

Research Paper

Staging a National Dish: The Social Relevance of *Nasi lemak* in Malaysia

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Abstract: This article examines the social construction process of *nasi lemak* as a national dish in Malaysia. Considering its institutional valorisation, especially in the field of tourism, the study attempts to understand the social imaginaries related to the dish as well as its practical status in the day-to-day food habits using empirical data from the Malaysian Food Barometer (MFB) study. The Malaysian historical and social context is also taken into consideration in elucidating institutional actions on *nasi lemak*. Findings reveal that the emblematic status of *nasi lemak* is not only supported by institutional actions, but also by social imaginaries and practices. The paper also highlights the importance of commensality and consumption contexts around national dishes such as *nasi lemak*. Finally, it points out the social 'relevance'—using UNESCO's notion — of some emblematic dishes especially in multicultural contexts and in particular, Malaysia.

Keywords: *Nasi lemak*, national dish, tourism, collective identities, food habits, commensality.

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Introduction

Nasi lemak is a Malaysian dish of rice cooked in coconut milk and served with gravy, boiled egg, peanuts, cucumber, and fried anchovies as a condiment. While its historic origin is rooted in the Malay food culture, it is consumed today by all groups of the Malaysian society¹. *Nasi lemak* is featured as a national dish in most of the country's tourism brochures and promotional materials. Numerous scholars (e.g. Mennell, 1985; Appadurai, 1988; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Belasco & Scranton, 2014; Ray, 2008; Hassoun, 2010; Cardon & Garcia-Garza, 2012; Adell, Bendix, Bortolotto, & Tauschek, 2016; Ichijo & Ranta, 2016) have analysed the social construction of 'national dishes', focusing on the role and contribution of political bodies, leaders or elites, certain social groups such as middle-class women, and even the agro-food industry. The role of tourism has also been pointed out in some of these analyses. Some others identified tourist guides and country websites in addition to cookbooks and cooking shows on radio and television as involved in the construction process (Cusack, 2000). Others highlighted visitors and their expectations and attitudes about food (Cohen & Avieli, 2004), contending that national dishes are created through interactions with others, i.e. tourists, foreigners, colonisers, and invaders. Furthermore, the role of tourism in the production of local cuisines has been studied as the dynamics of food heritage-making in the context of globalisation (Wilk, 1999; Rutenberg, 2003; Wilson, 2006; Poulain, 2008, 2012; De Robert & Van Velthem, 2008; Henderson, 2009; De Soucey, 2010; Bessiere & Tibère, 2013; Mognard, 2018). In the context of Malaysia, Tibère and Aloysius (2013) explored the role of food in tourism sustainability. Similarly, Ramli and Zahari (2014), as well as Omar, Ab Karim and Omar (2015) analysed the status of food in Malaysia's tourism activity by linking it to the development of the collective identity.

Recognising that tourism is involved in the construction of national dishes as emblems of destinations, the paper attempts to explore this through the framework of the social status of food and its role in building and maintaining spaces for sharing, and 'feeding' collective identities which we refer to as 'in common' in multicultural societies (Tibère, 2015). In other words, apart from its institutional construction, the social 'relevance' of *Nasi lemak* is also examined, in reference to UNESCO's terminology on intangible cultural heritage: "to be kept alive, intangible cultural

¹ According to heritage historian Ahmad Najib Ariffin, founder of *Nusantara, Academy of Development, Geocultures and Ethnolinguistics (NADGE)* (<http://www.nadge.org/>). As a direct translation, it literally means "fatty rice" or "rice in cream." It is prepared by boiling rice in coconut milk, with *pandan* leaves added for flavour. The basic version of the dish (*Nasi lemak bungkus biasa*) is prepared with eggs, fried anchovies (*ikan bilis*), cucumber slices, grilled peanuts and chili paste (*sambal*). It is served on a plate or in a banana leaf folded into a cone to eat on the go.

heritage must be relevant to its community” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 4). In addition to the Malaysian historical and social contexts, we also consider the social representations and practices of this dish in Malaysia to answer the following questions: 1) how Malaysian people consider *nasi lemak*, 2) what are their consumption practices, and 3) what can we conclude about its social relevance as an emblem of Malaysia in tourism?

For the methodology, we used empirical data from the 2012-2013 Malaysian Food Barometer (MFB) study. The data was collected through questionnaires distributed to a national representative sample of 2,000 individuals². Some of the questions were related to the dish’s place in the everyday diet of the local population. For example, one question looked at ‘dishes and food that best represent Malaysia’ to capture social representations of food as an identity builder. In addition to this quantitative approach, we also examined the social imaginaries activated by *nasi lemak* using data collected between 2013 and 2015 from 3 focus groups (24 people) and 33 semi-directed interviews with locals and institutional actors from the tourism sector. Additionally, the analysis also included print media (newspapers, magazines) and audio-visual material related to food heritage.

One Malaysia: Food as a Symbol of Unity in Diversity

The Institutional Promotion of *Nasi lemak*

Malaysia gained its independence in 1957 as a former British colony³. It has a population of 31 million which is divided into four major ethnic groups: 1) the indigenous populations (e.g. Orang Asli, Orang Ulu, Kelabits), 2) Malays (people who came to Malaysia in 14th and 15th centuries and converted to Islam)—this group is now the dominant majority and are called *Bumiputera* (a Malay term meaning ‘sons of the soil’) as they are considered the country’s historic population, 3) Chinese and 4) Indian who originally came in as migrants and have since lived in Malaysia for several generations. The Chinese and Indian migrants gradually mastered the Malay language in addition to their original languages. Despite inter-ethnic barriers and maintenance of numerous specific cultural traits within each group, all groups have undergone cultural transformation to some degree through borrowing and adaptations over time (Shamsul, 1986, 2015; Olmédo, 2015). In terms of food,

² The methods used are presented in detail in: Poulain J.-P., Smith W., Laporte C., Tibère L., Ismail M.N., Mognard E., Aloysius M., Neethiahnanthan A.R. & Shamsul A.B. (2015). Studying the consequences of modernisation on ethnic food patterns: Development of the Malaysian Food Barometer (MFB). *Anthropology of Food*, April 2015.

³ Before England, Malaysia had been colonised by Portugal and Holland.

the different cultural influences have transformed and blended to create Malaysian versions of 'original' cuisines and dishes. These dishes, which were originally eaten by one component of Malaysian society, have been adopted and adapted by others as well. *Nasi lemak* is one such dish, which originated from labourers on the west coast of Peninsula Malaysia. Other examples include *roti canai* and *tosai* (Indian dishes), and *mee goreng* and *chicken rice* (Chinese dishes). The specificity of *nasi lemak* is highlighted as a local and institutional dish, especially by national media. In the tourism industry, this dish is always featured in promotional websites and leaflets. In 2012, an article in Malaysia Airlines' inflight magazine listed *nasi lemak* as one of the 'dishes that Malaysians should be most proud of', and promoted as one of its meal menus⁴. In 2017, Miss Universe Malaysian wore a *nasi lemak*-inspired evening gown at the international competition, which had been designed by a famous Malaysian Chinese fashion designer. In addition, an annual cooking competition for *nasi lemak* vendors was created a few years ago.

Not surprisingly, this dish is also popular on TV. For example, the FriedChillies Food Network hosted a special episode on *nasi lemak* on their *Malaysians eat: That's what we do* show and launched an annual one-day event called *I eat Nasi lemak* in 2014. These programmes not only highlight the dish's nutritional qualities, but also show the excellent taste and practicality of the dish, which makes it an enjoyable dish at any time for Malaysians. The main message of the programme was: "You know... we should make *nasi lemak* our national dish. You can get all your protein, carbohydrates, fiber and vitamins in one dish, which gives you different types of chili kicks and swings depending on the sambal they serve".

Over the years, *nasi lemak* has found a special place in the lives and hearts of Malaysians. From being just a breakfast meal, it can now be enjoyed anytime throughout the day and night by all races in Malaysia, which is totally unique. This is particularly important in the multicultural context of Malaysia, and is often promoted by the local media. For example, the director of a Malaysian movie in 2011 entitled *Nasi lemak 2.0* at the movie premiere proudly asserted that "*Nasi lemak* symbolises national cohesion". One of the stars quipped: "My message is that the system in Malaysia is unequal ... But when we live together, we eat together, there is no racism" (Fred Chong, Wee Meng Chee, 2011). This leads us to ponder on the role of food as a marker of national unity which is a national aspiration in Malaysia.

⁴ *Going Places*, Malaysia Airlines' inflight magazine, August 2012, p. 74.

The Political Status of Food in Malaysia

The cohesion among the different ethnocultural groups which makes up the Malaysian society, in addition to the political dynamics intended to create unifying symbols, are major concerns in Malaysia. This was manifested in the slogan of One Malaysia of the previous administration, which encouraged ‘unity in difference’. This promotion takes place in competitions with Singapore and Indonesia, who equally proclaim some of the common dishes such as *nasi lemak* as part of their cultural natural heritage. For about a decade, the “gazetting or certification of heritage food by the Department of National Heritage become a significant national agenda” (Ramli & Zahari, 2014, p. 410). The institutional and media consensus surrounding the dish highlights the role that institutions, particularly governmental, play in the construction of national symbols. Ramli and Zahari (2014) highlighted the role of food in a nation’s construction of their uniqueness and common belonging by proposing the word ‘Gastropolitic’ (García & Matta, 2017) and ‘Gastronationalism’ (De Soucey, 2010). In multicultural societies, national cohesion and strong ties between different cultural groups are particularly important. Prior research have shown the central role played by unifying symbols (Taylors 1994; Kymlicka, 1995; Semprini, 2000). In Malaysia, like many Southeast Asian societies where ethnic and religious plurality is the norm, the political management of diversity is crucial (Ganesan, 2005; Kymlicka & Baogand, 2005; Bideau & Kilani, 2012; Olmédo, 2015). For example, Chong (2009, 2012) pointed out the importance of strengthening ties with neighbouring countries, especially Indonesia, by increasing food heritage awareness in Malaysia over the ‘Indonesia-Malaysia dispute’. However, Yoshino (2010) argued that the poor presence of Malaysian cuisine on the international stage denotes the lack of a strong national food identity.

All the aforementioned studies reveal that food, as a heritage builder, carries “a consequence for, and in, the day-to-day lives of individuals beyond the provision of a collective identity” (Smith, 2006, p. 276). Wilson (2006) contended that the role of eating and drinking in the construction of collective identities is indisputable. He also mentioned their role in the preservation of social cohesion and differentiation mechanisms, reminding us that eating and drinking represent far more than simple nourishment. Cusack (2000) cited Billig’s concept of ‘banal nationalism’ to highlight the symbolic construction of unity in everyday life through food (Cusack, 2000). Moreover, according to Anderson (1991), if the ties that bind the populations within a society are largely imaginary, how do food dishes or drinks contribute to the creation of these shared imaginaries? In their work on the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1966) highlighted that each society needs a social reservoir of knowledge and symbols, whereby ‘language’ is the most powerful symbol. Lévi-Strauss (1968) posits cuisine as a language, or more precisely as a symbolic

system that elucidates shared representations, where food takes on an important dimension.

In addition, Rozin and Fallon (1980), Rozin and Nemerof (1990) and Fischler (1990, 1993) highlighted three ‘principles of incorporation’ involved in eating: 1) the physical incorporation of foods and their biological characteristics, 2) the incorporation of the symbols associated with them, and 3) incorporation into a group. The incorporation of certain foods or drinks cements strong ties with others, and with one’s circle of family or friends. Based on this viewpoint, we investigated if a popular or “vernacular” regulation and political management including the tourism promotion of collective belonging (Chua, 1991), exists in food. In this context, the following questions emerged at this stage: 1) what is the symbolic status of *nasi lemak*? and, 2) what is its place in the collective imaginary, and in the concrete social life? Answering these two questions could help to strengthen the argument of its relevance as an emblematic dish, or otherwise, unravel the artificiality of its status. From a theoretical and methodological view, it also reveals the wide range of applications of Food Sociology in understanding better social and life events.

The Social Valorisation of *nasi lemak* in Collective Representations and Imaginaries

The analysis of the quantitative data reveal the importance of *nasi lemak* in collective representations. This dish was chosen as the best dish to represent Malaysia by 42% of respondents, followed by *roti canai*⁵ and chicken rice, each receiving 22% of responses and *satay*⁶ at 9.5%. The preference for *nasi lemak* is relatively homogeneous across the country’s ethnocultural groups, i.e. 43.7% among Malays, 38.2% among Indians and 35.6% among Chinese. It scored even higher (50%) among non-Malay Bumiputeras (those who stay in East Malaysia). On further enquiry, it was found that *nasi lemak* was introduced and popularised in these regions by hotels and restaurants run by West Malaysians⁷. It is possible that East Malaysians have wholeheartedly adopted this ubiquitous dish and have come to see it as a powerful symbol for “Malaysians”.

⁵ *Roti canai* (or roti prata) is a flatbread popular in Southeast Asia (Malaysia and Singapore), inspired by the Indian Naan. It is part of the traditional breakfast, and its filling is made from a vast range of foods: fruit, cheese, curry, meat, etc. *Chicken rice* is a dish of Chinese origin, generally associated with the Hainan region, Singapore and Malaysia, although it is also common in Thailand.

⁶ *Satay* is a Southeast Asian delicacy. Its condiment is peanut sauce, saté sauce, or bumbu kacang in Indonesian. It is available in powder, paste, or sauce form and is used with meat and fish.

⁷ We met with two hospitality professionals, one from the Peninsula and the other from Sabah. Both agreed on this point.

During interviews conducted in East Malaysia one woman highlighted this aspect:

“I cooked the rice and bought this ikan bilis (dried anchovies) because it is the most inconvenient for me to bring. Sambal, I did that. I cook the eggs. We have for vegetable a lot, tomato, cucumber, they have a lot. I cook the rice. My friend put a box there and one tablespoon is two Euros [...] Yes, it is nasi lemak. [...] That’s the national (dish). Because of that.” (Kelabit woman, 42).

Not surprisingly, *nasi lemak* with pork (*nasi lemak babi*) or wild boar curry (Menon, 2017) in East Malaysia by non-Muslim groups is another example of the appropriation of this dish.

Finally, we examined the socio-economic characteristics of those who have a strong favourable view of *nasi lemak*. We know that the middle and upper classes of a society often drive the promotion of local cuisines in response to increased food modernisation and the accompanying fear of the erosion of cultural markers (Poulain, 1997; Ray, 2008; Cusack, 2000). In India, Appadurai (1988) showed the role played by the Indian urban middle class, particularly women, through the development of cookbooks and the social construction of a national Indian cuisine beyond regional and ethnic differences. The rise of Malaysia’s middle class is likely to induce similar effects (Embong, 2002; Lange & Meier, 2009; Shamsul, 2015). Findings from the quantitative survey show that the upper class and highly educated segments as well as young people made up the majority of those who responded that *nasi lemak* was the “dish that best represents Malaysian food”⁸. Respondents generally associated the popular dish with two qualities: flexibility and availability. With regard to the flexibility, *nasi lemak* is perceived as easy to cook, and garnished according to one’s tastes. This allows different ethnocultural groups to make different adjustments according to their specific palate. For example, Indians are reputed to make the spiciest *sambal* (chili paste), while Malays prefer to add coconut milk and sugar, and the Chinese highlight its salty flavours. The other point related to flexibility is the adaptability of *nasi lemak* to religious or health dietary restrictions (pork-free for Muslims, beef-free for Hindus, with mock meat for vegetarians). Respondents highlighted the accessibility of *nasi lemak*, which refers to it being available and sold everywhere. Next, we examine the presence of *nasi lemak* in Malaysians’ daily diet.

⁸ The question posed: According to you, which dish(s) best represent Malaysian food? Categorical data were analysed using Chi squared test in the SPSS Software (VS 14.0). Statistical significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$.

The Social Valorisation of *nasi lemak* in Everyday Food Practices

Nasi lemak is consumed in almost the same way by the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. It primarily makes up 12.4% of Malaysian breakfasts. In a study on the status of beef in Medieval Great Britain, Mennell (1985)⁹ revealed that beef became a symbol of the English nation based on the food they ate. Mennell (1985, p. 63) also argued that “the emblematic value of a food product is in the quality, not the quantity”. It is also possible that the status of *nasi lemak* can be attributed more to its symbolic qualities than to its actual consumption. In the MFB study, for breakfast, *nasi lemak* came in second place behind bread (13.7%) and before Chinese fried noodles (*mee goreng*) (11.4%) and *roti canai* (6.8%). It is also consumed in 3% of mid-day meals, and 1.5% of evening meals, fairly far behind other dishes like mixed rice (25% of the other meals), noodles (12.5%), dish served in a sauce with rice (12%), and fried rice (7.8%). In terms of social class, consumers were primarily made up of lower-middle and middle class individuals which supports the hypothesis of heritagisation based on the social practices of the lower and lower-middle classes, and the more symbolic promotion at higher classes. The working class is perhaps more likely to eat *nasi lemak* on a daily basis outside the home. An Malaysian Indian taxi driver in Kuala Lumpur expressed his attachment and patriotism to the dish in these terms:

“without nasi lemak, no life in Malaysia!” (Indian man, 32).

These words, which highlight the vitality of the dish and its nourishing role, also reveal the important symbolic role of *nasi lemak* for Malaysians. Additionally, in their study of public consumption spaces and habits that reflect interactions between different ethnic components in Malaysia and Singapore, Duruz and Knoo (2014) showed that all Malaysians, regardless of their social and ethnic backgrounds, generally eat out. They explained that the policies promoted by the NEP (New Economic Policy)¹⁰ and the increasing trend of islamisation of Malaysian society have led to a decrease in interethnic meal sharing or commensality particularly in Chinese and Indian communities, which was common in the 1960s and 1970s.

⁹ According to Mennell (1985), beef’s symbolic qualities were at least as important, if not more important than, its nutritional value, since it encapsulated certain positive British values (the simplicity of British cooking, promoted by Protestantism, in opposition to the sophistication and trickery of French cooking; the ‘bleeding dish nation’ and the ‘warrior nation’ as opposed to the ‘sauce nation’).

¹⁰ For an overview and better understanding of the NEP (New Economic Policy) implemented in the 1970s, we recommend that the reader refer to *The New Economic Policy in Malaysia :Affirmative actions, Ethnic inequalities and Social justice* by Gomez E.& Saravanamuttu J. (2012). NUS Press, Singapore.

However, according to Duruz and Knoo (2014), eating out remains common and highlights the role of work, schools, and restaurants in driving this. The findings of MFB's quantitative data showed that 46.12% of meals of the previous day were taken outside the home. This is much higher compared to France (13.6%) and the United Kingdom (21%) (Poulain & Laporte, 2014). Therefore, we examined the contexts in which *nasi lemak* is consumed, and particularly interethnic commensality during which it may be consumed. We found that 56% of *nasi lemak* consumption took place outside the home, and was mainly (61.7%) shared with others. This result suggests social interactions around *nasi lemak* meals, which if we consider the interethnic commensality, reaches 36% of the shared meals. In summary, the status of *nasi lemak* is not only due to its daily consumption, but also to the commensality and social interactions that it enables outside the home with relatives, friends, and colleagues. Eating out and sharing meals outside the home with other ethnic groups carries a special role in Malaysia's multicultural society.

The Social Importance of Commensality

Durkheim (1912) suggested that repetition of rituals gives individuals a strong feeling of connection to others in the present and in the past (heritage). He highlighted the unity created by a shared meal: "Now in a multitude of societies, meals taken in common are believed to create a bond of artificial kinship between those who partake in them" (1912, p. 481). For Simmel (1997), sharing food and meals makes up a part of the social forms that build commonality. Similarly, Douglas and Isherwood (1979) stressed that food consumption constitutes a ritual process whose primary function is to give meaning to a series of events. Even if the ritual processes change or disappear with modernisation, meals and the food paradigms that they make up still contribute to the maintenance of collective identities and values.

Moreover, Poulain (2017) compared meals to a "compass" which orients our food-related decisions and our routines, particularly meal locations and times. In that regard, Bringéus (2001, pp. 9-10) contended that "we eat at certain times, in certain places, and often with certain people. Furthermore, the different dishes are eaten in a certain order (...) eating and drinking are socially important for all members of a society, and are activities which order the world, whether as a part of everyday life or during special festive events". Therefore, what people consider as the national dish materialises in their social imaginary and collectively, represents and unites them despite their differences. National cuisines and dishes are a part of the construction of social representations as "socially developed and shared knowledge (...) which contributes to the construction of a shared reality" (Jodelet, 1997, p. 53). In certain cases, these constructions, which form a part of social life, are paired with other social and political dynamics which amplify or complement them. However, in spite of differences and distances in all cases, they contribute to preserving the

shared imaginary and identity. Food is used as a way to regulate, both politically and socially, in the multicultural context of Malaysia.

In addition, beyond the consumption of *nasi lemak*, we noted other types of socialisation around meals that maintain interethnic social ties. First, meals taken at food courts (spaces for eating out) represent a multi-ethnic characteristic. Malaysians meet to share meals at the same table, with the ability of selecting their choice of food based on their preferences and religious/health dietary restrictions. Second, the unique concept that is open house, which refers to Malaysians inviting friends and acquaintances from other ethnic and religious communities into their homes to celebrate their religious or cultural festivities. For example, during Hari Raya (the first day after the Ramadan month), Malays invite Indians and Chinese and other ethnic groups to their houses for a merry celebration. The same happens for Christmas, Deepavali or Chinese New Year. Food is often served in the form of a buffet, without overlooking guests' religious or health dietary restrictions (e.g. halal, no beef). These festive occasions are considered very important for social cohesion in Malaysia with its increasingly segregated society. These meals, which bring Malaysians together from different ethnic groups, take unique forms and have a very strong symbolic status. One interviewee highlighted this:

“When you’re invited, you can’t say no (...) it’s just not done, and even if you have 4 invitations for the same day you go and you stay as long as you can, everyone understands” (Chinese woman, 37).

Her comments emphasise the meals' status as a social institution and the reciprocal social commitments which invitations create. This is relevant not only with emblematic dishes such as *nasi lemak* but also other Malaysian dishes in their social contexts of consumption. It should be noted that *nasi lemak* is not the only emblematic dish. There are other dishes, which have been contributed to the whole community by Chinese, Indians, Bumiputeras, and non-Malay Bumiputeras, that could be counted as ‘in common’ (Tibère, 2015) food symbols. Next, we look at food events and food commensality for its supportive function in interactions and coexistence in Malaysia.

Essentially, the social constructions around *nasi lemak*, its economic accessibility, practicality, adaptability to religious dietary restrictions and social ties, and reactivation of certain essential values in Malaysians' social imaginary all make this dish the ideal example that builds common cultural representations (Lévi-Strauss, 1968). According to Anderson (1991), the ties that bind the populations within a society or country are largely imagined: “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each, lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). While it is in

fact the object of a social consumption, particularly at breakfast in urban areas, and among the working classes, the power of *nasi lemak* lies in its ability to manifest this connection amongst all Malaysians. This is largely the reason why *nasi lemak* is promoted at all stages and levels from tourism promotion to the political process as a symbol of Malaysian food culture in building “social cohesion”.

Finally, Malaysia is not the only country to claim *nasi lemak* as its national dish. Indonesia and Singapore too can legitimately claim it as their own national dish. It is quite difficult to pinpoint exactly something about the recipe, ingredients, culinary techniques, and its consumption that uniquely belongs to Malaysia. However, its difference lies in the context of the dish’s social functions which provides its “relevance”. In the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia, *nasi lemak* is considered both a native dish of the Malay community and a dish, which is not only enjoyed but also recognised as ‘their own’ by other communities (e.g. Indians, Chinese, and Other Bumiputeras). These groups, with their own complex and intertwined cultural histories and live side by side, have adopted this dish (sometimes with difficulty), and made it an “in common” dish, which attests to their coexistence. Besides *nasi lemak* and other symbolic dishes such as *roti canai*, *tosai*, *mee goreng*, *chicken rice*, *satay*, strong commensality which also exists in everyday life or in celebrations (especially during open houses), reinforces social interactions and interethnic links around food. Such social events that contribute to building the “in common” identity not only enrich tourism promotion considerably, but also support hospitality and catering by providing a true “story to tell” to visitors as well as a respectful local valorisation of Malaysian culture(s).

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Appendix



Photo 1. *Nasi lemak* with wild boar curry. Source: Priya Menon



Photo 2. *Nasi lemak babi* (pork) (Kelabit Highlands). Source: Elise Mognard



Photo 3. Malaysian food court.



Photo 4. Hari Raya open house —the host and his guests. Source: Elise Mognard