

# “FOOD DYNAMIC FROM THE GENDER PERSPECTIVES: THE CASE OF INDONESIA”

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*(work is still in progress, please do not quote)*

## **Abstract**

Food as an essential element in human life is closely related to gender issues. Traditionally, food and kitchen are conventionally women’s “world”. Kitchen is the place where women could extend their power, affection, and passion to their families. Women could do those duties through the selection and serving of food. In a more conservative view, men were required to work and earned money while women were required to nurture the household and be responsible to the feeding of the family. Nowadays, the kitchen is not merely women’s zone anymore as more and more men become involved in the cooking duties because more women work and pursue career outside. The idea of liberation and democratization come along with modernization. Consequently, they also influence the order of the formerly traditional society.

Like clothes and other commodities that we purchase, food also holds an essential mark as an indicator of somebody’s class in the hierarchy of society. Food we buy and eat also brings symbols which enforce our position in the society. Eating habits also represent meanings and symbols. Food can be perceived as a series of meanings, such as symbolic meaning, economic meaning, cultural meaning, and religious meaning. Food carries a collection of symbols and codes.

The exchange of cuisines among societies may result in the advent of the culture of glocalization or hybridization. The term “glocalization” embraces this blending of local and global cultures. This blend could generate new kinds of cultural practices. Foods which are originally from distant culinary cultures have been adopted and embedded into the local culinary culture. Likewise on the smaller scale, the process of “domestic glocalization” also occurs within the Indonesians. In Indonesian’s archipelagic context, people could migrate from one island to another island, meaning from one cultural entity into another one. On their migrations, they bring along their native culture with them or vice versa, including cuisine. This circumstance, as a consequence of intermingling and acculturation, stimulates the spread of cuisine to other parts of the archipelago

**Key words:** food, gender, symbols, global, local, glocal

## **Introduction**

This research started from curiosity based on my daily encounter, “What is the meaning of food except for overcoming hunger?” I eat, cook, buy, and share food on a regular basis. Those activities make me wonder whether food also carries intrinsic merits beyond its physical material. This curiosity brings me to study food from cultural perspectives, particularly as an element of changing identifiers and lifestyles.

There are some examples of empirical practices about food. Traditionally, food and kitchen are conventionally women’s “world”. This is the place where women could extend their power, affection, and passion to their families. Women could do those duties through the selection and serving of food. In a more conservative view, men were required to work and earned money while women were required to nurture the household and be responsible to the feeding of the family. Nowadays, the kitchen is not merely women’s zone anymore as more and more men become involved in the cooking duties because more women work and pursue career outside. Moreover, with the availability of ready-to-eat food and more convenient kitchen, cooking has become easier. It is not time and energy consuming like it used to be when cooking could require the whole family to participate.

Shopping for food in the traditional market was once also mostly done by women. It was a very rare opportunity to see men doing the shopping for food, and if it did happen people would consider it as strange and uncommon. More common sights are husbands accompanying their wives do the shopping on expeditions in the traditional markets. However, with the modern and convenient places for buying food, such as supermarkets or hypermarkets, it is no issue at all to see men doing their own shopping nowadays.

## **Discussion**

Like clothes and other commodities that we purchase, food also holds an essential mark as an indicator of somebody’s class in the hierarchy of society. Goods carry particular symbols of somebody’s status in the society. Therefore, the food we buy and eat also brings symbols which enforce our position in the society. There are four “capitals” which differentiate classes, by borrowing Bourdieu’s terms, they are “economic capital”, “cultural capital”, “educational capital”, and “social capital”. Those four “capitals” are intertwined and supportive of one to another in establishing one’s class in a society. The way we eat food, the place we buy our food, and what food we eat are all consistent with those capitals. It means that those capitals are the drive and, at the same time, enhance the establishment of the capitals to an individual. In other words, those types of capital reflect our tastes of food and simultaneously, our tastes of food is the reflections of our capitals (Bourdieu, 1984; D. Miller, 1987).

Eating habits also represent meanings and symbols. The non-material function of foods or meals could be stripped off from their physical material. Intrinsic values and meanings of foods are attached in the body of foods. Food can be perceived as a series of meanings, such as symbolic meaning, economic meaning, cultural meaning, and religious meaning. Food carries a collection of symbols and codes. People can communicate and send

messages through the food they cook, eat, and share. Food can represent the class, taste, and culture of the eaters and a particular society (Ashley, Hollows, Jones, & Taylor, 2004; Hall, 1997; B. D. Miller, 1997; Soler, 1997; Veen, 2003; Warde & Martens, 2000; Watson & Caldwell, 2005).

Food as the representation of class, taste, and culture can be observed among groups of Indonesian society.<sup>1</sup> The trend apparently occurs among the urban-middle-class society, young people, and the high-class society. People shift their food preference towards foreign, modern, and classy tastes. Because of the scarcity of these *new kinds of food*, they require more money to buy. Thus, they may function as an identifier of one's economic power, cultural capital, and taste. These specific characteristics of the newly introduced foods distance somebody from the others because she/he can access commodities which others cannot. This might be influenced by the growth of income as better-income people have gained better purchasing power to choose the preferences of what they eat. The vast growth of fast food restaurants, ready-to-eat food and bakery industries have boosted the consumption of noodles, bread, and other wheat-based food, as indicated by Fabiosa in his paper, *Westernization of the Asian Diet: The Case of Rising Wheat Consumption in Indonesia*. To emphasize the statement above, he affirmed that "Indonesia is not a producer of wheat but has the largest wheat miller in a single location and is the largest instant noodle producer in the world. Indonesia ranks in the top five leading wheat importing countries in the world, with its imports representing 4% of the world import market" (Fabiosa, 2006:23). The change is also indicated as "food consumption in Indonesia has shown a pattern of change over the past three decades, from a diet characterized primarily by staple foods of cereals and cassava, to one that includes a larger share of fruits, fish, meats, dairy products and processed foods." (Chowdhury, Gulati, & Gumbira-Sa'id, 2005:ii).

The assumption that economic development has also contributed to the change of Indonesian menu could also be found in Cole's dissertation. His work focused on the changing of food habits among Balinese as a response to the national development. He did a close investigation of two villages in Southern Bali as the sample of his research. One of the villages did show the trend of changing their foods habit as an adjustment to change brought by development, such as tourism. While, the other village partially maintained its old traditions (Cole, 1983).

There are changing patterns of food consumption in contemporary Indonesia. The rise of modern shopping centres especially in urban areas, such as supermarkets and

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<sup>1</sup> Following the crisis in Asia during the 1997-1998, Indonesia got the pressure from the IMF to accelerate the economic deregulation. The policies which were taken by the Indonesian government included "a range of trade monopolies and restrictions of foreign investment were eliminated, several insolvent banks were closed, a new commercial court and bankruptcy law was introduced, several state-owned enterprises were privatised." (Rosser, 2002, p. p. 3). This procedure has marked the liberalization of Indonesian trade, including the agricultural sectors ((Swastika & Nuryanti, 2006, pp. pp. 258-259)) The monetary crisis in 1998 brought big implications for Indonesian economic, that "Trade Policy Review Mechanism (TPRM, 2003), cited by Sawit (2003), reported that there were increasing number of "declining tariffs" in Indonesian agriculture during 1998-2003. In 2003, about 83 percent of tariff lines." (Swastika and Nuryanti 2006:258).

The emerging of new middle class in Indonesian society, as an outcome of the transformation, is also part of the bigger map of the economic changes in the region. The economic reform occurred in Asia during 1980s – 1990s during the processes of economic development and industrialization. These brought economic modernization and social change, including in Indonesia (Ansori, 2009:87).

hypermarkets, may contribute to the changes. People go to the supermarket because they want to get different and “modern” food other than what they customarily have. While at the same time, the existence of these new shopping premises has spurred people to come and try new tastes and modes of shopping. In other words, the new tastes and places of shopping exist to fulfil the need for different food consumption patterns and simultaneously they become the push of the change itself (Chowdhury, et al., 2005:1-2).

In this paper, I would like to discuss about the representation of food in media. As we all know that food is very significant to our life, therefore, food can be used as a kind of a microscope to look closely at the life of a society. The influence of globalization on food can also be observed through the media. In this paper, I will limit the discussion on the representation of food in a song and advertisement. I will start with a song called “Singkong dan Keju” or literary translated into English as ‘cassava and cheese’. The song was sung by Arie Wibowo and popular during the 1980s. It coincided with the years of deregulation of the trade policy and the rise of the consumer culture in Indonesia. Below is the lyric of the song:

### **“Singkong dan Keju” (Cassava and Cheese)<sup>2</sup>**

*Kau bilang cinta padaku* (You say that you love me)  
*Kalau ku bilang pikir dulu* (if I say, think about it)  
*Selera kita* (our tastes)  
*Terlalu jauh berbeda* (are very much different)

*Parfum mu dari Paris* (your perfume is from Paris)  
*Sepatu mu dari Itali* (your shoes are from Italy)  
*Kau bilang demi gengsi* (you say that for the sake of prestige)  
*Semua serba luar negeri* (everything has to be from abroad)

*Manakah mungkin mengikuti caramu* (How could I follow your way)  
*Yang penuh hura-hura* (which is full on partying)

*Aku suka jaipong kau suka disko* (I like “jaipong”, you like disco)  
*Oh oh oh oh*  
*Aku suka singkong kau suka keju* (I like cassava, you like cheese)  
*Oh oh oh oh*  
*Aku dambakan seorang gadis yang sederhana* (I am yearning for a modest girl)  
*Aku ini hanya anak singkong* (I am only a cassava boy)  
*Aku hanya anak singkong* (I am only a cassava boy)

*Notes: “jaipong” is a traditional folk dance in west Java*

*(Translation by CNW)*

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<sup>2</sup> <<http://www.senikata.com/lirik-lagu-indonesia/arie-wibowo/singkong-dan-keju.html>>

Based on the lyrics, I can interpret that the song is about the love story of two individuals from different background and tastes. The girl is illustrated high class and cosmopolitan character, while the boy is said to be more traditional. In terms of food, the girl likes cheese while the boy likes cassava. This can also be translated as the personification of their different world.

The lyrics of the song tell about the difference between tastes of the “local” and “cosmopolitan”. The song depicts the girl as a “victim” of the consumer culture in which it reinforces the stereotype that women are normally shopping addicts. The song illustrates how the girl is a fan of luxury and hedonism. According to the boy, the girl is not his type because she associates herself to foreign culture. The girl puts on perfume from Paris, wears shoes from Italy, dances disco, and eats cheese. While the boy dances ‘jaipong’ and eats cassava. This makes me wonder why he does not mention about the perfume he puts on and the shoes he wears? Does it the reflection of the common stereotype that women need high maintenance? Something which is actually, I think, relatively subjective. As there are many men who also like shopping, like wearing nice clothes, and like spraying nice perfume. Or otherwise, we would never see any commodities targeting male consumers for grooming themselves.

The option of taking “cassava” as the personification also raises a question: whether it was chosen because of its low price or because of its low status against other staple foods in the archipelago. This song could be seen as a kind of a social critique against the rise of the consumer culture in the Indonesian society in around 1980s, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. But, it seems that the song writer did not fully aware that both commodities are not Indonesian native plants. Or, the song writer might have deliberately chosen the staple food which is less prestigious and cheaper if it is compared to rice. Thus, it is aimed for the representation of the generic and commoner tastes.

Cassava has been widespread consumed in Indonesia and has become one of the common foods among the Indonesians (Dixon, 1979:83). Cassava was originally from South America and introduced by the Portuguese to the Indonesian’s diet in the early of 16<sup>th</sup> century (Peterson & Peterson, 1997:1-8). However, after being adopted into the native’s diet, cassava has gained the less prestige. Cassava is regarded as peasant taste & the poor’s diet. The assumption that cassava is poor-people food could also be traced back to the colonial time. At that time, superior food was rice, fruit, eggs, and chicken; while cassava and maize were regarded as inferior carbohydrates (Dick, 1985:78). During that period of time, cassava was a commercial crop cultivated by the peasant (Purwanto, 2002:4) and was consumed by people in some areas in Java as additional food or a substitution to rice (Purwanto, 2002:8).

The consumption of cassava between the urban and rural communities also shows different patterns. Dixon says that among the urban population “virtually no *gaplek* or cassava flour was reported consumed, and fresh cassava consumption was at a lower level and declined slightly as expenditures increased” (Dixon, 1979:100). In other words, the urbanites or wealthier families consume cassava only as snack or substitution, while the peasants or the poor eat it as the main food.

People regard cassava as closer to the natives because it can serve as the staple food for some people especially during the time when rice is considered as an expensive commodity for the lower income earners. The indication that cassava is eaten as the main

food among the less affluent families is also suggested by Gross. According to his study, cassava is “eaten at least once day if sufficient rice is not available”. Another example to this assumption is that more than 50% of the rural families in East Lombok eat maize or cassava. This phenomenon is related to the lower income of the people in that region (Gross, Schultink, & Sastroamidjojo, 1992:135). To put it in other words, this phenomena strengthens the assumption that cassava is poor people’s diet.

As well as the dairy products, cheese was introduced by the Dutch. Contrast to cassava, cheese embraces a much higher prestige in terms of food class. Compared to cassava, cheese is still distanced by the average people as “foreign” and “luxury”. It is related to the fact that originally Indonesian was not a dairy consuming society. During the colonial time, dairy products were aimed merely for the colonialists, and then followed by the high class indigenous Indonesians (Den Hartog, 2002; Raffles, 1965:96). In his paper, *The Rise of a Middle Class and the Changing Concept of Equity in Indonesia: An Interpretation*, Dick categorized cheese as “other food” or the luxury food together with meat and alcoholic beverage (Dick, 1985:74).

However nowadays, we might get the combination of “singkong rasa keju” (cheesy cassava) or “singkong goreng dan keju” (fried cassava topped with cheese). This kind of “acculturation” and “reconciliation” of classes of food could be seen as the sign that the border between cassava and cheese has become blurred if not a kind of food revolution. Or in other ways, the cassava and cheese have been more adopted into the internal-Indonesian-food inventory because there are newer imported foods which become the new class signifier, such as the fast food outlets.

Back to the discussion about the lyrics of the song, they feature the issues on globalization, class, tastes, and gender. Or in this case, I would rather see the gender issues as a gendered prejudice. Looking closely at the lyrics, they suggest the “superiority” of the man in ways that he could resist himself against the temptation of foreign culture. On the opposite, the lyrics of the song illustrate the vulnerability of the woman towards consumer culture through her preferences for foreign-associated commodities.

The objects of “cheese” and “cassava” are used as the representation of classes. “Cheese” is used as the parallel to prestige, overseas, partying, and high class. “Cassava” is selected as the parallel to humble lifestyle, tradition, and modesty. Therefore, I could say that this song also echoes the notion that women are the gatekeepers of the consumer culture and food consumption:

“Because a good deal of consumption occurs in the home, it has been assumed to be the province of women. Women are credited with control over purchasing, storing, cooking, and serving of food. In addition, they are perceived as greatly influencing the food habits of family members.” (McIntosh & Zey, 1998:126)

The term ‘gatekeeper’ itself, according to McIntosh and Zey was developed by Kurt Lewin in 1940s and they cite that: “arising out of an experimental program designed to change the shopping habits of women, the concept of gatekeeper reflects the perception that women control the flows of goods, specifically food, into the household” (McIntosh & Zey, 1998:128).

The implication of women as the gatekeepers of food consumption could also be seen through the advertisement, such as Masako and sweet potato. In Bahasa Indonesia, sweet potato is known as 'ubi jalar'. In Indonesian vocabularies, there are two types of "ubi", namely 'ubi kayu' or literary means "wooden cassava" (cassava) and 'ubi jalar' or sweet potato. As indicated before, both of them are considered cheap, peasant, and less prestigious food. Like cassava, sweet potato was also introduced by the Portuguese on around the same time. The advertisement of Masako shows the society's attitude to this opinion. In the advertisement, it is illustrated that a "tukang sayur" or vegetables vendor, a common petty trader in urban housing complex, is being surrounded by women from the neighbourhood. They made derogatory comments of a woman who only buys "ubi" (sweet potatoes). This woman cooks the "only sweet potatoes" and flavours it with Masako seasoning. She sends the cooked sweet potatoes to the neighbours, another common practice among Indonesian neighbours. (please see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eggosvbwe\\_c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eggosvbwe_c)).

The message is that no matter how cheap the raw material is, if it is cooked with Masako, it will be transformed into a "delicatessen". Masako was produced by Ajinomoto company, or the brand is known as AJI-NO-MOTO in Indonesia. The influence of Japanese occupation on Indonesian cooking can be observed from the extensive use of MSG among Indonesian food. The product was distributed in Indonesia before Indonesian Independence in 1945 and then has been manufactured locally in Indonesia since 1969. AJI-NO-MOTO is produced by a company owned by Japan. Therefore, it is quite clear that the Japanese introduced MSG into Indonesian food when the Japanese administered Indonesia.<sup>3</sup> Despite recent opinion which opposes the use of MSG as being harmful to our health, many people still use MSG for seasoning their food.

In these two examples, cassava and sweet potato are the representation of resistance to the bombard of the more globalized food. I use the term "more globalized" to emphasize the fact that originally cassava and sweet potato themselves are not native plants. Both cassava and sweet potato were introduced into the Indonesian's diet by the early European merchants during the centuries of spice trade<sup>4</sup>. Somehow as the time progressed, cassava and sweet potatoes have become more internalized into the Indonesian culinary substances and have undergone the embodiment of particular values.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ajinomoto.co.id/page.php?keyLink=PROFILE&subKey=HISTORY&idLang=ENG>, accessed on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2010

<sup>4</sup> During the pre-colonial period, Indonesia encountered many foreign cultures which later had a big influence on Indonesian's culinary culture. The encounter between Indonesians and Chinese merchants was noticed as early as around 200 BC or during the Han Dynasty. The Chinese introduced tea, noodles, cabbage, mustard greens, yard-long beans, mung bean sprouts, soybeans, soy sauce, and the use of the wok. From the Indians who first came in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Indonesians became acquainted with eggplants, onions, and mangoes, ginger, coriander, cumin, cardamom, and fennel. The Muslims who first arrived in around 700 AD introduced goat and lamb dishes into Indonesian's culinary culture. The first Indonesians' encounter with Europeans was marked by the arrival of the Portuguese in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. They introduced cassava and sweet potatoes to Indonesians. Despite, the Spanish's short existence in the spice trade in Indonesian's archipelago between 1521-1529, they introduced chilli peppers, peanuts, tomatoes and corn (Peterson & Peterson, 1997:1-8). From the Dutch, Indonesians were acquainted with carrots, potatoes, turnips, cabbages, red radishes, cauliflowers, lettuce and green beans, coffee, and beer. The legacy of the Dutch in the Indonesian cuisine can also be found in the existing bread and cakes such as spekkoek or lapis legit and lapis Surabaya (Peterson and Peterson, 1997:10;, Owen, 2002:186-187).

## Conclusion

The exchange of cuisines among societies may result in the advent of the culture of glocalization or hybridization. The term “glocalization” embraces this blending of local and global cultures. This blend could generate new kinds of cultural practices. The global culture is taken down into the local settings or, in the reverse direction, the local culture is taken up into the global culture frames (Probyn, 2000:38). Some examples of the introduced foods into Indonesian’s cuisine which have been presented in the previous part of this chapter are the concrete cases of the glocalization process. Those foods which were originally from distant culinary cultures have been adopted and embedded into the local Indonesian culinary culture.

Likewise on the smaller scale, the process of “domestic glocalization” also occurs within Indonesians. The term “domestic glocalization” is used to refer to the process of glocalization which occurs among Indonesian sub-cultures themselves. It is meant to be different from the process of glocalization which engage foreign culture involvement as referred in the previous paragraph. In Indonesian’s archipelagic context, people could migrate from one island to another island, meaning from one cultural entity into another one. On their migrations, they bring along their native culture with them or vice versa, including cuisine. This circumstance, as a consequence of intermingling and acculturation, stimulates the spread of cuisine to other parts of the archipelago (Kroef, 1963; Ngwenya & Tray, 2007 - 06; Suryadarma, Poesoro, Budiyati, Akhmadi, & Rosfadhila, 2007; Suryana, Ariana, & Lokollo, 2008).

The modernization in Indonesia also undeniably has an impact on women and household structures (Jones, 2002). Modernization brings along new values and cultures unknown before. The idea of liberation and democratization come along with modernization. Consequently, they also influence the order of the formerly traditional society, including the relational and spousal relations. For women, this could mean the opportunities for women to build career outside, seek higher education, and competing with men in a fair manner. When it comes to the financial consideration, both husband and wife have the same voice to decide what is best for their circumstances, including the reversal of the traditional role of husband as the main breadwinner into a househusband. Gerke (1992), in one of her researches on Indonesians, did a close investigation on the impact of social changes on rural women’s life. Regarding the distribution of housework among the young families, she concluded that “men doing kinds of household work except cooking, which was the responsibility of the woman alone.” This contradicts to the opinion of older generation who consider that housework is mainly women’s duties (Gerke, 1992:117).

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