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Balut

Fertilized Duck Eggs And Their Role In Filipino Culture

MARGARET MAGAT

"Whoever discovered balut stumbled onto the fact that food has changing excellences (taste, texture) as it evolves and develops. Thus between the egg and the full-grown duck, there are stages that bear exploring—and eating. And the Filipino has explored them and evolved the culture of balut."

Doreen Fernandez in "The World of Balut"

This essay illustrates how consumption of one particular food, fertilized duck eggs, can reveal the interplay between food, beliefs, culture and history. Called balut in the Philippines or hot vit lon in Vietnam, fertilized duck eggs are also familiar in the food customs of Chinese, Laotians, Cambodians and Thais. Socio-cultural factors, not just nutritional reasons dominate its consumption. Using historical and literary sources, as well as fieldwork data culled from 25 balut eaters, two balut distributors and a duck farmer as well, I will explore what it is about balut that makes eating it desirable. Why ingest something that may already have bones, feathers and a beak? For Filipino and other Asian Americans, there are alternative sources of protein, (which is not the case for many in the Philippines who do not have the luxury of choice).

"Eating is usually a more complicated function than just taking nourishment" wrote food scholar Kurt Lewin. The complexities involved in the eating of balut, or any other food for that matter, has since been explored by a number of folklorists and anthropologists. Food scholarship has ranged from food as a semiotic system (Theophano 1991; Douglas 1966 & 1972; Weismantel 1988), to how consumption is tied to psychological and economic factors (Lewin 1942; Richards 1932), to the way food defines ethnicity (Brown and Mussell 1984; Georges 1984; Kalčik 1984). However, much of the debate between food scholars is between the materialists, led by Marvin Harris and Marshall Sahlins, and
symbolic theorists such as Mary Douglas and Claude Levi-Strauss. Harris agrees that food may have symbolic meaning, but before anything else, “food must nourish the collective stomach before it can feed the collective mind” and whatever foods are eaten, “are foods that have a more favorable balance of practical benefits over costs than foods that are avoided (bad to eat)” (Harris 1985:15). For Douglas, however, food embodies a code, and the messages in it can be seen in “the pattern of social relations” (1972:61). Who is being excluded or included can be gleaned from the food categories and meal patterns; for example, drinks are reserved for strangers and acquaintances while meals are for intimate friends and family (Douglas 66).

In the case of balut, both symbolic and material explanations can illuminate the reasons why people would eat embryonic duck eggs. Although it is always eaten boiled, and never raw, eating balut requires the consumption of something in the fetal stage, and psychological, cultural, and socio-economic factors must all be considered. Generally sold late at night or early morning, balut is consumed by Filipino males for its alleged aphrodisiac properties, while women eat it for reasons such as energy and nutrition, but never as a sexual stimulant. As one informant put it bluntly, balut as an aphrodisiac is “para lang sa lalaki ito” (it is just for men).

Eaten usually as a snack, and not a formal food, fertilized duck eggs have been described to be as “popular in Manila as hotdogs in the United States” (Maness 1950:10). Although at one point, balut may have been prevalent only in the Luzon region, and not in other areas of the Philippines, it has been hailed the country’s “national street food” (Fernandez 1994:11). Balut is so deeply embedded in Philippine culture that it has inspired everything from a hit record song about the distinctive howling calls of balut vendors in the late night and early morning to dishes in Filipino haute cuisine. Indeed, the love affair of Filipinos with fertilized duck eggs has been carried by immigrants to the United States.

Estimating the number of balut businesses in the U.S. today is difficult. But wherever there are Filipinos, one can usually find balut. In California and Hawaii, businesses cater specifically to balut eaters. It is also easy to make balut in homes, where it is then sold to friends and co-workers. From Alaska to Rome, wherever Filipinos migrate for work, balut may be found.

Numerous articles on exotica have remarked upon balut, but now there seems to be a genuine interest in the eating of balut in its cultural context. The last decade has seen a flurry of articles on balut, including balut in Denver, Colorado (Kessler 1995); balut in Temecula, California
(Hennessey 1995); interest in making balut by a Wellington, New Zealand duck farm (Lane 1995); balut served in Manila’s cemeteries during the Day of the Dead (McIntosh 1994); and how Filipinos in Hong Kong eat it (Sheridan 1995). The New York Times ran a short story on the Filipinos’ ongoing relationship with balut, describing it as a “national passion” (Mydans 1997).

According to the 2000 census, Filipino Americans number close to 1 million in California, the second biggest Asian group in the U.S., second to the Chinese Americans. Not surprisingly, the state is a leader in balut production. During the course of my fieldwork for my master’s thesis, from which this article is derived, I visited Metzer Farms, which supplies an estimated fifty percent of the balut sold in the Bay Area. The farm also sells balut to other immigrant groups such as the Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Chinese. In addition, Thais, Malays and Indonesians are known to eat it. Based on the closest Thai transliteration, balut is called khaj luuk or khay luuk (same in Laotian). For Cambodians, the closest transliteration in the Khmer language that refers to embryonic eggs is pomtiakhong or pomtiakong. Another spelling based on the sound of the word is poomgpiakoong.

WHAT IS BALUT?

Fertilized duck eggs sold as balut in the U.S. range from 16 to 20 days in age. The older the egg, the larger the chick and the more pronounced its feathers, bones, and beak. An embryo at 17 days has beak and feathers which are more developed at 20 days. Normally, after being fertilized, a chick hatches after 26 to 28 days of incubation.

The taste of the egg also depends on the breed of the laying duck. Different breeds of ducks supposedly produce balut varying in taste, with Muscovy ducks being hailed by some as the “cream of the crop” (Freeman 1996:53). The kind of balut sold in the U.S. is made from duck eggs. Chicken eggs may be made into balut as well, but duck eggs are preferred by the majority of Filipino Americans since they are larger and thought to be better in taste.

But whether the fertilized egg is chicken or duck, there are two types of balut. One is called mamatong by Filipinos. Mamatong balut has the embryo floating on top of the white and yolk and the consumer can easily detect it. Roughly translated to mean “the float,” mamatong occurs between 14 to 16 days. The second is balut sa puti where the embryo is wrapped by a thin, whitish membrane and one cannot tell whether there is an embryo or not. In balut sa puti, the embryo is hidden by the albu-
men’s white film. Balut sa puti is 17 to 18 days old and it is the preferred favorite of Filipinos in the U.S. and in the Philippines. A folk belief in the Philippines lets people know if an egg has developed into matamot or balut sa puti. One takes a balut egg and drops it in water. If it floats, it is matamot, but if it sinks, it is balut sa puti.

Just how good and fresh a balut is after it has been boiled can be determined by its broth, called “soup” by balut eaters. After cracking a hole in the wide part of the shell, the consumer usually sips the broth before he or she eats any part of the tiny chick and remaining yolk. If the balut is good, its soup has a sweet, clean taste. Fresh balut can be good for ten days to two weeks. Cooked balut if stored in the refrigerator will last for as long as a month. But the longer the balut is in the refrigerator, the more likely that its liquid will be dried out.

Nguyen is a balut distributor in Orange County. He has been familiar with fertilized duck eggs (which he calls balut instead of hot vit lon), since he was a young child in Vietnam watching his father down three eggs with cognac during dinner. Nguyen says there are not too many big duck farms in Vietnam. If there are some, the eggs are usually hatched for the young. The hot vit lon that are available are boiled and sold by vendors who resemble the Filipino sellers, crying “hot vit lon” much like the way Filipino balut sellers sound. The eggs are sold in the afternoon, after work. However, Nguyen claims that hot vit lon is not believed in Vietnam to be an aphrodisiac. But now in the U.S., he and other Vietnamese believe it after hearing about it from Filipino friends.

EATING BALUT

In the U.S., balut is usually sold uncooked in Asian markets and sometimes cooked in Filipino restaurants. Once bought, raw balut is prepared by cooking it in boiling water for 20 to 30 minutes. It is eaten warm and never cold, and can be eaten by itself or accompanied with condiments. Filipinos eat it with salt, vinegar or soy sauce, while many Vietnamese Americans like Nguyen eat it with a green, mint-like herb called rau ram as well as salt and pepper. Nguyen also uses a spoon to eat the egg like many Vietnamese do, in contrast to Filipinos who do not.

Nguyen emphasizes that when he eats balut, it has to be accompanied by a drink, either cognac or beer. This is also true for Filipino male consumers. “I don’t drink too much, but when I eat balut, I have to drink something,” Nguyen said.

A good duck balut has four parts. There is the yolk, the white part called bato (rock) which is the tough-to-eat albumen, the embryo, and some liq-
uid which aficionados sip with gusto before opening the egg. If the balut has a crack or if it is a chicken balut, it tends to not have the soup or liquid which is naturally present in duck eggs even after they are cooked.

There are numerous ways to eat the egg, but a usual method involves tapping the broad base of the egg on the table or with a spoon. Then the consumer removes the small cracked shell and breaks the delicate membrane to sip the liquid of the balut. As one sips the soup, one continues breaking the shell to expose the yolk, embryo and albumen. At this point, one can separate the pieces on a plate and salt them before eating. Others prefer to eat the egg straight from the shell, in two to three bites in order to not see the duck or chicken embryo. Those who like the taste of balut but cannot chew the embryo swallow it whole.

In his 15 years of distributing balut to stores as well as Filipino Americans and other Asian Americans in the Bay area, Butch Coyoca estimates that he has sold hundreds of thousands of eggs. In 1997, Coyoca states that he handled 5,000 to 10,000 fertilized eggs twice a week. Not surprisingly, he has come up with his own observations on why people eat balut.

According to Coyoca, about 60 percent of the people who buy balut from him believe that there is some medicinal value in eating it or that it creates a sex drive in males. When delivering balut directly to consumers during parties, he observes most balut eaters are males. This is similar to the Philippines. Of his customers, roughly 75 percent of Filipino American males and 25 percent of Filipino American women eat balut. Most of the Filipino American males who eat it are over 15 years old to seniors aged 55 and above.

But when it comes to Coyoca’s Vietnamese American and Cambodian American consumers, eating balut is more evenly distributed, with 55 percent men and 45 percent women consuming balut. Thai Americans, however, do not eat as much as other groups. If they do eat balut, they prefer it to be made from chicken eggs.

Preferences for the age of the balut differ from group to group, although individual choices play a role as well. Vietnamese Americans generally prefer their eggs to be at least 17 days old and they along with Cambodians find 19-to-20-day-old balut to be more desirable, unlike Filipinos. In general, women prefer younger eggs with smaller embryos like 14 or 16 days old or *penoy* eggs. Penoy eggs range from 8 to 10 days of the incubation period, and they generally have no embryo.
Traditionally, men are what Coyoca terms the “hard-core balut eaters.” This is the case for men no matter what race. Male customers usually want a bigger embryo aged 17 to 20 days. They tend not to be bothered with the appearance of the developed embryo.

A CHEAP, “SUPER” FOOD

The Food Composition Table for Use in East Asia (W. Leung et al. 1972:111) provides the following breakdown for nutrients in balut: embryonated duck egg—188 calories, 13.7 grams of protein, 14.2 grams of fat, 116 milligrams of calcium, 176 milligrams of phosphorous, 2.1 milligrams of iron, 875 micrograms of retinol, 435 micrograms of B-carotene equivalent, .12 milligrams of thiamine, .25 milligrams of riboflavin, 0.8 milligrams of niacin, 3 milligrams of ascorbic acid.

Balut is categorized in Filipino culture as a “hot” food, and therefore those with a fever are told not to eat it. A few informants mentioned limiting their balut consumption for fear of cholesterol. But for many, balut’s reputed benefits more than outweigh its proscriptions.

Calling balut the cheapest nutritional substitute available to Filipinos, Butch Coyoca says that one can buy balut instead of buying vitamins. “It’s like a powerbar, a superfood,” he said. “If you stay up late at night and it’s already morning, like 2 a.m., a lot of people would eat one or two before they go to bed because they would believe that (balut) would compensate for whatever losses they incurred for not sleeping enough.” Coyoca also points to the ease in transporting balut, which makes it a convenient food to eat during long journeys when one cannot have a regular meal with rice, fish and vegetables.

The stark poverty in the Philippines is a definite factor in the consumption of balut. “Because most Filipinos have low incomes, they have learned to use all edible parts of a plant or animal product. . . the internal organs of chicken, hogs, cattle, which may look unappetizing, can be made into savory dishes” (Claudio 1994:6). A list of the items available as street foods shows this to be the case, especially illustrated by the barbecued items sold on skewers and flavored with condiments to the customer’s preference. Many of the barbecued parts have given rise to their own folk names. Beside barbecued bananas and rice porridge, one can find chicken feet, nicknamed “Adidas,” chicken wings called “PAL” (Philippine Airlines), chicken intestine called “IUD” for its appearance, pig’s ears which are known as “walkman,” and the combs on roosters, which are referred to as “helmet” (Fernandez 1994:10).
According to Fernandez, about forty years ago chicken breasts and thighs and pork meat were being sold. But as the economic crisis worsened, so did the food. By the 1970s, “almost every part of the pig and chicken came to be used: pigs’ ears and intestines; chicken wings, necks, feet, heads, tails, combs, even intestines, meticulously cleaned and looped on thin skewers” (Fernandez 1994:9).

The consumption of balut, therefore, may in recent times be more tied to the economic situation in the Philippines since it is a relatively inexpensive source of protein and calcium. However, this cannot be the reason as to why Filipino Americans continue to eat balut. Other factors must be present. The fact is Filipino Americans choose willingly to eat a food that others consider exotic in a country full of steak and chicken. It may be that for them, balut is a luxury item, along the lines of oysters and caviar. But before expanding on the possible cultural factors involved, I will first turn to balut history.

THE HISTORY OF BALUT

It is impossible to date accurately when the custom of eating balut first began since pre-Spanish records written in syllabic writing by early Filipinos have not survived the burning zeal of the Spanish missionaries. This has forced scholars to consult ancient records of neighboring countries to find references regarding the Filipinos. What is known is that long before the Spaniards set foot on the Philippine islands in 1521, Filipinos were already conducting maritime trade with Persia, Arabia, India (directly and indirectly through Indonesia from the 2nd century A.D.) and especially China beginning in 300 A.D. (Garcia 1979:8–34; Jocano 1975b:135–158).

Theorizing that many of the modern world’s eating habits are a result of Columbus’s journey to the New World in 1492, and the subsequent growth of the Spanish empire which involved the exchange of goods as corn, tomatoes, chilies and livestock, Raymond Sokolov points to the Philippines as being one of the main “centers for gastronomic change” (1991:14–22). Spain controlled the Philippines through Mexico, enabling the Spaniards also to partake in commerce with China. The effects of Spanish colonization as well as the history of exchanges with neighboring countries can be seen in Philippine cuisine with its Spanish, Chinese and Malay-influenced dishes that have been indigenized by the use of local ingredients and Filipino seasoning tastes.

Popular dishes like adobo betray their Spanish-Mexican origin with their names. “dobo is chicken or pork simmered with vinegar, soy sauce and bay leaves. There are rich desserts such as leche flan and a bread
called *pan de sal*. The Philippines owes its noodle dishes, as well as its *lumpia* (egg roll) and *siopao* (*chao su bao*, a white bun filled with meat), to the Chinese (Fernandez & Alegre 1988:17). For references to the Philippines in ancient Chinese records, see Wang 1952.

The influence of the Chinese may perhaps explain the presence of balut in the country. Many books on Chinese food tend to mention salted duck eggs, tea eggs and century-old duck eggs (see Chang 1977; Barer-Stein 1979; E.N. Anderson 1988), but a sprinkling of works do mention fertilized eggs. In his work *Food in China: A Cultural and Historical Inquiry* (1991), geographer Frederick Simoons provides a clue regarding fertilized duck eggs. “Perhaps also of nutritional relevance is the Chinese liking for fertilized eggs in which the embryo is well-developed, a preference they share with certain peoples in Southeast Asia and the Pacific region. Embryonated duck eggs . . . are substantially higher in calcium than ordinary ones” (Simoons 365). In addition to confirming that fertilized eggs were consumed by the Chinese, Simoons also verifies the widely held belief in the Philippines that balut is an important source of calcium, which explains why pregnant women and sick people are urged to eat it as well.

The earliest citation I was able to find regarding balut is an 1830 report on Siam and Cochin, China (Crawfurd 1830). It seems that “hatched eggs” were being eaten during great parties. The eggs “formed a delicacy beyond the reach of the poor, and only adapted for persons of distinction”; after 10 to 12 days when an egg is being hatched, they are “exactly in the state most agreeable to the palate of a Cochin Chinese epicure” (Crawfurd 1830:408).

M. Duval also mentioned incubated duck eggs in 1885, and so did geographer Friedrich Ratzel in *The History of Mankind* (1896–1898). “The Tagals are said to have learnt from the Chinese to eat eggs that have been sat upon, with the chick in them, as tit-bits” (Ratzel 1896–1898:432). In 1905, Jenks took note of the Igorots’ liking for developing eggs and how they preferred to wait “until there is something in the egg to eat” (Jenks 1905:143). There are other works mentioning balut consumption; see Verrill 1946:211; and Schwabe 1979:399.

Before his 1979 work on Chinese food, Simoons included a paragraph on the eating of fertilized eggs in *Eat Not This Flesh* (1961). He speculates that this custom may have arisen long ago “when people gathered the eggs of wild fowl, any of which contained half-hatched birds, or it may be related to some primitive fear of undeveloped eggs. As eggs are widely considered to be a fertility symbol, primitive man may have been
afraid to eat them before they had developed into some recognizable form of life, when their dangerous quality was presumably eliminated” (Simoons 1961:68).

I do not agree with this theory, for in my search through historical records of the Spanish chroniclers dating from 500 years ago, there is no mention of a fear of “undeveloped” eggs by early Filipinos; instead there was plenty of evidence that they enjoyed eating all kinds of eggs. For example, both Pigafetta and Loarca remarked on the tabon bird whose eggs in the sand were prized by Filipinos (Blair & Robertson 33:133; Blair & Robertson 5:167).

Describing his fascinating encounter with a native chief, Pigafetta writes in 1521 that the chief “was eating turtle eggs which were in two porcelain dishes, and he had four jars full of palm wine in front of him covered with sweet-smelling herbs and arranged with four small reeds in each jar by means of which he drank. . . then the king had us eat some of those eggs and drink through those slender reeds” (Blair & Robertson 33:149). Diego de Bobadilla also remarked on how he enjoyed eating those eggs as well (Blair & Robertson 29:303). Eggs were not only eaten but used in devotions to deities (Blair & Robertson 27:261), to honor the dead (Blair & Robertson 21:209), and hurled in rituals where the broken eggs cemented promises (Blair & Robertson 14:283–284).

As these records show, the early Filipinos were not afraid of eating eggs. Eggs for Filipinos were not things to fear but things to savor. Although there is no mention that the eggs were fertilized, it may well be that Filipinos may have been eating them long before the Spanish arrived. Filipinos have the most adventurous palates and consume many items which others, especially Westerners, may fear. In light of the brief historical mentions above, it may be assumed that by the 19th century, the Chinese truly did influence the Filipinos regarding the eating of balut.

If the practice of eating balut was already common in the 16th century, I am sure it would have been noted by the friars and explorers who were only too eager to mention all the seemingly gross eating habits they could find, such as the Filipino liking for what Spanish chronicler Antonio De Morga called “rotting” fish and shrimps (this may be bagoong, fermented shrimp not unlike fish sauce) (see Blair & Robertson 16:80).

It is my contention that balut-eating developed because it is an easy and relatively cheap protein source for people to eat. I also believe that the aphrodisiac belief attached to it was not originally a reason for people to eat balut, but I would suggest that this belief in balut as an aphrodisiac for
men only came about when the Spaniards introduced the concept of “machismo,” a notion I will expand on below.

Chinese consumption of fertilized eggs does not appear to be as pervasive as Filipino consumption, which some of my informants confirmed as well when answering the balut survey. Several of them were firm in their opinion that the Chinese did not eat balut. The lack of Chinese recipes mentioning fertilized duck eggs may mean that they are not as popular in China as salted eggs, tea eggs, soy sauce eggs or thousand-year-old eggs. It is worth noting, however, the many similarities between the production of thousand-year-old eggs and fertilized eggs.

Simoons describes the process of making thousand-year-old eggs, where the duck eggs are coated in lime clay and then wrapped up in rice husks (1991:364). In the Philippines, the traditional way of incubating balut involved the eggs being surrounded by heated rice husks. Now, however, mechanical incubators likely warm the balut. Some claim that eggs from an incubator do not taste as good as eggs incubated with rice husks which they say gives balut a sweeter taste.

This phenomenon, where one food item seems more popular in one country than in another, may be explained by cultural differences in taste. Another case which illustrates this is that of bagoong (shrimp paste) which is found in China as well as in the Philippines (Chang 1977:336). Although the shrimp paste in China is basically the same as the one in the Philippines, “these preparations are by no means as popular as they are in Southeast Asia; they are peripheral extensions of the Southeast Asian technology” (Chang 1977:336). It may well be that balut originated in China and was taken up by the Filipinos, but whatever the case, balut is now considerably more popular in the Philippines than in China.

“Balut is sold all the time and everywhere—on streets, at stalls, outside movie houses, outside nightclubs and discos, in markets; by vendors walking, sitting, or squatting; at midnight and early dawn, at breakfast, lunch, merienda, and dinner time” (Fernandez 1994:10). The newly cooked balut are sold with twists of rock salt in baskets covered with cloth to keep them warm, as the vendors walk the streets hawking their wares loudly. Worth noting is the fact that tea eggs in China were sold by vendors at night who called out in a “sing-song” manner (Leung 1976:21). This is much like the way balut is sold, usually at night and accompanied with the vendor’s own style of calling “bal-uuuut!” which can vary from person-to-person.

Balut is also sold at food stalls and in restaurants, where they have transcended their street food status and have become haute cuisine.
can now be ordered in restaurants “as an appetizer [rolled in flour, fried, and with a vinegar-chili dip], adobado [cooked in vinegar with garlic], or baked in a ramekin with olive oil or butter and spices [“Sorpresa de balut”]” (Fernandez 1999).

The notion of balut as a street food and a food for the masses takes on special meaning when linked to Fernandez & Alegre’s idea that the Chinese dishes brought to the Philippines have flourished in the food stalls, small eateries, and as street vendors’ wares; not in the meals of the rich. They point out that “the Chinese, who first came as traders, merchants, and then settlers, had their food absorbed into lower and middle-class cuisine” (Fernandez & Alegre 1988:17–18).

The conquistadors who dominated and ruled over the people have, appropriately enough, influenced most the meals of the Spanish-enamored Filipino elite. These dishes such as morcon and embotido tend to be served at fiestas and other festivities, not eaten everyday. In the meantime, the Malayan-Filipino dishes which resemble those of other Southeast Asian countries are dishes favored by everyone and considered appropriate for all events (Fernandez & Alegre 1988:18). This observation that the Chinese food in the Philippines is the food of the streets is taken into account, this certainly lends further credence to balut originating in China, with Chinese salted and century duck eggs appearing to be distant cousins of balut.

**THE BALUT INDUSTRY IN THE PHILIPPINES**

To shelter themselves from typhoons, the early Chinese settlers in the Philippines constructed their settlements in the Luzon region by the shores of Laguna de Bay, which is a freshwater lake with an area of 350 square miles that is 25 miles in length and 21 miles in width. By the time the Spaniards arrived, one village in particular had an enormous number of ducks, and so it was christened “Pateros,” meaning “duck-raisers.” As late as the 1950s, Pateros had an estimated 400,000 ducks producing eggs, with production supplemented by millions of imported eggs (Maness 1950:10–13). For Pateros, which is 40 kilometres from Manila, producing balut became the number one industry and balut from this area was synonymous with the highest quality (Cunanan 1968; Zabilka 1963).

But by 1977, gone was the crystal-clear water where fishing was easy and ducks were free to roam and eat their favorite diet of snails. Pollution from factories and the dumping of garbage had taken their toll and blackened the waters of Laguna de Bay, infecting snails with
algae which in turn has led to ducks having infertile eggs. The Pateros balut industry suffered as a consequence and many balut producers pursued other business ventures (Herrera 1977:24–25). One informant told of being forced to move from Pateros when the Laguna de Bay got polluted to other towns in Rizal in order to gather the fresh eggs needed for balut. Balut is now made in other places.

The word “balut” may have been derived from the traditional way that it was made. “Balut” is very similar to the Tagalog word “balot,” which means “wrapper” when used as a noun, or “to cover” when it is used as a verb (“balotin mo” translates to “cover it”). Balut made in the traditional way involves the eggs being covered by bags containing rice husks. The husks are heated in copper kettles until they become dry as well as extremely hot.

No matter what method is being used to make balut, the first step is to choose fertilized duck eggs that have thick, unbroken shells. In the Philippines, special men would be hired whose job consisted of selecting eggs with the thickest shell. This is no small feat as there are thousands of eggs that have to be looked at. These selected eggs must then be exposed to the sun for 3 to 5 hours to get them to “perspire” out the extra moisture before they are ready for incubation.

One common method utilized by balut-makers, called mangbabalut, involved the eggs being kept in woven bamboo incubators in the shape of barrels 3 feet high and 2 feet in width. The bamboo barrels were frequently used before the advent of artificial incubators and were designed to hold 10 bamboo trays, each of which could hold 100 to 120 eggs. One barrel could then contain 1,000 to 1,200 eggs (Maness 10). A variation on the bamboo trays was that the eggs would be placed in bags made of abaca hemp.

The eggs stay in the barrels to incubate for 18 days, and are “candled” using a candle or a lightbulb on the seventh, fourteenth and eighteenth days. A typical instrument for candling is the silawuan, which is a box-like device in the shape of a triangle or a square. The Filipino balut-maker inserts the egg into a specially designed hole to hold it and by means of a light bulb inside the box, the contents of the egg can be seen. Something to watch out for while candling is a dark shape in the egg, which means an embryo has formed. If there are web-like veins, then the embryo is growing. If the light does not show anything but a whole yolk, then the egg is infertile. Sometimes, there is a crack on the egg or the embryo has died early. These are sold as penoy or made into salted eggs. In the U.S., the sale of eggs with dead embryos is prohibited.
THE IMPORTANCE OF DRINKING: PULUTAN AND INUMAN

Upon their arrival in the 16th century, the Spaniards were astonished at the abundant seafood and other staples such as taro, coconut and yams which were being eaten (Jocano 1975b:162). Deer, carabao, fowl, pigs, along with vegetables like beans, quilites and fruits like guavas and pineapples were also being consumed. However, the Moros, the Moslem tribes from the southern end of the Philippines, did not eat swine but goats, chickens, ducks and carabaos (Garcia 1979:272, 340).

Accompanying this eating were a startling array of local wines made from sugar cane, rice, coconuts, bananas and nipa palms which were often consumed in ceremonies for death and illness (Garcia 1979:262, 331). Most importantly, early Spanish chroniclers like Chirino wrote that drinking was not limited to rite-of-passage events such as weddings. The natives were known to drink with guests and while honoring deities as well. Drinking occupied such a high status with Filipinos that “they designate a feast by the term ‘drinking,’ and not eating” (qtd. in Garcia 1979:262).

Chirino goes on to describe a typical drinking feast:

They eat, sitting in a low position. . . without covering or napkins, the plates containing the victuals being placed on the table itself. They eat in groups of sufficient number to surround the table; and it may happen that a house is filled from one end to another with tables, and guests drinking. The food is placed all together upon various plates, and they have no hesitation in putting the hands of all into the same dish, or in drinking out of the same vessel. They eat but little, drink often, and spend much time in the feast (Garcia 1979:262).

Compare this description with the popular custom called inuman, a social drinking event which entails both sexes drinking (more women participate in inuman outside Luzon) with their barkada (friends). The Tagalog verb “inom,” means to drink. An inuman event is usually accompanied by pulutan, which are the finger foods served in various platters along with the alcoholic beverages. Balut is a favorite pulutan. A typical inuman takes place at a sari-sari store (small convenience store) equipped with low benches and tables or in someone’s house. In a sari-sari store, the best-selling item is the wine or alcohol drinks (Cabotaje 1976:109). A sari-sari store is frequented by people from throughout the area and it is a place to interact with others in an inuman.
“Drinking is necessary for a certain type of social interaction. They go
to the stores to meet friends and to relax after the day’s work. To remove
‘the feeling of fatigue,’ by ‘improving the blood circulation,’ and to
make one’s self feel ‘active and revitalized,’ a man takes a drink”
(Cabotaje 1976:109). These same feelings of being energized from
drinking were described by some of my male informants, who attributed
their energetic feeling to the balut that they ate. In general, balut and
other pulutan items do not make a complete meal, since rice is not
served with pulutan. But it appears that balut can be eaten both as a
pulutan or as part of the meal itself. A majority of my informants stated
that they ate balut as a snack and as pulutan, not part of the meal.
However, there were several who said they also ate it with rice. In
December 1996, one of my informants visited a five-star hotel in Manila,
where she witnessed “adobong balut.” This was balut without the shell,
and then cooked with garlic, soy sauce and vinegar instead of using the
usual chicken or pork. Reportedly, the resulting taste was delicious.

With the exception of these few examples of balut being a main dish,
the traditional consumption of balut is almost always as a snack or pulu-
tan accompanied with an alcoholic beverage in an inuman or other
event. It may then be theorized that the custom of eating it may have
begun several centuries ago during a drinking feast similar to Chirino’s
description.

SUPERNATURAL BELIEFS AND BALUT

Many of my informants expressed strong feelings of disgust at seeing
the embryo or catching a glimpse of the developed little chick. After
studying the survey responses, I believe that the feelings of revulsion
experienced by many at the sight of the fetus may be due to the idea of
ingesting something that is clearly on the verge of being born. The
notion of eggs as symbols of life can be demonstrated by the fact that
many places, including parts of Africa, Europe and Australia, impose
prohibitions on the eating of eggs (Newall 1971:113–115). Eggs were
not to be consumed or destroyed because they had “universal signifi-
cance . . . as an image of life force” (Newall 1971:113). This idea of eat-
ing something and ending its life as a chick seems to be a deep,
disturbing issue for even those who choose to eat balut as well as for
those who do not.

Several of the informants I interviewed mentioned that eating balut
makes a person like an aswang. Also known as a manananggal, an aswang
is a supernatural creature who craves human flesh and is afraid of salt
and spice. Folklorist Maximo D. Ramos was convinced that "the Filipinos' decided preference for salt, sour, and spicy foods is likely due to their fear of the *manananggal* and similar preternatural beings" (1990b:148). I am not, however, insinuating that balut eaters are aswang. Rather, there seems to be a symbolic relationship between the belief in a balut's invigorating powers and the belief in the aswang. Perhaps the beliefs regarding balut may have been an effect or a result of the belief in the aswang.

I had asked my informants if they had heard of any connection between balut-eating and the aswang, and three out of 19 informants who answered replied in the affirmative. All three who answered were female adults. One 38-year-old informant said, "If I eat balut, I feel like I'm from the countryside, like where they always tell about the aswang."

The answers of another informant led me to suspect that living in a certain place had something to do with not only believing in the aswang, but the environment in such a place was conducive to perceiving a connection between the aswang and balut. P. P. was a 40-year-old Filipina-American. Born in the U.S., she lived in Antique (pronounced an-ti-ke) on the island of Panay for three years. With an area of 4,446 square miles, Panay is part of the Visayan region and is located between Mindoro and Negros Islands. Besides Antique, the other towns are Iloilo, Aklan and Capiz, all places reputed to be aswang territory (see Ramos 1971:108; 1990b:136).

Indeed, among Filipinos, Antique is especially reputed to be an ancient place where mysterious forces reign. According to P. P., Antique was named by the Spaniards who recognized the "antique" or old nature of the place. There are many beliefs regarding supernatural beings such as aswangs (also known as *wak-wak* in Visayan if in the form of a bird), who are believed to exist here (see for example, Gonzalez-Tabujara 1985:97, 103–104; De Jesus ed. 1986:14, 24–25, 30).

From 1992 to 1995, P. P. was in Antique along with her three children and husband to oversee some property. She ate duck balut every other week while in Antique. She continues to eat balut in the United States. While pregnant with her first child, however, P. P. ate balut daily. She thinks that the inside appearance of an open balut egg is similar in looks to a human fetus with its skin and veins. "It's almost like cannibalism," P. P. said. "When you look at balut, you see the veins, the skin, the fetus inside. It's like you're eating a human fetus." P. P. believes that balut is something that would empower an aswang, whose favorite meals include eating fetuses from pregnant women. "I can see where eating balut can
empower an aswang, since aswangs like to eat the fetuses of human babies,” she said.

The idea that eating balut will transform a person into an aswang caused a lot of childhood agony for one Filipina informant, I. Y., a visiting student at U.C. Berkeley. Born and raised in Quezon City, Luzon, I. Y. recalled the intense teasing she was subjected to whenever others saw her eating balut. “Oh, aswang ka, aswang ka!! Kadiri ka, kadiri ka!!” (Oh, you’re an aswang, aswang!! You’re gross, you’re gross!!) was a common taunt that was directed at her. She would retort back that since she was eating balut, it would make her strong. She would tell others that if she was going to be an aswang for eating the balut, she would catch them as soon as she could. According to I. Y., this was a popular response to the common taunt linking balut-eating to the aswang. She learned this from other children.

I. Y. believes children who ate balut were teased more than adults who ate it. “If children are seen eating balut, the reaction is more strong as opposed to adults eating the balut, because the child is vulnerable and is preying on something vulnerable,” she said. She thinks that because the chick inside the balut is seen as vulnerable, this connects eating balut to the aswang because the aswang eats the vulnerable, unborn baby in the womb.

ASWANG: CREATURES OF THE NIGHT

As early as 1582, Miguel de Loarca described the aswang belief among the Pintados of Panay, and in 1588 to 1591, Juan de Plasencia followed with an account of the Tagalogs and their belief in the aswang. However, it is Maximo Ramos who is credited for comprehensively defining not only several types of aswang but the numerous creatures of Philippine lower mythology.

According to Ramos, the aswang can be understood best if identified with similar European creatures. There are five types: the aswang who is usually female and likened to the blood-sucking vampire; the viscera-sucker who can remove its upper half from the lower half of its body; the weredog aswang who can change its shape; the aswang who is a witch capable of the evil eye and spells; the ghoul aswang who eats corpses. These five types share similar traits with each other and with other supernatural beings, leading to some confusion.

Various Filipino ethnic groups have different names for the aswang depending on its form and behavior, and the names proliferate even more with each type of aswang, such as the viscera sucker (see Lieban 1967:68;
Ramos 1990c:xvi–xvii). Among the most well-known terms for viscera-suckers are: aswang (Bikol, Tagalog, Visayan); abat (Waray); boroka (Iloko, from Spanish word ‘bruja’); manananggal (Tagalog); mangalok (Cuyonon); aswang na lupad (Bikol); naguneg (Iloko); laman luob (Tagalog) and kasudlan (West Visayan) (Ramos 1990b:142 and 1990c:xviii).

Viscera suckers are not limited to the Philippines but they can be found in Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia and Melanesia, including the Trobriand Islands. They are known as tanggal in Indonesia (tanggal means to “remove” or “take off something” in Tagalog and Indonesian. It also means “come apart,” in that the top of the tanggal’s body comes off). In Cambodia, it is known as srei ap and it feeds on human feces. It can fly using its hair or ears or pandanus leaves in Melanesia (Ramos 1990b:144). For clarity’s sake, I will limit myself to the use of the word aswang as a general term for all five supernatural creatures.

It is significant that in Filipino folk belief, salt and seasonings play an important part in warding off creatures like the aswang or placating others like the dwende (dwarves), who prefer food without salt (see Ramos 1990a:40–41, 58). For example, ghoul aswangs, who are believed to feed on dead bodies which they often steal during wakes, are terrified of salt, spices, and vinegar. Vampire aswangs and viscera suckers are also driven away by the use of salt and spices like garlic. For more on the aswang’s fear of salt and spices, see (Arens 1982:84; Ramos 1990c).

Salt also plays an essential role in eating balut. The overwhelming majority of balut eaters prefer salt sprinkled on their eggs. Other spices include pepper and vinegar with chilies. Perhaps salt is used by people as a sort of neutralizing agent when eating balut, unconsciously warding off the aswang effects. Since salt and spices are reputed to scare off various types of the aswang, presumably the person eating balut would not turn into an aswang.

In addition to being a neutralizer, salt may also be used unconsciously as a sort of purifying agent, to cleanse the balut eater from the impure action of eating and therefore ending the life of the baby chick. I speculate that if this is the case, the sprinkling of salt may be for the balut eater a way of atoning for the “sin” of ending another’s life for the sake of continuing his/her own. The notion that a life must be ended to ensure that others may live could be applied here, with salt acting as an offering to the sacrificed life. However, salt should not be taken too seriously as an extension of the fear of the aswang or as a purifying agent; after all, supernatural beings aside, salt does tend to make everything taste better.
A more fruitful comparison between the aswang and balut beliefs can be achieved by first noting that a person could become an aswang four ways: by personal desire, by receiving aswang powers from an aswang, by accidental contamination (eating food touched by an aswang), or by being born to an aswang. An individual who deliberately desires to transform into a viscera sucker must hold “a fertilized chicken egg against his/her belly and then tie it in place with a cloth around the body. After an unspecified time, the chicken from the egg passes into the stomach by a sort of osmosis. Then one becomes able to emit the sound characteristics of the aswang” (Ramos 1971:121). Still another way to become and aswang by one’s own hand involves bringing “two fertilized eggs to the cemetery after the Good Friday procession at night. There one should stand erect, gaze directly at the full moon without closing one’s eyes, place an egg under one’s armpit, and mumble certain words... when the egg disappeared into the initiate’s stomach, he had become an aswang” (Ramos 1971:122).

Perhaps the method best known to transmit the power of the aswang is “by voluntarily swallowing a black, chick-like creature which pops out of the mouth of an old viscera sucker who cannot otherwise die and rest” (Ramos 1973:21). The chick then resides in the new viscera sucker’s stomach and it feeds on the entrails eaten by its host. The aswang’s desire for human entrails is triggered “when the chick starts cheeping” (Ramos 1990b:144. Also see Ramos 1973:21). For the aswang, the craving for human flesh begins after the black chick is swallowed (Ramos 1990c:xxiv). Although Ramos never addresses why a person would want voluntarily to become an aswang, folk narratives suggest that the aswang has mysterious powers and is feared by everyone. In addition, revenge against fellow villagers for perceived injustices is also a common theme in many aswang legends, a motivating force for the creatures to kill others.

Could this belief that one becomes an aswang by swallowing a chick be the reason why most Filipinos do not want to see the duck embryo in the balut? It may be that seeing a fully formed chick arouses in their mind the uncomfortable comparison of eating a fetus-like food, so that their eating balut seemingly resembles the actions of an aswang, who also enjoys eating an unborn baby. One could also say that because the balut contains the underdeveloped embryo, although eaten boiled, in a sense it is still incomplete and “raw,” an item not meant for “civilized” humans who like more completed, more “cooked” foods. Balut as a
“raw” food would then be appropriate for animals or animal-like creatures, like the aswang.

Ramos is not the only one who discusses the aswang at length. In the 
Dictionary of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs (1971), Francisco 
Demetrio comments on the traits and behavior of the aswang, who are 
believed to utilize eggs in several interesting practices. For example, if 
one swallows an unhatched egg of a chicken with its shell on, one will be 
able to fly as an aswang (Demetrio 1971:241). Another fascinating belief 
involving eggs is that a new balbal (the ghoul aswang of the Tagbanua), 
can once again become a normal person if it is made to vomit a yolk-like 
substance. If the aswang is already in the advanced stages, then a “chick- 
like creature” is vomited (Demetrio 1971:247–248).

However, Demetrio notes that once someone has been an aswang for 
a long time, nothing can be done to make that individual normal again. 
Richard Arens identifies this stage of no return as the fourth and last 
stage in the development of the aswang. If the infected person tries to 
seek a cure from an expert, death, not a cure, will be the result (Arens 
1982:78).

Although Demetrio does not specify the chick-like creature’s color, 
Ramos does. He writes that those who swallow a “black chick-like” crea-
ture become aswang (Ramos 1973:21). The significance of the color black 
can also be seen in the method of choosing a “good” balut. One 
has to avoid eggs which are black inside as this color means that they 
have gone “bad.”

Both Demetrio and Ramos emphasize that once the chick is developed 
inside, the viscera sucker aswang is now at the mercy of its animal desires 
and this is the worst stage for the afflicted. Arens also describes this con-
dition, pointing out that once the monster in the aswang’s stomach is fully 
developed, “the newly bewitched person becomes strongly imaginative 
and feels an urge to suck fresh blood from warm-blooded animals includ-
ing human beings. When hungry, she sees things not as a normal person 
sees him. In the egg, for example, she sees the developed chicken; in a 
pregnant woman she sees the little child. At this moment she develops a 
strong urge to feast on these living things” (Arens 1982:79).

This belief in developed chicks being the harbinger of evil may have 
influenced Filipino balut eaters in their preference for balut aged no 
more than 17 days, since they do not want to see, much less eat, a de-
veloped embryo.

It is interesting to note that in transportation hubs in the Philippines, 
such as bus and train stations, balut vendors purposely sell 19-day-old or
older balut to customers they never will see again, customers who are not their “suki” (regulars). These balut eggs being sold are described as “chicks almost ready to be hatched” and are sold by vendors “who will never see their customers again, will not hear recriminations, or form friendships with them” (Fernandez 1994:10). This deliberate sale of items considered by many Filipinos as culturally unwanted and undesirable can be construed as a hostile act since the vendor is foisting upon an unsuspecting customer an egg that is a “chick-like creature.” One can even venture to say that the vendors are, in effect, treating their customers like an aswang or forcing them to be an aswang in that the customers are “swallowing” what in essence is a chick.

Fernandez adds that even in the way balut is sold, one can see “the dynamics of Filipino personal relationships” at work (1996b:11). I suggest that these same “dynamics” of relationship are played out through beliefs regarding the aswang, which in turn are related to the dynamics one experiences when eating balut. In this way, the dynamics of “Filipino personal relationships” are consistent no matter what medium of belief takes place. There seem to be recurring patterns of behavior which appear in both the natural and supernatural world of the Filipino.

Another notable point Ramos makes is that the aswang’s craving for human entrails starts when the chick begins to “cheep.” What this implies is that once the chick is developed, it has more power over its human host victim and it directly arouses hunger for flesh. To put it simply, the fully developed chick “power” intensified hunger for human flesh. This parallels the belief that the sexual hunger of a man is supposed to intensify after eating balut.

Defined as “hard-core balut eaters” by distributor Butch Coyoca, men prefer balut that are aged 17 to 20 days. These mature balut harbor bigger embryos with feathers, bones and beaks—in short, embryos which look more like chicks. This preference by men for balut almost fully formed can be interpreted to mean that a more developed chick “arouses” men’s sexual hunger. Support for this idea can be found in numerous males intentionally eating balut as an aphrodisiac to boost their virility—an objective which sharpens the hunger for sex. With this in mind, it may indeed be “appropriate” that women generally like eating balut that are less than 17 days, when the embryo is not as formed. This again can be interpreted to mean if there is no embryo, then there is no sexual hunger. Again, Filipino women do not eat balut to increase their sexual drives; only the men do.
These ideas tie in with Demetrio’s and Ramos’s report on how an aswang can become normal by vomiting the chick inside it. No chick means no abnormal desires since the source seems to be the chick. As mentioned, an aswang cannot be cured by vomiting the chick if it has been an aswang for a lengthy period of time. Perhaps this is due to the chick being digested, much like how balut, once eaten, cannot be taken out once it is subjected to time and one’s digestive process.

One last point which should be mentioned shows another parallel between the aswang and balut. The aswang feeds on human fetuses and viscera at night. Balut is also commonly eaten at night. The darkness of the night shields the balut eater from confronting the reality of what he is eating while the aswang needs the night in order to eat its “disgusting” food. Most of my informants prefer to swallow the balut whole. If they do bite the embryo, they avoid looking at it. Some people take apart the egg and eat it piece by piece. P. P. described eating balut “like eating an Oreo cookie—you eat it in sections.” But another informant, A. G., disagreed. “If you eat it piece by piece, it’s gross. So I’d rather eat the whole egg in two bites, including the chick.”

There is a direct link between the fear of the aswang and the treatment of peddlers that may provide a clue to balut’s popularity in certain areas. Ramos’s numerous books on legends of supernatural creatures include common narratives collected around the Philippines in which balut eaters and balut sellers are suspiciously viewed as local versions of aswang.

In some parts of the country there is considerable hostility to peddlers, especially those known to come from provinces reputed as the home of the aswang, such as Sorsogon and Tabaco, Albay, in the Bicol region and Aklan and Capiz in the Western Visayas. The folk fear that weredogs take the guise of peddlers in order to enter communities, and they say they linger in neighborhoods where expectant mothers reside (Ramos 1990c:xxiv–xxv).

Where the aswang is thought to exist, peddlers are not at all welcome. Perhaps this is why the popularity of balut has not been as widespread in the Visayas region as it is in Luzon, because the former area is commonly thought to harbor more aswangs. Peddlers are not the only ones feared. Ramos adds that government laborers who come from places suspected of harboring aswangs are also treated with suspicion by villagers.

It makes perfect sense, then, that balut did not take off in popularity in the Visayas as it did in Luzon, since balut is usually sold by vendors who are transient and who sell from village to village. The sale of balut by vendors is the traditional way, and for many Filipinos, the only way
balut has been known to be sold. Therefore, if a place fosters a suspicion of peddlers, it follows that a product such as balut which relies on male peddlers moving from village to village will not be highly successful.

"Food is freely exchanged among neighbors, but where the aswang belief persists, Filipinos seldom accept gifts of food from strangers" (Ramos 1990c:xxv). A balut vendor is basically a stranger who offers food in exchange for money. It may be a worthwhile investigation to see if the areas where balut is not popular can be correlated with the same areas where the fear of the aswang in the form of peddlers continues to be strong.

This fear of balut vendors or peddlers being aswang has surfaced in the stories of the folk. In Legends of the Lower Gods (Ramos 1990a), one narrative tells about how a balut vendor is threatened with death unless she agrees to heal the boy who gets sick after eating her balut. Another legend illustrates the case of a girl who is rude to a balut vendor: the vendor bewitches her by possessing her mind and body. Only a native doctor or healer familiar with herbs is able to free her from her illness.

The link between a certain place, in this case Ilocos Norte, and the fear of the aswang is also mentioned briefly by Gilda Cordero-Fernando. She first notes that garlic (bawang) is to be found in every Ilocano home and business like stores and funeral parlors, but it is only displayed to attract buyers. "Such a lot of bawang could be the reason why aswangs have not settled in the Ilokos whereas they are all over the Visayas and Bikol... anthropologists attribute the absence of the belief in aswang to the fact that Ilocanos are used to strong women. They need them, are not afraid of them and therefore, do not convert them into aswang" (1992:144).

The idea that strong women are seen as aswang is analyzed by Filipina folklorist Herminia Menez. Menez suggests the influence of the Spaniards was of such magnitude that previously respected female baylans (shamans) were inverted into the aswang. She writes that the Spaniards "dealt with recalcitrant female shamans not only as their religious rivals but as females whose sexual powers, in their view, needed to be subjugated under male authority" (1996:88). As such, the Spanish missionaries discredited the baylans by placing them in the same category as the "self-segmenting 'cannibal aswang'" (1996:92).

Where the baylan was formerly held in esteem for her skills as a midwife and healer, as the aswang she now "drains the fetus out of the womb" and kills infants in her desire for flesh (Menez 1996:89). According to Menez, this "opposition between life taking and life giving, between killing and birthing, is underscored by the self-segmenting process in which the reproductive half is left behind while the upper
half is engaged in death-dealing activity,” a primary trait of the viscera sucker (Menez 1996:89).

SEXUAL BELIEFS AND BALUT

Whether balut is eaten for nutrition or avoided due to fear of becoming a terrifying aswang, the most common reason why balut is eaten as cited by my informants is the fertilized egg’s alleged sexual energizing powers. Venetia Newall demonstrates that in many cultures, eggs are believed to restore virility to men but they can also bestow fertility to women (1971:113–141). It seems, then, that the sexual benefits of balut should apply to both men and women. But not so in the Philippines. I suggest that although the eating of fertilized eggs may have begun centuries ago at the same time as *pulutan*, the belief that it is an aphrodisiac strictly for men can be traced to the arrival of the Spanish in 1521. Christening the archipelago “Las Islas Filipinas” in honor of King Philip II of Spain, the Spanish conquistadors set about converting the natives. In addition to the morals and values of the Catholic religion, the Spaniards also brought with them their own set of values which they enforced on the natives. One of the lingering effects of more than 300 years of Spanish colonial rule is the machismo concept.

Tomas Andres’s *Dictionary of Filipino Culture and Values* defines machismo as the “belief in male supremacy and the relegation of the women to a domestic role and as second-class citizens” (Andres 1994:97). It must be stressed at this point that not all women in the Philippines are treated in such a manner, and not all men believe in this concept.

Andres includes other terms like “*esmu*” (wife), saying that the Filipino wife is “treated like a queen by a Filipino husband” (1994:46). Folkspeech like “*naku*” which is a contracted form of “*nanay*” (mother) and “*ko*” (my) are used in times of illness and need, and according to Andres, this use “indicates the value of a mother to a Filipino” (1994:113). He states that clearly, women are held in high esteem.

But one cannot ignore the existence of a double standard as well. I believe that the machismo belief is still alive and flourishing in the Philippines and is partly responsible for the belief that balut is an aphrodisiac good for men only. Andres himself alludes to the double standard in his inclusion of words like “*binyag*.” *Binyag* can mean baptism, but it also refers “to the ritual an adolescent male must undergo in order to prove himself a man. A male is not considered a man unless he has experienced his first sexual intercourse with the opposite sex. Usually this practice is initiated by the *barkada* or peer group” (Andres 1994:23). In contrast,
however, Filipino women are generally expected to be virgins when they are married. With the population comprised of about 80 percent Catholics, the religious and conservative Filipino society places a high premium on virginity even today.

Andres discusses in detail how the machismo belief has influenced Filipino society and its treatment of women. He reports that machismo is extremely prevalent among Filipino males and it requires Filipino men “to engage in a sexual role which could only be verified by the peer group to which he belongs in terms of the number of affairs he maintains and children he sires either with his lawful wife or his mistresses” (Andres 1987:4). This practice can be observed at all levels of society, from the rich man to poor jeepney drivers who nevertheless manage to have two to three kabit (mistresses).

Andres confirms that it is because of machismo that the double standard exists. “A set of principles requires women to be faithful, modest and chaste while on the other hand, men are considered immune from such principles and restrictions” (Andres 1987:5). Machismo is the cause of the “querida” system (the kept mistress supported by the male in secret while supporting his wife), but in no way is the legitimate wife expected to have an affair. Instead, she is expected to demonstrate “strict and persevering fidelity and chastity . . . acclaimed as virtuous if she suffers martyrdom and keeps her chastity for the unfaithful husband to come home” (Andres 1987:5). This double standard is also expected for single men who are encouraged to be playboys, while the single women cling to their virginity. All this points to the fact that “high regard for womanhood is based on the belief that the woman is a possession of the man” (Andres 1987:5).

The cultural expectations enforced on the Filipino male are easy to follow in a country where “sex is the cheapest entertainment under the sun” (Andres 1987:7). Andres argues that Filipino males are encouraged by the hot weather, by the frequent custom of inuman (drinking alcohol), and the “abundance of spicy food and aphrodisiacs” which make men seek to sire first-born children from different women (Andres 1987:7).

Other scholars have also perceived this double standard and are attempting to draw attention to it. Arnold Azurin calls the cultural value on the hymen an “emotional and sexual booby trap to the female psyche. By embedding in the consciousness of women from early childhood the belief that the hymen—or what it symbolizes, virginity—is crucial to the maidenhood and self-esteem, Philippine society predetermines the woman’s sense of well-being and personal fulfillment to one validating
male supremacy or dominance” (Azurin 1995:157). Azurin calls for a recognition of this syndrome to put an end to the exaggerated value on the hymen and virginity which is a result of Filipino machismo. This same machismo may be responsible for what he terms “its darker flipside, female masochism—as manifested in the perennially pregnant but emaciated women, the periodically bruised and the ever-forgiving abandonadas” (Azurin 1995:163).

In stark contrast to this vivid image of today’s abused and abandoned Filipinas who rely on the males to define their sexuality, the indigenous natives encountered by the Spaniards upon their arrival in 1521 did not at all treat women this way. Instead, the conquistadors reported that the native women were reported to be quite free of concerns over their virginity and they were depicted as fully enjoying their sexuality.

Antonio De Morga writes that there were men “whose business was to ravish and take away the virginity of girls. These girls were taken to such men, and the latter were paid for ravishing them, for the natives considered it a hindrance and impediment if the girls were virgins when married” (as quoted in Garcia 1979:303). He notes early Filipino women were in charge of their sexual pleasure, stating that “the natives . . . especially the women, are very vicious and sensual” (Garcia 1979:303).

This comment may have come about upon De Morga’s observation of the custom practiced by the native males that was designed to prolong the pleasure of the woman. Both De Morga and Pigafetta remarked on the male custom of boring a hole near the tip of the penis and inserting in it a bolt made of metal or ivory secured by pegs. Pigafetta elaborated on the ends of the bolt which have “what resembles a spur, with points upon the ends; others are like the head of a cart nail” (as quoted in Jocano 1975a:67).

No matter how painful this might be, early Filipino males claimed it was necessary to wear such a device. “They say that their women wish it so, and that if they did otherwise they would not have communication with them” (Jocano 1975a:67). According to both De Morga and Pigafetta, this device caused the men to be “unable to withdraw until a long time after copulation” since the only way a penis can withdraw with this device is when it becomes flaccid (Jocano 1975a:67; Garcia 1979:303). Menez points out that in addition to likening the powerful baylan women priestesses to aswang, the Spaniards also tried to control Filipina sexuality. “In their zeal to dampen female sexuality, they even forced the men to abandon the penile rings which, despite their own discomfort, the latter wore because their women insisted on the use of this device to enhance female sexual
gratification” (Menez 1996, 93). For more on women’s sexuality, see Povedano’s description in 1572 (Hester 1954:28). For more on the double standard affecting women, see (Jagor 1875:157).

Whether or not machismo is the reason for balut’s male-only aphrodisiac effects, it is certain that many people feel that it is only for men. The belief that balut is an aphrodisiac has not been scientifically supported, but for most of my informants, it does not make a difference. Several of them expressed their awareness that the effectiveness of balut as a sexual stimulant may be tied to the consumer’s willingness to believe. A 27-year-old Filipina American saleswoman echoed the belief expressed by most of my informants. “Sabi nila pag kumain ka ng balut, titigas ang tuhod mo at makakatagal ka raw sa sex” (They say if one eats balut, your knees will get hard and you will last longer at sex). For these informants, there is undoubtedly a “psychological connection between food and sex” and they believe that aphrodisiacs “will work if one believes they will work” (Frazier 1970:6).

Both Frazier and Benedek discuss eggs and their alleged powers as aphrodisiacs. Eggs are associated with aphrodisiacal qualities because they are “obviously related to reproduction” (Benedek 1972:7). For Frazier, “the egg is the supreme symbol of fertility, birth and regeneration. Eggs are also said to increase sperm . . . an egg yolk contains the fountain of sexual energy, for it is in the yolk that the spark of life ignites” (Frazier 1970:28).

However, both men’s comments on eggs as aphrodisiacs are mere additions to the lengthy list of writings concerning this topic. For centuries, eggs have been considered aphrodisiacs, whether eaten alone or combined with ingredients such as honey and asparagus. Such recipes may have been created to increase the egg’s supposed titillating powers. Although they can be eaten raw, aphrodisiacal recipes from the ancient Greeks, Romans, and the Chinese have consistently mentioned mixing eggs with other items.

In addition, eggs from certain species were considered superior. For example, duck eggs were believed to be better than chicken eggs, and pigeon better than duck, with the sparrow being thought to be the best (Hendrickson 1974:150–151). It may be that eggs are considered sexual stimulants because they symbolize male testicles in places such as Ghana, Holland, Germany, and Latin America (see for example, Newall 1971:113–141). Eggs in Hebrew (“betzim”) also refer to testicles, as well as in Italian (“uova”). For the Wik-Mungkan aboriginal tribe in Australia, eggs also refer to testicles (McKnight 1973). For the tribe, foods such as
eggs are thought to represent the sexual organs and this affects their distribution in the community. A man who gives eggs to those of the opposite sex must follow certain rules, since the eggs he gives are imbued with symbolism. However, no taboos are present regarding the giving of eggs between mother and daughter or sisters to their mother’s younger sister. McKnight was told that in cases where women give each other eggs, although “eggs are like testicles. . . because only women are involved, then there is ‘nothing in it’” (1973:197). He also notes that the nest was likened to pubic hair (1973:197. For an international list of eggs in relation to sexual beliefs, including eggs as phallic symbols, see Goodland 1931:40, 78, 80, 141, 209. For eggs as fertility symbols, see pp. 515, 582, 643).

However, in countries like France, Indonesia, and Morocco, equating eggs to the female hymen is quite common (Newall 1971:137–140). Persian brides crack eggs on their wedding nights in hopes that their maidenhead will “break as quickly and completely” (Hendrickson 1974:151). It must be stated at this point that the men who ingest duck or chicken balut are actually eating what is essentially a “chick.” In the Philippines, as in other countries like the U.S., the word “chicks” is often used by men to refer to women. In her article about Manila jeepneys, Herminia Menez notes the popular use of the word “CHICKSeater” on vehicle signs and she suggests that it can mean “chicks eater” with chicks referring to women, or it can refer to the driver eating balut (Menez 1996, 6).

What does all this data about sexuality have in common with balut? In my study of balut, I have attempted to show how sexual and cultural values of the Filipinos and Filipino Americans can be seen in the beliefs regarding the consumption of fertilized eggs. I argue that for Filipino men in the U.S., balut is eaten primarily for its powers to increase sexual potency and virility. It must be repeated that Filipino Americans who eat balut purchase their eggs raw, and not cooked since vendors selling balut are not present in the U.S. as in the Philippines. This means that eating this food is not a matter of convenience—the raw balut has to be boiled anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes. And one must first obtain some eggs from a farm or a market, that is, if there are even some fertilized eggs available to be sold. All of these factors are obstacles which may altogether discourage Filipino immigrants from seeking to eat balut in this country. But this is not the case as of now.

Although Filipinos of all ages and sexes in the Philippines eat balut, my informants stated that in the U.S., male balut eaters outnumber female eaters. The fact that female eaters, although a minority, continue
to consume the fertilized duck eggs suggests that consuming balut is part of their ethnic identity. Food as a marker of ethnicity has been illustrated by numerous food scholars (see for ex., Theophano 1991; Brown and Mussell 1984; Staub 1989). But in addition to eating balut as enacting one’s ethnic identity, I would like to suggest another reason why Filipinos, specifically Filipino American males, would want to eat it. Since nutritional needs for protein are not under consideration (indeed, many Filipino Americans have to limit their intake of foods like this which are high in cholesterol), it seems that balut as an aphrodisiac for men is the prime reason why Filipino Americans continue their consumption of balut. In a land where economic hardships do not necessarily distract Filipino American males in their pursuit of more sensual considerations, balut is sought for the belief that it can “rev up” one's sex life.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE
[Questions marked with an asterisk were considered especially important.]

Balut Survey: Please answer the following:

1. Name, age, occupation, ethnicity, (please also mention if first or second generation Filipino or other nationality)
2. Are you familiar with eating a fertilized egg called balut?
3. Do you know another name for it?
4. When and where did you first eat balut and how old were you?
5. When and where was the last time you ate balut? When did you eat it, morning, noon, or night?
 *6. Why do you eat balut?
7. Where do you tend to eat it? ex. home, work, parties, dinner, snack during the day.
 *8. How do you eat it? Please describe in detail from the moment you get it. Do you also put any seasoning or condiment on it?
9. Whom do you eat balut with, yourself or with others?
*10. Is balut good for anything? (ex. health, energy, sex). Please explain in detail what balut is good for according to your opinion and personal experience. If you are stating hearsay, please state this clearly as hearsay.

*11. If balut is good for something, do you think balut works?

12. How often do you eat balut?

13. Do you think everybody, male and female, young and old, eats balut or is there a specific age group that eats balut in the Philippines?

14. What immigrant groups are you aware of eating balut?

15. Is there any reason or occasion NOT to eat balut?

*16. How did you feel after you ate balut? In other words, did you feel any effects and how soon did you feel those effects?

17. Does eating balut have any connection that you know of to Filipino supernatural beliefs ex. multo (ghosts), dwende (dwarves), aswang (witches) and other creatures of the night?

18. What was the effect of balut on your friends who ate it when it was prescribed to them by others (usually, friends urge others to eat balut for a reason, ex. telling newlyweds to eat it).

19. When is balut sold in the Philippines: morning, noon, or night? In U.S.? If sold at night in the Phil., why do you think this was so?

*20. Who was selling the balut, male or female? Why do you think it is sold the way it is in the Philippines, wrapped up like a baby?

*21. Can you think of any stories connected to balut from your experience or hearing from others about balut’s supposed powers for the male? Please be detailed. (If this is something new to you, just say you have not heard it before).

22. What country and place do you think balut originated from?

23. If balut was easily available, how often would you eat it?

24. Optional: If you have further information about balut, please add it here. It could be anything from what you feel about balut or books and articles you came across that had information on balut.

ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA FOR INFORMANTS

To protect their identities, only the initials of the informants will be used, followed by their gender, age, occupation and ethnicity if it was given. Several informants are identified and one informant is also included for her experience about eating balut although she did not complete the questionnaire.

E.R., female, 58, government employee, first generation Filipina American.

V.P., female, 42, homemaker, first generation Filipina American.
E.C., male, 30, businessman, Chinese Filipino.
J.M., male, 42, seminarian, first generation Filipino American.
R.T., male, 37, driver, first generation Filipino American.
T.A., female, 50s, first generation Filipina American.
H.P., male, 46, equipment technician, first generation Vietnamese American.
J.M., female, 8, student, second generation Vietnamese American.
N.C., female, 28, homemaker, first generation Chinese Filipino.
M.M., male, 38, nurse, first generation Filipino American.
A.G., female, 27, salesperson, first generation Filipina American.
C.R., female, 50, bank teller, first generation Filipina American.
J.J., female, 58, homemaker, first generation Filipina American.
J.T., male, 33, trade assistant, first generation Filipino American.
D.A., male, 9, student, third generation Filipino American.
N.A., male, 6, student, third generation Filipino American.
N.A., female, 4, third generation Filipina American.
P.P., female, 40, librarian and outreach worker, second generation Filipina American.
J.M., male, 67, financial analyst, first generation Filipino American.
J.M., male, 28, software engineer, Filipino.
D.V., male, 64, engineer, first generation Filipino American.
Mr. B., male, 35, investment banker, Filipino.
I.Y., female, 22, student, Filipina.
Butch Coyoca, male, 50, balut distributor and businessman, first generation Filipino American.
Canh (Kent) Nguyen, male, 64, balut distributor and restaurant owner, first generation Vietnamese American.
Doreen G. Fernandez, female, 62, professor and writer, Filipina.

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