

Eating my Best friend: Empty Icon and Competing Discourses on Dog Meat Consumption in the Philippines

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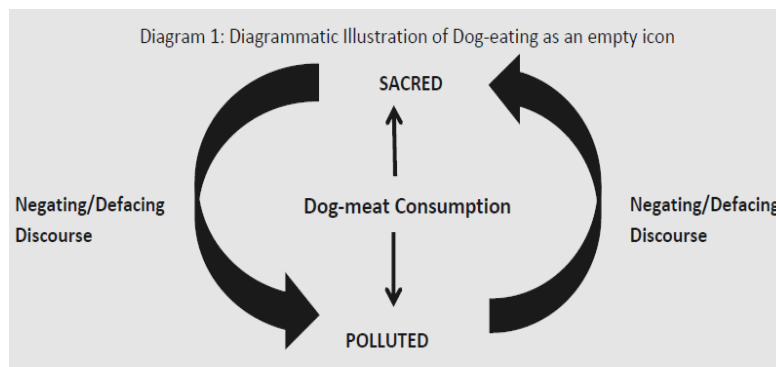
Abstract. This paper explores how dog-meat consumption in the Philippines serves as an empty icon for varied social discourses. By utilizing structural hermeneutics of the Strong Program and Ernesto Laclau's concept of empty signification, this research locates dog and dog eating as empty signifiers that function as a battleground for competing discourses about Philippine identity, tradition and culture. The debate, however diverse, is informed by a cultural code that positions dog eating in a polarized image as a 1) pollutant of legal system *or* marker of basic rights, and 2) symptom of past culture or signifier of 'authentic' contemporary Filipino identity. This paper also notes how binary codes could work as an analytic tool that is socially contingent and free-floating.

1. Introduction

Can food serve as a signifier of how a nation understands its history and tradition? Does food habit such as dog-meat consumption shed light on the intricacy of changing Philippine tradition and culture? In this paper, I explore dog-meat consumption in the Philippines by considering how various discourses on animal rights and cultural authenticity reflect the bigger and more contentious debate about the proper constitution of Filipino tradition. I juxtapose these discourses with an analytic framework that is situated between the *binary code* of the *Strong Program* and the concept of *empty icon* to surface a historically grounded and structural explanation of dog-meat eating.

Scholars have long recognized that culture is inextricably linked to food; although their assumptions as to how they are related either oscillate between an explanation in terms of deep structural rules i.e. Mary Douglas (1988) & Marshall Sahlins (1976) or through the transformation of social and economic institutions in history i.e. Sydney Mintz (1996). While earlier works were successful in elucidating the function of deep codes and the historicity of food consumption, the discursive turn in social sciences has ushered in another aspect of food that could open up new grounds for social analysis. With diverse explanatory discourses, how do social actors understand dog-meat consumption? What is the relationship among different discursive frames with one another? Within this conceptual gap, I offer my own framework by marrying the binary code of cultural sociology and Ernesto Laclau's (1985) floating signification to explain how food in general and dog-meat consumption in particular function as signifiers of various discourses on Philippine culture (see Diagram 1). Following Laclau (1985), I consider dog-meat consumption as an empty object or an icon, whose meaning is derived through an endless negation of various discourses about Filipino culture. The

negation takes an implicit mudslinging among involved stakeholders through a portrayal of the enemy as polluted and evil while projecting one's discourse as sacred and pure. To use a metaphor, dog-meat consumption is similar to an empty street wall where people can openly write their opinions or contest someone else's ideas by defacing them.



1.1 Methodology

Understanding competing discourses is possible by interpreting their empirical traces in newspaper articles. While each article reflects the subjective understanding of a journalist, his/her opinions are mirror images of the on-going contestation of ideas about dog-meat consumption. The journalist is a small reflection of the horizon of meaning that alters the shape of public opinion (Gadamer 1989). Thus, newspaper articles, or any written works for public consumption, are surface expressions of politicized opinions and textual summary of opposing public sentiments. Their interpretation is a way to trace the curve of social discourses (Geertz 1973) as they are inscriptions and direct fixations of social meanings (Ricoeur 1970). I have to emphasize, however, that public discourses do not necessarily refer to ideas that every member of a community shares. Alexander (2003) clarifies that they refer to structures of signs, constructed out of deep cultural principles, which can influence policies and individual behavior.

This research interprets selected newspaper articles published in major national and regional broadsheets in the Philippines. Two newspapers have national circulation (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *Manila Bulletin*) and two others are regional papers (*Baguio Midland Courier & LinisBayan*) with weekly publication in the Northern provinces. The selected articles were published from 2002 to 2012.

2. Interpreting Dog Consumption

2.1 Dog and Ritual

Dog occupies an important role in the rituals of indigenous peoples (IP) in Northern Philippines. Death, accident and illness due to witchcraft require the performance of community rituals in which members of the village symbolically command a dog to seek revenge for an aggrieved person (Lacbawan & Dao-ines 2008). This link between human beings and dogs is based on a cosmology that treats the human soul as intimately connected, if not similar, with dogs. Even if a dead person cannot physically return to life to avenge his death, the people can summon his 'spirit' by performing the *dao-es* (ritual for revenge). His soul, in the form of a dog, is ritually provoked to curse the person who has done him wrong until that person dies.

Rituals, such as *dao-es*, illustrate how actions are made not as separate symbolic entities but as an outcome of peoples' interaction with non-humans. However, the religious element of dog is drawn out of the picture upon the entry of market capitalism. In most Philippine cities, particularly those situated in the northern region, dogs become business commodities for restaurateurs. About 200, 000 dogs are slaughtered annually for restaurants and private consumption. These results in serious debates among animal rights advocates and other groups that separately argue for the recognition of dog eating as illegal or an important marker of Filipino heritage.

2.2 Authenticity in Filipino culture

In Cecile Afable's (2004) article *Dog are Man's Bestfriend*, she links dog eating to culture and human rights.

The International Body Group, who are complaining against dog trade in our areas, should go to Taiwan and Korea, where dog meat is a daily fare to them. It is a *national delicacy*. Eating dog meat to us is *part* of our culture and we do not tolerate anybody especially a foreign supported group to come and legislate against our culture. It is a *human right* and we can take this up against them to the *United Nations* as a violation (p. 1, emphasis is mine).

Equating dog eating as an expression of culture and human rights mirrors the larger debate about the place of indigenous communities in Filipino identity. Although the country has achieved its independence in 1898, its indigenous groups have never 'gained' such freedom due to their lingering minority status and misunderstood cultural practices (Mander & Tauli-Corpuz 2008). By describing dog eating as part of human rights, Afable provides a cultural object that denies the 'incivility' of IP and relates the practice as part of *national* Filipino delicacy. She accomplishes this by overtly portraying dog eating as '*part of our culture*' and cites the international community as an institution that ensures the respect for human rights. What is originally considered as an indigenous becomes part of the cultural repertoire that now defines and unites a heterogeneous country. As an expression of identity, dog eating is not a mundane practice that foreign groups can castigate anytime, as it symbolizes the *sanctity* of Philippine culture. Such a view coincides with an opinion article published by the *Manila Bulletin*:

Eating of dog meat is part of northern tribes' culture, and sometimes it is a gesture of hospitality when a man butchers a dog and offers dog meat-delicacies to his visitors (Guimbatan 2007: 1).

On the other hand, embracing dog eating as a Filipino heritage is a bold expression that is impossible to claim in the earlier part of the 20th century. This was due largely to the prevailing colonialist attitude that downgraded Filipino practices as vestiges of a barbaric pre-colonial civilization (Salvador 2005). Modernist narratives did not coincide harmoniously with the cultural contour of earlier Filipino communities. Nevertheless, the colonial project forcibly imposed Western ideals of aesthetics and appropriate taste by banishing uncivilized culture, such as dog eating. Writing in Madrid in 1889, the Filipino *ilustrado*, Isabelo De Los Reyes, even described dog eating as an expression of a beastly attitude that has inflicted the people of northern Philippines. For him, and for other educated Filipinos at that time, *Las Islas Filipinas* has to embrace the culture of *Madre Espana* if it wants to move forward and attain progress. While dog eating had been categorically considered as a polluted element of earlier Filipino culture, an important shift in nationalist rhetoric, which has been taking place since the 1970s, allows the reinterpretation of pre-colonial practices as symbols of 'authentic' Filipino heritage. Afable's article is part of this nationalist ripple that has taken root in Philippine public discourse. It elevates dog eating into the on-going search for traditions that

enable the collective imagining of an ideal Filipino community.

2.3 Polluting the Enemy

Interpreting the claims of other groups as polluted is another strategy that supporters of dog eating use to verbalize a defense for dog meat consumption. Take for instance how the first article describes organizations that salvage dogs as being ‘paid’ by foreign groups. ‘Paying’ someone to accomplish a task could denote two meanings: either the person is sincere in performing the job or simply doing it for the monetary reward. The latter could also extend to violating public trust by succumbing easily to an evil person who pays someone to create chaos.

Another article puts a more blatant description of these foreign-funded groups as *anti-Filipino* and *unpatriotic*.

There should be an office whose responsibility it is to monitor foreign NGOs operating (doing business) in our country, perhaps there is one, although I would suppose that most of us would not know where to check and or verify on this foreign NGOs. Very often even, a lot of us Filipinos seem to love *patronizing* some of this *a_sholes*. It is bad enough that our country is full of scammers and worse to get flocked up by a fellow Filipino, but to get taken for a ride by a foreign national in our own country? Normally, this piece of white shit who tried to put a fast one on us would often be aided by some willing Filipino accomplice (Farres 2002: 1).

The vulgar words and outright portrayal of ‘fellow Filipinos’ as unpatriotic transform the whole debate into a question of loyalty and betrayal. Those who allow foreigners to castigate Filipino culture are blinded by money and betray their own heritage. Likewise, the construction of an ‘accomplice’ is not an ambivalent figure but a polluted persona who permits foreigners to do their dog saving agenda in the Philippines.

2.4 Barbaric Dog

While dog eating is understood as a signifier of Filipino heritage, those who claim otherwise follows a form of discourse that approaches dog eating from a perspective that resembles a combination of colonialist and universalists understanding. For instance, *LinisBayan*, the most ardent group that lobbies for animal rights, links dog eating to savagery, barbarism and murder. In an article written by its director for a local paper, dog meat consumption is compared to the pre-colonial practice of headhunting.

Even if we follow (although not admitting) the dog eaters argument that dog eating is part of the Igorot culture, still it is one of those supposed part of the culture that needs to be changed. Headhunting was part of the Igorot culture and way of life a hundred years ago. However that had to be scrapped because that is savagery, and that is no longer allowed by our laws – that is murder...This is adaptation. This is cultural evolution. We discard the bad ones, and we adapt the good ones from other cultures. Definitely, I would not want to remain savage and disrespectful (Bawang 2003: 1).

In contrast to the first two articles, the writer frames the practice as an element of past culture that must be ‘vanquished’ if the country wishes to ‘evolve’ and attain progress. Such a narrative is not new, as Filipino intelligentsias in Spain had utilized this modernist notion to support the expansion of Spanish control. What is different in this article, however, is the portrayal of the other camp as backward and resistant to changes. They chose to remain ‘savage’ and disrespectful of those who want to move forward and forget their barbaric history. But what is this ‘vision’ that this group tries to achieve by forgetting vestiges of the past i.e. dog eating? The answer lies in the next article.

2.5 Illegal Dog vs. Universal Rule

Understanding dog eating from a legal framework is the ‘cure’ to distill the ‘uncivilized’ consumption of dog meat. Such an argument couches itself in state laws and challenges the practice as cruelty to animals. In an article published by the influential *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, one gets a glimpse of how dog eating is pictured as a violation of animal rights.

Trading in dog meat has been illegal in the Philippines since 1998 under the Animal Welfare Act which states that no animals other than cattle, pigs, goats, sheep, poultry, rabbits, carabaos, horses, deer and crocodiles may be killed for food... Violators face imprisonment of six months to two years, or a fine of not less than P1,000 (Yap 2012: 1).

Compared to Afable, who cites the international community (UN), this article takes the national state law to castigate and brand dog eating as illegal. This inversion brings the debate outside the question of culture and human rights, and puts it within a frame where animals possess inherent rights against all forms of abuses like dog eating.

3. Analysis: Dog in Deep Structures

Alexander (2003) argues that all facets of human life are guided by deep cultural codes. Apart from the subjective intention of actors and shared public meaning (Weber 2001), deep cultural codes (objective, non-public meanings) also serve as causal mechanism of human actions (Mannheim 1968). Drawing from the works of Emile Durkheim (1915), Alexander claims that the sacred-profane binary codes are cultural structures that inform the shape of public discourses. To extend this to our discussion, the sacred-profane binary is the inherent cultural logic that shapes public opinions. Although we can see various discourses in the debate, the curve of mudslinging takes a polarized structure, which pits one (sacred/good) against the other (evil/polluted/backward) in an endless process of negation (see Figures 2 & 3).

Figure 2: Binaries used by dog-eating supporters

Dog-eating		vs.	Groups Against Dog-eating	
Sacred	Practice		Polluted and Evil Accomplice	
Marker of Culture			Marker of Corrupted Filipino	
Source of Pride			Source of Shame	

Figure 3: Binaries of anti-dog meat consumption

Groups Against Dog-eating		vs.	Dog-eating	
Follow Animal Rights			Element of Barbarism	
Progressive			Backward	
Open to Change			Static	
Universal			Local	

What is sacred from one camp is inverted into something polluted or backward by another camp. Dog eating, from the vantage of Afable, represents the sacred culture of Filipinos, while, for the supporters of animal welfare, it is a lingering reminder of barbarism and backwardness of Filipino heritage.

This endless negation presents an illustration of how signification is not a fixed process. Instead, the signified is an empty icon or form that absorbs and expels any signifier according to the subjective intentions of actors. Dogs in general and dog eating in particular are empty icons that could be twisted and redefined as conduits of diverse discourses about Philippine culture, identity, heritage and even legal system. We can also extend this argument to the deep cultural binary codes that become iconic representation in the Strong Program. The

sacred and profane are forms that are socially contingent and not universal structures with fixed meaning. What is sacred for one group could be construed as evil and polluted for others.

One of the criticisms lodged against the use of binary code as a frame for analysis questions its apparent lack of factual evidence. Critiques posit that Durkheim's binary opposite may not be empirically grounded as it was conceived purely as a heuristic device. Others also criticize the proclivity to translate *profane* into evil or the opposite of *sacred*. Jack Goody (1962), for example, argues that among the Lo Daga of northern Ghana, the strict division between sacred and profane does not exist because they do not distinguish natural from supernatural world. Perhaps such assertions are true but they do not necessarily deny the use of binary as a tool for analysis. I argue that a missing element must be integrated in Durkheim's sacred-profane to explain how people create and understand meanings.

By following Laclau's explanation of how words and actions become empty receptacles for signification, we can also consider the binary as floating words that do not possess inherent meaning apart from their oppositional nature. As they traverse the landscape of human interaction, people associate meanings to each side of the polarity. In dog-meat consumption, the sacred is linked to something nationalistic or an expression of animal rights. Take note that *sacred* does not necessarily imply a religious or spiritual dimension but anything that arouses and strengthens the collective conscience of a group. Dog is a sacred pet because it allows the realization of an emotional attachment, and anything that hinders such bond is deemed evil or polluted. Again, profane or mundane could mean ordinary, taken for granted meanings or it could refer to acts that negate the actualization of intended meanings (i.e. animal rights or 'authentic' tradition). Hence, we should not always equate sacred with something 'religious' since it can assume different form of sacredness depending on the context or *script* of social encounters. The contexts or scripts in this paper are the discourses that shape peoples' understanding of dog-meat consumption. *Respecting animal rights, achieving authentic tradition, modernity* and *right-to-culture* are scripts that mold how Filipinos approach dogs.

4. Conclusion

Few months ago, the Philippine Congress passed the third and final reading of an amended Animal Welfare Right Act (Boncocan 2013). The House Bill 6893 seeks steeper punishment by penalizing the violator with two-year imprisonment for every maltreated animal and a fine amounting to USD 2400. Few hours after the amendments, the Congress convened another session to reiterate their commitment of protecting indigenous groups amidst the widespread developmental aggression committed by the state and corporations. The Congress used the Indigenous Peoples Right Act (IPRA) of 1997 to push for sustainable and responsible mining in ancestral lands. Interestingly, the IPRA also demands the recognition of all cultural practices like dog-meat consumption.

The existence of two contradictory laws is not at all peculiar but a microcosm of a changing and diverse Philippines. The diversity becomes even more obvious as we study how people understand dog eating. One group considers it barbaric and backward while others treat as a marker of authentic tradition. This research recognizes that binary codes serve as an organizing structure over diverse discourses on dog eating. Moreover, it illustrates how the endless debate elevates the dog, not simply as an animal, but an empty icon that serves as medium through which one witnesses the contestation of Philippine culture and identity.

However, this paper does not deny how institutionalized power can fix meaning to an icon. As Laclau (1985) has argued, the emptiness allows the powerful to glue permanent meanings to icons. In a process, he calls *hegemony*; the fuzziness of human action is arrested by the imposition of order by interested groups, such as the state. This fixation of meaning is

another interesting topic for sociological investigation.

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