


# Steaming-Hot Socio-Political Beginnings of Siomai Festival of Tisa

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the socio-political foundations and sustainability of the Siomai Festival in Barangay Tisa, Cebu City, Philippines. Specifically, it aimed to trace the origin of the festival and analyze its role in sustaining local identity and community engagement. Employing a qualitative ethnographic design, data were gathered through interviews and observations involving 15 informants composed of barangay officials, siomai vendors, and local tourists. Thematic analysis revealed that the festival originated as a strategic socio-political initiative to establish a distinct local identity and address territorial misidentification with neighboring areas. Furthermore, the sustainability of the festival is anchored on its adaptive and community-centered activities, which enhance participation, economic opportunities, and cultural pride. The study concludes that the Siomai Festival serves as both a cultural and political instrument that strengthens community cohesion and local branding. It is recommended that local government units institutionalize similar culturally grounded initiatives to promote sustainable community development and gastrotourism.

## RESUMO

Este estudo examinou os fundamentos sociopolíticos e a sustentabilidade do Festival Siomai no bairro de Tisa, na cidade de Cebu, Filipinas. Especificamente, buscou traçar a origem do festival e analisar seu papel na manutenção da identidade local e no engajamento comunitário. Utilizando uma abordagem etnográfica qualitativa, os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas e observações com 15 informantes, incluindo autoridades do bairro, vendedores de siomai e turistas locais. A análise temática revelou que o festival surgiu como uma iniciativa sociopolítica estratégica para estabelecer uma identidade local distinta e combater a identificação territorial equivocada com áreas vizinhas. Além disso, a sustentabilidade do festival está ancorada em suas atividades adaptáveis e centradas na comunidade, que promovem a participação, as oportunidades econômicas e o orgulho cultural. O estudo conclui que o Festival Siomai funciona como um instrumento cultural e político que fortalece a coesão comunitária e a imagem local. Recomenda-se que as unidades governamentais locais institucionalizem iniciativas semelhantes, com forte base cultural, para promover o desenvolvimento comunitário sustentável e o turismo gastronômico.

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## Introduction

Food as the major component of culture, has direct significance to one's local economy and governance. According to Haysom (2015), Food offers opportunities to explore innovative forms of urban governance. This means that there are countless viable socio-economic opportunities circling cuisine which has significant impact to local culture governance and politics.

Among the colorful tapestry of cultural celebrations often holds within its threads the rich narratives of a community's history, identity, and aspirations---festivals relating to one's local food is common in any places in the Philippines. As cited by Magpantay et. al. (2014), a festival is not just an exhibition of cheery dance moves and flamboyant ensembles, but more of a representation of a towns or city's culture, tradition, natural resources, and its beautiful people. Among these vibrant celebrations in the Philippines, lies the Siomai Festival, an event that not only signifies culinary delight but also encapsulates the socio-political essence of Barangay Tisa in Cebu City, Philippines. This study embarks on a journey to explore the intricate layers of significance woven into the fabric of the Siomai Festival, aiming to unravel its socio-political beginnings and assess its enduring sustainability.

Barangay Tisa, nestled within Cebu City, has been cast in the shadows of its neighboring areas, notably Labangon. Amidst this geographical misconception, the Siomai Festival emerged as more than a culinary celebration—it became a beacon for asserting Tisa's unique identity. Born in 2014 as a deliberate effort to showcase its renowned product, siomai, this festival was an intentional step toward redefining Tisa's presence and correcting the misconceptions that obscured its distinctiveness.

Beyond its culinary charm, the Siomai Festival mirrors the socio-political narrative of a community striving for recognition and empowerment. It serves as a canvas where Tisa paints its story of resilience, cultural pride, and communal unity. Through a multitude of celebratory activities and engagements, this festival acts as a catalyst, not merely for entertainment, but for the preservation of local heritage and the nurturing of a communal spirit.

This study sets out on an ethnographic expedition, employing qualitative methods to delve into the essence of Tisa's sub-culture system. By engaging key informants—barangay officials, siomai vendors, and local tourists—the aim is to trace the genesis of the Siomai Festival and shed light on the sustaining forces behind its enduring success. Through narratives, observations, and immersive experiences, this exploration seeks to capture the unique socio-political underpinnings of the festival and its profound impact on the lives of Tisa's residents.

It is in this light that the researcher unravels the narrative threads of the Siomai Festival, by navigating through its origins, its cultural resonance, and the transformative role it plays in carving out Tisa's identity. Beyond the festivities and culinary indulgence, this study

ventures into the heart of a celebration that symbolizes more than just a gastronomic affair—it represents a community's quest for recognition, unity, and a distinct place in the cultural mosaic of Cebu City.

Despite the growing body of literature on festivals in the Philippines, there remains a limited number of studies examining the socio-political motivations behind the creation of barangay-level festivals and their role in constructing local identity. Most existing studies focus on economic or cultural impacts, leaving a gap in understanding how festivals function as political instruments for recognition, territorial distinction, and governance at the grassroots level. Hence, this study addresses this gap by analyzing the Siomai Festival of Tisa as a socio-political phenomenon.

This study explored the celebration of Siomai Festival in Barangay Tisa, Cebu City, Cebu, Philippines. This study further (1) traces the origin of Siomai Festival, and (2) describes the festival's annual celebratory activities and its sustainability.

## **literature review**

The literature and studies cited in this paper tackle the viewpoints of many scholars on the socio, economic and political significance of Festivals to a local cultural identity.

### **A. Festival Significations in the Philippines**

Peterson (2020) explained that the massive scale, ubiquity, and sheer age of many festivals in the Philippines reflects the history of colonization under the Spanish and Americans, and more significantly the continuous cultural adaptations which harness contemporary cultural flows in ways that generate and strengthen the sense of both normative and spontaneous communities. This means that the conduct of festivals in any of the places in the Philippines not only depicts influences of colonization but also shows the evolution of such influences in the modern Philippine society.

Moreover, Gonzales (2017) showed in his results that the community respondents strongly agreed that festival helps in the preservation of local culture and traditions. This suggest that Festivals in the Philippines provide identity to the local people which further nourish the Filipino culture as a whole. This further indicates that Festivals in the Philippines play a significant role in preservation of local culture and traditions amidst modernity due to massive globalization.

In addition, Magpantay et. al. (2014) shared in his study that the respondents strongly agreed that one of the socio-cultural effects of festivals is it provide unity in the community and in terms of economic effects, despite the fact that hosting a festival is expensive. This suggest that despite the expense, festivals can have economic advantages for the community. As practiced, festivals often attract visitors who spend money on things like food, accommodations, and souvenirs, which can boost the local economy.

Furthermore, Mesana & De Guzman (2022) noted that festivals evoke pleasant emotions such as pride, appreciation, and devotion (which are collectively termed as festival happiness) among festival participants. This means that festivals in the Philippines have intangible and unquantifiable aspects which goes beyond the logic of cost and benefit analysis. This suggest that the festival's success may be in the forms of happiness, empathy, resilience, and other altruistic behavior of festival participants.

However, Del Rosario (2022) revealed how festivals in the Philippines can become a limiting factor in urbanization and modernity. He explained that Filipino farmers still relied on the carabaos due to sociocultural significance and geographic reasons despite the animal's exclusion from the introduction of agricultural machineries. This deep entanglement was expressed in the harvest festivals, which creatively used the carabaos as temporary bearers of images pertaining to the locality's cultural heritage and agro-industries amidst rapid urbanization. This suggests that Philippine urbanization is capped due to the society's attachment to old ways and practices which are idealized in any of the festivals.

In conclusion, the various studies presented shed light on the multifaceted impact of festivals in the Philippines. these studies illuminate the rich tapestry of social, cultural, and economic dynamics woven into the fabric of Philippine festivals.

### ***B. Siomai as Basis of Local Gastrotourism***

Fernandez (2019) Food was among these humble but important culture-bearing objects. The grains, fruits, vegetables, and dishes that travelled from other countries to the Philippines are not only recorded in history, but are especially engraved in the society's culture. This means that food is not just as a means of sustenance but as a carrier of cultural heritage, traditions, and histories. It highlights how food serves as a medium through which cultural exchange, adaptation, and identity formation occur, contributing significantly to the cultural richness of Filipino society. Similar to how "puso" of hanging rice mirrors one's social identity.

According to Cabasag et. al. (2021), the attributes of puso mirror a social identity in Cebu's Street food industry and culture. Its orientation as a ritual object has shifted to a pragmatic orientation reflecting Cebu city's fast paced-life. Its new identification creates a changing perspective; its characteristics remain integral to the Cebuano cultural identity. This suggest that "puso" as a culinary symbol that has transitioned from a traditional ritualistic object to a more practical commodity in response to the fast-paced urban lifestyle. However, despite this shift, it remains a significant part of Cebuano culture, retaining its core cultural identity. A common food signification that has been observed even in the past.

In fact, Alonso (2009) noted that is not surprising because as early as 1920, Cebuano culture dictates that when food was served to important visitors and guests, the cuisine of choice was Chinese. This fact is even documented in a book that my loyal readers already know, *Lagda sa Pagpanluto* (1924) by Maria Fadullon Rallos, the first and only cook book written in

the Cebuano language. This provides that a glimpse into the intersection of cultural practices, hospitality, and culinary traditions in Cebuano society. It highlights the historical significance of Chinese cuisine as a choice for serving guests of importance, emphasizing the cultural importance of food in social interactions and hospitality within the region. Among this Chinese cuisine, siomai is notably the one of the most viable.

According to See, C. A. (2012), Siomai (烧卖) which has other Alternative names spelled as shaomai, shui mai, shu mai, sui mai, shui mei, siu mai, shao mai, xiu mai is common in the Philippines. This food is ritualistic where people gather and share their food, and at the same time, their life stories with each other. He further added that the food items served for the snacks should not only be filling, but also a gastronomic delight that could create and sustain friendship. Crackers or cookies simply would not suffice. Long before dim sum became a byword in Philippine cuisine, siopao and siomai were regular "party" food items, especially in school or office functions. The Tagalog terms from the word are again derived from the Hokkien terms for this dim sum food, even though they are Cantonese in origin. It is in this context that Siomai as more than just a culinary delight; it serves as a cultural symbol of social interaction, community gatherings, and the fostering of friendships.

In addition, Fernandez, D. G. (1988) mentioned that the Philippine cuisine is as dynamic as any phase of culture that is alive and growing, has changed through history, absorbing influences, indigenizing, adjusting to new technology and tastes, and thus evolving. Filipino food today as shaped by Philippine history and society consists of a Malay matrix, into which melded and blended influences from China and India (through trade), Spain and America (through colonization), and more recently the rest of the world (through global cultural communication).<sup>1</sup> A special path to the understanding of what Philippine food is can be taken by examining the process of indigenization, which brought in, adapted, and then subsumed foreign influences into the culture.

Overall, the collected insights from various studies present a rich tapestry of the cultural significance of food in the Philippines, emphasizing its role as more than mere sustenance but as a carrier of cultural heritage and social identity. These studies collectively showcase how food transcends its basic function, weaving cultural threads that reflect history, society, adaptation, and globalization in the culinary landscape of the Philippines.

## **Materials and methods**

This qualitative study made use of ethnography as a method in exploring the celebration of Siomai Festival in Barangay Tisa, Cebu City, Cebu. For this, the researcher utilized narratives and actual observations as qualitative data gathered through interviews and immersion. Interviews were made with persons who lived in Tisa and who have direct and

indirect participation to the preparation and implementation of all the activities related to Siomai Festival.

The key informants (KIs), casual informants (CIs) and general informants (GIs) of the study were selected based on the researcher's pre-determined criterion. The focus of the researcher is to capture the socio-political reasons of the conduct of Sioma Festival as it captures the unique significations of Tisa's struggle for local cultural identity. The gathered data were validated by citing related studies and other references.

The study was conducted in Barangay Tisa, Cebu City, Cebu, Philippines where Siomai Festival is held on the third Sunday of September annually. Tisa is known for a street-vended pork Dim Sum "Siomai" (Punzalan et. al., 2013). Siomai; as a street food, became the primary reason of the visit of both local and international tourists. This kind of gastrotourism has become the major economic activity of the place with which the livelihood of the locals depends on. As of today, almost everywhere, one can see Siomai sa Tisa stalls for small or bulk orders (flavoursofiloilo, 2014). This suggest that among the places where siomai can be bought, Tisa remains to be ideal locale of an ethnographic study on siomai or/and siomai Festival.

This study utilized interview guide as primary instrument in gathering narratives from key informants identified by the researcher. For this matter, an interview guide was devised by the researcher based from the problems of the study. The interview guide is composed of thirty series of questions formulated in such a way that it can reach data saturation. The copy of interview guide is attached as part of the appendixes (refer on appendix No. 1 in the appendixes). Other instruments used by the researcher were recorder, camera, pen and paper for the success of data gathering.

The respondents of the study are the informants identified by the researchers for interview. There was a total of ten (15) informants for the study. The key informants will be composed of the following: five key informants (KIs) were barangay officials of Tisa, five casual informants (CIs) were siomai vendors in Tisa, and five general informants (GIs) were local tourists who witnessed the festival.

Each will be interviewed using the interview guide devised by the researcher. The informants have pseudonym for confidentiality of identity. Hence, KI-1, KI-2, KI-3, KI-4 and KI-5 were the Key Informants; CI-1, CI-2, CI-3, CI-4 and CI-5 were the Casual Informants and GI-1, GI-2, GI-3, GI-4 and GI-5 were the General Informants of the study. The study employed purposive sampling to select informants who have direct and relevant experiences with the Siomai Festival.

The selection criteria included: (1) residency in Barangay Tisa for at least five years, (2) direct participation in the planning or implementation of the festival, and (3) involvement in siomai-related economic activities or festival attendance.

**Table 1.**  
*Distribution of Informants*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Description</b>
Key Informants (Barangay Officials)	5	Involved in planning and implementation
Casual Informants (Vendors)	5	Engaged in siomai trade
General Informants (Tourists)	5	Festival participants
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	

Prior to the actual data gathering procedures by the researcher, an interview guide was constructed. The fifteen (15) informants were asked for their available time to conduct the interview. Moreover, the fifteen (15) informants were purposively selected by the researchers based on a self-made criterion. A hard copy of interview guide was provided to the informants so they may constructively be ready on the questions. The confidentiality of the narratives and its contents were explained by the researcher upon giving the hard copy of the interview guide. The interview guide was subjected to expert validation by two faculty members with expertise in qualitative research and cultural studies. Revisions were made based on their recommendations to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. The researcher waited for the schedule time and place of the requested interview preferred by each key informant.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was secured from all informants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

On the day of the interview, the researcher asked questions based on the interview guide to the key informants. The researchers recorded all the verbal narratives of the key informants using a recorder, a paper and a pen. After, the researchers transcribed the recorded narratives. The researcher used tabular matrix to comprehensively assemble the narratives on each question per key informants. The researchers used pseudonym on the table for confidentiality of identity key informants.

A thematic analysis then been employed to examine the pattern of similarities on the narratives of key informants until data saturation is reached. The study employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved data familiarization, coding, theme generation, review of themes, and interpretation. This ensured systematic identification of patterns across the narratives of informants. The pattern of similarities on the narratives of the respondents was presented on the succeeding pages as findings of the study. The researchers then draw conclusion out from the findings of the study. After which, the

researchers carefully formulate recommendations and conclusions out from the findings of the study.

## **Results and Discussions**

### ***A. Origin of Siomai Festival***

The conduct of 1st ever Siomai Festival in 2014 was meant to gain Political advantage and to establish Local Social Identity. This is evident in the narratives of key informants saying:

*Tisa, a barangay in Cebu City, has always been mistaken for its neighbor, Labangon. So, when the village celebrated its fiesta to honor San Lorenzo Ruiz, it made sure visitors would know Tisa by holding its first Siomai Festival for 10 days to showcase its popular product—Siomai (KI 1, 2, 3 &5).*

These utterances boldly show how This narrative about Tisa, a barangay in Cebu City, sheds light on a situation where the community felt overshadowed or mistaken for its neighboring area, Labangon. The celebration of the fiesta in honor of San Lorenzo Ruiz provided Tisa with an opportunity to distinguish itself and assert its unique identity. The decision to host the first-ever Siomai Festival for a period of 10 days was a deliberate attempt to put Tisa on the map and showcase its renowned product, siomai, which comes in different variations.

Moreover, the significance lies in the strategic use of this festival as a tool for branding and differentiation. By focusing on siomai, a beloved and popular food item, the community aimed to highlight its culinary heritage and create a distinct association between Tisa and this particular product. This festival served as a platform not only to celebrate local cuisine but also to draw attention to Tisa's unique offerings, attempting to correct the misconception that the neighborhood was interchangeable with Labangon. This concern is reverberated in the utterances of key informants, when they say:

*Some residents would write down their address as “Tisa, Labangon” when paying their real property taxes, eventually depriving the Barangay part of its share of the taxes (KI 1,4 &5)*

This narrative suggests an intriguing scenario where certain residents in the area of Tisa might have been incorrectly identifying their address as "Tisa, Labangon" when fulfilling obligations such as paying real property taxes. This seemingly innocuous act could have substantial implications, particularly affecting the allocation and distribution of tax revenue between the two barangays—Tisa and Labangon.

The act of residents indicating their address as "Tisa, Labangon" implies a conflation or confusion between these two neighboring areas. However, from a financial perspective, this seemingly minor misrepresentation has significant consequences. By listing their address in this manner, residents might unintentionally divert tax revenue that should rightfully belong to Tisa to Labangon. The implications could extend beyond a mere misallocation of tax

revenue. It may also reflect a lack of distinct identity perception among residents or a historical ambiguity regarding the boundaries or specific areas of each barangay.

As of today, almost everywhere, one can see Siomai sa Tisa stalls for small or bulk orders (flavoursofiloilo, 2014). This suggests that among the places where siomai can be bought, Tisa remains to be main place which people associate with it. The inauguration of Siomai Festival in 2014 was a strategic move intended to serve multiple purposes, extending beyond the celebration of a culinary delight. Firstly, hosting such an event allowed local politicians or leaders to gain a political advantage. Secondly, the festival was likely intended to establish a distinctive local social identity. Events like these can significantly foster a sense of community pride and belonging. The Siomai Festival could have been envisioned as a way to showcase local culture, culinary heritage, and communal spirit. By highlighting a specific food item (siomai in this case) that might have had local significance or popularity, organizers sought to create a unique identity for their barangay, potentially attracting tourists and fostering unity among locals.

This finding supports the study of Peterson (2020), who emphasized that festivals serve as mechanisms for constructing community identity and social cohesion. Similarly, Gonzales (2017) found that festivals contribute to cultural preservation and local pride. However, the present study extends these findings by highlighting the explicit political motivation behind the creation of the festival, particularly in addressing territorial misidentification and local governance concerns. This suggests that beyond cultural expression, festivals at the barangay level may function as strategic tools for political visibility and administrative recognition.

### ***B. Festival's Annual Celebratory Activities and Sustainability***

The Siomai Festival, the most recent festival introduced in Cebu Province and the only festival initiated by a single barangay, faces difficulties in organizing its diverse celebratory events and ensuring sustainability. The most common descriptions depicting the festival's activities are seen on the narratives of general informants, when majority said:

*“Fun, Engaging and Worthwhile activities (GI 6,8, 9 &10).”*

This statement indicates a set of criteria or conditions that individuals or a community consider essential before engaging in any activities. The emphasis is placed on the qualities of the activities themselves rather than just participation for the sake of it. The requirement for activities to be “fun” suggests a desire for enjoyment and entertainment. This criterion indicates a preference for activities that bring pleasure, excitement, and a sense of amusement. “Engaging” criterion suggests a desire for activities that captivate attention, involve active participation, and perhaps stimulate interest or curiosity. Engaging activities tend to hold people's interest, encourage interaction, and foster a sense of involvement or immersion. The term “worthwhile” implies that activities need to offer value or significance. They should be

purposeful, beneficial, or meaningful in some way. It indicates a desire for activities that contribute positively to personal growth, learning, or the community's well-being.

These criteria (fun, engaging, and worthwhile activities) suggest that the individuals or community prioritize experiences that offer a balance between enjoyment and value. They seek activities that not only entertain but also engage them actively and offer meaningful or beneficial outcomes. This approach can contribute to the fact that Barangay Tisa and its inhabitants are busy and value their time more. They want to spend it on fulfilling and rewarding experiences, ensuring that their time and energy are invested in activities that align with their preferences and values.

In addition to the roster of traditional nightly events, including Bingo, Schools' Night, Barangay Night, Dance, Singing, and Beauty Contests, the 10-day Siomai Festival celebration introduced an array of dynamic activities that captivated participants. Embracing a more diverse and active approach, the festival innovatively incorporated events like Fun Run, Zumba sessions, Biking adventures, Free Theoretical Driving Course Seminars, exhilarating Buddle Fights, and vibrant Music Fests. These novel additions not only expanded the range of activities but also sparked tremendous enthusiasm among attendees, adding an extra layer of excitement and enjoyment to the festival's overall experience. These are further reflected on the narratives of general informants, when the majority said:

*Fun Run, Zumba sessions, Biking adventures, Free Theoretical Driving Course Seminars, and Buddle Fights are the best in the list of activities (GI 1, 4, 6 & 8),*

The provided statement outlines a comprehensive list of traditional nightly activities commonly associated with festivals' "best" activities. It notably highlights the Siomai Festival's innovative approach by introducing a diverse range of activities beyond the conventional. Overall, the Siomai Festival's expansion beyond the traditional roster of activities signifies a deliberate effort to cater to diverse fun interests of people, engage the community in new ways, and enhance the overall worth for festival-goers. This demonstrates adaptability, responsiveness to community preferences, and a commitment to creating an inclusive and sustainable celebratory experience.

The findings align with Mesana and De Guzman (2022), who noted that festivals generate emotional engagement and community satisfaction. Moreover, Magpantay et al. (2014) emphasized the economic and social benefits of festivals despite associated costs. However, this study reveals that sustainability is not solely dependent on economic gains but also on the perceived meaningfulness and inclusivity of activities. This indicates that adaptive programming and community participation are critical factors in sustaining local festivals.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights that the Siomai Festival is not merely a cultural celebration but a socio-political instrument for identity formation and local governance. The findings

demonstrate that festivals at the barangay level can serve strategic purposes beyond tourism, including territorial recognition and economic positioning. Compared with existing literature, the study provides a localized perspective that underscores the role of grassroots initiatives in shaping community identity. Furthermore, the sustainability of the festival is closely tied to its adaptability and responsiveness to community preferences, reinforcing the importance of participatory governance in cultural initiatives.

This study concludes that the Siomai Festival of Barangay Tisa is deeply rooted in socio-political motivations aimed at establishing local identity and addressing territorial ambiguity. The festival has evolved into a sustainable cultural practice through its adaptive activities and strong community engagement. It serves as both a cultural expression and a governance strategy that enhances economic opportunities, social cohesion, and local pride. The findings affirm that grassroots festivals can function as powerful tools for community development and identity formation. Future studies may explore comparative analyses of similar barangay-level festivals to further understand their role in local governance and sustainable tourism.

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