Excerpt from: ***No Heads, No Feet, No Monkeys, No Dogs: The Evolution of Personal Food Taboos***

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Every fledgling anthropologist who is preparing to conduct first fieldwork is formally trained in research methods, and informally prepared by the anecdotes shared by friends and mentors who have already successfully navigated the rite of passage that "fieldwork" represents for anthropologists. …In the early 1980s I began to prepare for dissertation field research in Southeast Asia, and ultimately Palawan Island in the Philippines was the destination for my work…. My friend and undergraduate mentor, Jim Eder, had been working in Palawan for many years and generously provided contacts and networks to help establish plans for working there as well. Secondly, my then boyfriend and now husband Tom, went to Palawan in 1979 to scout for possible locations for both of our dissertation research projects. ..

During the summer that Tom was in Palawan, he received a great deal of support from a family I'll call Flores, who had been great friends of Jim, and this couple generously gave Tom advice and a place to stay while he scouted locations for our field work. They knew that Tom was unmarried at the time, and although he referred to me and indicated I would be joining him when it came time for our full stint of fieldwork, Mrs. Flores apparently thought she had a better plan for his future. She had an unmarried friend from a prominent local family who she thought would make an ideal wife for Tom, and the chance to live in the US was a welcome prospect for this woman. …When Tom returned to begin fieldwork in 1980 with a wife (me), she was obviously

disappointed that her friend was not destined to be betrothed to the handsome American anthropologist.

All of this is a round about introduction to the chicken head soup encounter. When we arrived in the Philippines, after months of preparation, we spent the first few days living in luxury with good friends Bob and Gina Cowell, who were working at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) on the Philippines main island of Luzon. [where] we also experienced our first episode of food poisoning, and arrived in Palawan still wobbly from that illness.

The morning we arrived in Palawan we traveled to the Flores' home where Mrs. Flores had prepared lunch for us, which she called chicken noodle soup. Although my constitution had not yet adjusted to the high heat and humidity, and I was still reeling from the IRRI illness, the thought of the Philippine version of my grandmother's "Jewish penicillin" sounded like just the right meal. As we sat down to eat our chicken soup, I noticed something peeking at me from my bowl, partially obscured by a fat noodle. Upon brief exploration it became apparent that Tom's bowl contained noodles, chicken pieces, and broth, and mine contained a chicken head (or more precisely rooster as the cockscomb clearly indicated) and two chicken feet, as well as my share of noodles. Hmmm, what to do? To this day I do not know whether my bowl contained those body bits just by chance, or whether Mrs. Flores thought these were special and intended to share them with me…or whether this was her expression of displeasure of my role in botching her matchmaking plans. …As I was new to the practice of ethnographic fieldwork, I was concerned about not offending my host, but I was also pretty sure I could not bring myself to chew on a chicken head, and so I sipped broth and a few noodles, but kept some in the bowl to hide the remnants of the soup I had not been able to bring myself to eat. In that first meal in Palawan, I had discovered the first two of the food taboos; no heads, no feet.

Within a few days after our arrival we had located a house in the village of Napsaan, on the remote and isolated west coast of Palawan, where we settled in for our fieldwork. …The

village where we lived was only about 35 miles as the crow flies from the capital city of Puerto Princesa, but it was worlds away in a practical sense. Access was difficult at all times, and impossible during the worst of the rainy season, as getting to Napsaan required driving through several big rivers, the largest in the middle of the island in the Iwahig penal colony. …Our house was a typical rural Philippine house on stilts, bamboo slats woven into panels for the wall, and widely spaced slats for the floor. Complete with thatch roof, living in this house was like living in a giant basket, and the loosely woven walls and slats in the floors allowed the air to circulate and the whole building to breathe. We soon adjusted to life in our village, as we made friends with our neighbors, we learned to sleep soundly with a mosquito net that also prevented bats, mice, and lizards from sharing our bed, and we learned how to manage a house lacking both electricity and running water.

Over the next two years in the field, we also encountered many wonderful foods, I learned to use many exotic ingredients that I had never encountered growing up in suburban Phoenix, but we also had a few challenges in the food department. … A few months into our stay we began to grow a vegetable garden, but our inexperience resulted in poor yields of everything except zucchini and yellow squash, so this was only marginally successful in bringing home dinner. During one three week period during the rainy season, the seas were too rough for local men to venture out fishing, and our diet during that time consisted *only* of rice and yellow squash (*kalabasa)* for three meals a day. Once back in the US it was many years before I could face yellow squash with any enthusiasm. …[only when someone threw a party was meat available, when] … wealthier households would mark the occasion by slaughtering a pig as the center piece of the feast. Both the best and worst dishes we encountered were served at these feasts. …The butchering was usually performed by the men, who would collect the blood and offal and turn it over to the women for preparation, while they would build a spit and start a fire to slowly roast the whole pig over a low fire to prepare the famous dish *lechon*. …Preparing *lechon* was expensive and time consuming, as the properly prepared pig required hours of slow roasting and

rotation to be ideal. It represented the finest in Philippine cooking, and was a dish highly anticipated by all guests at a party.

The second dish most popular dish that was usually served at parties was made from the innards of the pig that the women cleaned and prepared. This dish, known as *dinuguan* came from the root word, *dugo* or blood. In a nutshell, *dinuguan* was pigs' intestines cooked in pig blood, with vinegar to prevent the blood from coagulating. …I never grew to share my neighbors love of this concoction. I may have been channeling my Jewish grandmother when I faced this dish with revulsion, as I imagined my kosher-keeping grandmother rolling over in her grave at the though of eating something so *treyf* (unclean).

In addition to birthday parties or celebration of saint's days, smaller gatherings of men were occasionally held, during which they would typically drink and play cards. …There was a special classification for food served at these events, termed *pulutan*, which are finger foods to be eaten while drinking.[and often] p*ulutan* was generally a strongly seasoned meat or seafood dish…, on one memorable occasion I was offered *pulutan* that led to my third food taboo. In some parts of the Philippines …eating dogs is considered a delicacy. In Palawan dogs were not common fare, nor were dogs coddled house pets. …There were a very few households that seemed to treat their dogs more like the family pet that I had grown up with, where the dogs lived in the house and were shown affection by their owners. One such exception was the household of Jose and Linda Alvarez, a couple who ran a small *sari-sari* store and several small businesses. Jose and Linda became our good friends, and as their store window was in the central part of the village it was a frequent gathering place for people as they walked through the area. …Another reason I liked to visit Jose and Linda was because their friendly black dog, Perla, would greet all comers with a wagging tail and plea to be petted – this was a couple I could relate to.

One day, well into my second year in Palawan, I walked by the Alvarez's store and saw Linda sitting outside, obviously in a foul mood. Jose and his companions were close by, sitting on

the verandah of their house, obviously very inebriated and in high spirits as a rousing card game was underway. I was invited to come to join them, and as I greeted them they offered to share their *pulutan,* which was on a platter in the middle of the table. Linda then piped up, with alarm, that I should not eat this *pulutan* as Jose had killed and cooked Perla and was serving her to the guests. She was clearly very angry with Jose, and was upset about what he had done to Perla, a dog who was her faithful companion at home while she tended the store. Linda was not about to share in partaking of this *pulutan.* Obviously I was not alone in my shock at the prospect of eating the family pet! I had heard my neighbors refer to northerners disparagingly to as dog-eating people, so I came to learn that my taboo against eating dog (especially Perla), was considered acceptable by many people. In Palawan eating dog is a guilty pleasure that usually only men engage in, and eating dog as *pulutan* has macho qualities. My polite refusal to share the dog meat was generally ignored, and I joined Linda outside to sit in silence, reflecting on the fate of the friendly black dog.

The fact that Jose and his *barkada*, or pals, could blithely eat Perla may not be attributable to insensitivity, so much as scarcity of meat and animal protein. … In some ways it is ironic that meat was so seldom available, as Philippine cooking is replete with recipes that effectively preserve and season meat in the absence of refrigeration, so efficiently using up a pig butchered and sold locally would not have been a problem. Perhaps the most famous national dish, *adobo* differs from Spanish and Latino versions of the same name, as it is a blend of soy sauce, rice wine vinegar, and lots of garlic and black pepper that is used as a marinade and preservative for raw meat. Even very tough cuts of ancient animals become tender and delicious prepared in this way. Other preservation involved slicing meat into thin strips and smoking it over a fire resulting in a bacon-like flavor, or salting and drying it in the air; similar to the preparation of hams and cured meat found in so many cultures.

The only occasions when meat might be available to purchase were when someone had luck with hunting – either with conventional weapons, or a "pig bomb." Our time in Palawan

coincided with President Ferdinand Marcos' imposition of martial law, and guns and bullets were illegal. …Hunting was a macho affair, as groups of men would track and kill a formidable wild pig in the forest, using a traditional spear as a weapon. Hunting was only successfully carried out by a few men, all of whom were members of the ethnic minority Tagbanua people, who had a stronger hunting and gathering tradition than the majority population of lowland Filipino farmers. When these Tagbanua men returned to the village carrying the carcass of a wild pig, everyone, including the local anthropologists, would line up to try to buy some of the precious meat to satisfy their "meat hunger" (Lee 1993).

The other strategy to obtain wild pig involved an ingenious explosive device called a "pig bomb," borrowing the English words to name this device. …For farmers who planted upland rice close to the forest margins, protecting the crop from the threat of wild pigs was a constant challenge. Pigs would root around these fields just as the rice was ripening, and one pig's raid in the middle of the night could do tremendous damage to a farmer's annual harvest. To combat these porcine threats many farmers rigged pig bombs, that were made of a mixture of extremely ripe mashed bananas and shards of broken glass, wrapped in banana leaves. The smell of ripe bananas would attract the pigs to these baited bombs, and as they bit into them it set off a detonation. The home-made detonators were made from phosphorous scraped from match heads as the incendiary material, as gun powder was illegal under martial law. The shards of glass would be propelled through the pig's face and head, killing the animal.

Most pig bombs detonated just before dawn and we recall waking up with the sound of the explosion during the pre-harvest season, and happily anticipating the first light when we could go inquire whose pig bomb had been successful, and whether there was any fresh meat to purchase. The other wild animals that threatened to wreak havoc on farmers' fields were the monkeys and birds that also lived in the forests. …Monkeys, like pigs, were active during the night hours and presented a more serious threat to the harvest. We found monkeys to be very ingenious when it came to experimenting with human food, they routinely raided the farm fields

to feast on ripening rice. Once while we were hiking on another island, a curious monkey found Tom's backpack sitting on the ground, unzipped it, and helped himself to a peanut butter sandwich that was wrapped in plastic. Local farmers had equally ingenious ways to combat these monkeys, as they devised snares that were baited with the ripening rice. The bait was placed on top of a long pole cut from a variety of thorny tree, which the sensible monkeys would not climb as they would be impaled. The snare was placed on an adjacent pole which the monkey could climb, and as he reached out to grab the rice, it tripped a counterweight and noose, and snapped the poor monkeys' necks. Some local people, as with the eating of dogs, found these snared monkeys acceptable game for the cooking pot. Others, however, commented that they too closely resembled humans and had qualms about eating them – so I was safe in my fourth food taboo as they understood some peoples' reticence to partake of monkey meat.

Other wild animals did not rate dietary deference as far as I was concerned. On one sojourn we traveled on foot a long day's walk away to the more remote village of Bubusawen, also on the west coast of Palawan. Bubusawen was one of the coastal villages settled by lowland, Christian farmers who were homesteading land not occupied by one of the indigenous ethnic minorities of Palawan. We were accompanying our friend who was the parish priest, and he had planned to visit Bubusawen to say Mass in this remote community that had no formal church, in celebration of a saint's day. We were joined on our adventure by a number of young people who volunteered for the local church, and by our landlord and father-figure, our neighbor Mang Luis, who was a Tagbanua, a member of a tribal minority group indigenous to Palawan. We camped on the floor of local porches for the few days that we were in Bubusawen, and were well cared for by the local villagers, who were pleased to have visitors, as this was a rare experience. As we shared the festivities and honors intended for our friend Father Erning, we sat down to a dinner of rice and a flavorful stew. As we chatted over dinner my husband thanked our hosts and commented that the chicken was delicious, to which I replied, "I've cut up a lot of chickens, these are not chicken bones." As the conversation continued we were informed that we were eating a stew of

monitor lizard, a huge lizard common in the area that often exceeded 4 feet in length. Mang Luis dropped his plate and looked appalled! He said that for the Tagbanua people, monitor lizard was strictly taboo, and that he could not continue eating this food that clearly now repelled him. This was a little lesson to us; *to each her own food taboos*. While sympathizing with Mang Luis' reaction, we did not share his dislike of eating lizards, and to the delight of our hosts, we happily cleaned our plates.

References Cited

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