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Original Article

Mekeni Abe, tara mangan! (Welcome Friend, let's eat!): A Kapampangan Cultural Exegesis on Meal Fellowship and Hospitality

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Abstract

*This research examines meal fellowship as a gesture of inclusion, emphasizing its cultural expressions within Filipino society, particularly Kapampangan culture. It investigates the interrelationship between food culture, hospitality, and the values of inclusion and accommodation, highlighting how shared meals function as meaningful social and relational practices. Central to the study is the exploration of indigenous Kapampangan categories that embody these values, especially as manifested in Kapampangan gastronomy and the distinctive concept of *abe*, understood as a culturally grounded expression of welcoming and relational openness toward others.*

Employing de Mesa's cultural exegesis, the research analyzes the cultural and religious significance of food-sharing practices and their implications for understanding inclusion and accommodation from a Kapampangan perspective. This approach enables a critical reading of local cultural symbols and practices in dialogue with Judeo-Christian Tradition and current Church teachings. The analysis is anchored in Jesus' practice of table fellowship, interpreted as an inclusive act that creates 'space' for befriending those considered "unwelcome" or "uninvited." Through this lens, meal fellowship emerges as both a cultural and theological resource for fostering inclusive relationships and communities.

*Therefore, this study argues that the Kapampangan concept of *abe*, expressed through meal fellowship, constitutes an indigenous theology of inclusion that resonates deeply with Jesus' table fellowship and Eucharistic living. Overall, the study contributes to theological, cultural, and educational discourse by highlighting the transformative potential of meal fellowship as a lived expression of inclusion rooted in Kapampangan culture.*

Keywords: Accommodation, Fellowship, Friendship, Hospitality, Inclusivity

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Introduction

Hospitality and shared meals have long been recognized as essential dimensions of human interaction across cultures and societies (Heo & Kim, 2024; Šimočková et al., 2022). Beyond sustenance, the practice of sharing food fosters community, belonging, and mutual understanding, cultivating empathy and strengthening interpersonal bonds. The act of "breaking bread" together serves as a primary means through which individuals forge meaningful relationships and build trust. In a contemporary context increasingly shaped by technology and diminished face-to-face interaction, the enduring significance of hospitality and meal sharing warrants sustained scholarly attention. By inviting others to the table, individuals engage in dialogue, exchange ideas, and create shared memories that promote cultural appreciation, acceptance, and tolerance. Consequently, hospitality and shared meals play a vital role in nurturing social connections, advancing cultural exchange, and fostering inclusivity across various spheres of life, including education, the workplace, and broader social interactions. Meal sharing connects people and strengthens relationships (Wallace et al., 2020), functions as a language that transcends borders and cultures (Singh, 2023) and serves as a reminder of humanity's inherent interdependence (The Connection, 2024).

Within the Christian tradition, the practice of meal sharing assumes a profound theological dimension, particularly in the ministry of Jesus. Numerous accounts of Jesus sharing meals with marginalized members of society reveal an intentionally inclusive posture that challenged prevailing social and religious hierarchies. His table fellowship with sinners, tax collectors, and social outcasts underscores His compassion, radical hospitality, and salvific concern for all. These meals functioned not merely as social gatherings but as transformative spaces of acceptance and restoration. As Parihala (2021) argues, Jesus' table fellowship constitutes an invitation to create a "space" for befriending the "unwelcome" and the "uninvited," thereby embodying a praxis of inclusion rooted in divine love.

Against this backdrop, the concept of meal fellowship as a gesture of inclusion presents a compelling area for inquiry, particularly within diverse cultural contexts such as the Filipino setting and, more specifically, Kapampangan culture. This study explores the intricate relationships among food culture, hospitality, and the values of inclusion and accommodation, seeking to identify indigenous categories that embody these principles. Particular attention is given to Kapampangan gastronomy and the concept of *abe* as an expression of welcoming and embracing others. By examining the cultural and religious dimensions of shared meals, this research offers insights into how inclusion and accommodation are understood and practiced from a Kapampangan perspective. The study contributes to the advancement of inclusive values within a religious framework and seeks to inform efforts to resist discrimination and exclusion, especially of those on the margins of society. It argues that the Kapampangan concept of *abe*, expressed through meal fellowship, constitutes an indigenous theology of inclusion that resonates deeply with Jesus' table fellowship and Eucharistic living.

Food Culture and Hospitality of Filipinos

Food and culture are deeply intertwined realities (Aguilar, 2005). As Aguilar observed, "food and culture ... are intimately related and mutually constitutive" (p. 2), underscoring the extent to which cuisine is embedded within specific cultural

contexts. In the Philippines, food functions not merely as sustenance but as a powerful expression of the nation's history, layered influences, and communal orientation. Filipino cuisine reflects a rich fusion of indigenous traditions and external influences shaped by centuries of Spanish, American, and Japanese encounters (Valencia, 2016).

A defining feature of Filipino food culture is its emphasis on communal eating, which embodies the values of hospitality, generosity, and relational closeness. The practice of *salosalo* (eating together) reinforces social bonds among family, friends, and guests, while common greetings such as "*Kumain ka na ba?*" ("Have you eaten yet?") signify care, concern, and the sharing of one's blessings (Penafuerte, 2020). Among Kapampangan, this hospitality is expressed in the invitation "*Tara mangan*" ("Let's eat"), extended even to strangers. Similarly, the tradition of the boodle fight, where food is shared on banana leaves and eaten by hand, symbolically affirms equality, solidarity, and togetherness.

Food also occupies a central place in Filipino celebrations and rituals (de Villa et al., 2022). Social gatherings- from fiestas and birthdays to weddings and religious observances- are marked by the preparation and sharing of traditional dishes such as *adobo*, *sinigang*, *lechon*, and *lumpia*. These meals do more than satisfy physical hunger – they connect participants to collective memory, cultural heritage, and shared identity. In this sense, food functions as a primary medium of welcome and belonging. Moreover, Filipino cuisine remains closely linked to agricultural practices, relying on locally sourced ingredients that reflect respect for the land, environmental consciousness, and sustainable living. Studies on Filipino food practices further indicate that shared meals function as vehicles for intergenerational transmission of values, memory, and identity, reinforcing communal belonging across generations (Leuterio & Vargas, 2021).

Ultimately, food in Filipino culture transcends nourishment; it entails the consumption of history, tradition, and community. It serves as a potent symbol of Filipino identity and a source of cultural pride (Mulder, 2013). Through the sharing of meals, Filipinos affirm relationships, celebrate their heritage, and sustain their cultural legacy. As Penafuerte (2020) aptly noted, "food brings people with a lot of differences together and thus becomes a social lubricant" (para. 3), highlighting its role as a unifying social force. de Mesa (2016) further emphasized that Filipino table fellowship embodies *kagandahang-loob* ("gracious and winsome self," p. 5), affirming its centrality in everyday life and relational ethics.

Kapampangan Concept of 'abe' and its Inclusive Undercurrent

The term *kapwa* is generally regarded as the Filipino concept of "neighbor" among lowland Filipinos (de Mesa, 2016; Mercado, 1975; Miranda, 1988). Kapampangan people employ the word '*abe*' as a related term. The Austronesian Comparative Dictionary (n.d.) defines the noun *abe* as "friend" or "companion," with its verbal form connoting "to accompany" or "to stay together" (<https://acd.cild.org/languages/291>). Classical Kapampangan lexicographical sources likewise affirm the relational depth of *abe* as denoting companionship and shared belonging within the community (Turla, 1999). The term is translated in Tagalog as *kasama* or *kaibigan* (Tagaloglang.com, 2024).

Inclusion, Equality, and Meal Fellowship

The notion of inclusion is generally understood as a process that ensures the meaningful participation of all individuals in social, educational, and community life, regardless of differences. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006) conjecture inclusion as the continuous recognition and removal of barriers to participation, emphasizing that

inclusion extends beyond physical access to a sense of belonging and active engagement. This perspective aligns with UNESCO's (1994) Salamanca Statement, which frames inclusion as a rights-based approach that upholds diversity as a resource rather than a challenge.

Some scholars argue that genuine inclusion requires systemic change rather than isolated interventions. Slee (2011) critiques performative inclusion practices that fail to address structural inequities, highlighting the need for transformative policies and institutional cultures. Empirical studies support this view, showing that inclusive practices are most effective when supported by institutional commitment and community involvement (Forlin, 2010; Artiles, 2011). Collectively, the literature suggests that inclusion is relational and participatory, rooted in social practices that affirm dignity and mutual recognition.

Equality is a foundational concept closely tied to inclusion, though researchers distinguish between formal equality and substantive equality. Rawls' (1971) theory of justice introduces the principle of fair equality of opportunity, arguing that social and institutional arrangements should benefit the least advantaged members of society. Expanding this view, Sen (1992) proposes the capability approach, emphasizing individuals' real freedoms to achieve valued ways of living rather than mere equal distribution of resources.

Young (1990) critiques universalist notions of equality that overlook group-based differences, arguing that true equality requires recognition of social, cultural, and structural inequalities. Applied research reinforces these theoretical insights, particularly in education and community settings. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] (2012) findings indicate that equitable systems intentionally allocate resources and support to marginalized groups to achieve comparable outcomes. Thus, equality is increasingly understood as equity-oriented and relational, focusing on justice, access, and participation rather than sameness.

Theological and Ethical Perspectives on Meal Fellowship

Meal table fellowship has been examined across disciplines as a powerful social practice that shapes inclusion and exclusion. Douglas (1966) explains that food practices symbolize social boundaries, determining who belongs and who does not. Similarly, Fisch (2015) highlights how shared meals historically function as sites where social hierarchies are either reinforced or challenged.

In sociological research, commensality, or eating together, has been shown to foster social bonds, trust, and mutual recognition (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Kaufmann (2010) further argues that shared meals operate as informal mechanisms of social inclusion by creating spaces for interaction across differences. These studies emphasize that meal table fellowship is not a neutral activity but a socially meaningful practice that can cultivate belonging.

Within theological scholarship, meal table fellowship is often portrayed as a radical practice of inclusion and equality. Wright (2012) and Brueggemann (2001) highlight how Jesus' practice of eating with social outcasts disrupted cultural norms and symbolized an alternative social order rooted in justice and hospitality. These practices challenged purity systems and economic hierarchies, redefining community around shared dignity rather than status.

Baker (2015) widens this insight into contemporary faith communities, demonstrating how shared meals serve as embodied practices of welcome, particularly for marginalized individuals. From this perspective, meal table fellowship becomes an ethical action that enacts inclusion and equality rather than merely advocating for them. Such embodied practices of inclusion reflect the Church's

broader ethical call to move beyond abstract affirmations of equality toward concrete actions of welcome, solidarity, and shared life (Boyle, 2020).

Table Fellowship in the Bible

The Gospels narrate how Jesus restored people through preaching, healing, and casting out demons. The Gospel of Luke, however, distinctly emphasizes Jesus' table fellowship and highlights His actions that created acceptance among the people but rejection among the leaders of Israel (Brown, 2024). Luke's Gospel provides numerous accounts of Jesus sharing meals with people from diverse backgrounds. These meals were frequently interpreted as a symbol of acceptance, reconciliation, and the establishment of a new community centered on Jesus.

One example of Jesus' table fellowship is found in Luke 5:27-32 (New Revised Standard Version [NRSV], 1993), where Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners. When the Pharisees criticized him for eating with such individuals, Jesus responded, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). An analysis of Jesus' public ministry confirms this pattern; He was often either a guest or a host at meals and did not discriminate against His table companions. He ate and drank not only with religious people but, significantly, with the poor, outcasts, tax collectors, and those considered sinners. This practice scandalized the Pharisees, leading Jesus to be labeled a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of sinners. Jesus' table fellowship was not merely a social act; it served as the symbol of communion, unity, sharing, and friendship that characterized the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed. It was His way for creating a culture of inclusion, a way of ensuring people belonged and were not marginalized (Meijers, 2019).

Jesus' table fellowship fundamentally challenged the societal norms and religious expectations of His time. By sharing meals with those considered outcasts or marginalized, Jesus demonstrated His mission to reach all people, regardless of their social status or perceived righteousness. Picardal (2023) noted that Jesus' actions conveyed a message of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation, inviting people to turn away from sin and embrace the Kingdom of God.

Furthermore, Jesus' table fellowship foreshadows the Eucharistic meal, which is central to the Catholic faith (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 1994, para. 1407; de Mesa & Cacho, 2012; Foley, 2023, 2024). Biblical scholarship further underscores that early Christian understandings of the Eucharist were inseparable from practices of table fellowship, hospitality, and communal sharing (Velankani, 2012).

At the Last Supper, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples, instituting the Eucharist as a sacrament of his presence and sacrifice. This sacred meal continues to be celebrated, uniting believers in communion with Christ and one another. Jesus commanded, "do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19). When Christians gather around the altar, Jesus' table fellowship with people is spiritually recreated. This bond of friendship strengthens and inspires the community to become more zealous in discipleship (de Mesa & Cacho, 2012). This practice of eating with socially stigmatized individuals aligns with Blomberg's (2009) observation that Jesus' table fellowship functioned as a deliberate enactment of grace, signaling forgiveness, restored dignity, and the reconstitution of community beyond purity boundaries.

The Eucharist

Traditionally, the Last Supper served as the primary reference point for understanding the Eucharist. However, Foley (2024) argued that Jesus' overall meal

fellowship with people provides a more comprehensive basis. The table ministry of Jesus, particularly with the "unwelcomed," ostracized, "sidelined," and those in the "peripheries" – individuals frequently denied "space" in society – offers a superior perspective of the Eucharistic meal. This understanding parallels contemporary theological reflections that describe everyday shared meals as an "Eucharist of the ordinary," where communion, gratitude, and mutual care are enacted in daily life beyond liturgical settings (O'Shaughnessy, 2020).

The Last Supper narratives, in contrast, mark only a limited aspect of the developing Eucharistic tradition (Foley, 2024). This ubiquitous table ministry highlights the core of Eucharistic living as being primarily about reconciliation, inclusivity, and mission, signifying a close connection between God and humanity (Angiola, 2021). Conversely, Meng (2023) conjectured that the Eucharist as communion is a "relationship of mutual participation between Christ and the faithful, a relationship that suggests 'giving' and receiving" (p. 2). Similarly, Feenstra (2017) noted that the Eucharist is a remembrance that makes Christ's sacrifice present to enable participants to live "a spirit-empowered life of discipleship" (para. 4). Pope John Paul II (2003) emphasized that the Eucharist builds the Church as a "communion" rooted in Christ's self-giving love, forming believers into a community of shared life and mutual responsibility.

In its Greek origin, the word Eucharist (eucharistia) signifies gratitude—suggesting that the assembly is a gathering in gratefulness to God's benevolence, embodied in Jesus (de Mesa & Cacho, 2012). Pilario (2023) characterizes the Eucharist as "a shared meal and a shared life" (para. 5), connoting a simple communal human meal. God's enduring love persists through the various manifestations of His presence in Christian life and festivities. Christians publicly proclaim God's benevolence with humility when they convene to honor God's union with them.

de Mesa and Cacho (2012) noted that Filipinos frequently show appreciation to individuals by acknowledging their graciousness, which stems from the individual's kindness. The Eucharist also serves as a celebration of gratitude for God's generosity and action, enabling the Christian community to cultivate solidarity and common concern. This understanding resonates with the Catechism for Filipino Catholics, which presents the Eucharist as both a sacramental celebration and a way of life that calls Filipino Christians to communion, solidarity, and concern for the poor within concrete cultural contexts (Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines [CBCP], 2005).

Intersection of Inclusion, Equality, and Meal Table Fellowship

The literature increasingly recognizes meal table fellowship as a concrete intersection of inclusion and equality. Wilk (2006) illustrates how everyday food practices can either reproduce inequality or create opportunities for solidarity, depending on how power and access are negotiated. Paxson (2010) similarly shows that food-sharing practices reflect broader social values and can become tools for community-building when intentionally inclusive.

Collectively, these studies suggest that meal table fellowship functions as both a symbolic and practical expression of inclusion and equality. Shared meals provide relational spaces where differences are acknowledged, hierarchies are softened, and communal belonging is experienced. However, the literature also reveals a gap in empirical research explicitly linking meal table fellowship to structured inclusion outcomes, indicating a need for further study.

Synthesis

For Filipinos, food is more than a means of sustenance; it is a way of bonding with people and sharing one's blessings. Food reflects the values, traditions, and history of a community. Table fellowship among Filipinos is a channel for showing 'kagandahang loob' (winsome goodness) and is therefore a significant part of Filipino everyday life. Jesus used 'meal sharing' as a medium for connecting to people. The meals He shared with different individuals, especially the underprivileged, were a manifestation of His esteemed attitude and gesture toward inclusion.

The reviewed literature establishes that inclusion and equality are relational, justice-oriented concepts that require intentional practices to be realized. Meal table fellowship emerges as a significant yet underexplored practice through which inclusion and equality can be embodied in everyday community life. While theoretical and theological perspectives strongly affirm its transformative potential, there remains limited empirical research examining meal table fellowship as a systematic approach to fostering inclusion and equality. This gap underscores the relevance of the present study.

Conceptual Framework

The study explores the vibrant food culture and hospitality of the Kapampangan in relation to Jesus' inclusive gesture of sharing meals with people from all levels of society. The research further examines the concept of '*abe*,' a Kapampangan term for "friend" or "companion" suggesting the Kapampangan's inherent friendly and hospitable culture. Moreover, the rich and diverse food culture of the Kapampangan implies an underlying inclusive ethos.

Employing de Mesa's cultural exegesis, the research analyzes the cultural and religious significance of food-sharing practices and their implications for understanding inclusion and accommodation from a Kapampangan perspective. This approach enables a critical reading of local cultural symbols and practices in dialogue with Judeo-Christian Tradition and current Church teachings. The analysis is anchored in Jesus' practice of table fellowship, interpreted as an inclusive act that creates 'space' for befriending those considered "unwelcome" or "uninvited." Through this lens, meal fellowship emerges as both a cultural and theological resource for fostering inclusive relationships and communities. Figure 1 presents the conceptual diagram of the study.

de Mesa's Thematic Cultural Exegesis (TCE) is defined as "the systematic process of bringing into explicit awareness and orderly categorization (i.e., to thematize) the implicit cultural meanings arising from a tradition of experiences that are embodied in specific cultural elements or aspects within the framework of culture as an integrated system" (de Mesa, 2016, p. 104). Cultural exegesis constitutes an interpretive activity conducted from a given perspective or context. Interpretation, which starts with dynamic equivalence translation, is always aimed at understanding from a particular standpoint (de Mesa, 2016). TCE is a cultural analysis intended to make the implicit cultural meanings embodied in specific cultural elements understandable or meaningful. de Mesa posited that the complexity of any culture necessitates drawing out aspects or dimensions of cultural elements related to the issue, concern, or question requiring a Christian response. Without this thematic approach, the researcher might be overwhelmed by a profusion of data. A productive way to organize data, therefore, is through thematization or categorization into themes or aspects. The themes drawn from the culture can serve as points of departure for cultural analysis. According to de Mesa (2016), "themes from the culture may revolve around important aspects of the indigenous worldview" (p. 109).

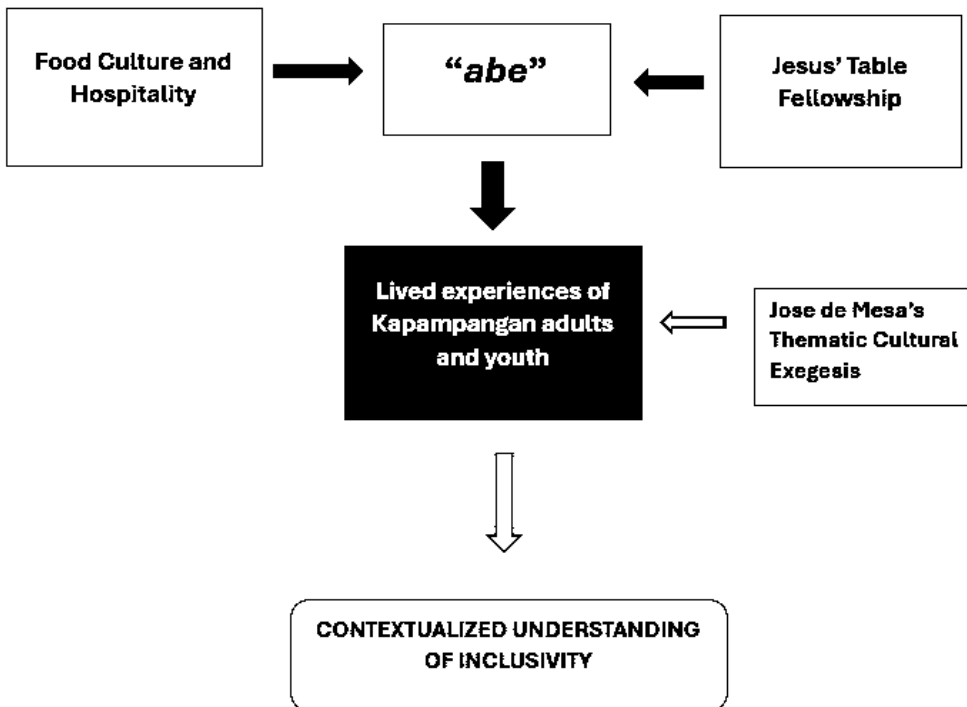


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of the study

However, the issue, concern, or question dictates the particular theme or set of themes to be used. The starting themes may lead to further analysis, revealing a new theme, a combination of themes, further explanation, modification, or even relinquishment of the theme in favor of something more appropriate. Thus, TCE is considered an ongoing task within the inculturation process (de Mesa, 2016). The cultural analysis focused on themes and cultural elements related to the issues of inclusivity and hospitality in the Kapampangan culture and the concept of *abe*, seeking to generate an appropriate Christian response. A respectful stance toward the culture guided the researchers to identify the positive resources and potential of the culture, leading to the discovery of aspects or elements of the local culture relevant to the situation. At this stage, de Mesa (2016) recommended that a cultural analysis is essential. The central issue addressed is how meal sharing and inclusivity are understood in the common language and practices of the Kapampangan people. The cultural exegesis also delved into the intricate use of *abe* in conversations among Kapampangan individuals. The determination of this core issue directed the researchers' attention to the relevant cultural aspects. Specifically, the term *abe* was examined using linguistic analysis and was made to interact with existing Western and/or Church teachings on inclusivity and accommodation. Using culture as a source for interpretation, the study sought to discover the cultural relevance of Church or Western teachings regarding inclusion and meal sharing. This respectful and critical dialogue was intended to bring out the strengths of each pole, extracting the meaning embedded in the culture while making the objective meaning relevant to the culture encountering it.

At the final stage of the analytical process, a tentative faith interpretation emerged from the dialectical interaction of the two poles. This interpretation was

considered tentative, as de Mesa conjectured, because no one can claim a definitive answer to the issue under hermeneutical reflection. The culturally intelligible interpretation resulted from the mutual dialogue between the culture and the current Church teachings on inclusivity.

Objectives of the Study

The current research attempted to explore the relationship between the intricate food culture and hospitality of the Kapampangan and the inclusive attitude of Jesus Christ towards outcasts, which is evident in his table fellowship with them. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How were the values of meal sharing and hospitality interpreted by Kapampangan adults and youth?
2. How was the concept of '*abe*' explained in the culture of the Kapampangan? In what way was this related to inclusivity?
3. In what way was the table fellowship of Jesus with the outcasts interpreted in the culture of the Kapampangan?

Significance of the Study

With the increasing awareness and promotion of equality and diversity in society, people are becoming sensitive to discrimination and oppression. The study is significant because it supports the advocacy in advancing inclusivity in society. Using the Kapampangan culture as a lens, the study intends to contribute by culturally understanding the notion of inclusivity and accommodation. With Jesus Christ as model, the study pursues to further the preferment of inclusion in society from a cultural perspective. In this regard, the study complements recent scholarship on inclusion in Catholic educational contexts, which emphasizes the importance of culturally resonant practices of welcome and belonging in translating Church teachings into lived institutional realities (Bonfiglio & Kroh, 2020).

Methodology

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to examine the flamboyant food culture and hospitality of the Kapampangan people in relation to Jesus' table fellowship. Phenomenology seeks to describe and interpret how individuals experience a particular event or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, selected Kapampangan adults and youth participated in in-depth interviews to explore their worldviews and lived experiences concerning food culture, hospitality, and the Kapampangan concept of *abe*. This phenomenological orientation aligns with descriptive approaches that aim to articulate participants' lived meanings as they are experienced, prior to theoretical abstraction or normative judgment (Jackson et al., 2018).

Philosophical Underpinning

The study hinges on Jose de Mesa's Inculturated Model of doing theology. This paradigm focuses on the cultural approach to doing theology - where culture is a starting point and is made to interact with Scripture and Tradition. A cultural approach to local experiences, according to de Mesa (2016; 2003), has, at least, become recognized as a legitimate and fruitful way of doing theology. This approach is underpinned by 'Hermeneutics of Appreciation' philosophy. In line with de Mesa (2016), a hermeneutics of appreciation does not render a culture under investigation

as ‘inferior’ nor is it subjected to ‘suspicion’ (as opposed to Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion). While hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to unmask power, ideology, or domination within texts and cultures (Felski, 2011), de Mesa’s hermeneutics of appreciation foregrounds a posture of respect that allows the positive moral and theological resources of culture to emerge. Culture here becomes a target and mutual yet critically dialogues with the Judeo-Christian Tradition (JCT) and current Church teachings.

de Mesa (2003) argues that to understand culture from within is to explore language, which is its ‘closest door.’ The community’s language is an opulent source of getting into the depths of the people’s psyche, particularly their shared experiences and worldviews (Bowe, 1998). de Mesa’s Hermeneutics of Appreciation recognizes both the positive and the negative aspects of culture, which are subjected to thematic exegesis. The culture that is being explored is appreciated and not held in suspicion, since it is through the culture or experiences of the people that the Good News of Jesus Christ becomes more relevant and meaningful. The culture does not replace the Gospel but, in its mutual interaction with JCT, is positively transformed. People, therefore, as argued by de Mesa, “are forced to re-think and re-evaluate their presently held models of interpretations” (2016, p. 104).

The schematic description of doing theology as inculturation begins with the issues, questions, and concerns of people. de Mesa lays out the methodological procedure of hermeneutics of appreciation. The positive resources of the culture have to be emphasized to interpret both the situation and the Faith tradition. Consistent with de Mesa (2003) emphasizing the schematic nature of the procedures' explanation is important to highlight the inherent possibilities. A careful analysis of both the culture and JCT will provide a clearer and more inclusive understanding.

de Mesa highlights three significant stages in his theological process:

1. First Stage: Issues, questions, and concerns
2. Second Stage: Respectful and critical correlation between culture and Judeo-Christian Tradition
3. Third Stage: New tentative faith interpretation

In the first stage (issues, questions, and concerns), attention is drawn into the situation that is confronted with. This, de Mesa posits is the starting point in doing theology, i.e., the culture that is being brought into reflection and analysis. It is imperative to bear in mind the foci of both cultural and social analyses in figuring out the real issue, question, and concern. The study at hand is an attempt to explore the food culture and hospitality of the Kapampangan and their concept of ‘*abe*.’ A respectful stance towards the culture induces one to the positive resources and potential of the culture. This leads to discovering those aspects or elements of the indigenous culture which have or can have bearing on the situation. The determination of the issue, question, or concern to be dealt with calls one’s attention, directs, alerts, and sensitizes the relevant aspects or elements of the culture. At this stage, de Mesa recommends that a cultural analysis is essential. The transition from the first to the second stage happens when the aspects or elements of the culture which are relevant to the issue, question or concern, call and direct one’s attention and alert and sensitize the aspects or elements of the Judeo-Christian Tradition which have a bearing on both the issue, question, or concern and the culture.

The second stage is the actual respectful and critical correlating of the cultural aspects in question with the Judeo-Christian Tradition. Using the relevant aspects of the culture as source we are able to discern and discover the riches and strengths of the Judeo-Christian Tradition in relation to the context. In line with de Mesa, the relevance of the Faith to the here and now is implicit in the cultural context to which

the Faith is experienced. Culture reveals the significance of the faith- making it more meaningful and relevant. In this cultural interpretation of the Tradition the meaning of the gospel in the understanding of the people is deepened, particularly in understanding the notion of inclusivity as taught by Jesus Christ, and as understood by the Kapampangan. The biblical teaching on ‘meal fellowship’ can be understood from the indigenous experience of the Filipino, particularly of the Kapampangan people. How the Kapampangan use of the local term in ordinary speech or in conversations, in literature, and dealings with people will reveal the relevance of the Christian Faith for the local people.

de Mesa theorized that culture takes a critical posture towards Tradition. It does not only allow one to discover the riches and strengths of this tradition. Within the process, culture as a source gives the capacity to recognize and confront the limitations or weaknesses of the present cultural and historical quintessence of this Tradition. For that reason, de Mesa conjectured that in this mutual interaction, change is not only on the side of the culture nor criticism only from the side of Tradition (de Mesa, 2016; 2003;). This respectful engagement with culture resonates with Smith’s (1999) call for decolonizing methodologies that privilege indigenous knowledge systems and local epistemologies rather than imposing external interpretive frameworks.

In the second stage of the theological process, the Tradition, i.e., Judeo-Christian Tradition or JCT becomes the basis for interpreting the culture. This allows us to discover the riches and the strengths of the culture and indeed is a way of augmenting the cultural identity of the people. The culture is not only the source but also becomes the focus of the respectful and critical stance of the Tradition when the tradition is used as source to construe the relevant cultural aspects. This Tradition, which according to de Mesa, is the Tradition of the experiences inclusivity must be appropriated culturally, and this can only be done through the continuous interaction or dialogue with the culture itself.

The result of the interaction between culture and Judeo-Christian Tradition is the ‘New tentative faith interpretation.’ This is now the third stage in the theological process. As the two poles (Culture and Tradition) interact, a new tentative faith interpretation emerges. The issues, questions, and concerns which triggered the theological process are now addressed- resulting to a new tentative faith interpretation. At this stage there is now ‘a culturally intelligible theological interpretation.’ The new theological reflection is tentative, according to de Mesa because there is no definitive answer as regards the issues, questions, and concerns being addressed. The continuous dialogue with the situation requires an on-going theological reflection. The process then is unremitting since even the tentative result could easily be the achievement of already many dynamic interactions between the poles (de Mesa, 2016).

de Mesa (2003) noted that, “a genuinely inculturated theology arises from life and is geared towards the enrichment of life” (p.158). This implies that the theological reflection should hopefully have an impact on the actual situation- wherein the goal is to enrich the culture that is being interpreted using the Judeo-Christian Tradition as a source for the interpretation. However, de Mesa reminds us that the task and responsibility of inculturation is not conducted by theologians alone, it is a collaborative advocacy of the local church and the community.

At this stage of the process the new tentative theological reflection resulting from the interaction between the two poles can utilize the resources of both culture and Tradition in addressing the “imperatives” arising from the situation by ‘shedding light’ on it and critically but respectfully confronting it.

Participants and Setting

The target respondents for the study are adults (ages 40 and above) and youth (ages 18 – 30 years old) from selected towns in Pampanga. They were inquired of their knowledge and experiences of Kapampangan food culture and hospitality and their notions of '*abe*,' a term which connotes 'friend' or 'companion.' The research participants were probed of their perceptions about inclusivity, their experiences of discrimination, and how these experiences may be understood in the context of the Kapampangan culture. The youth respondents are ages 18 – 30 years old (National Youth Commission, NYC, RA 8044, Section 2).

The respondents were selected using purposive sampling technique. Around 10 Kapampangan (five adults [ages 40 and above] and five youth [18-30 years old]) coming from selected towns in Pampanga were recruited as participants in the study. The respondents were subjected to an in-depth interview to extract their notions of meal sharing and their concept of '*abe*.' Data from the interview were collated and thematized and were made to interact with current Church teachings on inclusivity and accommodation. The qualitative insights from the sources (interview and relevant literature) were analyzed using Jose de Mesa's thematic cultural exegesis (TCE). The resulting 'new faith interpretation' was utilized in re-appropriating the concept of inclusivity using Jesus Christ as model for the Kapampangan audience.

Instrument

This study utilized a self-created semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers to elicit a comprehensive description from the participants regarding their perspectives on meal sharing and their understanding of '*abe*.' To ensure the validity of the tools, a pilot test was conducted before gathering data. A one-on-one in-depth interview is preferred to facilitate open conversation and acquire deeper insights and understanding from the participants regarding their views on meal sharing and the concept of '*abe*'. This approach also allows for uncovering the participants' authentic thoughts without the influence of group dynamics present in focus group discussions.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through individual in-depth interviews during which participants were inquired about their availability. This ensures that the interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for them. All participants were given information about the study's purpose, their voluntary involvement, and the confidentiality of their responses. Moreover, they have the option to withdraw from the interview at any point if they feel it is necessary, in line with ethical research practices, without causing any disruption to the study. Overall, the data collection process prioritized the careful acquisition of reliable and valid data for the analysis and interpretation of findings.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data that were drawn from the in-depth interview of selected Kapampangan adults and youth were content analyzed using de Mesa's TCE as an analytical framework. Data that were collected from the lived experiences and worldviews of the respondents were thematized and were subjected to a cultural exegesis. Hermeneutical analysis, as employed in this study, enables a dialogical movement between lived experience and interpretive meaning, consistent with qualitative traditions that treat understanding as relational and contextually situated (McCaffrey et al., 2012). de Mesa's TCE follows a three-stage process (Please refer to

Conceptual Framework and Philosophical Underpinning) in analyzing the thematized responses, which are made to interact or dialogue with JCT and current teachings of the Catholic Church on inclusivity and meal fellowship. The issues, questions, and concerns which triggered the theological process are now addressed- resulting to a new tentative faith interpretation. At this stage there is now ‘a culturally intelligible theological interpretation.’ At this stage of the process the new tentative theological reflection resulting from the interaction between the two poles can utilize the resources of both culture and Tradition in addressing the “imperatives” arising from the situation by ‘shedding light’ on it and critically but respectfully confronting it.

Establishing Trustworthiness

The study followed the four trustworthiness criteria as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985, in Nowell et al., 2017) to guarantee the strength of data analysis obtained from the individual in-depth interview. These criteria consist of: (a) credibility, which pertains to the trustworthiness of the study's findings; (b) dependability, indicating the stability and trustworthiness of the results; (c) confirmability, guaranteeing that the analysis relies only on the participants' testimonies and not on the researchers' biased views; and (d) transferability, ensuring that the research findings can be relevant to various settings, will be upheld throughout the study.

Ethical Considerations

In the entire research processes, it is the utmost priority of the researchers to secure the participants confidentiality and anonymity to avoid ethical transgression. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, the researchers will follow the Data Privacy Act of 2012. The researchers will safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants using informed consent prior to data collection that clearly outlines the purpose and method of the study. All data provided by the participants were treated with utmost confidentiality, responses of the participants were given codes or pseudonyms instead of using their real names in the research materials to ascertain anonymity. Data collected were stored in a protected electronic file to prevent breaches of confidentiality. Participation in the study is purely voluntary, and no coercion was made for the respondents to participate. The researchers informed the participants that they can withdraw anytime during the duration of the study. Any changes to the research protocols that may impact the confidentiality were communicated promptly to the participants. This commitment to ethical standard will ascertain protection of the rights and well-being of the research subjects and at the same time enhances the validity of the research findings.

Results and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the study's findings by exploring how shared food carries cultural and religious meaning within the Kapampangan context, and how these meanings shape practices of inclusion and accommodation. The results show that sharing meals is more than a social activity- it also serves as a deeply theological expression of hospitality, solidarity, and belonging, especially for those at the margins of society. Central to this is the Kapampangan concept of *abe*, which comes to life through the act of eating together. This idea functions as an indigenous theology of inclusion that echoes Jesus' own table fellowship and Eucharistic way of life, offering a culturally grounded lens for understanding what it means to build an inclusive community.

Some adult and youth respondents (Table 1, N=10) from Pampanga, Philippines were recruited to participate in an in-depth interview. Table 1 shows the

distribution of the participants in terms of age, gender, marital status, and religious affiliation.

The respondents come from age groups 18-30 years old for the youth and 40 years old and above for the adult participants. The youth respondents are all single while adults are mostly married (F=8, 30%). In terms of gender, the informants are mostly male (60%) for the adults while 50% for the youth. The youth respondents are all Catholics (100%) while seven (70%) of adult participants are Catholic. The other three remaining respondents belonged to other religious affiliations (Baptist F=1, Born Again F=1, Spiritual F=1).

Table 1. Profile of the Respondents (N=10)

Variable	Category	Adult		Youth	
		f	%	f	%
Gender	Male	6	60	5	50
	Female	4	40	5	50
Marital Status	Single	2	20	10	100
	Married	8	80	0	0
Religious Affiliation	Roman Catholic	7	70	10	100
	Baptist	1	10	0	0
	Born Again	1	10	0	0
	Spiritual	1	10	0	0
Age Group	18-30 years old			5	50
	40 years old and above	5	50		

How Kapampangan people express their hospitality

The respondents were queried about their perceptions regarding Kapampangan expressions of hospitality. Table 2 below shows the results of their responses.

In Table 2, both adults and youth informants responded the ‘sharing of food’ or ‘meal sharing’ as a predominant Kapampangan expression of hospitality. Two adult respondents shared that when a guest is received in typical Kapampangan households, the guest is usually brought directly to the kitchen and is offered food. Another adult informant said that most old Kapampangan houses have bigger kitchen than the sala or ‘receiving room,’ which is an indication that Kapampangan people spend most of their family gatherings in the kitchen through meal fellowships. Food here appears as a way of bonding relationships.

Table 2. Kapampangan Expressions of Hospitality

Question	Responses	
How do Kapampangan express their hospitality	Adults	Youth
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through sharing of food (F=5) • Bringing the invited guest/s directly to the kitchen instead to the sala; receive more their guests in the kitchen (F=2). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through preparing and sharing of delicious food (F=5) • Meal sharing (F=5)

Kapampangan understanding of ‘Abe’

The research participants were inquired about their understanding of the Kapampangan concept of ‘abe.’ Table 3 below indicates the results of their responses.

Table 3. Kapampangan Understanding of ‘Abe’

Question	Responses	
	Adults	Youth
What is your personal understanding of the term ‘abe?’	<p><i>Abe</i> means:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friend (F=5) • Companion (<i>kasama</i>) (F=5) • Shared inner self (more than just an ‘other’) (F=1) 	<p><i>Abe</i> means:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friend (F=5) • Someone who values you (F=2) • Not an ‘other’ (F=1)

Majority of the respondents identified ‘abe’ with friend or companion. An adult informant shared that *abe* is a ‘shared inner self’ who is more than just an ‘other’ person, while a youth respondent shares the same understanding of ‘abe’ as being not an ‘other’ (*hindi siya iba*).

Connotations of ‘Mekeni *abe, tara mangan!*’ (Welcome friend, let’s eat!)

The Kapampangan sentence, ‘*Mekeni *abe, tara mangan!**,’ which means ‘Welcome friend, let’s eat!’ was inquired of its connotation among the respondents. Table 4 below indicates their responses.

Table 4. Connotations of ‘*Mekeni *abe, tara mangan!**’ (Welcome friend, let’s eat!)

Question	Responses	
	Adults	Youth
What is your personal understanding of ‘ <i>Mekeni <i>abe, tara mangan!</i></i> ’?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A way of welcoming people (F=5) • Inviting people to eat is an expressing of hospitality and accommodation (F=5) • An invitation to forge a meaningful and healthy relationship (F=3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It shows how welcoming and friendly Kapampangan people are (F=4) • A warm and friendly invitation (F=5) • A special way of inviting people, including strangers (F=3)

Among adults, ‘*Mekeni *abe, tara mangan!**’ connotes a way of inviting and welcoming people (F=5). Three of the adult respondents said that this Kapampangan sentence implies an invitation to forge a healthy and meaningful relationship. Conversely, the youth informants said that the sentence indicates how friendly and welcoming Kapampangan people are (F4). All (F=5) youth respondents said that it is a warm and friendly way of welcoming people. About three (F=3, 60%) youth informants noted that ‘*Mekeni *abe!**’ connotes also inviting strangers.

How Kapampangan food culture related to table fellowship

The respondents were further asked about the relationship between Kapampangan food culture and table fellowship. Table 5 presents a summary of their responses.

Table 5. Relationship between Kapampangan food culture and table fellowship

Question	Responses	
	Adults	Youth
How is Kapampangan food culture related to table fellowship?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A means of sharing one’s blessings to others (F=5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a means of giving connection and the sense of love and comfort to those who are involved (F=5).

-
- Food is a way of binding relationships in the Kapampangan sense (F=3)
 - Food culture is more than just about culinary but a way of bonding people (f=5)
 - food becomes an occasion not just for a gastronomic experience but a sharing of meal and table fellowship. It's not just about taking in food but nourishing relationships and connections. (F=3)
 - A way of showing care (F=5)
 - Food for the Kapampangan is not just a means for sustenance but a way of connecting with others (F=5)
 - It is the Kapampangan way of sharing their blessings (F=3).
-

The qualitative findings indicate a strong thematic convergence between adult and youth participants regarding the relationship between Kapampangan food culture and table fellowship. Among adults, the most frequently cited themes (F=5) emphasize food as a means of sharing one's blessings and as a practice that goes beyond culinary experience to foster social bonding and communal relationships, suggesting a view of meals as relational rather than merely functional. Related responses (F=3) further describe food as an occasion for binding relationships and nurturing interpersonal connections through shared meals. Youth responses similarly reflect high-frequency themes (F=5) that frame food as a source of connection, care, love, and comfort, highlighting its role in cultivating relational intimacy and belonging. Further youth responses (F=3) highlight food as a way of sharing blessings, mirroring adult perspectives. Taken together, these recurring themes across age groups indicate that table fellowship in Kapampangan culture operates as a deeply relational practice rooted in generosity, care, and mutual connection, reflecting a shared cultural logic that affirms inclusion and communal solidarity.

The Concept of 'Abe' in Context: A Cultural Exegesis

Following de Mesa's method, the exegetical process begins with determination of the issue, concern, and question to be dealt with. At this stage, the lived experiences of selected adult and youth respondents regarding the concept of *abe* in relation to food culture and hospitality, and table fellowship are explored and analyzed.

Stage 1: Determination of the issue, concern, question

Some Kapampangan adults and youth were asked to share their personal experiences and understandings of the concept of *abe*, particularly in relation to Kapampangan food culture and hospitality. Adult participants commonly described *abe* as meaning "friend" or "companion" (see Table 3). Among the youth informants, *abe* was articulated as referring to "someone who gives you value" and not an "other" (see Table 3). Similar to the adults, the youth participants also associated *abe* with the notion of "friend."

Across the interviews, respondents consistently expressed that being addressed as *abe* signifies inclusion rather than exclusion. Participants explained that the term conveys that one is not regarded as a stranger or an insignificant person, but rather as a "fellow human being" (*kaparang tau*). Both adult and youth participants emphasized that *abe* denotes a person who is treated as a companion. One adult participant described *abe* as implying a "shared self," rather than simply an "other." In this sense, when *abe* is used as a form of greeting within the Kapampangan context,

it positions the addressee as *kayabe*—someone recognized as belonging to the family or the broader community.

According to the *Austronesian Comparative Dictionary*, *abe* is a Kapampangan term that signifies “companion,” “friend,” or “spouse.” When used as a verb, it conveys the meanings “to live or stay together” and/or “to accompany.” These definitions are echoed in the works of Forman (2019), Samson (2011), and Bergano (2007). A related term derived from *abe* is *pamakiyabe*, which refers to “the skill of making and keeping friends” (Forman, 2019, p. 16). As demonstrated in everyday speech, the layered meanings of *abe* emerge most clearly when the term is used in conversation. Table 6 illustrates selected examples of *abe* as it appears in participants’ narratives.

Table 6. Usage of Abe in Conversations

Kapampangan	Tagalog	English
<i>Abe abe bang mas matibe!</i>	<i>Sama sama para mas matibay!</i>	Together we become stronger!
<i>Abe abe, saup saup bang mibangun tamu!</i>	<i>Sama sama, tulong tulong para tayo ay makabangon!</i>	Let us help each other so that we can rise up together!
<i>Eka magmalun abe ko!</i>	<i>Huwag kang malungot kaibigan ko</i>	Don’t lose heart my friend!
<i>Mekeni abe ko malaus ka!</i>	<i>Halika kaibigan ko, tuloy ka!</i>	Come here my friend, you’re welcome!

The richness of *abe* as an inclusive concept becomes most evident in its everyday usage, particularly in conversational contexts. For example, the expression “*Abe abe, saup saup bang mibangun tamu!*” (“Let us help one another so that we may rise together”) conveys *abe* as referring to everyone rather than to a specific individual or group. In this sense, the term is neither gendered nor exclusive; instead, it is inherently inclusive and culturally sensitive. Within the Kapampangan worldview, *abe* signifies the active involvement of all in the pursuit of a shared goal. In another common usage, “*Mekeni abe ko, malaus ka!*” (“Come here, my friend, you’re welcome”), *abe* denotes a person who is not treated as an “other” but as a friend—someone already considered part of the family or community. To address someone as *abe* is to position them not as an outsider but as a *kasama* (companion or fellow member). As reflected in the responses of both adult and youth participants (see Table 4), being addressed as *abe* is widely understood as a cordial and welcoming gesture, especially toward newcomers. Moreover, an adult informant (see Table 3) described *abe* as a “shared inner self,” suggesting that the act of greeting involves an intentional sharing of one’s self with another. This layered understanding highlights *abe* not merely as a term of address, but as a relational practice that embodies hospitality, mutual recognition, and inclusive belonging.

***Abe*, food, and table fellowship**

Both adult and youth respondents (see Table 4) described the use of *abe* in meal invitations as a common and meaningful practice among Kapampangan people, particularly in rural areas. In participants’ lived experience, expressions such as “*Mekeni abe, tara mangan!*” (Come, friend, let’s eat!) were not simply procedural invitations but embodied acts of welcome that affirmed belonging and relational closeness. Being invited to dine with the term *abe* was experienced as a profound expression of Kapampangan hospitality, one that positions the addressee within a shared lifeworld rather than as an outsider. This resonates with phenomenological insights that understand shared meals not merely as acts of consumption, but as relational encounters that create and sustain social bonds (see Fischler, 2011; Lund & Mair, 2021).

As shown in Table 5, adult respondents described Kapampangan food culture as a way of bringing people together, where meal sharing and table fellowship nurture meaningful interpersonal connections. Such accounts align with research in the social sciences that conceptualizes commensality (the practice of eating together) as a culturally salient way of establishing social communion, shared identity, and group cohesion (Lund & Mair, 2021). Similarly, youth informants emphasized that food culture in Pampanga functions as an expression of kindness and care, highlighting how sharing food becomes a tangible experience of connecting with others and sharing one's blessings. In this way, eating together with *abe* exemplifies how everyday practices of hospitality are experienced as deeply relational and intersubjective within Kapampangan culture.

Stage 2: Respectful and critical correlation between culture and Current Church Teachings and Western Notions

Using relevant aspects of the culture as source we are able to discern and discover the richness and strengths of the Judeo-Christian Tradition in relation to the local context. At this stage the issue, concern, or question is made to interact, mutually and critically, with current Catholic Church and Biblical teachings on inclusion and table fellowship. Furthermore, select Western notions on inclusion and diversity are investigated and brought into dialogue with the Kapampangan notion of inclusivity, food culture, and the concept of *abe*.

The closest door to any culture is through a community's language (Karpiuk, 2018; de Mesa, 2016). A community's linguistic landscape provides access to the depth of the people's attitudes, values, and aspirations. The concept of *abe* in the Kapampangan spoken language, which expresses a welcoming attitude toward people, manifests the Kapampangan indigenous culture of inclusion and hospitality. The term's existence in the language reveals the people's values and attitudes about treating people – including strangers, as friends. The study's informants cited the use of the term in referring to 'fellow human' (*kaparang tau*) as the essential meaning of *abe* (see Table 3). Moreover, the term is addressed not only to fellow Kapampangan but to everyone, including visitors to the province. Therefore, there is no indication of 'othering' in *abe*. The Ethics Centre (2020) defines 'othering' as "turning fellow humans into abstract entities we can distance ourselves from or treat as less-than-human" (para. 5). Within *abe* the 'other' person is not treated as an 'other' but a person to whom oneself is shared, and therefore a '*kapwa*' (fellow human) not merely a neighbor. Miranda (in Keh, 2020) argued that the Western concept of neighbor is not synonymous with the Filipino concept of *kapwa* because someone considered a neighbor in the Filipino sense is not regarded as an "other" in the Western sense. *Kapwa* is therefore not an outsider (Miranda, 1992, as cited in Keh, 2020, p. 102).

In the Jewish culture, the term for neighbor is '*re'a*' which connotes 'anyone who is a fellow human and who is created by God' (Friedman, 2024). Contrary to the arguments of various biblical interpreters, Friedman (2024), a professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Georgia and Katzin Professor of Jewish Civilization Emeritus at the University of California, San Diego, USA, contended that the term *re'a* does not refer only to "fellow Jew or Israelite." In fact, *re'a* even includes "aliens" or "foreigners" who are non-Jews. *Re'a* first appears in the Bible in the story of the Tower of Babylon, the origin narrative of various languages and nations where every human being on the planet is involved: "And they said each to his *re'a* ..." (Genesis 11:3). In this context, there are no group distinctions; the term refers to all people.

Conversely, in one instance in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, a Samaritan was unfortunately not treated as *re'a* but as an outsider by the

Jewish audience. This parable of the Good Samaritan demonstrates the command to love one's neighbor by showing compassion and mercy to a wounded person, regardless of differences. This parable is referenced in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1932), which highlights the call to love beyond social and cultural boundaries. Several accounts of Jesus sharing meals with people from diverse backgrounds are found in Luke. These meals were often seen as a symbol of acceptance, reconciliation, and the establishment of a new community centered around Jesus. Brown (2024) noted that the Gospel of Luke distinctly emphasizes Jesus' table fellowship, highlighting actions that created acceptance among the people and rejection among the leaders of Israel. One example is found in Luke 5:27-32 (New Revised Standard Version [NRSV], 1993), where Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners who were typically despised in Jewish society and not treated as *re'a*. According to Parihala (2021), the conflict between the affluent and the impoverished, the powerful and the vulnerable, and the rulers and the marginalized formed the main backdrop of Luke's Gospel (Lk 4:18-19). Picardal (2023) argued that Jesus' table fellowship with the "unwelcome" was not solely due to his enjoyment of food, drink, and celebration. It denoted unity, sharing, and friendship that outlined the kingdom of God that Jesus aimed to proclaim and establish.

Exclusion and discrimination often emanate from a misconception of freedom, which frequently violates the freedom of others. This vision aligns with Pope Paul VI's insistence that authentic freedom must mature into solidarity, recognizing every person as a brother or sister rather than a rival or threat (Paul VI, 1971). Pope Paul VI emphasized that the mistaken understanding of freedom, which commonly manifests as a demand for independence by resisting the freedom of others, should evolve into its truest human essence: to engage and dedicate itself to fostering dynamic and experiential solidarity (*Octogesima Adveniens*, para. 47). Pope Francis, in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel), renounced "an economy of exclusion" which turns human beings into commodities that can be discarded (*Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 53). He urged Catholic Christians to relinquish a culture that excludes "others" and instead highlight and develop a culture of inclusion that accommodates fellow humans. The commandment to love one's neighbor is a cornerstone of Christian ethics and is intrinsically linked to the concept of inclusion- fostering among Catholic Christians the extension of love and compassion to all individuals, promoting an inclusive environment where everyone is welcomed and valued.

The Kapampangan culture for welcoming people through *abe* mutually interacts with the Church's teaching on inclusion since both (*abe* and the Church's concept of neighbor) pursue the person as a subject whose dignity is inherent and not an object of usefulness. The Church teaches that people can engage in the shared humanity of others, and as a result, every individual can be considered as neighbor (Pope John Paul II in *Dignitas Infinita*, 2024, para. 26). Similarly, Pope Francis exhorted that an encounter of another human person in love is an encounter of God (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 272). Consequently, the Church emphasizes and upholds the "dignity of every human person, regardless of their physical, mental, cultural, social, and religious characteristics" (*Dignitas Infinita*, para. 66). This teaching is evident in the Kapampangan concept of *abe* which connotes the pursuit of another person as a 'fellow' human and as 'co-equal' in dignity. *Abe* is inclusive, cordial, and hospitable. It is a Kapampangan way of expressing kindness and generosity. '*Mekeni abe*' (Come my friend) is an invitation to share one's humanity with a fellow human which considers the 'other' person as a member of the family or community and not a stranger nor an outsider. Although the Western concept of neighbor does not fully

capture the essential meaning of *abe*, it still depicts the intention of regarding the 'other' as a human being who is created by God and whose dignity is shared.

The richness and 'inclusive' connotation of the Kapampangan concept of *abe* and the Church's incessant advocacy for the promotion and protection of human dignity mutually interrelate. This reciprocal yet critical dialogue between the Kapampangan food culture and the concept of *abe* takes the analysis into the next stage of the cultural exegesis: New Tentative Faith Interpretation.

Stage 3: New Tentative Faith Interpretation

At this point in the cultural analysis, a new exploratory faith interpretation emerges from the dialectical engagement of the two poles. The interpretation is tentative as no conclusive response can be provided to the problem, inquiry, or matter being subjected to a hermeneutical process (de Mesa, 2016). The culturally comprehensible understanding arises from the reciprocal conversation between culture and current Church doctrines on inclusivity and hospitality. This leads to the central question for this stage: How can a culturally intelligible theological interpretation of inclusion be possible, arising from the mutual and critical dialogue between the Kapampangan culture of *abe* and the Judeo-Christian understanding of inclusion and "neighbor"?

According to the British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] Travel (2021) Filipinos are famous for their warm and welcoming hospitality and are even considered as one of the world's friendliest countries (Pineda, 2025; Greenfield, 2012). In the Philippines, hospitality is a core element of the culture, where visitors are welcomed as friends and are treated as family (Pineda, 2025). Genosa (2024) explained that Filipinos have a natural attitude for making people feel at home. *Tuloy po kayo!* (Welcome!) is a common greeting when one is invited to a Filipino house. Despite belonging to 'a third-world country' and often having limited financial resources, Filipinos still generously share with their 'neighbor' (fellow Filipino or foreigner). Mendoza (2023) found that customer service provided by Filipinos is hinged on the values of hospitality, positive attitudes, and a sincere desire to accommodate others.

As Filipinos, Kapampangan people also exhibit the values of inclusion and hospitality (Manlapaz et al., 1994). This particular trait of the Kapampangan is recognized by other regions in the country, particularly those in the Visayas (Ubaldo, 2014). The term '*abe*' is a concrete example of how one may get into the depths of the Kapampangan psyche. The existence of the term in the Kapampangan language manifests the people's inherent value for hospitality and in accommodating people, particularly those who visit the province. As cited by the study's informants (see Tables 2 & 4), Kapampangan express their hospitality through food by inviting the guest/s '*Mekeni abe, tara mangan!* (Welcome friend, let's eat!). More than just a mere gastronomic experience, Kapampangan share food as an expression of kindness, care, and generosity. They articulate their way of welcoming people through meal sharing and fellowship. This gesture, particularly the Kapampangan, parallels Jesus' table fellowship with people from various social classes. Through meal sharing, coupled with the greeting of *abe*, Kapampangan exhibit the values of hospitality and inclusion as taught by Jesus in the gospels. It is the Kapampangan's modest way of participating in creating 'space' for befriending the 'unwelcome' and the 'un-invited.' *Abe* becomes a potential 'tool' for advocating equality and inclusion in society. Through *abe*, every person is regarded as a 'human being' whose self and dignity are shared with fellow *abe*. When every person is treated as *abe*, they are regarded not as

an outsider but as a family / community member, i.e., a neighbor who should be loved and cared for.

This new tentative faith interpretation of inclusion, through *abe* as neighbor, offers valuable material for educating young people on inclusivity, friendship, and hospitality. Jesus' command to 'love our neighbor as we love ourselves' may be culturally interpreted using the Kapampangan understanding of hospitality, food culture, and through the concept of *abe* as neighbor.

Conclusion

The study explored the vibrant food culture of the Kapampangan people and their rich, distinctive concept of *abe*. Kapampangan people express their hospitality through the sharing of food and by welcoming and treating guests as part of the family or community. For them, food culture transcends mere culinary or gastronomic experience- it serves as a means of sharing one's blessings with fellow *abe*, thereby fostering and nourishing relationships and connections. It becomes an expression of love and comfort, especially toward the least, the last, and the lost.

The Kapampangan concept of *abe* refers to a friend, a companion, someone who gives value to your being, or even a shared inner self. In this sense, *abe* is not perceived as an "other," but as a fellow human being whose dignity is equally shared with others.

Mekeni abe, tara mangan! ("Come, friend, let's eat!") is both an invitation and an expression of hospitality and warmth. It reflects the Kapampangan spirit of inclusivity and serves as an impetus for building meaningful and harmonious relationships. Thus, *abe* embodies a friendly and heartfelt way of welcoming people, especially visitors to the province.

Western notions of the "other" and the "neighbor" do not fully capture the Filipino concept of *kapwa*, much less the Kapampangan notion of *abe*. In both *kapwa* and *abe*, the neighbor is not regarded as "other," but as a fellow human being- a person among persons. Although the Jewish concept of *re'a* originally referred to every person as a neighbor, in the New Testament context, most non-Jews such as Samaritans and Gentiles were still considered "others." By contrast, within *kapwa* and *abe*, all people are viewed as co-equal in dignity. Consequently, Jesus' meal fellowship with outcasts may be culturally interpreted and rearticulated through the Kapampangan concept of *abe*. This cultural and religious understanding of food-sharing provides a meaningful framework for reinterpreting inclusion and hospitality from a Kapampangan perspective, grounded in Jesus' table fellowship.

This research has consequently argued that the Kapampangan concept of *abe*, expressed through meal fellowship, constitutes an indigenous theology of inclusion that resonates deeply with Jesus' table fellowship and Eucharistic living. Overall, the study contributes to theological, cultural, and educational discourse by highlighting the transformative potential of meal fellowship as a lived expression of inclusion rooted in Kapampangan culture.

Declaration on the Use of AI

The researchers utilized ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Quill Bot for grammar check, paraphrasing, and refinement of sentences and paragraphs.

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