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Convergence and divergence in food consumption ? Culture, Class and Place in Malaysian urbanscape

This communication analyses the role of food and its cultural and social meanings in the process of identity construction among Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic groups in Malaysia. Malaysia, a multicultural country located in the heart of Southeast Asian trade routes, has seen three decades of robust economic growth placing it among the more urbanized countries (74.2% urban population) in the region. Historically inhabited by peoples from the surrounding

Malay Archipelago, the Malayan peninsula evolved into a dazzlingly multi-ethnic space in the twentieth century, through the British colonizers' policy of encouraging migration, especially from China and India. In 1957, the British left behind a uniquely complex society that was 'deeply divided' along ethnic, cultural and religious lines, segregated geographically and politically into ethnic enclaves, one that rarely met, married or ate together. With the industrial boom of the 1980s, however,

Mots-clefs

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this multi-ethnic citizenry - Malays, Chinese and Indians - found themselves frequently encountering each other in the new urban spaces, which became sites of convergence as well as divergence between the three cultures, each striving to achieve 'Malaysian-ness' without compromising its own unique ethnic identity .

Food is undoubtedly a powerful marker of identity, but in recent times, it has also become the focus of a number of complex issues that reflect ongoing cultural, social, and political realities. This is particularly true of Malaysia where each ethnic group has a deeply treasured culinary tradition shaped by its location, history, religion and culture, and the use of unique ingredients, recipes, taboos, and ways of eating, stores and restaurants that are deployed to perpetuate an intra-ethnic identity. In Malaysia's emergent urbanscape, however, each ethnic foodway has also 'converged' to produce a distinctive supra-ethnic cuisine- 'Malaysian'- commonly located in halal Indian-Muslim restaurants as well as Western and local branded food outlets which have become the site of commensality and co-habitation. How such transformations came about, and what they meant for the society that produced them, is an under-researched

area in Malaysian social sciences. In this paper we study the patterns of food consumption to understand how Malaysian ethnic groups navigate their urban universe by forging a collective supra-ethnic national identity that allow them to cook and eat 'Malaysian' cuisine together at strategic places where class and cultures converge, at the same time bolstering intra-ethnic identities by escaping into their own ethnic enclaves for 'Chinese' 'Indian' or 'Malay' food. In this study, food consumption is situated in the intersection of class, culture and places which are the sites and situations on which these convergences and divergences are regularly performed, and which themselves act as the scaffolding that define the limits of 'Malaysian' food diplomacy. This paper adopts a qualitative study by observation and in-depth interviews of 6 individuals from the three main ethnic groups in the urban centers of Petaling Jaya and Kajang in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. Data will be analyzed drawing on themes related to food consumption and its relation to culture, class and places. We contend that just like the three groups jostle for 'supra' and 'intra-ethnic' space in Malaysian politics and economy, their food consumption also diverges and converges in similar ways to create unique eating practices that demonstrate this Malaysian paradox.