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A Kaleidoscope of Home Through Macaroni Soup

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Prof. Deborah Geis

Alternative Autobiographies

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A Kaleidoscope of Home Through Macaroni Soup

I became a professional balancer at the age of sixteen. The graceful stamina of my hands always came in handy while juggling between multiple objects without losing my breath. But I have never clutched a full set of rubber balls, been trained by a ringmaster, nor placed my toes on a tightrope. I only have a bottle of water, matching silverware, and a steaming bowl of chicken macaroni soup prepared by my *tita*, perfectly perched atop the dandelion pleats of my high school skirt while sitting in the passenger seat of our family car. With every careful sip, I can endure hours of traffic inside our three-year-old Toyota van on the bumpy ride back home.

When my mother was pregnant with me, my aunt decided to move into our family's humble apartment in Manila, Philippines to ease her sister's worries about being a first-time mother. Since both my parents were full-time consultants who commuted to their workplaces every morning, *tita* took the reins of managing the household, which meant taking care of her young niece sprawled on the living room floor. While I was preoccupied with my Barney coloring books and Winnie the Pooh plush toys, she stationed herself in the apartment kitchen to prepare our daily meals. As my aunt became an overnight alchemist after experimenting with flavor cubes, peppers, spices, meat, and vegetables, I was fascinated by how she could make a savory appetizer of various meats or a refreshing fruit salad appear out of thin air. Yet among the

vast array of meals she cooked for me, my particular favorite was always chicken macaroni soup, also known as *sopas* in the Philippines.

Every time I witness *tita's* macaroni soup, I always admire the delicate architecture of her savory dish. The ivory curls of macaroni would float upon a creamy moat of evaporated milk, bubbling with dandelion remnants of a chicken cube. Diced carrots and sliced chicken hover in the periphery, like beeping mines filled with mouthwatering flavor. I try to capture each one in my little spoon, mimicking a fisherman catching seafood along a distant shore. Sometimes, my aunt adds vinegar to the broth, an ingredient that is never absent in the cabinets of a Filipino kitchen. The sour aftertaste tickles the edges of my cheeks as I take a sip of the soup, sending a flare in my nostrils and a satisfying taste on my lips.

With each intricate ingredient in a bowl of *sopas*, I eventually developed a personally verified three-step process to fully enjoy this signature dish. Stage One: Mesmerization. As I watch infinite reruns of "The Fairly Oddparents" on our living room TV, I am suddenly captivated by a savory aroma escaping from the kitchen. I scour my mind to decipher the familiar scent—what else could possess the mouthwatering smell of evaporated milk and boiled chicken, other than my aunt's signature macaroni soup? Stage Two: Immersion. During the first few minutes of the pot being lifted from the stove, the hard macaroni curls cluster together like little soldiers, until they absorb the broth and transform into soft, chewy curls that produce a burst of milky flavor. Each sip leaves me craving another, until I realize that every bit of macaroni has disappeared from my bowl. I then temporarily detach myself from the dish through Stage Three: Repetition. I devour two more rounds of macaroni soup over the dinner table, as I finally decide to save my fourth bowl for breakfast.

Tita's sopas was a warm companion that accompanied me into my teenage years. In 2016, I was offered a full scholarship by Philippine Science High School, a prestigious institution with a college-level scientific curriculum. Since my high school was an hour away from our house, I spent my mornings and afternoons in the passenger seat of our car, which significantly lessened my time at the family dining table. As I entered a scholarly world of research papers, laboratory experiments, and weekly exams, I slowly found myself drowning in an abyss of academic requirements. The only thing I looked forward to was the car ride back home, where my aunt would be excitedly waiting for me in the back seat. Since the kitchen was miles away, she decided to take matters into her own hands. All of a sudden, she would offer me a full homemade snack, complete with silverware, napkins, and bottled water. Every few weeks, I would find my favorite chicken macaroni soup magically transported into my lap, reminding me of the true comfort of home. Amidst my anxiety and frustrations as a scholar in a premier science high school, my *tita's sopas* provided me with a kaleidoscope of my childhood, a precious time when my friends were coloring books and cartoon marathons, my afternoons were enveloped in joy and laughter, and my purpose was to dream fearlessly and simply be myself.

Sopas is one of several meals served in a typical Filipino household, where food becomes a clear embodiment of the strong bond between family members. According to a cultural study by Jonathan Florendo, "Filipino food expresses a lifeworld wherein lies the source of Filipino values and identity. It speaks of the Filipino's understanding of identity, place, and role in the universe, while he/she relates with his/her fellows" (3). As families share steaming pots of home-cooked meals, the essential principles of solidarity, respect, and belongingness are cultivated within their homes. Moreover, each ingredient of a local dish is handled with meticulous yet

loving hands, which “indicates that Filipinos are lovers of order and harmony, reflective of our hospitable quality known all over the world” (Florendo 5).

Representing the encompassing warmth of a Filipino household, *sopas* is also prepared with particular ingredients to produce a savory and creamy flavor. These include “elbow macaroni, various vegetables, and meat (usually chicken), in a creamy broth with evaporated milk,” which emphasizes the importance of the soup’s immediate consumption since “the macaroni will absorb the liquid and become soggy and bloated over time” (Wikipedia). Yet this Filipino meal actually originated from the nineteenth century as it is a culinary adaptation of chicken noodle soup from the United States, which colonized the Philippines from 1898 to 1946. The etymology of the dish is a combination of the English word “soup” and the Spanish word “sopa”. Moreover, *sopas* is considered one of the common comfort foods of Filipinos, commonly “eaten during breakfast, cold weather, or served to sick people” (Wikipedia).

Various scientific research provides further evidence regarding the emotional solace provided by this particular meal, such as a 2011 psychological study conducted by Jordan D. Troisi and Shira Gabriel. The researchers conducted two experiments on more than a hundred undergraduate students to assess how comfort foods can impact a person’s loneliness. Upon analyzing a carefully curated set of survey questions and food-experience essays related to chicken noodle soup, it was discovered how “consumption of comfort foods automatically activates relationship-related concepts,” and that “comfort foods buffer against belongingness threats in people who already have positive associations with relationships” (747). This indicates how meals such as *sopas* provide a sense of familiarity and union with family and friends, as comforting memories evidently resurface upon consumption of the product. The recollection of

particular family events, local customs, and favorite childhood delicacies through macaroni soups improves individuals' psychological and emotional well-being.

Another significant finding of Troisi and Gabriel's research elaborated on how "people turn to food not only when they are hungry, but also when they desire comfort...the emotional power of comfort food comes from its connection with relationships and is realized in its propensity to reduce feelings of loneliness" (750-751). Various daily responsibilities such as corporate jobs, school assignments, and household errands could result in feelings of isolation and loneliness, especially as these tasks consume large periods of time which were previously used for leisure and strengthening family bonds during childhood. Thus, comfort foods such as macaroni soup allow people to reminisce on past memories for momentary solace, not only satisfying particular cravings but also evoking a sense of home and safety.

These findings were supported by another study by Aaron Negrillo, which explained that Filipino food "can be understood as a tangible expression of love: creating something for someone else and giving the energy they need to survive" (2). He expounds on the precious value of shared meals among family members, since "throughout the day they are separated by work or chores, but the time to eat together is sacred. A family will wait till everyone is gathered before blessing the food and beginning the meal, whether a large party or even the routine dinner with immediate family" (16). The excerpt indicates how *sopas* and other local meals represent the nurturing spirit within a Philippine household, which can accompany individuals through their daily lives despite being distanced from their native cuisine. This is especially true for Overseas Filipino Workers and international students who make numerous sacrifices through their professional and educational endeavors, to provide a better life for their families back home.

As a Filipino studying more than 8,000 miles away from my home country, I myself yearn for the familiar taste of chicken macaroni soup while sitting in our university dining hall. Yet the memories of my childhood escapades, high school journeys, and family meals will be more than enough to comfort my loneliness, as I await the day I can feel the warm embrace of my *tita* and enjoy another comforting bowl of *sopas* once again.

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