

An Autoethnographic Exploration of Malaysian Rendang

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2021

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A dissertation submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Gastronomy

Supervisor

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Abstract

The study of gastronomy involves the domains of history and culture, and the ways in which socio-cultures give meaning to food. That meaning creates food's actant and symbolic realities, and those realities aid the construction of our everyday lives. Reflecting these domains, my research dissertation develops and explores gastronomic insights into a popular Malaysian dish. Rendang is not only a vernacular Malaysian dish, but also a 'must eat' food that is recommended to tourists visiting Malaysia. With my personal narratives and ethnographic methodology, I actively engage with my dual realm of existence, having lived in both Malaysia and Aotearoa New Zealand, to illuminate rendang's meaning for me, and its meaning particularly within Malay culture. Consequently, the four central tenets of symbolic interactionism form my research method. As I apply the first and second tenet of symbolic interactionism, I actively engage in understanding the symbolic meanings of my actions within Malay socio-culture. Then, I implement the third and fourth tenet, reflecting holistically how meanings emerged and are re-created within my interactions with my family, friends, and wider community. Within that approach, my autoethnographic exploration of rendang places it as a dish that reveals knowledge transfer, the importance of belief and how symbols like rendang help us to construct and make sense of our world. Within the academic framework of my rendang research, I also located and negotiated my own taken-for-granted knowledge as a Malay, Muslim and Malaysian. Engaging in that process was one of the most challenging aspects of my research. In that way, I have been fortunate. My dissertation prompted me to question how I have come to acquire my taken-for-granted knowledge and come to understand the ways in which I see and negotiate the world around me. Exploring rendang has made real, for me, the importance of theory in everyday life, in almost unthinking ways. As I near the end of my journey, my autoethnographic study of rendang has revealed several things, the most important of which is the whakapapa of knowledge within families and communities that is expressed through rendang, particularly as a symbol of love.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I express my gratitude to my wonderful parents for providing me with the opportunity to live and study in Aotearoa New Zealand. That decision and the sacrifices that you have made have shaped me into the person that I am today; I thank you both! Also, thank you for always believing in me and motivating me to give my dissertation and my study my all. Additionally, I thank you for comforting me in my time of need. I love you, and I would not be where I am today without your continuous love and support.

Secondly, I express my gratitude to my younger brothers and to my partner. My brothers took me to university and helped me by helping Mum in the kitchen. I thank my partner for his love and support, and for giving me space to complete my work and for comforting me with delicious food during my study and research breaks.

Similarly, I thank my supervisor Dr Lindsay Neill. Thank you for being patient and for understanding my 'burnout' and for taking the initiative to address it. Thank you for helping me through my writing and believing in me from the very beginning. Your supervision and feedback helped me produce quality work. I was fortunate to have you as my supervisor. Thank you, I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Finally, I acknowledge and thank myself for keeping sane throughout this journey. While I experienced several setbacks, I was guided by my own patience and my belief in myself that I could do it! Completing my dissertation has taught me a lot about myself, my way of being, and my culture, within the realisation that I have taken so many of those constructs for granted. I have no regrets! I did it!

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Date: 31st October 2021

Glossary of Terms

Term	Explanation
Anyam	A Malay word translated as ‘plaiting’.
Bersanding	A Malay wedding custom involving the bride and groom sitting on the pelamin while rituals commence.
Batu lado	A traditional Malay version of a mortar and pestle.
Baju kurung	Traditional clothes for Malay women.
Baju melayu	Traditional clothes for Malay men.
Bunga telur	A traditional gift of hardboiled eggs gifted to guests during Malay weddings.
Char kuey teow	A flat noodle dish, cooked with meat, seafood, chives, eggs and beansprouts (Mok, 2014).
Halal	An Islamic term defined as ‘permissible’ (Nakyinsige et al., 2012).
Haram	An Islamic term defined as ‘prohibited’ (Nakyinsige et al., 2012).
Hari Raya	Internationally known as Eid, Hari Raya is an Islamic holiday celebrated by Muslims around the world to mark the end of Ramadhan, their fasting month (Fang, 2021).
Imam	An Imam is referred to as a leader, usually during prayers (Desai, 2002).
Ketupat	Cubed cooked rice woven with young coconut leaves.
Kuah kacang	A Malay version of peanut sauce.
Kuala Lumpur	The capital city of Malaysia.
Lemang	A glutinous rice dish that is often paired with rendang (Nik Mohd Nor et al., 2020).
Malay	One of the largest ethnic groups in Malaysia. Malay people speak Malay language and are Muslim (Mohd Rusli & Mohamad, 2014).
Malaya	A term referring to the Peninsular of Malaysia before the region’s independence in 1963 (McGibbon, 2016).

Malaysian	Any ethnicity regardless of faith that identifies themselves with the country of Malaysia.
Makcik	A title given to middle-aged women out of respect in Malaysia.
Marandang, merendang	Denotes a cooking technique (Rahman, 2020) which involves cooking for a long period of time (Nurmufida et al., 2017).
Minangkabau	A name of an ethnic Malay tribe originating in Indonesia (Mardatillah, 2020).
Muslim	Anyone who practices the Islamic faith.
Nasi campur	A rice dish that is consumed with a variety of side dishes, usually selected from a self-service buffet (Wiens, 2021).
Nasi Lemak	A coconut rice dish served with cucumber, eggs, fried anchovies and roasted peanuts (James, 2020).
Nasi minyak	A fragrant rice dish infused with spices and clarified butter (Grace, 2019).
Oghang Nogori	People of Negeri Sembilan region in Malaysia.
Oghe Kelate	People of Kelantan region in Malaysia.
Padang	The capital city of West Sumatra.
Pecah minyak	A cooking process called ‘oil splitting’ (Hassan, 2018).
Pelamin	A Malay term for a wedding dais.
Pulut kuning	A “yellow steamed glutinous rice dish” (Noor et al., 2013, p. 32).
Rantau	The act of wandering (Tanjung et al., 2020).
Rendang	A dish “made with beef simmered in spices and coconut milk” (Nurmufida et al., 2017, p. 233).
Rumah gadang	Signifies the maternal family’s house in Minang society.
Silaturrahim	An Islamic term that signifies kinship and the bond between people (Al Ghozali, 2017).
Sambal	A chilli paste/sauce, either uncooked or cooked.
Sesi Minta Maaf	A Malay tradition of asking forgiveness to each other on Hari Raya morning.
‘Terima Kasih Daun Keladi, Kerana Sudi	An appreciation and thank-you note in a form of Malay poetry.

Membaca Disertasi Ini'	
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Chapter 1: Overview/Background

Introduction to My Research

To complete my dissertation within the Masters of Gastronomy programme at Auckland University of Technology, I chose a topic that is deeply connected to my identity and my ways of being and becoming as a Malaysian Muslim: rendang. My research explores rendang, cognisant of Brillat-Savarin's (1825/2009) famous aphorism "tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you who you are" (p. 15). Reflecting my choice of topic is the consideration that if a non-Malaysian were to ask me what food would be a 'must eat' in Malaysia, then I would recommend rendang. I am not alone in that recommendation. Calderon (2017) also commented that rendang is a 'must eat' food when visiting Malaysia. However, exploring that dish within my dissertation is deeper than a recommendation for a tourist's 'must eat' experience.

So, what is rendang? Rendang is a traditional Indonesian dish. It originated in Minangkabau, West Sumatra, Indonesia, and over time has been adapted by various Malay communities in Malaysia. Rendang comprises meat, spices, herbs, and coconut milk. Consequent to the combination of ingredients, and rendang's extended cooking time, the dish has a concentrated flavour and fragrant aroma (Nurmufida et al., 2017). Within Minangkabau's socio-culture, rendang has a symbolic status. As Alimin and Kusnomo (2018) explained, rendang's ingredients symbolise the hierarchy within the Minangkabau community. In this way, and cognisant of Woodward (2007), rendang has come to represent something more than food. Rendang holds cultural connotations and connections.

According to Polat and Polat (2020), food plays an important role in the construction of our individual and collective identities. Within this consideration, rendang's preparation and consumption fosters its link to identity, and emphasises the importance of interaction. In that interaction, and communication, memories are made, and feelings are both reinforced and created. As Tibere et al. (2019) proposed, new friendships are often formed in situations that include rendang. In this way, food promotes themes of belonging and social meaning (Polat & Polat, 2020).

Applying these insights to my research, I reflect upon my knowledge and lived experiences that include rendang. Drawing upon them, I extend my autoethnography, within a personal narrative, to consider rendang within wider Malaysian socio-culture.

That process reflects, as Qutoshi (2015) noted, a transformative journey “that begins with exploration of researcher, ... the self [and then] beyond ... at our conscious level” (p. 163). This approach implies that, autoethnography should be more than a reflection of self, but an extension of self within the wider socio-culture. With these points in mind, I consider that my autoethnography, and its extension within wider Malaysian socio-culture, is also aligned to Bakhtin’s (1981) dual realm of existence.¹ That concept recognises that, as author, I am a product of two primary spheres of influence: my life in Malaysia, and my more recent life in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is within this combination that I reflect upon my connections with rendang.

Rationale for My Research

Two factors dominated my decision to undertake this research. The first reflects the requirement that, to complete my Master of Gastronomy degree, I needed to complete a research dissertation. Considering that made me decide to choose a topic that was interesting to me and that would stimulate my ongoing research work.

These considerations provoked my research curiosity. I wanted to explore my identity, my way of being and, most importantly, the construction of rendang, a dish I grew up eating. Rendang, as I have come to know it, has been a food item and symbol that I have taken for granted. Consequently, my research into it provides an exciting way for me to discover more about the dish and, in doing so, more about myself as a Malay, Muslim, and Malaysian.

Overview of My Dissertation

Here, I present an overview of my dissertation’s chapters. Chapter 1 introduces my research, my research questions and my rationale for undertaking this dissertation. Furthermore, this chapter provides an overview of my dissertation, its link to gastronomy, and an introduction to its author, Farzana Zainurin. In Chapter 2, I present the background and contextual information underpinning my research. In this chapter, I include a brief history of the Malay Archipelago, the land of the Malays, and the beginnings of an independent Malaysia. Additionally, I introduce Malaysian food culture, the Minangkabau people and, lastly, my research topic, rendang. Chapter 3 presents my

¹ Bakhtin (1981) realised the dual realm of existence within the reversal of social order of the medieval carnivals of Europe. Then, a king could be a pauper and a pauper could be a carnival king. My use of Bakhtin’s terminology extends its original intent to reflect my ‘two’ realms, one in Malaysia, and one in Aotearoa New Zealand.

theoretical and conceptual frameworks and my considerations of ontology and epistemology (Levers, 2013). I also present my understandings of symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016), the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and material culture theory and actancy (Woodward, 2007). My literature review is presented in Chapter 4. There, I discuss relevant literature on the symbolic nature of food, before concentrating my literature review's focus on the symbolic nature of food in Malaysia.

In Chapter 5, I present methodology and method. For me, methodology represents the theoretical themes constituting the practice of research, whereas method is the application of those theories in 'doing' research. Consequently, this chapter explores autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2010), personal narrative (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), and my application of the four central tenets of symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016). Considering those positions, Chapter 6 presents my autoethnographic narratives – four important narratives about rendang. These narratives are: rendang during Hari Raya, rendang during weddings, rendang as a commercial dish, and rendang as comfort food. My personal narratives in Chapter 6 are explicated in the following chapter, Chapter 7, which presents the discussion of and conclusion to my research. Here, within my discussion section, I synthesise my research findings cognisant of literature, distil my contribution to research, identify my research limitations, and recommend domains for future study. I conclude my dissertation's final chapter with a short section of written reflection about my experience in completing this dissertation.

My Research Questions

To explore rendang, I developed three research questions. My primary research question asked:

- What are the symbolic and cultural meanings of rendang within Malay socio-culture in Malaysia?

Underpinning that question, my two secondary questions asked:

- What occasions and themes reflect the importance of rendang within my own lived experiences?
- How do those occasions and themes reflect wider Malaysian culture and society?

Linking my Research to Gastronomy

Gastronomy has many definitions. Exemplifying that, Gillespie (2001) defined gastronomy as the study of food's role within various cultures. That study, as Maberly and Reid (2014) proposed, helps our understanding of the role of food in our everyday lives. Santich (2009) suggested that gastronomy is "a kind of religion, a way of life" (p. 213). This is made real when we consider the rituals involved when we prepare and eat food. However, for the father of gastronomy, Brillat-Savarin (1825/2009), gastronomy was about "the intelligent knowledge of whatever concerns man's [sic] nourishment" (p. 61). Within that knowledge, Brillat-Savarin (1825/2009) proposed, gastronomy includes the study of history, chemistry, cookery, business, and political economy. As a result, cognisant of the positions taken by Gillespie (2001), Santich (2009), and Maberly and Reid (2014), my relationship with rendang and its place within my experiences and wider Malay culture shows how one dish, rendang, illuminates the symbolic importance of food. Within these considerations, and from my own perspective, rendang is more than just a source of nutrition. I propose that rendang symbolically communicates and upholds Malay history, denotes the amalgam of chemistry and cookery, and connotes business and socio-economics. Within that gastronomic blend, rendang also reflects my relationships with my family and my interactions within wider Malay socio-culture.

Getting to Know the Author



Source: Author's Own
(2021).

Kia Ora. My name is Farzana Zainurin. I am 23 years old. I was born and raised in Malaysia. I identify as a Muslim, a Malay, and a Malaysian. When I was 5 years old, my family moved from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Perth, Australia. There, my father studied for his PhD. After he graduated, and prompted by my parent's desire that their children become immersed in the Malaysian language, Islamic education, and our traditions and culture, we returned to Malaysia and resettled in Kuala Lumpur. Then, when I was 16, our family migrated to Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. There, I went to college and excelled through Year's 11-13. Later, I went to university and gained a bachelor's degree in arts, majoring in culinary arts and hospitality. Now, I look toward the completion of my master's degree in gastronomy.

With that background, my life and dissertation are viewed through the lens of a 23-year-old Malay, Muslim, Malaysian, who has lived in Malaysia, Australia and now Aotearoa New Zealand. With my maternal family I identify as Minangkabau. While my realities and knowledge are grounded within my family background and the influences of my upbringing, theory has also influenced the way I have come to not only view my world, but also to research my topic. I will discuss those theoretical influences later in my work (refer Chapter 3). In the meantime, I would like to share more about myself and my background.

My view of the world has been realised within its dynamism. Key to that dynamic worldview was my coming to Aotearoa New Zealand, my time at high school and my later university study. Study in Aotearoa New Zealand has encouraged me to view a topic in different ways compared to my study of the same topic in Malaysia. Specifically, in completing my dissertation in Aotearoa New Zealand, I have had to research and elaborate upon information, that in Malaysia would simply be taken for granted. That 'thinking process' has caused me to reflect upon 'what I know,' and how I have 'come to know it'. Consequently, my base ontologies and epistemologies have been brought into question. Reflecting that, my supervisor was continually asking me 'what does this mean'; 'why do people do that;' 'please explain more, I don't understand.' His questioning revealed two important things. The first was his lack of knowledge about Malay/Muslim culture and the second was my own taken-for-granted knowledge about my culture and rendang, which I had assumed he shared. However, in completing my work, I am not in Malaysia and my supervisor is not a Muslim. Notwithstanding that, completing my dissertation has been very challenging for me. That challenge was reflected in my academic validation of Malaysian socio-culture that I had previously taken for granted. Needless to say, I undertook extensive research in order to validate my taken-for-granted knowledge. In that way, I began to consider what I knew, and how I came to know it in more holistic ways. Consequently, I have come to realise that within my autoethnographic exploration of rendang, my lived experiences of it reflect a unique combination of insider ("emic") and outsider ("etic") perspectives (Jary & Jary, 2005, p. 182). As I have come to realise, these perspectives have added depth to my own understanding and to my research.

Chapter 2: Background and Contextual Information

The Malay Archipelago – ‘The Land of the Malays’

The Malay Archipelago constitutes the “vast chain of islands stretching eastward from Sumatra for more than 6,000 kilometres” (Quammen, 2013, p. 165). The region exceeds 2 million square kilometres (Moore & Fairbridge, 1997). The archipelago includes a wide group of South-East Asian islands including Malaysia, Indonesia, Borneo, and the Philippines (Embong et al., 2016). As Embong et al. (2016) noted, the Malays were the earliest inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago. The migration of people to South-East Asia occurred in two waves, the first wave of peoples populating the Malay Archipelago occurred around 2500BC (Ryan, 1976). They were identified as Proto-Malays (Ryan, 1976). The Proto-Malays were the ancestors of the Malaysian aboriginals, also called Orang Asli, Malaysia’s first peoples (Radu, 2019). Omar Din (2011) suggested there were several waves of Proto-Malay migration that began around 489BC (Omar Din, 2011). Despite that contestation, Kedah,² in Bujang Valley, is “Malaysia’s richest archaeological region” (Omar et al., 2010, p. 222) dating back to 500 BC. That site adds to the contestation around dates because archaeological finds there, including cave paintings and graves in Perak, Kelantan, Pahang, Selangor and Kedah which suggest that there were early inhabitants in the archipelago as early as 16AD (Andaya & Andaya, 2016). The second wave of migration to South-East Asia occurred around 511AD, coming from Dongsong in Yunnan Province, South China (Omar Din, 2011). Soon, and because of the region’s geography, trade emerged. Reflecting that, archaeologists have discovered ancient iron-smelting sites in the Bujang Valley, Kedah (Andaya & Andaya, 2016). Evidence of iron, gold, and ceramics linking the region to the Indian and Chinese traders who settled the region has also been found (Andaya & Andaya, 2016).

Because of its rich gold deposits, the Malay Archipelago was also known as the Golden Peninsula (Andaya & Andaya, 2016). Gold became an early status symbol within an emergent Malaysian royal court, signifying the relationship between the land and its peoples (Andaya & Andaya, 2016). That relationship was further enhanced because early Malay people adopted animistic beliefs and made nature the centre of their universe

² Kedah is a region north of Malaysia which “extends from Mount Jerai in the north to the Muda River in the South, and the Straits of Melaka in the west” (Omar et al., 2010, p. 222).

(Omar et al., 2010). However, between the 7th and 13th centuries,³ the peoples of the Malay Archipelago began to learn about Islamic life and belief through the Arab traders and Muslim migrants who came to the area (Ardi & Abdullah, 2018). Despite that exposure, the embrace of Islam took time to evolve. While the emergence of Islam in the region can be traced back to the 1400s, many people still practiced their existing animist beliefs (Ardi & Abdullah, 2018). However, it was not until the time of the Malacca Sultanate (1344), founded by Parameswara,⁴ that Islam expanded widely throughout the archipelago. There are several theories explaining the spread of Islamic belief. Sokri (2020) claimed that, in 1414, Parameswara changed his name to the Islamic Megat Iskandar Shah. Later, and adding to the theories about the embrace of Islam, King Megat Iskandar Shah married a Muslim princess from the Pasai island of Sumatra (Sokri, 2020). Because the king's son embraced Islam, other people within Malaysia began to adopt similar beliefs.

The region's geographic positioning fostered its growth. The strategic importance of the Straits of Malacca reflected their connection to the Indian, and Pacific Oceans and the South China Sea. That connection enabled a faster and safer sea route for the emergent global spice trade (Beech, 2020) and associated commerce (Vann, 2014). Consequently, Malacca became a melting pot of cultures and religions (Beech, 2020). Additionally, because of the region's geographic and trade importance, colonising nations became interested in the area. Malaya was first conquered by the Portuguese in 1511, then the Dutch in 1641, and the British in 1824 (Ghazali, 2012). The region was occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War, and then the British returned in 1946 (Suhaimi & Zahari, 2014). The British ruled Malaya for a total of 171 years (Loo & McKerchar, 2014). During the British administration of Malaya, many Indonesians, Chinese and Indians were encouraged to settle in Malaya as farm, mining, and rubber industry labourers, and commercial assistants (Hirschman, 1986; Suhaimi & Zahari, 2014; Yoshino, 2010).

While the British emphasised trade and commerce, they also generalised the multiple ethnicities of the archipelago. Consequently, many Malay communities struggled to identify themselves because of the British tendency to generalise cultures and ethnicities

³ The 13th century date is contested (Ardi & Abdullah, 2018).

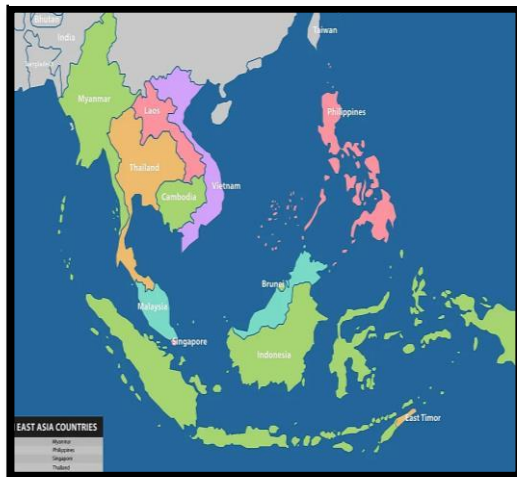
⁴ Parameswara was the son of the King of Palembang (South Sumatra, Indonesia), and of the Hindu faith by descent. He fled to Singapore, moved up to Johor and into Malacca, establishing a trading empire (Wake, 1964).

(Korff, 2001). However, as there were then, there are a wide variety of Malay identities. Reflecting that plurality, Omar Din (2011) proposed that the construct of being and becoming Malay is multifaceted. Within that thinking, identifying as a ‘Malay’ is, according to Omar Din (2011) and Korff (2011), a ‘broad’ claim compounded by the consideration that many Malays in Malaysia identify themselves within their region of origin. For example, Malays in Kelantan State refer to themselves as *Oghe Kelate* (Kelantan people), while Malays in Negeri Sembilan refer to themselves as *Oghang Nogori* (Negeri Sembilan people). That position is reflected by and compounded within the understanding that Malays speak a variety of different dialects and consume different foods (Raji et al., 2017). However, Beng (2000) argued that Indonesians residing in Malaysia are also Malay. According to Beng (2000), within their localisation and assimilation, Indonesian people, including Javanese and the Minangkabau people, are Malays. Additionally, Beng (2000) proposed their status as Malay was compounded because they shared similar religious and cultural traditions. In Malaysia, one can identify as a Malay, a Muslim, and a Malaysian. Consequently, being ‘Malay’ is a broad term. Adding to that has been the assimilation and intermarriage between Chinese traders and indigenous Malays. That blending created a hybridised group of Malay/Chinese (Oh et al., 2019). These considerations illustrate the complexity of Malay socio-culture (Hirschman, 1986).

A New Beginning – Malaysia

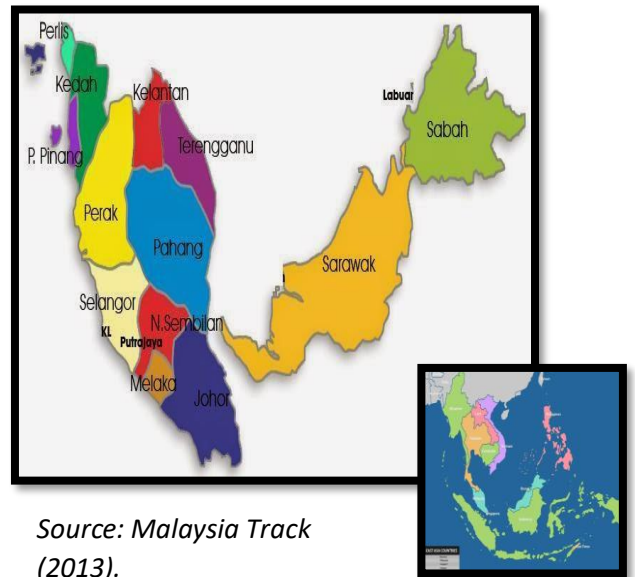
In 1957, Malaya gained independence from Britain (Ghazali, 2012). Then, in 1963, the Federation of Malaya amalgamated with North Borneo (Sabah), Sarawak and Singapore forming the Federation of Malaysia (Lee, 2018). However, in 1965, Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia and became an independent country (Lee, 2018). Today, the Federation of Malaysia is commonly called Malaysia. It is divided into 13 Federation states which are, according to Article 1(2) of the Malaysian Constitution: Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Selangor, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Perlis, Sabah, Sarawak, Negeri Sembilan, and Terengganu. Figures 1 and 2 (below) present Malaysia’s global location and its states.

Figure 1: South-East Asia – Malay Archipelago



Source: Shvili (2021).

Figure 2: States of Malaysia



Source: Malaysia Track (2013).

While Islam is the official religion of the Malaysian Federation, Malaysia is not an Islamic country (Husin & Ibrahim, 2016). According to Malaysia's Federal Constitution, Article 3(1), "Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation" (p. 11). Notwithstanding that, the identity of Malays is linked with Islam by law. Hence, people who identify themselves as Malay automatically become Muslim. Again, that status is noted within Malaysia's Federal Constitution, Article 160: "A Malay means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom" (p. 130). At the point of Malaysia's independence in 1957, people who identified themselves as Malay automatically became Muslim (Malaysia's Federal Constitution, Article 160). Until that point, this was not the case (Omar et al., 2010). Beng (2000) suggested that "it is almost impossible for Malays and even non-Malays to think of Malay identity in Malaysia without Islam" (p. 451). As a result, saying that you are a Malay in Malaysia automatically means you are a Muslim. However, saying you are a 'Malaysian' does not imply that you are a Muslim or a Malay. Thus, being Malaysian is a national identification not an ethnicity nor religion (Spykerman et al., 2015). In 2020, Malays accounted for 69.6% of Malaysia's population, Chinese people accounted for 22.6% and Indians 6.8%. 'Other' ethnicities constituted 1% of the population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Despite these estimates, Malaysian ethnicities are so diverse in terms of religion, ethnicity, values, and beliefs that Hun and Kaur (2014) argued that Malaysia contains up to 70 ethnic groupings. It would be difficult to include all of them in my dissertation.

Therefore, my dissertation will focus on the Malay and Minangkabau socio-culture in Malaysia.

Within the distinctions outlined above, Malays are united by their Islamic faith (Korff, 2001). Consequently, Islamic culture impacts the foods that many Malays consume (Korff, 2001). Within that consideration are the dietary prohibitions of *The Quran*. Pork and alcohol are two prohibitions.

Considering pork, *The Quran* notes:

He has only forbidden to you dead animals, blood, the flesh of swine, and that which has been dedicated to other than God. But whoever is forced [by necessity], neither desiring [it] nor transgressing [its limit] – then indeed, God is Forgiving and Merciful. (*The Quran*, Chapter 16, Verse 115)

Additionally, considering alcohol, *The Quran* considers:

Satan's plan is (but) to excite enmity and hatred between you, with intoxicants and gambling, and hinder you from the remembrance of God, and from prayer: Will ye not then abstain? (*The Quran*, Chapter 5, Verse 94)

Other prohibitions within *The Quran* include the consumption of dogs, cats, hawks, frogs, snakes, mice, rodents, and eagles (Gandhi, 2018). Their prohibition is because they are animals that possess canine teeth and/or talons, which makes them unlawful for Muslims to eat (Fawzi, 2019). Consequently, practicing Muslims only consume food and beverages that are considered to be halal. The word 'halal' derives from the Arabic language and defines something that is permissible and allowed within Islam (Nakyinsige et al., 2012). Related to food, halal denotes a product that can be eaten. Contrasting halal is haram. Within Islamic teaching, anything haram is prohibited (Nakyinsige et al., 2012). In the context of food and beverage, haram denotes items that Muslims should not consume. However, these terms extend beyond food. According to Hasri et al. (2016), halal also reflects hygiene and cleanliness. However, considerations of halal and haram are not absolute. Exemplifying that, *The Quran* reveals that Muslims can eat prohibited foods if there are no other alternatives when the person faces starvation and death, or they are forced to consume an item considered to be haram (Huda, 2019). However, for meat to be considered halal, as Nakyinsige et al. (2012) explained, the animal should be slaughtered within the guidelines noted in Table 1.

Table 1: Halal Slaughtering Guidelines

Action	Rationale
Slitting of the animal's throat	"Must be slaughtered by a sane adult Muslim by severing the trachea, oesophagus, jugular vein and carotid artery in a single swipe using a sharp knife, upon recitation of the phrase "Bismillah, Allahu Akbar" (In the Name of Allah, Allah is Greatest) or "Bismillahi Rahman Rahim" (In the Name of Allah, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful)" (Nakyinsige et al., 2012, p. 169).
Using a sharp knife	The knife must be sharp to ensure a 'clean cut' and reduce the animal's pain (Grandin, 2014).
Direction of prayer	When slitting the throat of the animal, the action should be undertaken facing Makkah (Mecca) because this is the direction of prayer for Muslims (Abdullah et al., 2019).

Source: Adapted from Nakyinsige et al. (2012), Grandin (2014), and Abdullah et al. (2019).

Because Islam is practised by most of the Malaysian population, most of the food and beverages adhere to halal requirements (Hasri et al., 2016), unless otherwise declared at their point of sale. Reflecting that is the 'taken-for-granted' concept of halal food among Malay communities. In Malaysia, it is uncommon for Malays to enquire about the halal status of the food because it is considered that the seller 'knows' and will inform them if the food is not halal. In western countries, like Aotearoa New Zealand, Muslims need to ask for halal food or be aware that their consumption of food meets *The Quran's* requirements. In those ways, in the eyes of non-Muslims, 'halal' became a point of identity and religious symbolism (Brown, 2016).

Malaysian Food Culture

Malaysia is "a country in Southeast Asia that is multi-ethnic, multifait, and multi-culinary" (Lee, 2017, p. 140). Key to Malaysia's contemporary growth and expansion is its diverse ethnic mix (Suhaimi & Zahari, 2014). Within Malaysia's post-colonial space and ethnic diversity, Lee (2017) proposed that a dynamic food and cultural awareness has facilitated the genesis of a 'new' Malaysian culture. As a result, cuisines, including Chinese cuisine, that often use pork are replaced with other meats, seafood, or vegetables, to accommodate Malay halal requirements (Suhaimi & Zahari, 2014). Exemplifying that is a dish called char kuey teow. Traditionally, in areas of Malaysia with a large Chinese population, like Penang,⁵ char kuey teow is a flat noodle dish that is fried in a wok with

⁵ Pulau Pinang, or Penang, is a state in Malaysia located in the north-west of the peninsula.

its special sauce, Chinese pork sausage, chives, eggs, beansprouts, and seafood (Mok, 2014). In many Chinese Malaysian kitchens, non-halal ingredients such as Chinese pork sausage and lard are used to make char kuey teow. Because of those ingredients, Malays cannot eat this dish. However, this dish has been adapted to meet halal requirements (Daily Masak, 2021). Pork sausage and lard have been replaced with oil and seafood including cockles and prawns. Compounding those changes, the dish can also be served ‘wet’ or ‘dry’ (Daily Masak, 2021).

Another dish with a similar ‘duality’ is nasi lemak. Nasi lemak, is a classic Malaysian dish (Tibere et al., 2019). It is a dish that can easily be found in venues ranging from roadside stalls to restaurants (Benedict, 2019). Nasi lemak consists of fragrant coconut rice, egg, crispy anchovies, peanuts, sliced cucumber, and sambal (James, 2020). I grew up eating nasi lemak. My family enjoyed the dish with anchovy and squid sambal. For others, combinations include fried chicken, and beef rendang. However, nasi lemak is available in other combinations that are not permitted within considerations of halal. Those include pork. Figure 3 shows a version of my family’s nasi lemak.

Figure 3: Nasi lemak.



Source: Author’s Own (2021).

Tibere et al. (2019) observed that Malaysian dishes like nasi lemak are often adapted to meet different religious and dietary preferences. In those ways, the construct of ‘Malaysianised’ food is a common consideration in Malaysia (Suhaimi & Zahari, 2014, p. 855). A Malaysianised food or dish is one that has been tweaked to become acceptable to the differentiated Malaysian consumer tastes and religious preferences. Consequently, within the construct of Malaysianisation comes the consideration that Malaysian food “is a marker of national unity” (Tibere et al., 2019, p. 54), and of multiculturalism (Benedict, 2019). Consequently, Malaysian food can be ‘read’ as “not static with [only] one set of identities” (Suhaimi & Zahari, 2014, p. 857) but a multi-layered and dynamic construction. Reflecting that, cultural festivals including the Chinese New Year, Diwali,

and Hari Raya (Eid) are nationwide celebrations that are directly linked to the culture associated with that festival (Lee, 2017). Best exemplifying that is the Malay celebration of Hari Raya (Eid) in Malaysia. In these ways, Malaysian foods like rendang bring people together, in meaningful ways (Nik Mohd Nor et al., 2020).

Figure 4: Lemang



Source: Author's Own (2021).

Like rendang, lemong, a glutinous rice dish often eaten with rendang, plays an important role during Hari Raya (Nik Mohd Nor et al., 2020). According to Yovani (2019), lemong is also a traditional Minangkabau dish that uses bamboo as a cooking utensil to cook the glutinous rice above a firepit. The use of bamboo as a cooking utensil reflects the past practices of an “ancient human life that was very dependent on nature and did not know metal cookware” (Yovani, 2019, p. 3). Inserting glutinous rice into a bamboo tube then adding coconut milk is the traditional way to prepare lemong (Wahyudi et al., 2017). Then, above a firepit, the rice parcels are constantly moved to ensure even cooking (Wahyudi et al., 2017). Traditionally, lemong takes up to five or six hours to be perfectly cooked (Abdullah, 2020). Its preparation and cooking require wisdom, patience, and persistence, and those attributes are mirrored in rendang’s significance in Minangkabau culture (Nurmufida et al., 2017).

Introducing the Minangkabau People

Minangkabau is a name of an ethnic Malay tribe originating in Indonesia (Mardatillah, 2020). Today, in Malaysia this group is commonly called Malay Minang (Embong et al., 2016). The ancestral tribal regions of the Minangkabau people lie in the highlands of West Sumatra (Gururaj, 2021) There, the region is punctuated with “lush green paddy fields, volcanoes, powerful rivers, stunning traditional architecture to its captivatingly vibrant society, rumah gadang traditional houses and the famous Padang cuisine” (Gururaj, 2021, p. 1). Minangkabau is the combination of two words, minang (win) and kabau (buffalo)

(Krisnawati, 2020). Their combination reflects the metaphoric desire for a foreign kingdom to take over the region. As the myth relates (Tanjung et al., 2020), the competition to take the region involved two buffaloes: one small, the other big. The invading force chose the big buffalo. However, it was the small buffalo that won the buffalo fight, which inspired the people to name themselves and their region Minangkabau (Tanjung et al., 2020).

Figure 6: Minangkabau location



Source: Lewis (2014).

Figure 5: Minangkabau landscape



Source: Gururaj (2021).

The Minangkabau people are one of the “largest matrilineal societies in the world” (Lipoeto et al., 2001, p. 11) and are renowned for their ‘rantau’⁶ characteristics (Abdul Wahab & Bahauddin, 2016). Rantau, in Minang culture, is mostly associated with men, not women, because women take care of the family at home (Madaus, 2019). The notion of women as family carers can be traced back to the mid-12th century. Then, following the death of the King of the Koto Batu Kingdom, his wife assumed control not only of the family but the entire kingdom (Sankari, 2016). Now, reflecting that history, in Minangkabau society the mother, or an elderly woman, is the most significantly important person in the family (Sankari, 2016). Consequently, because of the matrilineal system, daughters inherit family land, including rice paddies and houses (Sankari, 2016). Therefore, as Shapiro (2017) observed, women are treasured within Minangkabau socio-culture.

Contrasting the position of women, Minangkabau men take political and religious leadership positions in the community and have little involvement in the household (Shapiro, 2017). However, that division of responsibilities and labour is contested.

⁶ ‘Rantau’ is a Malay word interpreted as “the movement process to another country or to leave their home or to sail through rivers” (Echols & Shadily, 1963, as cited in Abdul Wahab & Bahauddin, 2016, p. 3).

Mardatillah (2020) argued that Minangkabau men make contributions to the household by way of slaughtering animals for special occasions. The act of rantau, or wandering, is one of the functions of men in a Minangkabau community (Tanjung et al., 2020). In that way, rantau reinforces the dominance of women in maintaining the home. Rantau is symbolically important to the Minangkabau people because rantau signifies a person's willingness to better their socio-economic position and to grow as a person (Franzia et al., 2015). Those considerations are particularly important for families because rantau's connotation reflects the desire for the family to have a better future (Tanjung et al., 2020). However, while rantau captures those possibilities of bettering life, it nonetheless reinforces gender roles within Minangkabau culture.

Introducing Rendang

As a domain of research, Malaysian rendang is under-explored. Linguistically, rendang derives from the Malay language where 'randang,' 'marandang' and 'merendang' denote a cooking technique (Rahman, 2020). That technique implies that the food is cooked slowly for an extended period (Nurmufida et al., 2017).

Figure 7: Act of 'Marandang'



Source: Photograph by Fitra ("Festival Marandang," 2020).

Rendang is one of the traditional foods of the Minangkabau people in West Sumatra, Indonesia (Nurmufida et al., 2017). There, and in Malaysia, rendang is a traditional dish that is often served on special occasions (Tanjung et al., 2020). Rendang is a part of Indonesia's national food identity (Rahman, 2020). However, and as Tanjung et al. (2020) realised, while rendang originated in the Minangkabau region, its recipe is not standardised. Consequently, there are many variations of rendang. As Nurmufida et al. (2017) proposed, rendang is "made with beef simmered in spices and coconut milk" (p. 233). Rendang's spices include "onion and garlic, ginger, turmeric, galangal, and red chilli" (Mardatillah, 2020, p. 3). Those ingredients were introduced to the Minangkabau people by Indian traders during the 13th century (Mardatillah, 2020). Settling with the

local peoples, the Indian traders' curry soon became part of the local diet (Mardatillah, 2020). However, and while the making of rendang mirrors that of curry, the local Minangkabau people cook the dish until it becomes dry and concentrated in flavour (Nurmufida et al., 2017). Nonetheless, rendang, and dishes like curry, are often served with a carbohydrate such as rice, or glutinous rice (Tan, 2019). Examples of glutinous rice dishes complementing rendang (refer Figures 17 and 18, below) include leman (Yovani, 2019) and pulut kuning (Abdul Raji et al., 2017).

Figure 8: Rendang with leman



Source: Author's Own (2021).

Figure 9: Rendang with pulut kuning



Source: Matahariku (2020).

Preparing Rendang

In its traditional preparation, rendang includes several laborious steps. Figure 11 shows the main ingredients that include beef, coconut milk, chilli paste, onion, garlic, lemongrass, fresh turmeric, galangal, and ginger. The two most laborious are creating the coconut milk and crushing the spice combination with a utensil called a batu lado⁷ (Mardatillah, 2020).

Figure 11: Rendang ingredients



Source: Author's Own (2021).

Figure 10: Batu lado



Source: Triboy (2018).

⁷ Batu giling and batu lesong are two other variations of batu lado (Abdul Raji et al., 2017).

In contemporary Malay society, many people choose to prepare their rendang in the traditional way, despite a range of convenient time-saving products being available.

Chilli paste is one of the most important spice ingredients in rendang, and many other Malay dishes (Abdul Raji et al., 2017) and within Minangkabau food culture (Mardatillah, 2020). Commonly, chillies, shallots, ginger, spices, and grated coconut are some of the fresh items that are ground or crushed in a batu lado (Abdul Raji et al., 2017). For rendang, ingredients like chilli, onions, garlic, lemongrass, galangal, fresh turmeric, and ginger are turned into a paste by using the batu lado (Figure 11).

Another important yet time-consuming step in making rendang is the extraction of coconut milk from a coconut's flesh (Abdul Raji et al., 2017). Coconut is a characteristic of Malay cuisine (Yusoff & Zain, 2013), and many Minang people consider that it "improves food flavours" and is "a trademark of Minangkabau dishes" (Lipoeto et al., 2001, p. 15). Rendang needs at least four litres of coconut milk per kilogram of meat or seafood (Fatimah et al., 2021). Extracting coconut milk requires the grating of mature coconut flesh with a tool that has metal spikes that rotate in a circular motion (manually or using electricity) to grate the coconut flesh (Abdul Raji et al., 2017). Then, the grated coconut is placed in a dish with very little water, and the coconut milk is squeezed from the shredded coconut flesh by hand.

Reflecting the significance of rendang within my family, I believe that the best way to know this dish is through my grandmother's Minang beef rendang recipe. The secret ingredient for my grandmother's aromatic rendang is sliced fresh turmeric leaves and kerisik (toasted coconut paste).

Figure 12: Pecah minyak



Source: Author's Own (2021).

In cooking rendang, a characteristic that needs to be observed is '*pecah minyak*' (oil splitting⁸). There are two signs of that occurring. The first is when the mixture darkens

⁸ Oil splitting is seen when traces of oil separate from the mixture, leaving a layer or puddles of oil oozing out on to the surface (Sha, 2021).

from caramelisation and then its oil rises to the surface and starts splitting (Hassan, 2018). The splitting of the cooking oil is a crucial point in Minang food culture. Splitting signifies that the ingredients have been properly cooked (Hassan, 2018). Cooking it to that degree helps the dish's longevity given the humid and tropical climate of Malaysia.

Rendang needs constant stirring and cooking for up to three hours. As the mixture starts to thicken and caramelise, the turmeric leaves and toasted coconut paste are added. Further simmering is needed until it reaches the kalio stage, at which point the cooking can be stopped. The meal can then be served, or the cooking time can be increased to attain a drier stage. Rendang has three cooking stages: curry, kalio and dry (Tanjung et al., 2020). For the Minangkabau people, rendang is usually eaten dry, when it is dark in colour and concentrated in flavour.

Figure 13: Curry stage



Source: Author's
Own (2021).

Figure 14: Kalio stage



Source: Author's
Own (2021).

Figure 15: Dry stage



Source: Author's
Own (2021).

Because of the dish's longevity, rendang in Minang culture is a dish that travels well. As rendang moved, through the process of rantau, from the highlands of West Sumatra (Yovani, 2019) a place known as Luhak nan Tigo, the three mountains "Luhak Agam, Luhak Limo Puluah, and Luhak Tanah Datar" (Nurmufida et al., 2017; Yovani, 2019), different varieties of rendang emerged. Those varieties include the rendang belut (eel rendang) of Batu Sangkar, rendang itik (duck rendang) and rendang jariang (jengkol rendang) (Nurmufida et al., 2017). Over time and as a result of rantau, as Nurmufida et al. (2017) explained, variations of rendang developed even within the Minang people; the common feature is the cooking technique. Some people add "cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, coriander and white pepper" (Lipoeto et al., 2001, p. 14). Consequently, rendang is not a standardised dish. Like all food, rendang is dynamic. Nonetheless, within my family, rendang represents a lineage of knowledge. My grandmother learnt her rendang recipe, rendang Minang, from her mother as she grew up in Malaysia. This is not surprising because Minangkabau food and culture had been immersed in the wider Malay socio-

culture (Lipoeto et al., 2001) even before Malaysia's independence in 1957 (Ghazali, 2012). However, she admits that she has changed the recipe slightly because of evolving personal preferences. Similarly, my own mother, who learnt the recipe from her mother, my grandmother, also admits to changing the 'family recipe', not only to suit ingredient availability, but also her husband's taste preferences. In these ways, rendang is, within my family, simultaneously a constant yet also an evolving family construct.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This chapter introduces the academic metatheories underpinning my exploration of rendang, a Minangkabau dish that has become part of Malay cuisine. Key to that exploration are my considerations of knowledge and reality. Until I undertook my dissertation, I rarely considered notions of reality or knowledge. As I reflect upon them now, I have come to realise not only their importance, but also that these concepts are often taken for granted in our everyday lives. However, my exploration of the concepts within my research has not only clarified them for me academically, but also helped me to comprehend how reality and knowledge help me to construct and understand the world around me. Consequently, this section presents and demonstrates my understanding of the metatheories framing my research, namely ontology, epistemology, the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), and material culture (Woodward, 2007). In the following sections, I explain each theory within its theoretical framework, and then apply that theory to my research in my consideration and application of that knowledge within my conceptual framework. In this way, I differentiate my theoretical and conceptual frameworks by acknowledging that a theoretical framework discusses theory, whereas a conceptual framework applies that theory to research.

Ontology and Epistemology: Theoretical Framework

Ontology is a field of philosophical study that considers concepts of existence (Jacquette, 2002) and represents a “science of what is, of the kinds and structures of objects, properties, events, processes, and relations in every area of reality” (Smith, 2003, p. 155). In simple terms, ontology is the “study of being and raises basic questions about the nature of reality and the nature of the human being in the world” (Levers, 2013, p. 2). Within that understanding, as Gray (2013) proposed, ontology asks: How do we know reality? With that question in mind, two themes need to be addressed: realism, and relativism. A realist ontology focuses on reality within pre-determined truths. Contrasting that, a relativist ontology focuses on reality as a subjective construct (Gray, 2013) in as much as reality differs from person to person, and from culture to culture.

Levers (2013) proposed that it is only through knowledge that we become aware of reality. Epistemology is a form of philosophical study that Levers (2013) defined as “the study of knowledge, a way of understanding and explaining how I know what I know”

(p. 2). In these ways, epistemology is “concerned with all aspects of the validity, scope and methods of acquiring knowledge” (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1171). Thus, epistemology challenges our way of thinking about how we know what we know, which in turn provides a base for our knowing and negotiation of our world and understandings of reality.⁹

Conceptualizing Ontology and Epistemology

As I engaged in academic reading about my ethnicity, nationality, and rendang, I recognised the importance of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology). Consequently, I have come to realise ontology and epistemology as complementary concepts. My ‘ah-ha’ moment in that realisation occurred when I considered how I could know reality without first having knowledge of what reality ‘is’. When I apply that thinking to my topic, I found that through my knowledge of rendang, reality was actualised. Similarly, that knowledge and reality, as I reflected upon it, was sometimes taken for granted in my own experiences within Malay socio-culture. As a Malay dish, rendang holds a legacy of knowledge and symbolic meaning that has accumulated over time. While it is important to realise that not everyone who eats the dish understands every aspect of it, rendang represents a vital cultural marker for many Malays in Malaysia. Consequently, within the history of rendang come knowledge, socio-temporal realities, and symbolic meanings. It is in these ways that dishes like rendang reflect how material items reinforce ways of being and becoming via interaction (Mead, 1934), meaning and symbolism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and actancy (Woodward, 2007).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory conceptualised by Charles Horton Cooley (1902) and George Herbert Mead (1934). Cooley’s research underlined the link between the self and society, emphasising that understanding oneself required an understanding of one’s surroundings (Quist-Adade, 2018) as realised by ‘others’. Later, influenced by Cooley’s (1902) thinking, Mead’s (1934) research focused on the development of the self through interaction with others (Quist-Adade, 2018). Mead’s (1934) construct of symbolic interactionism, as a ‘bottom-up model,’ contrasted with other theories of the day, specifically the ‘top-down model’ of Talcott Parsons (Fuller &

⁹ The evolutionary link between ontology and epistemology, particularly which of those domains comes first, is an interesting point for discussion. However, it sits outside the scope of this dissertation.

Carter, 2016). Mead (1934) questioned this structured way of life by introducing symbolic interactionism, which focused on society and how people communicate and interact. For Mead, communication was key to interaction. Within this understanding of interaction and communication within symbolic interactionism, Fuller and Carter (2016) proposed, language constitutes an essential component. For them, language can be understood in various ways that include speech (talking), gestures, signs, and symbols. Consequently, Fuller and Carter (2016) defined symbolic interactionism “as the manner in which the society is created and maintained through face to face, repeated, meaningful interactions among individuals” (p. 931). Additionally, Fuller and Carter (2016) illuminated Mead’s (1934) work by noting that, within symbolic interactionism, the following hold:

(1) individuals act based on the meaning’s objects have for them. (2) interaction occurs within a particular social and cultural context in which physical and social objects (persons), as well as situations, must be defined or categorized based on individual meanings (3) meanings emerge from interactions with other individuals and with society and (4) meanings are continuously created and re-created through interpreting processes during interaction with others. (p. 932)

It is within those four tenets that my research view of the world, my methodology and method are located.

Conceptualizing Symbolic Interactionism

Interaction is an essential part of rendang. Exemplifying that is the religious holiday observed by Muslims worldwide, called Eid ul Fitri. Eid ul Fitri’s celebration is a universal Islamic holiday that is honoured in diverse ways. For example, in Malaysia, Eid ul Fitri is known as ‘Hari Raya’. Rendang is an important part of Hari Raya celebrations, as rendang symbolises a sense of belonging promoted within commensality. These attributes encourage Malay communities to contribute money, time, and effort, particularly for people in need, whether they are strangers or family. Thus, rendang exemplifies how interactions between people reinforce constructs of being both Malay and Muslim. For Muslims, that reinforcement through the interaction rendang promotes within Hari Raya denotes the Islamic principle of Silaturrahim. Silaturrahim reflects how the bonds between people are reinforced and, within that reinforcement, how interaction supports and promotes a Malay Muslim identity.

The Social Construction of Reality Thesis (1966)

The social construction of reality “is defined as a social process through action and interaction in which the individual (or group of individuals) creates continuously a reality that is owned and experienced together subjectively” (Darisman et al., 2016, p. 150). Berger and Luckmann (1966) who created the social construction of reality thesis, supported the philosophy of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969) by recognising the relationship between ontology and epistemology because, within the construction of reality, knowledge and reality are created and recreated within dynamic and subjective social processes of interaction. In these ways, the social construction of reality thesis reinforces Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) point that humankind creates reality in order to understand it and, within that understanding, achieves a wider comprehension of the world around it. That creation is reinforced through language. Consequently, the social construction of reality thesis explains how and why different cultures perceive knowledge and reality in different ways and use different languages to express their ways of being and becoming.

Conceptualizing the Social Construction of Reality Thesis

Historically, rendang began with the Minangkabau (Minang) people (Nurmufida et al., 2017). For that group, rendang reflected more than just its ingredients. For the Minang people, rendang symbolised patience, wisdom, and persistence (Nurmufida et al., 2017). Consequently, rendang can be ‘read’ as an item of material culture and actancy (Woodward, 2007), signifying Malay culture, religion, tradition, and ways of being and becoming. The preparation and consumption of rendang within wider Malay socio-culture is but one way in which many Malays create and understand their world.

Within my own lived experiences in Malaysia, and as the granddaughter of a Minang grandmother, I was raised knowing the Minang ways of being, culture and identity. Whenever I visited my maternal grandmother’s village, most of the elders, uncles and aunties spoke and behaved in a certain manner. I call their behaviour an expression of the ‘Minang Way’ because their way of being reflected the inherited values and traditions of their Minang ancestors. Thus, Minang food and culture plays a significant role in the construction of my reality, my values and worldview. That significance is made even more relevant and important to me because I now live in Aotearoa New Zealand. Living in New Zealand, and reflecting upon my life in Malaysia, has made real, for me, the temporary nature of our lived experience and life. Accordingly, much of my lived reality

has been constructed around and connected to material items (Woodward, 2007) like rendang. Making rendang with my mother strengthened our mother–daughter bond and distilled memories of my paternal and maternal grandmothers. In these ways, material items like rendang present a lineage of being, one reflecting not only my own life, but also my mother’s life and my grandmother’s life. Consequently rendang, its memories and its presence represent a significant marker of my distinction as a Minang descendant, and a signifier of my family’s wider belonging. In these ways, rendang helps me to construct and make sense of my world, both in Malaysia and here in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Material Culture Theory and Actancy

Material culture, according to Woodward (2007), is the study of how people imbue objects with meaning and how those meanings are “transmitted, received, and created” by individuals and within their wider socio-culture (p. 14). Consequently, interaction is required to transmit, receive, and create our understandings of the meanings that people give to objects and ‘things.’ Key to that understanding is Woodward’s (2007) construct of actancy, which refers “to entities both human and non-human which have the ability to ‘act’ socially” (p. 20). In this way, objects and things hold meanings, memories, and ‘values’ that people ascribe to those objects. Consequently, objects holding such meanings could be read as a ‘biography’ (Appadurai, 1986) by those who ‘know its story’. Thus, a material object’s biography reflects its actant meanings within emotional and symbolic connotations, rather than the item’s commercial value.

Conceptualizing Material Culture Theory and Actancy

Rendang exemplifies actant materiality. Most non-Malaysians consider rendang to be a simple Indonesian or Malaysian dish. However, for Malaysians, rendang is a symbol of Malay identity. Consequently rendang, for Malay Malaysians, is imbued with actant meaning that surpasses the dish’s taste or nutritional or commercial ‘value’ (Woodward, 2007). In these ways, rendang signifies much more than food. Exemplifying that, for me, rendang signifies my relationship with my grandmother and mother who taught me how to make the dish. Their transfer of knowledge gives me a role and responsibility in preserving my knowledge and passing it on to future generations. Consequently, rendang is not merely about the skill and knowledge of cooking: it imbues memories and emotions. Polat and Polat (2020) recognised this in noting that food conveys “liveliness, emotion,

and excitement” (p. 284). When I make rendang, it is not only about the ingredients but the tips and wisdom that my grandmother shared with me about the dish, which make rendang more than ‘just food.’ Consequently, these memories are ways in which I embody my relationship with my ancestors (Polat & Polat, 2020) through the actant meanings rendang holds for me.

Chapter 4: Literature Review

According to Fink (2014), a literature review explores relevant scholarly articles, books, and other academic resources in order to inform readers about the current state of knowledge related to a topic. Consequently, preparing and writing a literature review allows its author to reflect on, interpret, critique, and evaluate past knowledge, and in doing so identify gaps in that knowledge. To achieve these aims, a literature review can take either a chronological or thematic approach (Lesley University Library, 2016). A chronological approach to a literature review occurs when the “literature is divided into time period[s]” (Cronin et al., 2008, p. 42) based on the order of publication (Lesley University Library, 2016). A thematic approach builds upon the themes gathered on the specified topic (Lesley University Library, 2016). Cognisant of the academic aims of a literature review, my literature review presents an amalgam of chronology and theme. That mix, as I have come to appreciate, best suits the explication of my topic because, within my review, I seek to understand, firstly, the symbolic nature of food; and secondly, Malaysian food and food traditions, and their symbolic meanings, particularly within Minang culture.

Understanding the Symbolic Nature of Food

Food is vital to life. Barrell (2020) suggested that, without food, humans might live “45 – 61 days” (para. 6). Notwithstanding that grim statistic, food consumption has become part of human socialisation. As Warde (2016) suggested, eating together, or commensality, provides a “focus on intimacy and bonding” (p. 59) denoting socio-cultural routines. Within these routines of consumption lies symbolism. Exemplifying that, for Christians, is the Last Supper, and Jesus’s own link between bread/body, blood/wine. For Christians, through drinking wine and eating bread comes the embodied recognition of the sacrifice that Jesus made for his people (Kruger, 2018). The tradition of slaughtering a cow/goat during Eid to be given to the needy is an Islamic tradition practiced by Muslims around the world (Akyol, 2018). Slaughtering a goat or cow during Eid symbolically reflects the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son Ismail, for the sake of God (Akyol, 2018).

In contemporary life, what is edible, according to Blichfeldt et al. (2015), is a social construct that not only provides nutrition but also symbolic meaning. Reflecting that, the research of Polat and Polat (2020) explores the symbolic meaning of food from a

sociological and anthropological perspective. Key to their anthropological perspective is food's ability to 'communicate'. Reflecting this symbolic meaning, and its cultural prescription, is Albon's (2015) research on birthday cakes. Aptly titled "Nutritionally 'Empty' but Full of Meanings: The Socio-cultural Significance of Birthday Cakes in Four Early Childhood Settings," the study explored and reinforced birthday cakes as an "important tradition and consequently, of socio-cultural significance" (p. 89) because Albon's exploration reinforced class constructs of food. Reflecting Pierre Bourdieu's earlier research on food and class, Albon (2015) commented that:

some working-class families were perceived as 'dirtier' in their food practices when compared to the practitioners, and second, they were perceived as more likely to provide 'inappropriate' cakes to share. In addition to this, a small but significant part of the data suggest that constructions of 'risk' in relation to foods such as birthday cakes are gendered, with some female practitioners and children noting concerns over controlling their weight or conforming to a slim, 'ideal' body type. (p. 89)

Additionally, Albon's (2015) research touches upon another factor impacting food's consumption and its symbolic meaning: Fischler's (1988) concept of the omnivore's paradox. For Fischler, that notion proposes that humans, as food consumers, negotiate consumption cognisant of neophilic and neophobic constructs. The act of investigating new cuisines and being open to change is known as neophilia (Fischler, 1988). Neophobia, on the other hand, is the dread of new things and aversion to change (Fischler, 1988). The paradox between these ideas reflects the ongoing relationship between humans and food impacted by wider social pressures of edibility (Blichfeldt et al., 2015). Consequently, it is within these considerations that food's symbolic meaning can be viewed as dynamic. That dynamism, and the paradox of consumption, are mediated within the research of Polat and Polat (2020) and the introduction of new foods and their meanings.

As Polat and Polat (2020) explained, through intercultural marriages and migration people are constantly introduced to new culture. For example, teh tarik is a Malaysian milk tea influenced by the Indian traders who resided in Malaya. Because Indian migrants missed home, they invented teh tarik using Malaysian ingredients. As time passed, the tarik has become a staple drink for many Malaysians. In such ways, as Lupton (1994) observed, food "is an element of the material world which embodies and organises our

relationship with the past” (p. 668), and as Nik Mohd Nor et al. (2020) realised, helps in preserving our cultural legacies. These legacies are recreated through memory and ritual and, within that amalgam, integrate notions of Woodward’s (2007) material culture theory and actancy. Reflecting these considerations, in Chinese tradition and custom, it is common that a newborn is honored by dying eggs and ginger roots crimson. That activity signifies fertility, happiness, and growth (Muhammad et al., 2013). Additionally, food can signify identity and place. An obvious exemplar is salad caprese. Its signification of place and identity can be interpreted in multiple ways. As Polat and Polat (2020) observed, the colours of salad caprese including green basil, white mozzarella, and red tomato. Those colours connote an association to the colours of the Italian flag, and by extension, being an Italian. In these ways, salad caprese reflects how, through food, its tastes, and colours, we create and reflect our world in order to understand it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Thus, salad caprese reflects national identity. In similar ways, New Zealanders make an association between the pavlova and national identity (Neill, 2018). Similarly, rendang denotes Malay ethnicity, Malaysian cuisine and national identity focused within a gastronomic lens that reflects Malaysia’s ethnic diversity (Yoshino, 2010).

Understanding Malaysian Food, Traditions, and their Symbolic Meanings

Figure 16: Nasi campur buffet



Source: Wiens (2021).

Figure 17: Nasi campur



Source: Wiens (2021).

According to Nik Mohd Nor et al. (2020), traditional cultural foods reflect and express not only identity, but emotional aspects including love, appreciation, friendship, and nostalgia. Exemplifying these notions is the Malaysian meal, nasi campur (refer Figure 17). This dish reflects the diversity of Malaysian culture because it incorporates elements from Malay, Chinese, and Indian culinary cultures (Suhaimi & Zahari, 2014). Nasi campur consists of a serving of rice consumed with a variety of side dishes that are usually selected from a self-service buffet (Wiens, 2021). The buffet selection includes a variety

of Malaysian dishes, as exemplified in Figure 16. Diners simply create their own combinations from that offering (Suhaimi & Zahari, 2014) depending on their taste preferences. The significance of this dish is an important reminder that food symbolises the acceptance and tolerance of diversity within Malaysian socio-culture (Zainal Abidin et al., 2020). In these ways, Malaysian food bridges ethnicities by bringing Malaysians together within the consumption of food and in wider constructs of identity and belonging (Zainal Abidin et al., 2020).

Another dish reflecting Nik Mohd Nor et al.'s (2020) observation is pulut kuning. Pulut kuning is a Malay dish that is described as “yellow steamed glutinous rice” (Noor et al., 2013, p. 32). The rice is yellow in colour because it has been marinated with turmeric. Pulut kuning is typically provided during Hari Raya, weddings, and the celebration of the birth of a newborn child (Nik Mohd Nor et al., 2020). Pulut kuning represents the hosts' thankfulness and admiration for their guests' attendance at the newborn's celebration (Noor et al., 2013). Pulut kuning has also been connected to silaturrahim.¹⁰ Muhammad et al. (2013) proposed that the sticky nature of glutinous rice was a metaphorical representation of the bonds between Malay people. According to Nik Mohd Nor et al. (2013), the tie between people extends beyond Malay society to include relationships with other cultures, regardless of faith or nationality. The yellow colour of the rice is significant because yellow was forbidden to be worn except by members of the Malay royal family.¹¹ In modern Malaysia, yellow continues to be associated with royalty, particularly the Malay kings. The construct of the colour's relationship with royalty continues with pulut kuning's place at weddings (Muhammad et al., 2013). Pulut kuning is a significant food that is served at weddings because the bride and groom are considered to be 'royal' by their families and the wedding guests (Muhammad et al., 2013) on the day of their wedding. Pulut kuning is also given as a gift of appreciation to guests during the wedding day (Muhammad et al., 2013). While pulut kuning is symbolic, it is usually eaten with something else: rendang (Abdul Raji et al., 2017).

Rendang Symbolism within Minang Culture

According to Tanjung et al. (2020), rendang is a 'must have' food for special occasions in the Minangkabau community. This dish symbolises Minang identity and Islamic faith

¹⁰ An Islamic term that signifies kinship and the bond between people (Al Ghozali, 2017).

¹¹ The Sultan (King) monarchy is still practised in Malaysia's nine states: Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Perlis, Terengganu, Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang, Johor, and Perak. Every five years, the Sultan monarchy is rotated among the nine states. The Sultan maintains responsibility for safeguarding Malay culture, traditions, and religion in Malaysia. The Sultan's families within each of Malaysia's nine states constitute the Malay royal families (Bostock, 2019).

(Mardatillah, 2020). Because of Islamic belief, the main protein sources for rendang include beef, seafood, or vegetables (Mardatillah, 2020). As Fatimah et al. (2021) noted, these choices reflect the Minang people's propensity for "high creativity and innovation" (p. 8). Minangkabau rendang is actant materiality (Woodward, 2007). Within Minang culture rendang connotes a generational legacy of wisdom (Mardatillah, 2020). That legacy and wisdom begins with the intergenerational passing on of rendang recipes that have imbued the dish with historic meaning, honour, and pride (Nurmufida et al., 2017). In traditional settings, including in the highlands of West Sumatra, where the Minangkabau society originated, the cooking of rendang uses meat, usually beef. However, as the Minangkabau people migrated to coastal areas, seafood and vegetable rendangs became popular (Fatimah et al., 2021). Whatever ingredients are used, Fatimah et al. (2021) remarked that women do not belong in Minangkabau culture "if they do not know how to cook rendang" (p. 3). That belonging is not only predicated upon culinary ability but also the emotional and cognitive characteristics that evolve consequent to the production of rendang. As Nurmufida et al. (2017) proposed, the waiting for hours for rendang to cook, choosing the right ingredients, understanding the right ratio of components, and even controlling the heat of the fire to ensure the dish does not burn, all require the development of "patience, wisdom, and tenacity" (p. 234). In these ways the actant properties of rendang include its ability to provide feelings of comfort and security. Consequently, rendang could be considered to be a comfort food because, as Long (2017) defined it, "comfort food usually brings to mind familiar foods that represent security, home, and cherished grandmothers" (p. 1).

Notwithstanding these observations, Tanjung et al. (2020) extended the philosophical significance of rendang by connecting it to Minangkabau society through its ingredients. Beginning that connection, the meat symbolically represents the Minang culture's older members. In Minang culture, elders are respected because they are the decision-makers and offer wise counsel. The coconut milk symbolises richness and being intellectual in the coconut milk's ability to bind the dishes ingredients together. Chili, as a leading taste, signifies Minang religious leaders as they guide the culture within Islamic belief. Finally, the rendang spice mixture represents the Minangkabau community as a combination of the different elements that come together in forming the dish called rendang (Tanjung et al., 2020). In these ways, rendang is a metaphorical illumination of Minang and Malay socio-culture that parallels the ways in which other dishes like char kuey teow, nasi lemak, and nasi campur reflect other Malaysian ethnic groups.

While all food potentially provides valuable insights into gastronomy, identity, and ways of being and becoming within different cultures, rendang provides a unique insight as a common Malay dish that holds particular importance to the Minang people. That importance reflects how food, in this case rendang, can be read as a metaphor for something else. For rendang, that something else is the dish's ability, despite recipe variations, to signify and differentiate the Minang peoples of Malaysia, and within its ingredients to metaphorically represent the conglomeration of a group. As a self-identifying Minang, I can explore my own identity and lived experiences of others through rendang and its physical and actant properties. In this way, my literature review adds weight to the methodological positions of Adam et al. (2015), Dyson (2007), Wall (2008) and Ellis et al. (2010) that begin my next chapter on methodology and method.

Chapter 5: Methodology and Method

In this chapter, I identify, define, and discuss my research methodology and method. I note that the difference between a research methodology and its method is that a methodology defines the theoretical approach to research. Complementing that, the research method reflects the application of methodological theory within its operationalisation/application to a research topic. Because my research adopts a constructionist perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), cognisant that humankind creates its world in order to understand it, my methodology applies a qualitative paradigm (Bhandari, 2020). That combination is congruent with researching subjective experiences. Specifically, my research uses a combination of autoethnography (Adam et al., 2015) as methodology and symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016). That combination not only recognises the subjective nature of experience, but also constitutes my own ontology and epistemology and my understanding of the world around me (refer Chapter 3). My research approach for this dissertation contrasts with quantitative inquiry. Quantitative research inquiry aims to collect and analyse numerical data (Bhandari, 2020), and use statistics. In that way, quantitative inquiry, consequent to its positivist positioning, contrasts with symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016) and the emphasis of the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) on the subjective nature of research within its participants' experiences. The Appendix lists the methodologies that I considered for my research before deciding upon the approaches I present in the following sections.

Autoethnographic Methodology

Autoethnography is among one of the most “intriguing and promising qualitative method[s] that offers a way of giving voice to personal experience” (Wall, 2008, p. 38) and, in doing so, revealing what was previously unknown (Dyson, 2007). According to Ellis et al. (2010), autoethnography is a research methodology combining constructs of the self within the recognition of wider culture. In this way, autoethnography is intended to make use of the researcher's personal experiences within the critical understanding and analysis of their wider cultural experiences (Ellis et al., 2010). Additionally, Adam et al. (2015) proposed that autoethnography “acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others” (p. 1). That process involves the author's reflection on the relationship between the author and their culture. Autoethnography derives from

ethnography. While ethnography reflects the study of culture through the lived experiences of people from that culture, Adam et al. (2015) suggested that ethnography and autoethnography were symbiotic constructs. Their symbiosis reflects the author's habitation of their own lived experiences as well as their wider lived experiences within their culture. In these ways, as Adam et al. (2015) explained, "the self and the field become one" (p. 10). Within this observation, Adam et al. (2015) made an interesting point that researchers undertaking autoethnography are not just passive observers and note takers, but active participants. Table 2 considers the ethnography/autoethnography nexus.

Table 2: Approaches to Ethnography and Autoethnography

Types	Explanation
Native ethnographies	A researcher provides an opportunity for Indigenous peoples to construct their own perspective on a topic.
Narrative ethnographies	The ethnographer's experiences are incorporated into ethnographic descriptions and analyses in the form of stories
Reflexive ethnographies	Similar to a reflexive interview. Reflexive ethnographies focus on how the ethnographer evolves consequent to their fieldwork.
Layered accounts	Emphasise the author's personal experience as well as statistics, abstract analysis, and related literature.
Community autoethnographies	A researcher shares their personal experiences within a community and evaluates how they respond to a particular social/cultural issue.
Co-constructive narratives	A co-constructed activity that involves participants talking about ambiguities or uncertainties when it comes to friends, family or partners.
Personal narrative autoethnography	The researcher becomes their own participant and uses an ethnographic lens to share and interpret their social and cultural experiences with the self, cognisant of the wider socio-culture.

Source: Adapted from Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Ellis et al. (2010).

My research used a personal narrative autoethnographic approach (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). That choice reflected how a personal narrative autoethnography is an "unlocker" and "revealer" of the researcher's consciousness (Qutoshi, 2015, p. 162) on often unquestioned assumptions. Ellis et al. (2010) and Ellis and Bochner (2000) recognised that autoethnography enabled researchers to embrace their involvement and influence through autoethnography. To gather data for an autoethnographic research project, the researcher becomes an observer not only of their own lived experiences but also the experiences of others. That to-and-fro movement adds critical depth to the research

because an autoethnography is founded within both an individual narrative and a socio-cultural pattern of being and becoming (Ellis et al., 2010). Consequently, with a bifocal “emic and etic” lens (Jary & Jary, 2005, p. 182), my research facilitates both an insider and outsider perspective on my topic. As Qutoshi (2015) elaborated, personal narrative (autoethnography) not only provides an insight to the researcher’s life but allows the researcher to re-evaluate and reflect upon the taken-for-granted knowledge within their experienced realities. Within those considerations, for me, comes an understanding and deeper appreciation of how I negotiate, create, and understand the world I live in. Within that understanding, there is an emergence of symbols that provide meaning and value for my existence. Consequently, to illuminate my personal narrative and understanding of rendang, I use the four tenets of symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016) as ways in which I can explicate my topic.

Method

Symbolic interactionism can serve as both theory and method (Carter & Alvarado, 2019). Allen (2017) stated that symbolic interactionism allows researchers to better comprehend the “relationship between humans and society” (p. 1). Within these relationships, there are interactions (Forte, 2009), including the attitudes, behaviours (Carter & Alvarado, 2019), and language that individuals use to be able to view and subjectively interact with their world (Fuller & Carter, 2016). Additionally, as a research method, symbolic interactionism’s four tenets promote the researcher’s understanding of the importance of symbols and meaning within interactions (Forte, 2009). For Forte (2009), symbols included “words, objects, or actions that stand for or represent something else” (p. 89). For me, rendang exemplifies a symbol. Consequently, I apply the four tenets of symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016) to generate and illuminate my findings.

Symbolic Interactionism’s First Tenet

“Individual’s act based on the meanings objects have for them” (Fuller & Carter, 2016, p. 170)

For me, items, including food, are actant materiality (Woodward, 2007). As a human being, I give, and have been given, within my whakapapa,¹² symbolic meaning within the foods that I have produced and consumed. In these ways, foods, including rendang, have

¹² A Māori word that means genealogy; the mapping of relationships from ancestors to descendants (Taonui, 2011).

become part of my identity (Polat & Polat, 2020). Consequently, notions about giving food meaning are based within my recurring interactions not only with food, but also with others. Unsurprisingly, my understandings of rendang concur with Polat and Polat's (2020) acknowledgement of the fact that food plays a central role among Malaysians, because it signifies unity across our differences in religion and ethnicity. Within those considerations, the first tenet of symbolic interactionism is realised within the meanings that rendang holds for me within the four topics, I present and discuss in my autoethnographic narratives (refer Chapter 6).

Symbolic Interactionism's Second Tenet

“Interaction occurs within a particular social and cultural context in which physical and social objects (persons), as well as situation, must be defined or categorized based on individual meanings” (Fuller & Carter, 2016, p. 170).

The second tenet of symbolic interactionism refines the social, cultural, and situational context related to my research topic. Thinking about rendang in that way suggests that, within my considerations, I need to explore how rendang became important in Malay socio-culture and how its meaning reflects various social and cultural contexts. Additionally, while using this tenet to illuminate my personal narrative, I can reflect on the dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981) created by living in Malaysia and New Zealand and how rendang has become meaningful to me consequent to living in those various locations. Similarly, within this tenet and my duality, I am aware of my “emic and etic” (Jary & Jary, 2005, p.182) perspectives. Key to those realisations, and within this tenet, I am mindful of my taken-for-granted knowledge about rendang, being Malay and Malaysian.

Symbolic Interactionism's Third Tenet

“Meanings emerge from interactions with other individuals and with society” (Fuller & Carter, 2016, p. 170).

In adopting this tenet, I came to recognise the importance of rendang within my relationships with people in both Malaysia and Aotearoa New Zealand. As I consider my narratives, I realise that meanings emerge in both countries in distinct ways. Because the majority of Muslims in Malaysia are Malay, rendang is a dish that is a key part of a Malay family's Hari Raya (Eid) celebration. Consequently, my store of memory and the narrative that develops from it is biased by time. Simply put, my Malay memories of

rendang in Malaysia are longer and more extensive than those from Aotearoa New Zealand. However, within this tenet, from a research perspective, my dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981) provides a deeper understanding and appreciation of the importance of rendang here in Aotearoa New Zealand, and in my home country Malaysia.

Symbolic Interactionism's Fourth Tenet

“Meanings are continuously created and recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others” (Fuller & Carter, 2016, p. 170).

Symbolic interactionism's final tenet emphasises the subjective and dynamic nature of knowledge as it is shared in interactions with others. In this way, this tenet contributes to the security that past knowledge creates, and how that knowledge creates comfort for the present lived experience. Notwithstanding that, this tenet also foreshadows the potential for change by recognising the dynamic and subjective nature of human experience. As a result, this tenet aids my understanding, reflection, and evaluation of my experiences in both Malaysia and Aotearoa New Zealand; my considerations of past events related to rendang are solidified, and my ability to create new considerations of rendang are promoted. Again, it is within the latter's communicative interaction that wider change in rendang knowledge and understandings are created.

Rounding Out My Method

In considering symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016) and its four tenets, researching and understanding rendang has not only assisted me in making sense of my topic, but also in making sense of the ever-changing world in which I live. That ‘making sense of’ denotes my dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981) as well as the material and actant qualities of rendang (Woodward, 2007). Within these considerations, I am cognisant of Polat and Polat's (2020) opinion that food transports emotions and culture with and within us, and that from that movement comes the interaction of new meaning and experience. In these ways, my research becomes not only about a Malay dish, rendang, but also about my own personal growth and realisations of ‘who I am.’

COVID-19 and Personal Factors Impacting My Research

My dissertation's journey was impacted by COVID-19. That impact was emotional and physical. As Auckland went into full lockdown, I had limited (online) library access. Also, I have not had printing or university computer use, or study space. While I enjoy

my home, it is not the best environment in which to complete my dissertation. Being at home, I needed to juggle my study needs with my family's needs and my responsibilities to them. Those situations impacted my wellbeing and my dissertation's progress. Emotionally, I was negatively impacted by my father's inability to return to Aotearoa New Zealand because of COVID-19. Additionally, our family plans to visit my grandmother, grandfather, uncles, aunties, cousins, in Malaysia was cancelled because of COVID-19. That was made worse when my grandfather passed away and we were unable to attend his funeral service and burial in Malaysia. These events have negatively impacted my wellbeing and my dissertation's progress. Nonetheless, as time progresses and summer approaches, I feel stronger.

Research Ethics

My research did not require ethics approval from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC), because it does not engage in primary research with participants, other than myself.

Chapter 6: My Autoethnographic Narratives

In this chapter, I present four personal narratives reflecting my relationship with rendang. Here, my wording is important. My use of the word ‘relationship’ reflects the depth of meaning, or as Woodward (2007) proposed, how rendang’s actancy signifies its importance in my life. Expanding upon that are my rendang narratives in regard to Hari Raya (Eid) and weddings, rendang as a popular dish in restaurant and street food dining, and finally rendang as a comfort food. As I reflect on these topics and compile my chapter’s narratives, I have developed a deeper understanding and appreciation of rendang’s importance. Key to that consideration is my recognition of my dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981), and how my living in Malaysia and Aotearoa New Zealand has impacted my rendang narratives. Additionally, and congruent with an autoethnography, has been my realisation of my taken-for-granted knowledge, a theme consistent with Adam et al.’s (2015) considerations discussed earlier in Chapter 18: “Autoethnography Methodology”. While I present my autoethnographic narratives in this chapter, Chapter 7 extends my narratives with a consideration of method, academic literature and the metatheories underpinning my research.

Rendang at Hari Raya (Eid)

Hari Raya is known internationally as Eid. For Muslims, Hari Raya is an Islamic holy occasion that occurs after the fasting month of Ramadhan. Ramadhan is a month of dawn-to-sunset fasting, spiritual self-reflection, and forgiveness (Saad, 2020). For me, Hari Raya represents the emergence of my ‘new self’. Similarly, Christians observe Lent, a 40-day fasting period symbolising repentance and self-control (Phillips, 2021). For Muslims, the celebration of Hari Raya is characterised by similarity and difference, depending upon a Muslim’s home country. Those differences are reflected in food, traditional clothing, and rituals. For example, Pakistani Muslims eat biryani for Eid (Hari Raya) (Izzah, 2020), whereas Malay Muslim’s eat rendang.

However, for my family when we lived in Malaysia, Hari Raya, went something like this. To begin, we practice a Malay custom, called ‘salam.’ Salam is a bodily gesture that involves bending slightly while taking an elderly’s persons hand, kissing it, or placing it on your forehead. Salam, during ‘Sesi Minta Maaf’¹³ on Hari Raya morning, signifies an asking for forgiveness, particularly from our parents. That act, and the day of Hari Raya,

¹³ A Malay tradition of asking forgiveness of each other on Hari Raya morning.

are my favourite times because they signify a breaking away from the negativity that accumulated in the previous year. Consequently, Hari Raya and salam encourage us to ‘start over.’ Following salam is the recitation of takbeer and Hari Raya prayers at the mosque.

As I recount this, I vividly recall my memories of the night before Hari Raya when I was in Malaysia. I was nine years old. I was watching television and waiting for the Hari Raya announcement to be made by an Imam. At around 8pm, my family would all gather around the television set waiting for his announcement. The Imam’s announcement was important, for if the new moon had been seen, then we could celebrate tomorrow, otherwise we would have to wait, and fast, for yet another day. My paternal grandmother and mother would always begin to cook food a few days before the estimated arrival of Hari Raya. That night, when I was nine, as the Imam announced the sighting of the new moon, I remember that my father immediately began to vacuum and decorate the house while my mother and grandmother began a renewed flurry of finishing food preparation. In the kitchen they had already prepared beef rendang, ketupat (cubed rice) and kuah kacang (peanut sauce). My two younger brothers and I would begin to help our mum and dad in completing their tasks. Later, my father and my two brothers went to the local mosque to perform takbeer. Takbeer is an Islamic tradition when Muslims would recite ‘God is the Greatest’ in congregation.

Figure 18: Takbeer in congregation



Source: Mohamed (2018).

Figure 19: Ketupat



Source: Author’s Own (2012)

While the men were out, my grandmother and mother continued with the food work. At nine years of age, I didn’t help them very much. I think I would have been in their way and have added confusion to what I realised was a ‘well-oiled machine.’ It was not until I was 15 that I clearly remember helping my mother and grandmother, in the kitchen, in a meaningful way. Then, I contributed toward making ketupat. Ketupat is rice cooked in coconut leaves (refer Figure 19). Making ketupat wasn’t an easy skill to learn, as I would have had to learn to ‘anyam’ (weave) a particular shape. However, it was a skill I really

wanted to learn and to excel at. My contribution, at that point, was significant because ketupat is an important rice dish that accompanies rendang, just as important as lemang. I recall my joy in successfully making this dish. For many previous years I had been an observer in its making as my mother and grandmother made its preparation look easy. Finally, it was my turn! Like my elders, who I had observed for many years, I now wove the young coconut leaves into a cubed shape. Doing that and preparing the rice showed me that what they had made look easy was, in fact, quite difficult. My weaving needed practice. However, after lots of practice and lots of coconut leaves, I finally managed to make the dish and present it in the manner of my mother and grandmother. I recall that I was so proud of myself. Over time, anyam ketupat became my task at Hari Raya, cementing my useful role among the women in my family.

Mum was usually the first person to get up on the morning of Hari Raya. Before leaving for Hari Raya prayer, she would double-check that everything was in place, including the new traditional garments we would wear and the food we would consume. Then, I would get out of bed followed by my two brothers, and finally my father. All dressed up in our beautiful traditional clothes called ‘baju melayu’ for men, and ‘baju kurung’ for women, we would all sit at the dining table as a family (including my grandmother) and drink hot tea. Best of all, we would eat rendang and ketupat. Then we headed off to the mosque to perform Hari Raya prayer.

Figure 20: Enjoying hot tea, lemang and rendang



Source: Author's Own (2012).

When we returned, we performed our forgiveness ritual, ‘Sesi Minta Maaf’. After that, we would pack up and get ready to visit my maternal grandmother. It was our tradition to celebrate this event at the home of an elder family member. Further, in Malay culture, it is a custom to visit an elderly relatives’ home on Hari Raya. In my case, that visit was to the home of my maternal grandmother located in a village about an hour’s drive from our home. As kids, we would be so excited to travel back to the village.

As a child, travelling back to the village, Balik Kampung, was fun for me. My maternal grandmother's village was away from the city, situated next to a small river that we could relax and swim in. The village was surrounded by exotic fruit trees including durian. I love durian. At my maternal grandmother's, she would spoil us children with homecooked meals and morning trips to her local markets. We were her only grandchildren. Days before Hari Raya, she would cook batches and batches of rendang, lemong, ketupat (cubed rice), kuah kacang (peanut sauce), and traditional sweets – not only for us, but for the whole neighbourhood!

Her husband, my late grandfather, was the leader of their kampung (village). Consequently, villagers looked up to him and his wife. She became particularly respected for her renowned rendang. Every year, and particularly during Hari Raya, she would make multiple batches of rendang for the never-ending stream of guests who came to visit her and the village. Those visits reflected that, within my culture, Hari Raya is considered to be an 'open invitation' day. Our elders anticipated that their younger generations would visit them at this special time. Key to those occasions and visits was the offering of food. Popular dishes include beef rendang, ketupat and lemong. Neighbours, friends, and family who lived close by and at distance travelled to honour the open invitation that Hari Raya promoted. Those visits and family time were especially important to my maternal grandmother. She missed the companionship of her husband and these occasions allowed her a time of socialisation and family-based enjoyment. The year before I came to New Zealand (2013), I recall helping my maternal grandmother prepare rendang for Hari Raya in her kampung. My task was to chop onions for rendang. While I busied myself doing that, under her watchful eye, she prepared the coconut milk from scratch. Then, I remember her getting a big wok and setting it on top of the fire stove on the floor outside her house. The pungent aroma of rendang began to permeate the surrounding area and into the house. Inheriting the wisdom of her rendang making was important to me. I have come to realise that my rendang interactions with my mother and grandmother signify its legacy within our family. However, that legacy has been compromised by the demands of contemporary living and the influences of Western lifestyles. Exemplifying both of those domains within my family's experiences of rendang are my own mother's experiences and my realisations that I have bridged a 'rendang gap' from my grandmother to her and within my dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981) into my new realm in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Rendang at Weddings

In my life, I've attended many Malay weddings. Rendang has been part of them all. My first cousin's solemnisation occurred when I was 12 years old. A solemnisation is the first part of the wedding where the Imam officiates at the couple's marriage. I recall helping my parents assist my cousin in making eggs as door gifts for the wedding guests. In a Malay tradition, known as bunga telur, giving guests a hardboiled egg at these occasions symbolises fertility. In giving eggs to their guests, the bride and groom invite their guests to pray that the marriage will bless them with many children. Additionally, the gifted eggs are also a token of gratitude and appreciation for attending the wedding. Figure 21 shows hard boiled eggs wrapped in netted sashes and decorated with flowers.

Figure 21: Bunga telur



Source: Author's Own (2010).

At this wedding, solemnisation for my first cousin (the bride) took place in their local mosque. As we entered the mosque, I noticed that a large number of close relatives (the mother of the bride, the mother of the groom, groom, father of the bride, the father of the groom, two wedding witnesses and the officiating Sheikh¹⁴) were seated on the floor-space surrounding the bride. As various cameramen circled the group, I noticed that while my cousin looked nervous, she also blossomed within her special occasion. Concluding the ceremony, the Sheikh held the groom's hand in a handshake hold and announced their union as husband and wife. Malay culture avoids public displays of affection. Consequently, the groom kissed my cousin's forehead as a display of his love.

Later, in a wonderful marquee set up outside my cousin's house, the bride and groom and their guests enjoyed food. There, the bride and groom were sat together on a regal (see Figure 23) pelamin. Then, the tradition of bersanding would begin whereby, one by one, close relatives approach the couple and offer salam to the elders, and then shower my

¹⁴ A Sheikh is a person who is knowledgeable in Islamic studies, whereas an Imam is referred to as a leader, usually during prayers (Desai, 2002).

cousin and her groom with thinly sliced pandan leaves, rice, and rose water. Bersanding's purpose is the display of blessings to the couple by their wedding guests. After bersanding everyone eats.

Figure 23: Bersanding starting with Salam Figure 22: Bride and Groom on pelamin



Source: Author's Own (2010).



Source: Author's Own (2010).

The wedding-food buffet is my favourite part of a wedding celebration! Rendang, despite being made by commercial caterers, is prominent. I recall scooping up a special wedding rice called 'nasi minyak' from the buffet, as well as some rendang and side dishes. As I enthusiastically ate my food, I noticed that my cousin, her husband, and her in-laws were dining at a separate table with their own set of food items. Key to the dishes on their table was rendang. As I observed them, and reflected on my own plate of food, I was flooded with memories of my maternal grandmother. To the front of my thoughts were her stories about how, in the past, rendang would only be served to the bride and groom at these occasions. Then, I remembered her saying that the wedding party's neighbours made the rendang, that it was not something that was brought in. In those ways it occurred to me how, particularly in the past, rendang served to bind neighbourhood life. Again, my mind wandered. I recalled my grandmother telling me how she organised teams of people in order to streamline not only making rendang but also washing dirty dishes and serving the wedding guests and party.

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, I have only been invited to one Malay wedding, that of a family friend. That event, despite its location outside of Malaysia, reminded me again of the 'beauty' in watching people 'pitch in' and contribute to the success of the event. That wedding reminded me again of my grandmother's stories and evoked the happy marriage ceremony of my cousin, many years before. Key to my feelings were the Malay rituals of the New Zealand wedding ceremony, particularly the pelamin and bunga telur. However, and to my horror, there was no rendang on the main buffet. How, I wondered, can Malays celebrate a wedding without rendang? Then, on the dessert buffet, I observed to my

delight something quite magnificent pulut kuning (glutinous yellow rice) with rendang and quail eggs.

Figure 24: Pulut kuning and rendang



Source: Author's Own (2019).

Figure 25: Pelamin in NZ



Source: Author's Own (2019).

The dish left me speechless. I was compelled to eat it. It was sublime. Later, when I arrived home, the symbolic combination of pulut kuning (glutinous rice), rendang and quail eggs made sense to me in the following ways: the eggs signified fertility and an expression of appreciation, pulut kuning symbolised bonding, and rendang our Malay background. Writing about it now reminds me of my own upcoming wedding. While I cannot bring to my wedding venue enough rendang for my guests, I can still uphold the customs of giving my guests bunga telur, having traditional Malay music, and of course wearing my traditional wedding gown ordered especially from Malaysia. A traditional highlight of my wedding will be my pelamin's design. Yet, technology will mediate my traditional desires. My wedding will be live streamed to my Malaysian relatives who are unable to attend the ceremony in New Zealand.

Rendang: A Commercial Dish

Rendang is a popular, commercially available Malaysian dish in both Malaysia and Aotearoa New Zealand. In Malaysia, self-service meals are available at many Malay eating establishments. When I lived in Malaysia, I often visited these establishments. These venues offer diners an opportunity to 'hangout,' socialise with family and friends, and for workers to stop for a quick lunch from the restaurant's buffet. I recall a specific buffet dining experience that I enjoyed with my family, in Kuala Lumpur. Like almost every restaurant experience, after being seated, the wait staff ask for drink orders, and while they are being prepared, we are invited to select our food choices from the restaurant's buffet.

On this occasion, I followed my brothers to the food buffet. First, I chose rice, then I looked at the selection of dishes the buffet offered. The choice of dishes was staggering.

I felt like I wanted to eat a bit of everything. However, the cost is based on the amount of food you select from the buffet. Then, it appeared – beef rendang, my favourite! But I didn't select it. Rather, I chose a chicken dish and some fish options. My choice was guided by my mother's voice. While she was not physically with me at the buffet, her voice was inside my head. It guided my choice: "Why would you buy or eat someone else's rendang when we have ours, or you could ask my grandma to make it for you?" Her wisdom reflected something deeper. Was it possible that the hierarchy of rendang, for our family, had our Minang rendang at its apex? Was eating a commercial rendang compromising our culinary and cultural lineage of rendang consumption? As I explore my relationship with rendang, those considerations have given the dish significant and important symbolic meanings. Rendang is more than a Malay dish. For Minang people, including my family, rendang signifies my relationship with my ancestors, and my family.

Figure 26: Buffet of Malay dishes



Source: Author's Own (2019).

Nonetheless, rendang is a popular dish offered in many roadside food stalls. Makcik operates a roadside food stall. One of her most popular offerings is the beef or chicken rendang that she makes as side dishes for nasi lemak. As a young girl going to school, I recall that my mother and I would stop by Makcik's roadside food stall for the food that I needed for my school day. Makcik was extremely kind and accommodating. We always ended up buying a lot of food from her! However, with my nasi lemak, which included cucumber, peanuts, and fried anchovies, plus sambal kerang (spicy cockles) and sunny side eggs, I never chose any accompanying rendang. That choice reflected my fear of being disappointed. While I assumed that Makcik's rendang was good, my grandmother had set the rendang benchmark incredibly high. In considering the rendang of others, I wondered: "How will it compare? Will I be disappointed?" Those questions, and the potential guilt I might feel should someone else's rendang be better than my grandmother's, prevented my consumption of many other rendangs. Only at weddings or

in the comfort of another Malay's house do I choose to eat other people's rendang. Clearly the influence of my grandmother's rendang is omnipotent.

My experiences of rendang in Tāmaki Makaurau / Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, are not much different. It is common that, in Malaysian restaurants in Auckland, beef and chicken rendang are served with nasi lemak. However, and by comparison, Malaysian restaurants in Tāmaki Makaurau are expensive. Consequently, I rarely dine in them. However, when I do, usually as part of a family occasion, I look forward to the nostalgic memories that Malaysian food at these restaurants affords me. However, my negotiation of taste and memory nostalgia can be 'hit or miss.' Often, I wonder: "Will the food be as great as the picture suggests?" Again, in these restaurants, I avoid eating rendang. That avoidance is despite many of my friends raving about the rendangs they consume. But I need to be honest; I have tried rendang in these venues. Recently, my friend offered me a taste of her beef rendang. She told me it 'was magnificent.' I tried it. The flavours were fine, but it lacked something. That something, for me, was the specific flavours of my family's rendang, the flood of nostalgic and mostly happy memories that 'come with this dish'. In that way, my rendang experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand have been incomplete.

Rendang: A Comfort Food

My association with rendang as a comfort food recognises that, for me, rendang evokes feelings of warmth, comfort, and nostalgia. In these ways, my association with rendang as a comfort food has a bias within my lived experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand. In Aotearoa New Zealand my need for 'comfort' is made simple because I am not in Malaysia. Consequently, rendang provides me with emotional comfort that meets my nostalgic and emotional needs when I am far away from my homeland.

When I was in the mood for rendang, my mother would always cook pulut kuning (yellow glutinous rice) to go with the rendang. Yellow glutinous rice and rendang are, for me, a natural pairing. Sometimes, when we have leftover coconut rice, I ask if my mum will cook a beef or chicken rendang. That too is a delicious pairing that I always find comforting. However, in seeking comfort in rendang, my change from child to adult has meant that my mother now replies to my request for rendang with clear a direction: "Prepare it yourself."

While I strive to cook the perfect rendang, I always feel that my rendang dishes are missing something. There are some subtle differences between my own, my mother's and my grandmother's rendangs. The latter two are identical. It's my version that could be considered to be 'the odd one-out.' Nonetheless, I persevere to secure rendang perfection. However, my best narrative about the comforting abilities of rendang are not my own. Rather, in observing my family during the COVID-19 pandemic, I have come to realise rendang's potent comfort.

My father works overseas. On his return to Aotearoa New Zealand, he looks forward to seeing us all. Then, my mother prepares his favourite Malay dishes as a special homecoming treat. However, since COVID-19, obtaining flights and securing managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) bookings in Aotearoa New Zealand has become difficult. However, after two years abroad, in June, my dad secured a flight and an MIQ 'residence.' While he spent his birthday in MIQ, we treated him every day to Malaysian food, homecooked by mum. We had the food delivered to his MIQ room. Part of those deliveries was rendang. My dad took comfort in its consumption. We took comfort in knowing that we were taking care of him and providing him with the foods, like rendang, that he loved. His joy and comfort were immediately realised because he would video link us and we could all enjoy his rendang-inspired food comfort, live! After his MIQ release, he was overjoyed to physically see us all. We celebrated his homecoming with rendang!

Figure 28: Malaysian Club catchup



Source: Author's Own (2019).

Figure 27: Food during catchup



Source: Author's Own (2019).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, rendang has also given me direct comfort. Being the President of Malaysian Student Association of AUT gave me the privilege of getting to know many Malaysian students, and to create a place of comfort for them within a sense of community. As a student who studied culinary art, I was motivated to include delicious Malaysian food with our association's activities. Like my father who was away from

home, and being away from Malaysia myself, I am familiar with the ways in which distance creates a sense of loss and longing. My longing, nostalgia, and homesickness can be comforted by Malaysian food. Additionally, being able to share our native languages added to the positive sense of self and belonging that our student association promoted.

Food gatherings have been an important part of the Malaysian Student Association's *raison d'être*.¹⁵ In pre-COVID-19 times, I offered to cook *rendang* and *nasi lemak* for the association's events. Key to my cooking was my awareness of 'edibility'. Consequently, I prepared non-beef *rendangs* for my Indian Malaysian friends and beef *rendang* for my Malay friends in considering my foods ability to meet the dietary/religious needs of my Malaysian friends. As comfort and fellowship, our shared food and our other interactions created a sense of belonging.

In concluding this chapter, I carry forward my discussion and analysis of my four narratives to Chapter 7, my discussion and conclusion chapter.

¹⁵ *Raison d'être*: the reason for existence (Merriam-Webster, 2021).

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

Before engaging my discussion of the themes developed in the narratives presented in Chapter 6, I begin Chapter 7 by discussing my deeper understandings of ontology and epistemology. Then, because I recognise and, within my dissertation, have realised their synergy, I draw together symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016), the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Woodward's (2007) considerations of material culture and actancy. These discussions, and their grouping, are important because they 'round out' my realisations, conceptualisations, and application of these theories within my understanding of my research topic, *rendang*.

Additionally, I reconsider and discuss my choice of methodology and method, namely my use and understanding of autoethnography and the four tenets of symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016). While I have discussed autoethnography and symbolic interactionism in earlier chapters in my dissertation, having almost completed my research I feel the need to engage in active reflection in order to evaluate the effectiveness of my choices. Despite being positioned with my discussion and conclusion chapter, these reflections could be considered to be findings, inasmuch as they add to knowledge about the application of theory within research practice.

In concluding this chapter, I revisit and directly respond to my research questions by reflecting upon my findings and research. Finally, I conclude my dissertation with the presentation of the limitations of my research, and an overview of potential future domains of research related to my topic. Finalising this chapter, I share a brief reflection on my dissertation experience.

Reflecting Upon Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology, as I discussed in Chapter 3, is the "study of being and raises basic questions about the nature of reality and the nature of the human being in the world" (Levers, 2013, p. 2). Levers (2013) proposed that we can only become aware of our reality through knowledge. In doing so, we engage in in-depth reflection within our understanding of what we know. To do that successfully, Moon and Blackmann (2014) suggested that researchers engaged "all aspects of validity, [and] scope" (p. 1171) in the acquisition of knowledge. That, for me has come to reflect how I negotiated my understandings of both ontology and epistemology, not only within my research but also in my understanding of and negotiation with the world around me.

Consequently, in coming to a deeper understanding of ontology and epistemology, I have come to realise Levers' (2013) position in deep and meaningful ways. Specifically, I understand the synergy within Levers' (2013) suggestion that we can only become aware of our reality through knowledge, and vice versa. Within my understanding and use of ontology and epistemology, "how I know what I know" (Levers, 2013, p. 2), has led to my questioning of my Malay culture and its realities in order to comprehend my relationship with rendang in more holistic ways. Consequently, my current knowledge and realisations of rendang starkly contrast the levels of knowledge and realisations that I began this research with. Within that process, ontology and epistemology have made me question knowledge. My questioning expanded as time progressed. My dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981) enhances my perspectives, questioning, and thought. That duality meant that I realised new considerations of knowledge and reality as I mentally engaged in the 'back and forth movement' that signified my "etic and emic" (Jary & Jary, 2005, p. 182) experiences. Yet within that ebb and flow, I have comprehended reality and knowledge in deeper and more meaningful ways. Not only have I questioned what I know, but I have actively had to research it. My taken-for-granted realities and knowledge were not enough for me to successfully complete my dissertation. While they contributed to my autoethnographic narratives, the need to understand rendang in deep ways necessitated that my realities and knowledge were punctuated by the realities of researched academic knowledge.

Discussing Symbolic Interactionism, The Social Construction of Reality Thesis and Material Culture Theory and Actancy

What I have come to realise while completing my dissertation is that these theories extend beyond academic research, and pervade my everyday lived experience. It would be fair to say that until I undertook my dissertation, I had not given these theories any consideration. Now, in concluding my dissertation, I feel confident in drawing symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and material culture theory and actancy (Woodward, 2007) together. That confidence reflects my realisation not only of the individual importance of each of these domains but also, and more importantly, their interconnectedness within my own lived experiences, including my dissertation research.

For my dissertation research, symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) focussed my attention on interaction. That interaction came within multiple levels of communication

about (and beyond) my topic that reflected how I interacted (Quist-Adale, 2018) with others in my culture and outside of it (Mead, 1934). In that way communication, particularly, but not exclusively, through language, realised my interactions in meaningful ways. Talking, gestures, reading and communicating signs and symbols exemplified my interaction. Through my exploration of rendang, the theories I note in the section heading realised for me Fuller and Carter's (2016) explanation that society and social structures are created, recreated, and reinforced within the commonality shared between symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and material culture theory and actancy (Woodward, 2007); that is, in interactive and dynamic communication.

As a result of my dissertation's completion, I consider that symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) has taught me to deeply consider and reflect upon how I come to find meaning in 'things' like rendang. I realised throughout my findings that my 'little interactions' actually held bigger meanings. My 'making sense of the world' denoted my acknowledgement of my own dynamic being and how, through the attribution of meaning and 'value' to items like rendang, I came to understand "how I know what I know" and "why I am the way I am". In these ways, as I move between my Malay and New Zealand/Malay identities, I have come to realise how actancy, communication and interaction contribute toward my own personal and emotional growth.

Discussing Methodology and Method

One way in which I was conscious of adding depth to my research was in my use of autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2010) and symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016) as method. Symbolic interactionism formed two key functions within my work. Firstly, symbolic interactionism was key to the metatheories underpinning my research as I presented them in my theoretical and conceptual frameworks (refer Chapter 3). Building upon that, the tenets of symbolic interactionism formed the base of my research inquiry, my method. Using that combination, I feel that my dissertation has not only illuminated my topic but added depth to how I have come to understanding myself. In this way, using those theories in my dissertation did as Qutoshi (2015) proposed – it unlocked and revealed my own previously unconscious assumptions. For me, this was made real by my need to question, research, confirm and support the knowledge that I had largely, as a Malay, Muslim, and Malaysian, taken for granted.

My enhanced consciousness came to not only permeate my narratives, but also informed other chapters of my dissertation. Exemplifying that was my consideration of my own dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981) within my lived experiences in Malaysia and New Zealand. Compounding that was my awareness that, most likely, my dissertation's examination audience would not be Malaysian, nor Muslim. Consequently, I was constantly aware of the need to not only research my assumed knowledge about my culture, but also to present that information to readers who may not be familiar with my cultural background or indeed my topic.

However, considering and undertaking those processes was one of the most difficult aspects of compiling my dissertation. To work through that effectively, I mentally positioned myself 'as someone else'. That someone else was a non-Malay Malaysian, someone with only a scant knowledge of Malaysian culture and the Muslim faith. Within that positioning, I needed to not only write in a coherent manner but also validate my own 'living knowledge' using accepted forms of academic literature. In that way, I moved between "etic and emic" (Jary & Jary, 2005, p. 182) positions in refreshing ways. Part of that was the combination of autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2010) and symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016) as method, which helped inform my rendang experiences through 'unlocking' and 'revealing' (Qutoshi, 2015) my own taken-for-granted knowledge. Those processes not only positioned my personal narratives but, in doing so, allowed me to realise richer understandings of myself, and my relationship with rendang, within my dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981) in deeply meaningful and personal ways.

Discussion: My Research Findings

In the following sections I present my discussion of my research findings. The purpose of a discussion section within a dissertation is, as Annesley (2010) explained, the interpretation of the significance of the researcher's findings within a consideration of what is already known about a topic. Consequent to that process, a discussion chapter also identifies new topic knowledge and insights. With these points in mind, and cognisant of existing literature, this section reflects upon my research on the following themes: rendang during Hari Raya; rendang at Malay weddings; rendang in commercialised settings; and, finally, rendang as comfort food.

Discussing Rendang During Hari Raya

Living in Malaysia taught me how to become a Malay, a Malaysian and a Muslim. Key to my being and becoming those identities was rendang. Consequently, occasions including Hari Raya reflected and reinforced rendang's important connotative meanings. Within Malay socio-culture, and as exemplified within my family, cooking, and serving rendang is an important Hari Raya tradition. Our tradition, at that time, held parallels with Albon's (2015) symbolic emphasis on the Western birthday cake, and birthday celebrations. In those ways, both rendang and birthday cake hold significant importance, albeit within different realms.

Rendang during Hari Raya also promotes the concept of 'silaturrahim', a bonding system that reinforces constructs of care within the family and wider Muslim community. Silaturrahim is analogous to leman, ketupat and pulut kuning. These items are served with rendang. As Muhammad et al. (2013) proposed, the sticky quality of those rice dishes reflects the close and caring relationships within Malay families. Consequently, the binding metaphor of sticky rice and the inherent close caring within silaturrahim are ways in which Malay people not only find themselves, but also locate themselves within Malay Muslim culture. In these ways, rendang at Hari Raya spans the four tenets of my method, symbolic interactionism (Fuller & Carter, 2016) because the inherent interaction of rendang, Hari Raya and silaturrahim create a cohesive identity within individualised expression. Rendang at Hari Raya also promotes Woodward's (2007) notions of actancy. The meanings and values, like silaturrahim, with which Muslims imbue rendang, mean that rendang becomes much more than just a nutritious dish: rendang signifies certain behaviours and emotions of care and respect. Consequently, rendang at Hari Raya helps Malay people to make sense of their world and in doing so reveal the importance of food as a vector of communication, interaction, and ritual. Thus, rendang and silaturrahim reflect Warde's (2016) suggestion that food promotes intimacy and bonding.

In my experience, observing and helping my mum prepare rendang and serving it with either leman, ketupat or pulut kuning to the family first thing in the morning, with a hot cup of tea, reflects an act of silaturrahim. Even my grandmother preparing batches of rendang for her family and the neighbours who visit during Hari Raya is a reflection of her love and silaturrahim within her village. In these ways and cognisant of faith, rendang at Hari Raya provides many Muslims and Minang with a whakapapa of tradition and custom that reflects the past, involves the present and provides a way to negotiate the

future. It is within these understandings of rendang that the positions articulated by Omar Din (2011) and Korff (2011) are realised. Additionally, rendang expresses the lineage of the Minangkabau tribes who settled in Malaysia and refined rendang as ‘their dish’ (Nurmufida et al., 2017). Taking a theoretical perspective, my experience and relationship with rendang, and that of many other Malays and Minang, aligns with Polat and Polat’s (2020) suggestion that food signifies identity and place. Yet, initially, I was surprised by Tanjung et al.’s (2020) research suggesting rendang’s ingredients were symbols of expression within Minang socio-culture. However, as I reflected upon that suggestion, I became aware that I subconsciously engaged in the behaviours Tanjung et al. (2020) described. For example, showing respect to my elders by slightly bowing, politely taking, and placing their hand on my forehead is something I and many other Malay’s ‘do’ almost automatically. In these ways, preparing and serving rendang at Hari Raya is but one of the important ways in which I have come to know my world and to appreciate my uniqueness as a Malay Muslim.

Discussing Rendang at Malay Weddings

Malay weddings are rich in tradition and ritual. Those customs and rituals are important to Malay culture and Muslim identity. One important custom is the serving of rendang to the wedding guests. Key to Malay weddings is also the gift of bunga telur. The gift of a hardboiled egg at these occasions symbolises fertility and is also a token of thanks from the bride and groom for their guests’ attendance (Muhammad et al., 2013). As I have come to realise, rendang at Malay weddings holds deep and significant meaning. Rendang with pulut kuning (glutinous rice), when served at weddings, acknowledges the importance of food symbolically representing identity, unity and, in combination with bunga telur, a wish for the future. Consequently, that food combination evokes Blichfeldt et al.’s (2015) remark about food as a social construct that provides its consumers and producers with meaning. Within that process the care and attention to others signifies acts of silaturahmi, not only between hosts and wedding guests, but between the couple themselves as they form a new and caring life together. In these ways, and much like rendang’s use in Hari Raya, rendang at weddings exemplifies an edible ‘display’ of Malay and Minang characteristics including love, care for others and the wish for a successful future. Those practices hold parallels with the Minang practice of rantau (the act of wandering) (Tanjung et al., 2020). While rantau is linked to male Minang culture, considered within a contemporary framework and metaphorically, the married couple has ‘wandered’ until their meeting point and subsequent marriage. Thus, rendang’s

ingredients, as reflectors of Minang culture (Tanjung et al., 2020), also signify the coming together of two people. Within that wedding, other Malay traditions are upheld. The bride and groom are treated like royalty (Muhammad et al., 2013) and are conspicuously placed in a pelamin (Boveli, 2010). Those acts and the actions of the Imam or Sheikh further solidify the sanctity of marriage within Muslim cultures. In this way, and like Hari Raya, a Malay wedding reinforces more cultural values and mores than are conveyed by food alone.

Furthermore, I consider my own upcoming wedding to be an opportunity not only to solidify my love for my soon-to-be husband but also, as a one-off opportunity, to showcase my culture and my family, and to signal our intention, within the gift of bunga telur, to have a family of our own. Within my own marriage, to a non-Malay, I have come to realise the deep meaning of rendang, and how it signifies my identity. However, since my wedding will be held in Auckland, is also grounded in something else: the dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981). That realisation has for me, and my fiancé, made our traditional Malay wedding all the more important. Like glutinous rice, we will come together and share this joyful occasion mindful of our culture, love, and care for others within silaturahmi. In these ways, rendang's importance at Malay weddings, including my own, has come to mean more than the nourishment of guests (Woodward, 2007). At weddings, and within my other narratives, rendang signifies, as Nik Mohd Nor et al. (2020) proposed, the preservation, embodiment, and enactment of cultural legacies. However, as my marriage to a non-Malay might suggest, it could promote a blended food practice within my own production of rendang. After perfecting my mother's and grandmother's rendang, will I adapt it to suit my new husband's taste? Only time will tell.

Discussing Rendang in Commercialised Settings

Reinforcing my relationship with rendang is my Islamic faith. While recipes and spice mixtures for rendang vary, Korff (2001) suggested that a point of commonality was the fact that Islamic culture influenced food consumption, particularly for Malays in Malaysia. As Malays, the Minangkabau people follow the Islamic faith (Mardatillah, 2020). This, for me, exemplifies part of the multiplicity inherent in my Malay identity. Extending my intersectionality, I am simultaneously Malay, Minang, Malaysian, and Muslim. Yet, within that blend of identifiers, my Islamic belief is transcendent inasmuch as it defines what food are considered edible (halal) and which are not (haram) (Nakyinsige et al., 2012). Consequently, my own considerations of my identity reflect

Beng's (2000) suggestion that it is hard to think of Malays without considering their Islamic identity. Yet, as a Muslim living in Aotearoa New Zealand, my Malay and Islamic beliefs appear to me to be contained within a hierarchy signifying 'otherness.' In Aotearoa New Zealand, as I have experienced it, being Muslim stands out as my first point of difference, not similarity. Brown (2016) reflected my experiences by noting that many Muslims are differentiated the clothes they wear. My headscarf is a fine example of Brown's position, as is the food I eat or, more particularly, do not eat.

In that way, rendang could also be considered to be a point of difference. While many restaurants serve the dish in New Zealand, I have tended to avoid it at these venues. One reason why I have done this is cost. Malaysian restaurants, particularly in Auckland, can be quite expensive compared to their counterparts in Malaysia. However, as I consider my work, I think that there is a deeper reason why I avoid rendang in commercial restaurants. I reflect Fischler's (1988) notion of neophobia, in as much as I am reluctant to consume rendang in environments outside of my home. As I have come to consider what I know and how I have come to know it, I realise that rendang signifies family, safety, and the security of home. Part of that is silaturrahim. For me, rendang is not a dish with a frivolous meaning. When I eat rendang, I 'flashback' to the tastes and smells of my mother's and grandmother's cooking, and how their rendangs taste. In this way, rendang holds a direct connection to literally who I am. When I consider that, within Brillat-Savarin's (1825/2009) famous aphorism "tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you who you are" (p. 15), I find myself, as a rendang consumer, part of a loving Malay family, negotiating a dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981), yet guided by our Minang past and our Muslim beliefs. Within my identities, I am still struggling to replicate my mother's or grandmother's rendang. In that struggle, it could be posited that my sense of self is incomplete, a work in progress. I am happy for that to be the case, because it opens me to new experience, and the possibility that one day my rendang will be as good as my mother's and grandmother's. In the meantime, a commercially made rendang, despite the restaurant's location, simply cannot match the benchmark they have established.

Discussing Rendang as Comfort Food

Rendang is not only a traditional Malay dish but is one of my comfort foods, a food that gives me joy in eating it. Through rendang, my parents, especially my grandmother, would always remind me who I am. Because I am my grandmother's only granddaughter, she believed it was very important to continue her rendang legacy. Her action reflected

Shapiro's (2017) explanation of women's important role in Minang culture. Part of that importance has been the passing down of knowledge and rendang. Knowing about and being able to make rendang is important. As Fatimah et al. (2021) described, lacking such knowledge signified a denial of belonging to Minang culture. In that way, and considering the position of Polat and Polat (2020), foods like rendang have the ability to communicate and, in doing so, reinforce expected social roles and mores.

Rendang helps me feel loved; without it, I feel incomplete. However, I am not the only member of my family with such feelings. I suggest that all members of my family view my mother's and grandmother's rendang as comfort food. I use my father's recent rantau and return to Aotearoa New Zealand to illuminate the comforting aspects of rendang. While rantau is an ancient construct, my father has enacted it in contemporary ways. His teaching at a university in the United Arab Emirates exemplifies the characteristics of rantau, since he seeks a better opportunity. However, while he engages in a contemporary rantau, his recent return home to Aotearoa New Zealand and his MIQ isolation reveal in significant ways the comforting qualities of rendang because my mother cooked his favourite dishes as a welcome home surprise. Those gestures recognised how rendang not only nourishes the body but also the mind. We relished sharing my father's joy in eating his favourite dishes, including rendang. His enjoyment, and his long wait to return home, evoked for me Nurmufida's (2017) suggestion that within the cooking of rendang, patience, wisdom and tenacity are necessary elements. As a family we exhibited these characteristics, as did my father, in his long wait to come home. Consequently, we were comforted by his joy and his comfort in enjoying the dishes like rendang that we had prepared especially for him. Thus, rendang and the other foods we took for our father's enjoyment reflect Long's (2017) suggestion that comfort food evoked notions of home and security, and for me, "cherished grandmothers" (p. 1).

However, I enjoy the comfort food status of rendang too. For me, its preparation, aromas and techniques bring a flood of nostalgic memory. Many of my Malaysian rendang memories add comfort to my feelings of isolation here in Aotearoa New Zealand. Yet, rendang has offered new forms of comfort to me. My involvement with the Malaysian Students Association has provided opportunities to meet new people, enjoy fellowship, and to share a food that holds deep meaning for me and many other Malaysians living within their dual realm of existence, here in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this way, as Warde (2016) suggested, foods like rendang provide a bridge between cultures, and help in

establishing deep bonds and relationships, not only between people but also within people (Warde, 2016).

Responding to My Research Questions

In this section, in Table 3, I directly respond to my research questions.

Table 3: Research Questions and Responses

Research Questions	Researched Responses
What are the symbolic and cultural meanings of rendang within Malay socio-culture in Malaysia?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rendang promotes cultural cohesion through commensality and the metaphor of its ingredients and accompaniments as symbolic representations of Minang and Malay culture. ▪ Rendang provides a whakapapa of knowledge within families and communities that reinforces social roles and mores. ▪ Serving rendang signifies care through silaturrahim. ▪ Rendang symbolically represents characteristics of identity and belonging for women within Minang and Malay culture. The ability to make rendang is a ‘must’ for these women. ▪ The ability to make rendang symbolically contrasts the stability of the Malay/Minang home with the male construct of rantau. ▪ Eggs as an accompaniment for rendang signify fertility and gratitude. ▪ Rendang signifies the importance of religious celebrations, like Hari Raya, and the meaningfulness of marriage. ▪ Rendang signifies my identity as a Malay within my family whakapapa. ▪ My grandmother’s and mother’s sharing of their rendang wisdom and knowledge expresses their symbolic love in a tangible manner.
What occasions and themes reflect the importance of rendang within my own lived experiences?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ My research has explored rendang at Hari Raya, rendang at weddings, rendang in commercial venues and rendang as a comfort food. However, my exploration only touches upon those domains. As I note within my recommendations for further research, more exploration of rendang within Malay/Minang culture is needed (refer “Research Limitations” and “Recommendations for Future Research”, below).

<p>How do those occasions and themes reflect wider Malaysian culture and society?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ My research explored my own experiences of rendang within four personal narratives. However, those narratives ‘sit’ within a wider cultural space. That space recognises my individual identity within the wider ethnic and religious communities. Those ethnic and religious communities include Malay, Muslim, Minang, and Malaysian identities/communities. Consequently, within those realms my narratives reflected: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The gendered nature of Malay/Minang culture. 2. How Muslim belief ascribes constructs of edibility and inedibility (halal and haram). 3. How systems of care (silaturrahim) are reflected in rendangs production, consumption and commensality. 4. How rantau, as an ancient activity, is expressed in contemporary ways. 5. That food and identity are social constructions that help Malays, Muslims, and Malaysians make sense of their world. 6. How my narratives, discussion, and literature review provided points of difference distinguishing Malay, Minang, and Muslim peoples. 7. The ways in which my dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981) provides insight into how a Malay Muslim woman perceives the importance of rendang, considering her internationalised experiences. 8. Finally, my narratives realise many of the emotions shared by Malay Muslims when they consider the place of rendang in their individual and shared lives.
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My Academic Contribution to Knowledge

Having discussed my research findings in the context of existing literature and then aligned them in responses to my three research questions, the following section identifies my dissertation’s contribution to gastronomic knowledge. My contribution to academic knowledge consists of the following:

- How rendang adds a unique perspective to the literature on commensality.
- How religious belief impacts constructs of edibility and care for others.

- The ways in which older traditions like rantau can be expressed in contemporary ways.
- How Malay food signifies tradition and reinforces gender roles.
- The importance of Malaysianisation as a signifier of social unity.
- How food generates similarity and difference in and between communities.
- A unique insight into how the dual realm of existence impacts notions of food and identity.
- The importance of food as a vector for emotion, memory, and nostalgia.
- The aspirational desire to create a dish that is as good as one made by my mother or grandmother, promoting a whakapapa of knowledge and technical skill.
- How personal narrative can illuminate widely accepted social practices and add new perspectives revealing both food and identities dynamism.
- How emotional connection can influence notions of edibility, within my reluctance to eat rendang if it is not made by my mother or grandmother.
- How issues of authenticity are addressed within the nexus of home-cooked rendang and commercially available rendang.

Research Limitations

As I approach the end of my dissertation, having considered its content and my research approach, I am aware of the limitations of my research. In this section, I present an overview of those limitations and proposals for their remedy. Table 4 provides this information.

Table 4: Research Limitations and Remedies

Research Limitation	Proposed Remedy
Limited access to Malay language literature	Undertaking research in Malaysia may have revealed academic Indigenous language sources that might enhance the academic scope of my research.
Limited participant range	Opening my research to include my mother and grandmother would add complementary perspectives. However, time, word limit, selected methodology and distance prevented their inclusion.

My selection of personal narratives may lack generalisability	Using a wider, yet inclusive methodology, such as a focus group of 20 participants, would have revealed different narratives from participants that might well contrast my own choice, thus offering yet more perspectives on rendang.
Time and word count	These constraints, while adding direction and focus to the work, were limiting inasmuch as I only had so many words within which to complete my entire work. However, research papers and the possibility of a PhD, for me, could extend my existing research.
Having a non-Malay, non-Muslim supervisor	This limitation meant that I needed to explain many details to my supervisor that, if they were Malay, they would automatically know and understand. However, this limitation also progressed my work, because I needed to actively reflect and communicate what I considered to be base knowledge to someone else.
Situational forces	COVID-19 and personal issues limited my research progress. But as I near its end, I realise that those factors were largely beyond my control.
My personal biases	While researchers, including myself, try to avoid their own bias in their research, it cannot be entirely excluded. Reflecting that are my choice of methodology, my choice of narratives, and my selection of literature. While those elements complement my research and, at times, provide it with points of contrast, their selection reflects my bias and preferences towards ‘things’ that I like and feel will work well, to achieve a satisfactory grade for my work.
Access to my university	Access was limited by COVID-19. More visits and use of the library may have resulted in wider academic content. However, the university’s online library access sufficed.
The reliability of memory	Personal narratives rely on the participant’s memory. While I would like to say my narratives and memory are 100% accurate, many studies question the reliability of memory and recall (Giorgio, 2013, as cited in Winkler, 2018). ¹⁶

¹⁶ “And memories may in fact be unruly and unreliable which brings some researchers to see various tensions with regard to using memorized information as data” (p. 238)

Recommendations for Future Research

While I have provided insights into the under-researched domain of Malay Minang culture and rendang, more research is required to further illuminate this fascinating topic. Consequently, with regard to future research in a variety of related domains, I recommend:

- That ethnographic research be carried out in both rural and urban Malay communities to explore the role and importance of rendang within those groups.
- That qualitative research explores rendang in Malay migrant communities in Aotearoa New Zealand and other locales.
- That a range of methodologies are used to explore rendang so that, from those diverse approaches, a more holistic overview of rendang is achieved.
- That food historians explore rendang's history and diversity within Malaysian society.
- That Malaysian food's link to myth and meaning be explored in new research.
- That research in Malaysia's non-Muslim communities and states compares and contrasts their perspectives on rendang.
- That research explores rendang within considerations of globalisation and glocalisation,¹⁷ and how those domains impact rendang's authenticity.
- That research explores the impact of convenience items (like canned coconut cream/milk) on rendang's authenticity and symbolic meaning.
- That future research explores other occasions where rendang is of importance within Malay and Minang culture.
- That future research explores the emotional connection Malay people experience in consuming and considering rendang.

Closing Considerations: A Reflection

As I near the end of my dissertation, I feel that it is vital that I reflect upon what is commonly called my research journey. Completing my dissertation reflects my dynamic evolution as a Malay of Malaysian ancestry who now lives in Aotearoa New Zealand. Indeed, my journey has functioned as an 'unlocker' and 'revealer' of the unquestioned habits, knowledge, and realities that configure my life. In completing this research, I have learnt more about myself and my culture, as well as Minang history and the importance

¹⁷ 'Glocalisation' is a term combining 'globalisation' and 'localisation', and is defined as an object that is globalised but has been adjusted to suit local preferences/taste (Hayes, 2020).

of rendang. Previously, I had taken this information for granted. However, my academic journey has not been easy. Questioning what you know and how you came to know it represents an interrogation of self. This often made me feel awkward and a little insecure. However, from those negativities and research has emerged a new self-positivity. YES! I can complete a dissertation and, in doing so, not only complete its requirements but along the way also find new and exciting ways to see myself, my cultural background, and my future life. Given that, and while I am excited to be drawing my work to a close, I shall miss its constant presence. My dissertation has been my constant companion. While that companion drifts toward examination, I am left more knowledgeable than before, and in missing my companion, in need of comfort. I think I might ask my mum if she will make me a beef rendang! Thank you for your time.

*‘Terima Kasih Daun Keladi,
Kerana Sudi Membaca Disertasi Ini’*

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Appendix

Methodologies Considered and Rejected

My choice of autoethnography and personal narrative was arrived at after I considered multiple alternatives. Those options are presented in the following Table.

Table 5: Methodologies Considered and Rejected

<i>Type of methodology</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Suitability</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
Ethnography	A study of culture through the lived experiences of people from that culture (Adam et al., 2015).	No	Ethnography was a possible methodology for my dissertation. However, due to time limitations and unpredictability of the COVID-19 situation, I decided against its use.
Case study	A study involves gaining comprehensive understanding of a complex subject in its real-world settings (Crowe et al., 2011).	No	Case study was not suitable for my dissertation because of the practicalities of observation, and time constraints of a dissertation.
Focus group	A study that involves a group of people being collectively interviewed to gain insight and more understanding on an idea/topic (Lavrakas, 2008).	No	Focus groups are not compatible with an autoethnography. However, a wider study of my topic could, in the future, use this method.
Narrative inquiry	A study that involves understanding participants in intimate settings and experiences over time (Given, 2008).	No	Narrative inquiry was a possibility for my dissertation. However, time and word count limitations made it an impractical choice.
Autoethnography	A study that combines constructs of the self in a wider socio-culture within an analysis of cultural experiences (Ellis et al., 2010).	Yes	Autoethnography was the most suitable methodology. Firstly, it limited my contact with others (fitting with the constraints of COVID-19), but enhanced my research aim of understanding the symbolic and cultural meanings of rendang.