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There once was a man who lived in the town of Dueñas in Iloilo, Philippines, and... Well, he wasn't any ordinary man. At least, not to hear his neighbors tell the story. He had his moments. At first glance, you wouldn't quite believe them. On one hand, he was a barrio lieutenant or an administrator of fair importance. Now, a barrio lieutenant wasn't a leader outright, and that was fortunate. No one would have been comfortable with Tenyente Gimo taking on that much influence in their lives, but there were things that no one really wanted to do. Tenyente Gimo was willing to do them, and he could do them well enough, so that was that.

But on the other hand, there was something... odd about Gimo: something that no one could entirely explain. He kept to himself, which made it hard for anyone to get a real sense of how or what he was. Now he hadn't always been that way, some of his neighbors would want to say in his defense. They had plenty of stories about him. They had fond memories of better days, playing in the school yard or at his mother's house. Those were distant times, yes, but adulthood will change you. Having kids changes you. At that point, Tenyente Gimo only had a daughter, but it is the first one that has the greatest impact. Or so they'd stay. They'd say as much when they were stalling for time. To avoid the questions. To avoid the realization that those who were uneasy with Tenyente Gimo had a better argument. One that didn't depend on nostalgia or a bygone memory. If they could, they would point out his lower face. There was something misshapened about it. Not obviously so. Not in a way that was too much different than the faces of those suffering from various oral afflictions, but it was still there. And hard to miss.

Aswang, they might have said, though proving it would have been a different matter entirely.

There was reason to worry but--perhaps--reason enough not to. Despite their suspicions, it could not be denied that Tenyente Gimo hadn't done anything to them at all. He had hardly done anything at all. He kept to himself mostly, with the exception only of his daughter, a daughter that he clearly loved and the memory of a lost wife. No one else kept him company.

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And his daughter and wife were fine people, Tenyente Gimo's defenders were quick to add. Though his wife was gone, his daughter remained a testament to his virtues. She was a school teacher, a noble profession to be sure. What Filipino did not think education was a virtue of the highest order? And there she was, providing it to the masses. At the very least, she would keep good company, which she thought to include her father.

One day, she came to her father's home with a friend of hers in tow, another teacher. This other young woman was not from their barrio but from one a ways away. They were friends from their training days, most likely. There's not so much time for young women to intermingle, especially with those so far from their homes. In fact, you would not really want your daughter to do that sort of thing to happen--if you could help it. Because of moments like this, when the young friend of Maria was far from home and could not safely make it back once night fell.

Now, she was smart and raised well. This young woman knew she should not be out so late. She knew she should have been keeping track of the time and left when it

was necessary, but knowing what is best does not make a human being infallible. And while she was dining with the family of a dear friend, she was immersed in the moment. Time slipped by and slipped her into a moonless night with distant stars unable to offer much assistance.

Suddenly, it was too late for her to venture home. Not safely anyway. Tenyente Gimo was quick to remind her of this and all the dangers that could be out there waiting for a young woman wondering off on her own.

‘Stay,’ he urged her. ‘Stay in Maria’s room with her tonight. You are safe under my roof. Believe me.’

And Maria--dear friend and darling daughter that she was--agreed. Who else but a woman would know the true extent of the horrors waiting outside? And who else but a daughter would be so oblivious to the horrors under her own roof?

The young woman fumbled with her necklace while she considered her few options. The pendant was the size of thumb and represented something akin to the idea of home. It wasn’t an expensive gem but a stone that glittered in the right light. It was a special gift to her. Merely rubbing her thumb across it made her feel stronger. But it could not change her plight.

What choice did the young friend have, really? None. It was not that she could not sense the dangers she might have been in. It was not that she did not feel the unease in the air or saw the signs in Tenyente Gimo’s face that so many of his neighbor’s did. Rather, it was that she simply did not have a choice. So she laid on the floor in Maria’s room beside her, talking only briefly to her friend before Maria--tired from the excitement of the day--drifted off to sleep.

But the young woman couldn't sleep. She knew not to.

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The clock struck midnight. The young woman was awake to hear it. But that wasn't all she heard. There were noises outside in the front, living area. Not the breath of someone who had exhausted themselves in a less than ideal place. Nor was it the sound of someone preparing to lay themselves down for the night. But something else. Water pouring into a pot, she soon realized. Which wasn't an unexpected sound any other time of day. But it was so late, so late and in a house that wasn't normal in the slightest.

Maria was still asleep, completely at ease in a house that made sense to her. But her friend couldn't say the same.

So she stood up and crept towards the door but did not open it. Instead, she bent down and tried to peer out from underneath the door. She saw shoes, yes, moving about the front wrong, but while it was odd at this time of night, it wasn't impossible. Tenyente Gimo might have needed to tend to something in his home. That was his right and duty, after all, but it was like... Well, when she craned her neck just so, she could hear something else, something that sounded like Tenyente Gimo talking about death.

So there was an emergency, the young woman wanted to believe. To someone in the family?

The young woman reached for her necklace again. She needed strength. And she was grateful to have that much, especially after she heard her name.

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On the other, the better hand, let's say, there was another man, a scholar, in fact, also a teacher, writer, editor, whole nine yards as the expression could go--named Maximo D. Ramos. Born in 1910, he spent his days knee deep in Filipino folklore and mythology, taking on the momentous task of documenting all the legends that called the Philippines their home.

This wasn't an easy task by any means. In addition to there being over seven thousand islands, there are numerous languages and dialects to be found there and tracing creatures across these barriers accurately promised to be nearly impossible, but if it wasn't, any resulting successes would be impossible to verify. And that's why no one had undertaken the project up until then. Or that was a reason. Certainly there might have been others why this didn't happen. It could very well have been a matter of racism or colonialism. I mean, there were probably forces that wished to completely wipe out this and all other legends, but by Ramos's time, there was some room for Filipinos to shine academic lights on their own world. It just hadn't happened yet.

But taking on the initiative, Ramos wrote what could be considered 'the book' on the Aswang. He was the one who saw the need and potential for this study, and with the Phoenix Publishing House, a local publisher that had Ramos's loyalty and devotion, he composed just such a book. 'The Aswang Complex in Philippine Folklore,' it's called, and with a skilled bookseller's help, you can still get a copy .

This book was the first to outline what the aswang was or was seen as, but taking it one step further, Ramos took the opportunity to gather up various tales about the beast from all across the islands. You see, the aswang is not a passing fancy. It is a

bit of a constant in the Filipino consciousness, which is why he was so determined to study it.

As for the story, I'm telling you, the tale of Gimo is one of the more famous ones. A quick search of the internet has a few websites that name him the original aswang. Or the first that the populace had to face directly. Others say that he was, in fact, an ordinary man who undertook the title as a way of keeping invading forces, specifically Spain, away from Dueñas. He wanted to scare them away, so the story goes, and became the villain necessary to do just that. Unfortunately, it might have worked a bit too well.

Ramos, for what it's worth, is a bit indifferent on that front. He presents this story judgment or comment, but I do think there's a reason why the tale of Tenyente Gimo has endured in the way that it has: reaching the forefront of all the tales out there about the aswang.

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The young woman couldn't make out exactly what he had said, but whatever it was, it was about her. There was her name. The sound of a filling pot. All from a man she was deeply suspicious of. She couldn't even tell who he was talking to. Or what, she thought with a deep sense of dread.

She took a shaky breath. A thumb against her necklace soon became a tightly clenched fist wrapped around it.

The room was dark. Even after being up and about for a few moments, her eyes had not adjusted. There was simply no light to adjust to. There was no easy way to flee with Tenyente Gimo awake just beyond the door. Once again, she was trapped.

Death, she heard. Kill, she heard also. Then her name again.

She looked over to Maria or where she thought Maria was and muttered a soft prayer. God help her for what she was about to do.

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The aswang is a unique literary figure. It takes on many different roles and faces depending on the context. In short, it is all that Filipino culture resists, it is all the fear that Filipinos carry, and with its inclusion in the narrative, so many aspects of Filipino culture fall into place.

The stories can be frightening. The creature, itself, potentially more heinous than anything you, dear listener, have known, but we can't shy away from it. It played and still plays a function socially, and to understand the phenomena behind it is to better understand not just the Philippines but the human endeavor in and of itself.

In fact, when Felipe Jocano, eminent scholar and renowned Filipino anthropologist, wrote the preface for the most recent edition of the book, he asked that we view the aswang not just as a story but also as ethnographic data.

More than any monster of the Western canon, the aswang stands as a shadow of something, and by seeing the twists and turns of the darkness before us, we can understand the shape above us. And yet, we don't go looking for the aswang. We have the stories, but we have never looked at them too closely.

Perhaps you should be asking yourself why. Are we scared? Frankly, I am a bit.

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Tenyente Gimo crept upstairs to the room where the two girls were laying: one the beloved daughter Maria and the other, the victim she had unknowingly brought him.

His mouth watered at the thought of her. He had not had such pure blood in quite some time. In fact, he hardly had any. It was hard to hunt around there. His neighbors already regarded him with a great deal of suspicion, and with the barrio being so small, no one could go missing without notice, without someone caring and going out to find the culprit.

But that young lady could. She could disappear from his house, and everyone would assume that she had just left in the middle of the night. Who is to say why? Perhaps she had run off with a young man who whispered sweet and baseless promises in her ear. Perhaps she had meant to go home as a good daughter would but had been stopped by someone who had more outward malice.

The details really did not matter. As all those stories were plausible enough that blame would pass from his home. And he would be safe. For once, he could indulge in his urges without fear.

The opportunity was too tantalizing to pass up. And so he burst into the room and locked eyes on the young woman's jewel. It was the only thing that he could see in a room so dark. The gem managed to catch what little light there was. And so he charged for and slayed the neck the jewel hung from before he could be stopped.

The death was quick, at least. That much could be said.

He dragged the small woman's body into the hallway and shut the door behind him, lest his daughter be disturbed, but to his horror, it was his daughter's body he carried in his arms. It was his child that he had killed.

The young woman, now without her treasured necklace, fled through the window while Tenyente Gimo's grief washed over him. The horrors of the moment stilled him



and gave her a chance to save her life. For all the trials of a darkened night, the young lady was able to escape and reported to local police what had happened. She felt fairly confident she knew what had happened, though some details were hard to place. After all, she had felt the blood rush from her friend's neck, covering her. It was still all over her body. She knew what had happened. And so did the people of Dueñas who now knew, to their horror, that they truly had an aswang in their midst. It was a confirmation that, perhaps they needed, but certainly did not want.

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Whether or not Tenyente Gimo was an aswang or the first known aswang or anything of the sort, I don't know. What I do know is that his story touches upon, perhaps, what is the most horrifying trait of the beast: it's ability to hide in what could be considered plain sight. The aswang is never all that far away, you could assume. It is part and parcel with all those traits that we loathe in ourselves, in humanity, those things we want to purge our society of.

Honestly, I am inclined to harbor some skepticism when it comes to the whole 'why did no one consider the aswang in an academic light?' I'm sure there was a great many who were either too lazy to put in the legwork, or who wanted to pretend this was a sort of fairytale, a child's story that the Filipino people would eventually outgrow. But I do think there is a third reason why some did not venture out this far. And it is that fear: fear of finding an evil far too close to home, one you cannot really escape. In looking for the Aswang, you may come to find that this evil is more real than you want to admit. If you know to look for it.

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Searching for the Aswang is a production of Hugot Podcasting, which itself is a division of Miscellany Media Studios. This show is researched, written, hosted, and produced by MJ Bailey with music from the Sounds like an Earful music supply. See you in two weeks.

Sources:

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