

Mandaue's *Bibingka* - A Living Relic of the City's Past

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ABSTRACT

This study determines the degree of valuing, as well as the promotion and preservation, of Mandaue City's *bibingka* (rice cake) by business owners, vendors, government officials, and buyers. It answers these objectives: (1) trace the origin of *bibingka*; (2) identify the process in making the delicacy; (3) ascertain the cultural significance of the food; (4) describe the efforts made to preserve the delicacy; and (5) assess the perception of the different stakeholders regarding the preservation and promotion initiatives. This study used the ethnographic design with naturalistic observation, interviews, and field notes, and was supported with secondary data. Key informants (KIs) were interviewed using interview guides at their convenience. To maintain ethics, the names of key informants and other stakeholders were kept confidential. Data triangulation was used to validate the findings. *Bibingka* is one of the traditional delicacies of Mandaue City that represents its agricultural past through the ingredients that are used. Aside from being a living remnant of the city's past, the food represents various cultural and social values of the Mandauehanons. Despite the city's modernization, the delicacy continues to exist through the persistent promotion and preservation efforts of the different stakeholders. For further investigation, these are hereby recommended: tracing of the specific origin and cause of the creation of Mandaue City's rice cake; an in-depth study on the possible ritualistic embodiment in *bibingka*-making. Preservation and promotion efforts may continue, but additional support, such as technological upgrades and financial assistance, is needed to sustain the cottage industry.

RESUMO

Este estudo determina o grau de valorização, bem como a promoção e preservação, da *bibingka* (bolo de arroz) da cidade de Mandaue por proprietários de estabelecimentos comerciais, vendedores, funcionários do governo e compradores. Ele busca responder aos seguintes objetivos: (1) traçar a origem da *bibingka*; (2) identificar o processo de fabricação da iguaria; (3) verificar o significado cultural do alimento; (4) descrever os esforços realizados para preservar a iguaria; e (5) avaliar a percepção dos diferentes atores envolvidos em relação às iniciativas de preservação e promoção. Este estudo utilizou a abordagem etnográfica com observação naturalista, entrevistas e notas de campo, e foi complementado com dados secundários. Os informantes-chave foram entrevistados utilizando roteiros de entrevista, de acordo com sua disponibilidade. Para manter a ética, os nomes dos informantes-chave e dos demais atores envolvidos foram mantidos em sigilo. A triangulação de dados foi utilizada para validar os resultados. A *bibingka* é uma das iguarias tradicionais da cidade de Mandaue, que representa seu passado agrícola por meio dos ingredientes utilizados. Além de ser um vestígio vivo do passado da cidade, o alimento representa diversos valores culturais e sociais dos habitantes de Mandaue. Apesar da modernização da cidade, a iguaria continua a existir graças aos esforços persistentes de promoção e preservação de diferentes partes interessadas. Para futuras investigações, recomenda-se: rastrear a origem e a causa específicas da criação do bolo de arroz de Mandaue; um estudo aprofundado sobre a possível incorporação ritualística na confecção da *bibingka*. Os esforços de preservação e promoção podem continuar, mas é necessário apoio adicional, como atualizações tecnológicas e assistência financeira, para sustentar a produção artesanal.

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Introduction

Delicacies reflect a place's rich cultural heritage. These foods not only fill empty stomachs but also represent the colorful past and traditions of the place (Cosido, I.C. et al., 2015). Mandaue City, a first-class industrialized city located at the heart of Cebu, showcases food that represents its distinctive past (GMA News, 2012). One of the city's famous delicacies is *bibingka* – a type of rice cake. *Bibingka* exists not only in Mandaue but also in the different parts of the country, and even in some Asian countries that produce rice. The origin of *bibingka* is thought to have originated from the Indian City of Goa as *bebinca* (GMA News, 2012). *Bebinca* is usually served during Easter or some special occasions in the place. Despite the similarity in spelling, *bebinca* uses flour instead of glutinous rice, which is used in making *bibingka*. GMA News (2012) also noted that the delicacy might have Chinese influence, as its first syllable can be translated as "rice" in Hokkien, a language in China.

In the Philippines, *bibingka* is produced mainly in rice-growing provinces, particularly in many parts of Luzon. It is highly popular during the Christmas season, as it is usually eaten after attending the dawn masses before Christmas Day. Despite its prevalence in rice-producing areas, each region has its own variation of the delicacy. In Quezon Province, their *bibingka* is made with rice flour, sugar, baking powder, milk, and salted egg and cheese (Mallari Jr., 2013). In Misamis Oriental, Fenix (2014) cited that *bibingkas* are also produced in the province. However, they differ from their counterparts in Luzon, as the said delicacy does not contain salted egg or white cheese.

To Eslao-Alix (2012), the *bibingka* of Mandaue evolved in the city as part of the early Mandauehanon's mini-meals to satisfy their gustatory cravings. Unlike most of Cebu, Mandaue was one of the few places that produced rice. Because of that, the city was able to produce a wide variety of rice cakes, which later became distinct from those made in other towns. Eslao-Alix (2012) noted that Mandaue's *bibingka* began almost a century ago, when Lorenzo Mayol's mother started making it. Lorenzo passed the recipe to his children, and it has been preserved by succeeding generations. Originally made using pounded rice, coconut milk, sugar, and coconut wine, modern-day Mandaue's *bibingka* also uses baker's yeast as a substitute for coconut wine. Given the ingredients of *bibingka*, it reflects the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the Mandauehanons in using locally produced ingredients to make such a mouth-watering delicacy.

Given *bibingka's* status as a trademark delicacy of Mandaue City, it is relevant to determine its cultural and economic value, as well as the preservation efforts to protect and promote it. *Bibingka* is not just a mere delicacy, but a living relic of Mandaue City's rich culture and history. Despite its prominence, no formal research is being conducted to assess its impacts, as well as the preservation and promotional efforts surrounding it. This study may determine the perspective of the different stakeholders regarding its cultural and economic value. The results can also be used to protect and preserve the *bibingka*-making industry.

This study describes and evaluates the degree of valuing, as well as the promotion and preservation efforts undertaken for *bibingka* by business owners, vendors, government officials, and buyers. It answers the following objectives: (1) trace the origin of *bibingka*; (2) identify the process in making the delicacy; (3) ascertain the cultural significance of the food; (4) describe the efforts made to preserve the delicacy; and (5) assess the perception of the different stakeholders regarding the preservation and promotion initiatives.

Review of Related Literature

It might be a question in the present times about how Mandaue can produce a rice delicacy despite its highly urbanized status and, literally, without any functional rice paddy or any large coconut or sugarcane plantations.

Long ago, before Mandaue became a highly urbanized city, Bagares (2014) posited that based on the geographical set-up of the city, which was comprised mainly of plains and mountains that are fertile and well-watered, it is inferred that rice and other agricultural products had been long grown in the place long before the Spaniards came. Mandaue was even said to have rice as one of its highly prized crops, which was not only consumed by the locals but also by neighboring towns, given that only a few towns in the province of Cebu were known to produce more rice than the people needed for consumption.

As a testament to the city's agricultural past, two of Mandaue's barangays have their names originating from rice and paddies, namely Barangays Basak and Umapad (Bagares, 2014). The word "*Basak*," according to Mandaue City Government (2012), comes from the Visayan word "*basakan*," which means paddy or flooded field in English. Because of the area's topography, rice and other hydrophilic plants continue to grow even during droughts. On the other hand, "*Umapad*" comes from the shortened phrase "*umahan na lapad*" or wide fields because of its huge rice paddies and corn fields (Mandaue City Government, 2012; Bagares, 2014).

During the Spanish Occupation, Morallo (2015) noted that, despite much of the area being converted by the Spaniards into a ranch, rice was still grown in the city and considered one of the top export crops. Around the 1840s, sugarcane also became one of Mandaue's highly valued farm products, marketed to far-flung areas such as Manila. However, the prestige of sugarcane as a prize crop faded in the 1880s after a crisis that hit the sugarcane industry (Bagares, 2014).

Given the city's geography and agricultural outputs, it is evident that Mandaue was one of the few places in Cebu Province where rice was produced before industrialization took over the city's agricultural prestige. Rice-related delicacies were made (Eslao-Alix, 2012). The existence of rice made the development of Mandaue's *bibingka* possible, which is distinguishable from other *bibingkas* found in other areas, including other towns and cities of Cebu.

Bibingka-making is considered one of the city's cottage industries, which helped Mandaue's economy even before it became industrialized. The popularity of the said delicacy, one of Mandaue's prides, slowly grew after the American Occupation of the place. It is even said that the city is considered "synonymous with the *bibingka* delicacy" (Sunstar, 2005). According to Bagares, cottage industries such as *bibingka* made Mandaue known across different parts of the country (Bagares, 2014). Even though Mandaue is presently a highly industrialized city, it cannot be denied that *bibingka* is still produced and highly valued, especially among the descendants of its original producers.

In an article by Modequillo (2005), *bibingka*-making is considered a tradition passed down from generation to generation. Among the pioneering makers of *bibingka* in Mandaue is the Mayol family. This family has been making the local rice cake for five generations. Among the Mayols, Lorenzo was credited as the first member of the family to make *bibingka* (Eslao-Alix, 2012). Lorenzo's children and other descendants continued the legacy of making the local rice cake, preserving the original method and recipe. The *bibingkas* of Luzon, Misamis Oriental, and Mandaue use rice flour and coconut milk as common ingredients. Salted egg and cheese are usually added to the delicacy made in Luzon, which is topped with butter or margarine (Mallari, 2013).

On the other hand, the *bibingkas* of Mandaue contain no such ingredients, and their color is similar to that of rice, as in the *bibingkas* of Misamis Oriental (Fenix, 2014). Mandaue's *bibingkas* are made of (or made using) fermented coconut wine, known locally as tuba, as part of the mixture to give a unique taste, and grated coconut meat as their topping. The fermented coconut wine, locally known as "tuba," adds a unique flavor to the rice cake.

Notwithstanding the comfort and practicality of new methods for making *bibingka*, the current *bibingka* makers of the Mayol family opted to use their age-old, unique baking style to ensure the quality and taste of the traditional *bibingka* remain the same (Modequillo, 2005). In an interview conducted by Modequillo (2005), manually pounded rice flour is preferred to ground rice flour, as the former helps the rice cake last for several days even without refrigeration. Baking the *bibingka* in traditional clay pots and over charcoal also helps evenly cook the rice cake. Modequillo (2005) said that some people preferred to eat *bibingka* the day after it was made because it tasted better than freshly made *bibingka*.

Bibingka is not only a symbol of the city's cuisine but also a source of income for residents. The Mayol family made *bibingka* not only as a source of livelihood for several decades but also as a family activity, with members helping one another make the rice cake and continuing their family's legacy (Sunstar, 2004).

In the past, like the Cebuanos from other towns and cities, locals ate *bibingka* as their afternoon snack. They served the delicacy during important celebrations, like festivals, as one of the desserts (Eslao-Alix, 2013). In the present times, *bibingka* is sold to locals and visitors as a snack for gustatory delight or as a gift to their loved ones, but not as a food sold after the

dawn masses in preparation for Christmas, unlike its counterparts in Luzon. The *bibingka* sa Mandaue is currently sold in designated areas designated by the city government, unlike *bibingkas* in other places, which are commonly sold near their local churches.

To promote one of the city's highly valued delicacies, the Mandaue City Government, in partnership with other government agencies and private groups, initiated activities to promote the food. One of the activities conducted by the city was the attempt to make the biggest *bibingka* for the Guinness World Records. In that endeavor, the private and public sectors, led by the city mayor, joined in the pursuit of the goal (Perolina, 2011). Mandaue City Government also opened several shops across the city to promote the city's products, including *bibingka* (Mandaue City Government, 2016). *Bibingka* Festival was even initiated by the Mandaue City Government and the Department of Education to promote the delicacy among the young Mandauehanons.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used an ethnographic design with naturalistic observations, interviews with key informants (KIs), and field notes, supported by secondary data. The KIs were selected from well-known *bibingka* makers and owners identified through the snowball technique. The key respondents were interviewed using a researcher-made interview guide. Selected key local government officials, prominent Mandauehanons, and buyers were chosen using opportunistic and snowball sampling. They were interviewed to gather necessary information and to validate data collected from the key respondents. The interviews were conducted at their most preferred time. The findings were validated using data triangulation.

Results and Discussions

Origin of Bibingka

Although the exact time when *bibingka* began in the city was not known to the Official No. 1, the delicacy is believed to have originated during the Spanish Period. The main ingredients of *bibingka*, such as rice, fermented coconut wine, and sugar, were already produced locally during the Spanish Period (Bagares, 2014). Bagares (2014) also noted that rice and sugarcane were grown in the city in the 1840s.

On the other hand, *Bibingka* Maker No. 1 mentioned that the family, considered the pioneer in making contemporary *bibingkas*, is in its 3rd generation. Meanwhile, *Bibingka* Maker No. 2 said that his family is also the 3rd generation in their clan to make the delicacy. The inputs of two *bibingka* makers also coincided with Sunstar's (2005) report that *bibingka* began to gain popularity after the American Period. It has also been found that the *bibingka*-making has been passed down to succeeding generations with utmost care, along with minor changes in methodology to efficiently produce the delicacy without losing its quality.

Basic Procedure in Bibingka-making

The following are the basic steps in making the traditional *bibingka* sa Mandaue: (1) Mill the 2 kilograms of rice and see to it that the rice is high-grade for it affects the quality of the *bibingka*; (2) Extract the coconut milk from the 4 kilograms of grated coconut meat; (3) Combine coconut milk with 2 kilograms white sugar; (4) After the mixture boils, let it cool down and the mixture can be placed in the refrigerator just in case it will not be directly used; (5) Once the mixture cools, blend it with milled rice; (6) Add 3 tbsps. of baker's yeast which is mixed in a ½ glass of water (in the early times fermented coconut wine was used in fermenting the coconut milk but since its pure form is hard to find in the city nowadays as well as its property of making the delicacy to spoil easily, *bibingka* makers opted to use baker's yeast for practical reasons) to the mixture and leave it for around two hours to ferment the blend; (7) Start setting the fire under the clay mound and place the molding clay on top of the clay mound; (8) Place the roundly-cut banana leaf on the molding clay then pour the mixture on the molding clay; (9) Place pieces of shredded coconut meat to the mixture; (10) Cover the mixture that is on the molding clay with a metallic sheet that has pieces of burning charcoal on top of it to equally heat the mixture; (11) After around 10 minutes (depending on the heat of the charcoals on top and at the bottom of the molding clay), remove the cooked *bibingka* and let it cool for few minutes; and (12) Package the *bibingka* by three (3) using a banana leaf. The *bibingka* is then ready to be sold. Dozens of *bibingkas* can be produced using the aforementioned quantities of ingredients.

It is noted that, unlike in the past, contemporary *bibingka* makers use ground rice flour and baker's yeast instead of coconut wine. Nevertheless, other aspects of the traditional steps and ingredients in making *bibingka* are still preserved.

Cultural Significance of Bibingka sa Mandaue

Bibingka sa Mandaue represents the city's rich cultural heritage. It represents the city's past through the ingredients used to make the delicacy. The rice, coconut, and sugar used to make *bibingka* represent the city's agricultural past. This is also supported by Officials Nos. 1, 2, and 3, who stated that *bibingka* is already part of the city's tradition. *Bibingka* Makers No. 1 and 2, as well as Official No. 1 and Buyer No. 3, posited that the delicacy is a pride of Mandaue City. As the *bibingka* makers mentioned, Mandaue City's *bibingka* is unique because it uses more coconut milk than other *bibingka* varieties. Its texture is also smoother and softer than that of other *bibingkas*.

Mandaue's rice cake shows the creativity of the Mandauehanons, especially in culinary arts. In making *bibingka*, one has to be keen on details, such as the color of the product. One has to make sure the temperature applied to the mixture is high enough to avoid the delicacy appearing black from overcooking or plain white from undercooking. *Bibingka* of Mandaue

City, therefore, contributes to the rich food culture not only in the city but also in the province of Cebu.

Making *bibingka* also serves as a quality bonding moment for the families of the *bibingka* makers. Family members help one another produce the delicacy because making it is difficult when only one person is doing it. In making the delicacy, a member may be assigned to one step, such as extracting the coconut milk, while the rest do something else. Also, the families of *bibingka* makers in the city made sure that their younger generations could learn the craft through consistent training and immersion, ensuring that the tradition would persist for generations to come.

As mentioned by Official No. 1, the stickiness and sweetness of *bibingka* sa Mandaue also represent the closeness of the families in the city through the years. This is similar to what Sunstar said: *Bibingka*-making is also a family activity. However, the concern of a *bibingka* maker is who will succeed after the present generation, since it was observed that many of the expected members of the next generation find the product cumbersome to make (Sunstar, 2004).

Bibingka sa Mandaue also represents the hospitality of the Mandauehanons to the visitors of the city. In the past, the delicacy was prepared for special occasions and served to visitors, as mentioned by Eslao-Alix (2013), who noted that it was served during fiestas as one of the desserts. In the present, *bibingka* is served by the citizens, government officials, and church leaders to welcome their visitors. For instance, during the International Eucharistic Congress in 2015, one of the *bibingka* makers produced around 300 packs of *bibingka*, with 3 pieces per pack, to be given to visitors as snacks and/or pasalubong. Other times where *bibingkas* are in demand are during Christmas, Holy Week, New Year, Mandaue City's major celebrations, and All Souls' Day.

Bibingka is also used as a bring-home gift, or pasalubong, by visitors. Some people who live outside Cebu come to the city to buy the said delicacy for its renowned taste that is distinctive from the *bibingkas* of other places. Official No. 3 even mentioned that *bibingka* evokes nostalgia among those who have eaten it.

Other Benefits of Bibingka

Bibingka sa Mandaue serves as the main source of living for the *bibingka* makers. As a cottage industry, the product supports the day-to-day needs of the families of *bibingka*-makers. *Bibingka* makers were able to support their children's education, especially *Bibingka* Maker No. 1, who completed their baccalaureate studies with money earned from selling *bibingkas*. Official No. 2 recognized the value of the *bibingka*-making industry, for it produces small and micro-level entrepreneurs. Official No. 2 even recognized the labor-intensive nature of the product and its indirect positive impact on the producers of the ingredients used to make *bibingka*.

The delicacy is also bought to satisfy buyers' gustatory cravings. Buyers No. 2 and 3 mentioned that they bought *bibingkas* to satisfy their cravings. It is also observed that *bibingkas* are more frequently bought in the afternoon than on the rest of the days, similar to what Eslao-Alix (2012) mentioned, where *bibingkas* are eaten as snacks in the afternoon.

Efforts Done in Preserving and Promoting Bibingka

The most common government effort to preserve and promote *bibingka* is the designation of a specific place where *bibingka* makers can sell their products, providing buyers with greater convenience in purchasing the delicacy. Garbo sa Mandaue serves as a place where *bibingkas* can be easily bought. Formerly, *bibingkas* were also available in front of the site where the Mandaue Coliseum used to be.

Garbo sa Mandaue is designated to the established *bibingka* maker in the city. Other *bibingka* makers are allowed to sell their products outside the Mandaue Coliseum, while others opt to sell their rice cakes by peddling or by taking orders. The allocation of specific spots for *bibingka* makers to sell their products was confirmed by Official No. 2, who considers it the best way to help the *bibingka* makers.

Aside from that, *bibingka* makers from Mandaue are also invited by the Mandaue City Government on several occasions, such as Gabii sa Kabilin, where they are asked to produce *bibingkas* given as free samples to visitors. The City Government shouldered the cost of the ingredients used during that occasion. Other significant activities were during the International Eucharistic Congress and the Bibingkahan Festival, a cookfest initiated by the Department of Education and the City Government. During the Bibingkahan Festival, some *bibingka* makers are selected to demonstrate to students and guests how to make *bibingka*. Aside from that, *Bibingka* Maker No. 1 said that the City Government tasked her family to spearhead the goal of attaining the biggest *bibingka* in the Guinness Book of Records. *Bibingkas* are also given by the City Government, along with other Mandauehanon delicacies, as pasalubong to showcase and promote local delicacies.

Bibingka Maker No. 1 also said that a handful of cottage industry makers were chosen to be part of the Obra Negosyo Eskwela Program – a project of the Cebu Provincial Government. From that program, they were given opportunities to enhance the quality and efficiency in making the delicacy. It was observed that, because of the program, *Bibingka* Maker No. 1 began using modern rice milling technology to shorten *bibingka*-making time without sacrificing quality.

Buyers also help preserve the *bibingka* industry by patronizing its products. Buyer No. 2 even mentioned that because the delicacy is delicious, he loves to eat it over and over again. Visitors from distant places come to the city to buy the delicacy. Others also bought the delicacy and froze it so they could give it to Filipinos working abroad. Consumer word of mouth about

bibingka sa Mandaue helps promote the product. Several radio announcers and commentators also help promote *bibingka* by saying it is delicious.

On the side of *bibingka* makers, they ensure that the tradition is passed down from generation to generation. *Bibingka* makers use cell phones so buyers can easily contact them, and one of them started making social media pages to promote their product.

Perception on the Promotion and Preservation Efforts

Generally, officials found the preservation efforts satisfactory. Official No. 1 said that the *bibingka* should be showcased from time to time and made one of the *pasalubong* for city visitors, and that the product's packaging should be improved to make it more attractive. On the other hand, Official No. 3 stated that technology should be improved to extend the product's shelf life and that innovations should be encouraged to diversify its flavors. It is also implied that promotion and preservation efforts are successful, as the demand for *bibingka* sa Mandaue has remained consistent over the years.

Regarding *bibingka* makers, there is general satisfaction that *bibingka* is promoted and preserved across generations. The locations where consumers can avail themselves of *bibingka* are helpful to the industry, though there are ways to improve the areas mentioned above. One way to increase the likelihood of selling *bibingka* in those areas is to create parking spaces, making it easier for buyers to purchase the product. Also, it is better if the roads near the places are two-way to increase the chances of attracting buyers. Regarding the City Government's promotional efforts, the *bibingka* makers expressed their gratitude and satisfaction.

Conclusion

Bibingka is one of the traditional delicacies of Mandaue City that represents its agricultural past through the ingredients used, and its preparation involves a tedious process that, in a way, reflects some of the Mandauehanon values. *Bibingka* is usually served on several occasions, and the delicacy contributes to the city's economic and cultural dimensions. Preservation and promotion efforts are consistently undertaken to ensure the product's continued existence.

Based on the findings, the following are hereby recommended: tracing of the specific origin of Mandaue's rice cake; an in-depth study on the possible ritualistic embodiment in *bibingka*-making. Preservation and promotion efforts should continue, but additional support could be strengthened, such as technological upgrades to improve the delicacy's shelf life and easier access to financial assistance and equitable loans to support the cottage industry.

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