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Negotiating "Local" Food: Eastern Part Indonesia Narratives and Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Calls for local food in Eastern Indonesia are often dominated by sago. Still, this attention is overshadowed by continuously glorifying rice as the primary staple, ignoring regional contexts and cultural identities. Through a collaborative forum called the Food Festival Archipelago (FFA), we engaged students in sharing their stories about local food to explore their experiences, imaginations, and cultural ties to Eastern Indonesian cuisine. Using creative methods such as podcasts, short stories, Instagram posts, and videos, we discovered that Java-centric food politics have distanced students from their local food heritage. This disconnection forces many to rely on elders to rediscover traditional food knowledge, highlighting a critical loss of cultural identity. This initiative amplifies marginalized food narratives and serves as an act of resistance against global hegemony, fostering resilience through re-localization efforts. Furthermore, our findings underscore the importance of strengthening food sovereignty and local cultural identity in policy discussions, addressing the challenges posed by modernization while celebrating the rich culinary heritage of Eastern Indonesia.

Keywords: *Eastern Part of Indonesia; Food Development; Food Politics; Local Food; Modernization*

1. Local Food: Whose Voice?: An Introduction

Modernization is a transformative process toward modernity in social, economic, and political systems (Inglehart, 2020). This process intertwines with various developments, including urbanization, industrialization, and the expansion of education (Breton, 2019). In the context of Indonesia, some indicators of these changes include the increased participation of women in the workforce by 0.72% between 2021 and 2023 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024), the rise in female literacy rates reaching 96.86% in urban areas (Pancawati, 2022), and the decline in fertility rates to 2.18 in 2020 (Rajagukguk, 2022). Furthermore, it is projected that by 2035, the majority of Indonesia's population, approximately 66.6%, will reside in urban areas (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2020). These social changes are not limited to urban centers but are increasingly apparent in Eastern Indonesia.

In Eastern Indonesia, modernization has also impacted social status and gender roles. In the previous research, the roles of Bugis women are no longer confined to domestic tasks but have expanded to include participation in external employment, such as cashiers or treasurers supporting family businesses (Anwar & Waru, 2019). This shift highlights how modernization reshapes social structures and reconnects traditional roles with the demands of a more modern economy.

The effects of modernization are also evident in food (Darmanto, 2024; Febriana et al., 2024; Holm et al., 2016; Triwijayati et al., 2022). Food is deeply interwoven with Indonesian culture (Wijaya, 2019), and these changes influence the perception of what is considered 'modern' versus 'local,' particularly in Eastern Indonesia. In this region, modernization often interacts with influences from Western Indonesia, especially Java. One significant initiative during Suharto's era, the Green Revolution, established rice as the dominant staple food in Indonesia. Narratives such as "it's not a meal without rice" have become ingrained, continually shaping Indonesian societal and national food policies (Rondhi et al., 2019). However, rice is not the primary agricultural product of Eastern Indonesia, where local staples such as sago, sweet potatoes, cassava, corn, and taro are increasingly neglected.

Moreover, food politics often culturally, socially, and economically disadvantage Eastern Indonesia. The food estate program initiated in 2010 forced many areas in Eastern Indonesia to alter their agricultural practices. Although its goal was food sustainability, the central government's monopolization of agricultural land often disrupted local farming systems. Homogenized agriculture gradually but significantly eroded local food systems. Political interventions, such as those led by the government, frequently resulted in forms of racial discrimination (Chao, 2022) and dispossession of Indigenous land rights (Ginting & Espinosa, 2016; Savitri & Price, 2016). These circumstances threaten justice and welfare (Elmhirst et al., 2017), creating dependencies on imported staples like rice and wheat, often processed into instant noodles (Arif, 2021). Local communities reliant on indigenous staples face stigmas of poverty, as rice is perceived as a marker of "progress." Such dependencies can further exacerbate local economic conditions by imposing additional costs on food needs that could otherwise be met with local resources.

The prevailing narrative highlights the need to reflect on local food in Eastern Indonesia. Drawing from experiences in the Nutrition Program at Satya Wacana Christian University, alternative methods were explored to engage with students during the COVID-19 restrictions. The impersonal nature of Zoom meetings, characterized by the display of names without faces, highlighted the need for meaningful methods to connect with students. Food was identified as a unifying medium grounded in an interdisciplinary exploration of the meaning of local food.

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This approach culminated in forming the Food Festival Archipelago (FFA) initiative in collaboration with educators.

Over two years, the FFA opened our eyes to the interdisciplinary discourse surrounding local food across the Indonesian archipelago alongside students. The forum also raised critical questions about how Eastern Indonesia's local food narratives are constructed. Within the modernization context, "local voices" are often overshadowed by national discourses emphasizing homogenized food demands. This paper explores modernization's impacts on local food narratives in Eastern Indonesia.

Highlighting local food narratives from Eastern Indonesia is expected to broaden discussions on food localization in the Indonesian context. Furthermore, such conversations may create opportunities to resist global hegemony (Beriss, 2019; Motta, 2021; Tilzey, 2018), contributing to solutions for broader challenges such as climate change, malnutrition, and other contemporary issues, ultimately advancing food justice.

2. FFA as a Methodological Framework

The meaning of local food was explored through the Food Festival Archipelago (FFA) initiative conducted in 2021 and 2022. The activities engaged 430 students, organized into 88 groups, each tasked with creating projects addressing local food in their regions. Among all the projects, only 25 focused on food from Eastern Indonesia, while the majority highlighted food from Western Indonesia, predominantly from Java.

Different themes were employed during the two periods. FFA 1 (2021) addressed the theme "What local food exists around you?" while FFA 2 (2022) explored "How is local food constructed?" These activities were conducted using distinct methods: FFA 1 was implemented entirely online due to COVID-19 restrictions, whereas FFA 2 adopted a hybrid format.

Students participating in FFA 1 were primarily third-year students from the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, particularly from the Nutrition and Nursing programs. However, during the second phase, we also involved students from the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, especially third-year students from the History Education and Science Education programs. The inclusion of third-year students was due to their enrollment in elective courses within their programs, which discussed food issues related to social sciences.

Students were free to use various methods, such as podcasts, short stories, Instagram posts, and videos, to explore their experiences, imaginations, and cultural connections to local food. Instead of structured interviews, these methods facilitated communication with the students, who belong to a younger generation, making it easier to delve into their experiences with local food. This process also encouraged students to reconnect with their local food heritage. We asked them to gather information through brief interviews with family members or community elders. Their narratives were then transformed into creative outputs intended for public dissemination, with a requirement to upload them periodically on Instagram along with captions. These methods produced rich and diverse data and allowed students to express their narratives creatively. This participatory approach aimed to empower students as knowledge producers while strengthening their cultural identity and memory associated with local food.

As a participatory and collaborative platform, FFA allowed students to rediscover and share their findings about local food. The students showcased and presented their work once all the projects were completed and submitted. During this process, they engaged in discussions, asked questions, and learned more about each other's food-related experiences, facilitating the exchange of information. Moreover, the promotion of food issues was reinforced by involving food experts and organizing workshops related to these topics.

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Students actively participated in webinars and three workshops, which included creating manual food-themed collages, introducing intercropping techniques, and hosting food tasting and memory sessions. Unlike FFA 2, the FFA 1 activities included only a family recipe-themed talk show. To reach a broader audience, the entire series of FFA 1 and 2 events was well-documented through various media platforms, including YouTube, Instagram, and podcasts.

Discussions with students were conducted to gain insights into their perspectives on local food, particularly its meaning in Eastern Indonesia. Modernization was identified as a transformative force that had shifted students towards more individualistic consumption patterns (Flanagan et al., 1996), disrupting traditions such as communal dining (Fischler, 2011) and contributing to the decline of home-cooked meals (Warde et al., 2007). These changes highlighted the intersection of societal values and modern individuality. Students' memories of local food were examined to explore this dynamic further.

It is important to note that the division of "West" and "East" in this discussion reflects the persistent reality of developmental disparities (Kumoro, 2019). The outcomes of these discussions were transcribed to gain a deeper understanding of the student's views. Our analysis focused on the discussions and projects that directly addressed local food from Eastern Indonesia. The media outputs—such as video uploads and podcasts—were instrumental in capturing key points and deepening our understanding of their connections to local food issues for further analysis.

3. A Different Perspective on Eastern Indonesia

Students from various regions in Indonesia provided valuable insights into how local food narratives vary significantly depending on regional contexts. This realization led to a focus on Eastern Indonesia. During discussions, students from the eastern regions often expressed deep affection for their local food staples, such as sago (a carbohydrate-rich starch derived from the pith of sago palm trees), cassava (a root vegetable known as manioc), and corn. They also introduced traditional dishes made from these ingredients, including papeda (a thick, glue-like porridge made from sago, typically served with fish soup), *dinangoi* (a sweet sago-based dessert cooked with coconut and sugar), *suami* (steamed grated cassava, traditionally served as a staple food), and *binte biluhuta* (a corn soup mixed with shredded fish, coconut milk, and spices). At the same time, these narratives highlighted the effects of modernization, which undermine the sustainability and preservation of local food traditions.

In one session of the FFA, students from Eastern Indonesia shared invaluable perspectives on the richness of their local food heritage, with sago becoming a focal point of the discussion. However, it also became evident that, behind their voices, significant challenges exist in preserving their local food. This reality prompted us to delve deeper into the concept of "local" regarding food in Eastern Indonesia and the challenges faced in contemporary conditions. We identified three key aspects for further exploration: national food politics overshadowed by rice, the fading of intergenerational interactions, and community resistance.

3.1. In the Shadow of Rice

In national food discussions, rice is often the dominant commodity. Unsurprisingly, Neilson and Wright argue that rice has become an ideology and a benchmark for a nation's "prosperity, resilience, and welfare" (Neilson & Wright, 2017). The discourse surrounding rice is deeply ingrained historically. Across various regimes, Indonesian leaders have intertwined the identity of the "nation" and "state" with rice production. Consequently, rice has become a politically strategic and focal point in national food policies.

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Food self-sufficiency, measured by rice production, is firmly embedded in the public imagination and remains a primary priority in national food development (Davidson, 2019; Macrae & Reuter, 2020). Various expansion efforts have been made to produce rice to meet the perceived "essential needs" of the Indonesian people. This prioritization of rice—"rice-centrism"—originates in Java and extends to other archipelago regions, based on the assumption that rice must be the staple food in every Indonesian household.

This emphasis has also extended to Eastern Indonesia, where rice was introduced as a staple. However, rice is not traditionally a familiar staple in this region. Several accounts, particularly from academics and journalists, highlight significant changes in the food system in Papua. For example, Nerenberg notes that government-initiated food assistance programs, such as the distribution of subsidized rice, have substantially altered livelihoods in Papua (Nerenberg, 2022). Previously, communities relied on subsistence systems using primary food sources like sago and sweet potatoes. This shift impacted consumption patterns and reshaped perceptions of their local food.

Additionally, Elisabeth observes that younger generations in Papua are beginning to forget or lose their connection to local food traditions (Elisabeth, 2022). The rapid influx of urbanization has brought migrants from other regions to Papua, introducing rice to local communities. As a result, traditionally, local foods like sago are gradually replaced by rice, which is perceived as more convenient to prepare. This shift has accustomed communities to rice consumption.

This dynamic is also reflected in the narratives of students from Eastern Indonesia. For instance, a student from the Papua Highlands mentioned that "rice is modern food." They acknowledged consuming rice only occasionally, as their daily diet traditionally consisted of sago prepared as papeda. Similarly, students from Bolaang Mongondow at North Sulawesi described consuming sago dishes like *dinangoi*. In contrast, students from Tanimbar Islands at Maluku expressed familiarity with cassava-based dishes such as *suami*, often served with traditional side dishes. While rice has been introduced into their lives, it remains non-essential. Local foods often receive little government attention compared to the focus on distributing rice as a national staple.

These sentiments reflect the strong construction of rice as a national food. This narrative is further reinforced by the Indonesian government's adoption of terms like food security and food sovereignty in international discourse. Unfortunately, these narratives are often misinterpreted and fail to address the realities on the ground, including agrarian reform. These policies still rely on neoliberal frameworks and overlook communities' needs and self-sufficiency capacities to access food resources (Neilson & Wright, 2017).

The dominance of rice-centric policies exemplifies food hegemony, marginalizing local food systems. This systemic marginalization aligns with agrarian transitions (Hadiprayitno, 2017; Khanif & Yunita, 2024) that shift local subsistence systems into market-oriented economies. Such changes have reframed local food narratives, often labeling them as "outdated" or "inferior" compared to "modern" staples like rice. National policies prioritizing rice as a key commodity ignore the diversity and value of local food systems, creating significant challenges for the sustainability of local food practices, which are deeply intertwined with cultural traditions.

However, local food systems in each region have the potential to support food sovereignty and security. Locally produced, distributed, and consumed foods can ensure food security and sovereignty, foster regional sustainability, and strengthen local economic cycles (Aucoin & Fry, 2015). By utilizing and preserving local foods, the government can reduce reliance on expensive

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food imports and mitigate risks associated with unstable price fluctuations. Therefore, national policies must provide greater space for the diversity of local foods across regions as an integral part of more holistic and sustainable food security and sovereignty strategies.

3.2. Fading Memories

Previous research emphasizes that preserving a community's memory is essential to prevent the extinction of certain food traditions (Almansouri et al., 2021; Seremetakis, 2019)—their research detail how cooking is a critical phase for safeguarding these memories. Without the act of cooking, the emotional space and exchange of information between generations are disrupted. Cooking is not merely a domestic or private activity but also creates opportunities for expanding communal knowledge. Through social interactions and information sharing, shared practices such as cooking methods, rituals, and communal dining strengthen the collective memory of local food, ensuring its preservation.

Unfortunately, modernization, which significantly changes social, economic, and political structures, has affected intergenerational communication, including knowledge about food. The domestic space, once a primary venue for passing down cooking skills, is gradually being abandoned. This shift has led to a break in the transmission of food knowledge. Previous research highlights this issue, noting that the loss of domestic cooking knowledge occurs because these skills are no longer transferred from generation to generation (Sutton, 2012; Trubek et al., 2017). As a result, kitchens lose their role as central spaces for exchanging knowledge about local food and its preparation. This discontinuity, in turn, severs the connection between younger generations and their local food traditions. Furthermore, communal spaces for discussing local food are also at risk of disappearing.

This phenomenon was reflected in the experiences of FFA participants. Many admitted that cooking skills were not directly inherited from their families, leading them to rely more on fast food. During discussions, some participants preferred fast food or dishes commonly available in Java. Besides being more accessible, they acknowledged that these foods were often cheaper than their local food.

Despite these challenges, FFA succeeded in reigniting students' memories of local food in Eastern Indonesia by asking, "What does local food mean to you?" This rediscovery process was difficult, as students had to trace the origins of local food by consulting their community leaders or older family members, such as grandparents. Alienation from their food heritage, reduced to mere "eating without meaning," was a recurring theme among participants. However, the meaning embedded in local food can be deeply emotional, spiritual, and cultural.

This phenomenon is not unfamiliar in Eastern Indonesia. The forces of modernization have introduced large-scale food production and distribution over long distances, often resulting in monocultural practices. The continuous availability of fast food has drastically altered eating patterns in the community. Furthermore, issues of social class and the desire to "be modern" have eroded the cultural imagination surrounding local food. In this context, local food, rich in cultural and nutritional value, often struggles to compete with the modernity portrayed by fast food.

3.3. Quiet Resistance

Discussions about local food with students from Eastern Indonesia were often rich with personal stories deeply connected to their respective communities. This was echoed by one of the FFA speakers, Dicky Senda, a local food activist based in Mollo, Eastern Indonesia. During an FFA session, Senda emphasized that local food cannot be separated from the community or

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its environment. His words resonate with Brune et al., who highlight how local communities interact with material, social, and natural resources as key elements for sustaining local food systems (Brune et al., 2023).

Unfortunately, the strength of these interactions has been disrupted by modernization. The processes of modernization, requiring transmission, adaptation, importation, and transplantation of modern ideas (Furtado, 2021; Peet, 2024), have imposed significant social and cultural changes on societies (Giddens, 1993). The expansion of modernization concepts from Western countries has not only attacked institutional foundations but also shaken long-held local values. These changes impact social and economic dimensions and raise questions about knowledge, power, and their effects on cultural identity. In this context, modernization has led to a shift in the "way of knowing," transforming how communities perceive and interact with their traditional knowledge, including local food systems.

The shifting "way of knowing" due to modernization has created new practices for indigenous communities, such as those in Eastern Indonesia. These can be seen as critical resistance against the oppression brought about by modernization (Gómez-Baggethun, 2022; Wilson, 2016). This dynamic was also evident during FFA activities. It was common for students from Eastern Indonesia, such as those from Papua, Maluku, or East Nusa Tenggara, to label rice as "modern food." Their experiences of consuming rice often began only in middle or high school, and one student from Papua shared that rice was only available in the provincial capital. Expressions like "so delicious" frequently emerged in discussions. These sentiments framed rice as a modern and prestigious food, gradually instilling a perceived necessity to consume rice to remain "modern."

However, when asked, "What is your local food?" students from Eastern Indonesia consistently referred to sago or corn as their staples. Another intriguing phenomenon occurred when FFA participants were asked to bring their local food; students from Eastern Indonesia eagerly introduced dishes such as *tinutuan* (a vegetable porridge made from rice, corn, pumpkin, and leafy greens, often served with salted fish or *sambal*, a traditional Indonesian chili paste) and *brenebon* soup (a savory red kidney bean soup cooked with smoked meat or beef, influenced by Dutch colonial cuisine) as their local cuisine. They even performed live cooking demonstrations for other participants.

Local food should not merely be viewed as a consumable commodity but as a symbol of cultural identity and resilience. Through their efforts to preserve local food traditions, these Eastern Indonesian students demonstrated that resistance to modernization is not limited to overt protests but can manifest in quieter, more meaningful ways. Their courage to reintroduce local food into a modern context illustrates their adaptation to changing times while striving to create spaces to discuss the diversity of local food, which is increasingly eroded. Thus, local food is not merely about food choices but represents a profound act of resistance against cultural homogenization driven by modernization.

4. Conclusion: Reframing the Question, "What Is Local Food?"

Discussing local food in Indonesia is not a singular issue. The diversity of localities reflects the richness of cultural contexts that must continue to be explored and preserved. Without these efforts, the dominance of uniform food systems risks eroding the diversity of local foods. Through FFA, we were encouraged to open our eyes and revisit the traces of local food found in various regions of Indonesia, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, which is often marginalized in national narratives.

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The discussions we have built over two periods revealed a variety of complex narratives and perspectives on the discourse surrounding local food. One of the main findings is that the national discourse often centers on rice as the staple food, leading to the neglect of the diversity of local foods, which are more relevant to the specific ecological, social, economic, and cultural conditions in different regions of Indonesia. Furthermore, intergenerational interactions, which have traditionally been a key medium for passing down knowledge, are gradually diminishing, posing a challenge to preserving collective memory related to local food. Traditions, once passed down through stories and daily practices, are increasingly rare. As a result, the knowledge of local foods handed down from generation to generation within communities is at risk of disappearing.

It is undeniable that the current food issues are heavily influenced by political discourse. Modernization has been present since colonial times and, further reinforced through Suharto's development policies, has altered many existing local narratives. National narratives have suppressed the attachment to food systems in Eastern Indonesia. These local narratives cannot emerge without first excavating the memories tied to them. This process demonstrates a gap between the practices of local communities and the national narratives shaped by modernization.

Nevertheless, the series of FFA activities also demonstrates hope. The young generation involved, particularly university students, is resisting food homogenization. They are reviving the narratives of local food through various media and critical discussions. Their works reflect a spirit to preserve and promote local identity while creating new spaces for local food within a modern context.

The complexity of the discourse on local food from the East leads us back to the fundamental question: "What does local food truly mean for Indonesia?" This question is important to continue raising, not only to define the meaning of local food itself but also to encourage concrete steps such as opening new spaces for dialogue and facilitating community adaptation within the dynamics of changing times to protect and promote the diversity of local food systems.

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6. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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