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Any pursuit begins with an act of recognition, an acknowledgement of the being being sought after or even just the silhouette. In some circumstances, the act of recognizing what is there is significant, maybe even emotionally charged by necessity or some form of idealism. But other times, it is a simple matter of practicality. One must know what it is they are after if they are going to be able to find it. One must know what to reach for if they have any chance of grabbing it. Your sheer resolve won't take you the entire way.

And therein lies the problem. For some of us. For those of us who were not fully immersed in the culture of the Philippines with all the folklore and legend surrounding the aswang. We might want to understand it, truly and earnestly, but that does not mean we will. In fact, we may find that language--our language--fails us.

In our pursuit of the aswang, that limitation is the reality. The Aswang is not the sister of any creature in the canon of horror stories that dominate media--those stories coming out of Europe and the United States. And it's certainly not a twin creature, though drawing a line across the ocean would certainly bring comfort of some sort. The menace you know is always less frightening than the one you do not. But while that impulse may be understandable, its conclusion will not be accurate.

The aswang is not a creature most know. In fact, trying to boil it down to being a single creature might be missing part of the larger point. It's not a single creature. This is not a Dracula or Frankenstein's Monster sort of scenario, in which a string of sounds is referred to as a name, and that name points towards a singular entity and all its iterations and nuances. As Maximo Ramos explains it, the aswang as a concept refers

to a collection of beliefs typically distributed across five mythical beings more established in the world's consciousness.

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The first is--perhaps--the most obvious. Or if it is not, it is the one I've seen many people gravitate towards. And that could be the result of recent trends in popular culture. Maybe market forces are even more powerful than we thought and can actually shape a cultural memory.

You remember, the Twilight craze, don't you? Yes, I am talking about the vampire. More blood sucking than sparkling in the sunlight.

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I have an... embarrassing habit. I think we all do. Every person has something they're ashamed of. Whether or not they should be isn't the point. It's just part of human nature, I guess. But I think mine is particularly bad. I really shouldn't tell you about it, but I will if I have to.

Everyday when I walk to or from school, I have to run past the house on the corner. Like actually run. I don't know why I do it, but I've always done it. No one lives there. No one has ever lived there for as long as I can remember, but still, I want to stay far away from that place and anything that might be in it. Ever since I was a super little kid. Like from the first day of school until now, and I've almost graduated. Every single day without fail I run past that house. I just have to. But no one told me to do it. I just feel as if I have to run from something. No matter what.

Not that I ever told my friends or family about this. It's been hard, but I've managed to never walk home with anyone. Ever. Normally, I just say that I have a lot of homework to do or a lot of studying, and that tends to be the end of it.

But I couldn't do that today. Because Dad managed to sell all his wares at the market early, and that's a great thing. We could use the money. It was a gift from God, but that meant he came to meet me at school to walk me home, which wouldn't be a bad thing, but when we got to the house on the corner and I felt the urge to run, well, I couldn't run in front of him. It would have been better if I didn't, but my legs seemingly begged me to give them permission to run. And it didn't go unnoticed.

Tatay chuckled. "You must remember," he said.

"Remember what?" I asked.

He raised an eyebrow. "What happened at that house."

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I somewhat doubt I have to explain to you what a vampire is. We all know, right? It's the standard horror or Halloween faire, and the holiday wasn't that long ago. You know the fangs, you think you know the M.O., and you think you know it's weaknesses. The vampire to you is likely this humanoid--or even more human than that--being who sometimes likes to hang out as a bat. But in the Filipino tradition, it's a bit different. Instead of hiding as a bat, which is a little creature most people aren't inclined to hang around, the vampyric aswang likes to hang out as a beautiful maiden. Or that's how Ramos put it. Pull the legend into the current year, and perhaps you could see the aswang simply as being a desirable young person otherwise unspecified. After all, the emphasis should remain on the aswang's goal: finding a victim.

As we all know, beauty brings love, which brings marriage, which gives the aswang prime access to their victim, feeding or draining said victim of their blood bit by bit every night until--as the legend was first recorded--the victim would die of blood loss. Or anemia as Ramos put it. Anemia is an iron deficiency that still kills over 800,000 people globally each year. Which makes it a fairly believable death. The sort of death people don't look into. The surviving spouse then receives sympathy and communal support to protect them from a similar death. After all, spouses tend to share a diet, but then the aswang will move on, marry someone else, and essentially take another victim, likely in the next town over.

In the true crime world, this would resemble the 'black widow' type of killer, usually a woman who kills their partner to inherit wealth or the life insurance policy. Or that's the surface reason. May--deep down--have a psychological bend towards killing. For the vampyric aswang, this is just how they live. How they feed. No one really cares about the details.

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Tatay was quiet. "Maybe it's better if you don't remember," he said. But then he sighed. "No, you need to know. You need to know to be careful."

"Know about what?" I asked.

Apparently I needed to know about the aswang that used to live in that home. Kuya Joel's friend built that home. He had met a girl in Manila and married her very quickly, and the lot on the corner was the only one available for this friend to put their home. And at the time, people thought it was weird that he got married so soon. After all, Kura Joel's friend had enjoyed being a bachelor and was pretty proud to be one. It

must have been an amazing girl to bring him to his knees like that. And then everyone saw her, and yeah, she was remarkably beautiful. Her face was well sculpted and delicate, heart-shaped and rather pale. Her smile reached her eyes, which twinkled in the moonlight. And suddenly, it all made sense to them. At least for a while.

Then Kuya Joel's friend started getting sick. In a way that was equal parts mysterious and abrupt. No doctor could figure out why it happened, but Kuya Joel knew. For a while, no one would believe him. Not even my dad. So the young man grew weaker and weaker, but when the priest came by to give him the Catholic Last Rites, Kuya Joel stopped him on the way out, saying that he knew why his friend was sick and could prove it. That night, in fact, he could prove it. However, it would help if the priest could gather a few strong men, well armed preferably, to back him up. While the priest was confused, to that request, he did agree.

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As Ramos identifies in his text, this version of the aswang was closely related to the tendency for endogamous marriages or matches. Endogamy refers to the custom of marrying within one's local community or clan. Think of it as this tendency to set up your son with the butcher's daughter or the neighbor's niece, rather than letting them find a spouse in a far away town. There was something comforting about sending off the most vulnerable and beloved of your family, to marry into a family you knew reasonably well or to marry someone you knew well enough that you felt fairly confident they hadn't had a string of blood related deaths among a longer than usual list of spouses.

There was a security that only the familiar could provide. After all, you can never know the true intentions of a stranger.

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Kuya Joel waited with a few cigarettes on his porch until it got fairly late. Ate Anna kept telling him to come inside and get to bed, but Kuya Joel back then was and now is incredibly stubborn. There was no reasoning with him, so she retired and left him to his business.

After the third cigarette, Kuya Joel strolled over to his friend's property with a large knife on his belt. And true to his word, the priest was waiting for him there with a few of the barangay's strongest men. And they too were armed with their trusted knives. That was all the men would ever really need.

Kuya Joel bid them to be silent and pointed to the door, signalling his intention to enter the dwelling place alone. Which did raise another issue, right? How was he going to do it? There were elegant solutions, but Kuya Joel wasn't elegant. There was no need for that when kicking in a door worked just as well. So that's what he did. With one stern kick, the door swung open, and Kuya Joel's eyes locked onto the figure in the bedroom. He recognized the creature that pretended to be his friend's dutiful bride with her fangs hanging out. The blood dripping from them caught the light from the moon and stars and shined out, making her secret--her nefarious secret--impossible to miss.

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This suspicion of strangers had more profound effects on Filipino communities, particularly in the past, than one might be inclined to think. While you might understand being protective of your children, this tendency had other ramifications. It meant that tensions between communities and different ethnic groups were solidified, justified by

this fear of deadly vampires. There was no need to prove these suspicions. The mere chance of it was proof enough.

Of course, the need to move about for work and other purposes has been cause to set this fear aside. It might be a lingering preference in older generations, but then again, who wouldn't think it sweet if your kid married your best friend's kid? There's a sentimentality to it all that still can't be beat.

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"Then what happened?" I asked Dad.

"She ran off. Or flew off to hear Kuya Joel tell it."

"Really?"

"Better than being cut up with your uncle's knife."

And I really couldn't argue with that.

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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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