

Eating rats

Grandmother held the rat by its tail and suspended it above the flames to start burning the hair on the skin of its head after which she dropped the animal in the fire with its back towards the center of the fire. She kept an eye on it. Using a pair of wood tongs she carefully turned it over to avoid certain parts of it been burnt. Once the hair burnt off, she took the animal, all blackened, out of the fire. She would scrape the rat entirely with a piece of dried bark until its toughened skin turned roasted brown. Then grandmother would hold her prey in her hands to empty it. She would attentively pull out an incisor from the bottom jaw. Then she would plunge it skillfully in the middle of its abdomen and in the same movement make an incision right down to the level of the anus cutting open the stomach with all its intestines coming out. Grandmother would take them out easily and place them in the ashes for later when they would be burnt in the heap of peelings and weeds. She never threw them away outside the hut since that would be lacking respect for food. Skinning the tail depended on another clever twist of hand. Waejue *qatr* would maintain the tail between the thumb and the forefinger while squeezing on it and abruptly slide the skin from the anus to the end of the tail. It was easy if the it was at the right temperature. That was what I liked doing! But when the skin remained stuck on the bone, I would cut off the tail. And that would set us off quarrelling. Grandmother would become very angry and without hésitating I would repeat what aunt Waloli had told me. According to grandmother I had no respect for food and she would mutter. « God will let us run out of food »

The emptied rats were laid out on a fig leaf then put on the ashes while waiting for grandmother to finish warming-up two banana leaves in the flames after which she would cross one on top of the other and in the intersection of the two leaves she would put some sticky cabbage leaves with mushrooms picked in season. Then she would carefully lay the rats on this layer of vegetables with their tails tucked in beside the belly while adding on a second layer of sticky cabbage leaves with mushrooms without spices nor seasoning and folding the ends of the banana leaves over it to envelope the dish by fastening it with the main veins of the banana leaves that she had carefully detached when been warmed previously in the flames. Then she would clear the embers in the middle of which she would put her small *bougna* on the hot ashes recovered with embers. We had only to wait.

Outside, under the latticework of passion fruit creepers, aunt Waloli had finished boiling the water that she had fetched from the main road and would call us to have hot tea with last evening's leftovers of mainly starchy food, vegetables, yams, sweet potatoes and sticky cabbage leaves that she had warmed up. Our dishes were often prepared with boiled flying foxes, pigeons or wild pigs. But the dish we all waited for the most was grandmother's *bougna* of rats.

Towards nine o'clock, we knew that grandmother was not far off when Gaboroc would appear and join the other dogs of the pack. She was not to be long in coming out of the little path with the *bougna* of rats in her hands.

Gaboroc was her small female dog that practically went everywhere with her most of the time. The day grandmother died, Gaboroc let itself wane away. For us, it was as if grandmother had died a second time and we mourned her like we had weeped for grandmother. The only member of our little community that did not shed a tear was of course aunt Waloli. Perhaps she was heartless!

When we heard the dogs barking, growling or become threatening, we would bend over again to speedily weed unnecessarily in the garden or quickly get down to doing something! As for me, I would squat down in the tall grasses or even crawl. Sometimes I would pull the stems of the yams in order to be seen by my uncle and hoping that he would persuade me to stop working. I knew that Icica and Thuluë were doing as much as I did.

In reality, our parents would laugh at our immaturity. It was just a way of keeping an eye on us to prevent us from playing 'the big bad wolf' among the trees. They knew about our careless way of working in the gardens and once we were sent off to school, they would return to weed the garden fields.

Then my uncle would say « Come on you boys, you can stop working. Go give your grandmother a hand »

We would quickly get up then, unfurling, like a *qagon* that loosens itself to tighten the neck of the rat, looking around at each other, careful not to burst out laughing in front of our uncles. Later on, after a long while we would have a good laugh between ourselves.

My uncles were strict, they would not allow us playing in the garden fields. Grandmother was always around to calm everybody down. While we ran towards the house made of pandanus leaves to fetch the flask of herbal tea and yams baked in the fire, the rest of the family would make their way towards the fig tree where grandmother was waiting. On our return at the fig tree, we could see that everyone had received his share.

Sitting next to the wide opened *bougna* of rats, grandmother would show us our share by pointing it out. She had laid it out with care on fern and fig leaves which were used as plates and a piece of rat meat or more than an entire one, depending on the catch of the day before, was served along with sticky cabbage leaves and mushrooms. As well as he was concerned, Loulou didn't like eating mushrooms and that often caused quarrels amongst us to see who would have his share. One of our aunts was responsible for distributing the yams cooked in charcoals and the bowls for drinking tea.

Thuluë and I would serve everybody with very hot lemon tea. Then, after gathering up our share, we would go away in the underwoods without hesitating to go farther forward into the woods away from the adults with whom we never mixed together. Sometimes we heard grandmother scolding one of our uncles for making us work too hard. Instantly, in reply, we would hear our uncles sniggering away.

As for us, not a word did we say. Besides we never talked in front of our uncles. We would just eat in trying to be quiet even if we wanted to laugh about the « tortures » inflicted on us by our uncles that ended up annoying grandmother. Little did we know at that time that they were all in cahoots!

We counted ourselves lucky that grandmother defended us. That's how it was at home. Waejue *qatr* was the 'go between' between us and the adults. She would come around to let us stop working on the fields. We would resume work in the afternoon after lunch so this allowed us, the children that we were to play in the woods. Some of us climbed right up to the top of the trees. Others went to hunt rats or if not locate the bunyip trees that were bearing fruits in order to post themselves there in the evening to hunt flying foxes. We abounded with things to do.

But the nine o'clock break was like a ritual. One could even believe that grandmother presided over the office being the only one who had the right to talk. We kept quiet, our mouths full, busy savouring our piece of rat meat.

Looking back now, I remember the odd feelings of those moments especially when I swallowed my piece of rat meat. I felt as if seized by a deep anguishing feeling of guilt. It choked me, instinctively stopped me from looking at my cousin who was gulping his share and was also avoiding looking at me. This uneasiness tended to gain the other members of the family. We felt the same hesitation when eating flying foxes where we would feel a kind of shame. It was the fear of being surprised by legitimate persons like the *lapa qatr** and the old people.

The rat and the flying fox are considered as noble dishes and daring to eat them is like eating yams before offering them to the chiefs of the clans or before receiving the blessings of the father among the catholics of the island. We cheat and we call that 'stealing' the yam.

Even if the root crops come from one's own garden one must hide himself in order to consume it. Like our nine o' clock break in the garden fields where each one of us ate to our heart's content.

Later on when I returned at my parents place at Hunöj and at Havila where I led my High School years, my schoolmates would point me out and to humiliate me, would say that I was a rat eater. It was as if I had committed the most appalling crime. How faulty! What a scandal! And if I felt disgraced and humiliated, I was especially ashamed of my mother's tribe. I suffered to death about it.

Basically, I know that they considered us as a backward people. The prehistorical man must have surely fed himself like us. At an age where a child learns to confirm his experiences in his relationship with others, I was also entitled to being mocked without understanding what I was liable for. I had to fight my way through.

One day, now a couple of years ago, I found myself alone in our staff room with a colleague, a teacher in Chemistry and Physics. She had opened the can of milkpowder that she had just taken out of the small refrigerator. She wanted to make herself a hot drink to revitalize herself.

« I'm cold » she told me.

« Stop, Maryline, the milk's no longer good. It stinks. It stayed too long in the fridge. For more than a year since then, you know. Can't you smell it? »

« Ha! Ha! Ha! Mr French teacher. If you knew about the chemical products added to foodstuffs and consumed everyday of our life, you wouldn't even give a care about this can of milk!

I remained astounded. Me, a rat eater!