

Asocena: History of Dog Meat-Eating in the Philippines

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Warning: Some parts of this article are graphically violent. The author has to write it the way it was described by those who witnessed it.

Curiosity does not kill

Who, when, where, and why did the dog meat-eating in the Philippines start? What is its cultural background? What is its implication in the identity of the Filipino nation? What are its effects on human beings? These are only some of the questions this paper will address along the way.

Some peoples of Latin America, China, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines eat dog meat as some peoples of Belgium, France and other European countries regard horse meat as a delicacy.

Various cultures view dog meat-eating in different ways. While it is said that famous actress Brigitte Bardot had accused the Koreans as “barbarians” because of their penchant for dog meat, Professor Yong Geun Ann of the Chungcheong College in Korea retaliated back with his pointing fingers at the French for dog meat-eating during the Franco-Prussian War.

Americans and other western cultures are shocked at viande de chevaline of Belgium and at the boucheries chevalines of France. They are as terrorized at the Philippines’ asocena or at Korea’s bo-shintang and boekum .

Besides Asians, some peoples of Latin America also eat dog meat. The ancient Aztecs of Mexico domesticate a hairless breed of dog called Xoloitzcuintli for their food consumption. This breed has become extinct nowadays.

Brigitte Bardot’s ceaseless campaign against horse meat-eating until her death was extremely difficult because its eating has already spread worldwide: Italians have the pastissada (boiled) and pizzeti di cavallo (pressurized horse feet); Japanese have the basashi (spread on bread), yakiniku (barbecue), and baniku (skewed horse meat); Dutch have paardenrookvlees (smoked horse meat for breakfast); Swiss have the fondue bourguignonne (ice cream from horse meat); and the Germans have the sauerbraten (sweet-sour braised horse meat as its traditional ingredient).

Debates in the Philippines as to the correctness of eating dog meat caught media attention when the Animal Welfare Act (Republic Act 8485) prohibiting killing of dogs and eating dog meat was passed into law in 1998. The issue has become murky that even President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo unknowingly asked Baguio City Mayor Braulio Yaranon while hosting a state dinner in her Baguio official residence The Mansion in 2006 New Year’s day: “Dog meat keeps you warm, does it?”

Dinner discussion strayed to dog meat when Mayor Yaranon was explaining how to grill gigantic one meter-winged bats in La Union. The President who hails from Pampanga known for exotic foods such as fried locusts, fermented crabs and roasted lizard, among others, apparently has no knowledge of the intricacies of eating dog meat and has even defended it based on her question.

Who, when and where did dog killing start in the Philippines?

Felix M. Keesing in his book *Taming Philippine Headhunters* traces dog killing from 6,000 to 8,000 years ago more or less in the Cordilleras. He says:

“Perhaps six to eight thousand years ago, according to Professor Beyer’s estimate, there came by sea in canoes a folk to whom he gives the rather formal name “Type A Indonesian” (page 43) ...The dog seems to be their only domesticated animal, and was apparently used – as it is today – for religious sacrifices and ceremonial feasting (page 45).

Long before Spain colonized the Philippines, our Malay ancestors had already been domesticating dogs for their personal needs. Another exposition reads:

“Culturally, the Malays were more advanced than the Negritos, for they possessed the Iron Age culture. They introduced into the Philippines both lowland and highland methods of rice cultivation, including the system of irrigation; the domestication of animals (dogs, fowls and carabaos)...”

Blair and Robertson’s *Philippine Islands* says that the natives had killed dogs during 17th century Spanish colonization. According to their book:

“..they get some gold, though in very small quantity, and with what they get in one way or another, they descend in peace to the towns nearest them to barter cows or cattle, and these are the ones they eat in their public gatherings with the aforesaid solemnity, since neither for these gatherings nor for their sustenance do they breed any kind of cattle or other living things whatsoever except some very wretched little dogs which we have often had a chance to see.”

William Henry Scott in his book *Discovery of the Igorots*, however, made no mention of dogs during rituals up north. He only mentions pigs, carabaos and cows that the Igorots slaughtered for offerings. They were a symbol of wealth. The more skulls of animals stuck on sticks or hang outside of houses, the wealthier the Igorots.

What Igorots most often slaughtered as offering in rituals were chickens and pigs in the recent past. Insides of opened up animals were analyzed intently based on the shapes of the internal organs and directions of the intestines. From this reading, they make a conclusion whether they will win or lose the battle.

However, Filipino American Historical Society founding president Dr. Virgilio R. Pilapil wrote in his essay Dogtown USA: An Igorot Legacy in the Midwest disclosed how the Igorots started to be known to eat dog meat in St. Louis World's Fair 1904.

This world fair was also called Louisiana Purchase Exposition to commemorate the 100th anniversary of USA's purchase of Louisiana from France. It was the biggest and longest of all expositions that occurred in the world during that time. Joining the seven-month exposition were 45 countries with representatives from 50 tribes who lived in 1,500 buildings that were built on 1,275 acres of land for six years.

Dr. Pilapil wrote that 1,100 Filipinos joined the Philippine Exhibit. Members of the Philippine delegation were Igorots who wore beautifully colored G-strings and later became known not only for their exotic dances with their gong beats but for their believed habit of eating dog meat. Dr. Pilapil further discloses:

"The head-hunting, dog-eating Igorots were the greatest attraction at the Philippine Exhibit, not only because of their novelty, the scanty dressing of the males and their daily dancing to the tom-tom beats, but also because of their appetite for dog meat which is a normal part of their diet.

The city of St. Louis provided them a supply of dogs at the agreed amount of 20 dogs a week, but this did not appear to be sufficient, as they had also encouraged local people to bring them dogs which they bought to supplement their daily needs.

The poaching of dogs became so common in the area near the Igorot Village such that the neighborhood was warned to watch for their dogs; even then, many dogs were disappearing in this neighborhood, angering and upsetting many people.

There were obviously many people who objected to the supplying of dogs to the Igorots, particularly the St. Louis Women's Humane Society, but there were also many people, perhaps much more, who sympathized with the Igorot's need for dog meat.

As one Missourian, who had been to the Philippines and realized the difficulty of not being able to eat the food that one is used to, noted, "Every dog has his day, and every man his meat." He donated 200 fat Missouri dogs to the Igorots!"

After this world fair experience, a small village in the southern part of Forest Park where the exposition in St. Louis, Missouri was held came to be known as Dogtown. This was later burned but another place, also in St. Louis, was renamed Dogtown.

High school students of Wydon Middle School in Dogtown baptized their annual yearbook as the Igorrote Yearbook in 1937. The Igorrote Football Team was also formed in 1974.

Dr. Pilapil likewise revealed that the word hotdog came from dog meat eating of the Igorots during the world fair. He further states in his essay:

"It first appeared at the St. Louis World's Fair among several other firsts such as the first ice cream cone, the first iced tea, the first Olympic Games in America (Third World Olympics), the first sliced bread, and the first coin changer. Even though many people will claim that the hot dog has been known for a long time before the St. Louis World's Fair, it is not so.

What was known, even as early as the late Middle Ages in Europe, was the making of sausages and it was a German butcher, Johann Georg Lahner, who developed prototypes in Frankfurt and later in Vienna, that were called frankfurter and wiener.

These franks, along with other types of sausages, were later brought to America by German immigrants in the nineteenth century. In New York, in 1900, a concessionaire sold a Lahner-type frank tie called a "Dachhund sausage" that was later sketched by a cartoonist in the form of a dachhund in a roll.

However, it was not until the St. Louis World's Fair that a sausage-on-a-bun was made up to be called the "hot dog" for the first time. It is evident that sausages were known for a long time and were called by various names, but it was the St. Louis World's Fair that gave the name "hot dog" to America.

Why was it called a hot dog instead of the already known names with which it has been associated? Was it because the sausage was made of dog meat? No, certainly not. The American public would just be horrified at the time to think of eating dog meat.

Was it then because the sausage was crafted to look like a dog or the bun shaped into the form of a dog? Again, the answer is no. Then why was it called a hot dog when there is nothing that could be associated with a dog in a hot dog? To me the answer is simple.

We have said earlier that St. Louis World's Fair was the greatest of expositions that there ever was. We also said that the Philippine Exhibit was the largest one at the Fair and was considered as a Fair within a Fair.

Then we also said that the Igorots were the top attraction at the Philippine exhibit, not only because of their primitive skimpy attire and their constant dancing, but also because of their dog-eating custom.

The city supplied them with dogs and they also bought dogs from the neighborhood, in addition to receiving donations of dogs from other sources, for their food supply. The people in the neighborhood near the Igorot Village were concerned, upset, and angered at times because of the disappearance of dogs in their neighborhood.

The people in the city of St. Louis and surrounding areas were engaged in an on-going debate about the use of dogs by the Igorots. This was evident in the newspapers of the day which carried regular news, letters, and comments concerning the eating of dogs by the Igorots.

In short, the atmosphere in and around the Fair and in the newspaper media was saturated by the thoughts of the dog-eating custom of the Igorots. Their dog-eating activities at the Fair had been referred to as the "Bow-Wow Feast" and we may look at it now as the first "Bow-Wow Feast" in America by the Igorots.

I have no doubt that the name “hot dog” was picked as a label for the sausage-on-a-bun to attract the attention of potential customers at the Fair by riding on the popularity of the eating of dogs by the Igorots, which had inspired the creation of the name.

Thus, it would appear that in the hot dog, the sausage is German, the sausage-on-a-bun is an American label inspired by the dog-eating custom of the Igorots.”

“We are Igorots but we do not eat dogs”

Philippine tinseltown analysts say that the victory of Marky Cielo of Mountain Province as the Ultimate Star struck Survivor of GMA’s Channel 7 in March 2006 can be traced to his pride in saying “Igorotak!” (I am an Igorot). Endearingly called Marky by his friends and Buknoy by his family, Cielo got the highest number of votes in the history of this television contest.

His being an Igorot was applauded but created a question among many Filipinos and people around the world: “Does he eat dogs?” Buknoy’s father, artist and educator Avelino Cielo gave a straightforward answer: “Hindi kami kumakain ng aso” (We do not eat dogs).

Earlier, Bing A. Dawang, Igorot editor of The Junction, a newspaper in Mountain Province, said not all Igorots eat dog meat. According to her article Dog Eating and my Culture:

“As an Igorot, I vehemently do not accept dog eating as my culture. I was not raised to eat dogs. Dog meat is not a part of my diet, nor has it ever been. I find it insulting that Igorots are branded as dog-eaters, not only in the Philippines but abroad. It is a shame, and because Igorots are Filipinos, dog-eating is a Philippine national shame. ”

Dawang further explained that Igorots slaughter dogs for spiritual practices done in solemn rituals much like the early pagans. Contrary to the present-day “pulutan” that goes with beer or wine because of the general belief that dog meat gives heat to the body, this is only done when a life-and-death situation arises such as during battles or conflicts.

Dawang disclosed: “It is true that in ancient times some Igorot tribes butchered their dogs before going to war. It was the belief of the then pagan Igorot that the spirits of the sacrificed dogs would guard them in battle. At times of tragedy, the family dog might also have been sacrificed to appease the spirits, and to assign the soul of the dog to guard the spirits of the living family members.”

Proof that the Igorots love their dogs is their great mourning when they offer their dogs in the solemn ritual. They deem their dogs as a sacrificial offering to cleanse the clan of foreboding death. Dawang continued: “Dog sacrifice always connoted bad luck, tragedy, or death. When a family butchered a dog, who had to be the family dog, not just any dog bought from nowhere, the family was not feasting but either mourning, in extreme pain, or involved in some other activity connected with death.

Dogs were not butchered as drinkers’ fare, nor as a daily or regular part of the Igorot diet. Igorot families much preferred to avoid the circumstances which might lead them to sacrifice their dog.”

Another Igorot, Reverend Moreno Tuguinay, a former priest in Sagada, calls the ritual dog offering daw-es. He affirms Dawang’s claim and says that Igorot ancestors sacrifice their family dogs in time of tribal wars because they have to cleanse the warrior’s body splattered or dirtied by the enemies’ blood.

Kankanaey and the Ibaloi tribes of Benguet also do the same. The number of tribal wars and internal conflict in the Cordilleras is directly proportional to the number of slaughtered family dogs: The more tribal wars in their areas, the higher the number of killed family dogs, according to Taguinay.

Mountain Province Vice-Governor Wasing Sacla in his book Treasury of Beliefs and Home Rituals describes dogs as “sacrificial animals” in a healing ritual called tomo. The Kankanaeys in the northwestern part of Benguet perform this ritual to prevent the spirit of dead enemies in the battlefield from following or haunting the living. In this process, the living can go home straight to their waiting tribes. Sacla notes:

“Since blood was spilled, the tomo was performed to cleanse or purify those who participated directly or indirectly in the battle. For the tomo, the ritual animal is the dog on the belief that it barks and, therefore, can drive away the haunting spirits.”

To perform the tomo, five men are chosen to wear weaved bamboo crown decorated with feathers and then arm themselves with itak or bolo and spears. The manbunong or mambunong, a native priest, instruct the five men to go on an expedition – in drama form – and hack the enemies represented by pine trees. The supposed to be head of the expedition strikes his spear through the trunk of pine tree. Other four representative men cut the branches of the pine tree to symbolize cutting the enemies dead.

How to cook asocena

The term asocena first came to use in the 1980s. The word became popular when a movie entitled Asucena written by Enrique Ramos and directed by Carlos Siguion-Reyes was shown in 2000. The film is about a pet dog brought to a butcher by a child’s father. It is also a popular word among the low strata of the Philippine society as men without jobs locally called istambay (from English word stand-by) usually cook asocena as their main fare to go with ice-cold beers or gin along street corners or stores by the road.

Through the years, asocena became a specialty in Baguio City, Pampanga, Iloilo and other parts of Luzon and Visayas – despite its being illegal as enshrined in Republic Act 8485 or Animal Welfare Act. Dog-meat eaters describe it as red-whitish meat with thin fats that does not look like beef, neither pork nor chicken. A Baguio restaurant discreetly has asocena written in its menu. Filipino istambays usually cook asocena this way:23

1. Strangle the dog from behind by surprise. Do this swiftly to prevent the dog from biting. Gag its mouth. Throw the dog in a waiting jeepney, tricycle or van. Drive as fast to avoid apprehension. When accosted

- though, bribe the barangay tanod or police with your crispy Php 500 bill. Should you bought the dog from a nearby area from an owner who is in dire need of money, put the dog in a sack. Carry the sack on your back.
2. Remove the dog from the sack. Tie the dog in a post. Do not hear its barks, cries and howls for dear life. Hit its head with a two-by-two inch piece of lumber with a nail at the end. Do this several times until it is dead.
 3. Hang the lifeless dog on a tree branch or post upside down. Slit its throat. Place a basin underneath to catch blood. Sprinkle rice and salt on blood until it solidifies. (Blood of black dogs is a potent medicine against tuberculosis, says a folk belief in Negros.)
 4. Burn the dog coat with a flame thrower. Release the lifeless dog from the post. Shave until its smooth white skin shows.
 5. Slice to pieces. Wash.
 6. Put the dog meat in a kawa or a big pan. Boil in vinegar for an hour.
 7. Add a little water and sprinkle salt. Do not mix yet. Let it stand for a few more minutes.
 8. Cook again in low, cooking fire. Add potatoes, soy sauce and sprinkle with black pepper.
 9. Pour tomato sauce, tomato paste, yellow and green peas and garnish with plenty of laurel leaves.
 10. Serve with plenty of ice-cold beers or gin.

Call it scary, violent or embarrassing for local governments – but mere words cannot express how inhuman and undogly, rather ungodly, this dog killing that has been going on for years. It has spread widely not only in Ilocos, Pangasinan, Pampanga or Bulacan but has also reached Batangas to as far as Iloilo.

This time, however, dog killing is no longer a solemn offering to drive away avenging spirits but has become an every weekend way of life that feeds on man's greed for pleasure.

Despite the promulgation of Animal Welfare Act that prohibits violation of animal rights including killing and eating dogs, the wet section of Baguio City Market remains to sell dog meat though discreetly. A law in 1920 declaring dog meat as "hot meat" for the rabies it may have did not deter dog meat eaters from continuing to violate it.

Dog killing has been done openly with even the supposed authorities to implement the law such as local village officials and policemen violating it during their drinking sprees with istambays and local people.

Linis-Gobyerno (Clean Government), an NGO in the Philippines, estimates that 290,000 dogs are being killed in the country for asocena yearly. It is a multi-million peso business that earns dog meat traders an average of Php 174 million annually.

Conclusion: Cultural evolution, health and poverty

The concept of dog meat-eating during this 21st century has been corrupted and in most cases no longer in accordance with the intention that our early Igorot ancestors had. Through the years, the solemnity of the ritual has lost among those who have a penchant for meat eating combined with convenient excuses such as 'dog meat goes well with beer or gin', "it is cheap" or that "it keeps the body warm."

Commercialism has obscured its traditional meaning as dog meat profiteers and eaters sell and kill dogs for money and pleasure.

Nita Hontiveros-Lichauco, president of Philippine Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), says the Cordilleran people love their dogs because they guide them in their hunting in the mountains. There have been many instances of pet dogs saving their humans and have the intelligence of a three-year old human being, according to studies. Dogs can feel, hear and smell 50 times more than humans can and that they save humans most of the time.

"The sacred tradition of the Cordillerans has been commercialized in the past 20 years," observes Linis-Gobyerno, an NGO based in Baguio City.

Bing Dawang, an Igorot editor, emphasizes that this kind of "cultural evolution" has implications to the Filipino citizenry as a whole. She likens dog killing to headhunting as she explains:

"Igorot culture has greatly changed since 1904. Headhunting, for example, was also part of the Igorot culture and way of life a hundred years ago. We now recognize and reject that practice as murder. This is adaptation. This is cultural evolution."

Dog meat traders also capitalize on poverty as they sell dog meat cheaper than pork, beef and chicken. A whole carcass of dog being sold from Php 300 up to Php 500 can feed 20 drunkards and their unsuspecting families. It may even be gotten for free when the dog is stolen in the neighborhood, accidentally went curiously out of the gate or totally gone astray. Dog meat eaters are usually poor people who cannot afford to buy the more expensive kind of meat, according to a general impression.

In Baguio City that has become a melting pot of many cultures, however, the cold temperature is made as a reason for eating dog meat. This was perhaps the reason why the Igorots ate dog meat at St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 not knowing of the implication they will create in the future. Or maybe food had been scarce during their seven-month stay in that US territory. It was recorded that two Filipino exhibitors died because of extreme cold and undisclosed disease during this world fair.

The western and local media reported on this dog meat-eating at the exhibit essentially drumbeating what they perceive as exotic from the point of view of strangers who do not know the intricacies of the Igorot culture. On the other hand, dog meat eaters who do not know the real meaning and sanctity of the tradition made a counter attack branding those who pick on them for their dog meat eating habit as cultural imperialists. This "cultural imperialism", dog meat eaters defend, has been another western imposition using as vantage point their own experience, standards in food habit and limited environment.

Unbeknownst to many – Filipinos and other nationalities – Igorots perform dog killing as a solemn ritual to save their lives, a cultural tradition that was misinterpreted to be just dog meat-eating per se stripped of its sanctity and depth by greed for profit and pleasure of and for the flesh.

Cultural tradition of foot binding in China is no longer practiced nowadays freeing girls and women of this age-old bondage; Clitoridectomy had already been banned in African and nearby influenced regions saving many girls of extreme pain and agony; Forced or arranged marriages or widow burning was also prohibited in India and other Asian countries; Same with the Igorots and other Filipino groups' headhunting tradition that was stopped decades ago. If this headhunting had stopped, dog killing may also be stopped through time. Some dog killers and dog eaters whom police apprehended falsely hide under the cloak of cultural tradition or guise of poverty. But they cannot hide the fact that while the number of tribal wars and Igorot conflicts has gone down in the past years, dog meat consumption has jumped up high not only in Baguio but also anywhere around the country.

It has been affecting how Filipinos relate to their families, to the people in the community, to the animals-dogs in particular, and to the environment in general. An egging question that can guide people in choosing the food to be eaten is: What is our intention in eating dog meat or any other food for that matter?

There are concepts and principles – and long forgotten history – in every food served on the table.

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