

The Cultural Significance of Kuih Lemper among the Javanese Community in Bagan Datuk, Perak

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Abstract

This study examines the cultural significance of kuih lempur among the Javanese community in Bagan Datuk, Perak, highlighting its role as intangible cultural heritage (ICH). However, the younger generation shows declining familiarity with preparation skills, reflecting broader vulnerabilities of culinary heritage in the face of modernisation. Employing an ethnographic qualitative design, the research combined participant observation during a village wedding with in-depth interviews (n = 8) selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis produced five key themes: (1) social function and communal labour (rewang); (2) cultural continuity across life-cycle events; (3) ritual and symbolic meanings in feasts; (4) adaptation through local ingredients and techniques without loss of identity; and (5) safeguarding challenges, particularly weakening intergenerational transmission and market pressures. Findings reveal that kuih lempur extends beyond food practice, operating as a medium of community cohesion, cultural identity, and embodied knowledge transfer. The preparation process fosters cooperation and interdependence, while its presence in ceremonies underscores its ritual significance. This article contributes to ICH and food-heritage scholarship by foregrounding a Malaysian Javanese case that nuances debates on identity, continuity, and globalisation. Policy implications suggest strengthening community-led teaching, integrating culinary apprenticeship into local programmes, and recognising kuih lempur as part of state or national heritage initiatives.

Keywords: *cultural identity, heritage food, intangible cultural heritage, Javanese diaspora, safeguarding.*

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Kepentingan Budaya *Kuih lempur* dalam Kalangan Komuniti Jawa di Bagan Datuk, Perak

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Abstrak

Kajian ini meneliti kepentingan budaya kuih lempur sebagai warisan budaya tidak ketara (WBTK) dalam kalangan komuniti Jawa di Bagan Datuk, Perak. Walau bagaimanapun, generasi muda menunjukkan kemerosotan dalam penguasaan kemahiran penyediaan, mencerminkan kerentanan warisan kuliner terhadap arus modenisasi. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk kualitatif etnografi menggabungkan pemerhatian ikut serta semasa majlis perkahwinan di kampung dengan temu bual secara mendalam bersama informan ($n = 8$) yang dipilih melalui persampelan bertujuan. Lima tema utama diekstrak hasil daripada analisis menggunakan analisis tematik iaitu: (1) fungsi sosial dan tenaga kerja komuniti (*rewang*); (2) kesinambungan budaya dalam acara kitaran hidup; (3) makna ritual dan simbolik dalam kenduri; (4) adaptasi melalui penggunaan bahan serta teknik tempatan tanpa kehilangan identiti; dan (5) cabaran pemeliharaan, khususnya kelemahan dalam transmisi antara generasi serta tekanan pasaran. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa kuih lempur melangkaui amalan makanan semata-mata, berfungsi sebagai medium perpaduan komuniti, identiti budaya, dan pemindahan pengetahuan berteraskan pengalaman. Proses penyediaannya memupuk kerjasama dan saling bergantung, manakala kehadirannya dalam upacara menekankan kepentingan ritual. Artikel ini menyumbang kepada wacana mengenai WBTK dan warisan makanan dengan mengetengahkan kes komuniti Jawa di Malaysia yang memperhalusi perdebatan tentang identiti, kesinambungan, dan globalisasi. Dari segi implikasi dasar, kajian mencadangkan pengukuhan pengajaran berasaskan komuniti, pengintegrasian latihan kuliner dalam program setempat, serta pengiktirafan kuih lempur sebagai sebahagian daripada inisiatif warisan negeri atau kebangsaan.

Kata Kunci: diaspora Jawa, identiti budaya, makanan warisan, pengekal, warisan budaya tidak ketara

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1.0 Introduction

Food is more than nourishment; it is a medium through which communities express identity, continuity, and belonging. Among the Javanese diaspora in Malaysia, *kuih lempur*, a glutinous rice cake filled with savoury meat and wrapped in banana leaves, serves not only as a dish but also as a cultural emblem. Its preparation in communal settings, presence at weddings and feasts, and symbolic references such as the *baju* (clothing) metaphor for its banana-leaf wrapper reflect its deeper role as intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Despite its ubiquity in Javanese gatherings, however, *kuih lempur* has received little scholarly attention in Malaysia, even as it continues to anchor rituals, identities, and intergenerational ties within the community.

It is known that heritage food is an essential marker of community and local identity. Beyond its gastronomic value, food is closely tied to culture and often regarded as part of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Food preparation processes are typically passed down from generation to generation, ensuring continuity of identity and belonging (Rinaldi, 2017). Within this realm, practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills related to food are recognised by communities as cultural heritage. These elements, in turn, reflect the cultural identity and values of society. As Romagnoli (2019) noted, UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, has recognised and inscribed food-related elements on the ICH List when they embody cultural identity and social unity. Heritage food, therefore, functions as an indicator of identity, enhancing pride and strengthening relationships within communities. By acknowledging food as intangible cultural heritage, communities are also able to safeguard cultural identity in the face of globalisation and the pressures of cultural homogenisation.

This study focuses on Javanese heritage food, specifically *kuih lempur*, which plays an integral role in the identity of the Javanese community in Perak. The migration of the Javanese to Malaya began in the 19th century and was shaped by both push and pull factors. On the one hand, many left Java to escape Dutch colonial rule and the harsh rural conditions marked by poverty and land scarcity (Arridzo & Sudardi, 2014). On the other hand, the expansion of industries, particularly rubber plantations, in late nineteenth-century Malaya attracted Javanese migrants seeking employment opportunities. During World War II, Japanese forces also brought large numbers of Javanese as forced labourers, estimated at between 200,000 and 300,000, many of whom remained in Malaysia after the war (Sunarti & Fadeli, 2021). The diaspora primarily developed in Johor, with most migrants originating from Ponorogo. While many assimilated into local culture, they continued to maintain their cultural identity, including traditional foods and culinary practices (Dwijayanto & Afif, 2023).

Today, however, heritage foods face multiple challenges, particularly the risk of declining traditional culinary practices due to rural–urban migration and lifestyle changes (Zağralı Çakır & Bekar, 2024). The rise of catering services and modern food options has overshadowed traditional cuisines, weakening community ties and diminishing cultural identity (Niiazalieva et al., 2023). Shifts in lifestyle, limited knowledge, and changing food habits among younger generations have also contributed to the declining popularity of heritage foods (Wahab et al., 2022). The growing influence of globalisation and exposure to fast food culture further intensifies these changes, with younger people often opting for quicker and more convenient meals due to fast-paced living (Hashim et al., 2024).



Much of the existing literature on Malaysian heritage foods has prioritised gastronomic, touristic, and economic perspectives (Zağralı Çakır & Bekar, 2024; Niiiazalieva et al., 2023), often framing them as cultural commodities. Far fewer studies have examined heritage food as an embodied cultural practice that conveys symbolic meaning, continuity, and community identity in everyday life. Within Javanese diaspora research, attention has largely focused on migration histories, performing arts, and social customs (Sunarti & Fadeli, 2021; Dwijayanto & Afif, 2023), while food traditions remain comparatively marginalised. Although *nasi ambeng* (Hashim et al., 2024) and *punten* (Hashim et al., 2022) have been explored in recent scholarship, *kuih lempur*, despite its ubiquity in communal and ritual contexts, has received limited scholarly attention in Malaysia. This lack of focus risks overlooking its role as intangible cultural heritage that sustains identity and belonging across generations. This gap underscores the need for closer examination of *kuih lempur* in the Malaysian context.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the cultural significance of *kuih lempur* among the Javanese community in Bagan Datuk, Perak. Accordingly, this article aims to: (i) identify the practices and meanings attached to *kuih lempur* in Bagan Datuk; (ii) examine preparation, language, and form to reproduce cultural identity; and (iii) analyse safeguarding challenges and community-led responses.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Heritage foods and cultural significance

Heritage food refers to traditional dishes and culinary practices that carry historical, cultural, and social significance within a specific community or region. These foods embody inherited practices of preparation and consumption across generations and are deeply rooted in local culture, ethnic identity, and regional distinctiveness (Almansouri et al., 2021). As a domain of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), culinary heritage encompasses not only recipes and ingredients but also unique preparation methods, cooking techniques, and symbolic practices that define a community's identity. Heritage foods are frequently embedded in rituals, festivals, and communal feasts, where transmission occurs informally through oral teaching, apprenticeship, and embodied practice (Romagnoli, 2019). This aligns with UNESCO's (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which emphasises the role of community participation, cultural continuity, and intergenerational transmission in sustaining living heritage.

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined heritage food as a marker of identity at multiple levels, individual, communal, and national, emphasising how shared culinary practices reinforce cohesion and belonging (Báti, 2024; Fiore, 2019). For instance, research on Indian migrants in the Netherlands shows how the preparation and sharing of traditional food strengthens community bonds and fosters a sense of "co-presence" with transnational families, illustrating how food practices facilitate belonging and homemaking (Bailey, 2017). Heritage food also functions as both tangible and intangible heritage: it materialises through recipes and ingredients, yet it also embodies memories, rituals, and social meanings (Báti, 2024; Di Giovine et al., 2017). Frameworks for safeguarding culinary traditions, therefore, call for attention to both dimensions, recognising that practices such as artisanal bread-making or cheese production preserve cultural



memory as much as material culture (Lee, 2023; Partarakis et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, much of the literature has prioritised the gastronomic, touristic, and economic dimensions of food heritage (Zağralı Çakır & Bekar, 2024), often treating it as a cultural commodity. Fewer studies have examined the cultural significance of specific dishes as embodied ICH practices situated in everyday community life. This limited attention underscores the need for closer analysis of particular foods such as *kuih lemper* that function simultaneously as nourishment, ritual complement, and marker of identity within diasporic contexts.

2.2 The Javanese diaspora and heritage food

During the Malay Sultanate of Melaka, people from across the archipelago frequently travelled for trade and settlement. The concept of *merantau* (migration or wandering) has long been a fundamental principle of life in the Malay Archipelago, particularly among groups such as the Minangkabau, Bugis, and Javanese. *Merantau* refers to the tradition of leaving one's homeland in search of opportunities elsewhere.

According to Ammarell (2002), *merantau is deeply embedded in Bugis culture as a journey to seek fortune, education, and experience, often regarded as a rite of passage symbolising independence and maturity. Despite migrating, Bugis communities continue to celebrate their cultural practices, including rituals, ceremonies, and festivals, as a way of asserting their identity in diverse contexts* (Ammarell, 2002).

Among the Javanese, cultural practices such as *rewang* (also known as *merewang*) remain significant today. *Rewang* refers to a traditional practice of preparing meals collectively for social gatherings, particularly weddings and communal celebrations. It is primarily carried out by women who come together to cook as an expression of hospitality and community support. This practice emphasises cooperation, social bonding, and the strengthening of communal relationships in Javanese culture. Food prepared during *rewang* goes beyond sustenance; it embodies artistic expression, showcases women's culinary skills, and plays a central role in fostering hospitality and solidarity within the community (Budiono, 2017).

As Javanese communities integrated into Malaysian society, they contributed to the development of cultural products that blend Javanese and Malay traditions. They continue to maintain art forms such as dance (*kuda kepang*), music, and *wayang kulit* (puppet theatre), as well as traditional knowledge like *jamu* (herbal medicine). These practices are transmitted across generations, symbolising cultural identity while also being embraced by the wider Malaysian community (Sunarti & Fadeli, 2021).

Javanese culinary heritage is equally diverse. Notable examples include *nasi ambeng*, a rice platter served during communal feasts (*selametan*), accompanied by dishes such as fried chicken, *rendang*, and sautéed vegetables, usually presented on banana leaves. Other heritage foods include *rujak* (fruit salad with spicy peanut sauce), *soto* (spiced meat soup), *gado-gado* (vegetable salad with



peanut sauce), and *tempe* (fermented soybean cake), all of which reflect the community's creativity and reliance on local ingredients (Sunarti & Fadeli, 2021).

In Malaysia, Javanese immigrants and their descendants have undergone significant assimilation and adaptation, giving rise to a distinct Javanese-Malay identity. While they are often officially recognised as part of the Malay population, they continue to maintain cultural traits such as language, customs, and traditions (Sunarti & Fadeli, 2018; Sunarti & Fadeli, 2021). The Javanese diaspora in Malaysia largely settled in Johor, Selangor, and Perak (Sekimoto, 1994; Sunarti & Fadeli, 2018).

Scholars have extensively examined Javanese culture in relation to ritual practices such as *slametan* (communal prayer and feasting), *rewang* (mutual assistance), and *tolak bala* (rituals to ward off misfortune), which are frequently adapted to align with Islamic teachings and local contexts (Aisyah, 2023; Rafianti et al., 2021). They have also highlighted social customs and performing arts, including *kuda kepang*, *barongan*, and *reog* dance, as well as *batik* (Sunarti & Fadeli, 2021).

By contrast, Javanese foodways have received comparatively less scholarly attention and are often overshadowed by studies on rituals and performing arts. Although some research has explored heritage foods such as *nasi ambeng* (Hashim et al., 2024) and *punten* (Hashim et al., 2022), studies on specific dishes remain underdeveloped. Compared to Indonesian dishes like *ayam lodho* (Ellyzabethania et al., 2023), *kuih lemper* in Malaysia has received limited focus, contributing to its lesser visibility and popularity.

2.3 Safeguarding heritage foods and challenges

Heritage foods hold deep significance for individuals and communities, serving as powerful markers of cultural identity (Abbots et al., 2016; Mintz, 2008; Yayuk et al., 2022). For immigrants, these foods become a means to express and reaffirm ethnic identity. Rooted in traditional practices, recipes, and sometimes specific ingredients passed down through generations, heritage foods connect people to their cultural roots and histories (Abbots et al., 2016). Each dish reflects the values, beliefs, and customs of the community, often carrying a story or tradition.

Beyond their symbolic value, heritage foods foster a sense of belonging and continuity, allowing individuals to reconnect with their roots even in new environments (Mintz, 2008). Through preparing and consuming traditional dishes, communities strengthen social ties, share solidarity, and nurture communal identity (Abbots et al., 2016). These foods also evoke nostalgia by offering familiar tastes, smells, and textures that provide comfort in unfamiliar surroundings. Importantly, they play a central role in community gatherings and celebrations, reinforcing friendships and collective identity (Abbots et al., 2016).

Heritage food is also tied to health and well-being. For example, the Banjar community in Indonesia frequently uses traditional foods for medicinal purposes, reflecting their understanding of food as both nourishment and healing (Yayuk et al., 2022). Traditional foods, rooted in local ingredients and cultural knowledge,



embody accumulated wisdom about nutrition and health (Hashim et al., 2024). Thus, they sustain both physical well-being and health traditions within a community.

However, safeguarding heritage foods faces mounting challenges, often linked to urbanisation, generational change, and the growing influence of global food culture. UNESCO (2003) highlights that informal modes of transmission such as oral traditions and hands-on practices during community events remain vital for ensuring the survival of food as intangible cultural heritage. Case studies illustrate different strategies: in Portugal, digital presentation and promotion support the preservation of ritual food recipes (Ramazanova et al., 2022), while in Cyprus, community involvement, festivals, and educational initiatives strengthen food-related traditions (Sadikoglu, 2021). In Malaysia, Radzuan et al. (2024) show how *gotong-royong* (communal work) helps transmit knowledge of traditional cakes such as *penganan* and *dodol*, reinforcing both social ties and continuity.

Nevertheless, contemporary shifts toward convenience and store-bought alternatives threaten embodied practices and weaken intergenerational transmission (Zingari, 2020). The growing reliance on convenience store food and other modern options risks homogenising diets and eroding traditional recipes, techniques, and practices (Quintero-Angel et al., 2022). This tension underscores the importance of examining specific cases, such as *kuih lemper*, where cultural significance persists despite evolving modes of production and consumption.

This study draws upon the UNESCO (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, specifically the safeguarding framework that emphasises transmission, continuity, and community participation as the core elements in sustaining intangible heritage practices. The framework underscores that heritage must be actively passed down through both formal and informal modes of transmission, such as oral tradition, apprenticeship, and communal practices, to ensure its survival across generations.

Within the context of heritage food, this framework is particularly relevant because the making and sharing of traditional dishes are not merely culinary practices but also cultural acts embedded in social values, collective memory, and intergenerational relationships. Applying the safeguarding framework to *kuih lemper* enables this study to examine how cultural significance is transmitted, how practices adapt to changing environments, and what challenges arise in ensuring continuity within the Javanese diaspora community in Malaysia.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design with an ethnographic orientation, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the cultural meanings embedded in heritage food practices. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and participant observation to examine the role of *kuih lemper* within the Javanese community in Bagan Datuk, Perak.



Purposive sampling was used to select eight informants from the Javanese community in Bagan Datuk, Perak. The selection was based on their knowledge, lived experience, and involvement in Javanese cultural practices, particularly those related to heritage foods. The sample reflects generational variation, ranging from younger participants in their late twenties to elders in their seventies, thus capturing both continuity and potential shifts in cultural knowledge across age groups.

Table 1: Informants' demographic backgrounds

Informants	Age	Occupation	Notes
Informant 1	65	Specialist in traditional Javanese cakes	Elder; cultural bearer
Informant 2	46	Self-employed	Active community member
Informant 3	65	Specialist in traditional Javanese cakes	Elder; cultural bearer
Informant 4	73	Former village head	Community leader
Informant 5	40	Government officer	Middle generation
Informant 6	50	Housewife	Food preparation role
Informant 7	58	Housewife	Food preparation role
Informant 8	28	Entrepreneur	Younger generation

The range of ages and occupations demonstrates both intergenerational participation and social diversity within the community (Table 1). Importantly, saturation was reached as informants shared overlapping insights, reflecting the close-knit nature of the community and the centrality of *kuih lemper* in social and ritual events.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and complemented by detailed field notes. The data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis, which involved coding, categorising, and identifying recurring patterns related to food, identity, and cultural transmission. Triangulation was ensured by cross-referencing interview data with observational evidence and existing literature, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings. All informants were provided with a consent form, and the terms of participation were explained verbally to ensure clarity. Issues of privacy and confidentiality were emphasised, with pseudonyms and codes (Informant 1–Informant 8) used to anonymise participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential throughout the study.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

There are five themes related to the cultural significance of *kuih lemper* among the Javanese community in Bagan Datuk, Perak, which were extracted from the data analysis, namely:



a. Social function: *Rewang* and communal bonding

Food serves as a medium for social interaction and community bonding among diaspora populations. Shared meals, communal cooking, and celebrations centred around food facilitate social networks and reinforce community ties (Mintz, 2008). Heritage foods, in particular, are often prepared through *gotong-royong*. According to Radzuan et al. (2024), the preparation of traditional cakes such as *penganan* or *dodol* typically involves collective participation, reflecting the spirit of togetherness and cooperation within the community. Families and individuals come together to share knowledge, with experienced members conducting informal workshops to pass down recipes and techniques to younger generations. Such collaborative efforts not only ensure the transmission of culinary skills but also strengthen social bonds

This communal dimension was evident in the preparation of *kuih lemper*. As Informant 6 explained, “*Kuih lemper is prepared collectively in social settings, depending on the host, reflecting the communal nature of its production*” (I6). Similarly, Informant 8 noted, “*Kuih lemper making is taught through oral tradition and hands-on participation during social events like kenduri*” (Informant 8, Interview). Informants consistently associated *kuih lemper* with *rewang*, a practice where neighbours and relatives gather to prepare food for weddings and other feasts. As Informant 1 succinctly remarked, “*Kuih lemper is not just eaten, but made together*” (Informant 1, Interview).

These findings resonate with the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which underscores community participation as central to the safeguarding of ICH. Through *rewang*, intergenerational knowledge transfer is facilitated, social bonds are reinforced, and communal reciprocity is enacted. This observation aligns with broader scholarship on heritage foods, which highlights the role of food practices in sustaining community cohesion (Abbots et al., 2016; Mintz, 2008).

b. Cultural continuity: Presence in weddings and rituals

Kuih lemper is a staple at social events such as *kenduri* (feasts), celebrations, and family gatherings. Several informants stressed that no event feels complete without *kuih lemper*, highlighting its importance for cultural identity and community bonding. Cultural events function as platforms for communities to showcase heritage, reinforce identity, and foster wider engagement (Zingari, 2020). In this sense, heritage foods are not incidental but essential components of specific occasions, particularly feasts.

As Informant 5 explained, “*Although cultural shifts occur, some individuals continue to preserve Kuih lemper, ensuring that the tradition remains relevant*” (Informant 5, Interview). Most informants also acknowledged that, while the mode of obtaining *kuih lemper* has shifted from homemade to store-bought its consistent presence in ceremonies demonstrates cultural adaptation rather than cultural loss.

For the Javanese community in Bagan Datuk, *kuih lemper* holds an integral role in social ceremonies. As Informant 2 expressed, “*Kalau tak ada kuih lemper, rasa janggal*” (I2), underscoring its function as a cultural constant. Its value lies not primarily in taste but in its role as a marker of ritual completeness. Comparable to *nasi ambeng* in Johor (Hashim et al., 2024), *kuih lemper* in Bagan Datuk illustrates continuity of



tradition across generations. At the same time, its sustained presence reflects the essence of cultural transmission, reinforced through repeated enactment during social occasions (UNESCO, 2003). The persistence of *kuih lemper* in rituals demonstrates continuity, a core element of the safeguarding framework.

c. Ritual complementarity: Symbolic role in feasts

Traditional food plays a vital role in linking social and cultural events, serving as a medium for communal identity and expression. On many occasions, heritage foods are considered indispensable, required to be present and served to guests. As Informant 2 explained, “*Kuih lemper serves as a social and symbolic complement to communal feasts*” (Informant 2, Interview). Similarly, Informant 1 emphasised that *kuih lemper* is “*a necessity in social and ritualistic events, reinforcing its role as a traditional dish in Javanese customs*” (Informant 1 Interview).

In other cultures, such as in Tulungagung, Ayam Lodho is more than just a dish; it symbolises gratitude shared during special events, highlighting the community’s cultural heritage (Ellyzabethania et al., 2023). A similar phenomenon occurs in Northern Cyprus, where festivals such as the Buyukkonuk Eco Day showcase traditional foods including *hellim* cheese, *zeytinli* (olive bread), *lokma*, and *harnup pekmez* (carob molasses). These foods embody not only culinary value but also cultural symbolism (Sadikoglu, 2021).

Several informants reiterated that *kuih lemper* functions as a ritual complement rather than merely a food item. As Informant 3 noted, “*Pelengkap juadah, kalau tiada macam ada yang kurang*” (Informant 3, Interview), suggesting that its absence would render a feast incomplete. The ritual complementarity of *kuih lemper* parallels other heritage foods embedded in ceremonial contexts, such as *hellim* cheese festivals in Cyprus (Sadikoglu, 2021). This comparison underscores how heritage foods operate simultaneously as nourishment and cultural semiotics, situating *kuih lemper* within broader debates on food symbolism and ritual significance.

d. Symbols and language (baju metaphor, form)

The names of traditional foods often reflect cultural identity and local heritage. Such terms may be unique to a region, representing not only the dish itself but also the customs and practices surrounding its preparation and consumption. In Hungary, for instance, *Halászlé* (Fisherman’s Soup) is a traditional fish soup made with freshwater species such as carp or catfish, seasoned with paprika and other spices. Closely tied to fishing traditions along the Danube River, the dish has distinct regional variations, including the Baja fish soup, which is known for its unique recipes and preparation methods (Báti, 2024).

Similar figurative language emerges in the making of *kuih lemper* among Javanese informants. The term *baju* (“clothing”) is used to describe the banana leaf wrapper, underscoring its symbolic value. During fieldwork, Informant 5 was observed wrapping *kuih lemper* in banana leaves, noting that the leaves serve as the dish’s “clothing.” As Informant 4 explained, “*Memang kena pakai daun... tak boleh pakai plastik. Itu baju dia*” (Informant 4, Interview). This metaphor highlights the significance of material form to identity: the banana leaf wrapper signifies authenticity and belonging. Such



insistence on form resonates with theories of food semiotics (Romagnoli, 2019), which argue that the material presentation of a dish constitutes a communicative act of cultural identity. Thus, the cultural significance of *kuih lemper* lies not only in its ingredients but also in its embodied form and terminology. Javanese identity & intergenerational transmission

As diaspora communities settle in new countries, they often adapt their culinary practices according to the availability of local ingredients and shifting social contexts. Such adaptation can give rise to hybrid cuisines that reflect both original food traditions and host-culture influences (Mintz, 2008). Traditional meals and food practices not only symbolize community values but also serve as powerful markers of regional identity (Rinaldi, 2017). This is evident in the Javanese community of Bagan Datuk, Perak, where heritage foods such as *kuih lemper* are regarded as indispensable cultural identifiers. As one informant remarked, “*Kuih lemper is deeply associated with Javanese identity, and its absence is felt strongly*” (Informant 2, Interview).

Nevertheless, concerns were raised that the prioritisation of Javanese heritage foods is waning, which could lead to their disappearance. As Informant 5 explained, “*Older Javanese generations recognise kuih lemper as part of their identity, while younger people are less connected to it. For example, younger generations do not know how to wrap kuih lemper.*” The concern about youth no longer knowing how to wrap *kuih lemper* illustrates the fragility of oral transmission highlighted in UNESCO’s (2003) Convention. While elders view *kuih lemper* as a cultural marker of Javanese identity, younger generations demonstrate declining familiarity. This intergenerational gap underscores the fragility of transmission and echoes wider scholarship on heritage food under globalisation, which emphasises the urgency of safeguarding measures. (Hashim et al., 2024) Ensuring the survival of heritage foods such as *kuih lemper* requires community-based mechanisms of safeguarding, including workshops, informal apprenticeships, and systematic documentation. Taken together, these five themes demonstrate that the cultural significance of *kuih lemper* lies in its ability to bind social relations, ensure ritual continuity, embody symbolic forms, and articulate Javanese identity across generations. Its meanings transcend gustatory pleasure, functioning instead as a medium of cultural heritage. In line with the UNESCO 2003 Convention, *kuih lemper* exemplifies how intangible cultural heritage is enacted through everyday practices of making, sharing, and transmitting knowledge.

5.0 Conclusion

This study highlights the cultural significance of *kuih lemper* among the Javanese community in Bagan Datuk, Perak, demonstrating that its value lies not only in its ingredients and preparation but also in its role as a medium of identity, continuity, and belonging. The findings reveal that while older generations strongly associate *kuih lemper* with Javanese identity, younger members of the community show declining familiarity with its preparation, signalling challenges in intergenerational transmission. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on intangible cultural heritage and food heritage studies by applying UNESCO’s safeguarding framework to a specific culinary practice. It shows how foodways function not merely as sustenance but as symbolic acts that embody cultural identity, collective memory, and resilience within diaspora settings.

Practically, the study offers insights for heritage safeguarding initiatives in Malaysia. It



suggests that *kuih lemper* could be considered for formal recognition at the state or national level as part of heritage food policies. More importantly, community-driven initiatives such as workshops, apprenticeships, and educational programmes can play a vital role in sustaining knowledge transmission and raising awareness among younger generations. This study, however, is limited by its focus on a single locality and a relatively small number of informants. Future research should expand the scope by including Javanese communities in Johor, Selangor, or Indonesia for comparative insights, particularly to examine how migration, assimilation, and local contexts shape the safeguarding of heritage foods.

In conclusion, safeguarding *kuih lemper* is not only about preserving a traditional dish but also about sustaining cultural continuity and strengthening identity within the Javanese diaspora. Its survival reflects the resilience of intangible heritage practices in adapting to social change, while reaffirming the importance of community participation and intergenerational transmission for Malaysia's multicultural heritage.

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