so, it contributes to debates in cultural heritage and food studies by framing cuisine not as a static artefact but as an evolving practice shaped by globalisation (Linnekin, 1997).

From a practical perspective, the framework offers guidance for policymakers and practitioners. It suggests that safeguarding Sarawak's culinary heritage requires more than individual custodianship; it necessitates institutional support, consumer education, and protective policies that balance tourism development with cultural integrity (Bogle, 2017). For educators, the framework provides a rationale for embedding food heritage into curricula as a means of fostering cultural pride and intergenerational continuity.

Finally, the societal implications are significant. While global recognition of Sarawak's cuisine—such as UNESCO's designation of Kuching as a Creative City of Gastronomy creates opportunities for cultural diplomacy and economic development, it also risks appropriation and misrepresentation if not carefully managed (UNESCO Malaysia, 2021). Thus, the preservation of Sarawakian cuisine must be understood as a shared responsibility among communities, policymakers, and consumers, ensuring that culinary heritage remains both resilient and relevant in an era of rapid change.

## **9.0 CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS**

Yugeetha Balan carried out the research, wrote and revised the article. Syed Syaquille Rafique conceptualised the central research idea and provided the theoretical framework. Jaydn Ting and Ng Ting Wei designed the research and supervised the research progress.

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## **11.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

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