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Arab Gastrodiplomacy in the Formation of Palembang's Culinary Identity: A Case Study of *Nasi Minyak*

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ABSTRACT

Nasi minyak is a culinary specialty of Palembang that is historically rooted in the Arab culinary tradition. This phenomenon presents a paradox, as a minority community was able to exert a lasting influence on the cuisine of the Malay majority. This study aims to analyze the social pathways through which the Arab community introduced its gastronomy, as well as the process by which *nasi minyak* was transformed from an Arab dish into a collective Palembang cuisine. The research employs a qualitative design with a single case study approach, drawing on secondary data collected through literature study and analyzed using Zhang's (2015) gastrodiplomacy framework. The findings show that *nasi minyak* entered Palembang society through three social pathways operating simultaneously: the Hadrami trade network with the Palembang Sultanate, wedding celebrations and Islamic holidays functioning as food events, and the shared Islamic faith, which rendered Arab cuisine easily acceptable as halal. The transformation of identity, meanwhile, occurred through four mechanisms: diversity appeal, positioning as an essential part of national culture, educational strategy, and the claiming of culinary heritage. This study reveals that Palembang has consistently been able to convert external influence into its own collective identity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nasi minyak is a culinary specialty of Palembang that is historically rooted in the Arab culinary tradition, yet has become an integral part of Palembang's culinary identity. The dish consists of rice mixed with ghee (*minyak samin*), served with meat or other side dishes, cucumber slices, and sambal (Oktaria, Idris, & Suriadi, 2022). This cuisine was influenced by the Arab community that migrated to and settled in Palembang (Syarifuddin, Asmi, Safitri, & Abidin, 2020). Febriyanti (2020) argues that *nasi minyak* bears a direct resemblance to the Arab dish *nasi kabsah*, which was introduced by the al-Munawar community of Palembang. Demographically, Jumhari (2010) notes that the Arab population numbered around 500 individuals. The 1915 population census estimated the Arab population at 2,200, compared with 640,000 indigenous inhabitants. This constitutes an anomaly, given that the Arab community in Palembang was a demographic minority, yet was able to exert a lasting influence on the cuisine of the Malay populace.

Academic studies on Palembang's *nasi minyak* consistently demonstrate that this cuisine is a product of cultural acculturation between the Arab community and the Malay society of Palembang. Syarifuddin, et al (2020) examines various culinary traditions, including *nasi minyak*, as expressions of cultural identity in Palembang within a historical context that spans from the Srivijaya era to the present. He argues that Palembang's ethnic diversity, shaped through trade interactions with foreign merchants, gave rise to cultural acculturation reflected in the diversity of local cuisine. Febriyanti (2020), meanwhile, examines *nasi minyak* as a Palembang dish historically rooted in the Arab gastronomic tradition. She finds that *nasi minyak* bears a resemblance to *nasi kabsah*, a distinctive Arab dish introduced by the al-Munawar community in Palembang, whose presentation was subsequently adapted to suit local Palembang taste. Yulmadira (2023) examines the process of acculturation and modification in the cuisine of the Hadrami Arab community in Kampung al-Munawar, Palembang. Her findings show that the acculturation of Arab culinary culture in Kampung al-Munawar occurred through a process of modification involving reciprocal adaptation between Arab culinary traditions and the culinary preferences of the Palembang Malay community. Collectively, these three studies affirm that Kampung al-Munawar functions as a crucial site of cultural negotiation and a locus of Arab gastronomic soft power. However, all three studies focus primarily on the reasons underlying this acculturation, without explaining why the Arab community, despite its demographic minority status, was able to exert a lasting culinary influence on the Malay majority of Palembang. The power mechanisms underlying this process, particularly its gastrodiplomatic dimension, have yet to be theoretically analyzed. This gap provides an opportunity for this article to contribute by employing a gastrodiplomatic framework.

The objective of this study is to examine how Arab cuisine was able to be transformed into Palembang cuisine, taking *nasi minyak* as a case study. This objective is significant because it addresses two gaps simultaneously: first, prior studies have yet to explain the gastrodiplomatic mechanisms employed by the Arab community; and second, there remains a paradox whereby a minority was able to influence the cuisine of the majority, with this influence persisting to the present day. Accordingly, this article poses two research questions. The first question is: through which social pathways did the Arab community introduce and disseminate its gastronomy within Palembang's Malay society? The second question is: how did the process of transformation occur, whereby *nasi minyak* evolved from an Arab dish into a collective cuisine of Palembang society? By addressing these two questions, this article contributes a new perspective on gastrodiplomacy as a mechanism of minority cultural

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influence, a framework that is also relevant for understanding the broader dynamics of culinary acculturation in the port cities of the Nusantara archipelago.

This article hypothesizes that the success of Arab gastronomy in shaping Palembang's Malay culinary identity is the product of a structural mechanism operating systematically and synergistically. Theoretically, four interlocking mechanisms sustain this process: the strategic social position of the Arab community, Islam as a cultural bridge, cuisine as an instrument of diplomacy, and hybridization as a strategy of adaptation. These four elements mutually reinforce one another throughout a prolonged process of acculturation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Nasi Minyak

Palembang's *nasi minyak* is frequently served at various traditional ceremonies and important celebrations, occupying a distinctive position in the social life of the Palembang community (Syarifuddin et al., 2020). Within Zhang's (2015) framework, food and its symbolic representations can be used to communicate ideas, values, identities, and attitudes. This is precisely what has made cuisine an essential component of cultural diplomacy since ancient times. Nasi minyak stands as concrete evidence of how food functions as a medium of cross-cultural communication.

Over time, *nasi minyak* is no longer been identified exclusively with Arab cuisine but has come to be regarded as a collective dish of the Palembang community. Within Zhang's (2015) gastronomic framework, *nasi minyak* exemplifies food functioning as one of the most effective mediums of acculturation—absorbing foreign influence, adapting it to local tastes, and ultimately becoming a collective culinary identity of the Palembang community.

2.2. Arab-Malay Palembang

Arab culture entered the city of Palembang in the seventeenth century, following the arrival of Arab merchants. Among them was Habib Hasan Abdurrahman Al-Munawar bin Ahmad Al-Munawar from Hadramaut, Yemen (Purwanto & Pratama, 2017; Suriadi & Suryani, 2019; Yulmadira, 2023). The structural conditions of the Arab-Malay relationship in Palembang are significant, as they reflect a prolonged process marked by both tension and integration. Within Zhang's (2015) framework, understanding the social context in which food is produced and consumed is a prerequisite for understanding why certain foods can become effective mediums of cultural integration. Without accounting for these underlying tensions, the claim that *nasi minyak* became a collective dish of the Palembang Malay community would lose its analytical weight.

Despite centuries of coexistence, the Arab-Malay relationship has not always been harmonious. The fluctuating relations between Malay rulers and the ethnic Chinese and Arab communities in Palembang were closely tied to dynamic political and economic upheavals (Jumhari, 2010). Amid these tensions, food emerged as the most natural and spontaneous space of encounter. One of the ways the Arab community introduced Middle Eastern cuisine to Palembang was through wedding celebrations. *Nasi kabsah* became a culinary staple at weddings within the al-Munawar clan.

2.3. Zhang's Theory of Gastrodiplomacy

Zhang (2015)defines gastrodiplomacy as a nation's effort to use food as a strategy to promote culture, build its national image, globalize its food industry, attract tourists, and cultivate relations with foreign publics. Within this framework, food is understood as a

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strategically operating system of cultural communication.

Zhang (2015) further examines the intersection between culture and nation-branding through contemporary case studies of gastrodiplomacy in Japan, Malaysia, Peru, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. She demonstrates that gastrodiplomacy campaign strategies encompass membership relationship-building through product marketing, the use of opinion leaders, and coalition-building. This framework has been widely applied in studies of cuisine as identity and shows that food possesses a dimension of cultural integration relevant to the case of *nasi minyak* in Palembang. Zhang's theory is relevant here because it offers a framework capable of explaining the mechanisms through which food functions as a medium of identity communication. Within the context of Arab-Malay Palembang, *nasi minyak* serves as a medium that communicates values, identities, and social relations across cultural boundaries.

3. METHODS

The focus of this study is Palembang's *nasi minyak*. This selection is grounded in its direct relevance to both research questions: *nasi minyak* is the most extensively documented dish resulting from the Arab-Malay gastronomic encounter in Palembang, while also most clearly illustrating the transformation from an aristocratic dish into a popular culinary identity. *Nasi minyak* satisfies the criteria for a case study because it simultaneously contains all the layers of analysis required by this article: the historical connection of its origin in Arab kabsah can be traced, the social pathway of its dissemination through *Kampung* al-Munawar is documented, the process of its flavor hybridization can be identified, and its status as a contemporary Palembang culinary identity can be empirically verified. It should nonetheless be emphasized that a focus on a single dish cannot represent the entirety of Arab community's cuisine, such as *manan sahmin* and *bubur asyura*. The selection of *nasi minyak* as the sole unit of analysis constitutes a deliberate epistemological choice, prioritizing depth of understanding of a single phenomenon over breadth of generalization.

This study employs a qualitative design with a single case study approach. This design was selected because the research aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the process of acculturation and the acceptance of *nasi minyak* as a part of Palembang's culinary identity. The data collected in this study are textual and interpretive in nature, comprising journal articles, official government documents, online news, and social media content.

The data used in this study are entirely secondary in nature, comprising journal articles, official institutional documents, online news, and web content related to *nasi minyak*, the Arab diaspora in Palembang, and Zhang's (2015) theoretical framework. This choice of secondary data is grounded in the consideration that the research questions do not require primary data in the form of interviews with the Arab community of Palembang. Data in this study were collected through library research techniques. This technique was selected because it aligns with a qualitative case study design based on secondary data. Operationally, data collection was conducted through several stages. First, a search of academic literature was carried out through platforms such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and academic institutional websites to identify journal articles, books, and research reports relevant to the topics of *nasi minyak*, the Arab community of Palembang, and Zhang's (2015) theory. Second, a search of institutional documents was conducted through official government websites and related institutions to obtain factual data on *nasi minyak*.

Third, a search of online news coverage was conducted through credible digital media outlets to obtain the socio-religious context surrounding the object of study. Fourth, a search of public social media content was carried out as an additional data source, as it more directly

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reflecting the identity and positioning of the object. Sources were selected based on several eligibility criteria: direct relevance to the research questions, source credibility, data recency, and full accessibility of the source text. Sources that did not meet at least three of these four criteria were excluded from the analysis. With its structured stages and explicit selection criteria, the library research technique employed in this study constitutes a data collection process that is systematic, transparent, and academically accountable. The data are presented using a narrative technique.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Entry Pathways of Nasi Minyak

Zhang's (2015) perspective opens an analytical space for understanding the mechanisms through which Arab cuisine entered Palembang through three social pathways that operated simultaneously and reinforced one another.

First Pathway: The Hadrami Merchant Network and the Palembang Sultanate

The arrival of Hadrami merchants in Palembang was part of a systematic diasporic mobility network that had operated along the Indian Ocean coast for centuries (Ardiza, 2021; Erasiah, 2018). Within Zhang's (2015) framework, this trade network functions as a historical parallel to the strategy of coalition-building. Arab merchants built relations with local rulers and society through economic trust (Apriana, 2019; Novita, 2007; Ramadoni & Badrun, 2022). They received privileged treatment, as they were perceived to possess superior religious standing (Fuadiyah & Hudaidah, 2021; Jumhari, 2010). This privileged status was leveraged to expand their influence within Palembang's aristocratic circles. Within Zhang's (2015) framework, this relationship functions as a historical parallel to the strategy of coalition-building, where trust built through economic networks and religious authority opened the door to deeper cultural exchange, including cuisine.

Among the offerings introduced during this process of expanding influence was *nasi kabsah*. This dish was introduced to Palembang's aristocratic circles and was received with great enthusiasm Febriyanti (2020). This acceptance by the aristocracy constituted a decisive first step in the transformation of Arab cuisine as it spread into broader Palembang society. Zhang (2015) refers to this mechanism as the use of opinion leaders, whereby when figures of authority and influence accept and consume a particular cuisine, that food's social legitimacy increases significantly in the eyes of the broader public.

Second Pathway: Weddings and Islamic Holidays as Food Events

Zhang (2015) identifies the strategy of food events as one of the most effective mechanisms for introducing cuisine to a wider community. Food is presented at celebratory occasions that bring many people together, creating positive associations between cuisine and shared social experiences. In the Palembang context, this function was fulfilled by the wedding celebrations of the al-Munawar clan. *Nasi kabsah*, chicken curry, and goat curry were served at these celebrations, allowing the Palembang Malay community to become acquainted with and taste these dishes (Febriyanti, 2020; Oktaria et al., 2022; Purwanto & Pratama, 2017). This mode of culinary acceptance through celebratory occasions proved effective because it unfolded within a warm social interaction.

Wedding celebrations, in this context, constituted an open public space that brought the

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two communities into direct contact. Beyond weddings, *nasi minyak* was also served during major Islamic religious occasions, such as Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha (Febriyanti, 2020). Each dish served represented an unintentional act of culinary introduction for the guests present.

Third Pathway: Religious Commonality

The third pathway is the use of shared Islamic faith as a foundation for social acceptance. The Arab community contributed to the propagation of Islam through Islamic missionary activities (*dakwah*), Islamic education, and the establishment of religious institutions (Ardiza, 2021; Maryamah, Anisah, Purnama, Liza, & Khoirunisa, 2023; Silaban, Kusa, Sinaga, & Sinaga, 2024). In Palembang, Arab *ulama* were accepted as individuals holding high religious authority (Jumhari, 2010).

This shared Islamic identity facilitated social acceptance in two ways. First, Arab food was automatically considered halal and met the consumption standards of Palembang's Muslim Malay community. Second, religious gatherings such as *pengajian* (Quranic study sessions), *haul* (death anniversary commemorations), and *maulid* (the Prophet's birthday) celebrations became mediums through which Arab food was served and enjoyed collectively. Within Zhang's (2015) framework, these religious gatherings constitute effective food events, as the food served during these occasions was associated with a positive spiritual experiences and a shared Islamic identity.

4.1.2. The Transformation of Nasi Minyak from Arab Dish into a Collective Palembang Identity

Zhang (2015) provides four concepts that sequentially explain the mechanism of this transformation.

First Mechanism: Diversity Appeal as a Narrative of Acceptance

Zhang (2015) notes that successful gastrodiplomacy campaigns consistently employ the concept of diversity appeal—a narrative of diversity used as the primary attraction that legitimizes the entry of foreign influence into a local culinary identity. The presence of *nasi minyak* in Palembang cuisine is not regarded as foreign contamination but rather as evidence that Palembang is an open and adaptive meeting space of civilizations (Darosan, Fikri, Rusli, & Niswah, 2025). It is this narrative that subsequently enabled *nasi minyak* to be accepted as a dish of the host community.

The most concrete evidence of this diversity appeal mechanism lies in the fact that the Palembang Malay community never refers to *nasi minyak* as Arab food but instead identifying it directly as Palembang food. Once the narrative of diversity has become fused with local identity, a cuisine's foreign origin is no longer relevant to mention and the cuisine itself has become fully absorbed as a local element.

Second Mechanism: Essential Part of National Culture as a Process of Naturalization

Zhang (2015) argues that food which successfully becomes a collective identity is food that has been established as an inseparable part of a community's culture. This process occurred gradually for *nasi minyak*: from an exclusive dish at Al-Munawar clan celebrations, it subsequently spread to the Sultanate's aristocratic circles, then to Palembang Malay festivities, and eventually to everyday dining tables. This transformation constitutes a process of naturalization, as *nasi minyak* is no longer regarded as a distinctly Arab dish but has instead come to be introduced as a signature Palembang dish.

This process of naturalization can be concretely traced through changes in raw materials

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and the context of presentation. Basmati rice, a primary ingredient in many Arab rice dishes, was difficult to obtain and costly, prompting the community to replace it with local rice varieties. The dish retained the same cooking principles, but developed different ingredients, flavor, and texture (Febriyanti, 2020; Purwanto & Pratama, 2017). This demonstrates that a distinctly Palembang identity began to take material form. The culmination of this naturalization process occurred when *nasi minyak* entered traditional markets and everyday food stalls.

Third Mechanism: The Education Strategy as a Means of Consolidating Culinary Identity

Zhang (2015) identifies education strategy as the mechanism that ensures the long-term continuity of culinary identity. This mechanism operates through the transmission of cooking knowledge from one generation to the next. Concrete evidence of this mechanism is that the recipe for *nasi minyak* is now passed down from Palembang Malay mothers to their daughters. This constitutes an act of cultural transfer, as subsequent generations are expected to preserve and continue the culinary culture that has been established (Wijaya & Erlyana, 2024; Zahra, Irkanidi, & Parera, 2025).

Fourth Mechanism: The Recognition of Intangible Cultural Heritage as the Culmination of Cultural Naturalization

Zhang (2015) explicitly discusses how cuisine, as intangible cultural heritage, becomes an arena of identity contestation. Communities and nations actively claim ownership rights over particular foods as part of their cultural identity. The same process occurred with *nasi minyak*, albeit on a smaller scale. When the Palembang Malay community becomes the primary reference point whenever *nasi minyak* is mentioned, the process of cultural naturalization reaches its culmination: the foreign cuisine has been naturalized as a collective Palembang heritage. This demonstrates that a process of acculturation unfolding over centuries has produced something new, now regarded as the shared possession of the Palembang Malay community.

Zhang (2015) notes that contestation over intangible cultural heritage between communities can give rise to disputes, such as the disspute over kimchi between China and South Korea. In the case of *nasi minyak*, however, no such dispute arose, as the appropriation unfolded peacefully and gradually. Over time, *nasi minyak* is no longer identified with distinctly Arab cuisine but has instead become a signature dish of the Palembang community. This transformation occurred without conflict because the Arab community of Palembang itself no longer felt the need to claim exclusive ownership of a dish that had already become a shared cultural heritage.

4.2. Discussion

This study finds that *nasi minyak* entered Palembang Malay society through three pathways operating simultaneously: the Arab trade network, which built economic and social trust with the Palembang Sultanate; the celebration of Islamic holidays and al-Munawar clan weddings as food events that introduced Arab cuisine within a shared festive atmosphere; and the shared Islamic faith, which facilitated the acceptance of Arab food as halal and its presence at religious gatherings across ethnic lines.

The transformation of *nasi minyak* from Arab cuisine into a collective Palembang identity occurred through four sequential mechanisms identified through Zhang's (2015) framework: diversity appeal, which legitimized the entry of foreign influence into local identity; essential

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part of national culture, or naturalization as an inseparable part of Palembang Malay culture, marked by a shift in accompanying dishes from goat to river fish and a change in serving tradition from trays to the communal *ngidang* practice; the education strategy, or the intergenerational transmission of the recipe from Malay mothers to their daughters as a mechanism for consolidating identity; and the establishment of *nasi minyak* as a signature Palembang culinary heritage transcending the boundaries of the al-Munawar community, marking the complete culmination of cultural appropriation.

Arab *nasi kabsah* and Palembang's *nasi minyak* share the same cooking method, yet differ in many respects. In terms of ingredients, *nasi kabsah* uses long-grain, fragrant basmati rice, whereas *nasi minyak* uses local white rice with a stickier texture (Febriyanti, 2020). In terms of accompanying dishes, *nasi kabsah* is typically paired with a whole goat cooked with spices, while *nasi minyak*, within the Palembang *ngidang* tradition, is served with *pindang* fish, *brengkes tempoyak* (durian-fermented fish curry), and fruit-based sambal. In terms of side accompaniments, dates and yogurt, wich are characteristic of Arab cuisine, are replaced by pineapple, pickles, and sambal. In Arab tradition, food is served directly on a shared communal tray in large portions (Fuadiyah & Hudaidah, 2021), whereas *nasi minyak* is served on individual plates in smaller portions for each person.

Palembang has become a space for cultural encounters with foreign influences that have shaped its identity formation (Darosan, Fikri, Rusli, & Niswah, 2025). *Nasi minyak* and *pempek* are two iconic Palembang dishes that emerged from this process of acculturation. Wargadalem, Wasino, and Yulifar (2023) demonstrate that *pempek* is likewise a product of acculturation that has been transformed into a collective Palembang identity. *Pempek*, originally known as *kelesan*, developed through contact with the Chinese community, and was subsequently absorbed, produced, and claimed across ethnic lines by the Palembang Malay community as their own food. These two dishes together demonstrate that Palembang has consistently been able to convert external influence into elements of its own collective identity.

The findings of this study suggest that *nasi minyak*, as a collective Palembang identity, offers a model of peaceful acculturation distinct from the dominant narratives of Arab indigenous encounters in the Nusantara archipelago, which has often been dominated by religious, political, or commercial perspectives. This acculturation occurred without coercion, without policy intervention, and without a deliberate agenda. No sultan declared *nasi minyak* an official dish, no *ulama* issued a fatwa mandating its consumption, and no merchant strategically marketed it to the Malay population. It entered instead through organic social pathways. *Nasi minyak* stands as evidence that acculturation that develops without coercion endures over the long term.

Although Zhang's (2015) gastrodiplomacy theory proves capable of comprehensively explaining the transformation of *nasi minyak*, its application in this study also reveals theoretical limitations that warrant reflection. The most fundamental limitation is that Zhang (2015) designed her theory for interstate contexts, in which food is a tool deliberately employed by actors with clear diplomatic objectives.

This study applies a theory designed to examine top-down gastrodiplomacy to analyze a phenomenon that is, at its core, bottom-up in nature. Zhang's concepts, such as food events, coalition building, opinion leaders, and education strategy, remain relevant and applicable, but must be employed as historical analogies rather than literal mechanisms. Zhang's theory provides a useful conceptual framework, yet it requires significant flexibility to account for culinary acculturation phenomena that are organic and historical in nature. This theoretical limitation, in turn, opens a contribution toward extending Zhang's (2015) gastrodiplomacy

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theory into a more inclusive framework. Her research was confined to government-initiated campaigns, and she herself suggested that grassroots gastrodiplomacy carried out by non-state actors should become an area of future research. The case of Palembang's *nasi minyak* offers a concrete response to this very implication.

Future research should develop a framework of intracultural gastrodiplomacy, an extension of Zhang's theory capable of explaining the mechanisms through which food functions as a medium of intercommunity integration within a single shared territory. This framework must incorporate variables not accounted for in Zhang's theory, such as extended historical time spans, unorganized non-state actors, and informal, domestic mechanisms of culinary transmission. With this more inclusive framework, gastrodiplomacy theory also becomes relevant for examining the long history of cultural encounters that we now regard as entirely our own.

5. CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that food functions as a sustainable mechanism of social integration. Food succeeded in transcending communal boundaries fully and without significant conflict. *Nasi minyak* required no formal policy or agreement to become part of Palembang's collective culture. This indicates that culinary acculturation operates at the level of sensory experience, which is pre-ideological in nature, allowing acceptance occurs before a food's origin can be contested by the receiving community.

This study contributes to the field of culinary acculturation studies in Indonesia through two interrelated aspects. First, it demonstrates that cuisine constitutes an archive of acculturation that is more legible than other cultural artifacts. Palembang's *nasi minyak* proves that a dish can serve as a valid source of historical data on the mechanisms through which two communities meet, negotiate, and ultimately integrate, without leaving behind any written documentation of the process. Second, this study offers a three-pathway model of culinary acculturation, namely the economic pathway, the social celebration pathway, and the shared religious identity pathway. This three-pathway framework can serve as a useful analytical tool for examining how various cuisines across the Nusantara archipelago become integrated into local identities.

This study has a limitation that must be acknowledged, namely its reliance on entirely secondary data sources. All arguments presented in this study are constructed from previously published academic journals, books, and articles. Future research employing ethnographic methods, interviews, and direct observation in *Kampung Arab* al-Munawar would be able to address this gap and yield a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of Arab-Malay culinary acculturation in Palembang's everyday life.

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