



Fast Food Globalization in the Provincial Philippines

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*This book is dedicated to my wife and best friend Lorena Parker
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Preface

I traveled to the Philippines in the summer of 2005 to examine the country's thriving fast food scene from an anthropological perspective. At this point in my career, I was just completing my third year as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Central Florida (UCF) in Orlando. Newly pursuing the tenure track and anxious to reacquaint myself with the friends and contacts I had developed over previous stays in the islands, I returned to the Philippines with no small sense of enthusiasm. Indeed, this fieldwork session was not my first trip to the archipelago as I had visited the country twice before in the 1990s; actually living there for a year between June 1997 and May 1998. Since 2005, I have been back to the islands four more times in 2006, 2010, 2011, and 2015. Altogether, I have made seven trips to the Philippines for various research purposes and durations, ranging from a few weeks to some 12 months, since 1994.

I initially went to the Philippines in the summer of 1994 as a Master's student from Texas A&M University but not to study corporate fast food per se. With only two semesters of graduate coursework under my belt, I originally journeyed to the islands to ethnographically investigate the interplay between natural disasters and commercial retail trade. Pursuing this research topic proved worthwhile given the country's consumer market orientation and recurring impacts from extreme geophysical events such as volcanos, earthquakes, and typhoons. Looking back, my inaugural visit to the Philippines was life altering in the sense that it both confirmed my decision to pursue anthropology as a career as well as instilled within me a deep-felt appreciation for the country and its people that persists to this day.

Of all the reasons that I find the Philippines so endlessly fascinating, probably the most deeply resonant for me is the seemingly uncanny ability of Filipinos to co-opt outside influences, particularly those originating from

the United States, to create something new and entirely their own. This propensity toward indigenization encompasses a wide variety of endeavors and undertakings. From the mid-twentieth century popularity of the live entertainment genre of *bodabil* that duplicates classic American vaudeville with a hodgepodge of sketch comedy, musical numbers, and dramatic stage pieces to the near fanatical devotion to a localized variety of U.S. basketball that is played professionally by 12 company-branded franchised teams within the Philippine Basketball Association (PBA) and throughout the archipelago on homemade sandlot courts by pick-up teams of shirtless young men in shorts and flip-flops (Bartholomew 2010), Filipinos demonstrate a real knack for reinterpreting and refining many tangible and intangible externalities into manifestations of local culture with increasingly tenuous Western roots.

Perhaps nowhere is this more in evidence at the community level than in the highly idiosyncratic and now ubiquitous mode of public transportation known as jeepneys. Every day these artistically imaginative public utility vehicles jam city streets in a colorful tableau of chrome-plated metal and customized paint jobs. With elaborate hood displays that feature a profusion of small mirrors, air horns, whip antennas, yoked miniature horses, and other quirky chrome ornaments, jeepneys offer a visual spectacle for passengers and bystanders alike. For commuters packed knee to knee along the parallel benches that face each other in back, jeepneys approach something akin to “mobile discos,” especially at night, because of their booming sound systems and flashy interior lights (Garland 1998:24). In like manner, their dashboards and windshields reflect their owner-operators’ distinct personalities, ornamented as they are with a mish-mash of translucent colored decals, tasseled fringe, and all variety of Roman Catholic motifs and imagery.

As flamboyant as these vehicles are today, their origins lay in a much more utilitarian purpose. Jeepneys trace their roots back to just after World War II when hundreds of abandoned or surplus U.S. military jeeps were repurposed in an effort to reestablish a transportation system effectively decimated by years of war. Over time, as this mode of transport caught on locally, the reliance on old American army jeeps gave way to imported or locally produced vehicles. Soon, a fleet of privately owned and aesthetically extravagant minibuses came to define urban transit in towns and cities across the islands, giving thousands of drivers and porters an economic livelihood as well as offering passengers an inexpensive way of getting around. Today, despite their initial U.S. military roots, jeepneys are now widely showcased as viable symbols of Filipino cultural identity both at home and abroad.

Doubtless, my status as an American with a notable fixation on all manner of U.S. popular culture has much to do with this abiding fascination on Filipino reimaginings of non-local influences. The oft romanticized funhouse reflections of American tastes and trends that I frequently encounter in the

Philippines, whether emanating from popular music, movies, television, fashion, or other expressions of this highly mediated realm, tend to emphasize the more superficial aspects of popular culture at the expense of many of the subtleties and nuances that U.S. audiences variously recognize and appreciate. Yet, this sort of indigenization is more than just pastiche. If anything, it is a highly discerning response to colonial, postcolonial, and neoliberal processes that produces new and novel forms that can be appreciated entirely on their own terms.

Indeed, as a nation of some 103 million inhabitants spread across three major island groupings (the Visayas, Mindanao, and Luzon), the country reflects an intriguing confluence of Western and Eastern influences. I should note that the Philippines is one of the few predominately Christian nations in Asia with well over 90 percent of today's Filipinos defining themselves under this religious affiliation. The vast majority of Filipino Christians, some 80 plus percent, identify as Roman Catholic, while the remaining ten percent or so belong to various Protestant denominations. Moreover, despite Tagalog (sometimes simply called Filipino) serving as the country's official language, the Philippines as a nation also boasts the third largest number of English speakers in the world behind the more heavily populated United States and India. The historical legacies of some four centuries of Spanish colonial rule (1521–1898), followed by a decades-long administrative and military relationship with the United States, are manifested in both profound and subtle ways at the local level.

As a frequent visitor to the islands, these influences are oftentimes entirely palpable. From the distinctive colonial architecture of the Spanish Imperial era to the considerable influence of the Roman Catholic Church, the lingering effects of this prolonged period of Hispanization remain an inextricable aspect of contemporary Philippine life. Similarly, the country's more recent colonial affiliation with the United States (1898–1946), however complicated or conflicted, continues to shape the lives of Filipinos. The introduction of an American-style public education system over a hundred years ago, coupled with democratic institutions of national governance based largely on those of the United States, exemplifies the Philippines' enduring linkages to America.

While these Spanish and U.S. influences continue to loom large, it is important to recognize that certain aspects of Philippine culture have also left their mark on contemporary American life, albeit in much less transformative ways. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in those seemingly quirky Tagalog terms that occasionally crop up in the American lexicon. Thanks in part to the everyday encounters of U.S. military service personnel with local Filipinos beginning in the late nineteenth century, a few memorable native words and colloquiums have found their way into the vocabulary of stateside English speakers. Indeed, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that words such

as “amuck/amok” and “boondocks”—ones that I have pretty much taken for granted my entire life—are derived straight out of spoken Tagalog.

So, even as vestiges of Spanish and American colonial rule persist within the country’s sociopolitical fabric, the Philippines still shares myriad characteristics with its geographical neighbors across insular and mainland Southeast Asia including China, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Among other things, these cultural commonalities include core social traits such as an instilled deference to family or the corporate group in nearly all decision-making activities as well as a distinct emphasis on maintaining social “face” in most, if not all, public contexts. At more tangible level for Filipinos and visitors to the country like me, local foodways draw notable similarities with the traditional cuisine and practices of its regional counterparts (see chapter 2). Filipinos’ emphasis on rice consumption and similar modes of food preparation are but just some of the culinary practices held in common with neighboring populations.

While today’s Philippines is certainly a reflection of its colonial past and regional geography, it is also something much more than the sum total of these enduring influences. To be sure, Philippine modernity defies simple categorization as the interpenetrative linkages between East and West produce a vibrant and textured cultural terrain that is as unique as it is complex. Adding further dimension to this cultural bricolage is the fact that some ten percent of Filipinos now live or work abroad as overseas contract workers (OCWs) or *balikbayans* (former Filipino citizens who are naturalized citizens of other countries and their children who periodically return to the islands). The financial remittances and cultural influences these transnational migrants contribute to their native homeland from places like Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Kuwait, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Canada, and the United States lend an even more globalized character to contemporary Filipino identity, working to reshape the national tapestry in decidedly more intricate and unexpected ways.

Local foods and foodways are not immune to the transformative sway exerted by OCWs and *balikbayans*. In fact, their travels and time abroad make them powerful agents in disseminating preferences for new types of cuisine, food brands, and consumption practices to those friends and family back home with whom they maintain connections. The so-called “*balikbayan* boxes” that accompany these overseas Filipinos on their return to the islands have emerged as potent symbols in this regard, loaded as they are with all variety of non-perishable goods and consumables crammed within the prescribed dimensions of their cardboard frames.

Beyond such imported comestibles, the financial support of overseas Filipinos supplements household discretionary income at the community level to the point where many locals can now afford a range of consumer

experiences that include regularly dining at American-style fast food restaurants. While never exactly tenuous, the financial and cultural clout wielded by OCWs/*balikbayans* over their communities of origin have only intensified as manifestations of social media and the Internet have become more and more ubiquitous locally since the late 1990s.

Suffice it to say, the Philippines offers anthropologists and others in the social sciences an ever-shifting topography from which to understand how global and local processes interface and influence each other. Accordingly, I returned to the archipelago in 1997 for a yearlong fieldwork session to support my PhD dissertation research. Somewhat more seasoned than I was as a newbie anthropologist three years prior, I yearned to immerse myself in Philippine culture in such a way that I could better understand the complexities, ironies, and ambivalences that characterize this arguably most “Americanized” of Southeast Asian countries.

Besides living in a local household whose members I now consider akin to family, I also endured my fair share of hardships recognizable to almost any cultural anthropologist who has ventured well beyond the familiar confines of home. Looking back, I consider these 12 months in the field as pivotal to my professional and personal development as I was able to collect enough ethnographic data to begin drafting my dissertation upon returning stateside in June 1998.

As previously mentioned, I did not focus on the local encroachment of American-style fast food restaurants in my MA thesis or PhD dissertation research to any great degree. Rather, in both studies I documented the commercial transformation of Dagupan City, Pangasinan, a tertiary city located on the main Philippine island of Luzon some 200 kilometers north of Metro-Manila along the Lingayen Gulf, as it rebounded economically from a devastating July 1990 earthquake. Dagupan’s remarkable recovery from this calamitous event, in many ways, expedited the emergence of various modern retail enterprises throughout the city and across the northern Philippines. These highly capitalized ventures included several shopping malls, warehouse clubs, and corporate fast food eateries such as McDonald’s, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), Pizza Hut, and other brands familiar to Western diners.

For my PhD work I ended up contrasting Dagupan’s post-disaster economic growth with the commercial experience of neighboring San Fernando City, La Union. I pursued this comparative research in an effort to better assess how natural catastrophes can accelerate pre-existing economic trends to the point whereby impacted communities undergo a dramatic surge of economic activity that would unlikely occur otherwise. Such analysis proved effective in highlighting the similarities and differences between these corresponding urban communities, rendering a more carefully hewn picture of post-disaster socioeconomic dynamics.

This is probably as good a time as any to raise an important point, one that will prove significant over subsequent chapters. Rather than concentrate my fast food research on one specific provincial Philippine community, in this book I follow a tack similar to the one I employed during my dissertation fieldwork. That is, I draw on findings from both Dagupan City and San Fernando City's local fast food scenes to document the sort of intricacies and incongruities underlying this dining format's spread and impact on local populations. This broad approach allowed me to take advantage of relationships that I had cultivated over the years within either city's retail trade community as well as add more ethnographic granularity to this fast food study.

Admittedly, during both of these early stints in the field (1994 and 1997–98), I ate at corporate fast food restaurants such as McDonald's and its home-grown Philippine rival, Jollibee, quite regularly. Whether in Dagupan, San Fernando, or elsewhere, this kind of patronage probably reflected the limited palate I had developed up to this point as a graduate student as much as it did the sense of comfort I derived from dining amid such ostensibly familiar and convenient surroundings. So, while I ate more than my fair share of native dishes, I also enjoyed frequenting quick-service eateries whenever and wherever the opportunity arose.

Truthfully, it was not that I intrinsically disliked or did not appreciate traditional Filipino cuisine. To this day some of my favorite local dishes include *pancit canton* (a tossed noodle dish with slices of pork, shrimp, and sausage), chicken *adobo* (a vinegar-marinated meat dish), grilled *bangus* (milkfish), and skewers of cubed pork barbecue. These native delicacies, coupled with a wide array of fresh fruits from across the islands such as *calamansi* (small lime-like citrus fruit), bananas, pineapple, and mangos, expanded my culinary horizons in myriad ways. No, what motivated me to seek out these corporate eateries was that, after consuming so much unfamiliar fare while living in a local household for extended periods of time, there were occasions when I simply wanted to eat something that I immediately recognized or that could in its own small way remind me of home.

Fast food restaurants not only provided a welcome refuge for me during those times when I simply wanted to decompress from the stresses and strains of my overseas fieldwork in somewhat familiar surroundings, they also offered a convenient setting for meeting and interviewing research informants over soft drinks or snacks in a relatively clean and cool environment. The ease and accessibility of these eateries allowed me to pursue my research agenda in various ways.

Plus, I found an entirely practical rationale for regularly consuming so much fast food. Despite a far-from-lavish food budget, my modest purchasing power as a fledgling anthropologist could still go quite some ways at these quick-service eateries, especially after the 1997 Asian financial crisis

severely undercut regional currencies and effectively doubled the value of my U.S. dollars. Paying for meals and snacks at McDonald's and Jollibee quickly became my go-to method for assessing the general value of my American greenbacks against the Philippine peso. In many ways, I came to view it as my very own Big Mac Index, the popular metric introduced by *The Economist* magazine in the 1980s to illustrate how the standard cost of living varied by region vis-à-vis the pricing of this widely available and uniform global product (Ritzer 2004:7).

I suppose I was fortunate that my initial stays in the Philippines in the mid-to-late 1990s coincided with the first real wave of fast food expansion into the country's provincial hinterland. More by circumstance than design, I found myself well situated to ethnographically observe these developments as they unfolded in various ways at the local level. While restaurants of this type first appeared in limited numbers in and around Metro-Manila in the early 1980s, it took the better part of a decade before they gained a foothold in smaller regional markets like those of Dagupan and San Fernando City. Such growth was driven largely by the rising demands of a burgeoning middle class whose increased discretionary income and emerging appetite for the latest consumer products and experiences created new opportunities for fast food companies looking to attract fresh clientele.

As local dining choices in provincial towns and cities noticeably expanded, so too did manifestations of a previously muted global consumer culture. With the Golden Arches and its various national and international competitors carving out an increasingly visible presence locally, the street-level urban fabric of provincial municipalities began to take on a more cosmopolitan character. Regional urban centers, formerly characterized by neighborhoods of mostly drab low- and mid-rise commercial buildings, suddenly featured sleek new dining establishments whose signage, menus, and service formats contrasted markedly with most pre-existing restaurant operations. In just the three short years that separated my summer 1994 fieldwork stint in Dagupan from my yearlong research project in 1997–1998, the city's retail morphology came to include several new fast food outlets; some of which stood over two stories and offered consumer amenities such as children's playgrounds and banquet rooms replete with tract lighting and karaoke systems.

Given my penchant for hanging out at such quick-service eateries, I was able to encounter many of these new fast food offerings right alongside my Filipino counterparts. Looking back some 20 plus years later, it seems readily apparent just how instrumental this experience was in exposing me to new research possibilities. Although I could not really know it at the time, I was already starting to plot out secondary lines of inquiry that extended well beyond the original purview of my initial field efforts. After coming across a *Time* magazine review of James Watson's seminal anthropological edited