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As yet an Asian Flavor does not Exist

The Philippines constitutes the only true end-point of the world.

—Pierre Chaunu 1960, *Les Philippines et le Pacifique des Ibériques*

JAVANESE DIP DEEP-FRIED and roasted foods either in sambal—a paste made from red chili peppers, garlic, salt, and sugar—or in *terasi*, a fermented shrimp/fish paste that may be studded with chopped red chilies. Tagalogs prefer dipping sauces with a sour base: palm vinegar with a lone crushed chili pepper pod; vinegar with slivers of onion with mashed garlic and pepper; chopped green camias and tomatoes; or small raw pickled mangoes mixed with tomatoes and coriander. Though the Javanese use some tamarind juice in their dishes, they complain that the Tagalog's sour dishes, especially those cooked in vinegar, upset their system. On the other hand while the Tagalogs use some chili pepper, many of them claim that sambal burns their stomach. Which taste is more authentically “Asian”: the Javanese or the Tagalog?

Many assume that an identifiable pan-Asian sensibility exists in all domains, from philosophy to literature to music to cooking; and that while Javanese culture is authentic, because it conforms to this ideal norm, Tagalog culture is inauthentic because submission to Spanish colonization has alienated it from this norm. Thus, the writer Mariles Vitug (interview 1997) asked the culinary expert Doreen Fernandez, “The Philippines has been colonized twice. Did this confuse the country's cuisine?” Note the loaded word “confuse.” In an interview for the *Philippine Star*, Lorrie Reynoso, a chef-instructor at the prestigious New York Restaurant School, says that the consensus of Filipinos and American food editors and critics is that when Westerners think of Asian cuisine, “whether it is Thai, Burmese, Indonesian,” they always associate it with indigenous spices “which Philippine cuisine does not have” (Martel 1997).

I question, however, whether a pan-Asian sensibility has ever existed—especially one that favors burning spices. For their dipping sauce, the North Vietnamese favor *nuoc mam*,

which, like our *patis*, is an amber-colored fish sauce. On this they sprinkle a few slices of chili. Cantonese food, which has influenced Filipino sensibility, uses ginger, pepper, and soy sauce but not the variety of spices one finds in Java, certainly not the chili pepper that Szechwanese love. While Koreans love plenty of chilis and garlic, Japanese abhor their taste and their smell as low class. They prefer mustard (wasabi) and soy sauce. Who is more Asian: the Japanese who hate garlic and chili or the Szechwanese and Koreans who love these?

I also question whether indigenous pre-Hispanic, pre-Islamic Philippine societies participated in a pan-Asian passion for piquancy. According to my anthropology students, who have lived in the uplands of Mindanao, both the hitherto animist upland Bukidnon and Manobo only use salt for flavoring, and sometimes not even that because of the cost of transport from the coast. The town centers of Ilocos Norte were exposed to Hispanization from the late sixteenth century onward. But Ilocano farmers, among whom I stayed while doing field research, generally use only bagoong to flavor their everyday vegetables and occasional meats. Peppers appear when they fry and sauté [*guisa*], usually for feasts. Their term for black pepper is *paminta*, from the Spanish *pimienta*. It is hard to believe that their ancestors enjoyed spicy meals before the coming of the Spaniards. Or that contemporary Ilocano farmer taste is “confused.”

As far back as the early seventeenth century, the missionary Alcina ([1668a] n.d., 3, 351) observed of the Visayans that “many times [they take] their roots or rice alone or with a little salt and not all have this always.” The Boxer Codex ([1590] 1960, 364) said of the Visayans that “their ordinary food is a little rice boiled solely in water and some sun-dried fish.” Neither author mentioned pepper and other spices. Just because we are close to the Spice Islands does not mean that a taste for black pepper was widespread here before Legazpi. Or that cardamom, cloves, cumin, and nutmeg were regular seasoning agents of Visayan and Tagalog food. Westernization supposedly resulted in the loss of piquancy. And yet the descendants of the Mexican Indians, who domesticated the chili before Columbus (Sabau 1992), came here during the galleon trade, bringing with them new plants, cooking styles, and the fiery fruit. In the rest of Asia, Portuguese traders introduced the chili.¹ That a taste for it spread like fire in other Southeast Asian countries, whereas it merely simmers among us, says something about the intensity of the Filipino sensibility.

I propose questioning a concept that is over two millennia old, namely, “Asia.” Simplistic notions of what Asia is and should be in relation to the West have succeeded in marginalizing, on the international scene, the achievements of lowland Christian Filipinos, not only in cuisine, but in the other arts as well. They have also succeeded in making many educated lowland Christian Filipinos apologetic about their culture *when they reflect on it and have to articulate it before outsiders*. Often they assume that since the costume, the music, the architecture, and the literature of lowland Christian Filipinos have an obvious Hispanic component, they cannot be Asian, for to be Asian means to be non-Western. Therefore, they cannot be “authentic” either, for to be in Asia means thinking and behaving like a true Asian. Thus the anguish in defining the Christian Filipino’s identity. The maps indicate that his country is in Asia but both fellow-Asians and Western authors (generally non-Latin) question his credentials as an “Asian.” On the other hand, though Hispanic

elements continue to be vivid in the Filipino's culture, Spanish as a spoken language has practically disappeared from his home, office, and school. This is a situation shared by the Filipino with the Guamanian. Hence, despite interest in the Philippines among educated Spaniards and Spanish Americans, and despite invitations to join their group activities, non-Spanish-speaking Filipinos shun such activities whether these be informal get-togethers or formal conferences. And while the educated Filipino is fluent in English, he cannot join either that club of English-speaking former colonials, the British Commonwealth, simply because he was colonized by the Americans rather than the British. He does not play cricket. In which gathering of nations is the lowland Christian Filipino fully accepted for what he is, given his unique history? This dilemma galls especially if we consider that in Filipino culture, one has to belong to a *barkada*—to a peer group. Who are our likely barkada mates in the assembly of nations?