

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Food is a vital necessity for human survival and growth and can be categorized as a fundamental and physiological requirement (Mela, 1999). Besides, food is an intrinsic part of socio-cultural values. It incorporates everything that is of significance to people, symbolizes social variances and cements social ties and relationships. Food is a universal human need but it can have considerably different meanings from one to another. The variety of food that we eat, the manner of preparing the components to cook the food and how we ingest and share it, all together are enough to demonstrate our true selves: who we are and where we are from (Kittler et al., 2012). This is proven by the well-known saying of a renowned gastronome, Jean-Anthelme (1825): “the food that you take explains the person who you are.”

However, several factors affect our food choices. Food choice is a complex field of study and consumers' choices are complicated by a wide range of factors such as advertising, function, health, price, sensory aspects and so forth. The specific decision making process related to food choice is still indefinite due to its complexity and perhaps due to the fact that food choice process is naturally complicated. Furthermore, its relevance to a range of disciplines makes it even more complex because different disciplines may relate to food from different perspectives, thus highlight different processes (Drewnowski, 1997).

The types of food preferred have evolved with the historical evolution of culture (Wright et al., 2001; Montanari, 2006). When it comes to the food preferred, the cultural group that people fit into is greatly significant. Deciding what to eat or not eat goes beyond liking or disliking a particular type of food as food choice is affected by several factors including habits, beliefs, attitudes and values (Mela, 1999; Palojoki & Tuomi Gröhn, 2001). Culture is often the outcome of cumulative memory that determines individual behaviors (Franchi, 2012), and the impact of culture has its basis in an agreement of numerous factors, which include the environment; or geography, as well as climatic conditions and the availability of different fauna and flora.

Another major factor that affects food choice is ritual and belief systems, whether religious or otherwise, while community and family structure also play a part as well as the extent of innovation, mechanization, and experimentation in the society. A certain degree of social mobility is also necessary for purposes of trading with and importing from other populations or consumer groups, and this may affect food culture. It should also be noted that the history, economics and politics within a culture can also influence consumers' decisions on what they would prefer to eat (Mela, 1999; Wright et al., 2000).

The patterns of diets evolve and change over time (Saba, 2001) as part and parcel of social development. This is because of the multidimensional nature of people's diets which are molded by various factors, including society (Drewnowski, 1997; Naska et al., 2006), and this explains the occurrences of cross cultural transformations in food preferences (Risvik et al., 2006). Historically, there has been a close association between food choice and cultural development (Wright et al., 2001; Montanari, 2006).

It is to be expected that since people in different societies and different cultures develop in different ways, there would be the development of a multiplicity of distinctly different food traditions and cuisines (Montanari, 2006). This suggests that various demographic, socio-cultural and economic factors moderate the association between taste responsiveness to food and our food choices (Drewnowski, 1997). This however is based on the assumption that people who are culturally or regionally grouped would be similarly influenced with regard to their food preference in comparison with people from other cultures or regions. Although in today's world people from different cultures and regions throughout do consume the same type of food, with more or less similar ingredients, it does not necessarily mean that these "Common" foods are prepared in the same way as allowances have to be made for different climatic conditions and soils among other things (Risvik, et al. 2006).

The Arab world consist of 21 countries that originated from North Africa to the Persian Gulf (Abraham, 1995). These include, Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauretania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Yemen, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and United Arab Emirates (Musaigar, 1993). Therefore, eating and the dietary habit of Libyans are similar to those of other Arab countries and involve customs that focus on hospitality about food and mingling with family and friends (Abraham, 1995). Libyan gastronomy like that of other Arabs is recognized by the flavor and the usage of fresh ingredients.

The collective elements that give aroma to their cuisine include herbs and spices (bitter orange black pepper, caraway, cardamom, coriander seed, cinnamon, cumin, cloves, galangal, garlic, ginger, marjoram, mint, nutmeg, saffron, sumac, berries, and thyme), dried fruits and nuts (dates, raisins, almond, walnuts, hazelnuts, peanuts,

pistachios), fresh fruits (both sweet and sour), ,sugar and honey, vegetables (onion, leek, celery root, fresh coriander, carrots, cabbage, and spinach), rosewater, vinegar and dairy products (Kritzman, 1999). Libyan main food is bread; and their natural fat is olive oil. Mostly, fruits are offered as sweets after meal and eggplant is the favorite vegetable. Arabs like Libyan cuisine and continue to prefer dairy foods, dates, melon, and camel hump even after migration and acculturation (Kritzman, 1999; Helstosky, 2009). Libyan food customs diverge along religious lines. They have religious prohibition regarding the consumption of pork and alcohol (Hussaini, 1993). They want meat that is slaughtered in agreement with the prescribed letting of blood while mentioning the name of Allah (God) (Sakr, 1971). Their habit also includes obligatory abstinence from every food and drink before daybreak till dusk during the fasting month of Ramadan (Sakr, 1975).

Numerous researches have revealed variations in food habits among diverse clusters of immigrants in different parts of the world (Gardner et al., 1995). Dietary changes reported among immigrants in other parts of the world have been found to be interconnected to the duration of residence in the new place, level of acculturation or social contacts with the population in the “adopted” culture (Liou & Contento, 2001). It was also reported that younger immigrant populations are more likely to adjust their food habits than the adult immigrant clusters (Gordon et al., 2000). Nevertheless, there is scant information on dietary practices and the impact of dietary choice on the sociocultural lives of Arabs especially Libyans living in Malaysia. As such, this current study seeks to determine the level of food choice and preferences of Libyans when they stay in Malaysia, and how these variables impact their culture and social life.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Food forms the bedrock of the existence of every living thing, especially human beings. Based on the universal requirement of food, it is an essential part of every culture. One can tell the origin and the lifestyle of another through the type of food they eat and their attitude toward food. Food means different thing to different people and in different cultures. Migration from one place to another is something that has been and will continue to be as long as there is life. Since food is a critical need for everybody, it is therefore established that the immigrant will also accept food wherever they find themselves. This has been found to change the eating habits of many immigrants; for example, it common in America to eat even while walking on the street but for Arabs, food must not be taken that way. It is therefore not surprising to find an Arab who has spent time in America eating while walking. The food choice and even habits of America have been incorporated in his life.

Since Malaysia has become a country of choice for many people from different arts of the world, it is useful to observe the choice of food of these immigrants since they would probably continue eating some of the foods from their original culture prior to their stay in Malaysia. Such observation will give an indication of how much they have retained of their original cultural food preferences and how much Malaysian culture they have adopted. Taking into consideration that Malaysia is now a hub of tourists and immigrants from around the world, it can be assumed that cross cultural flow can and does occur and Malaysians have also accepted some of the food preferences and eating habits of the many tourists and immigrants they come in contact with. This study intends to identify the level of socio-cultural impact of food choice

and preferences by Libyan Arabs to the new culture and their experience during their stay in Malaysia.

1.3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this current research is to explore the impact of socio-cultural food choice and preferences among Libyan residents in Malaysia. This study will attempt to determine whether Libyan residents in Malaysia change their food choice and preferences in relation to Malaysian eating behavior. The findings of this study could provide better understanding of the relationship between socio-cultural adaptation and food choice and preferences, and further improve the adaptation of socio-cultural theory and practice in the food area.

Specifically, the objectives of this study are the following:

1. To determine the best food choice among Libyan residents.
2. To ascertain the most preferred food among Libyan residents.
3. To evaluate the level of socio-cultural adaptation among Libyan residents in Malaysia.
4. To examine the relationship between the food choice and preferences and sociocultural adaptation among Libyan residents in Malaysia.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are the research questions of this study:

1. What is the food choice that is most highly rated by Libyan residents in Malaysia?
2. What is the most preferred food among Libyan residents in Malaysia?
3. What is the level of socio-cultural adaptation practiced by Libyans living in Malaysia?
4. Is there any significant relationship between the food choice and food preferences and socio-cultural adaptation among Libyan residents in Malaysia?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is important both theoretically and practically. First, the theory that related to socio-cultural acculturation has been well developed, but little research has been done to investigate some of the fundamental relationships between the sociocultural and food habits (food choice and preferences) which are considered a limitation for many food researches. Second, little food choice and preferences research has been conducted among Arabs in Asian countries although many studies have been done mostly in western countries. Results of this study may determine how the pattern of eating and food choices and preferences of Arabs may differ from their everyday pattern as they travel abroad. The results of this study may offer some insights into the impact of food choice and preferences on socio-cultural adaptation.

Moreover, it can be argued that food education in terms of choice and preferences can help Arabs to shop prudently and make decisions about food consumption and organization that can contribute to their socio-cultural adaptation. For

illustration, scholars in the developing world have revealed that many demographic factors can affect the people's food choice and preferences. Thus, the aptitude to quantify the degree of food choice and preferences among Arabs abroad might benefit the educational interventions in food to evaluate the effect of socio-cultural adaptation from the food choice and preferences among people that travel and stay abroad.

1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted at selected Libyan residences in Malaysia. The residential areas most popular among Libyans are the following:

- i. Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur
- ii. Sri Hartamas, Kuala Lumpur
- iii. Kajang, Selangor South City Area, Seri Kembangan, Selangor
- iv. Sierra One, Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor
- v. Nilai, Negeri Sembilan
- vi. Ampang, Kuala Lumpur

Besides, the selected population of this study focused mainly on Libyans who have been staying in Malaysia for three months or longer because this researcher felt that this particular segment of the Libyan population in Malaysia would have been in Malaysia long enough to have adapted to some cultural and food preferences and habits.

As such, the findings of this study can only be generalized to Libyan Arabs staying in Malaysia.