

A Narrative Research: The Golden Noodle Soup of the Ibanag in the Philippines

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Abstract:

The Ibanag tribe is one of the oldest ethnic groups of Northern Luzon in the Philippines. They dominate the majority of the ethnic groups in the province of Cagayan. Sinanta is one of the few existing cultural dishes of the Ibanag people of the province of Cagayan. It is a unique dish that comprises different ingredients found in the area and is only produced by the Ibanag people. This study aims to know the ways and practices done by the Ibanag people in preserving the cultural practice of making sinanta, and the challenges they face in the gradual vanishment of the practice. This study utilizes a qualitative method incorporating a narrative type of research. Four respondents were purposefully selected to share their stories and experiences about the production of sinanta. A purposeful selection of respondents was used to fully exhibit the subject of the research with the only criteria that the respondent must be a local of the province of Cagayan. The narratives of the respondents presented six themes namely: sinanta as a cultural identity, culture of sharing, the traditional ingredients, the contribution of observational learning and cultural transmission in preservation practices, the harm brought by trending dishes and modernization, and continuous practice and direct passing of knowledge. This study finds sinanta as a unique element of the people's culture and that it should be preserved and passed to the younger generations.

Keywords: sinanta, Ibanag, cultural dish, preservation, golden noodle soup

Introduction

Cagayan, one of the provinces that comprises the Cagayan Valley region, is located at the northeast portion of Luzon in the Philippines. Cagayan was historically known as "La Provincia de Cagayan" and was established during the Spanish colonial period. The province is geographically protected by the Sierra Madre to the east, the Cordilleran Mountain ranges to the west, the Caraballo range to the south, and the Babuyan Islands to the north (Provincial Government of Cagayan, n.d.). Agriculture is the most dominant activity throughout the province of Cagayan (Suyu, n.d.). Farming is the presiding activity in central Cagayan and fishing in its coastal areas, specifically on the northern most portion of the province.

Cagayan serves as the home to different ethnic groups residing in the region (Gocal, 2021). Some of the ethnic groups living in Cagayan are the Ibanag, Itawes, Gaddang, Yogad, and the Aeta. The diverse cultural group in the province made Cagayan a melting pot for culture

and practices. The diversity of culture and its history also contributed to the creation of the few unique cuisines found in the area.

The Ibanag tribe is one of the oldest ethnic groups of northern Luzon concentrated on the province of Cagayan and Isabela, and are dispersed in small groups in the different areas of southern Cagayan Valley. They dominate the majority of the ethnic groups in the province of Cagayan. The word “Ibanag” means “people of the river”, for the Ibanag people are settled along the banks of the Cagayan River (Yodisphere, 2020).

Most of the Ibanag culture and traditions were diminished due to colonization. Only those written in books, artifacts, the Ibanag language, and the common general practices with a mix of modernity exist today. Their practices and traditions are deeply rooted on their environment, affecting all factors in their society. Left among their few distinct practices is their unique preparation of food. It is to be noted that one major element in a society that binds people together is the food that they share especially during occasions and festivities. People follow unique ways of preparing, processing, cooking and even serving their food. This is a mark of one’s unique identity. One dish that represents the culture of the Ibanag is a dish called sinanta.

Sinanta is one of the few existing cultural dishes of the Ibanag. It is a well-known dish in the province of Cagayan and is served prevalently in occasions and as an afternoon snack because of its comforting umami flavor, best consumed after a day of hard work. This is the reason why sinanta is the preferred snack of farmers. Sinanta is traditionally made with ingredients present in the surroundings of the Ibanag, both from the land and the Cagayan River itself. It is typically prepared with flat egg noodles, rice vermicelli, chives, clams, chicken and pork in an annatto infused broth (Raymund, 2020).

The traditional way of making sinanta is passed from generation to generation through directly imparting the knowledge and process to the young ones. Transmission of knowledge and practices occurs dominantly from grandmothers and mothers pass to the younger generations (Shariff et al., 2021). Because of the habitual serving of sinanta during occasions, younger Ibanag generations are able to retain the practice of making the dish.

Sinanta is still continuously being served in Ibanag households till this modern time. However, challenges in the traditional practice of making sinanta presents a decline in its production as modernization gives access to individuals for a variety of more popularized dishes. According to Ekka (2013), the trend of modernization is that it gives rise to challenges that hinder the preservation of indigenous customs and traditional lifestyle. The young generation of the Ibanag tend to lean over to popular modern foods than the traditional dishes of the Ibanag culture.

Food and Culture

Food is a very important element of a people’s culture. It is an element transmitted from one generation to the other from its production, preparation and consumption. Food symbolizes a lot of people’s genuine practices, traditions, beliefs and values. It is an element that also unifies people together. People bond and nurture relationships through the food that they prepare and partake. It is a very rich source of people’s unique identity.

According to Mohan (2023), food is recognized as an important cultural trait that reflects the identity and nature of people in a society. It is always an essential part of each person's identity. Food represents the history of the people where it originated from (Toussaint, 2009). Each region in each country has something to offer when it comes individual cuisine. Each food prepared has a story to tell. For example, in the Philippines, regions like the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) offers unique cuisine compared to other regions in the lowland areas of the Philippines. Just like the Ibanag dish sinanta, it is a dish molded by the culture and traditions that is specifically done by the Ibanags of the province of Cagayan. The environmental aspect also contributes to the unique characteristics of a dish (Derek, 2021). The resources that are only available in the environment of an individual have a great effect in the construction of a dish. For example, the Ibanag people utilized what ingredients they can get from the Cagayan River and from the land to make the sinanta.

When unique food preparations and presentations are transmitted from one generation to another, the cultural roots and identity of the people are kept alive. Younger generations are able to understand their rich history and origin. The traditional foods provide each generation a concrete insight and perspective of their ancestors' way of life, survival, responses to their natural environment and the changes that have taken place in between. The aim of this study is to explore on the people's knowledge and concept of sinanta as a unique ethnic dish of the Ibanag from Cagayan, a northern province of the Philippines.

Design and Methods

The research utilizes qualitative method of research specifically narrative research. Narrative research involves collecting stories and making meaning from them through collaboration between the researcher and participant (Creswell, 2013 as cited by Mahoney and Khwaja, 2016). The stories of people derived from their direct experiences and observations provide a significant role in further understanding the occurrence or presence of situations, events, practices, beliefs as well as products.

Participants of the Study. Four respondents residing in the city of Tuguegarao, in the province of Cagayan participated in this study. Respondents 1, 2, and 3 stated that they are pure blooded Ibannag while respondent 4 stated that she belongs to a different tribe. Respondent 1, auntie Irma, is an Ibannag belonging to the generation Z. Respondent 2, Lola (grandmother) Lucing, is an Ibannag elder. Respondent 3, Lolo (grandfather) Eping, is also an Ibanag elder and a known cook in their barangay. Respondent 4, Ma'am Joy, is a high school teacher belonging to the Itawit tribe. All of the respondents have a knowledge about Sinanta and its preparation.

Data Generation. The study utilized a semi-structured interview method complemented with field notes. The questions asked aimed to capture the historical and cultural background of sinanta, its process, materials, and ingredients, symbolism and significance, and the challenges and ways of preserving the practice. The interview was audio-recorded and the responses were transcribed. They were interviewed in the place of their choice. Each interview

lasted for 30-45 minutes each. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interview anytime they would want to if they decide to retract their participation.

Data Analysis. This study utilized Riessman's (Duque, 2010) thematic analysis strategy to analyze the narrative data obtained from the respondents. Themes were derived in light of the gathered data, the research question, and prior theories. A priori codes were developed to cluster the respondents' experiences, values, ideas as well as attitudes on the subject of the study.

The narratives followed a specific flow of ideas. The respondents were asked questions to develop a narrative in line with the subject of the research. These questions are:

- Do you know about the history of sinanta?
- What is the cultural symbolism of sinanta for the Ibanag?
- Do you have the skill to produce/ create sinanta? If yes, where and whom did you learn it from?
- If you do not have the skill to produce sinanta, are you at least aware of its procedure? If yes, where and whom did you learn it from?
- What are the challenges you encounter in its continuous production?
- What are your recommendations / suggestions on how we can preserve, maintain and sustain the production of sinanta in our place? How can we endear the young generation of today in our place to appreciate and continue its tradition?

Presentation of Narratives

Auntie Irma

I am not sure about the history of the dish, but ever since I was a child, sinanta is served almost in every meal. It is served every occasion, grand or small, even in simple family gatherings, it is a dish that is for the mass. Generally, these days, you can only see sinanta for religious gatherings. If there are "padasal" (prayer sessions) or in Holy Week, you can already imagine that there will be a sinanta on the menu. It is like one of the reasons that you will attend the event.

I have the skill to cook sinanta. There are those who innovate sinanta in other ways, but of course the original recipe is still the one that is delicious. Sinanta contains flat noodles called "laddit" (flat noodles), sotanghon (white slim noodles), broth from tulya (clams), tulya meat (clam meat), hibi (dried shrimp), shredded chicken, and atsuete (achiote) for coloring. After the preparation, it is garnished with kuchay(chives) and partnered with puto (steamed rice bread or cake) or simply sliced bread. Sinanta is an easy dish. Since I was a child, I observed how sinanta is prepared that is why even if you just see the preparation, you will already have the skill to prepare it if you are truly sincere in cooking sinanta. You can already prepare it even without guidance.

The challenges I observed is that there are many other dishes that are becoming popular nowadays that the essence of preparing and serving old dishes slowly fades away. But for me, sinanta is a unique dish. Only the Ibanag have the knowledge to produce it. Even if there is no one who is interested in doing and eating the dish, I will still always prepare it. When it comes to the preservation of sinanta, start from yourselves, your family, your household to practice

during occasions to make sinanta as your signature dish for all. Make it more delicious so that if your visitors taste the dish, it will leave a mark in their minds that they will never forget it. In that way, you can also make it as a business and try to make it popular in this time so that it will not fade in the tastebuds of every Ibanag.

Lola Lucing

For me, even though I'm old, I don't have any knowledge of the history of sinanta, just that it is a part of my life. It was passed from the past generation to my generation. We, the Ibanag are the only people that serve it and know how to cook it. It is like, sometimes it is prepared during New Year and Holy Week, and is believed to prolong life. It is a dish present in any event. If there are many people present in an occasion, in the old days, for example if there is a bayanihan (community work) in which they carry houses and relocate them, sinanta is served as a meal for the volunteers.

I can cook sinanta. My own unique ingredient in cooking sinanta is the ala, "narnar" in Ilocano or famously known as the meat inside small shells. For me, that is the most important ingredient. Next is chicken breast, and atsute (achiote) for color or soy sauce, but if there is already an atsute (achiote), you can disregard the soy sauce. Then you can add the common spices like pepper and salt. Always use laddit (flat noodles) as your main noodles and add sotanghon (white slim noodles). If its cooked, garnish it with kuchay (chives). I learned to cook sinanta from my mother. There are many who say that my recipe is delicious and they cannot imitate it.

There are many dishes that are being popularized nowadays, and people who make authentic sinanta are rare compared before. People today modify the recipe of sinanta, contributing to the gradual vanishing of the original recipe. And nowadays, people do not like sinanta. I suggest that sinanta must be placed in history for people to know that it is a part of the culture so that people cannot forget it and still try to produce it.

Lolo Eping

Sinanta is an old dish for the elders and it is the original dish of the elders made for snacks or served at the dinner table. It is an original Filipino dish of the Ibanag. It is a dish that was made by our ancestors even in the old days.

Of course, I know how to make it. My own recipe is composed of atsute (achiote), kuchay (chives), then narnar (meat inside small shells), hibi (dried shrimp), and an additional small amount of chicken meat. That is the original recipe for sinanta. I almost forgot, laddit (white slim noodles) also. Laddit is the original noodles for sinanta, miki noodles (yellow noodles) cannot be used. I saw the process of making sinanta from our elders. I observed it until I can already replicate it. That time I realized how delicious sinanta is for snacks.

Sinanta is slowly vanishing because of how modernized people are nowadays. The only people who know how to cook sinanta are the ones who are like us, the oldies and the elders. This generation do not even know the original ingredients and the process of doing sinanta. In order to preserve it, ask the young ones to prepare it themselves. If the young ones want to learn to cook sinanta, then teach them. Pass it from the next generation in order to preserve the culture of making sinanta.

Ma'am Joy

Honestly, I don't know the history of sinanta, but based from what my parents and colleagues say, it is a dish that is made particularly in this province. The Ibanag are the only ones who know how to produce sinanta. There are many non-Ibannags who replicate it, but they can't imitate the taste of an Ibanag-made sinanta. All I know is that it is for special occasions or big gatherings like Christmas, New Year, birthdays, and even in wakes. Every occasion that I attend to in the barrios of Cagayan, there is a sinanta served on the table.

I do not know how to exactly produce it, but I eat sinanta every now and then. I had experiences eating sinanta when I was a child, in school, because it is always served during break times and from my parents and grandparents who, somehow, learned it from our Ibanag neighbors. At first it tasted different for me because it is a mixture of ingredients both found on land and water, like the ala which is a small river clam and of course the chicken meat. But as I grew older, I learned to love it, even crave for it sometimes.

Today, there are still many, whom I know, that know how to make sinanta, but overall, the practice of making it is slowly fading due to having many popularized modern and foreign dishes. Now, sinanta is only popular for the tastebuds of the elders. To preserve it, sinanta must be served still in any occasion, small or big, like even in small gatherings in order for people to have a knowledge that it is still present in the modern day and for them to have a taste of the culture of the Ibanags.

Discussion

Each of the respondents shared their stories and knowledge about sinanta in the region and its symbolism as a cultural dish. The respondents have presented their knowledge of its preparation, and from whom or how they have learned it. The respondents also shared the challenges faced in the production of the dish in today's time, and each of their suggestion in preserving the practice of producing sinanta. The following themes have been derived from their narratives.

Cultural Identity

All of the respondents do not have specific knowledge about the true history of sinanta, yet they have all agree that sinanta is an authentic Ibanag-made dish and is part of the Ibanag culture. Respondents claim that the Ibanag are the only ones who know how to properly prepare the dish. According to Evan (2023), food is considered as a way of life that is passed down from generation to generation, a part of an intangible cultural heritage. All of the respondents stated that sinanta is a part of their life. Since they were a child, sinanta is one of the main dishes served in every occasion. Even in schools, sinanta is served as snacks for kids. The narratives of the respondents imply that sinanta is widely produced in the Ibanag areas and is popular in the old days and even until now, some households still prepare the dish. Some other cultures may produce their own version of a golden noodle soup but the distinction comes from the people's choice of ingredients, food preparation, presentation and serving.

Culture of Sharing

All of the respondents articulated that sinanta is always present in any occasions in the area, either in grand events or small family gatherings. This implies that sinanta is made for sharing in the community and is a food for everyone to enjoy. It suggests that the sinanta has a communal symbolism for sharing. Sharing in culture involves informal networks in a region that work together to share resources, time, services, and knowledge, focusing on solidarity and camaraderie instead of profit (Katrini, 2018). Respondents indicated that sinanta symbolizes long life similar to the cultural interpretation of the Chinese people that noodle dishes prolong life. According to Chinese tradition, the unbroken length of these noodles symbolizes the eater's life, with the notion that longer noodles brings a longer and more prosperous life (Muncher, 2023). Respondents added that it was a dish prepared by the elders for snacks. Snack times during the day are light moments where people could just sit down, relax, tell and share stories and also opportunities to lighten up each other's day through their humor.

Traditional Ingredients

In the production of sinanta, respondents stated that they have the skill and is knowledgeable when it comes to making the dish. Based from their narratives, there are similarities in each of the respondent's own recipe in making the dish. This suggests that the traditional or original main ingredients for preparing sinanta are as follows:

- Ala/Tulya/Narnar
"Ala" is a small fresh water clam; the most important ingredient in sinanta
- Atsuete
Annatto; use as food coloring and added flavor
- Laddit
Flat egg noodles; a specific noodle used in sinanta
- Chicken meat
Shredded chicken breast
- Hibi
Dried shrimps
- Kuchay
Chives; used as a garnish

These ingredients are present and abundant in the natural environment of the Ibanag. People have always found ways and means to maximize their natural resources and part of that is making it a part of their food. People survive because they are sustained by the availability of food around them. The Ibanag people are endowed with agricultural products like those mentioned above that also enriches the unique taste of their food.

Observational Learning and Cultural Transmission

The entirety of the respondents learned sinanta through knowledge passed to their generation, from observation and direct cultural transmission. Respondent #1 and #3 stated that they have learned sinanta through observing their elders and imitating their actions. Stone (2016) stated that observational learning involves watching and imitating another person's

behavior, attitudes, or emotional expression. On the other hand, respondent #2 and #4 stated that their parents directly taught them how to make sinanta and let them experience the dish itself. Transmission of culture can happen through language, and observable practices that shapes values, identity, and perception of acceptable behavior through societal and environmental learning (Drew, 2023).

Trending Dishes and Modernization

The production of sinanta shows a slow decline and signs of endangerment due to modernization factors. Respondent #1 and #4 stated that the emergence of popular modern dishes contributes to the slow vanishing of the practice of making sinanta. Today's generation have now access to a faster food production like fast foods and the emergence of trending dishes that are most popular to the young ones. Eating habits are evolving to orient with changing demand as flexibility and mobility gain considerable implications (Anuga, 2024). Respondent #2 added that there are many who modify the recipe of sinanta, contributing to the slow disappearance of its original recipe. Furthermore, respondent #3 claimed that the younger generations of today lack the skill in producing the sinanta.

Continuous Practice and Direct Passing of Knowledge

The respondents suggest different practices and solutions to preserve the cultural practice of making sinanta. Respondent #1 and #2 stated that to keep the continuous production of sinanta, serving it in each and every occasion even in the presence of trending and more popular dishes, contributes to the preservation of the dish and retainment of its existence in everyone's mind. Respondent #2 suggested that sinanta should be placed in history particularly in textbooks, for it to completely be a part of the Ibanag culture and for the young learners to be acquainted with it. Lastly, respondent #3 stated that the young ones must be taught on how to prepare and cook it at home and in schools. According to Evan (2023), food is more than a source of nourishment, but also a way to connect with others, a way of communicating oneself, and passing on one's cultural heritage.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The practices and traditions still being executed by the Ibanag have their uniqueness, most specially in their cuisine. The efforts of the Ibanag individuals to preserve their culture reflects their honor and respect they have of their origin. The simple practice of retaining the knowledge of traditional cooking and sharing it to the younger generations is one of the best ways to teach them of the past. Sinanta is part of the Ibanag's still standing histories. Although its background is almost entirely forgotten, there are some who are willing to continue and preserve the culture embedded in the dish. It is a dish that honors the communal behavior of the Ibanag of sharing and caring for others.

The challenges of modernization haunt the production of sinanta. As time passes by, the tradition gradually fades and the popularization of modern foods might put sinanta out of its existence. Yet, some individuals put their faith into the hands of the next generation to still

continue the traditional practice of making sinanta either by the means of teaching or letting them experience it. The tradition must survive.

The tradition of making sinanta is significantly practiced until these days by those who are knowledgeable of its process, and still appreciated by the people who know of its existence. Sinanta is truly one of the most important parts of the Ibanag culture and cuisine, considering also that it is one of the few dishes left in their culture.

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