

Recipes of Citizenship: Politics, Moral Discourse and Kapampangan Cuisine

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With its rich, exotic cuisine, the province of Pampanga in the north of Manila, is known as “The Culinary Capital of the Philippines.” The reputation has much to do with politics, history, and geography. Indeed, as Larkin (1972, 8) notes, Pampanga’s socioeconomic history should be understood in the “context of farming and related activities” (Larkin 1972, 8). Located in the plains of the Central Luzon region, Pampanga is blessed with fertile soil, with its towns, swamplands, fishing pools, streams, and forests named after trees. Low-lying towns bordering Manila Bay and Candaba swamp harvest rice, while towns near the Zambales mountains produce sugar. In the Spanish era, the province supplied agricultural products to the Manila-based colonial government through *cascos* (a boat with a flat base and square rear used to transport goods), which traveled across streams and the water highways of the Rio Grande de la Pampanga (Tayag 2015; Galang 1940). The Spanish colonial government treated Pampanga as their “experimental grounds,” where land was used for different crops. Different farm animals were also brought in (Borromeo 2015). The cuisine of the province received an infusion of Spanish and Chinese flavors, which helped define the savoriness of Kapampangan cooking (Borromeo 2015; Galang 1940).

Much has been written on Kapampangan cuisine. There is a heritage cookbook flavored with a grandmother's touch and anecdotes (Borromeo 2014), a home economics textbook seemingly for a finishing school (Kalaw 1934), diary entries of a foodie posing as a cookbook (Henson 1970), and nostalgic culinary histories of the province (Fenix in Panlilo and Sta. Maria 2005; Tangingco 2012).

In this essay, I showcase excerpts from interviews with Kapampangan chefs and culinary experts to depict how food, including the principles and practices of cooking, permeates the Kapampangan language, and frames their notions on democracy, parenting, and child-rearing. The interviews were conducted in Kapampangan-English, and I translated the transcripts to English. Putting Kapampangan food and political thought on the same plate, as it were, the essay shows how Kapampangans practiced the notion of "lived citizenship," referring to "peoples' backgrounds and material circumstances affecting their lives as citizens" (Lister 2003, 3). This includes thinking of citizenship, if not politics in general, in unconventional "spaces and places" (Siim 2000, 1; Lister 2003, 3), such as the kitchen.

Atching Lillian's *Bobótung Asan*: A Tale of the 'Domestic' Electoral System

Lillian Lising-Borromeo, popularly known as Atching Lillian, learned her trade from her grandmother, at a time before culinary shortcuts and bastardized dishes dubbed as "twists." She fondly recollects the stories attached to Kapampangan recipes, sharing that in the olden times, cooks had no electricity or entertainment. They would compose songs and poems and make stories about their dishes to stave off boredom.

One of Atching Lillian's anecdotes pertained to the *Bobótung Asan*. This is not to be confused with the more popular *Bobotung Asan*, which has a *Tamális* shape and packaging. Atching Lillian's refers to an entrée of fish (typically milkfish and catfish, although it can be of any kind) prepared similarly to *pangat* (fish boiled in water with salt and tart vegetables, having

just the right amount of broth to keep the meat moist). The dish is simple, not an elite viand with Spanish and Chinese influences. A legacy of Candaba, the version Atching Lillian serves in her restaurant in the rustic Parian in Mexico, Pampanga was modified from the recipe of Mrs. Nene Pelayo.

It is difficult to identify the original author of her story on *Bobótûng Asan*. Atching Lillian's main sources were Candaba's prominent families who really knew their way around the kitchen and with whom she was acquainted. Collecting their stories, Atching Lillian fashioned a tale that she has been asked to tell time and again during election season.

One recipe that I have, we call it the *Bobótûng Asan*. Why was it called Bobótûng Asan? Because it was prepared in the time when the men were the only ones who could go to vote, and women stay at home. So the Kapampangan ladies from Candaba have this. They told themselves that they can do much better; what men can do, they can do it much better. So what they did was to vote in the kitchen. While the men were out to vote, the women went in the kitchen. They started to vote by asking 'What is the recipe you are going to make?' There was no answer. 'What are the ingredients?' They started. They got this *alagaw*, *tangle*, *camatis* (tomato), *sibuyas* (onion), other ingredients that can be found in the yard, the garden. And then they asked themselves 'What else? Who wants to add this or that?' That was voting. And then, when everything was there, almost finished, a woman came and asked, 'Why are you all so noisy?' And then they answered her, 'Mag-boto kami' (We are voting). The woman was confused. But then she saw the fish. She replied, '...Bobótûng asan?' ([You're] voting on fish?)

It is possible that this tale is set during the early American colonial period when Filipino women did not have rights to suffrage. The story echoes G.H. Mead's theory of socialization, where pretending with the devices of language, play, and game act out the symbolized attitudes in the perceived model (Mead 1934; cf Panopio and Raymundo 2002).

Indeed, the ladies in that Candaba kitchen were preoccupied with the idea of voting. But there was more to their idea of suffrage than imitation. Theirs was akin to deliberative democracy. Democracy thrives in numerous spaces, from nation-states to cities, governments, and public places. But it may also be practiced in nonconventional, seemingly nonpolitical spaces—the “home, neighborhood, commerce, work, worship, or any other gathering place” (Stacheli and Mitchell 2004, 147).

The account of *Bobótung Asan* demonstrates democracy and citizenship through the “forum” of the kitchen, whose members come from different walks of life. The idea of a forum is itself fluid, a “place-metaphor...” where “citizens are found” and “citizen actions.....occur.” Examples vary from “clubs, parties, homes, associations, workplaces, special media locations, events, and public demonstrations” (Saward 2006, 404). Unlike the deliberative democracy of American politics, which includes an infusion of “republican themes and thinking” (Pettit 2002), the story of the *Bobótung Asan* embodies a democracy founded on individual layman knowledge, sans line of thought or tradition. It focuses on the virtues of participation, representation, tolerance, the recognition of others and their opinions, and so forth. It satisfies the primary requirement to come together to demonstrate deep-seated practices and attitudes at the core of democracy—including “dialogue, reasoning together, and making decisions that reflect more than “narrow self-interest and non-deliberative preferences” (Saward 2006, 404). Emulating elections in the kitchen gave the women of Candaba a platform to exercise free speech, express their opinions, and engage in debates and deliberations. The potential of dialogue advances the practice and honing of virtues later seen in mainstream politics and governance.

‘Cooking’ Good Citizens

Scholars of politics in the past twenty years have explored the idea of citizenship as a “system of moral duties rather than an ensemble of legal rights” (Linklater 2007, 101) which “can be associated with any

geographical unit stretching from the city to the whole of humanity” (Heater 1990, 163–64). “Citizens are made, not born” (Saward 2006, 401) in the same way that mothers rear their children (Marston and Mitchell 2004, 103). The way individuals have been “molded” influences the “construction of their identities” and “competences” (Saward 2006, 401–02).

In the same way, cooking and other related-metaphors—planting, harvesting, cooking and cuisine—permeate Kapampangan discourse on child-rearing, taking pride in one’s children, and expressing dislike in another’s. Atching Lillian (2015) provided terms to show the allegories, *Umpisan king simpling bage* (Start with the simple things); *magtiyaga* (patience); *banten* (care); and *pupulan* (harvesting). “Simpleng bage” conjures up an image of “seeds”—the priorities, principles, traits, and attitudes the child should have, all of which are likened to ingredients planted, grown, and harvested. All the ingredients undergo “slow cooking”—a catch-all term for techniques emphasizing duration and effort. Tending the crops reflects the steady guidance and patience of the parents as they raise the child. Differences among people mirrors varying degrees of discipline and character-building. This pervasive use of agricultural terms is anchored on the belief that the land is the origin of all things, a view not unlike that in the Hebrew Bible.

The good child, who will eventually be a good citizen, is described as *mabukal* (thoroughly boiled), *mepalambut masalese* (well-tenderized), *malwat migogo* (stirred for a long duration), *manangnang* (well-roasted), or *malutu* (well-cooked). The Kapampangans have a strong dislike for the raw or undercooked. Food historian and culinary personality, Francis Musni (2015), discusses the origins of these words and their usage.

“Manangnang” usually pertains to fully-cooked rice or rice delicacy. Kapampangans, being known for their culinary prowess, are very particular with the way their food is cooked. They frown over food that is undercooked (and even overcooked) and raw or at the least, that which have “raw taste.” Being a rice-growing province, many Kapampangans are also particular about how their rice is cooked. They don’t like “magadtu” (undercooked or lacking in water), “malpa” (watery, mushy, gruel-like) and “meduluk” (burnt).

“Magogo” (well-mixed) is a child who has the good looks. “Gogo” or to mix, is an important culinary term in Pampanga. One’s coffee had to be magogo (well-stirred) to make sure that the milk and sugar mixed well with the coffee. A dish had to be magogo to make sure the flavors meld and the ingredients are well-incorporated. It’s also perhaps a veiled allusion to the sexual act, practically the mixing of the female ovum and the male sperm. And that is why we have the term “Aspak o Balbal ya malutu” which means mentally ill or deranged. Probably because when eggs rot, the yolks develop a red tinge. It may also refer to an abnormal embryonic development.

Similarly, Kapampangan parents stress balance, and teach virtues and morals to guide conduct. They frown at superlatives, always seek the median, and strive to instill a “moral maturity,” which is defined by their “respect for others” and their sense of “responsibility and obligation” (Pasoula 2000, 32). Parents want their children to live a virtuous life, practice prudence, and respect the community, especially the law. A child, on the other hand, who grows up to be a bad citizen is said to be “ala yang asin” (one without salt), meaning the individual is immature.

There are several biblical allusions to salt. Salt being a preservative not only keeps fresh food from spoiling, it also adds flavor to it. For which reason the Roman Catholic liturgy is rich with symbolisms attached to salt. Under the old rite, (pre-Vatican), holy salt was sprinkled on a babe’s mouth in an invocation of the enlightening effects of the Holy Spirit. In blessing holy water, salt used to be sprinkled in the batches of holy water blessed during the Easter Vigil. The Kapampangans (and if I may say) the Filipinos adopted this symbol altogether in their folk beliefs. Thus, they sprinkled salt on foundations and posts. Salt, along with rice, was sprinkled around a new house before the family moved in as a sort of housewarming practice. And because salt is one of the most basic preservatives and seasoning, it has been associated with “substance” and “essence.” For which reason a child who doesn’t act his age or seem to understand how he is expected by society to act at his age is labelled as “ala ya pang asin” or “kulang ya pa asin” (one lacking salt). (Musni 2015)

The bitter melon also serves as a metaphor for laziness and lack of initiative. “Atin yang apalya gulut, kailangan me pang pukpukan bayu ya mag-obra” (They have bitter melon on their back; you have to hit them in order to get them to do work).

Baking also figures in discipline. Atching Lillian recounts her recipe for Saniculás (a portmanteau of San Nicholas), a crisp biscuit made with arrowroot flour, coconut milk, egg yolks, and flavored with “humility” and “prayers.” At a cooking demo, she was asked to prepare a batch of Saniculás. After pressing and rolling the dough to fit the mold, she applied a bit of force to ensure a flawless emboss from their wooden casts. It made a flinch-inducing sound. “I am *hangry!*” she joked, after giving the dough a good tap. Hangry is a play of the words “hungry” and “angry.”

Sometimes, it pays to be angry. Not all kinds of anger are bad. I’m angry at my children, only because I want them to end up as beautiful as this.

Her musings serve as a metaphor of the role of pressure in building a child's character. The design on the molds symbolize the parents' desire to have well-rounded children by disciplining them and cultivating certain attitudes and talents, and teaching them how to do away with negative traits. The more intricate the motif, the more careful force is required for even distribution.

Anger. Because if you don’t make them aware about their mistakes, they wouldn’t know. It’s to call attention, but not angry to harm. When you’re hungry, you don’t have energy. But feeling and acting on anger is an exception for some reason. You pound on something; it would still be a strong hit.

Atching Lillian adds that baking involves sacrifice. Saniculás are baked in a traditional *bibingkahan* oven. Without a timer and a thermostat, cooks back in the day had to stick their hands into the oven to feel if the heat was just right. When the cookies were baking, they prayed three *Padre*

Nuestro (Our Father), three *Ave Maria* (Hail Mary) and three *Gloria* (Glory Be to the Father) to estimate a twelve- to fifteen-minute waiting time. Atching Lillian relates this to a mother's sacrifice. A child fighting or talking back is akin to being burnt, yet a mother remains firm even if the child does not approve of what she sees fit. Like baking a cookie, raising a child is a labor of love and devotion.

A Dying Linguistic Dish?

This political-culinary language, which reflects an intimacy with the culinary, is unfortunately in decline, driven in part by the disappearance of traditional cooks. It has been a struggle to attempt even a dictionary as people find it more difficult to remember relevant expressions. Musni (2015) last heard most of the common terms some 20 years ago. He laments that even the elder population have already forgotten these terms. And those well-versed in the stories and culinary flavor of these expressions brought these traditions to their graves. What remains are the colloquial usages, not the originals. In this sense, this essay helps preserve the remnants of a dying tradition.

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