

# SIAMESE HERBAL RICE AND THE NEGOTIATION OF LOCAL FOOD LANDSCAPE IN CONSTRUCTING PLACE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY OF SIAMESE IN KELANTAN, MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the cultural significance of Siamese herbal rice (*khaoyam*) in Kelantan, Malaysia, with a focus on its role in shaping the relationship between people, plants, and place. Using an ethnographic approach, the research involved fieldwork in six villages across four districts and utilized focus group interviews and key informant discussions to compile a comprehensive list of fifty-nine edible plants used in herbal rice preparation and herbal rice narratives. The analysis considers both the plant knowledge embedded in plant selection and the ways herbal rice practices are performed, including *khaoyam* shops and temple-based festivals. The study introduces the new concept of “Eating in a shared landscape” to articulate how the preparation and sharing of herbal rice materialize deep-rooted ecological knowledge and foster adaptation, negotiation within a multicultural context. Findings demonstrate that herbal rice acts as a living foodscape that reflects Siamese identity, transmits ecological wisdom across generations, and mediates relationships with both landscape and neighboring communities.

**Keywords:** herbal rice; plant knowledge; foodscape; ethnic identity

## INTRODUCTION

Food is a form of material culture that represents the relationship between humans, place, nature, and landscape. As tangible culture, food creates a bridge between the physical environment and human societies, embodying shared histories and meanings. As Yeoh & Kong (1999, p.136) observe, places act “as the palimpsests on which people write their stories, not only are places repositories of history and memory, they often contain multiple levels of sedimented history.” In this way, food acts as a lens to explore the layered histories and identities of different groups. It connects to landscape, utilizing local resources in ways that shape, negotiate, and construct both the distinctiveness of cultural identity and the meaning of place. In the case of the Siamese community in Kelantan, herbal rice serves as a salient example of how a specific food can interconnect local knowledge and belonging.

This research focuses on the construction of place, ethnic identity, and cultural landscape among the Siamese in Kelantan by examining traditional ecological knowledge related to making herbal rice (*khaoyam*), and analyzing how herbal rice features in public space and cultural expression. Malaysia’s multicultural setting is reflected in the diversity and importance of food cultures which both differentiate and connect its many ethnic communities. As Shamsul (1996) explains, post-independence Malaysian identity is shaped

on two levels: “authority-defined” and “everyday-defined.” Food, in both senses, assumes a prominent position in Malaysian multicultural life, with different communities using food to negotiate belonging and difference, and sharing meals at public events (Melissa, 2017).

**Fig. 1: Herbal rice (*khaoyam*) with fresh onion, bean sprouts and chopped Vietnamese coriander (*kasem*). Photo by author on January 10th, 2024**



In Kelantan, the Siamese community is a notable ethnic minority distinct in language, religion, ritual, livelihood, and food practices. The state’s strong Islamic identity and Muslim Malay majority intensify the community’s need to preserve and perform their cultural distinctiveness. Food is one of the main features dividing Malaysians into ethnic groups; as such, concerns about halal and non-halal food are central to the rhythms of everyday and ceremonial eating. Herbal rice becomes a central ethnic food to constructing and expressing that identity, both within the community and in multicultural public life. For the Siamese, herbal rice is the most distinctive ethnic dish, seen as crucial to representing Siamese food identity in Kelantan. Herbal rice (*khaoyam*) is a vital dish served as breakfast and for special occasions. It is highly valued for its health benefits, with Siamese people holding knowledge about nutritional uses of local plants. The processes of foraging and preparing herbal rice require deep understanding of the surrounding Kelantanese landscape. Also, halal version for Kelantanese Malays that shows how Siamese have a deep knowledge of courtesy among different ethnic communities.

Scholars have explored diverse aspects of Siamese identity in Kelantan and Northern Malaysia, such as religion, ritual, language, and the significance of temples (Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, 1993; Johnson, 2012; Nakseethong, 2016; Tipsrinimit, 2007). Temples and houses have been emphasized as key arenas of identity construction and cultural practice (Bahauddin & Tat, 2017; Bintin Mohd Rashid *et al.*, 2025; Tepsing, 2015; Tohsan, 2019). However, much less attention has been paid to the relationship between food practice and the construction of place and ethnic identity. Botanical and scientific works by Aweng *et al.* (2014), Karunakarn & Aweng (2018), and Aweng, Karunakarn, Latiff (2023) document plants for herbal rice, but generally focus on plants rather than the food’s social or cultural function.

This research addresses the gap by compiling a detailed list of fifty-nine edible plants used for herbal rice from six villages across four Kelantan districts and examining how this knowledge supports ethnic identity, memory and construction of place. Drawing on the

concepts of the “foodscape” and “sense of place,” this study demonstrates the complex relationships among place, landscape, and ethnic identity, emphasizing the cultural significance of food in the construction of ethnic identity. The concept of “foodscape” reflects the dynamic interactions among people, places, and foods, linking individuals with their environment, culture, and society (Sage, 2010). Social sciences and geography further highlight the importance of place in shaping identity, as individuals often associate their sense of self and belonging with particular communities and regional settings (Appadurai, 1996; Friedman, 2002). This study also draws on insights from landscape ecology, which views humans as active participants in, and integral components of, the landscape (Naveh & Lieberman, 1994, p.9). By integrating these perspectives, this research bridges cultural and ecological approaches to understanding food and ethnic identity. The making and sharing of herbal rice are not only matters of taste or nutrition but also powerful means of reinforcing relationships, nurturing collective memory, and transmitting knowledge across generations within a specific landscape. The presence of *khaoyam* shops, temple-based cooking, and the prominence of herbal rice during major community events, such as the Kathin festival, further strengthen Siamese identity both within and beyond the community.

Ultimately, this article proposes the concept of “eating in a shared landscape” to describe the phenomenon of herbal rice as a food practice that demonstrates how deeply rooted ecological knowledge, culinary tradition, and adaptation to a multicultural context intermingle in the lived experiences of the Siamese in Kelantan. The existence of herbal rice also reflects an ecological perspective that emphasizes human–nature interactions, a central concern of landscape ecology. It is important to consider how social structures and ecological systems have evolved through their mutual interaction, and how the structural–functional attributes of the biophysical landscape foster distinctive socio-cultural systems. These relationships shape how environmental dimensions are incorporated into cultural practices and social organization (Radeloff *et al.*, 2001). The concept underscores how food practices mediate ecological relationships and cultural coexistence within multiethnic environments. Herbal rice thus represents not only a culinary tradition but also a dynamic cultural landscape where narratives, collective memory, and ethnic identity are actively expressed and continually negotiated within Kelantan’s diverse landscape.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Study Site

Kelantan state is located at the Northmost of Peninsular of Malaysia. The northern part is bordered by Thailand’s province of Narathiwat, Terengganu to the east, Perak to the west, and Pahang to the south. The north part of Tumpat district next to the border of Terengganu is the South China Sea. Geographically, Kelantan can be categorized into the upper north and lower south regions. The upper north consists mainly of the Kelantan plain, characterized by paddy fields, orchards, and vegetable farms. Data collection is focused on four primary areas (Fig. 2). Firstly, in the Pasir Mas district, data is gathered from Pasir Parit village (V1). Secondly, in the Tumpat district, data is collected from villages including Kok Seraya village (V2), Pa Trang village (V3), and Khao Din village (V4). Thirdly, in the Bachok district, data is obtained from Balai village (V5), and finally, in Kuala Kruai, data is collected from Guchil village (V6). A multi-sited fieldwork approach is employed to compare various herbal rice recipes, as well as to analyze the similarities and differences in meanings and narratives across different locations.

**Fig. 2: Map shows six villages across four districts where data was gathered (created by author)**



### Data Collection

This research was approved ethical clearance by Chiang Mai University Research Ethic Committees (CMUREC No. 66/ 278). The study employs two primary methods for data collection. The first involves compiling a list of edible plants used to prepare herbal concoctions for making herbal rice. These edible plants were identified using both local and English names through eight focus group interviews. The author conducted one focus group in each of six villages, with two additional focus groups in Balai and Khao Din villages to recheck the herbal plant lists and related narratives. In addition, discussions with key informants were conducted in two phases: the first from August to September 2023, and the second in January 2024. These activities focused on compiling plant lists, documenting harvesting practices, observing cooking processes, and measuring the proportions used in herbal rice preparation. Prior to the ethnographic fieldwork and plant surveys, the study objectives were clearly explained to the key informants. Informants were selected based on their experience in preparing herbal rice, ownership of herbal rice shops, and knowledge of edible plants, and all informants were required to be Siamese. After selection, permission was obtained to conduct interviews and surveys. In total, forty-two key informants participated in the study. Group interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions,

allowing flexibility for new themes to emerge during the discussions (Yin, 2015). The key interview questions included: (1) What is the main composition of herbal rice? (2) What are the edible plants used to make herbal rice, and how are they harvested? (3) How did you acquire this knowledge? (4) When and where do you usually consume herbal rice, and on what occasions? (5) Do you think herbal rice is important to the Siamese communities? (6) How do you perceive changes in the preparation and consumption of herbal rice over time? (7) What role does herbal rice play in maintaining community relationships or expressing ethnic identity? These questions were designed to reveal local knowledge of edible plants, to understand the cultural meanings and social functions of herbal rice, and to explore how this food practice reflects the interaction between people, place, and ecology. Data were recorded through photographs to document the edible plants, and the semi-structured interviews were supported by detailed note-taking and audio recordings.

Second, ethnographical fieldwork is employed to understand narratives and practices of herbal rice among Siamese in Kelantan at the same period of gathering edible plants' list. The primary methodology is participant observation. Additionally, sensory ethnographic practices were employed to capture the significance of senses in relation to food. Sensory ethnography is an alternative method that is reinvented from classic ethnographic methods that fill the gap in informants' self-reflexivity and experiences (Pink, 2009). Sensory ethnographic practice is noted here to understand and compare the food through senses that require personal experiences of researcher. This method involved observing food experiences through the sensory encounters of the researcher, extending the traditional approach of participant observation to encompass "participant sensation" (Howes, 2006, p.121). In this research, the author entered nearby forests and orchard gardens to harvest edible plants, using sensory engagement to explore their locations, aromas, and participated in the cooking process of preparing the herbal concoction. Also, the author tasted herbal rice in all participating villages, documenting variations in flavor and reflecting on these sensory experiences during participant observation to better understand the informants' perceptions and meanings associated with taste. The researcher also participated in various Thai Theravada Buddhist activities where herbal rice was a prominent festive food and practice of daily food in different households. Informal interviews were conducted with locals in different villages to understand how Siamese individuals in Kelantan perceive herbal rice and edible plants.

The researcher employs the concept of "liquid identity," which illustrates that the position of insider and outsider is fluid, in flux, and exists on a continuum; at times, researchers may not be able to actively change their positioning (Thomson & Gunter, 2010). Positionality in this study is fluid between insider and outsider. Additionally, because this research prioritizes a sensory perspective to understand food, using bodily senses is integral to the methodology. Consequently, the researcher also employs self-reflexivity, an ongoing process within the interpretive approach that enables reflection on the researcher's positionality in the fieldwork context. This involves awareness of one's role as an insider, outsider, or somewhere in between, both during and outside fieldwork. Atkinson *et al.* (2001) define reflexivity as the researcher's capacity to recognize and account for the mutual influence between themselves and the researched subjects. In this study, self-reflexivity is essential to mitigate bias and ensure a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. Scholars such as Stoller (1989) and Seremetakis (1993) emphasize reflexivity in anthropological fieldwork, highlighting how sensory experiences contribute to comprehending human perception and interpretation. By understanding the reasoning behind participants' actions, biases, and assumptions, this approach enriches the interpretive process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The interpretive approach offers an insider's perspective, enabling outsiders to grasp the nuances of data

collection from participants' viewpoints, similar to ethnographic fieldnotes that demand reflexivity.

### Data Analysis

The process began with the author reviewing and organizing the compiled list of edible plants collected during six field research sessions. The list was sorted by local names, English names, scientific names, family names, and availability across the designated villages, using tables to verify repetitive plant names. Information gathered through focus group interviews and ethnographic fieldwork included the cultural meanings of herbal rice, the availability of plants, the connection between herbal rice and place, and relevant stories related to herbal rice and edible plants. Narratives were repeatedly examined through field notes and transcripts from audio recordings to identify patterns in the data. The researcher analyzed the collected data by interpreting field notes and participant observations from both interviews and daily conversations. These two data collection methods allowed the researcher to explore the relationships among food, ethnic identity, place, and landscape, which were recognized through recurring narratives across the villages. The author then formulated themes and connected them, providing a rich reflection on herbal rice among local communities in Kelantan through their experiences, memories, and narratives.

## RESULTS

### Edible plants for making herbal concoctions

The findings are divided into two parts, first part is the table reveals fifty-nine local edible plants with botanical family and family name, local and English names that gathered from six various villages namely: Pasir Parit village (V1). Kok Seraya village (V2), Pa Trang village (V3), Khao Din village (V4). Balai village (V5), and, Guchil village (V6). Second, the records from local perspective to explain the existence and social function of herbal rice that gathered from focus group interviews, interviews and daily conversations.

**Table 1: Edible plants gathered for making herbal rice from six Siamese villages in Kelantan state**

Botanical family, family name	Local name	English name	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
<i>Litsea monopetala</i> , Lauraceae	Chum prua/paya chum prua	Shampoo tree	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Artabotrys suaveolens</i> , Annonaceae	Nom Meaw/Nom kwai Lako/Pelau	Fragrant tailgrape	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Vitex negundo</i> , Lamiaceae	Kunti daeng/Bokiu	Five-leaves chaste tree	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Desmos Chinensis</i> , Annonaceae	Pelau yai/Sermak	Dwarf ylang-ylang	✓				✓	
<i>Psychotria sp.</i> , Rubiaceae	Nang dam, setai, duam hitam	Wild coffee	✓	✓		✓		✓
<i>Curcuma longa</i> , Zingiberaceae	Kamin, kunyit	Tumeric	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
<i>Melastoma malabathricum</i> , Melastomataceae	Kreng, Senduduk	Malabar melastome, Indian rhododendron	✓			✓	✓	✓

Botanical family, family name	Local name	English name	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
<i>Ardisia crenata</i> Sims, Primulaceae	Mata Kersing	Christmas berry, Hen's-eyes	✓					
<i>Micromelum minutum</i> Wight & Arn., Rutaceae	Samui, Kermatu	Lime berry	✓					
<i>Oroxylum indicum</i> , Bignoniaceae	Phea Ka, Bekoi	Indian trumpet tree	✓		✓			
<i>Citrus hystrix</i> , Rutaceae	Makrut	Kaffir lime	✓				✓	✓
<i>Cenchrus purpureus</i> , Poaceae	Ya kum bang	Napier graa, elephant grass		✓				
<i>Etilingera elatior</i> , Zingiberaceae	Kantan	Torch ginger	✓	✓				
<i>Cymbopogon citratus</i> , Poaceae	Takrai	Lemon grass	✓	✓				✓
<i>Cymbopogon nardus</i> , Poaceae	Takrai hom	Citronella grass		✓				
<i>Pandanus amaryllifolius</i> , Pandanaceae	Panan	Pandan leaves	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Morinda citrifolia</i> , Rubiaceae	Yor	Noni, grear morinda	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
<i>Piper nigrum</i> , Piperaceae	Prik, Ho-chiu	Black pepper		✓			✓	
<i>Chassalia chartacea</i> Craib, Rubiaceae	Khem khau	White cassalia		✓				
<i>Tiliacora triandra</i> (Colebr.) Diels., Menispermaceae	Ya nang	Ya nang		✓		✓	✓	
<i>Plumbago zeylanica</i> , Plumbaginaceae	Katmun	Ceylon leadwort		✓				
<i>Coccinia grandis</i> , Cucurbitaceae	Tamleung	Ivy gourd		✓				
<i>Alpinia galanga</i> , Zingiberaceae	Kha	Greater galangal		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Paederia foetida</i> , Rubiaceae	khatod	Skunkvine		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Cananga odorata</i> , Annonaceae	Pelau	ylang-ylang		✓				
<i>Streblus asper</i> , Moraceae	Khoi	Siamese rough bush		✓				✓
<i>Flemingia macrophylla</i> , Fabaceae	Nud phra/Samut phra	large leaf flemingia		✓	✓		✓	
<i>Breynia androgyna</i> , Phyllanthaceae	Pak whan, cekuk manis	Star gooseberry	✓	✓			✓	
<i>Panicum sarmentosum</i> , Poaceae	Ya lam phong	Para grass		✓	✓			
<i>Boesenbergia rotunda</i> , Zingiberaceae	Ka shai	Fingerroot, Chinese ginger		✓				

Botanical family, family name	Local name	English name	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
<i>Vitex trifolia</i> subsp. <i>litoralis</i> Steenis, Lamiaceae	Kunti le/Kuntita le	Roundleaf chastetree, Beach Vitex		✓	✓	✓		✓
<i>Cajanus cajan</i> , Fabaceae	Tua red	Pigeon pea	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Zingiber zerumbet</i> (L.) <i>Roscoe ex Sm.</i> , Zingiberaceae	Ka theu	Shampoo ginger						✓
<i>Clitoria ternatea</i> , Fabaceae	An chan	butterfly pea	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
<i>Zingiber zerumbet</i> (L.) <i>Roscoe ex Sm.</i> , Zingiberaceae	Ka theu	Shampoo ginger						✓
<i>Allophylus cobbe</i> , Sapindaceae	Sep sai	Titberry			✓			✓
<i>Morus nigra</i> , Moraceae	Mon	Black mulberry						✓
<i>Alpinia mutica</i> , Zingiberaceae	Katapuk/Tapud, Chipud	Orchid ginger, False cardamom ginger			✓	✓		✓
<i>Gynochthodes sublancoolata</i> , Rubiaceae	Nam nom	-					✓	✓
<i>Piper sarmentosum</i> , Piperaceae	Chlong Plu	Wild betal			✓	✓		✓
<i>Moringa oleifera</i> , Moringaceae	Ma rum	Moringa	✓		✓			✓
<i>Physalis peruviana</i> , Solanaceae	Ma kue khon	Cape gooseberry						✓
<i>Microcos tomentosa</i> , Tiliaceae	Chum pla	Cenderai tree				✓		✓
<i>Ocimum tenuiflorum</i> , Lamiaceae	Ka pao	Holy basil				✓		✓
<i>Ocimum basilicum</i> Linn., Lamiaceae	Ho pha	Sweet basil						✓
<i>Zanthoxylum nitidum</i> , Rutaceae	Mae thau pan ya	shiny-leaf prickly-ash			✓	✓		
<i>Magnolia champaca</i> , Magnolia	Champa	Champak			✓			
<i>Zingiber mekongense</i> Gagnep., Zingiberaceae	Khing Heng	-			✓	✓		
<i>Jasminum sambac</i> , Oleaceae	Mali	Arabian jasmine			✓			
<i>Zingiber cassumunar</i> , Zingiberaceae	Plai	Cassumunar ginger	✓		✓	✓		
<i>Erythrina fusca</i> Lour., Fabaceae	Thong lang	Coral tree			✓	✓		
<i>Flagellaria indica</i> , Flagellariaceae	Wai ling	Whip vine, False rattan, Bush cane				✓		

Botanical family, family name	Local name	English name	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
<i>Callerya atropurpurea</i> , Fabaceae	Kasac	Purple Milletia				✓		
<i>Leucaena leucocephala</i> , Fabaceae	To bao	White lead tree				✓		
<i>Alpinia purpurata</i> , Zingiberaceae	Khing Deang	Red ginger				✓		
<i>Barringtonia acutangula</i> , Lecythidaceae	Jik	Freshwater mangrove				✓		
<i>Clerodendrum indicum</i> (L.) Kuntze, Lamiaceae	Mai thao yai mom/thao yai mom	Indian tubeflower	✓			✓		
<i>Citrus × aurantiifolia</i> , Rutaceae	Manao	Key lime	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Brownlowia tersa</i> (L.) Kosterm., Tiliaceae	Nam nong	False Ashoka				✓	✓	
<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i> , Moraceae	Kanun	Jackfruit				✓	✓	

According to the list of edible plants, there is a notable diversity in the species used to make herbal rice concoctions. These plants are commonly employed in cooking rice, with several species appearing repeatedly across different communities. This repetition suggests the presence of shared traditional local knowledge regarding plant usage among many villages. Local people primarily utilize the leaves of these edible plants; however, other parts such as barks, roots, and stems are also sometimes used to put as herbal concoctions. Edible plants are mostly cultivated from nearby orchard or kitchen garden. Some of edible plants are also forage from forest or rice field inside the village.

All six surveyed villages make use of ten main edible plants in their traditional herbal rice dishes: *Chum Pruak/Paya Chum Pruak* (shampoo tree), *Nom Meaw/Nom Kwai Lako/Pelau* (fragrant tailgrape), *Kunti Daeng/Bokiu* (five-leaved chaste tree), *Kamin/Kunyit* (turmeric), *Panan* (pandan leaves), *Yor* (noni, great morinda), *Kha* (greater galangal), *Khatod* (skunkvine), *Tua Red* (pigeon pea), and *An Chan* (butterfly pea). Additionally, thirteen other edible plants are foraged in at least three out of the six villages. These include *Nang Dam/Setai/Duan Hitam* (wild coffee), *Kreng/Senduduk* (Malabar melastome/Indian rhododendron), *Makrut* (kaffir lime), *Takrai* (lemongrass), *Ya Nang*, *Nud Phra/Samut Phra* (large leaf flemingia), *Pak Whan/Cekuk Manis* (star gooseberry), *Kunti Le/Kunti Ta Le* (Roundleaf chastetree, beach Vitex), *Katapuk/Tapud*, *Chipud* (orchid ginger/false cardamom ginger), *Chlong Plu* (wild betel), *Ma Rum* (moringa), *Plai* (cassumunar ginger), and *Manao* (key lime).

The widespread presence and usage of these edible plants highlight a complex understanding of the ecological context of the Kelantan plain. The Siamese community in Kelantan demonstrates the ability to both cultivated, forage and accurately identify diverse edible plant species, a skill set that is transmitted through generations. This knowledge is further reinforced by cultural practices and the structure of traditional Siamese houses, which have backyard kitchen gardens and nearby natural forests. The local knowledge of edible plants across various villages not only reflects diverse ecological understanding of Siamese

but also reveals complex social relationships that produce the symbolic meanings of herbal rice as a core element of ethnic identity. These edible plants carry symbolic significance and are intimately connected to the specific landscapes where they are harvested and used in herbal concoctions, thereby linking people from nearby ethnic community to the ecological system of the Kelantan plain.

### **The existence of herbal rice in Siamese communities**

According to focus group discussions and interviews conducted across six villages, key informants consistently emphasized the cultural and medicinal significance of herbal rice. For example, one key informant from Khao Din village in the Tumpat district.

“I remembered when I was younger, my grandmother told me that *khaoyam* is referred to as *khao ka ya*, which means ‘rice medicine,’ because you always eat rice, so we put medicines (herbal plants) into it and consume it as an ordinary meal”

Dam (pseudonym), interviewed by the author on January 12th, 2024.

This terminology reflects traditional knowledge that involves mixing rice with various herbs as a form of preventive medicine. Such practices are believed to enhance immunity and protect the body from illness. The nutritional benefits of this tradition are particularly valued during the rainy season by locals, when herbs in rice are thought to help prevent colds and related ailments. Since there was a limited choice in health care and hospitals were far away. Herbal rice became one food element that was undertook unique ethnic food that reflect the ability of Siamese who can utilize their ecology context to ease and prevent unexpected circumstances in the past.

“We do not know where the term *khaoyam* came from, but the concoction of herbal rice is closely related to plants that are utilized in postpartum care by soaking them in warm water to take a bath”

Ning (pseudonym), interviewed by the author on August 25th, 2023

Although the precise origin of the term *khaoyam* remains uncertain, informants from Balai village noted that many of the plants used in herbal rice are identical to the set of herbal plants used for new mothers who are cared for after giving birth, a practice still strictly observed in the village today. These edible plants reflect the same set of plant-use knowledge that is deeply understood among locals and has become part of the local ecological knowledge of the landscape.

The term "*khaoyam*" shares similarities with the Malay dish "*nasi kerabu*," which consists of mixed rice, fresh vegetables, *sambal* (chilli paste), and meats. Unlike *nasi kerabu*, which is widely recognized throughout Malaysia, *khaoyam* is primarily known among the Siamese, Kelantan Peranakan Chinese, and Kelantanese Malays in Kelantan. A distinguishing characteristic of *khaoyam* is its green color, produced by cooking rice with a variety of edible plants. This sets it apart from other Malaysian rice dishes. Within the region, *khaoyam* is regarded as an ethnic food, and specialized shops are predominantly found in or near Siamese temple grounds.

**Fig. 3: Edible leaves are chopped and pounded by mortar and pestle. Photo by author on September 2nd, 2023**



Herbal rice plays a central role in various community events. One significant context for its preparation and consumption is the Kathin festival, the largest Buddhist event for Siamese communities start from beginning of October to the first week of November. The Kathin festival, held annually after Buddhist Lent, includes religious rites such as the offering of yellow robes and the creation of money trees called "*ton ngoen*," which are focal points for merit-making. Festival preparations begin a day in advance as residents gather the edible plants in the afternoon. Women are responsible for the labor-intensive preparation of herbal rice, which includes chopping leaves, blending ingredients using a mortar and pestle, and straining the mixture through cloth.

Women gather edible plants from their homes and bring them to the temple to make herbal rice, marking an important seasonal moment for sharing knowledge, as each village uses different plants for the concoction. According to Pat (pseudonym), interviewed by the author on September 3rd, 2023, women are the key custodians who inherit and pass down this knowledge from older generations, harvesting plants from their environment, with men assisting by preparing coconuts and other ingredients for cooking the rice. This collective process fosters social interaction, culinary knowledge exchange, and intergenerational learning. Festivals, such as the Kathin festival at the temple, provide key opportunities for young people to observe and learn plant selection and preparation techniques from elders. Most informants noted that knowledge of edible plants is passed down through the maternal line, and women learn to cook herbal rice both at home and during these communal gatherings.

Herbal rice is also available outside of festival settings, with *khaoyam* shops commonly situated near or inside temple. The importance of the temple in Siamese community life is reflected in both religious and culinary traditions. It is especially popular as a breakfast item or during auspicious events that attract large gatherings.

“Herbal rice has become an ethnic food that clearly represents Siamese identity. People both tourists and locals know they can find this delicacy near the temples because the Siamese community traditionally settles in pockets around Thai Theravada Buddhist temple”

Boon (pseudonym), interviewed by author on August 26th, 2023

Herbal rice shops serve as important physical spaces that reinforce fundamental aspects of Siamese ethnic identity, which is expressed both within the community and in public settings. From the author’s observations, these shops are a popular choice among locals and tourists visiting the temples, and their presence within temple grounds highlights the availability of herbal rice in both private and public spheres.

Moreover, the sharing of herbal rice during auspicious occasions also reflects interethnic relations, especially during family celebrations such as weddings. Siamese hosts demonstrate respect for their Malay Muslim guests by preparing halal dishes, including herbal rice. The author had the opportunity to attend wedding ceremonies in multiple villages, where Siamese hosts consistently invite their Muslim Malay friends to join the celebrations.

“Siamese always invite Muslim Malays to join the ceremonies, either before or after the main rituals. We have been friends and neighbors for a long time. They, Malay Muslims, trust us because they know we understand Islamic customs (*adat*) very well. Herbal rice is always a choice for this type of ceremony because it can make it *halal*. This kind of relationship is distinct. You will not often find Malay guests are invited to share meals inside Buddhist homes elsewhere in Malaysia”

Yai (pseudonym) interviewed by the author on January 20th, 2024

The preparation begins by setting aside a separate time for Muslim guests. To respect dietary restrictions, the herbal rice is cooked separately to avoid contact with pork ingredients. Additionally, a new set of eating utensils or plastic utensils is provided. This approach reflects a deep awareness of local cultural norms and the dietary requirements of Muslim guests, facilitating cross-cultural exchange and mutual respect. For many Malay Muslims, these events provide rare occasions to enjoy Siamese herbal rice, which is typically available only within temple grounds and inside the household. A Malay Muslim informant expressed trust in the Siamese practice of preparing *halal* dishes and described herbal rice as a symbolic dish that can be shared with people of other religious backgrounds.

The findings highlight diversity of edible plants in making herbal rice concoction in Siamese communities across Kelantan state with ten main plants and several repetitive plants. This plant usage reflects deeply rooted and shared edible plants knowledge that is practice through both daily practice and public activities. Herbal rice is one of important cultural materials that highlight Siamese ethnic identity and emphasize the unique ethnic food. Furthermore, by adapting the dish to meet religious dietary requirements during interethnic celebrations, herbal rice becomes not only a symbol of Siamese heritage but also a medium for social cohesion and respect among diverse groups.

## DISCUSSION

This discussion draws upon essential findings that reveal the connection between the Siamese community and the Kelantan landscape, ecological knowledge, and the construction of place, which together elucidate Siamese ethnic identity and the importance of herbal rice

in shaping the meaning of specific landscapes. Begin with a foundational definition of place as a humanized space, a blank canvas made vibrant by human interactions and emotional investments (Tuan, 1977). Place contains meanings created by humans, reflected through interaction and emotion, and requires a comprehensive understanding of cultural significance to be fully appreciated. This research grounds the discussion on two key findings: first, that ethnic identity is constructed through place, and second, that the compiled list of edible plants underscores the relationship between humans and the landscape, highlighting the significance of the cultural landscape and foodscape of herbal rice in Kelantan.

The notion of locality and place is multifaceted, involving both material and non-material values through which people create meaning and experience. As Lovell (1998) suggests, belonging provides a collective identity and a sense of cultural cohesion and commensality. Locality is not static; it is continually constructed, negotiated, and reimagined. From a phenomenological perspective, place encompasses physical environments as well as events, tradition, and memories. For example, Trubek (2008) in her study of terroir in France demonstrates how the experience of taste is deeply associated with particular places and culinary practices. She contends that terroir, which literally means “earth” in French, also refers to the personal and collective histories attached to a place, connecting food choices to heritage and roots. Therefore, the meaning of place must account for people, tradition, and collective heritage within both physical and intangible spaces.

### **The construction of place and ethnic identity through herbal rice**

The formative role of place in constructing identity has been recognized at individual, community, and societal levels (Appadurai, 1996; Ingold, 1996). Drawing on the concept of “sense of place,” which refers to a local structure of feeling that emphasizes the differences in how people experience place (Agnew, 1987). As Law (2001, p. 275) notes, “food acquires its meaning through the place it is assembled and eaten,” the experience of food and the construction of specific foods provide distinct meanings that are attached to place. Furthermore, the notion of taste, as Trubek (2008) illustrates through the idea of terroir, is shaped by both the physical environment and shared tradition, as each food connects individuals to a specific landscape, history, and community narrative. In this way, herbal rice serves as a manifestation of place, embodying the relationships among people, plants, and the environments they inhabit. Collective memory is encoded in the identification and use of various edible plants, and these foodways become powerful means by which the Siamese construct and experience their sense of place in the Kelantan plain.

The role of herbal rice in the ongoing construction of ethnic identity is to identify the construction of the sense of place. In Kelantan, a region characterized by multi-ethnic interaction, food provides a tangible and visible marker that marks both social and spatial boundaries between minority groups (Siamese and predominantly Kelantanese Malays). Alongside Thai Theravada Buddhist temples and the Siamese dialect, herbal rice distinguishes the Siamese as a minority group, often classified as “others” (*lain-lain* in Malay) and partly recognized as Bumiputra (indicating groups that settled in Malaysia prior to colonization). Johnson (2012) and Mohamed Yusoff Ismail (1993) highlight the significance of temples as important arenas of Siamese identity and mobility. The use of herbal rice in ceremonies, community gatherings, and temple-based shops, as well as its pivotal role in celebrations such as the Kathin festival, illustrates how everyday food practices contribute to the spatial and symbolic boundaries that define and reinforce Siamese ethnic identity. These activities not only strengthen communal cohesion, but also make Siamese identity recognizable to neighboring groups, fostering both boundary-making and opportunities for cross-cultural engagement. Ritual and seasonality further heighten the

symbolic value of herbal rice. Particularly during the rainy season and the annual Kathin festival, the elaborate and labor-intensive preparation of herbal rice involves collective participation, experiential learning, and the reinforcement of social ties. Food, as Sutton (2010) argues, functions as a mnemonic device that anchors communal memory to cyclical time and natural rhythms. The rhythm of harvesting and utilizing particular plants at specific times of the year links the community's sense of continuity with their environment, while the shared experience of preparing and consuming herbal rice at communal events furthers the transmission of knowledge and strengthens the ties of community belonging. According to the concept of *terroir* (Trubek, 2008), the taste of herbal rice functions as a form of collective identity for the Siamese in Kelantan. It serves as a mnemonic material that recalls seasonal cycles and the ecological diversity surrounding the community, reinforcing the continued presence and distinctiveness of the Siamese among other ethnic groups. Moreover, herbal rice shops have become important physical anchors of this identity. As places where ethnic food is consistently available, these shops embody a sense of place that captures both physical and social dimensions, including place attachment and place dependence (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2006). Their presence alongside temples and Siamese settlements underscores the cultural landscape in which herbal rice is embedded, connecting individuals to specific locations and contributing to the emotional and collective meaning of Siamese identity for both locals and visitors.

The social function of herbal rice is not limited to intra-community relations; it also operates as a bridge in interethnic contexts. Adaptations in the preparation of herbal rice, such as accommodating *halal* dietary requirements for Malay Muslim guests at major events, reveal the flexibility of foodways in supporting intercultural respect and dialogue. In such moments, herbal rice becomes a medium for expressing hospitality and mutual recognition, simultaneously affirming Siamese cultural identity and supporting peaceful coexistence in a plural society. The food practices of the Siamese, along with other forms of social courtesy, have long been observed by scholars (Johnson, 2012; Suwannathat-Pian, 1998; Winzeler, 1985) as reflecting salient, flexible mutual relationships built on longstanding ties between the Siamese, Kelantan Peranakan Chinese, and Kelantanese Malay Muslims. This action a willingness to build bridges with other groups and exemplifies food's role as both a marker of distinctiveness and a site of negotiation and mutual recognition (Agnew, 2011). The community's relationship with herbal rice illustrates that place is not solely a matter of geography, but is dynamically constituted through shared practices, collective memory, and the continual exchange between internal traditions and external influences. In essence, herbal rice exemplifies how everyday food traditions are central to both the preservation and expression of cultural distinctiveness, while ensuring that the Siamese remain rooted, both physically and symbolically within physical landscape and social interethnic relations among Kelantanese.

The sense of place provides the cultural meaning of herbal rice as a socially constructed symbol that expresses Siamese cultural identity. It highlights the physical places connected through herbal rice, which both construct ethnic identity and shape interethnic relationships between the Siamese and other ethnic groups in Kelantan state. Place is understood as an overarching concept that encompasses landscape as its material, ecological, and spatial foundation. Within this framework, landscape provides the physical setting, while place and sense of place emerge through cultural meanings, practices, and lived experiences. This section examines the construction of place as cultural meaning arising from the Kelantan Plain landscape, explaining the unique phenomenon of herbal rice through the concepts of

cultural landscape, foodscape, and a new concept emerging from the findings“ eating in a shared landscape.”

Landscape is commonly defined as “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors” (European Landscape Convention, 2000). Culturally, landscape is shaped by human interaction with nature, emphasizing the importance of cultural perspectives. Herbal rice, as cultural material, signifies cultural identity and gives meaning to place. Cultural landscapes exist at the intersection of nature and culture, tangible and intangible heritage, and biological and cultural diversity. They form a closely woven network of relationships that embody culture and identity (Rössler, 2006). The concept of cultural landscape focuses on the connection between nature, culture, and identity. Foodscape, or food landscape, is therefore an integral part of cultural landscape. Foodscape encompasses places where people grow, purchase, prepare food, and share food-related knowledge (MacKendrick, 2014). The preparation and consumption of herbal rice reflect the community’s deep-rooted connection to the local environment, as shown through the diversity of edible plants skillfully gathered and the methods used to create herbal mixtures. From a foodscape perspective, the Siamese community’s skills in foraging and identifying edible plants for herbal rice underline a distinctive foodscape shaped by everyday practices of sourcing ingredients from home gardens, nearby forests, and rice fields. These practices reveal deep ecological knowledge embedded in lived experiences and contribute to the unique meanings of food and place among the Siamese. This cultural and ecological knowledge, reflected in the extended list of herbal plants documented across six villages, strongly supports this interpretation. This traditional ecological knowledge, related to edible plant use, involves understandings of resources, environmental practices, and meanings attached to specific landscapes (Berkes, 1999; Usher, 2000). This ecological literacy goes beyond sustenance; it becomes a mode of “eating the landscape” (Salmón, 2012), where plants, taste, knowledge, and place are inseparably intertwined. The stories, practices, and preferences surrounding herbal rice are transmitted intergenerationally, with elders passing down both practical skills and the symbolic meanings tied to the ingredients and preparation.

### **The notion of “eating in a shared landscape” among Siamese in Kelantan**

To further conceptualize this phenomenon, I propose the notion of “eating in a shared landscape.” This concept highlights the broader implications of shared food practices in forming and expressing collective attachments to place. The act of consuming herbal rice, embedded in seasonal rituals, communal gatherings, and interethnic festivities, serves as a mechanism through how the Siamese community negotiates its identity and affirms its ongoing presence in the Kelantanese landscape. Eating herbal rice can be understood on two levels. First, the cultural meaning of herbal rice constructs social meaning through emotional and societal attachments to place. Second, it reflects the relationship between the Siamese and the landscape, as seen through local knowledge of edible plants used to make herbal concoctions harvested within the villages.

The concept of commensality further explains “eating in a shared landscape.” While commensality is commonly understood as the practice of eating together, Seremetakis (1994) expands this to encompass the exchange of sensory memories and emotions as well as substances and objects that embody remembrance and feeling. He explains, “Historical consciousness and other forms of social knowledge are created and then replicated in time and space through commensal ethics and exchange” (Seremetakis, 1994, p.37 ). The emotions and memories shared by those who eat together help construct shared rules and practices. Commensality signifies unity and sharing in most cultural contexts. It reflects

social roles and positions, revealing an individual's place within social networks and systems (Sobal *et al.*, 2002). Often, commensality unifies social members by reinforcing their roles and positions within their social surroundings. Based on the findings, shared meals among the Siamese during religious festivals at temples, as well as meals shared between the Siamese and Malay Muslims, evoke memories and feelings of mutual recognition that transcend religious and ethnic boundaries. This crossing of differences represents one of the most prominent social functions of herbal rice, moving beyond the traditional notion of commensality.

The concept of “eating in a shared landscape” thus captures meanings related not only to physical spaces such as temple grounds, edible plants surrounding villages, and herbal rice shops, but also to the cultural landscape produced through herbal rice. This includes the construction of place and sense of place associated with herbal rice, which imbue locations with emotional and cultural significance, marking their actual locality. This understanding aligns with Hausmann *et al.* (2016) and Wilk (2008), who argue that food acts as a bridge linking social relationships to ecological contexts and endowing both with symbolic resonance. Collective memory, local narratives, and kinship ties the expression in the preparation and consumption of traditional dishes, giving tangible form to otherwise abstract notions of heritage and belonging. To support the concept of “eating in a shared landscape,” the notion of a shared landscape underpins not only the sharing of a physical environment but also the production of a cultural landscape that encompasses the formation of place and sense of place within the unique Kelantan Plain. This shared landscape is constituted through everyday food practices that link food, social practice, and ecological environments, and it is collectively inhabited and negotiated by the Siamese. Drawing on commons theory, particularly the concept of the “commons” as articulated by De Angelis (2017), the shared landscape can be understood as a socio-ecological assemblage produced through social relations. In this sense, the commons refers not only to the landscape itself but also to the collective practices, norms, and meanings generated through food practices and social interaction. Herbal rice exemplifies this process of sharing, as it relies on shared ecological spaces while simultaneously generating social cooperation, mutual recognition, and interethnic relations, thereby constructing a commons through everyday acts of eating and food preparation. These multifaceted interactions reveal that the Siamese experience of place in Kelantan is not solitary or isolated. Instead, it is actively constructed and continually reshaped through shared memories, kinship ties, communal rituals, everyday practices grounded in the local environment, and shared landscape. Herbal rice, in this context, symbolizes broader ongoing processes through which ethnic identity is negotiated, articulated, and made visible. At the same time, the community maintains its roots in both the physical environment and the socio-cultural fabric of its homeland.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that herbal rice among the Siamese in Kelantan is more than a traditional dish; it reflects the deep relationship between people and their natural environment and helps shape cultural identity and a sense of place. Through detailed knowledge of edible plants and food practices, herbal rice reveals how the Siamese connect with the landscape ecology of the Kelantan plain. To better understand this, the study proposes the concept of “eating in a shared landscape,” which captures both cultural and ecological dimensions of this practice. This concept highlights how herbal rice is not only embodies cultural traditions but also reflects the ecological knowledge of the environment in

which it is produced and consumed. Sharing herbal rice during festivals and family gatherings fosters social bonds, encouraging trust and mutual respect between the Siamese and Malay communities. As a cultural symbol, herbal rice links different ethnic groups through shared memories, rituals, and a common relationship to the land. This connection between food, place, and identity underscores the importance of cultural landscapes, where food practices carry both material and symbolic meaning. Herbal rice exemplifies how food can strengthen social relationships and promote a shared sense of belonging, while also revealing the intertwined cultural and ecological systems that sustain diverse ecology and ethnic communities.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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