

# Hari Raya Aidilfitri

## More than just a Celebration of Culinary Delights

By Nuridah Lee

Coming from a multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious society like Singapore and having the fortune of belonging to a similarly diverse extended family, I am often asked about what I feel about *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* whenever non-Muslim friends and family members come for a scrumptious meal at my parents' home as part of the

festivities. In many ways, perhaps the somewhat nostalgic rhythms, yet tongue-in-cheek lyrics of Anuar Zain and Ellina's duet '*Suasana di Hari Raya*' sung in Malay, often heard on the local radio airwaves, best encapsulates some aspects of the celebration:

### *Suasana Di Hari Raya*

### *The mood and atmosphere during Aidilfitri\**

*Berlalulah sudah Ramadan, sebulan berpuasa,  
Tiba Syawal kita rayakan dengan rasa gembira...  
Anak muda di rantauan, semuanya pulang ke desa,  
Ibu dan ayah keriangannya bersyukur tak terkira.*

*Ramadan, the month of fasting has passed  
We welcome Syawal with joyous celebration  
The young from overseas all return home  
So mother and father's joy knows no bounds.*

*Bertukar senyuman dan salam, ziarah-menziarahi,  
Tutur dan kata yang sopan, saling memaafi...  
Suasana hari raya, walau di mana pun jua,  
Memberikan ketenangan dan mententeramkan jiwa.*

*We exchange smiles, well wishes during visits  
Words and manners befitting the occasion, mutually asking  
for forgiveness,  
The mood during Aidilfitri, no matter where you go  
Inspires calmness that soothes the soul.*

*Kuih dan muih beranika macam,  
Makanlah jangan hanya di pandang.  
Ketupat rendang sila nikmati kawan,  
Penat memasak malam ke pagi.*

*Cookies and dessert of various kinds  
Please do not hesitate to taste them  
Ketupat, rendang are meant for you my friend  
Prepared painstakingly from nightfall till dawn.*

*Wajik dan dodol, jangan lupakan,  
Peninggalan nenek zaman berzaman.  
Asyik bersembang, pakcik dan makcik  
Hai duit raya lupa nak di beri.*

*Do not forget Wajik and dodol  
Traditional recipes passed through the generations by grandmother  
Dearest uncles and aunts always in prayer,  
Please don't forget to distribute money packets to the young ones!*

*\*Approximate translation by Nuridah Lee*

When guests are faced with the sumptuous and usually eclectic spread of dishes that my mother prepares, I often have to explain that it is not a new year celebration like the Chinese Lunar Year. I also explain each dish, such as the traditional Malay *rendang* (spicy beef cooked in a coconut-based gravy), *kuih* tarts (pineapple tarts lovingly prepared by hand) and the dry *mee siam* (spicy vermicelli noodles with shrimp, sprinkled with small chunks of tofu and spring onions). My father makes *ketupat* (rice

cakes in hand-woven coconut leaves which resemble a square casing. They are cooked for at least four hours in a huge pot of water over a slow-burning charcoal fire, then later served with a peanut-based gravy). Nor does the cuisine need necessarily be Malay/Arab-influenced since Muslims may be of any cultural descent. In my family's case, a lot of cooking (*masak*) and eating (*makan*) are usually involved. My aunt Rose for instance, also cooks her outstanding *ayam masak merah* – literally 'chicken

## Additional Muslim Festive Dates celebrated in Singapore

20 – 21 September	<i>Hari Raya Puasa</i>
27 November	<i>Hari Raya HajilQurban</i>
18 December	<i>Awal Muharram (Maal Hijrah)</i>



Beef Rendang



Mee Siam

cooked in red' but actually chicken marinated in several spices like turmeric, fried to perfection and then covered in a homemade spicy thick chilli paste called *sambal*. This is actually a rare dish since it is usually prepared for weddings and requires considerable effort and skill (and self-restraint!), since the fasting 'chef' has to estimate the proportions by sight!

While *Aidilfitri* is undeniably a joyous occasion to mark the triumph of having accomplished a month-long fast in the physical and spiritual sense, it is also a day when there is a tinge of sombre regret since the holy month of *Ramadan* is now over.

*Hari Raya Aidilfitri*, otherwise known more internationally as *Eid*, is probably the most significant festival in the Islamic calendar. The festival celebrations take place on the first day of the Islamic month of *Syawal*.

It commemorates the end of the fast during the month of *Ramadan* when Muslims the world over abstain from food and drink from dawn till dusk. Fasting during *Ramadan* is one of the five pillars of Islam and is an obligatory act except for some, such as those who are too ill or women who are menstruating. More importantly, *Ramadan* is also a time of great reflection as Muslims are expected to cultivate their spirituality through abstinence from physical pleasures for the greater part of the day; discipline and sincere devotion to God are fostered because believers are expected to be calm, patient and kind at all times. For instance, one should not lose one's temper or engage in idle gossip. One should also refrain from overindulging when breaking fast in the evening and eat in moderation by maintaining a simple diet.

Indeed, Muslims are also expected to develop greater compassion towards the less fortunate and the poor so all forms of good deeds are encouraged. Special evening prayers called *Tarawih* are also organised in all the mosques. These prayers are in addition to the five obligatory prayers that Muslims do throughout the day, except the *Tarawih* is encouraged but not compulsory. Hence, the main significance of *Ramadan* is arguably to encourage Muslims to develop a stronger connection to God and greater compassion towards their fellow human beings since it is hoped that the habits cultivated during this entire holy month will have positive spill-over effects in the rest of the year.

Another lesser-known aspect of the *Eid* celebrations is to ask friends and family members for their forgiveness for our actions (whether intentional or otherwise) when visiting each other's homes. It is hoped that in this way all misgivings will be aired, misunderstandings cleared and positive relationships strengthened.

Thus, while there may be culinary and cultural differences in terms of how *Eid* is celebrated by Muslims around the world, perhaps certain similarities remain – the strengthening of one's faith through disciplined efforts at cultivating one's good behaviour towards God and towards one's fellow human beings.

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*Nuridah Lee* is currently a graduate student at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. A former teacher, she enjoys museum visits, travelling, volunteer work, discovering new eating haunts and taking long walks, preferably through jungle.

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