

## Comparative of Cultural Material Study Between Baba Nyonya Original Descendants and Baba Nyonya New Descendants in Malacca

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### Abstract

*The richness of Baba Nyonya material including kebaya or Nyonya dress, ornaments, craft from porcelain and ceramic is important to educate our future generation of its precious material culture in Malaysia especially in Malacca where parts of the Baba Nyonya community reside. This change has not only happened in modern age, but since the World War II. Due to the decimation of their wealth, compounded with rapid modernization, much of the elaborate traditions and customs of Peranakan are disappearing. Modernity and the changes in lifestyle have almost killed the culture especially among the Baba Nyonya young descendants. This current study aimed to explore the cultural material of Baba Nyonya in Malacca, and compare between Baba Nyonya origins and the new descendant's cultural material practices. A qualitative method is applied in data collection where an in-depth interviews were carried out. Findings showed that it is difficult to preserve the cultural materials among young descendants due to the change of lifestyle with advance technology and career development.*

**Keywords:** Baba Nyonya, material culture, Malacca, technology, community, comparison

### INTRODUCTION

Baba Nyonya Peranakan is a descendant of a community that lived along the Straits Settlement of China. Most of them can be found settling in the South East Asian region. The word Peranakan originates from a Malay word that refers to *anak* which is a child. The Peranakan ethnic group are not only within the Malay-Chinese community but it is also within the Europeans, Indian and Arab who marry local women (Neo, Sheau & Gek 2019). In addition, Neo, Sheau & Gek (2019) emphasized that Baba is also referred to the men and women who are born in Straits Settlements and it contrasts with the born-immigrants from China in the 19th century. The word Nyonya derived from a Javanese word, which was borrowed from the Dutch during the Dutch colonisation era in Indonesia. The root word borrowed was Nona which refers to grandma and it also brought a meaning of foreign married madam. Therefore, Baba Nyonya culture has been assimilated into numerous local cultures to form new ethnicities that were converged with two different cultures. This present study is to identify the original material culture practices among the Baba Nyonya descendants in the 21st century towards its original Baba Nyonya culture in Malacca. Furthermore, the study will be comparing two categories of Baba Nyonya descendants. The first category is the golden age (1405-1942) and the modern age (2015-2020). This study is important to maintain the uniqueness of interculturalism between Malay and Chinese that led to the creation of their own culture (Kauthar Ismail,2020). Baba Nyonya descendants have to inherit the Baba Nyonya culture to ensure it is preserved for future descendants.

On the other hand, modernism has changed the cultural adaptation in the original culture of Baba Nyonya descendants in the 21st century. However, the number of Baba Nyonya descendants who are interested to adopt its origin culture lifestyle into daily lives have decreased after the advent of

technology as it somehow affected the cultural practices among the descendants. According to Awani (2018), the Baba Nyonya descendants nowadays are more interested in an outside culture like K-Pop culture and they are facing a crucial issue due to the advent of technology that has changed the identity, especially young descendants. This change not only happened in modern age, but since World War II another factor is the decimation of their wealth, compounded with rapid modernization, much of the elaborate traditions and customs of Peranakan disappearing (Sankar, Neo & Rycker, 2016).

The material culture of Baba Nyonya has been inherited from an ancestor to a few numbers of descendants. The said material culture includes tools, weapon, utensils, machine, images, clothing and art that has been produced during the golden age and has been practised by the descendants. Even though Baba Nyonya is a minority community in Malaysia, they have shared a lot of material culture with the Malay community. The cultural study of Baba Nyonya is important to preserve their culture and heritage. Baba Nyonya culture has a uniqueness due to the convergence between Malay, Indonesia, Chinese and also Thailand (Kauthar Ismail, 2020). Therefore, the present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the original material culture of Baba Nyonya practices among the descendants in the 21st century.
2. To explore the comparison between original and descendants Baba Nyonya's material culture in the 21st century.

The variation of Baba Nyonya community around Peninsula Malaysia is different due to geography and ethnography factor. In this research paper, the researcher focuses on a few cultural materials of Baba Nyonya such as Peranakan dress and Peranakan food that undergoes the biggest change during the modern age to the young descendants to preserve the material practices. This research is important due to the past record to state the Peranakan culture has declined and is in danger of dying as the community has become the victim of rapid dissolution through geographical dispersion, modernization and socialisation with other groups.

### ***Baba Nyonya Material Culture Practices***

Baba Nyonya material culture is important because it represents the culture's community through dress and food identity. The identity of Baba Nyonya material is apparent because some of the practices are similar to Malay culture. Furthermore, material culture practices have formed a Straits Chinese Settlement identity that caters for women. Nyonya plays a big role in preserving the culture. The material culture of Baba Nyonya is the product and symbol of the nation identity that keeps Baba Nyonya community alive (Zawawi, Musa & Raja Ahmad, 2019).

The Peranakan culture somehow has been recognized from 1980 to 2000 when some of the television stations have commercialised and aired Baba Nyonya sitcom (Neo, Sheau & Gek, 2019). In addition, the Baba Nyonya is a community that lives in luxury and is rich with extraordinary privilege during the golden age. However, the circumstances have changed when World War II has destroyed many countries including the Baba Nyonya community as they have to change their lifestyle. The Baba Nyonya did not only create unique cultures but their descendants have also developed the material culture over the century, with proudly taken as highly presentative and salient to local indigeneity in Singapore and Malaysia (Courtney Fu, 2020). The material culture of Baba Nyonya or Peranakan is not only representing a stable economy, but also their identity in the social hierarchy within the community is very high.

Furthermore, the material culture of Baba Nyonya such as dress and food plays the biggest role to ensure the society recognizes the Peranakan community. Previously, the original descendants are proudly wearing their ornaments and dress that represent their identity (Zawawi, Musa & Raja Ahmad, 2019). Today, the scenario has changed and most of the young descendants in the 21st century are often

wearing the kebaya with batik sarong and a pair of beaded shoes together with a few ornaments as the original image of the Baba Nyonya community.

Apart from that, the food practices have a different scenario when some of the dishes are globally known in a certain country. The migration factor and also the advent of technology (Ng & Karim, 2016), have helped the Baba Nyonya community especially in Malacca and Singapore as very significant few of Peranakan food has been acknowledged around the world. According to scholars, Malacca is the original place of Peranakan food establishment by the first settlements of Straits-Chinese in the Malay peninsula (Oh, Abdul Razak, Hee, Lu & Rahman, 2019). The revolution and transformation of Baba Nyonya social lifestyle have influenced the material culture practices in the modern age.

### ***Type of Cultural Materials***

The centre of this research focuses on two cultural materials that are important in Baba Nyonya practices. Within the present elements of Malay and Chinese culture, the researcher aimed to explore parts that represent Baba Nyonya uniqueness. Among the highlighted aims is to look for material representing Baba Nyonya identity which is the Peranakan dress and food within the cultural practices.

### **Baba Nyonya Dress**

The Peranakan dress is similar to Malay appearances in which a Peranakan woman wearing a *kebaya* with *batik sarong* is the usual look before the modern age. This cross-culture carries Malay and Chinese values. Lee (2016) argued that the Peranakan dress and the appearances have meaning for the people who wear and strive to make sense of their social realities.

Before World War II, most of the older descendants within the Peranakan community would proudly wear *Baju Panjang*. However, the transition sense of fashion from *Baju Panjang* to *Kebaya Biku*, followed by *Kebaya Renda* until now kebaya is worn by many so many people, not only Baba Nyonya community. Nowadays, the modern age young descendants will most likely pair a *kebaya* with pants or skirts.

The *batik sarong* has a different motive and colour in which *batik* worn by the Peranakan are inspired by Chinese designs (Lee, 2016). The details of a Nyonya dress are associated with the rise of commercial *batik*-making in the Javanese community. As noted by history, the Baba Nyonya culture is influenced by Javanese, especially the Baba Nyonya community from Singapore and Malacca have followed an Indonesian Baba Nyonya culture (Neo, Sheau & Gek, 2019). The Peranakan have different *batik* designs under various fabric motifs which carry numerous symbols.

In addition, the Peranakan *batik* motif is inspired by auspicious designs such as bird, dragon, snake and nourishing water (Lee, 2016). Courtney Fu (2020) interviewed a Singaporean Peranakan scholar Peter Lee on the Peranakan textile which was used to express the interrelated culture between Malay and Chinese. The outcome of the interview emphasizes the aesthetics of the pattern that are transmitted and reinterpreted due to the different motive of *batik sarong*. The visual identity of the Nyonya dress does not only bring up an ethnic identity to be recognized by the appearance, but also by the meaning. The researcher views that even though the motif of Peranakan batik looks similar to Javanese batik, it is slightly different from the Chinese aesthetics that are more appealing to the Nyonya philosophical lifestyle.

Generally, a common Baba Nyonya dress style is completed with a Kebaya as the top, paired up with *kerongsang* as the button, a *batik sarong* wrap, a pair of beaded shoes enriched with embroidery, the metal belt to hold the sarong in place and ornaments such as necklace, bangle and *cucuk sanggul*. The transformation of traditional Peranakan kebaya dress style took various forms when most Malaysian women wear different types of kebaya for special occasions or festivities.

### **Baba Nyonya's Food**

Nyonya cuisine is well-known in the Malay Archipelago as the food fusion of the converged Malay-Chinese culture was formed since The Peranakan settled in Peninsula Malaya a long time ago. Peranakan culture became popular starting in the 1980s when their culture received exposure through mainstream media platforms such as television shows in *Radio Televisyen Malaysia* (RTM) (Neo, Sheau & Gek 2019).

However, Baba Nyonya cuisine was modernised through commercialization when food industry companies began manufacturing it. Previously, Baba Nyonya cuisines went through strict preparation to ensure the ingredients are good enough to satisfy the family (Oh, Abdul Razak, Wee, Ching & Rahman, 2019). The ingredients used in a cuisine were a top priority as Nyonya were often judged for their cooking capabilities. Apart from that, Kuake James & Kuake Steffanie (2017) found that the older descendants and their judgements of one's dish were also a pressure factor in ensuring perfect ingredients were used, as they would criticise the taste and look of a dish. The original Baba Nyonya dish is known not only for its taste but the symbol of cultural practices in the Peranakan community as it is of utmost importance in the community culture.

However, most of the dish posed similarities with Malay cuisines such as fish *asam pedas*, beef *rendang*, *ayam buah keluak* and *sambal belacan* as it is the common cuisine prepared by the Nyonya (Kuake James & Kuake Steffanie, 2017). The womenfolk are the people who would take charge to serve the family while also preserving the Peranakan tradition. Nyonya took responsibility for the house meanwhile Baba works and is involved in the trade and business with the British colonials to ensure the family lives comfortably. However, the current modernisation has been influencing Peranakan cuisine as the technology in the food industry grows. In the golden age era, Peranakan cuisine preparation is more rigid as they adhere to Chinese patriarchal customs. Nyonya womenfolk are often associated with being confined in the house, specifically in the kitchen as the kitchen is the place for Nyonya to spend a great part of their lives (Ng & Karim, 2016). The scholars found that kitchens in the Peranakan community represent the *Perut Rumah* or conceptually known as the heart of the house in which household activities and the family's lifestyle revolves around it. The researcher views kitchens in a Peranakan household as an important place where Nyonya will learn to cook and develop its traditional cuisine.

The food innovation of the modern age is challenging the Nyonya cuisines in the culinary world as their traditional food practices are struggling to be preserved even though Nyonya cuisines are products cooked with principal food influenced by other cultures such as Chinese, India, Portugal, England and Malay cooking ingredients and technique (Kuake James & Kuake Steffanie, 2017). The challenges deepened as the young descendants of Baba Nyonya migrated and live-in other countries. Hence the onus is on them in taking initiatives to expand the Nyonya cuisine at the place they're in.

Another aspect of preserving traditional Peranakan food culture is the undocumented recipes as the young descendants faced challenges to learn the steps to cook cuisines from their older descendants. In preserving traditional cuisines, Peranakan food recipes are passed down to the next generation while some of them are being published or having their original ingredients and food preparation strictly preserved. Today, the Peranakan food culture is known well and recognized by citizens of the world. Although research on Peranakan cuisine increases over the year, reading materials on the subject remain limited. However, Peranakan cuisine has started finding its ways in gastronomy foods of the modern age.

### **Comparison Between Golden Age and Modern Age of Baba Nyonya**

Apart from foods and cuisines, Baba Nyonya cultures also represent the community's identity. Their traditional appearances have influenced the Malays, Chinese as well as colonisers during the Dutch colonisation. There is more than one type of *kebaya* in the traditional Nyonya Peranakan appearances, as some designs were dated way back and worn by their great descendants.

Furthermore, the Nyonya dress was identical to the native Malay's *Baju Panjang* (Long Dress) donned with *batik sarong* (batik wrap skirt) and three *kerongsang* which was worn by the elderly woman. Most of the *kebaya* colours are plain. It was found that the young female descendants of Nyonya Peranakan prefer brighter colours with a variety of patterns for their *Kebaya* designs. The younger woman descendants wear *Kebaya Renda*, *Kebaya Biku* and are more fashionable in that era (Yusof, Md Nawawi & Aris, 2018). The *kebaya* itself was designed to represent the luxurious lifestyle of Baba Nyonya descendants before World War II.

However, the current Baba Nyonya descendants in Malacca have rarely worn a *kebaya* or beaded shoes as daily wear because the new generations are getting detached from their root lifestyle due to the reduction of Baba in the Peranakan population. Statistics show that there is only 600 Baba Nyonya family residing in Malacca and the intermarriage of original Baba Nyonya descendants to non-Peranakan contributes to the changing culture within the community (Azmi, Nizam, Mohamad & Mohamed, 2018).

The smaller size of the community population affects their cultural practices, especially in crafts and arts preservation. Among the popular crafts in Baba Nyonya culture are the beaded shoes or *Kasut Manik* and the embroidery arts practised since generations ago. This goes to show that globalisation affects the custom of beaded shoes making, even though Nyonya cultures demand few skills must be learned before one gets married (Zakaria, Ramli & Nor Azmi, 2017). In addition, beaded shoes were introduced by Princess Hang Li Po when she was officially married to Sultan Mansur Syah and within that period, beaded shoes' traditional process is almost manually handmade (Zakaria, Ramli & Azmi, 2017). Scholars found that women getting married must make their own beaded shoes to be worn during their wedding ceremony. This is part of Nyonya's effort in celebrating their art-making culture.

Baba Nyonya's beaded shoes are considered a national heritage that contributed to human civilization a long time ago. The beaded shoes are unique as there are only one of a kind produced, where the motif designs and embroidery differed from one another. Baba Nyonya descendants of the golden age used high quality and fine beads as well as embroidered flower motifs to represent Chinese culture into each design (Azmi, Mohamad & Mohamed, 2018).

The motive created is important as it represents Baba Nyonya culture that interrelates with Chinese arts and Malay culture. Today, beaded shoes are less popular as their cost including money and manpower are high. In a twist, Baba Nyonya descendants of the modern age are more interested in producing beaded shoes with modern designs as seen sold in shops. The beaded shoes need tedious skill to produce as they are made without the help of any modern machine, but solely on traditional handmade methods. Furthermore, cultural convergence formed the grounds for material culture practices within the Baba Nyonya community. In the modern era, the descendants of the golden age struggle greater than before in preserving their culture. Thus, they required the modern age descendants to work hard in learning beaded shoemaking, especially now with the descending number of Baba Nyonya descendants in Malacca.

### **Baba Nyonya's Food**

Food is an important, complicated and powerful symbol that represents a culture within a community. Baba Nyonya cuisine is vital in the environment creation of the Nyonya as the womenfolk of Peranakan communities are fostered by the intermarriage of offspring of Fujian and Guangdong seafarers who married native women or local people (Ng & Karim, 2016). The uniqueness of Baba Nyonya cuisine is interrelated with Malay and Chinese cooking style. Baba Nyonya came to Malacca thus created their own food that is suitable in their sense of taste (Oh, Abdul Razak, Hee, Lu & Rahman, 2019).

In addition, the Peranakan cuisine itself was borrowed from the Malay, Dutch, Chinese, Thailand, Indian and Portugal cultures, which explains why the food preparation in the old days was tediously complicated. The original Baba is also very strict in preparing food ingredients as the kitchen became the 'sacral' place for the women to prepare meals every day, hence the responsibility put onto the Nyonya plate of duties in ensuring Baba and other family members are happy with the food.

Nyonya cuisine has been reinvented in Malaysia and Singapore in the modern era. The dynamic of modern Nyonya cuisine has become homogenised and the sense of taste somehow different from the original ingredients (Lam, Lee, Goh & Siti Samsi, 2017). Modern Nyonya cuisine is becoming a huge profit to entrepreneurs who see food as a high value of commercialization and the role of food culture in identifying various ethnicities across the globe.

Baba Nyonya's origin history from Straits Settlement has similarities in cultural and heritage practices with Malay and Chinese. Even though the size of the remaining Baba Nyonya population is decreasing, the cultural practices remain relevant. The type of cultural practices among the Baba Nyonya descendants is important to ensure the new descendant has the knowledge of their heritage. To collect the data and explore the Baba Nyonya culture, the researcher undergoes tremendous reading material as well as observation and data collection from representatives of the Baba Nyonya descendants.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research paper was conducted by using qualitative methods, in which the researcher applied several methods including textual, observation or visual analysis from reading materials and videos. The researcher also conducted an in-depth interview with one representative from the Baba Nyonya community for data research collection.

The interview session began via e-mail and messenger whereas the interview was conducted via virtual video call due to the current Covid-19 pandemic restrictions that entered both the researcher and interviewee into self-lockdown. The researcher had asked numerous open-ended questions during the interview session and the answer was recorded then transcribed from audio to word. The in-depth interview protocol was handed to the interviewee beforehand as it was compulsory in getting their consent and assured their data remains private and confidential.

The researcher also made an observation of Baba Nyonya lifestyle, especially on their cultural practices and the function of material culture used by the original Baba Nyonya community. The intended location for the observation was to be in Malacca, as there are remaining Baba Nyonya communities living at Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street.

However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic situation, where a Movement Control Order (MCO) imposed, and restricted interstate travel was enforced at the time of this research.

This data collection is crucial to ensure the research objective answers. The data sampling focused on one respondent who is a direct lineage of the Baba Nyonya descendants. The in-depth was crucial for the researcher to discover the length of the interviewee's involvement and cultural practice, as highlighted in the research objective.

Furthermore, the researcher also did some reading on the literature of past research to get a deeper understanding of Baba Nyonya cultures. The data collected during in-depth interviews and viewing two videos based on Baba Nyonya dress and Peranakan food. During in-depth interviews with virtually and the recorded audio. Data analysis was conducted by deciphering the data collected in-depth interview session, after manually transcribing the record manually. From the transcript, interpreting the text process took place in order to apply the thematic analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The data analysis process took place right after the data gathering process was completed. Discussions were constructed around the outcome received during the in-depth interview on Baba Nyonya culture and comparisons of material culture practised by golden age and modern age descendants, in order to answer the research objective. The in-depth interview was done on June 4, 2021 and the second interview was completed on August 20, 2021, in an informal setting which takes about 30 to 40 minutes

to complete. The interviewee 1 and 2 was briefed on the questions and purpose of the research before the in-depth interview begins, as well as having the session recorded using a smartphone. During the interview session, the interviewee was open in sharing and relating their viewpoints on the questions asked to them.

**Table 3** shows the information of the informants' in-depth interview session

| Gender | Age | Descendants  | Background story   |
|--------|-----|--|--|
| Male   | 55  | 6 <sup>th</sup>  | Former President of Peranakan Baba Nyonya Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. His family is from Malacca Baba Nyonya.   |
| Male   | 52  | -5 <sup>th</sup> generation on the mother's side.<br>-10 <sup>th</sup> generation in father side | -Received his PhD from La Trobe University Melbourne and dissertation was on magical realism in cinema. His research interests are world cinema and Peranakan culture.<br>-Born in Singapore and his father from Baba Nyonya Malacca. In addition, his father's family are descended from Tan Tock Seng who created a free hospital in Singapore. Meanwhile, his mother is from Singapore Peranakan. |

The objective of this research is to identify the origin of Baba Nyonya's material culture practices among the descendants in the 21st century. The second objective is to explore the comparison of the origin and modern descendants of Baba Nyonya in practising material culture in the 21st century. It was revealed that the Baba Nyonya material culture of Kebaya and Batik as well as their food culture are similar to other cultures and also some of the cultures were left unpractised due to the advent of technology. Few themes have been analysed from the interview.

1. The True colours of Kebaya looks and the fashion revolution.
2. Different generation perspective towards Baba Nyonya Kebaya.
3. Traditional taste of Nyonya food.
4. Preserving the food from the old descendants.

### ***The True Colour of Kebaya Looks and The Fashion Revolution***

*Kebaya* is a traditional cloth worn by women in the Malay Archipelago which is also worn by the Nyonya. This particular dress is interrelated with the rise of commercial *batik* as Indonesia has the upper hand to produce *batik*, thus strengthening the community identity carried in the *batik* designs. As acknowledged, the Nyonya dress in Malacca is influenced by the Dutch. According to the interviewee, the Baba Nyonya from the Straits Settlements which is Indonesia, Singapore and Malacca are culturally interrelated through anthropology and sociology history however it is a different case with the community from Pulau Pinang as Peranakan from the island share the same culture with those in Medan, Indonesia.

*"...Rata-rata yang tinggal di Singapura tu asal Melaka. Jadi kebanyakan cara hidup..Pertuturan, cara hidup lebih mirip kepada Melaka."* (Interviewee 1)

*"Because its was.. it was most of Malacca peranakan are move to Singapore and then when they move to Singapore you know they are back and forth as well. So a lot of them married within that ... (Inaudible). Between Malacca and Singapore there is back and forth. But Singapore sort of close bit to Riau Island also have Peranakan coming from Indonesia. So yeah. Whereas the Northern Peranakan in Penang they don't speak Malay. They speak Hokkien. So they have sort of their Hokkien variation that adapted Malay word. But you know in Southern kita Cina Buta. (Laughing)"* (Interviewee 2)

From the interview both of the respondents agree the culture of Baba Nyonya in Malacca and Singapore have a similarity due to geographic factors. Baba Nyonya in different states in Malaysia for example in Pulau Pinang they speak Hokkien as their mother tongue. Meanwhile, in Singapore and Malacca they are speaking a creole language or Malay language. Even though there is a difference between southern Peranakan and northern Peranakan, they share the same cultural material, which is kebaya.

The original Baba Nyonya Kebaya was designed with a long dress and transparent cloth. According to the Lee (2016), the first original Nyonya descendants is originally a slave. They are identified by wearing *Baju Panjang* without *baju kecil* or an inner garment similar to a camisole made of transparent material. However, the original Nyonya clothes are not like what we see nowadays, as the current design of *Baju Panjang* is the product of the transformation of *kebaya* Nyonya after it had gone through layers of changes in accordance to the environment and time period.

*“...setahu saya kalau masa dulu tu kalau... urmmm... dia tu hamba kain baju dia tu panjang ya dan kain dia tu nipis transparents nampak dalam. Boleh nampak semua dalam tu memang dah tak pakai jadi... urm... tapi bila adakala kain yang cantik dan transparent tu datang dari India pemakai orang perempuan yang masa tu dia nampak ....urmm... keindahan kain tu dan pakai kain tu dan cara tu macam tu dan mereka dulu pakai pendek tapi bila nampak kain tu jadi dia pakai yang panjang pulak...” (Interviewee 1)*

*“They like kind of transparent material. Like floral transparent material. Because they have a baju dalam that is like... (Inaudible)... blouse like you know long sleeve with collar (Inaudible)... usually they have gold button for the baju dalam. The whole idea of transparent (inaudible) In top of gold button there is kerongsang in top of the baju...” (Interviewee 2)*

The interviewee 1 had also informed that traders from India had historically changed their slavery outfit as they brought over fabrics with more flowery motives, that were later used for *kebaya* or *Baju Panjang*. Meanwhile, interviewee 2 are also admit the material of *Baju Panjang* is suitable to be worn by that time due to the current fashion. Later, the material of *Baju Panjang* was transformed to cotton that is thicker than that which came from India.

*“Tapi bila kain fashion seterusnya yang datang tu khasnya kapas yang kain tenun kain kapas yang ditunen jadi dah lebih tebal. Jadi itu pasal dekat dalam tu dia dah tak pakai baju kecil lagi. Tak payah pakai sebab tak nampak. Sebab masa datang dulu pada masa tu sudah ada kesedaran ada perkara tak boleh ditampikan. seperti separuh bogel. Jadi kain kapas datang dia macam dah tutup mmg tak nampak. Jadi memang tak perlu kain baju kecil dia. tapi bila masuk abad ke-20 an bila ada kain2 yang lagi transparent mcm kain kasa dari Barat jadi sudah ada org kata urmm orang dh berjinak dengan kain baju kapas cotton putih yang pakai di dalam baju kecil dialah ah tapi macam moyang saya dulu mcm urmm mcm moyang2 saya tu dia mula tak pakai.” (Interviewee 1)*

After women are freed from the slavery system, traders from the West and India came to trade in Malacca bearing new clothing material such as cotton but then former slaves are still wearing *Baju Panjang*, which inspires the local woman to do the same. The Malacca style of wearing *Baju Panjang* has its own set of dress etiquette to ensure the Nyonya who wears it looks perfect. *Baju Panjang* was started to be worn widely by local women in the early 19th century.

*“Ummm... Setahu saya yang paling akhir ada satu bibik yang pakai tu dah tua dalam tahun mungkin 1970, 80-an awal 80-an itu yang paling akhir. Yang sebelum tu lagi dalam 1920-an 1930-an apabila bertukar kebaya. Yang paling awal tu baju panjang jugak Tapi baju panjang dia ada tak pakai baju kecil.” (Interviewee 1)*

*“Ummm ...its kebaya well we say Baju panjang. So that is the olden up to 1920 the Nyonya wearing Baju panjang. Its was sort only around in 19...its term in 19<sup>th</sup> century some people said by the 1980's the Nyonya is already set converted to wearing the Kebaya. But my grandma wore the day until she die. And she die in the 90's you know I probably the only*



*one who in Singapore you know who had a grandma who is growing up that is still wearing baju panjang.” (Interviewee 2)*

According to the interviewee 1 the last Nyonya known as 'Bibik' from the golden age descendants was the last person who wore *Baju Panjang* in 1970, the year she passed away. For interviewee 2, he has a different experienced to see the his last grandmother is the only one who is wearing *Baju Panjang*. From the interview, researcher find out the transition of the Nyonya attire is the changes of lifestyle and also growing up in the develop country is hard to see an original Baba Nyonya material culture.

*“Its was my grandma. Because in that time when I growing up you know when I was younger yes but yeah in my teenage year I hard to saw any Nyonya wear Baju Panjang .Ummm... In Singapore its was like you know In Baju Panjang basically (Inaudible).....” (Interviewee 2)*

The transition of *kebaya designs* did not only change the Malacca Nyonya style but also influenced the way Nyonya used a *kerongsang* and hairstyle with *sanggul* that is a compulsory look of a Peranakan Nyonya. The Nyonya fashion transformed accordingly to fit the environment today, as the *kebaya* with colourful material are more accepted as it is more cheerful with traditional touch.

### ***Different Generation Perspective Towards Baba Nyonya Material Culture***

Even though the Baba Nyonya community is rich with tradition and a product of a hybrid culture with the Malay, Dutch, Java and also Portuguese, the young descendants in the 21st century nowadays have changed drastically. The in-depth interviewee 1 and interviewee 2 had mentioned that the modern age nowadays did not understand the importance of practising and keeping all these Baba Nyonya cultures alive. For example, a funeral is an important event for the deceased family members. Instead of understanding the use of colour and choice of attire, young Baba Nyonya descendants are more comfortable wearing modern clothing rather than *kebaya* nowadays.

*“Sekarang budak-budak tak mengerti ya. Jadi sekarang pun dia dah ikut apa yang syarikat yang menyediakan perkhidmatan menatian ni. Ummm... jadi sekarang dah banyak pakai warna hitam. Jadi kalau di rumah di Melaka memang semua pakai hitam.”(Interviewee 1)*

*“...Which is why these days people is so ignorant as like you know they will wear all blue kebaya to party. And you know we are like matilah... Siapa mau tua har (Death) ni? all that is very specific and you don't wear tua har (Death) jewellery like these day inherit like you know oh you know this is my grandma and all that. Then why going to party such you know orang mati paka ni. (Laughing). Yeah! even their Kasut Manik also you know they will sew known for their mourn period. So, its all colour coded three years and only third year you can bringing in green to those colours. The minute someone look at you as like they will know you are someone is die in your family. Is like the colour that you wear is like you know these days people are no idea and go to parties and all blue kebaya. And like kus semangat!”(Interviewee 2)*

According to the interviewee 1 and interviewee 2 they have a same opinion for the new descendants who is not following the customs of the material culture Baba Nyonya. All the custom that has been made from the ancestors is about educating the community. There are a lot of *pantang larang* or superstitions that are not followed by the new descendants. The richness of material culture in Baba Nyonya is not belong to them when the new descendants are not following the traditional custom they have lost the original touch of old descendants. The modern age descendants had assimilated into a new culture while some of the senior citizens in the 21st century still wear *kebaya* and speak the creole language.

Previously, when attending a Baba Nyonya funeral, the colour of garments that will be worn is white, which has been accustomed to Malacca Baba Nyonya style when visiting funerals. The white *kebaya* worn by Nyonya is usually with simple design with a *kerawang* or filigree in the cloth. The white *kebaya* will usually be matched with a *batik* of a different colour. Baba Nyonya family members

will wear full black attire in the first year after a family member's death; white kebaya with blue batik on the second year and white kebaya with green batik on the third.

The changes in the environment could be the factors that had influenced the younger descendants to be more free in adapting to the fashion of the current era. Either way, the Baba Nyonya culture remains learnable from the senior descendants that are still highly determined to pass down the culture in the community linkage.

*“Tak. Tak sangat. Sebab sekarang saya rasa berpakaian kebaya tu lebih macam orang kata satu umum bukan untuk seharian. Hanya untuk majlis-majlis tertentu sahaja. Itupun kalau bertandang ke rumah orang meninggal pun tak pakai lagi. Hanya sekarang kita tengok mereka pakai kalau pergi ke majlis makan malam macam itulah. Jarang sangat kita tengok orang pakai untuk sehari-hari” (Interviewee 1)*

*Tak ada lagi. It like you know all your kerongsang siapa yang buat lagi? Its like you know. Whatever you buy now is antique but some people producing them and trying to sell them as antiques. But its not like during the turns of the century was like ...uhmm...if you look at the jewellery its amazing and just everything lah. The workmanship of lot of things is not like it used to be. We don't have the patient anymore. To sort of like you know devote time and effort...” (Interviewee 2)*

From the in-depth interview, the interviewee 1 admits that modern age descendants are not known within the community as they no longer wear traditional cloth nor produce traditional craftwork as done by the Nyonya years ago. The traditional material culture that is used by the original descendants is not being practised by the new descendants. New descendants are more flexible when it comes to custom and also the culture. It is different from original descendants that are more strict following all the customs because they believe Nyonya is the responsible person to take care of the family traditions. The cultural material of the original *kebaya* is hard to see these days, especially to find the new descendants sewing her own *kebaya*.

The *kebaya* contributed identity to the Baba Nyonya community as its uniqueness symbolises cultural hybrid as its elements were accelerated from being inspired by other cultures. Furthermore, modern descendants should continue championing material culture to ensure the Baba Nyonya tradition stays alive. The culture should be embraced by all-age descendants especially now that the modern era is conquering the world.

### ***Traditional Taste of Nyonya Food***

*Ayam buah keluak, gerang asam, pulut tekan, kuih angku* and even the *Laksa Nyonya* or *Katong Laksa* have been well loved across the world. Baba Nyonya cuisine is notably the oldest traditional dish in the Malay Archipelago. Peranakan food is one of Singapore's oldest traditional cuisine, as it blends Chinese traditional herbs and spices, together with Malay food preparation, accelerates such cuisine across cultures, which further shows that Singapore and Malacca Baba Nyonya shares the same Peranakan culture hence some cuisines are similar. Peranakan cuisine is well known for its spices and strict food preparation, especially cooking methods. Baba Nyonya has various cuisines that cater to specific festivities as well as events such as ancestral worship, winter solstice, etc. Food culture is celebrated with a variety of dishes as some of them are similar to Malay cuisine food. They also have a dish called *Lauk Merah* for the Chinese New Year celebration even though the current generation of Baba Nyonya descendants are living in the modern age and cuisines preparations are easier.

*“...Kita kena tengok ya ada lauk kita kira macam lauk hari besar ya. Ada tu lauk sembahyang untuk arwah lah. Tapi sungguhpun begitu, kadang tu kita masak lauk ni untuk sehari-hari lah. Takkan nak makan rendang setahun. Jadi ada nafsu nak makan tu kita masaklah. Tapi untuk hari-hari kebesaran memang kita akan masak lauk tertentu. Buah keluak macam kari ayam ke, lauk merah macam kalau orang Melayu kata masak asam pedas. Kalau kita gerang asam jadi kita tahu. Kalau orang Baba kita panggil Gerang asam. Kalau Melayu asam pedas.” (Interviewee 1)*

From the in-depth interview, the Baba Nyonya community is still celebrating a few important celebrations with traditional dishes. Even Chinese New Year is the biggest festival and the food preparation for the family usually has a variety of dishes. In addition, the interviewee 2 has a different view for the special dish in Chinese New Year.

*“I again there are people are tell about lauk mati and lauk hidup. The other central peranakan culture is ancestral worship... In fact that is the things yeah and people are involve with Chinese new year. In preparation of new year eve that is when they will cook all the Lauk Tahun Baru. which is essentially your ancestral worship. When you cook offered to your ancestor that basically you will do in the morning and than at night you eat that. So all the preparation for that... This is what the lauk mati will be basically ....there are also some specific lauk for death. like you know so when someone die they will serve a certain food .You cannot have merah-merah. All the kuih-kuih .You know kuih Ku? You cannot have kuih Ku at awake. Lauk mati merah-merah tak boleh... They made kuih Ku but the things is that they cannot make it red. They used another daun and it turns out to be like a Moorish green colour or biru. They use Bunga Telang... umm... so all the kuih must to be in mourning colours...” (Interviewee 2)*

Regarding interviewee 2 the ancestral worship is the central of Peranakan culture. It's important to serve an ancestral who is dead. Usually, they will be preparing all the dishes but without a red colour because red represents a joyful colour. The new descendants nowadays do not notice this kind of culture due to the changing environment. The material culture of food in Peranakan custom is important because the hybridity of food is interrelated with Malay, Chinese, Java and also Dutch in one plate. The taste from the different geographical places is unique and Peranakan celebrates the culture lively.

### ***Preserving Food from Old Descendants***

In the past, a home cooked meal in a Baba Nyonya household was a priority in ensuring the household is satisfied with the food.

*“Okay dulu kita pakai batu giling, lesung ya untuk hancurkan bahan masakan tapi sekarang kita pakai blender. Yang tumis tu okay biasa dari segi mungkin umm... masa kita siapkan. Dulu kita takde peti sejuk kan? Kita kena buat semua fresh. Sekarang dah ada peti sejuk kita boleh siapkan rempah dia lebih awal....”(Interviewee 1)*

*“A lot of people would say not sedap as used to be. Because when you tumbuk your rempah its you tumbuk. With your blender it cutting it. Its not blending the spices as well as you know. I think you said about Malay cooking as well” (Interviewee 2)*

The Baba Nyonya cuisine somehow has verbal recipes as it is usually passed down from one descendant to another. From the interview 1 the new generation specially are not looking up to learn the Nyonya recipe. The modern world has changed when new descendants have been influenced by the food service monopoly. Changing lifestyle is the reason new descendants are not interested in learning the traditional recipe. From the interviewee 2 the technology of food somehow has to do with the food preparation. Previously, the old method of cooking was used and the taste was rich of flavour when all the spice mixed well together. It might take a long time but the art of the taste is important to serve because the Nyonya will be judged by her cooking skills. Nowadays there are a lot of food restaurants and food stalls serving Peranakan cuisine.

According to the interview 1 and 2, new descendants nowadays had no time to learn the traditional Peranakan cooking method, while the worst part is having no people cooking at home, for the household.

*“Ada tu masih ikut lagilah. Saya rasa generasi saya tu masih ada lagi. Urm.. Mungkin yang generasi muda ni ada malas sikitlah. Yelah semua benda dulu bila ada orang tua kita kena buatlah. Nenek suruh buat semua kena pergi. Sekarang tak tinggal dengan nenek. Mak pun kurang masak .Jadi dah tak samalah.”(Interviewee 1)*

*“Exactly. And that was all the women did. It was like you know and they had a luxury doing that .Yeah! Now your Nyonya are sub into your career and half of them don’t know how to masak... I think it’s dying. Its like you know. We always complain as like orang muda ngam satu apa pun tak tau. It was like you know.” (Interviewee 2)*

According to both interviewees they agree that new descendants are not mastering traditional recipes and they are not interested in cooking. It was said that the modern food technology industry has given an advantage to the young descendants in exploring the Peranakan traditional cuisine.

The modern age descendants chose easier lives, which does not include cooking as part of their lifestyle. Previous Peranakan descendants are very passionate about the Peranakan cultural material. Today, the new descendants have a good career and they are focused on earning a better money and life, so the traditional material culture is just a practice for the custom events. Furthermore, the changing world and advanced technology had influenced the new descendants to go for the easier way in having a full plate of food served on the table.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Peranakan or Baba Nyonya material culture has its uniqueness, as Nyonya from Malacca share the same culture as those from Indonesia and Singapore, as well as those from Penang shares the same culture with Baba Nyonya community that originates from Medan, Indonesia. Never mind the differences between North and South Baba Nyonya communities in Peninsula Malaysia, they are met in the same dress and food culture region.

On the other hand, the new generations are more focused on improving their lifestyle and career path as products of their education and family background. Apart from that, modern descendants and older descendants have different philosophies of life where the original descendants especially the Nyonya are the person responsible for taking care of the family while the Baba are responsible for ensuring the economy and business will produce more profits, especially bearing fruits of profits for their family economies. Even though the patriarchal hierarchy would point to Baba being the person in power who is responsible for the households, past research shows that Nyonya is the person who will take good care of the family and hold bigger responsibility for preserving Baba Nyonya culture.

Therefore, the revolution of the food industry somehow influenced the modern descendants to apply the easiest methods when preparing traditional cuisines. In the past, some of the traditional dishes were prepared only for a special day such as Chinese New Year, ancestral worship, wedding or other ceremony events. However, nowadays, this particular material culture is less practised by the modern descendants as their changing lifestyle factored to the decreased cultural practices passed down from their original descendants. However, some of the modern descendants are still willing to learn and bring up Nyonya cuisine across the world.

Lastly, this research is not only important to educate the people and society on Baba Nyonya material culture, but also to explore the comparison of original and modern descendants in ensuring cultures are preserved within era transformations. On the other hand, the Baba Nyonya culture has layers of philosophy to be interpreted as the product of the richness that comes from hybrid culture practices. The acceleration of culture between Malay, Chinese, Indian, Dutch and Portuguese have made the Peranakan culture a unique one to be explored. The new descendants are responsible for ensuring the original Baba Nyonya practices are well preserved for their future descendants.

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