

Aeta Cuisine from the Philippines

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The first Negrito macro-grouping found in the Philippines is that of the Aeta - also known in their various locations as Agta, Alta, Ati, etc. Like the Mamanwa, they are a short dark-skinned and kinky-haired ethnic grouping that came to these islands before any other known group. Pure Negritos (estimated to number between 15,000 and 60,000 individuals in the Philippines) have very dark skins, a small flat nose, thick lips, small hands and feet and a well proportioned-body.

While a very detailed treatment of Aeta and other Negrito groupings can be found in my [Aeta of Bataan](#), I will limit myself here to a description of the cuisine of those denizens of the forest that are presently located in several communities on the Bataan peninsula. Nearly all of the information presented below was obtained from Negrito community chiefs as indicated. In my [Black Cuisine of the Tropics](#), the presentation follows the following format: a) name of community; b) name of chief (or informant), and c) a listing of items consumed as indicated by the informant. In some cases additional related information is supplied.

(1) Aeta of Pastolan- Here Bonifacio Dela Junta Florentino (the 42-year old “tribal chief” of Pastolan, Bataan) affirms that his community consumes a great variety of foods including rice, wild pig, shrimp, peas, vegetables, *paniki* (fruit bat), wild chicken, bamboo bat, cassava, banana, *gabi* (taro), honey, mango grubs, mango, jackfruit, guava, cashew, avocado, papaya, pineapple, *duhat* (Java plum), and *santol* (fruit of the *sandor* tree). The garden in front of his home contains *guyabano* (soursop) trees, *saging* (banana), *nyug* (coconut) palms, *bunga* (beetle nut) plants, *epil-epil* (used for firewood), and mahogany trees. He also has another garden (a half hour's walk away) planted with mango, jackfruit, and banana.

Bonifacio affirms that the element of culture which distinguishes his group most from its Tagalog neighbors is the continued Negrito love for and dependence upon the forest. Members of his community gather honey during the rainy season and trap *damong baboy* (wild pig) and *labuyo* (wild chicken) all year round.

When asked how this is done, Bonifacio demonstrated how the *silong baboy* (pig trap) is constructed. A wire lasso is placed on the ground over a small branch that is slightly elevated at one end over a trigger mechanism. Two bent twigs are then placed over the stick. The trap is then armed using a sturdy branch which is bent over the lasso and held firm in this bent horizontal position by a cord to which the end of the wire lasso is attached. This is done in such a way that when the bent twigs under the wire lasso are depressed by the wild pig's foot, the trigger mechanism (held in place by one end of the stick beneath the twigs) is released and the sturdy branch springs back to its original erect position pulling the attached wire with it. When this happens the lasso closes around the wild pig's foot entrapping it and suspending the animal from the ground in such a way that it cannot escape. After the trap is armed, the lasso is camouflaged by piling dry leaves on top of the exposed wire lasso.

Bonifacio also showed me how the wild chicken trap is made. Unlike the *silong baboy*, this trap (*silong labuyo*) uses cord, bamboo, and twigs. Tourists – he affirms – still come occasionally to Pastolan to see how the Aeta, make fire, set traps, and hunt with bows and arrows. Aetas chew a mixture of betel nut and tobacco to relax and Christmas Eve (December 24) is celebrated in Pastolan with special foods. The biggest problem facing Pastolan with respect to food and drink is the lack of water nearby. Villagers are obliged to walk a long distance to collect drinking water from the spring.

The Aeta of Pastolan continue to trap fish, and gather forest products in the mountain reserve surrounding their village. The names of some of the wild fruits gathered are *lamiyu* (a small sweet yellow fruit), *susumbik* (a small yellow bitter fruit), *libas* (a small green bitter fruit), *limuhan* (a small green sour fruit), *guibano* (soursop), and *pao* (small wild mango). They use *yawo* (bows) and *pana* (arrows), *telador* (slings), or *silo* (traps) to obtain *labuyo* (wild chicken), *baboi ramo* (wild pig), *usa* (deer), *paniking kaging* (bamboo bat), *paniking kunanaba* (fruit bat), *bayawak* (iguana), *timbabalak* (another kind of lizard that is smaller than an iguana), *panilan* (beehive), *lukot* (a species of honeybee), *musang* (wild cat), *dagang* (rabbit), and *loro* (parrot). They also use traps, arrows, or hook and line for catching fish like *bulig*, *hito*, and *tilapia*.

In Pastolan children enjoy eating sugared roast banana on a stick and *palamig* (a delightful sweet drink resembling kool-aid).

During my stay in Pastolan, Leonardo Abraham's brother-in-law caught a *musang* (a civet cat) and I got the opportunity to see how it was prepared for consumption. First, the dead animal was held over the fire to facilitate the removal of its fur and a whisk broom was then used to knock the burned fur to the ground. The hairless carcass was then taken to the river where the head and entrails were removed. The Negritos of Bataan find this animal extremely delectable and affirm that whoever eats of its flesh is immediately cured of any digestive ailment.

The *musang* (also called *alamid*) is a kind of palm civet that is endemic to the Philippines. These cats are commonly found in Luzon, Palawan, Mindanao, and in most of the larger islands of the Philippines. A closely related species roams the larger islands of the Sulu Archipelago, while their distant relatives are widely distributed in Southeastern Asia and in the East Indies. Philippine palm civets have black stripes on their gray fur and are expert climbers. As such they prefer the high branches of tall dipterocarp trees. After it is cooked, I was served a generous portion of which I found to be much tastier than the chicken.

The Negrito population here – because of its diet of fresh forest foods – appears to be quite strong and healthy and I present below a discussion of a picnic adventure in the neighboring forest extracted from pg. 117 – 121 of my [Aeta of Bataan](#).

Exploring the Forest

I awakened early in the morning to a piping hot cup of coffee and a breakfast of rice and eggs. My mission on “day 3” was to discover what the forest holds and for that purpose I enlisted the services of Michael Dela Junta and three of his youthful companions: Rosito Pabayan (aged 17), Jon-Jon Dela Cruz (aged 16), and Pio Duero (aged 12).

Michael was the leader of our little expedition and, because of the very real danger of poisonous snakes that inhabit the deep forest, he easily persuaded me to opt for a tamer semi-forest site used to train marines in jungle survival. As we set out on our trek I was asked to purchase an onion, salt, a can of Argentina corn beef, a pack of *ajinamoto* [a magi cube], and some bamboo rice to eat while we are there. I asked where the cooking utensils were and Michael said that we needed no pots or pans because we would be using bamboo tubes instead.

In order to have a supply of fresh water for drinking and cooking, Jon-Jon Dela Cruz cut some lengths of bamboo and proceeded to remove the inner nodules by banging them open with a slender but sturdy pole. After he finished removing the inner nodules, Pio Duero filled some of these tubes with water.

At this point Kaykay Dela Cruz joined our little expedition and we began our trek through an area thick with *talahib* grass which towered above our heads. We had to walk carefully because this grass has rather sharp edges that can easily cut the skin if rubbed against.

As we walked, Michael pointed out some of the useful plants we encountered along the way. Among these were *lutuk* (cobra grass) which serves as a disinfectant. Since I had already sustained a grass cut on my hand, Michael had an opportunity to show me how it works. He took some of the leaves of this miraculous plant and rolled them into a tiny ball between the two palms of the hand. When the leaves were of a mushy consistency, he squeezed the juice on my wound and presto, the cut healed immediately and painlessly.

Kaykay Dela Cruz then showed me another interesting plant called *pandakake*. The sticky white juice obtained from its leaves is used to speed up healing after a form of circumcision called *tuli*.

Michael then dug up the root of the *kalot* plant and showed it to me. Like some types of tapioca, *kalot* is highly poisonous if eaten as is. In order to detoxify this tuber, one must first wash it and then let it sit in the river for one week. Only after this soaking process can it be cooked and eaten [cf. how the Garifuna detoxify their toxic manioc plant, below]. I was then told that if a person tastes it without following this process, he or she becomes high as if on drugs and having more than a very small taste results in death.

Michael then showed me how to look for *katod*, a reddish-colored edible grub worm. Since we only found one of them, however, I decided to let it live in peace. We also discovered three tiny *pugo* (quail) eggs - which we also left in place- as well as some ripe *bananuyo* (a grape like fruit) which we consumed.

We then reached Nagbuaya cave where we did our cooking. Kaykay Dela Cruz opted not to join us for our meal and left our expedition after pointing out a bird's nest with small eggs inside.

At the cave site, Michael and his friends placed rice in two of the *buho* (bamboo) tubes. They then poured water from another tube into a small window like opening that they cut into the center of the upper portion of each tube. This "window" had a covering which was closed before placing the two tubes on the fire to cook.

As the other members of the expedition busied themselves gathering more fire wood, Michael rested the bamboo lengths on two large rocks and started the fire. After the rice was cooked, the bamboo tubes were split open and the rice placed on banana leaves for consumption.

And what of the Argentina corn beef and onion, you may ask. Michael placed those ingredients along with some water in a smaller tube which was open on one end. He then propped this against one of the stones and this cooked at the same time he was cooking the rice.

Though not as delightful as the meals prepared by Bonifacio's wife [for which, see below], I found our meal both tasty and filling. On our way back to the village Rosito Pabayan showed us the tracks of a wild boar that had been rooting in the vicinity. Safe at home, I reflected on the excursion and wondered what it would have been like had we gone to the deep forest.

"Day 7" of my stay with the Aeta of Pastolan was dedicated to *Aeta Cuisine* and my informant was none other than Bonifacio's wife, Marilyn Florentino. Marilyn is 34 years old and the mother of two of Bonifacio's children. In addition to being a housewife, she works at a tree nursery 11 days a month and is thus able to contribute approximately 2,200 pesos a month towards household expenditures.

When asked what kinds of dishes she usually prepares at home, she provided me with the following short list: a) *adobong baboing damo* (*adobo* of wild pig). *Adobo* is typically made of meat, poultry (or a combination of both) or seafood in a dark tangy sauce; b) *sinigang na hipon* (shrimp) or *sinigang ng bangus* (milkfish). Note that *sinigang* is a dish of meats or seafood boiled with sour fruits to give it a tangy taste; c) *sopsoy ng hipon* - shrimp chop suey; d) *pritong galungung* (a small fried fish) said to be a particular favorite of the Negrito; e) *paksiw na terong* - "paksiw" being fish or meat cooked in vinegar with salt and garlic added; f) *guisadong manok* - stewed chicken; g) *kalot* (the poisonous tuber described in our excursion, above); and h) *pakbit* - an intriguing stir fry dish.

I then asked her if I could observe the preparation of our next lunch and she agreed. She said we would be having *pakbit (rastu)* and then busied herself with the preparation. To make *pakbit a la Marilyn Florentino* one needs a big wok and the following ingredients: *sebolhas* (onions), *kamatis* (tomato), *bawang* (garlic), *pritong galungung* (small fried fish), *sitaw* (string beans), *talong* (egg plant), *calabasa* (squash), *saluyot* (okra), *sili* (hot pepper), *baguno* (a sauce made from small fish, water, and salt), *ajinamoto* (MSG), *tubig* (water), and *mantika* (oil).

As I looked on, Marilyn explained to one of her daughters how the dish is prepared. She told her to:

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| <p>Pakbit
<i>a la Florentino</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. boil two jars of water;2. add oil to big wok;3. add garlic;4. add onion5. stir fry these ingredients;6. add tomatoes and stir in;7. wash other vegetables and add them to the mixture;8. cover and cook for ten minutes;9. uncover, add fish sauce, and stir;10. add one packet of <i>ajinamoto</i> (i.e. MSG);11. add boiled water that has been allowed to cool;12. add (here 8) whole fried fish and cook uncovered for 10 minutes; |
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Pakbit is typically served with boiled rice, but so is every other preparation for that matter. Indeed, Aetas apparently consume as much rice as the Malagasy of Madagascar. When I pointed this out, Bonifacio told me that a 50 kilo sack of rice (which currently sells for 1,200 pesos) lasts only for 10 to 15 days in his house. After lunch we learned that the son of Bonifacio's sister, Minoy had trapped a wild pig and we all rushed there to get our share. In the old days the meat was distributed freely, but now it is sold by the kilo.

The pig we saw was two-toned in color (black and white). The white portion, however, was actually the part of the pig's body the skin of which has been removed. To obtain this result, boiling water was poured over the skin and a knife was used to peel it off of the carcass. I purchased one kilo of the meat and Bonifacio obtained another. I don't know if his kilo was purchased or gifted, but it really didn't matter.

Marilyn then made us an *adobong baboy* with one kilo and a *sinigang* with the other. Despite the fact that I do not eat pork, it was so tempting that I temporarily shelved this taboo and unleashed myself on the "boar" meal with a passion. I consumed fully half of the *adobo* and half of the *sinigang* and as a result was afflicted with diarrhea for the next 6 days. Woe was me! The lesson I learned here was that anything in excess, no matter how tasty, is bad for you. I also learned that changing the name from "pig" to "boar" does not change the nature of the beast.