PART I

A Taste of Nutritional Anthropology

Nutritional anthropology encompasses many types of studies and food is fundamental to most of them. Foods fulfill nutritional functions in that they nourish the body, but anthropologists often start with the assumption that humans make choices about what to eat, and these choices are not necessarily governed by the physiological need for nourishment. Rather, humans make choices governed by the social, cultural, aesthetic, and even moral meaning of food, coupled with the realities of availability and cost. The clearest examples are the extremes. North Americans do not classify dogs, pigeons, or grasshoppers as "food" even though they have nutritional value and are consumed by other groups. They do not consider the small intestine of sheep as food either, but willingly consume it disguised as the natural casing of hotdogs, and they willingly consume hotdogs at picnics but not at formal dinner parties. In contrast, native peoples in the Amazon consider leaf cutter ants a delicacy and find cow's milk quite repulsive. Because of the social dimensions that underlie food consumption, limiting the study of nutrition to aspects of nourishment determined by physiological needs is, well, limiting.

The four chapters in this section illustrate the meanings of foods in different times and places (Figure 1). In his classic article, "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari," Richard Lee relates a lesson learned about humility in providing a gift of food. In "No Heads, No Feet, No Monkeys, No Dogs," Miriam Chaiken provides a personal story of encounters with foods of different kinds and because of their differences finds them difficult to eat. In "From Hunger Foods to Heritage Foods," Penny Van Esterik emphasizes the fact that the meaning of a food is context specific and can be very different at local and global levels. In "Rough Food," a brief introduction to a book of the same name, John Omohundro provides a glimpse of the traditional winter diet in the northernmost reaches of Newfoundland. All four chapters were written by cultural anthropologists. Together they provide a sense of some of the issues to be addressed in greater depth in the section introductions and chapters to follow.

Richard Lee, the author of "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari," undertook a long-term study of the economy of the !Kung San in the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa in the 1960s and 1970s (see chapter 7, "What Hunters Do for

Figure 1 *Map shows the location of the groups referred to in the chapters in this section by chapter number: 2 = !Kung Bushmen of the Dobe area of Botswana; 3 = village, Palawan Island in the Philippines; 4 = Lao People's Democratic Republic; 5 = northern Newfoundland.*

a Living, or, How to Make Out on Scarce Resources"). Lee relates a story of his own foibles in deciding to purchase an ox as a gift for his community of informants. Lee imparts a lesson about the power of food, the symbolism that is embedded in important "gifts," and other forms of exchange.

In the second paper, "No Heads, No Feet, No Monkeys, No Dogs," cultural anthropologist Miriam Chaiken shares some of the food-related challenges she faced in doing field research on the pacific island of Palawan in the early 1980s. She and her husband lived in a small, isolated village where there were no food stores and people ate largely what they were able to grow in their garden or catch in the sea. Hence, a fundamental challenge was simply securing food for herself and her husband in an environment where the nearest food market was two and a half to seven hours away depending on the number of "jeepney" breakdowns and flat tires. There was also the challenge of graciously declining local foods that she was uncomfortable eating, including the dog she had thought of as a pet. Miriam Chaiken's story is an example of the challenge that anthropologists often face in accommodating to local food habits.

The third paper, "From Hunger Foods to Heritage Foods: Challenges to Food Localization in Lao PDR" by Penny Van Esterik, is a longer and more complex paper, but a highly provocative one. Van Esterik highlights the contrasts in the meaning of a food that grows wild in a local place, northern Laos, with the meaning of that same food in the global market place. The food, *khai*, is a variety of green algae collected from rivers in northern Laos and eaten in water-based soups in times of food scarcity, when the availability of rice, the basis of the diet, is inadequate. It is what is known as a "hunger food," a food eaten to satisfy the gnawing stomach discomfort that is physical hunger. The same green algae, *khai*, is also collected and sold in the global market to be processed into delicacies for elite diners in North America to satisfy the "hunger" for the exotic.

Van Esterik sets the story of *khai* within the larger nutritional context of Laos, a developing country with alarmingly high rates of adult and child undernutrition. According to a recent report from the World Food Programme (WFP 2011) only 16% of children under 5 years of age have diets that are adequate in terms of quantity and diversity. In poorer households rice is the basis of the diet; meat and oils may only be eaten once or twice a month and vegetables are only available seasonally. As a result of their generally poor diet, over 40% of children suffer from iron deficiency anemia as well as vitamin A deficiency. Deficiencies of other micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) are also likely. As some of the other papers in this volume note, these kinds of deficiencies can lead to physical and cognitive impairments.

The paper raises many questions. Why do farmers run short of rice? Who are these farmers? What could be done to help them be more self-sufficient? Why don't people include iron and vitamin A-rich foods in their diets, or the diets of their children? Is it poverty and/or beliefs about what constitutes a "good" diet? These are the kinds of questions nutritional anthropologists, working in a variety of different societies, attempt to answer.

The fourth paper, "Rough Food," is from the first pages of an ethnography by John Omohundro, in which he describes subsistence practices and diet in northern Newfoundland at the very northern edge of where agriculture is possible in North America. This was a place where people lived far from food markets until the 1970s, but did not find the remoteness of the setting a problem because they could grow, hunt, and fish much of what they needed. Theirs was a diet attuned to the rhythm of the seasons and the resources of the local environment. As romantic as that might seem, it was also a simpler diet than most readers of this book can probably imagine. In the winter it was "rough food," a diet based on the staple foods that had been harvested in the fall and preserved: potatoes, carrots, cabbage and salt beef, supplemented with moose, caribou, rabbit or fish, and some store-bought staples like flour and butter. It is a diet from a time not too long ago, before the word "locavore" (one who eats from the local area) was invented, but a time during which being a locavore was the norm, not the exception. It was the only option.

So what can we learn from the four papers in this section? One thing is that there are, and have been, very different food systems in different places. In some we can clearly see how local subsistence practices connect to diet. Another is that a food can have a different meaning in the local food system, to the anthropologist, and in the global market place. A final example is açai, a palm fruit that grows wild in the eastern Amazon. In rural areas, açai is an ordinary part of the diet and consumed as a thick oil-rich drink alongside *farinha* (a toasted meal made from manioc roots) and grilled fish (Piperata et al., 2011). Exported to North America it becomes an exotic food, a "berry" with properties that verge on the magical. Its advertised role in promoting weight loss comes as a great surprise to rural Amazonians who say that the season of açai is the season when everyone gets fat! Interesting. How can people attribute such different attributes to the same food?

References

Piperata BA, Ivanova SA, Da-Gloria P, Veiga G, Polsky A, Spence JE, Murrieta RSS. 2011. Nutrition transition: Dietary patterns of rural Amazonian women during a period of economic change. American Journal of Human Biology 23:458–469.

World Food Programme. WPF Lao PDR Country Strategy. Accessed on May 5, 2011 at http://www.wfp.org/sites/default/files/WFP%20Lao%20PDR%20Country%20Strategy_ENG.pdf

CHAPTER 2

Eating Christmas in the Kalahari

Richard Borshay Lee

(1969)

The !Kung Bushmen's knowledge of Christmas is third-hand. The London Missionary Society brought the holiday to the southern Tswana tribes in the early nineteenth century. Later, native catechists spread the idea far and wide among the Bantu-speaking pastoralists, even in the remotest corners of the Kalahari Desert. The Bushmen's idea of the Christmas story, stripped to its essentials, is "praise the birth of white man's god-chief"; what keeps their interest in the holiday high is the Tswana-Herero custom of slaughtering an ox for his Bushmen neighbors as an annual goodwill gesture. Since the 1930's, part of the Bushmen's annual round of activities has included a December congregation at the cattle posts for trading, marriage brokering, and several days of trance-dance feasting at which the local Tswana headman is host.

As a social anthropologist working with !Kung Bushmen, I found that the Christmas ox custom suited my purposes. I had come to the Kalahari to study the hunting and gathering subsistence economy of the !Kung, and to accomplish this it was essential not to provide them with food, share my own food, or interfere in any way with their food-gathering activities. While liberal handouts of tobacco and medical supplies were appreciated, they were scarcely adequate to erase the glaring disparity in wealth between the anthropologist, who maintained a two-month inventory of canned goods, and the Bushmen, who rarely had a day's supply of food on hand. My approach, while paying off in terms of data, left me open to frequent accusations of stinginess and hard-heartedness. By their lights, I was a miser.

The Christmas ox was to be my way of saying thank you for the cooperation of the past year; and since it was to be our last Christmas in the field, I determined to slaughter the largest, meatiest ox that money could buy, insuring that the feast and trance-dance would be a success.

Through December I kept my eyes open at the wells as the cattle were brought down for watering. Several animals were offered, but none had quite the grossness that I had in mind. Then, ten days before the holiday, a Herero friend led an ox of astonishing size and mass up to our camp. It was solid black, stood five feet high at the shoulder, had a five-foot span of horns, and must have weighed 1,200 pounds on the hoof. Food consumption calculations are my specialty, and I quickly figured that bones and viscera aside, there was enough meat—at least four pounds—for every man, woman, and child of the 150 Bushmen in the vicinity of /ai/ai who were expected at the feast.

Having found the right animal at last, I paid the Herero £20 ($56) and asked him to keep the beast with his herd until Christmas day. The next morning word spread among the people that the big solid black one was the ox chosen by /ontah (my Bushman name; it means, roughly, "whitey") for the Christmas feast. That afternoon I received the first delegation. Ben!a, an outspoken sixty-year-old mother of five, came to the point slowly.

"Where were you planning to eat Christmas?"

"Right here at /ai/ai," I replied.

"Alone or with others?"

"I expect to invite all the people to eat Christmas with me."

"Eat what?"

"I have purchased Yehave's black ox, and I am going to slaughter and cook it."

"That's what we were told at the well but refused to believe it until we heard it from yourself."

"Well, it's the black one," I replied expansively, although wondering what she was driving at.

"Oh, no!" Ben!a groaned, turning to her group. "They were right." Turning back to me she asked, "Do you expect us to eat that bag of bones?"

"Bag of bones! It's the biggest ox at /ai/ai."

"Big, yes, but old. And thin. Everybody knows there's no meat on that old ox. What did you expect us to eat off it, the horns?"

Everybody chuckled at Ben!a's one-liner as they walked away, but all I could manage was a weak grin.

That evening it was the turn of the young men. They came to sit at our evening fire. /gaugo, about my age, spoke to me man-to-man.

"/ontah, you have always been square with us," he lied. "What has happened to change your heart? That sack of guts and bones of Yehave's will hardly feed one camp, let alone all the Bushmen around ai/ai." And he proceeded to enumerate the seven camps in the /ai/ai vicinity, family by

Richard Borshay Lee, "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari." *Natural History*, December 1969:14–22. Copyright 1969 by the American Museum of Natural History. Reprinted with permission.

family. "Perhaps you have forgotten that we are not few, but many. Or are you too blind to tell the difference between a proper cow and an old wreck? That ox is thin to the point of death."

"Look, you guys," I retorted, "that is a beautiful animal, and I'm sure you will eat it with pleasure at Christmas."

"Of course we will eat it; it's food. But it won't fill us up to the point where we will have enough strength to dance. We will eat and go home to bed with stomachs rumbling."

That night as we turned in, I asked my wife, Nancy: "What did you think of the black ox?"

"It looked enormous to me. Why?"

"Well, about eight different people have told me I got gypped; that the ox is nothing but bones."

"What's the angle?" Nancy asked. "Did they have a better one to sell?"

"No, they just said that it was going to be a grim Christmas because there won't be enough meat to go around. Maybe I'll get an independent judge to look at the beast in the morning."

Bright and early, Halingisi, a Tswana cattle owner, appeared at our camp. But before I could ask him to give me his opinion on Yehave's black ox, he gave me the eye signal that indicated a confidential chat. We left the camp and sat down.

"/ontah, I'm surprised at you: you've lived here for three years and still haven't learned anything about cattle."

"But what else can a person do but choose the biggest, strongest animal one can find?" I retorted.

"Look, just because an animal is big doesn't mean that it has plenty of meat on it. The black one was a beauty when it was younger, but now it is thin to the point of death."

"Well I've already bought it. What can I do at this stage?"

"Bought it already? I thought you were just considering it. Well, you'll have to kill it and serve it, I suppose. But don't expect much of a dance to follow."

My spirits dropped rapidly. I could believe that Ben!a and /gaugo just might be putting me on about the black ox, but Halingisi seemed to be an impartial critic. I went around that day feeling as though I had bought a lemon of a used car.

In the afternoon it was Tomazo's turn. Tomazo is a fine hunter, a top trance performer... and one of my most reliable informants. He approached the subject of the Christmas cow as part of my continuing Bushman education.

"My friend, the way it is with us Bushmen," he began, "is that we love meat. And even more than that, we love fat. When we hunt we always search for the fat ones, the ones dripping with layers of white fat: fat that turns into a clear, thick oil in the cooking pot, fat that slides down your gullet, fills your stomach and gives you a roaring diarrhea," he rhapsodized.

"So, feeling as we do," he continued, "it gives us pain to be served such a scrawny thing as Yehave's black ox. It is big, yes, and no doubt its giant bones are good for soup, but fat is what we really crave and so we will eat Christmas this year with a heavy heart."

The prospect of a gloomy Christmas now had me worried, so I asked Tomazo what I could do about it.

"Look for a fat one, a young one... smaller, but fat. Fat enough to make us *//gom* ('evacuate the bowels'), then we will be happy."

My suspicions were aroused when Tomazo said that he happened to know of a young, fat, barren cow that the owner was willing to part with. Was Tomazo working on commission, I wondered? But I dispelled this unworthy thought when we approached the Herero owner of the cow in question and found that he had decided not to sell.

The scrawny wreck of a Christmas ox now became the talk of the /ai/ai water hole and was the first news told to the outlying groups as they began to come in from the bush for the feast. What finally convinced me that real trouble might be brewing was the visit from u!au, an old conservative with a reputation for fierceness. His nickname meant spear and referred to an incident thirty years ago in which he had speared a man to death. He had an intense manner; fixing me with his eyes, he said in clipped tones:

"I have only just heard about the black ox today, or else I would have come here earlier. /ontah, do you honestly think you can serve meat like that to people and avoid a fight?" He paused, letting the implications sink in. "I don't mean fight you, /ontah; you are a white man. I mean a fight between Bushmen. There are many fierce ones here, and with such a small quantity of meat to distribute, how can you give everybody a fair share? Someone is sure to accuse another of taking too much or hogging all the choice pieces. Then you will see what happens when some go hungry while others eat."

The possibility of at least a serious argument struck me as all too real. I had witnessed the tension that surrounds the distribution of meat from a kudu or gemsbok kill, and had documented many arguments that sprang up from a real or imagined slight in meat distribution. The owners of a kill may spend up to two hours arranging and rearranging the piles of meat under the gaze of a circle of recipients before handing them out. And I also knew that the Christmas feast at /ai/ai would be bringing together groups that had feuded in the past.

Convinced now of the gravity of the situation, I went in earnest to search for a second cow; but all my inquiries failed to turn one up.

The Christmas feast was evidently going to be a disaster, and the incessant complaints about the meagerness of the ox had already taken the fun out of it for me. Moreover, I was getting bored with the wisecracks, and after losing my temper a few times, I resolved to serve the beast anyway. If the meat fell short, the hell with it. In the Bushmen idiom, I announced to all who would listen:

"I am a poor man and blind. If I have chosen one that is too old and too thin, we will eat it anyway and see if there is enough meat there to quiet the rumbling of our stomachs."

On hearing this speech, Ben!a offered me a rare word of comfort. "It's thin," she said philosophically, "but the bones will make a good soup."

At dawn Christmas morning, instinct told me to turn over the butchering and cooking to a friend and take off with Nancy to spend Christmas alone in the bush. But curiosity kept me from retreating. I wanted to see what such a scrawny ox looked like on butchering and if there *was* going to be a fight, I wanted to catch every word of it. Anthropologists are incurable that way.

The great beast was driven up to our dancing ground, and a shot in the forehead dropped it in its tracks. Then, freshly cut branches were heaped around the fallen carcass to receive the meat. Ten men volunteered to help with the cutting. I asked /gaugo to make the breast bone cut. This cut, which begins the butchering process for most large game, offers easy access for removal of the viscera. But it also allows the hunter to spot-check the amount of fat on the animal. A fat game animal carries a white layer up to an inch thick on the chest, while in a thin one, the knife will quickly cut to bone. All eyes fixed on his hand as /gaugo, dwarfed by the great carcass, knelt to the breast. The first cut opened a pool of solid white in the black skin. The second and third cut widened and deepened the creamy white. Still no bone. It was pure fat; it must have been two inches thick.

"Hey /gau," I burst out, "that ox is loaded with fat. What's this about the ox being too thin to bother eating? Are you out of your mind?"

"Fat?" /gau shot back, "You call that fat? This wreck is thin, sick, dead!" And he broke out laughing. So did everyone else. They rolled on the ground, paralyzed with laughter. Everybody laughed except me; I was thinking.

I ran back to the tent and burst in just as Nancy was getting up. "Hey, the black ox. It's fat as hell! They were kidding about it being too thin to eat. It was a joke or something. A put-on. Everyone is really delighted with it!"

"Some joke," my wife replied. "It was so funny that you were ready to pack up and leave /ai/ai."

If it had indeed been a joke, it had been an extraordinarily convincing one, and tinged, I thought, with more than a touch of malice as many jokes are. Nevertheless, that it was a joke lifted my spirits considerably, and I returned to the butchering site where the shape of the ox was rapidly disappearing under the axes and knives of the butchers. The atmosphere had become festive. Grinning broadly, their arms covered with blood well past the elbow, men packed chunks of meat into the big cast-iron cooking pots, fifty pounds to the load, and muttered and chuckled all the while about the thinness and worthlessness of the animal and /ontah's poor judgment.

We danced and ate that ox two days and two nights; we cooked and distributed fourteen potfuls of meat and no one went home hungry and no fights broke out.

But the "joke" stayed in my mind. I had a growing feeling that something important had happened in my relationship with the Bushmen and that the clue lay in the meaning of the joke. Several days later, when most of the people had dispersed back to the bush camps, I raised the question with Hakekgose, a Tswana man who had grown up among the !Kung, married a !Kung girl, and who probably knew their culture better than any other non-Bushman.

"With us whites," I began, "Christmas is supposed to be the day of friendship and brotherly love. What I can't figure out is why the Bushmen went to such lengths to criticize and belittle the ox I had bought for the feast. The animal was perfectly good and their jokes and wisecracks practically ruined the holiday for me."

"So it really did bother you," said Hakekgose. "Well, that's the way they always talk. When I take my rifle and go hunting with them, if I miss, they laugh at me for the rest of the day. But even if I hit and bring one down, it's no better. To them, the kill is always too small or too old or too thin; and as we sit down on the kill site to cook and eat the liver, they keep grumbling, even with their mouths full of meat. They say things like, 'Oh this is awful! What a worthless animal! Whatever made me think that this Tswana rascal could hunt!'"

"Is this the way outsiders are treated?" I asked.

"No, it is their custom; they talk that way to each other too. Go and ask them."

/gaugo had been one of the most enthusiastic in making me feel bad about the merit of the Christmas ox. I sought him out first.

"Why did you tell me the black ox was worthless, when you could see that it was loaded with fat and meat?"

"It is our way," he said smiling. "We always like to fool people about that. Say there is a Bushman who has been hunting. He must not come home and announce like a braggard, 'I have killed a big one in the bush!' He must first sit down in silence until I or someone else comes up to his fire and asks, 'What did you see today?' He replies quietly, 'Ah, I'm no good for hunting. I saw nothing at all [pause] just a little tiny one.' Then I smile to myself," /gaugo continued, "because I know he has killed something big."

"In the morning we make up a party of four or five people to cut up and carry the meat back to the camp. When we arrive at the kill we examine it and cry out, 'You mean to say you have dragged us all the way out here in order to make us cart home your pile of bones? Oh, if I had known it was this thin I wouldn't have come.' Another one pipes up, 'People, to think I gave up a nice day in the shade for this. At home we may be hungry but at least we have nice cool water to drink.' If the horns are big, someone says, 'Did you think that somehow you were going to boil down the horns for soup?'

"To all this you must respond in kind. 'I agree,' you say, 'this one is not worth the effort; let's just cook the liver for strength and leave the rest for the hyenas. It is not too late to hunt today and even a duiker or a steenbok would be better than this mess.'

"Then you set to work nevertheless; butcher the animal, carry the meat back to the camp and everyone eats," /gaugo concluded.

Things were beginning to make sense. Next, I went to Tomazo. He corroborated /gaugo's story of the obligatory insults over a kill and added a few details of his own.

"But," I asked, "why insult a man after he has gone to all that trouble to track and kill an animal and when he is going to share the meat with you so that your children will have something to eat?"

"Arrogance," was his cryptic answer.

"Arrogance?"

"Yes, when a young man kills much meat he comes to think of himself as a chief or a big man, and he thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this. We refuse one who boasts, for someday his pride will make him kill somebody. So we always speak of his meat as worthless. This way we cool his heart and make him gentle."

"But why didn't you tell me this before?" I asked Tomazo with some heat.

"Because you never asked me," said Tomazo, echoing the refrain that has come to haunt every field ethnographer.

The pieces now fell into place. I had known for a long time that in situations of social conflict with Bushmen I held all the cards. I was the only source of tobacco in a thousand square miles, and I was not incapable of cutting an individual off for non-cooperation. Though my boycott never lasted longer than a few days, it was an indication of my strength. People resented my presence at the water hole, yet simultaneously dreaded my leaving. In short I was a perfect target for the charge of arrogance and for the Bushmen tactic of enforcing humility.

I had been taught an object lesson by the Bushmen; it had come from an unexpected corner and had hurt me in a vulnerable area. For the big black ox was to be the one totally generous, unstinting act of my year at /ai/ai, and I was quite unprepared for the reaction I received.

As I read it, their message was this: There are no totally generous acts. All "acts" have an element of calculation. One black ox slaughtered at Christmas does not wipe out a year of careful manipulation of gifts given to serve your own ends. After all, to kill an animal and share the meat with people is really no more than Bushmen do for each other every day and with far less fanfare.

In the end, I had to admire how the Bushmen had played out the farce—collectively straight-faced to the end. Curiously, the episode reminded me of the *Good Soldier Schweik* and his marvelous encounters with authority. Like Schweik, the Bushmen had retained a thorough-going skepticism of good intentions. Was it this independence of spirit, I wondered, that had kept them culturally viable in the face of generations of contact with more powerful societies, both black and white? The thought that the Bushmen were alive and well in the Kalahari was strangely comforting. Perhaps, armed with that independence and with their superb knowledge of their environment, they might yet survive the future.

CHAPTER 3

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

Miriam S. Chaiken

(2010)

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. My training was no different than this scenario: while a graduate student at University of California-Santa Barbara I took research methods from the esteemed Paul Bohannan (then President of the American Anthropological Association), classes on theory from other faculty, and delved into southeast Asian cultures with Donald Brown (and previously as an undergraduate with James Eder at Arizona State). All of these professors set the bar high for us, challenging us to do excellent qualitative and quantitative field work and to continue this important tradition of anthropologists. The informal transmission of knowledge needed during this apprenticeship was shared by the senior grad students, who had returned from "the field" full of wisdom and amusing tales of what not to do in conducting fieldwork, stories that remain vivid in my memory now decades later. Nowhere in all of this excellent preparation did anyone warn me about chicken head soup. But I get ahead of myself.

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. Palawan was an ideal choice because many of my interests could be pursued in this one locale. I had become interested in the process of spontaneous relocations of populations, which were happening all over Asia, paralleling a process of government managed relocation schemes that were also moving people from areas of population density to frontier regions. I had originally envisioned exploring this issue in Indonesia, where the government-planned "transmigrations" were well established and well documented, but political difficulties in that nation at the time made this a problematic location. While there was a smaller scale process underway in the Philippines, and Palawan Island was the site of a notoriously badly managed relocation project near the town of Narra (both of which factored into my choice of Palawan for research), the real reasons for the selection of this site boiled down to personal choices. 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. While my intent is not to expose my romances indiscreetly, my encounter with chicken head soup was directly a result of my attachment to Tom.

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 United States was a welcome prospect for this woman. In spite of her valiant efforts, Mrs. Flores' matchmaking efforts were not successful. 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 roundabout 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. This was a way to make an easy transition to the heat and humidity and to begin our tentative efforts to speak the national language, Tagalog. While our visit to IRRI was wonderful in many ways, we also experienced our first episode of food

Miriam Chaiken, "No Heads, No Feet, No Monkeys, No Dogs: The Evolution of Personal Food Taboos." *Adventures in eating*. Hanes HR and Sammells CA, eds. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, pp. 181–190, 2010. Reprinted with permission.

poisoning, ironically, from a lavish country-club like party at IRRI. We left Luzon 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. Even after 2 years of fieldwork in Palawan I'm not sure how to interpret the body bits in my bowl. While most families include heads and feet in the cooking pot, it is odd that I would receive them all in a random portioning of soup. Heads and feet aren't special delicacies that I was singled out to receive, so what was the symbolism of my soup?

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 that I would later codify for myself: 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. Palawan has long been considered the Philippines' frontier, as it is remote, sparsely settled, and the destination for prospectors and pioneers seeking to claim lands and a new life. The west coast of Palawan where we lived is the most inaccessible area of the island, where most travel is still done on foot or by boat along the coast of the South China Sea. The coastline is dotted with small villages of subsistence farmers who cultivate upland rice in slash and burn fields. The mountainous terrain and relatively easy access to land have permitted this very traditional system of cultivation to flourish, and very little area has been developed into the irrigated rice padi that is found most commonly elsewhere in Asia.

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—getting to Napsaan required driving through several big rivers, the largest in the middle of the island in the Iwahig penal colony. If weather permitted, once or twice a day a jeepney, converted weapons carriers that were remnants of World War II, made the bumpy journey to Napsaan, bringing people and cargo in each direction. One's journey was equally likely to be shared with live pigs and chickens as with fellow passengers, and we soon learned the maxim that there is no such thing as a full jeepney; there is always room for another person or two. On a good day the journey from Napsaan to Puerto took about two and a half hours; on a bad one the journey could take as long as seven hours, depending on the number of break downs and flat tires. Given the difficulty and relative expense of travel for our meager research budget, trips to Puerto were fairly rare, but welcome respites from life in our village.

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: 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 2 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. We quickly, and fortunately, learned that local people were very familiar with the concept of allergies, and when food that was offered was too far out of our comfort level, a claim of being allergic to said food gave us a gracious way to refuse. Tom's polite fiction of being "allergic" to shellfish, which he really dislikes, was usually greeted with other people recounting the food allergies that they or a family member experienced. We invoked the allergy excuse quite rarely, as most of the foods we encountered proved to be tasty and enjoyable treats. Although I had never cleaned and prepared a whole fish prior to my life in Palawan, I eventually learned how to grill over an open fire the incredibly fresh fish we could sometimes buy from neighbors, who had been fishing in the sea. This produced some delicious meals of grouper and red snapper, though the first effort at cooking fish was disastrous and resulted in tossing it out in the woods for cats to scrap over in the night. In general, our consumption of protein largely rested on neighbors' success at fishing.

Most of the fieldwork we have conducted over the years were in communities like Napsaan where obtaining fresh food was a big challenge, and in our isolated village on Palawan that was because of the absence of a market. The few local *sari-sari* stores, windows in the wall of someone's home where we could purchase items, stocked only very basic durable and dry goods such as matches and kerosene, sugar and instant coffee. Every household grew their own vegetables, most of the men went fishing occasionally, and

people gathered shellfish during low tides. Surplus foods, such as extra fish that were caught, were processed at home for storage and consumption at a later date, usually by packing them in salt and air drying. We compensated for difficult access to food by buying rice in bulk, which was our staple three times per day, as was the local custom. We would purchase dried, salted fish or fresh fish from neighbors when they had some to spare, and we occasionally splurged and bought a chicken for the pot. When we visited the capital city we would purchase a few canned goods to provide occasional relief from the monotony of our rice-based diet.

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 United States, it was many years before I could face yellow squash with any enthusiasm. We also tried raising our own chickens and found our skills with animal husbandry were as pathetic as our farming. One hen was enticed away into the forest by the wild roosters that inhabited the hinterland, another was killed in the night by a snake and her chicks scattered and were lost. Clearly we were not cut out to be subsistence farmers like our neighbors. During our 2 years in Napsaan, it was frequently difficult to count on access to foods to provide the *ulam*, or savory side dish to accompany rice.

As part of my research involved collecting data on household food consumption and child nutrition, I was well aware that most local people's diet was far better than what we were consuming. Despite this awareness, we had neither the time nor the skill to become full time subsistence cultivators as were our neighbors, and so we had to make do with the limited food resources at our disposal. There were a few important interludes that gave us a respite from our dietary monotony, the most common of which was when someone had reason to throw a party. In rural Palawan instead of the person who has a birthday to celebrate being treated by their friends and family, the person who had the birthday celebrated by throwing a party, preparing lots of food, and inviting everyone around to help them mark the occasion. Poor families had very modest celebrations that may involve only their closest family members and consist of noodles cooked with vegetables (*pancit)* or tinned mackerel in sauce, but wealthier households would mark the occasion by slaughtering a pig as the centerpiece of the feast. Both the best and worst dishes we encountered were served at these feasts.

Slaughter of a pig for cooking at a party necessitated cooperation by people from neighboring households, as the butchering process was complicated, and no part of the pig was allowed to go to waste. The butchering was usually performed by the men, who would collect the blood and offal and turn it over to the women for preparation; then 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*. In this preparation the meat remains very succulent as it is naturally basted by the rendering fat of the pig as it cooked, and the outer skin became a crispy counterpoint to the meat. 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 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. While this is a local favorite, and a dish that I ate on many occasions, 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 thought 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. Women were not normally included in these parties, but if they happened to be close at hand, they would be invited to share in whatever food the men had prepared. There was a special classification for food served at these events, termed *pulutan*, which are finger foods to be eaten while drinking. Instead of the store-bought chips or pretzels that might be the fare for such occasions in the United States, *pulutan* was generally a strongly seasoned meat or seafood dish that counterbalanced the flavor of the beer or *ginebra San Miguel*, a Philippine gin. I have had *pulutan* that consisted of squid cooked in soy sauce and vinegar (*adobo*-style), or strongly seasoned fried chicken that were delicious treats, but on one memorable occasion I was offered *pulutan* that led to my third food taboo.

#3 TABOO DOG

In some parts of the Philippines, notably in the north of Luzon Island, far from Palawan, eating dogs is considered a delicacy. In Palawan dogs were not common fare, nor were dogs coddled house pets. Most dogs were fairly mangy beasts that largely fended for themselves, but were kept by households with the expectation that they provided protection. For this reason, dogs were given names that made them sound ferocious, such as *matapang* (brave, fierce) and, notably, Hitler. The risk of rabies in dogs was also well known, and this too led to people's ambivalent attitudes towards keeping dogs in the home.

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 their store window was in the central part of the village, so it was a frequent gathering place for people as they walked through the area. I recall many happy

conversations on the benches outside the window of their store and many language lessons as local people coached me to become proficient in the national language, Tagalog. 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* because 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! In fact, on earlier occasions, I had heard my neighbors refer to northerners disparagingly 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.

TABOO #

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. Fish was consumed when available, and on special occasions families would cook a chicken, but meat was rarely consumed because it was rarely available. There was no equivalent of a butcher or meat market, so everyone felt pangs of "meat hunger" as Richard Lee so poignantly discusses among the San people (Lee 1993).

Many families raised pigs, but these were intended as investments to be sold for profit when they reached maturity. These pigs were shipped to Puerto Princesa to be sold at market for a better price than they could ever fetch in the village. Other livestock were intended as working animals—there were a few oxen and water buffalos that were used to pull plows in cultivating irrigated rice fields or to pull a sledge or a cart. Unless an animal died of natural causes, such valuable animals would never be considered fair game for the cooking pot, so meat consumption was a rare and special treat.

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. 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. 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 preservations involve 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 with a "pig bomb." Our time in Palawan coincided with President Ferdinand Marcos' imposition of martial law, and guns and bullets were illegal. While a few households might have owned a hunting gun, these were kept under wraps and never used (to my knowledge). Hunting was a macho affair; 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."

The other strategy to obtain wild pig involved an ingenious explosive device called a "pig bomb," borrowing the English words to name this device. These were perhaps the original improvised explosive device (IED), not intended for targeting enemy humvees, but rather for marauding wild pigs. 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, which 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. We recall waking up with the sound of the explosion during the preharvest season and happily anticipating the first light, so we could go inquire whose pig bomb had been successful, and whether there was any fresh meat to purchase. While pig bombs were very ingenious, these were generally only used during the few weeks before and during the rice harvest, as these were the only times the wild pigs were lured out of the remote forests by the promise of cultivated foods to ravage.

The other wild animals that threatened to wreak havoc on farmers' fields were the monkeys and birds that also lived in the forests. Birds were only active during daylight hours, so for the few weeks of the harvest season many families would build a lean-to in their fields and camp there for the duration of the season. Children were out of school during this harvest holiday and would be put to work in the fields, scaring birds by waving their arms, and using slingshots to pelt birds with pebbles.

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 because they would be impaled. The snare was placed on an adjacent pole that 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.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to our editors for helpful suggestions in revising this paper, and to many students over the years who have been regaled with our tales of adventures in eating. I received very helpful feedback and comments on this paper from James and Pia Eder, Gina Cowell, Billy Garrett, David Brokensha, and my aunt and prolific author Miriam Chaikin.

Reference

Lee RB. 1993. The Dobe Ju/'hoansi. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

CHAPTER 4

From Hunger Foods to Heritage Foods: Challenges to Food Localization in Lao PDR

Penny Van Esterik

(2006)

"A commodity chain is a series of interlinked exchanges through which a commodity and its constituents pass from extraction or harvesting through production to end use" (Ribot 1998:307). The end of the commodity chain for a small basket of crisps made of Lao river algae purchased for 40,000 kip (around $4.00 U.S.) at a local market in Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), is my kitchen. But before I simply consume the algae chips, and their sweet counterparts, cassava chips, I want to place them in a broader interpretive framework than commodity chains and use them to interrogate the ethics of exotic foods. I do this first by placing these two food items in the context of Lao national food security, and then in the context of Southeast Asian culinary traditions. But the story of these chips is neither linear nor unambiguous. Nor are these food products centrally important to anyone's diet. They are marginal in the Lao diet where the chain begins and in the North American diet where it ends—marginal in multiple ways and in multiple contexts. It is their marginality I want to reflect upon in this chapter.

Under conditions of food insecurity and seasonal scarcity, Lao cooks—usually women—rely heavily on collecting wild foods from the forest. They make ingenious use of wild foods considered exotic by outsiders, such as crickets, green tree ant eggs, river algae, wild cassava, and wild yams. These regionally specific seasonal foods are not always part of the regular diet of the lowland Lao; we might refer to them as *hunger foods*—foods that act as insurance against hunger in times of seasonal or catastrophic food shortages.

This chapter argues that the rarer and harder these foods are for the Lao to obtain, the more valued they have become to North American and European chefs. How have seasonal hunger foods become heritage foods in the gourmet boutiques of Europe and North America? In the quest for new ingredients and new tastes for chefs and consumers, some importers have discovered elements of the Lao cuisine that can be sold as specialties in niche markets. These include products that are produced in the northern region of Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, like *khai pen* (river algae sheets), and products created out of cassava such as *khao kiep* (cassava crisps). These items have been redesigned to meet Western tastes. In California, where food boutiques and food banks stand side by side, these two Lao food items have begun to appear in specialty food shops and online shopping services, provisioners of yuppie chow.

Being Food Insecure

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), a landlocked country in Southeast Asia, is classified as a low-income, food deficit country. After decades of war, including fighting for independence from French colonial control and surviving the bombing inflicted by the American secret war in Laos, the country remains food insecure.

With a per capita income of around $400, Lao PDR is one of the poorest and least developed countries in Asia. This poverty is reflected in the nutritional status of its population. Forty percent of children under five are underweight, 41 percent stunted, and 15 percent wasted (Health Status of the People in Lao PDR, 2001). The prevalence of wasting among children increased to 15 percent in 2000, and the presence of chronic energy deficiency among adults was "alarmingly high (19 percent), even higher than reported during a previous survey in 1995 (14 percent)" (FAO country profile). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) country profile on Lao PDR, "the daily dietary energy supply per capita increased from 2030 kcal in 1968 to 2400 kcal in 1995." Almost 30 percent of the population is below the minimal level of dietary energy consumption. Household food insecurity is defined by the government as the inability to provide 2,100 calories per person per day. To reduce the number of poverty households, the government reduced the minimal dietary energy requirements to 1,983 calories per day (Millennium Development Goals 2004:6). Clearly there is a poor fit between the measurement of calories nationally and the hunger and malnutrition experienced by individuals in households.

Penny Van Esterik, "From Hunger Foods to Heritage Foods: Challenges to Food Localization in Lao PDR." In *Fast Food/Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System*, R. Wilk, ed. Lanham, MD: Altamira, pp. 83–96, 2006. Reprinted with permission.