Celebrating Blessings in Purple



As an Indonesian, I am grateful that we always seem to find a way to celebrate something. One of those ways is *tumpeng*, a traditional Indonesian dish, particularly associated with Javanese cuisine. Usually, it consists of rice shaped into a cone and surrounded by various side dishes. Tumpeng accompanies many stages of life: birth, a child's first steps, birthdays, weddings, deaths, and countless other occasions. Different moments call for different forms of tumpeng, but behind them is something simple: gratitude for what life has given us.

Traditionally, tumpeng is savoury. But when life enters a sweeter chapter, why shouldn't the tumpeng become sweet too?

For Wear It Purple Day at RSB, I made a twist: a sweet tumpeng composed of *jajanan pasar*, or traditional Indonesian sweets. There were *sawut ketan* with jackfruit and sticky rice, *kue talam* made with pumpkin and rice flour, cassava-based *utri*, *putu mayang*, and *putu ayu*.

Even in Indonesia, some of these sweets are becoming difficult to find. They are particularly nostalgic for me because they are more common in the countryside of Java, where I grew up. These foods make the most of what is locally available: yam, cassava, pumpkin, jackfruit, rice, banana, coconut, and different kinds of tubers. Coconut alone appears in almost every possible form: its flesh, milk, and even its sap (processed into palm sugar).

Growing up, I thought this was simply how we romanticised what we had and what we could afford. Many of these ingredients were cheap and accessible to ordinary families. After studying biology, however, I began to see another side of it. Different fruits and tubers become available throughout the year, and traditional recipes follow those seasonal resources. What I once understood simply as countryside cooking now also feels like a small practice of sustainability: making something beautiful from what the land gives us.

Perhaps sustainability does not always begin as a philosophy. Sometimes it begins simply by learning to celebrate what we have.

But this particular tumpeng was intentionally unusual.

I made it purple.

It was created for Wear It Purple Day, so among those traditional Javanese sweets I incorporated purple colours and symbols representing gender and sexual diversity. The result eventually won “Most Purple.” Seen from Indonesia, perhaps it is an inappropriate tumpeng: something deeply traditional, carrying symbols often portrayed as too progressive, too foreign, or even threatening.

But that raises a question: **progressive compared with when?**

Gender diversity is not entirely foreign to Indonesia's cultural history. Different communities across the archipelago have had their own understandings and social roles surrounding gender diversity. Yet today, LGBTQIA+ people in Indonesia can face intimidation, discrimination and violence.

Somewhere along the way, we seem to have forgotten something important.

We are still human beings.

That is partly why celebrating Wear It Purple Day here means something to me. I am grateful to be somewhere that can openly celebrate LGBTQIA+ young people, while knowing that back home, simply showing the same colours can come with pressure, fear, or even danger.

And perhaps that is why this strange purple tumpeng feels appropriate after all.

On one plate are foods from the countryside where I grew up and colours associated with identities often portrayed as incompatible with that tradition. Something “old” sits beside something supposedly “progressive.”

Yet when I look at the plate, I struggle to see why they must be opposites.

The *putu mayang* does not lose its sweetness because it becomes rainbow-coloured. The tumpeng does not suddenly lose its roots because new colours appear on it. Nothing traditional needs to disappear simply because another colour is allowed to exist.

Perhaps people do not need to understand every colour before allowing someone else to celebrate theirs. Perhaps, like unfamiliar food, difference could first be approached with curiosity rather than fear.

After all, isn't that part of what a tumpeng is for?

To gather different things around one table, to recognise what life has given us, and to celebrate.

So perhaps the question is not whether another colour belongs on the Indonesian plate.

Perhaps the question is why some have become so afraid of seeing it there.

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