

(Music fades in)

The aswang is a beast that consumes the innocent. Simple as that, you could say. But no, it's not that simple.

We are somewhat comfortable with a vampyric aswang, or not comfortable per say. Quite obviously, we would like to keep our blood in our own veins and to be able to trust the strangers our loved ones elect to marry: two things which the vampyric aswang challenges. However, for those of us nurtured by popular culture alone, it just so happens to be the more familiar beast. The vampire might have its roots in Europe, but through our intrigue and fear, it has crossed the globe, embedding itself in our consciousness enough to become a frame of reference for our other fears or for the other monsters that lurk in the night to orient themselves against.

But the aswang is a creature that consumes. And blood might be appealing for any variety of reasons, but much like early peoples would deliberately eat all the meat of an animal they had killed, the aswang could be said to do much the same thing of us. But not out of practicality or respect. It just seems to be... Well, it just seems to be how the viscera sucker, as this second face of the aswang will be called, eats. It does not just drink the blood but eats the organs of its victims... And other things. I hope you did check the trigger warning in the show notes. Let me just say as much right now.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

Tito Manuelo came back from visiting Tita Cora's sister today. To our surprise, he came home alone, without her. Before we could ask him about it, he told us that Tita Cora had decided to stay for a couple extra days. They needed her help for a little while

longer, he said, and he did not want to wait for her when there was work around here for him to be doing.

My parents, older siblings, and I had gathered on the road around the tricycle when it pulled up to bring him home. As he was saying this, the tricycle driver pulled away. The sound of his engine was the only noise to be had. Our conversation had gone quiet. My parents and siblings clearly did not like what my uncle had said, but I didn't think it was worth being upset over. It's not a difficult trip for someone to make on their own. It's just a few towns over and deeper into the jungle. But Tito Manuelo's face had lost its color, his eyes were more sunken in, and he told us where Tita was with a heaviness in his voice that I had never heard from him before. My parents seemed to understand what he was getting at, but I didn't. I really didn't. Nothing about it made sense.

After all, they just needed her for a few extra days, to help around the home, right?. Or... Well, something was wrong. We all started back to the house, and everyone else seemed to be weighed down by something. I just couldn't figure out what.

"Is Juanito okay?" I asked.

A sick child would be plenty of reason to be upset. It's tragic and one of the reasons Tito Manuelo and Tita Cora had gone out there in the first place. It was because Juanito was sickly. The other part of it was Tita Cora's sister and well... And well, something tragic happened. It's hard to talk about. It must be to lose a baby so late in the pregnancy. It had to be painful. Physically and otherwise.

Maybe that's why Tita Cora had stayed. I had heard her sister couldn't get out of bed. She was just so sad and sick over it. And she had a valid reason to be sad.

At my question, Tito Manuelo looked at me and mustered a small smile. Patting me on the head, he said, "He'll be fine, *Ineng*, don't worry yourself."

But I couldn't help it.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

Viscera suckers are fairly unheard of in the European canon, but they frequent the folklore traditions of Malaysia and Cambodia, meaning this aspect of the creature could be imported or further developed through interactions with other cultures in Asia. Or maybe that's a gross simplification of things, though trying to ground this through a somewhat familiar lens like help explain all the aspects of the creature that seem beyond the imagination of those not nurtured by this tradition. So perhaps you cannot blame me for trying.

To start with what has perhaps become familiar to you, the viscera sucking aswang still hides as a beautiful woman during the day, but I would hesitate to try and ground this trait in norms that suit our current year. After all, romance is not embedded in this aswang's M.O. It might be a nice cover, diversion, or alibi, which is always appreciated when you're on a murderous plot. But it wasn't necessary. It gave them the opportunity to have residence they could consider a basecamp, of sorts, but without that, they would have to be more mobile or live in the jungle--either in the trees or in small, makeshift huts assuming they could make these huts deep enough to avoid any human interactions. Where the aswang chooses to reside is so deep in the jungle that if any human being were there they would be going in pursuit of something and wisely carrying a large knife in their hand. The viscera sucking aswang knows to fear knives.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

By night, the viscera sucking aswang is a more hideous beast. Its defining feature would be its tongue, which extends a great distance as a narrow, straw-like tube capable of latching onto its victims. The horrors of this beast don't end there. As Maximo Ramos reports, this version of the aswang--perhaps all but especially this version--can take flight, utilizing a form of mobility that better allows it to lurk or loom over its potential victims. But in order to do this--whether it is to achieve the right aerodynamics or to lose some other form of hindrance--this aswang must disconnect the upper and lower parts of its body. The lower part clearly gives it life or some ability to exist in some way because someone is able to kill an aswang by spreading ashes, spices, vinegar, or salt over its lower body, by moving said lower body or cutting it up in some way that makes reattachment impossible.

To protect itself, the aswang must hide this body part somewhere while it is out on the hunt. If it has a home, it will elect to hide its lower body in a closet or under a bed but if not, banana trees or a banana tree grove is particularly useful because the shapes, lines, and silhouettes of that space are fairly forgiving.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

I made banana fritters that afternoon. They're Tito Manuelo's favorite, but when I went out to the yard to offer him some, he refused. And that wasn't like him at all.

"Tito..." I started.

"I am well," he tried to assure me.

I tapped my fingers against the plate, and he heard the argument hidden in my noises.

"I don't want to think about bananas right now," he said.

“But why?”

He didn't answer me right away. Instead he turned to me and looked me over. And he asked me how old I was.

“I'm seventeen,” I reminded him.

To him, that was old enough, and he beckoned me to sit beside him.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

Having discarded its lower body, the now unencumbered aswang can fly onto the roof of its victims home and sneak its tongue through any opening, latching onto its victim's stomach. It is most interested in eating the heart, liver, lungs, or spleen of its victims. Though how these organs come out is not so clear. It could be that the aswang has some way of almost liquifying these organs before they pass through or the tubular tongue can expand as need be. Or the creature's claws could just reach in and take out the organs once the process has been started. It has options, unfortunately.

But it also has a taste for the fetus carried by a pregnant woman and through its tongue can take it from her, allegedly, whole.

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Tito Manuelo started this story with a promise or by getting one out of me. My parents didn't want me to know what had happened. They wanted to shield me not because I was very young but because I was their youngest child. Protecting me from this truth became one of their main concerns. All parents have the impulse to protect, after all, and it's a hard thing to get rid of when all your kids have grown up. You can just hitch it onto the youngest child and keep it there until grandchildren come along. And that's as fine of a solution as any. But as Tito Manuelo saw it, lying to me--even by

omission--was doing me a disservice. I needed to know the truth if I was to actually be safe.

“There was a monster,” he said. “Hiding out in the banana trees. It’s what killed the baby, you know?”

“How?”

I wish he hadn’t told me how.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

The viscera sucking aswang has had a profound effect on life in the Philippines as defending against it has become a central preoccupation. It is not uncommon for Filipinos to hang the entrails of slain animals--the parts of the animals they admittedly would not likely eat otherwise--on the boundary of the property, to lure the monster away from the roof of their home. But even sleeping arrangements seem to be designed to keep the aswang at bay. At the time of Ramos’s report, Filipinos often sleep prone, or on their stomach, believing that this shields their organs from the beast’s tongue, windows are limited to two sides of the house only, and families adopt alternating sleeping positions or arrangements for optimal vigilance.

After all, this version of the aswang makes use of our vulnerability, of the time of day we are most vulnerable, stoking a great deal of anxiety around an action that is absolutely necessary to one’s survival.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

“What about Juanito?” I asked. “Did the aswang try to get him too?”

Tito Manuelo nodded sadly. “I went into his room one night to check on him. And I saw the long thread extending from his stomach and out the window. I knew what it

was. All of us know what the aswang does. So I pulled out my knife and chopped the tongue in too. Just in time, I think.”

Tito Manuelo heard the monster scream and ran outside with Tita Cora’s brother-in-law in tow. They saw the monster fly off into the night, far out of their reach. He tapped his brother on the arm and beckoned him not to follow the flying monster but to run into the banana grove with him because Tito Manuelo knew that’s where the creature’s weakness was. They just had to find it.

But the grove was large, and as he ran, Tito Manuelo wondered if they ever had a chance of finding it.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

Fear of the aswang might have had an unexpected effect on Filipino culture, as Ramos identifies. It is controversial in some circles to say that food is reflective of a culture’s history--both good and bad--but Ramos notes that the most common flavors and tools of Filipino cuisine are sour, spicy, and salty flavor profiles that are the same sorts of flavors that repel the aswang. So--I would say--it isn’t impossible to think that every meal a Filipino family cooks would further drive the beast away from their home, better even still if you could manage to sweat out those same spices.

But it’s a hard pill to swallow, isn’t it? The Philippines is so famous for its food and rightfully so. How could it simply be a product of our fear?

Honestly, I don’t know if I believe that. I think Ramos might have misaligned the cart and horse as the English phrase would go. I think Filipino identity and this legend are interwoven in some ways, but the exact details will have to come later.

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“Did you find it?” I asked.

He laughed. “Of course, *Ineng*. There is no better warrior than me.”

I didn’t quite understand what he meant by that, but this was the Tito I knew so well. He didn’t always make sense, but he was always strong.

“I cut it up, and now, that monster is dead somewhere. Maybe in that grove. I don’t know. There was no need to look for her.”

“So... it’s over.”

He took a deep breath. “No, *Ineng*. There’s always more of them out there.”

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

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:

Ramos, M. D. (1994). *The Aswang complex in Philippine folklore*. Quezon City: Phoenix Publishing House.