

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Open Access



# Tracing the origins of *rendang* and its development

Fadly Rahman

## Abstract

One of the most Indonesian popular food is *rendang*. In recent years, the popularity of this food goes upward to foreign countries after CNN's polling in 2011, and 2017 placed *rendang* at the first number of the most delicious food in the world. Along this time, *rendang* is often associated with the culture of Malay and Minangkabau. Nevertheless, this research tries to trace the historicity of *rendang* and also the possibility of foreign culinary influences which shapes this Minangkabau's food heritage. By employing the historical method supported with the reading of various primary sources, this article traces the trail of *rendang* and resulted fact findings related to foreign culinary influences in West Sumatra and also its development in becoming an Indonesian national food.

**Keywords:** Rendang, Origins, Malay, West Sumatra, Minangkabau

## Introduction

There are so many ethnic foods in the Indonesian culinary sphere. Of the many, *rendang* can be said to be an iconic one in the collective tastes of the Indonesians and has even become a part of the national identity, besides it also being associated with the Minangkabau culture of West Sumatra. It can be seen from how *rendang* is always presented in typical Minangkabau restaurants in every city in Indonesia, always presented as one of the special dishes on every *Lebaran* (Islamic holy day), and is one of the common domestic menus in Indonesian households. In essence, this Minangkabau specialty food is liked by all social levels and ethnic groups in Indonesia.

The image of *rendang* as an ethnic and domestic food then increased to the global level after CNN Go released a poll titled "World's 50 Most Delicious Foods" in 2011. The world's attention then was turned to this black meat preserved food. The results of the poll put *rendang* in the top-notch position as the most delicious food in the world. This has become a kind of "victory" for Indonesia in dealing with Malaysia, considering that this neighbor country once claimed *rendang* as part of its national food. In 2017,

based on 35,000 votes on social media, out of fifty delicious foods in the world, CNN Travel in the "World's 50 Best Foods" poll, again put *rendang* in the first place as the world's most delicious food (Fig. 1) [1].

The rating as the most delicious food in the world itself is more on representing the tastes of foreigners in assessing the long-lasting and "crunchy" *rendang*; different generally with processed meat that is chewy or tough. *Rendang* is considered suitable not only as an official dinner, but also as a provision for travelers who need preserved food for weekly to monthly periods. Cooking *rendang* can also be interpreted as a surefire strategy to prevent meat from decay so that it can be eaten anytime and taken anywhere. The drying process for it to be durable is long and requires patience. But the fruit of patience can be felt from how important, efficient, and economical the results of this meat preservation process are.

Along with the growing popularity of *rendang* in the world, it also appeared in several publications which aimed to strengthen the image of *rendang* not only as a Minangkabau identity, but also as the nation's cultural heritage. The effort was seen from three works of *rendang* by Reno Andam Suri [2–4], namely *The Story of Rendang*, *Rendang Traveler: Menyingkap Bertuahnya Rendang Minang* (*Rendang Traveler: Uncovering the Sorcerer's Rendang Minang*), and *Rendang: Minang Legacy to the World*. This

Correspondence: [fadly.rahman@unpad.ac.id](mailto:fadly.rahman@unpad.ac.id)

Department of History and Philology, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Jatinangor, West Java, Indonesia



© The Author(s). 2020 **Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



DESTINATIONS FOOD &amp; DRINK

## 1. Rendang, Indonesia



No. 1 as voted by you.

Reader Kamal F Chaniago showed great foresight when he wrote, "Rendang is the best." A clear winner with a loyal following, this beefy dish can now rightfully claim the title of "World's Most Delicious Food."

Beef is slowly simmered with coconut milk and a mixture of lemongrass, galangal, garlic, turmeric, ginger and chillies, then left to stew for a few hours to create this dish of tender, flavorful bovine goodness.

The Indonesian dish is often served at ceremonial occasions and to honored guests. It's not only delicious but also comes with a simple recipe. If you haven't already, go ahead and take reader Isabela Desita's advice: "Rendang should be the first! It's really nice, you should try!"

**Fig. 1** Screenshot of *rendang* at 1st rank of 2017 CNN Travel poll "World's 50 Best Foods" [1]. This poll is not merely considered by many Indonesians as proof of *rendang* as the most delicious food. However, this is more often used by the government and various culinary communities to claim that *rendang* belongs to Indonesia (not Malaysia). Many do not realize that the context of this claim makes *rendang* no longer the most delicious food. *Rendang* has shifted its meaning to being loaded with political content

publication is needed to disseminate knowledge on the tradition and philosophy behind *rendang* to the people of Indonesia and abroad. This is certainly a kind of cultural strategy to legitimize *rendang* as well as dismiss the claims against *rendang* as carried out by Indonesia's neighboring country in recent years. An Indonesian senior actress that has Minangkabau descent, Jajang C. Noer, for example, expressed her surprise when Indonesia and Malaysia claimed *rendang* to themselves [5]. She emphasized in a humorous tone that *rendang* did not belong to Indonesia or Malaysia, but rather from Padang (West Sumatra's capital city). This claim has made tension to Indonesian bilateral relations with Malaysia several times [5, 6], whereas historically, both countries actually were allied brothers [7]. Indonesian culinary expert, late Bondan Winarno [8], once said that *rendang* should be understood as a "*pusaka bersama*" (shared heritage) between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Although it has been attached as a unique part of West Sumatra and Malay cuisine, the origin of *rendang* itself has not been explored in depth. In terms of historical substance, the "origin" word itself does not only refer to the

*rendang* image that has been synonymous with "Minangkabau culture" and "Malay culture", but also the possibility of foreign influence that shape *rendang* culture itself. This possibility certainly needs to be explored considering that in the past, Indonesia culinary culture cannot be separated from the touch of foreign culinary influences.

Some historians from West Sumatra seem to be still confused in investigating the *rendang's* origin. That, for example, can be read from the opinions contained in the series of "*Jelajah Kuliner Nusantara*" (exploring Archipelago culinary) in the national newspaper *Kompas* 1 September 2013, *Rendang dan Martabat Minang* (*rendang* and Minangkabau's dignity) [9].

*First*, there is historian Muhammad Nur who assumed that a meat food like *rendang* have been mentioned in oral history since the ancient centuries (between the fourth and tenth centuries). As for the written record of processed meat, he said it only appeared in the report of an Islamic Cleric, Sheikh Burhanuddin from Ulakan (Pariaman) in the seventeenth century. *Second*, there is historian Nurmatias who assumed *rendang* as a part of the missionary movement of Islam in West Sumatra by Sheikh Burhanuddin in

the seventeenth century. According to him, before the entering of Islam, there might be foods like *rendang* which are made from non-halal meat. Then, after entering Islam, there was the movement of halal meat consumption. If we deduce the tendency of both statements, the historicity of “processed meat” and “similar *rendang*” is more emphasized in the context of the seventeenth century period that was associated with the awareness of processing and consuming halal food in line with the missionary movement of Islam in West Sumatra.

The *third* opinion comes from the historian Gusti Asnan who alludes to the report of Padang Resident H.J.J.L. Ridder de Stuers in 1827. Asnan reads, de Stuers reported on the provision of dried black meat. The provisions were brought by Minangkabau traders when trading to Singapore and Malaysia via the Indragiri River and the Batang-Kwantang River. However, in my reading, I examined de Stuers’ report in two volumes of his book *De Vestiging en uitbreiding der Nederlanders ter Westkust van Sumatra* [10] (Formation and expansion of the Dutch on the West Coast of Sumatra), there was no mention of a kind of *rendang* at all.

From the three opinions above, it can be concluded that *rendang* is closely related to the Islamic context, wandering culture, and the ethics of commerce of the Minangkabau people—three things that really reflect the Minangkabau identity. However, it is necessary to check through the reading of old sources: Since when did *rendang* actually become part of Minangkabau tradition?

To answer the question, this article discusses *rendang* based on sources that describe the tradition of food preservation in culinary culture in West Sumatra from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. Through a historical approach, this research process begins with source heuristics. The sources used in this study include primary and secondary sources. The types of sources obtained include monographs, research results, cookbooks, newspapers, and magazines. After going through a heuristic process, tracking data related to *rendang* is processed through criticism of the source. By corroborating data from one source with the other sources, it can be interpreted that the facts about the origin of *rendang* until its development becomes part of cultural identity in the Malay region in general and especially West Sumatra.

This research specifically uses a food study approach which examines the relationship between food development and geographical space. According to Ian Cook and Philip Crang [11], food is not just a cultural artifact, but material from the results of cultural practices that can be displaced and changed through a series of processes: invented → invention → innovation and constructed → deconstructed → reconstructed. The relationship between geographical and social environment in general forms the cultural character of eating in an ethnicity. The aim of this study is to examine the influence of environmental factors

in shaping people’s eating habits which are passed down from generation to generation into a culinary tradition.

Based on this, in the case of the history of *rendang*, the relationship between geographical, social, and cultural factors that form *rendang* will be explored as part of the Indonesian culinary tradition. In this article, the narration about *rendang* does not focus on the scope of local culture (read: Minangkabau) only; rather, it embraces the trans-cultural relationship between Malay and various foreign cultures such as Indian, Islam, and Portuguese. This trans-cultural relationship is very reasonable, possible, and represents the real conditions of the formation of Indonesian culinary which generally results from the encounters with culinary influences of foreign cultures.

## Discussion

### The rise of *rendang* and condition of meat consumption

Even though at present *rendang* has become known globally as one of Indonesia’s famous foods, its earliest historical record is very scarce. The earliest record pertaining to *rendang* is a Malay manuscript from the early sixteenth century, *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*. This manuscript that was written during the spreading of Islam in Malay was an adaptation of the Persian classical literary work (*Hamzanama*) which was later compiled into Malay to encourage Malacca Sultanate soldiers to fight the Portuguese empire who wanted to conquer Malacca in the early sixteenth century. In Malay version, there mentioned the words “*rendang*” and “*merendang*” (roasting) which is quoted as follows: “... *Khoja Buzurjumhur Hakim pun pergi pula ke kedai orang merendang daging kambing, lalu ia berkata ‘beri apalah daging kambing **rendang** ini barang segumpal’*” (Khoja Buzurjumhur Hakim went to the stall where people are roasting goat meat, then he said “give me just some of this goat meat *rendang*”) [12].

From the words in bold it is clear, that “*merendang*” is the term for technique of processing meat and “*rendang*” is the processed product. At least this shows that these two words have long been a part of the Malay vocabulary. However, in the sixteenth century, there was not much written information about *rendang* besides of course the text of *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*. Besides that, if the spatial context of the manuscript text is Malacca, what about in West Sumatra? Was there also the practice of processing food by “*merendang*” and also food like *rendang* at that time in this region?

If in the present, Minangkabau cuisine is identical with the fleshy menu, according to the early historical record in the sixteenth century—or quite contemporaneous with when the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* was written—the food consumption of natives in West Sumatra generally was so simple. This can be proof from the travel records of French poet, Pierre Crignon, who in 1529 participated in the nautical expedition of two brothers, Jean and

Raoul Parmentier, visiting the Tiku region in northern Padang. Crignon reports his observations regarding the Tiku peoples' lunch menu:

*"... au repas ils ont pour tous mets un petit de ris à demi cuit à l'eau sans sel, et aucune fois un petit de poisson menu comme le doigt séché au soleil qu'ils mangent avec : et c'est un bien grand banquet quand il y a quelque coq haché par morceaux, roty sur le charbon, ou bouilly en un peu d'eau et meslé avec le ris" [13]*

(...when they eat they only have half-cooked rice cooked with water without salt, and small fish as big as fingers are dried in the sun and they eat with it: as for a meal, it is considered very special when in the meal there are several pieces of grilled chicken that are roasted over charcoal, or boiled using a few water mixed with rice).

Based on the Crignon report, it can be concluded that a simple picture of the daily diet of Tiku residents often consume rice and fish. Even if there was chicken meat, its presentation and consumption was only occasional when there is a special moment. This assumption is in line with what was explained by Penny van Esterik [14], that historically, meat has rarely been the main focus of eating culture in Southeast Asia. Although in not-so-dominating culinary traditions in Southeast Asia, meat was highly valued by the people.

Of course for a European like Crignon whose eating habits cannot be separated from meat consumption, the Tiku people's diet is considered boring. But he did not realize that before European influence began to develop since the seventeenth century, the cultivation of livestock for the consumption of animal protein in West Sumatra was not yet massive. Even if buffalos are farmed animals, the energy of this cattle is more used for farming. In addition, buffalo also tends to be considered as a sacred animal in West Sumatra. Naturally, if livestock meat can be used as animal protein ingredients, it cannot be considered as the daily consumption.

The Indian influence also seems to contribute in forming the habit of less meat consumption as the daily diet of West Sumatra people. Seemingly it has still developed through the spreading of Islam to West Sumatra in the fifteenth century, replacing the traditions of animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. One of the chronicles of Islamization is marked by the story of a new Minangkabau king who converted to Islam [15]. The development of Islam then began to spread in the seventeenth century as read from the report of a Portuguese mestizo, Thomas Dias [16], who in 1684 visited Minangkabau and witnessed the presence of pilgrims in the royal palace. Dutch philologist, Ph. S. Van Ronkel in his work *Rapport: Betreffende de Godsdienstige*

*verschijnselen ter Sumatra's Westkust* (report on religious phenomenon on the West Coast of Sumatra) published in 1916 discusses the story of the famous Islamic propagator in West Sumatra in the seventeenth century, Sheikh Burhanuddin of Ulakan from Pariaman. In carrying out his Islamic law activities in Ulakan, Burhanuddin provided some interesting information regarding meat consumption among the people. One interesting story is when the Ulakan residents entertain Burhanuddin with a dish of turmeric rice and seasoned chicken. Based on his observations, the dish was processed well. Burhanuddin thought it was very appetizing and enjoyed the dish which was shown from a piece of chicken meat stuck between his teeth [17].

The interesting thing from what Burhanuddin enjoyed was turmeric rice and seasoned chicken. The ingredients used for seasoning are indeed not mentioned. However, this shows that in the seventeenth century, meat processing techniques using herbs had become part of domestic tastes among the Ulakan population. In processing the chicken dish that Burhanuddin enjoys, the native used herbs, in addition to turmeric, as an important spice to arouse appetite.

However, in terms of meat consumption, there are interesting stories about the mission of spreading Islam by Burhanuddin. After eating seasoned chicken, he expressed his regret having eaten it. The regret was due to the way of slaughtering chicken by Ulakan residents who did not comply with Islamic law. This can be confirmed from the attitude of Burhanuddin who on another occasion in his missionary journey refused to take a piece of chicken meat that was not slaughtered according to Islamic law. Burhanuddin's refusal was also taken towards a group of children who brought to him roasted wild boar meat. Burhanuddin then advised all their parents to leave behind everything that was unclean. After that, the natives agreed to accept Islam and to leave consumption of forbidden meat and all unclean food that was practiced previously in the animist tradition [17]. In addition to the Islamic law rules related to meat consumption, the development of Islam in West Sumatra gave rise to various *tarekat* (religious way) schools. One of them is the *Tarekat Basoeloea* which applies the rules for congregations to abstain from eating meat for 40 days and only consume once every 2 weeks [17].

From Burhanuddin's story, it is implied that what originated from the influence of Islam in West Sumatra was the propaganda of halal movement in terms of meat consumption. Another thing besides the halal movement was the limitation of animal protein consumption. Regarding the low consumption of meat in Ulakan as implied by Burhanuddin's story, at least it is confirmed with the report of Crignon in the sixteenth century. Behind the low consumption of animal protein, the interesting thing to observe from Crignon and Burhanuddin were the meat processing technique by grilling. Until the seventeenth century, grilling

seems to be a technique commonly used by people in West Sumatra—as well as in Southeast Asia [14].

The testimony of Crignon and Burhanuddin which implies the low consumption of meat in West Sumatra until the seventeenth century certainly needs to be confirmed by reading wider primary sources. It is important to trace since when the trail of *rendang* existed as part of the culinary tradition in West Sumatra. This will be interesting because both testimony of Crignon and Burhanuddin did not mention the meat preserving process as it is identical to *rendang*. So the question is, from where exactly does the *merandang* technique come from?

### Portuguese culinary influence

The expansion of Europeans to Southeast Asia since the seventeenth century began to influence also the increasing of animal protein consumption in Malay regions. At the same time, the consumption of meat and its processed products began to take root in West Sumatra. The Portuguese can be said to be one of the European nations which has contributed to its culinary influence in the Archipelago. When the Portuguese controlled Malacca from 1511 to 1641, Luso (the term refer to the Iberian culture, namely Portuguese and Spanish) cultural influence was also spread around the area. The beginning of the contact of Portuguese influence in West Sumatra itself can be factually evidenced by the arrival of Tomé Pires and João de Barros in the second half of the sixteenth century [18, 19] and Thomas Dias [16, 20] who visited the Minangkabau Kingdom at the end of the seventeenth century.

Gradually Portuguese culture was also absorbed in West Sumatra. Antonio Pinto da França [21], for example, found evidence of the similarity of the Minangkabau groom's dress to the Portuguese clothing style. That is, if the influence of clothing itself is adopted, then it is open to the possibility of adoption of food culture. Portuguese influence in the culinary sphere spread across various regions of the world that stretched from Africa (Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Sao Tome, Principe, Angola, and Mozambique), South America (Brazil), to Asia (Goa, Macau, Malacca, and East Timor) [22]. In Malay, the influence can be seen from the various culinary vocabulary that is actually a derivation of Portuguese vocabulary [23, 24], such as *acar*/pickles (absorbed from *achar*), *belacang*/shrimp or fish paste condiment (*baleicho*), *bolu*/spongecake (*bolo*), *kaldu*/broth (*caldo*), and *mentega*/butter (*mentega*).

According to Janet P. Boileau [25, 26], a distinctive legacy of Portuguese cuisine is food preservation technique which is shown by the high consumption of meat and its various processing techniques. Portuguese-style meat processing itself includes *assado* (grilling), *recheado* (mixing meat with spices), *buisado* (boiling), and *bafado* (steaming). As for those who first absorbed Luso's culinary influence, they were the *Cristangs* (Malays who had been converted to

Christianity). For more than a century of Portuguese rule in Malacca, *Cristang* also adopted and enjoyed the patron's appetite, one of which was the habit of meat consumption and its processing techniques [25, 26].

However, after Malacca was released into the hands of the Dutch, and the Portuguese were thrown away, the *Cristang* people were affected by economic difficulties. They then think of ways to meet their food needs as economically as possible. Finally, they found a surefire method as did their fellow brothers in Macau (a region on the southern coast of China that became part of the Portuguese colony). The method in question is a cooking technique by preserving food ingredients (ranging from meat to vegetables). To process meat, they have to fry while stirring constantly in a tightly covered cauldron with a little water until the color of the flesh is blackish. In Portuguese, this cooking technique is called *bafado*. In Boileau's research [25], this Luso-Asian culinary influence spread since the sixteenth century from around the Malacca Strait to Sumatra.

If we look back at the words *rendang* and *merandang* in the early sixteenth century Malay manuscript *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* (as previously the text has been quoted in "The rise of *rendang* and condition of meat consumption" section above), then this becomes interesting because this manuscript has been well-known in Malacca contemporaries with Portuguese influence when it began to develop in the Malay region. Even so, there is no detailed explanation in this Malay text on how to cook meat by *merandang*. However, if it is related to the Portuguese-style *bafado* technique, it seems interesting to examine: Is there a connection between the *bafados*'s Portuguese influence on *merandang*?

The following interesting interpretation from Boileau [26] seems to answer the question above: "*Braising meats and then finishing them by frying is a Portuguese technique used in dishes such as Malay/Indonesian rendang. The class of Indonesian dishes called balado ('with chilies') probably also originated with the Portuguese*". Boileau's description can be confirmed by checking directly the Portuguese vocabulary. In the book of *Influence of Portuguese Vocables in Asiatic Languages*, the author Dalgado [27] mentioned that *bafado* is a derivation from *abafado*. *Abafado* itself means "a dish of stew". In the dialect of the East (Luso-Asia), *abafado* is commonly pronounced as *bafado*. In Konkani language (Indo-Aryan language spoken by Konkani people along the western coast of India), *abafado* is pronounced as *bāphād*; and in Bengali language, it is pronounced as *bāphādú* [27]. At least, it can be drawn that the *bafado* term were adopted and turned into the word "*balado*" which is now more familiarly known as a popular culinary vocabulary of particularly Minangkabau and generally Indonesia. A Minangkabau-descent gastronome, Sri Owen [28], more assumes that the word "*balado*" in Minangkabau language means "using chili pepper". She has a point

indeed, although it needs to be added that what is used in processing *rendang* is not only chili, but also various spices. It should also be added that the meaning of *balado* is actually more of a recurrent cooking technique aimed at preserving food (for example meat, anchovies, eggs, and tempeh).

Both *bafado* and *balado* have the same processing purpose, which is preserving food. If we look at the geographical location of the Malacca Strait which divides Sumatra and Malaysia, then Luso's culinary influence may be spread due to human traffic activities between two regions (Fig. 2). The activities of the Minang traders who crossed from Sumatra to Malacca or from the opposite direction while carrying the *rendang* provisions indicated that the food was spread through the process of giving and receiving influence. Foods such as *rendang* was undergoing modifications that are tailored to human tastes in certain regions. Likewise, the durable technique adopted from Luso's influence was later modified by Minangkabau people, that is cooking meat to a high level of ripeness.

#### The early information of *rendang* in European texts

Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the traces of *rendang* as Malay vocabulary began to be found in European sources. If compared with the sixteenth century Malay manuscript of *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*, what is

mentioned in European sources more clearly is explaining *rendang* neither as a food product nor cooking method. In a dictionary of Dutch and Malay published in 1708, *Vocabulaer of te Woordenboeck Duytsch ende Mallays*, the word *randang* (sic.) is associated, by the author Fredericus Gueynier [30], with *fricaseren*. It is an old Dutch writing style for *fricasee*, a French method of cooking meat in which it is cut up and braised.

Of course as a Dutch, Gueynier tried to translate the word *fricaseren* (as a European food which certainly he knew very well) by interpreting it synonymously with *rendang*. In other words, he does not really understand the historical and cultural background of *rendang*. Previously, it has been discussed that there is a possibility of *rendang* with Portuguese culinary influence in the Malay region. Nevertheless, the origin of *rendang* is also often assumed to have a connection with Indian influence on Malay cuisine as seen from the use of spices that seep in with coconut milk in *rendang* processing. India's relationship with Sumatra itself has been established since the sixth century [31]. Both are bound by political activities and spice trade that cause cultural exchanges, including in the culinary aspect. Sumatra itself is an entrepot of typical Archipelago spices, such as cloves (*Eugenia aromatica*) and nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*), which are sought by foreign traders since ancient times.



**Fig. 2** Mapping area around Malacca Strait ca. 1600 adapted from Reid [29]. From the map, the geographical proximity between West Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula that mediated by the Malacca Strait can be seen. Portuguese influence, since their reign in Malacca from 1511 to 1641, allows spread in these two regions. In the past, trading activities and human migration from West Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula were woven through this strait. *Rendang* which is favored as a provision for the journey of the Malays also spread along with the development of the tradition of wandering

It is also noteworthy that from the relations over the centuries, India helped bring and introduce its special spice plants to the Sumatra region, including pepper (*Piperaceae*), ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*), and cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*). The inclusion of Indian spices in its development was followed by the embedded influence of Indian cuisine in the food culture of West Sumatra.

William Marsden, an Englishman who at the end of the eighteenth century traveled and observed in Sumatra and in 1811 published a complete Sumatran history book entitled *The History of Sumatra*, clearly states evidence of the influence of Indian cuisine in Sumatra:

*“Their dishes are almost all prepared in that mode of dressing to which we have given the name of curry (from a Hindostanic word), and which is now universally known in Europe. It is called in the Malay language gulei, and may be composed of any kind of edible, but is generally of flesh or fowl, with a variety of pulse and succulent herbage, stewed down with certain ingredients, by us termed, when mixed and ground together, curry powder. These ingredients are, among others, the cayenne or chili-pepper, turmeric, sarei or lemon-grass, cardamums, garlick, and the pulp of the coconut bruised to a milk resembling that of almonds, which is the only liquid made use of. This differs from the curries of Madras and Bengal, which have greater variety of spices, and want the coconut. It is not a little remarkable that the common pepper, the chief produce and staple commodity of the country, is never mixed by the natives in their food. They esteem it heating to the blood, and ascribe a contrary effect to the cayenne [32].”*

From Marsden’s observations, at least the curry as an essential element of Indian culinary tradition in the eighteenth century has become part of the culinary culture in the Malay region. Despite adopting Indian influence, Marsden reports that in curry processing, Sumatran people prefer to use chili (*Capsicum*) rather than pepper as a spice seasoning and use coconut milk that is commonly not used in Indian curries. The use of chili and coconut milk is more a matter of taste based on the availability of these cooking ingredients in Sumatra and the natives’ habit of consuming them. Chili is a spicy flavoring ingredient which is cultivated more recently after pepper from India. This spicy fruit was from South America and began to be brought by the Portuguese to the Straits of Malacca in the sixteenth century and then cultivated extensively by the West Sumatran people until it became the prima donna for cooking ingredients. Resident of Padang, Ridder de Stuers [10], reported on the comments of Sumatran people who tended to sweep aside the use of pepper as the main spice due to the uncomfortable heat in the stomach.

Indian influence with the sensation of spices was also adopted in culinary practices in West Sumatra as part of the food preservation techniques, given the nature of spices which have the ability to preserve. Spices and coconut milk then became a very unique blend of ingredients in cooking activities among the West Sumatra people. Thick curry sauce that is loaded with spices in essence is used as a means to preserve food (e.g., meat, fish, and eggs). The preservation technology itself is undergoing an evolution in processing of various animal proteins, as observed by Marsden:

*“They dress their meat immediately after killing it, while it is still warm... and in this state it is said to eat tenderer than when kept for a day: longer the climate will not admit of, unless when it is preserved in that mode called dinding (sic.). This is the flesh of the buffalo cut into small thin steaks and exposed to the heat of the sun in fair weather, generally on the thatch of their houses, till it is become so dry and hard as to resist putrefaction without any assistance from salt. Fish is preserved in the same manner, and cargoes of both are sent from parts of the coast where they are in plenty to those where provisions are in more demand. It is seemingly strange that heat, which in a certain degree promotes putrefaction, should when violently increased operate to prevent it; but it must be considered that moisture also is requisite to the former effect, and this is absorbed in thin substances by the sun’s rays before it can contribute to the production of maggots [32].”*

Marsden’s observations were cursory at first glance when he explained that in processing *dinding*—written and pronounced by Indonesians as “*dendeng*”—or jerked meat, it does not rot without the help of salt. Even before being dried in the sun, jerked meat must be mixed with sugar, salt, and spices (coriander, cumin, and garlic) and then left to soak for an entire night. Perhaps Marsden did not pay close attention to the processing; or maybe he was explaining two types of processed meat with different techniques. The reason he alludes to the addition of hot temperatures to prevent the process of decaying meat and its use as provisions for travel. This explanation leads to a different way of processing with beef jerky, that is, if repeatedly heated, it can preserve the meat until it is blackened and durable. This durable nature makes it preferred to be taken as a food provision of people in West Sumatra when trading or wandering.

Maybe Marsden missed mentioning the name of the preserved meat product. Nevertheless, Marsden cannot be blamed let alone accused of being inaccurate. It may be that the preserved meat food as described by Marsden is more of a verb to refer to a practice and how to process meat. That is why Marsden was so closely watching the

process of making this preserved meat that he missed mentioning the name of the process. If only he asked the Malays what they were cooking, the answer might be “*merandang*” aka cooking meat with coconut milk and spices until the sauce seeps into the meat and the texture of the meat dried and blackish. However, in 1812, Marsden published his work, *Dictionary of the Malayan Language*, and interestingly we can find entry of *rendang* with the meaning of “to fry (in a vessel over the fire)” [33].

At least there are two things that can be concluded about *rendang* based on the readings of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European texts from Gueynier and Marsden. *First*, it is becoming clear that *rendang* is a way of cooking that is intended to preserve food. *Secondly*, as Marsden observed, in West Sumatra tradition, the use of spices in *rendang* implicitly showed a combination between Malay and Indian influences that had fused with Portuguese influences.

#### **Rendang wandering far away**

The widespread culture of wandering among the Minangkabau people in the nineteenth century unwittingly helped spread their unique *rendang* to each region they visited. With no exception, Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia, which since the fifteenth century has been a migration destination of Minangkabau people, has also received the influence of *rendang*. So, it is reasonable if Malaysia ever claimed *rendang* as their national identity; although in fact this neighboring country of Indonesia forgot that the people in Negeri Sembilan were of Minangkabau descent, which means they inherited cultures from their ancestors [34]. The *rendang* influence as a result of the meeting of Malays and Portuguese in the seventeenth century is not impossible to spread and shape a common of Malay cuisine culture with their characteristics which has scattered in Malacca Strait.

The advantage of processed “*Rendang Minang*” that lasts for months is clearly liked by wanderers and traders. Many Minangkabau men migrated to leave their hometowns and spread to various regions outside Sumatra. Aside from being the prima donna’s journey, the missing of *rendang* often ambushed them when they were on the overseas land. The solution is that Minangkabau men usually write to their relatives in their hometowns and beg for *rendang*. This kind of coexistence even infects Europeans who were infatuated with *rendang* pleasure. A father of Malay journalism who was also an expert on women’s ethics education in the early twentieth century, Datoek Soetan Maharadja, in his article in *Soenting Melajoe* magazine on 2 February 1917, reported on Europeans in Palembang, Batavia, and Kupang who wrote to Minangkabau women while depositing money via the editor of *Soenting Melajoe* with the intention of ordering made and sent “*rendang Alam Minangkabau*” (the original of Minangkabau’s *rendang*) [35].

During the second decade of the twentieth century, preserved meat foods such as *dendeng* and *rendang* were successfully popularized through recipes published by *Soenting Melajoe*. In addition, the popularity of *rendang* also developed through the existence of Minangkabau-style *lepau* (food stall) in the area where Minangkabau migrants reside. Europeans who have tasted the enjoyment of *rendang* believe this durable meat can harden their veins [35].

It not only began to be excellent for Europeans. For people in West Sumatra alone, *rendang* becomes the most preferred choice to be used as provisions to travel far toward foreign countries. Mecca is the most obvious destination where *rendang* wanders far and is anchored there brought by Muslims from West Sumatra who perform the pilgrimage. Sri Owen has memories of *rendang* in her childhood when she lived in Padang Panjang. In around 1940s, she had witnessed her grandmother cook buffalo meat around 5–10 kg in a large skillet. The grandmother told her that *rendang* is an important provision for Muslims who will perform the pilgrimage. Besides being liked and known as a food supply, *rendang* is also considered nutritious and durable without having to be stored in a cooler and does not have to always be reheated/refried frequently so as to make *rendang* preferable to be stored for a long time and, at any time, can be served for family parties and salvation [28, 36].

“*Rendang Alam Minangkabau*” got increasingly popular when Minangkabau migrants opened the *lepau* style in big cities in the Dutch East Indies (Fig. 3). Seeing its popularity, cookbook writers from the beginning of the twentieth century who wrote in Dutch and various local languages (e.g., Malay, Javanese, and Sundanese) began to incorporate *rendang* recipes in their works. The spread of *rendang* then wander off, breaking through geographical, ethnic, and racial boundaries.

For example, in 1936, a Javanese cookbook was published entitled *Lajang Panoentoen Bab Olah-Olah Kanggo Para Wanita* (cooking guide for the ladies) by Raden Ajoe Adipati Rekso-Negoro aka R.A. Kardinah (a sister of Javanese women’s emancipation figure, R.A. Kartini) (Fig. 4). In her cookbook, Kardinah combines recipe elements of indigenous Arabic, Chinese, and European cuisines. From 65 recipes, Kardinah put *rendang* in it. To make *rendang*, Kardinah apparently does not use buffalo or beef meat as one of the ingredients for making *rendang*, but she preferred to use chicken meat [38]. This modification shows that Kardinah seems to understand that *rendang* is not synonymous with certain meat ingredients, but rather is interpreted as a way to process food ingredients with a little water through absorption of spices until dry.

Besides Kardinah, in 1939, Mrs. S. Noer Zainoe’didin-Moro from Banjarmasin (South Kalimantan) published a cookbook entitled *Lingkoengan Dapoer: Boekoe Masak*

*bagi Meisjes-Vervolgscholen jang Berbahasa Melajoe* (kitchen environment: a cook book for Girls Advance-School in Malay). From a total of 80 recipes that she collected, there are 16 recipes that emphasized originating from Java, Sumatra, and Padang. Zainoe'ddin-Moro emphasizes the image of her cookbook based on Malay tastes. Here, she represented various Padang foods as the virtues of Malay cuisine. In addition, the tendency that every person who was capable of cooking accompanied by writing skills such as Zainoe'ddin-Moro will prioritize and dominate the original tastes or the variety of preparations from their region when they write their cookbook. This can be seen from the selection of more recipes from Padang than from Java and Sumatra. One recipe displayed by her is “*rendang padang*” [39].

By presenting the *rendang* recipe, Zainoe'ddin-Moro tried to encourage readers in any region to make their own *rendang*. Obviously, this is a new breakthrough in the early development of cookbooks in Indonesia, considering that in previous periods, *rendang* recipes were quite rare to find in cookbooks. Its long-lasting nature, as Zainoe'ddin-Moro mentions, makes *rendang* an excellent processed meat, especially during the period leading up to World War II (since 1940).

*Rendang* itself is one of the favorite foods whose recipes are demonstrated and recommended in cooking courses ahead of the war. This is evident, for example, from the recipe “*Rendang (Padangsch)*” in a cookbook published by the Department van Oorlog (Department of War Affairs) in 1940 entitled *Kookboek ten dienste van menages in het garnizoen en te velde* (Cookbooks for food service on garrisons and battlefield).



**Fig. 3** A rice stall or *lepau* in the Payakumbuh Market in West Sumatra around 1911 as documented by photographer Jean Demmeni [37]. Along with the increasing number of Minangkabau wanderers, since the end of nineteenth century many *lepau* have sprung up in the cities of the Dutch East Indies. In *lepau*, varieties of Minangkabau special foods including *rendang* were also served. *Lepau* became an important hub in popularizing *rendang* to the various groups of people. The relationship between *rendang* and *lepau* really cannot be separated

In terms of processing techniques, there was no difference in making *rendang* for war soldiers in the garrison. But there were striking things related to the amount or weight of meat for making *rendang* which reaches circa 7 kg. This is reasonable because *rendang* processing as recommended in this cookbook is to meet the intake for 150 people in the garrison [40]. As meat consumers, it seems that Europeans were well suited for *rendang* to meet their calorie needs both on the garrison and on the battlefield. In addition, what is emphasized in this cookbook is “*Padangsch*” (Padang) as the origin area of *rendang*.

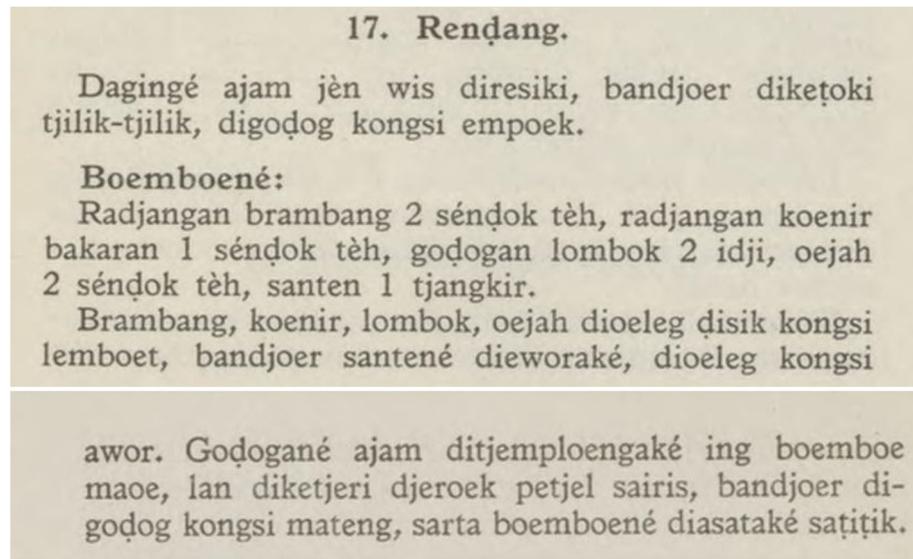
The relationship between animal husbandry condition and meat supply also influences the decrease in consumption of animal protein. Practically, identical foods that use meat ingredients must be reduced in portions. This also happened in West Sumatra, where during World War II, meat was scarce. Sri Owen [41] recalled the story of her childhood, on how when making *rendang*, she and her family had to make it with only a few beef given extra coconut milk and red beans. In normal times, once making *rendang*, her family used to use meat as much as 20 kg.

After Indonesia’s independence, the Minangkabau diaspora became more widespread in many areas of Indonesia. The existence of Minangkabau people in their wander land also helped popularize the image of *rendang* as a typical culinary of West Sumatra. Today, the hallmark menu of the Minangkabau restaurant in Indonesian cities and also abroad is *rendang*—alongside with other meat-based dishes [42]. From the beginning, *rendang* “wandered” from *lepau* to *lepau* that it builded by the Minangkabau people wherever they are. Now who would have thought that *rendang* grew even wider into a delicious food on the dining table and in the world!

## Conclusion

Like the overseas culture inherent in the Minangkabau tradition, *rendang* tradition also has a long overseas trail in culinary history in the Malay region and West Sumatra. The history of *rendang* cannot be separated from the historical setting of the Malacca Strait for centuries as a strategic geographical area for Malay people in establishing political, economic, social, and cultural relations with various nations. Not surprisingly, foreign culinary influences from India, Islam (from Arabic, India, and Persia), and Europe helped shape hybrid culinary styles in West Sumatra.

After the Portuguese conquered Malacca in 1511, gradually the Iberian cultural influence also developed in various regions around Malacca Strait complementing the preexisting Indian and Islamic culinary influences. The influence of Portuguese cuisine then blends harmoniously with Malay cuisine, especially in West Sumatra and generally in Malay regions. *Rendang* which has now been identified with the Minangkabau culinary culture is



**Fig. 4** A rendang recipe in a Javanese cookbook *Lajang Panoentoen Bab Olah-Olah kanggo Para Wanita* (1936) by Raden Ajoe Adipati Rekso-Negoro. Here is the translation of Javanese text recipe into English: "Chicken meat if it has been cleaned, then cut into small pieces, boiled until soft. Red onion slices 2 teaspoons, grilled turmeric slices 1 teaspoon, 2 chili stew, salt 2 teaspoons, 1 cup coconut milk. Shallots, turmeric, chilies, salt are ground first until soft, then coconut milk is added, mixed (stirring) until evenly distributed. Chicken stew is put into the seasoning, then dropped with one slice of lime juice, then boiled until cooked, also the spices are cooked until slightly dry"

characteristic in terms of processing and it is actually very identical to the tradition of food preservation in Portuguese culinary culture.

In the Minangkabau culinary culture, *rendang* is not the food name, but rather the derivation of dwelling, which is a term to refer to the technique of preserving food in covered cauldron with a little water. Obviously, this is very suitable with the preservation technique in Portuguese culinary culture. The tradition of *merandang* is increasingly attached to the Minangkabau culture in line with the development of wandering culture since the eighteenth century. *Rendang* as a durable food is clearly needed by Minangkabau wanderers who migrate to various regions by taking a long time of travel for the purpose of trading, studying, and preaching. Wandering culture has become a connecting chain in attaching *rendang* as an important identity for the life of Minangkabau people.

#### Acknowledgements

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the Dean of Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Yuyu Yohana Risagarniwa, M.Ed., Ph.D; the Head of Department of History and Philology Universitas Padjadjaran, Dr. Undang A. Darsa; and the Head of Study Program of History Universitas Padjadjaran, Dr. Dade Mahzuni for the opportunity that has given to the author to do this literature research in the National Library of Indonesia. The author also wants to thank Galuh Ambar Sasi from the Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana who helped in the translation of the Javanese text used in this article.

#### Availability of data and materials

Author confirms that the important data supporting the findings of this study are available. Most of the historical data are obtained at the National Library of Indonesia at Jakarta.

#### Author's contributions

FR is an author for this article. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

#### Funding

The author received no financial support for research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

#### Competing interests

Author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Received: 23 February 2020 Accepted: 12 August 2020

Published online: 01 September 2020

#### References

- Cheung T. Your pick: world's 50 best foods. CNN 2017. <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/world-best-foods-readers-choice/index.html> (Accessed 20 Feb 2019).
- Suri RA. The story of rendang. Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy: Jakarta; 2011.
- Suri RA. Rendang traveler: Menyingkap Bertuahnya Rendang Minang [rendang traveler: uncovering the sorcerer's rendang Minang]. Terannt Ink: Jakarta; 2012. [in Bahasa Indonesia].
- Suri RA. Rendang: Minang legacy to the world. Afterhours Book: Jakarta; 2018.
- Clark M, Pietsch J. Indonesia-Malaysia relations: cultural heritage, politics and labour migration. New York: Routledge; 2014. p. 67–8. Article Google Scholar.
- Clark M. The politics of heritage: Indonesia–Malaysia cultural contestations. *Indonesia and the Malay World*. 2013;41:396–417 Article Google Scholar.
- Chong JW. "mine, yours or ours?": the Indonesia-Malaysia disputes over shared cultural heritage. *Sojourn*. 2012;27(1):1–53 Article Google Scholar.
- Winarno B. Pameran Pusaka Bersama [joint heritage exhibit]. *Kompas [newspaper]*. 12 September 2009. [in Bahasa Indonesia].
- Suwarna B. Jelajah Kuliner Nusantara edisi Rendang dan Martabat Minang [exploring Archipelago culinary; rendang and Minangkabau's dignity]. *Kompas [newspaper]*. 1 September 2013. [in Bahasa Indonesia].
- De Stuers HJLR. De Vestiging en uitbreiding der Nederlanders ter Westkust van Sumatra [formation and expansion of the Dutch on the West Coast of Sumatra, 2 vols]. Amsterdam: van Kampen; 1849. p. 177. Article Google Scholar [in Dutch].

11. Cook I, Crang P. The world on a plate: culinary culture, displacement and geographical knowledges. *J Material Culture*. 1996;1(2):131–53 Article Google Scholar.
12. Ahmad AS. Hikayat Amir Hamzah [Amir Hamzah's chronicle]. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia; 1987. p. 10. Google Scholar [in Malay].
13. Schefer Ch. Le Discours de la navigation de Jean et Raoul Parmentier de Dieppe voyage à Sumatra en 1529; description de l'île de Saint Dominigo [the discourse on navigation by Jean and Raoul Parmentier de Dieppe's travels to Sumatra in 1529; description of the island of Saint Dominigo]. Paris: Ernest Leroux; 1883. pp. 74–75. Article Google Scholar [in French].
14. Van Esterik P. Food culture in Southeast Asia, vol. 39. London: Greenwood; 2008. p. 47. Article Google Scholar.
15. Sjafoeddin DS. Pre-Islamic Minangkabau. *Sumatra Res Bulletin*. 1974;4(1):31–57 Google Scholar.
16. Reid A. Witness to Sumatra: a travellers's anthology. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford university Press; 1995. p. 152–61. Google Scholar.
17. Van Ronkel PHS. Rapport: Betreffende de Godsdienstige verschijnselen ter Sumatra's Westkust [report on religious phenomenon on the west coast of Sumatra]. Batavia: Landsdrukkerij; 1916. p. 16. Article Google Scholar [in Dutch].
18. Pires T. The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires an Account of the East, from The Red Sea to Japan, written in Malacca and India in 1512 – 1515. [trans.] Armando Cortesão. London: Hakluyt Society; 1944. Article Google Scholar.
19. Dion M. Sumatra through Portuguese eyes: excerpts from João Barros 'Decades da Asia'. *Indonesia*. 1970;9:128–62. <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/53480>.
20. Hadler J. Muslim and matriarchs: cultural resilience in Indonesia through Jihad and colonialism, vol. 19. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; 2008. p. 114. Article Google Scholar.
21. Da França AP. Pengaruh Portugis di Indonesia [Portuguese influence in Indonesia]. Jakarta, Sinar Harapan; 2000. Google Scholar [in Bahasa Indonesia].
22. Hamilton CY. Cuisines of Portuguese encounters. New York: Hippocrene Books; 2001. Article Google Scholar.
23. Abdurrachman PR. Some Portuguese loanwords in the vocabulary of speakers of Ambonsche – Malay in Christian villages of Central Moluccas. In: Abdurrachman PR, editor. Bunga Angin Portugis di Indonesia [Portuguese wind flowers in Indonesia]. Jakarta: Obor & LIPI; 2008. Google Scholar.
24. Djafaar IA. Jejak Portugis di Maluku Utara [the Portuguese trail in North Moluccas]. Yogyakarta: Ombak; 2007. [Google Scholar](#) [in Bahasa Indonesia].
25. Boileau JP. A Culinary History of the Portuguese Eurasians: the origins of Luso-Asian cuisine in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Doctoral Dissertation. School of History and Politics, University of Adelaide, 2010. p. 367. [Article Google Scholar](#).
26. Boileau JP. Portuguese in Asia. In: Albala K, editor. Food cultures of the world encyclopedia (3rd volume of four volume). Oxford: The Greenwood Press; 2011. p. 228. Article Google Scholar.
27. Dalgado SR. Influence of Portuguese vocables in Asiatic languages. [trans.] Anthony Xavier Spares, Baroda : Oriental Institute; 1936. p. 2. Article.
28. Owen S. Indonesian food, vol. 22. London: Anova; 2008. p. 178. Google Scholar.
29. Reid A. Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450 – 1680 vol. 1: the lands below the winds. New Haven, Yale University Press; 1988. p. 9. Article Google Scholar.
30. Gueynier F. Vocabulaer, ofte Woordenboek, Nae ordre van het alphabet, in 't Duytsch ende Mallays [vocabulary or dictionary, new order of alphabet in Dutch and Malay]. Batavia: Andries Lambert Loderus; 1708. p. 60. [Article](#) [in Dutch].
31. Coedès G. The Indianized states of Southeast Asia. [trans.] Susan Brown Cowing, Canberra : Australian National University Press; 1968. Article Google Scholar.
32. Marsden W. The history of Sumatra. Singapore: Oxford University Press; 1986 (1811). pp. 62–63. Article Google Scholar.
33. Marsden W. Dictionary of the Malayan language, in two parts: Malayan and English and English and Malayan, London: Cox and Baylis; 1812. p. 151. Article Google Scholar.
34. De Jong PE. Minangkabau and Negri Sembilan: socio-political structure in Indonesia. S-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff; 1980. p. 9. Article Google Scholar.
35. Maharadja DS. Kepandaian Oentoek Perempoean [skills for women]: Kabar berita [news], Padang. Soenting Melajoe [newspaper]. 2 February 1917; vol 6.5: 1-2. [in Malay].
36. Owen S. Rendang: a traditional west Sumatran dish. In: Jaine T, editor. Oxford symposium on food and cookery, cookery: science, Lore & Books. London: Prospect Books; 1986. p. 48–51. Article Google Scholar.
37. Demmeni J. Een warong op de Pasar te Pajo Koemboeh Sumatra [a stall at market in Payakumbuh region of West Sumatra]. [prod.] NV de Tulp. Haarlem : ANWB Toeristenbond voor Nederland; 1911. Article.
38. Reko Negro RAAA. Lajang Panoentoen Bab Olah-Olah Kanggo Para Wanita [cooking guide for the ladies]. Batavia: JB Wolters; 1936. p. 23. Article [in Javanese].
39. Zaino'eddin Moro SN. Lingkoengan Dapoer: Boekoe Masak bagi Meisjes-Vervolgscholen jang Berbahasa Melajoe [kitchen environment: a cook book for girls advance-School in Malay]. Batavia: J.B. Wolters; 1941. p. 32–3. [in Malay].
40. van Oorlog D. Kookboek ten dienste van menages in het garnizoen en te velde [cookbooks for food service on garrisons and battlefield]. Batavia: Centrum; 1940. p. 60. [in Dutch].
41. Owen S. Indonesian regional food & cookery. London: Frances Lincoln; 1999. p. 40–1. Google Scholar.
42. Zoelverdi E. Rezeki tidak Berpintu [sustenance is wide open]. Gatra [magazine]. 6 April; 1996. pp. 50–56 [in Bahasa Indonesia].

### Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

**Ready to submit your research? Choose BMC and benefit from:**

- fast, convenient online submission
- thorough peer review by experienced researchers in your field
- rapid publication on acceptance
- support for research data, including large and complex data types
- gold Open Access which fosters wider collaboration and increased citations
- maximum visibility for your research: over 100M website views per year

**At BMC, research is always in progress.**

Learn more [biomedcentral.com/submissions](https://biomedcentral.com/submissions)

