Exploring Indonesian Cuisine Ethnographically: A Fusion of Heritage and Innovation Through the Lens of Local Wisdom

Listiyono Santoso[1], Mohammad Adib[2], Moch Jalal[1], Nadya Afdholy[1]

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ABSTRACT

Background: Traditional cuisine as an ancestral cultural heritage is a marker and an inherent identity characteristic of the presence of an ethnic group in a city. The preservation and development of Indonesian culinary become the important choices to preserve the cultural heritage of foods. This research aims to find the types of preservation and development of Indonesian culinary as the cultural heritage in East Java.

Methods: This research employed the ethnography approach, which was carried out in East Java, Indonesia, specifically in the cities of Surabaya, Gresik and Sidoarjo as the representation of community with the industrialist culture and coastal community using marine products as the distinctive food ingredients for the community.

Result: The dynamics of culinary food stalls, such as rawon, soto, rujak cingur, penyetan and kupang lontong which produce traditional cuisine has become the attributed icons in East Java. Indonesian culinary preservation that is established in the traditional cuisine-based industry has given new hope to consolidate the populist economic sector or the small and medium enterprises, as well as providing job opportunities for the urban community. Through this preservation, Indonesian culinary can be the important part of cultural heritage as well as the distinctive identity of a city.

Key words: Creative industry, Cultural heritage, Indonesian culinary, Urban community.

INTRODUCTION

Everyethnic group that resides the islands in Indonesia has various unique and distinctive cultural heritage, which can be the traditional arts, the values as the life guidelines, the social system, or the traditional cuisine. Traditional food reflects the relationship between the region and the culture of its people (Saidane *et al*., 2021). The dissimilar natural environment creates the different adaptation and habitual activities pattern. The emergence of each ethnic group's cultural system is none other than because of the existence of the patterned activities that are carried out continuously as part of the adaptation pattern toward the natural environment (Koentjaraningrat, 2010). The cultural heritage of each ethnic groupis the wealth treasure of tradition that should be preserved and developed to avoid extinction, because it is an inherent identity in the cultural community, just like the race and ethnicity with its own uniqueness and distinctiveness. When the cultural heritage is in the critical situation that, if not experiencing a shift, may be on the verge of extinction (Pearson *et al*., 2021). When a mother tongue is no longer used by its user community, then certainly the ethnic group is uprooted from its cultural roots, including the heritage of traditional cuisine.

There is no ethnic group that does not have theirown distinctive food heritage. The community in the agrarian culture usually produces the type of food made from plants into vegetables while the fishing community creates the type of food made from seafood (McClements and Grossmann, 2022). For example, pecel in Javanese community has different types like pecel Blitar, pecel Ponorogo and pecel Madiun. There is also plecingkangkungin Sasak tribe of Lombok, ketoprak in Betawi and gudeg in Yogyakarta.

The traditional cuisines made of seafood are pindang patin Palembang and asam padeh tongkol Padang. The sustainability of the traditional cuisine indicates that the availability of natural resources is still sufficient, the heirs of the culture or the community have a concern for the cultural heritage of the ancestors and the identity of the ethnic group is still an inherent personality (Kleden, 1987). On the other hand, the disappearance of traditional cuisine from the community indicates the shift of cultural identity in the ethnic group, or the extinction of a certainethnic group.

Recently, there are many traditional cuisines that demonstrate their existence in the middle of the modern cuisines and developed creatively into Indonesian culinary

[1]Department of Indonesian Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya-60286, Indonesia.
[2]Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya-60286, Indonesia.

Corresponding Author: Listiyono Santoso, Department of Indonesian Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya-60286, Indonesia.
Email: listiyono-s@fib.unair.ac.id

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with the better taste, as well as it becomes the creative industry that generates economic resources and provides the job opportunity. The example is rawon, the cuisine made from meat that is very typical with the city of Surabaya, is currently demanded by the public, even already penetrates to other areas. The people of Surabaya know the culinary called Rawon Setan on Embong Malang Street well; shrimp sambal of Mrs. Rudy on Dharmahusada Street; Soto Cak Har on Soekarno Hatta Street; Rujak Cingur of Ambengan; Rawon Gajah Mada on Gadjah Mada Street, Sidoarjo; and sambal rice of Mrs. Siti in Magersari, Sidoarjo, in which is always crowded by consumers every day. The preservation and development of Indonesian culinary becoming the food creative industry that deliver the socioeconomic impacts to the community for increasing the community autonomy in the economic aspect, the food sovereignty, as well as keeping Indonesian culinary tastes to be maintained by the successors (Alexandri *et al*., 2019). Food is also a vital factor for maintaining health (Kalpana and Vrinda, 2023). The process of indigenization of knowledge, as revealed through the activities of preservation and development among indigenous people, is fascinating. This approach underscores the value of evolving traditional wisdom within the context of cultural reproduction. This research aims to find the types of preservation and development of Indonesian culinary as the cultural heritage in East Java, Indonesia, particularly Surabaya, Gresik and Sidoarjo City.

Materials and Methods

This research employed the ethnography approach as one of the current cultural research models. The ethnography approach in this study was employed to deeply search how the local community can preserve and develop the traditional cuisine in that they have competitiveness at the national or global level (Batat, 2021). Ethnography is a research model and method that requires the researcher's full engagement as a significant part of the discovery of Indonesian culinary preservation by the hereditary community (Prastio *et al*., 2023). The data sources in this research were 4 informants who owned traditional food stalls in Surabaya, Gresik and Sidoarjo. The data for this study consisted of information collected during interviews. Data collection was carried out by interviewing informants during August 2022. All information during the interviews was recorded and transcribed to then be analyzed and interpreted in depth.

Results and Discussion

Indonesian culinary of east Java: Preservation and development

Indonesian culinary, especially in East Java, often becomes the tourism destination, both for local and international tourists. There were some Indonesian culinary that become the distinctive branding of Surabaya city, *i.e.*, rujak cingur, sate klopo, soto, rawon, nasi penyetan, tahu tek, lontong balap, sambal rice, bebek penyet, lontong kikil, sop buntut, ceker lapindo, bandeng presto, otak-otak, nasi krawu, sop sembilang, sate blekok and sego romoo. The cuisines made of shrimp paste, sambal in penyetan, rawonmade out of meat and seafood cuisine dominate the traditional cuisines that can survive in the pressure of the modern culinary. Let us talk about Rawon Setan that is located in Embong Malang 78, Surabaya. Rawon Setan was established by Musiatiin the 1950s, which is now inherited to the third generation, *i.e.*, Endang Martiningsih. The stall of Rawon Setan, which initially opens from 6 p.m. to 3 a.m. except for other branches which open from the morning, has the turnover of 6 million to 7 million rupiahs per day by spending 60 kg of meat, 30 kg of rice and 4 kg of kluwek seasoning. Rawon Setan stall of Mbak Endang has four main branches which have the similar turnover from the main branches. The turnover of Rawon Setan per day is not less than 20 million to 24 million rupiah. This stall has 60 employees which are disseminated to the four branches.

"We indeed try to maintain the distinctiveness of *rawon* with big meat and the noticeable spicy broth. Although there is the non-spicy choice for the broth, the excellence of Rawon Setan actually lies on the pitch-black broth with the spiciness it has" (The Interview with Mrs. Endang, 2 August 2022).

The data from the interview with Mrs. Endang on 2 August 2022 highlights the dedication to preserving the unique qualities of Rawon Satan, a traditional Indonesian beef soup known for its distinctive dark broth and robust flavors. Mrs. Endang emphasizes the effort to maintain the authenticity of the dish through the use of large meat pieces and a notably spicy broth. Although a non-spicy version of the broth is available, she asserts that the essence of Rawon Satan's excellence is encapsulated in its characteristic pitch-black, spicy broth. This insistence on the importance of spiciness to the dish's identity reflects a broader cultural appreciation for flavor depth and complexity in traditional culinary practices.

The signature feature of Rawon Satan is not merely its spiciness but also the depth of flavor that comes from the traditional blend of spices. This combination ensures that each serving offers a unique taste experience that goes beyond mere heat, embodying the rich culinary heritage of the region" (The Interview with Mrs. Endang, 2 August 2022).

Mrs. Endang underscores the intricate balance and complexity inherent in Rawon Satan, a dish that transcends its initial impression of spiciness to offer a rich, layered flavor profile. This depth of taste is attributed to the traditional spice blend, a hallmark of the region's culinary practices, suggesting a meticulous selection and combination of ingredients that contribute more than just heat to the palate. Through Mrs. Endang's insights, it becomes evident that Rawon Satan is not just food; it's an experience that encapsulates the cultural and historical essence of its origin. The emphasis on the unique taste experience speaks to the broader significance of culinary traditions in connecting individuals to the heritage and communal identity of a region, showcasing how traditional dishes like Rawon Satan act as vessels of cultural expression and preservation.

The similar phenomenon can be found in the sambal rice stall of Mrs. Siti in Sidoarjo. The sambal rice stall of Mrs. Siti established by a husband and wife, Wito and Siti, is included as the type of traditional cuisine that is quite popular for the people of Sidoarjo and its surrounding areas. The business started in the half of 2001 that initially occupied asmall segment of the roadside around the square of Sidoarjo now becomes a food stall with the quite immense turnover. Wito (52) and Siti (50) pioneered thesambal rice stall of Mrs. Siti from scratch. For the first three years of its establishment, it was not widely known by the public, so they at that time practically spent only 2-3 kg of rice every day. However, their persistence and patience were paid off. In the fourth year (2005), the cuisine of sambal rice started to be familiar and they obtained a large number of consumers.

"The people in Sidoarjo and its surrounding areas are more familiar with *penyetan* instead of sambal rice. Many people were not familiar with this kind of food at the beginning of its establishment. But slowly, they finally got to know and addicted to the presentation of the stingray fish with super spicy sambal" (The interview with Wito, 10 August 2022).

The data from the interview with Wito on 10 August 2022 sheds light on the evolving culinary preferences in Sidoarjo and its neighboring regions, emphasizing a cultural shift towards the dish known as penyetan, particularly stingray fish served with super spicy sambal. Initially, residents were more accustomed to sambal rice and not very familiar with penyetan. However, over time, the community gradually became acquainted with and developed a fondness for this dish, to the point of addiction. The slow but significant transition in local food preferences underscores the dynamic nature of culinary traditions and the ability of a specific dish to carve out a niche for itself in the local gastronomy. This change also reflects the broader theme of regional cuisines evolving through the introduction and adoption of new flavors and dishes, further enriching the culinary tapestry of the area.

"The uniqueness of their penyetan, particularly the stingray fish variant, not only lies in its spiciness but also in the meticulous preparation process. The fish is marinated with a special blend of spices before being grilled to perfection, ensuring that every bite is infused with flavor. This careful preparation, combined with the super spicy chili sauce, has contributed significantly to its growing popularity among locals and visitors alike" (The interview with Wito, 10 August 2022).

The data reveals the distinctive appeal of their penyetan, especially the stingray fish version, which captivates both locals and visitors not just with its spiciness but through a detailed culinary process. The essence of this uniqueness stems from the fish's marination in a carefully selected spice blend, followed by expert grilling techniques that ensure flavor permeates every portion of the dish. This methodical approach to cooking, when paired with the intense spiciness of the accompanying chili sauce, elevates the dining experience, making it more than just a meal-it becomes a memorable encounter with the locale's culinary artistry. The popularity of this dish, therefore, is not merely due to its heat level but is deeply rooted in the quality, tradition and innovation that the preparation process embodies, highlighting the significance of culinary craftsmanship in the promotion and appreciation of regional cuisines.

Interestingly, from which they only spent 2-4 kg of rice every day, currently sambal rice of Mrs. Siti spends 2-3 quintals of rice spread over three branch stalls. The turnover from sambal rice of Mrs. Siti is around 20 to 25 million rupiah per day. The food stall with approximately 15 employees serves the distinctiveness of rice with the sidedishes of fried stingray, catfish, mujair or tilapia, eggs and tofu or tempeh. What makes the difference is the serving of sambal which indeed owns the different taste and all-spicy sambal. The food texture is indeed suitable for the 'tongue' of Sidoarjo people and its surrounding areas who adore the all-spicy cuisine along with its fresh vegetables. The culinary with broth texture like *rawon* and *soto* has the plentiful enthusiasts in those three cities, added by the seafood cuisine that employs the shrimp paste such as *tahu tek*, *lontong kupang*, *rujak cingur*, *lontong balap* or the marine products such as grilled fish, becomes the dominating culinary type. The sustainability of traditional cuisine that becomes the promising business is the result of solemnity and consistency of the culinary business entrepreneurs in maintaining the traditional tastes.

"Consuming traditional cuisine becomes the part of inheriting the local knowledge of a certain community about food. The urban community, even from other regions, is sometimes visiting other cities only for the sake of hunting the distinctive culinary. The traditional cuisine becomes '*klangenan*' (the favorite things) for the urban community who yearns for the classic tastes" (The interview with Yusak Anshori, a tourism activist of Surabaya, 12 August 2022).

The statement by Yusak Anshori, a tourism activist from Surabaya, on 12 August 2022, emphasizes the integral role of traditional cuisine in the preservation and transmission of local knowledge and cultural heritage through food. Anshori points out a growing trend among urban communities, even those from other regions, to travel to different cities with the specific aim of exploring distinctive local cuisines. This pursuit is not merely about the consumption of food but represents a deeper yearning for connection with traditional flavors and culinary experiences. Traditional dishes thus become 'klangenan,' or favored items, among urbanites seeking to reconnect with or discover classic tastes. This phenomenon highlights the significance of culinary heritage as a bridge between past and present, serving both as a form of cultural expression and as a catalyst for tourism and intercultural exchange.

The allure of traditional cuisine extends beyond its taste and into the stories and history it carries. He pointed out that each traditional dish serves as a gateway for the

urban community to connect with the local culture and history of a place. This connection, facilitated by culinary exploration, not only enriches the dining experience but also fosters a deeper appreciation and respect for the diversity of Indonesia's cultural heritage among people from various backgrounds (The interview with Yusak Anshori, a tourism activist of Surabaya, 12 August 2022).

The data illuminates the profound impact of traditional cuisine as a medium for cultural immersion and connection. Traditional dishes are presented not just as items of consumption but as narratives and histories on a plate, offering a tangible link to the past and the essence of a community's way of life. This perspective elevates the act of dining to a form of cultural exploration, where the flavors and ingredients become symbols of the local identity and heritage. Anshori's observations suggest that culinary experiences can bridge the gap between different cultures, fostering a mutual respect and appreciation for diversity. The emphasis on traditional cuisine as a 'gateway' for the urban community underscores the potential of food to unite individuals from varied backgrounds, encouraging a deeper, more meaningful engagement with the cultural tapestry of Indonesia. Through this lens, traditional dishes transcend their culinary value, embodying the soul of the regions they originate from and enriching the social fabric by promoting understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity.

It is true to mention that the traditional cuisine becomes the answer to community's longing of all the local food flavors of a region, especially if they are the indigenous people who have been accustomed to these types of traditional cuisine since childhood. Thus, it makes sense if the urban community who is bored of modern culinary will yearn for the local taste in acertain condition. The sustainability of traditional cuisine in these regions is certainly dependent on the ability of culinary entrepreneurs to evolve the cuisine of their ancestral heritage to be the culinary with ahigh attraction that isnot only about the taste, but also about the packaging, the marketing and the serving. The culinary entrepreneurs have the confidence that the people of Surabaya, Gresik and Sidoarjo surely will not forget their ancestral heritage's distinctive cuisines.

"Every person must have their own favorite cuisine. Their habits in consuming the local foods will be the attachment for the inherited cuisine as their favorite cuisine" (The interview with Mak Yeni (54), the owner of sambal rice of Mak Yeye Wonokromo, 15 August 2022).

In her interview on 15 August 2022, Mak Yeni, a 54-year-old owner of Mak Yeye Wonokromo, a sambal rice eatery, articulates a fundamental observation about personal taste and cultural attachment through food. She suggests that individual preferences for certain dishes are deeply rooted in one's habitual consumption of local foods, which, over time, fosters a strong emotional and cultural connection to those cuisines. This statement underscores the idea that favorite foods are not just about flavor or ingredients but are intimately tied to experiences, memories and the cultural environment in which one is raised. Mak Yeni's insight reflects a broader understanding of how culinary preferences are shaped by cultural heritage and personal history, highlighting food's role in the continuity of cultural traditions and the formation of individual identity. This connection between personal taste and cultural inheritance emphasizes the profound impact of local cuisines on one's sense of self and belonging.

The sambal rice stall of Mak Yeye is even located only on the roadside of Wonokromo, as well as the sambal rice stall of Mrs. Siti which was located only on the small segment in front of DKT Hospital Sidoarjo and evolved in the residence of Magersari Sidoarjo. The similar phenomenon goes to Soto Cak Har which was initially located in front of Surabaya City Government Investment Office on Arif Rahman Hakim Street which then developed after moving to Soekarno Hatta Street. The activity of eating out while traveling currently becomes the main attraction for the tourism in East Java. This happens because the taste is suitable for people's demands, such as sambal, sayur asem, rawon and rujak cingur. The spiciness, which is one of the Indonesian distinctive tastes, can provide the symbol of lifestyle and the prestigious products that successfully penetrate the international market. Interestingly, there are many culinary communities in those regions that often disseminate the culinary they are interested in by uploading the pictures of food stalls to the social media, such as Facebook, Youtube, Instagram and TikTok. The ways done by Indonesian culinary enthusiasts and culinary agents will have the positive impact on the development of the culinary industry.

Culinary as the indigenous people

Indonesia possesses many distinct food diversities between the regions which should be maintained so they will not be claimed by other countries. Culinary is a part of the cultural identity of ethnic groups in Indonesia. The efforts to popularize the authentic tastes of Indonesian traditional cuisine to the world people is the significant part to demonstrate the cultural heritage richness owned by Indonesian people (Wijaya, 2019). There are many varieties of Indonesian culinary that grow and develop into the creative industry which bring the new hope for the lethargy of food-based industrial world. In the global era, the creative industries that bring the new hope are the industries based on the entertainment (fun), clothing (fashion) and culinary (food) (Nicholls-Nixon, 2022). This reality can be detected from the increasing spread of food stalls, restaurants and other food-based industries with Indonesian culinary tastes. The culinary in East Java, Indonesia, *i.e.*, Surabaya, Gresik and Sidoarjo, has the similarities from one another. Besides the abundant types of marine and fishpond product-based, such as fish and shrimp pastes, they also rely on other resources from farms such as beef and poultry as well as the culinary with sambal like penyetan. The creative economy programs based on the traditional cuisine industry in these cities have already been able to encourage the

economy of the community as well as providing the promising job opportunities for communities that contributes the positive impact for the economic dynamics of the local and regional people.

Indonesia's richness of natural resources gives the impact on the creation of many traditional cuisines. It is labeled traditional since this type of cuisine is hereditary passed from a generation to the next generation (Koentjaraningrat, 2010). This reality is then termed as the indigenous people reproduction. The term 'indigenous' refers to the local knowledge which corresponds to the local life experience as well. All the things related to the local conditions will surely be absorbed as the knowledge for the local community (Varghese and Crawford, 2021). The context of indigenous people reproduction provides the evidence how the community has always possessed the proper knowledge to be developed and to become the significant knowledge source (Kleden, 1987). The contemporary society needs to be notified of the traditional knowledge that is always relevant in the context. Local food-based Indonesian culinary is processed from the recipes that are already familiar to the local community with the ingredients acquired from the local resources that have the flavors that are relatively suitable with the taste of local community. Developing value-added products is one strategy for increasing the value of a society (Suparmi *et al*., 2019). The significant part of cultural heritage is embodied in the richness of Indonesian culinary traditions (Nurhan, 2010). The more it is maintained, the more preserved the identity of each cultural system.

The preservation and development of Indonesian culinary are the implementations of eagerness to advance the local identity in the middle of global settings. Culinary becomes the cultural event since it is assembled from the patterned activities which continue to be carried out together by the community members (Reddy and van Dam, 2020). The habit of consuming the same food types, food serving and equipment is the realization of the presence of cultural system in the food-consuming event. The concept of eating as the cultural system certainly applies universally in human's eating habit regardless of its diversity (Rahman, 2016). This kind of diversity then composes the reality of variation differences of Indonesian culinary. The more ethnicity, the more abundant culinary variants will be presented. Interestingly, if the food was originally just a fulfillment of biological needs, it then gradually evolves into the option of the tastes craved by the culinary connoisseurs.

Conclusion

Through the discovery of Indonesian culinary traces, it is found that the traditional cuisine has a close relationship with a culinary tradition that has developed for a long ago, as well as it owns the ability to survive well since the taste is a classic problem that is difficult to change. This is marked by the increasingly massive development of the culinary industry in Surabaya, Gresik and Sidoarjo, even it becomes the identity politics. Indonesian culinary is the uniqueness of traditional heritage that should be maintained and inherited through the learning process from generation to generation. The professional management of Indonesian culinary as the food-based industry will increase the traditional cuisine 'self-esteem' that is no less competitive with the modern cuisine. However, the development of Indonesian culinary will not grow for the better without the intervention of the state in participating to help provide assistance, both funds and policies that are in line with the eagerness to revitalize Indonesian culinary as a culinary destination in every city. The development of Indonesian culinary still has to build some network with other industrial sectors, such as tourism industry and trade industry, to increasingly popularize the culinary of Indonesia massively in various regions.

Conflict of interest

All author declare thay they have no conflict of interest.

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