

BRIDGING THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE THROUGH FOOD CULTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Food culture refers to shared routines, viewpoints, beliefs, and practices surrounding the food system, from cultivation, harvesting and production to consumption and celebration. Across the world, including Southeast Asia, food culture is deeply intertwined with a community's history, geography, and social structures, influencing everything from ingredients to the rituals and meanings associated with food. Therefore, food is beyond direct consumption, with manifest and latent functions that can bridge the past and present, especially in ritual. The rituals, performed by the family, descendants of ancestors over many generations, invoke the unseen spiritual realm during the ritual. The community acknowledges the significance of specific food as essential to the ceremonial proceedings. Food bridges the realms of the seen and the unseen, and signifies a metaphysical link between ritual practitioners and the supernatural world. Based on the ethnographic method and observations of selected rituals among communities in Southeast Asia, such as the Malays, Thai, the Kadazan, Sama-Bajau, and the Peranakan Chinese, this study will analyse the food offerings in the rituals, including food type, preparation, functions and their meaning to the relations between spirits and human beings. This study will also examine the food culture adopted and assimilated as a people's custom, expressed in traditional celebrations that became calendrical events for family members. While some rituals and celebrations are conducted within the household at the family and community level, others are performed at the state and nationwide level, where food is the central focus, as in offerings during rituals. Therefore, food plays a role in maintaining and preserving tradition, becoming a national agenda and nation-building among younger and future generations. This study concludes that food culture continues to serve as a bridge between past, current, and future generations.

Keywords: *food culture, ritual food, offerings, bridge, seen and unseen, Southeast Asia*

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