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If I asked you where Frankenstein came from, I would get any one of the following answers.

One: a novel.

Two: Actually, Frankenstein was the scientist, and the monster you're referring to was just known as the Creature because the scientist couldn't even be bothered to give him an actual name.

Three: a repeat of the second choice but with the added quip that maybe the scientist was the real monster the whole time. Which... valid.

Or four, maybe you will admit that you don't know. But on some subconscious level, you are comforted by the fact that you could just Google it later.

A similar exercise can be done with Dracula or any of the other mysterious creatures that haunt the... more popular canon, as it were. Mysterious sightings and origin stories of certain creatures litter not just our mind but the internet and remain only a few keystrokes away. This knowledge has been transmitted in various forms, seemingly without a break, until it could finally rest in the ultimate repository that is the internet. And hey, you might want to put additional emphasis on the method of transmission or the relative youth of some of our horror icons. And maybe their survival has been more of a perfect storm situation than one might think. Maybe it is simply a matter of having everything fall into just the right place at the right time. Regardless of the details or whatever made this possible, the same thing cannot be said of the aswang.

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To hear Ramos tell it, as we have in a few instances already, the aswang is a creature that has always haunted the people of the Philippines, and their culture has adapted to meet it. They sleep prone to protect their stomachs from the viscera sucker, they are loud to keep the ghoul away, and so on and so forth. Even if the aswang isn't real, the perception of it--according to Ramos--was a powerful force in Filipino life, pre-Spain, and it is as native and authentic to the island as any real living creature.

But not everyone agrees with that assertion. Reasoning aside.

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Ramos's work has endured, but the work of Herminia Meñez, specifically her book *Exploration in Philippine Folklore* published in 1996, has not and seems to be out of print. And/or the pandemic really doubled down on the scarcity of it. Because I have been unable to hold the book in my hands outright and it was never made available digitally through an e-book edition, I have to rely on a journal article from Kathleen Nadeau to get a sense of Meñez's argument. As Nadeau describes it, Meñez theorized that the aswang is, for lack of a better word, a creation of the Spanish. Or Spanish propaganda, almost.

According to Meñez, the aswang is the product of the battle between Spanish friars and missionaries and the shamen of the traditional Filipino religions, particularly when it comes to aswangs conceptualized as viscera-suckers that seemed to be more prevalent in the lowlands that have strong Christian leanings now or relatively strong so stronger, let's say.

To walk back more towards the beginning of the argument, Christianity is not particularly known for being accommodating of and adapting to indigenous beliefs,

specifically those that run counter to certain aspects of the Christian faith. In this case, the shamen, mediums, and healers in the indigenous religions were able to harness their powers through their femininity--whether they were biological women or had a more fluid understanding of their own personal gender. The language often used in this case could either be outdated or--if it is accurate--the best descriptor in a sea of inaccurate ones. But to side-step all that discourse, at the end of the day, femininity was the key to mystical powers which runs counter to the more male-rooted notions carried by the Spanish friars.

Through one's femininity, they could participate in rituals and ceremonies for the ancestors or the native spirits that filled their world. Mediums could interpret dreams or other signs to better understand what was coming. But all in all, it was a competing connection with the divine to what Christianity was offering.

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Now, consider what we've heard before, specifically the various forms of the creature as I have explained them to you. If you'll remember, many of the different aswang were female or more likely to be, and many of the legends Ramos gathered in his book featured female aswangs that invaded communities. There is some sort of connection there or a potential for such, though it may be up for interpretation. The hypothetical conclusion one might hope for would be that feminine power was destructive and all-consuming. It was something to be afraid of or to dread. It was dangerous and--conveniently--counter to the everlasting life promised by the friars.

And this is--on some level--connected to some of the comments Ramos makes, specially the ones that I was more critical of in which he seemed overly connected to

the canon surrounding European witches and the beliefs propagated about them that weren't, in my estimations, wholly accurate but politically or socially motivated. If these perceptions of the aswang were outright dictated by that same European canon, then... okay, fair enough, a spade is a spade. To add to that, there is something predictable about the reaction of Spanish friars to women in positions of mystical or divine power, and the accusation of witchcraft in response to feeling that type of threatened is the exact same tactic I accused Ramos of overlooking when he was trying to explain, briefly, what European witchery was all about.

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I'm sure you came to this podcast with a perspective in mind. In all likelihood, you are more inclined to understand the aswang as a uniquely Filipino beast and not a tool of Spanish propaganda. I understand that. However, this is an important distinction, in many ways, and it's worth considering both sides of this, however briefly that I end up doing it. This point will influence the direction in which we take further considerations. If the aswang is propaganda from Spanish friars, then we need to explore the tense relationship that was created when Spanish forces landed onto the island. If this is propaganda, it's propaganda in a larger struggle that is hardly ever considered and conveys a message along a particular conflict node. On the other hand, if the aswang is native to the islands, then--well--we get to have a more indepth exploration of what that means.

Here's the thing... Or here's the perspective I'm going to be taking moving forward. I do think the aswang is a native beast to the Philippines.

That isn't to say that the aswang couldn't be used for psychological warfare. In fact, there's actually a history of that. In 1950, US Colonel Edward Lansdale was brought in to help the Filipino government's battle against communist rebels. Landsdale established the Civil Affairs Office, which really just engaged in psychological warfare. According to an account Landsdale provided a decade later, his soldiers would puncture the necks of captured rebels, drain their corpses of blood, and plant a reminder of the aswang's presence in these communities in the hopes that it would lower morale. And it did. It totally worked. Insurgents and previous sympathizers to their cause were thoroughly disheartened. So it is an effective tactic. Or it proved to be such much later in Filipino history.

But no, I don't think and I can't think that's all the aswang is.

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I want to borrow some of Katheen Nadeau's ideas here, though she attaches it to a specific word. Her article, which is included in the source notes, is concerned with witchlore, which is a classification attached to a certain branch of mystic beliefs and legends. But ultimately, you could extend conclusions about witchlore to the aswang more broadly. And Nadeau opens this door for me in the beginning of her article by designating witchlore and folklore as abstract categories without a set designation.

As Nadeau understands it, folklore can (quote) "be used to transmit values or to defuse the stress and pressure that can build up in our lives." (end quote)

Now, I firmly believe that the aswang does do this; it does transmit values, usually through a distortion. It is a beast that exists outside of communities in a culture that values community. It attacks the vulnerable, particularly young expectant mothers:

a group that are heavily protected now. And it has a duplicitous nature about it--presenting itself as one thing when it's really another--in a culture that seems to value authenticity. To add to that, it serves as an explanation for some of the quirks, for lack of a better word, that you may see in Filipino cultures. For example, the tendency to sleep on one's stomach, being loud at gatherings, marrying close to home, and even some architectural choices. And these are things that predate Spanish influence. So are we just to assume Spanish friars were just really careful and cunning in their crafting? That they could make five different versions of a beast that sweep up so much of the Filipino identity that Filipinos themselves wouldn't even have been aware of this discrepancies? The use of certain spices and foods that just happen to chase the aswang off while being super common in Filipino cuisine would be an obvious choice, but everything else? Not so much.

But hey, there are some similarities between aswang canon and that of the witches of Spain and Portugal--as a neighbor of and presumably great influence on Spain. The dividing into two and flying into the night with a long tongue to slurp up organs is a pretty damning detail, you could say. Also, the tendency to attack children. But in some ways, those feel more inevitabilities rather than conscious choices.

In later episodes, I want to go into the issue of fear more generally, and that's where I think the issue of attacking children may lie. The long tongue, in some ways, could fall into that too. Really, the dividing into two is the hardest thing to dismiss. But at the same time, there's a better explanation. This idea may have come from Spain and Portugal but not in the way you might first think.

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When one thinks about the Philippines and their history, there's a temptation to view the island nation as incredibly isolated pre-Spain, but that's not a fair assumption. That's actually a very Euro-centric notion of history that's just been normalized to the point that one looks at a map of the region and thinks that if someone didn't have an armada of ships at their disposal, they couldn't navigate those waters while at the same time not fully answering how it is that people got to the islands in the first place.

It's that latter query that ends up revealing the whole picture. If you take something like the Core Population Theory, meant to explain how it is people got to the islands, the larger picture and potential origins of the aswang legends is revealed.

The Core Population Theory was first proposed by Filipino anthropologist Felipe Landa Jocano, the first to challenge the theory posed by someone who--while well-meaning--was an outsider looking into this world. Jocano was native born and was shaped by the culture of the islands. In some ways, his theory and the complexity within it could be seen partially as a product of his esteem for and faith in his people and their ancestors.

The Core Population Theory starts with a set group of people inhabiting some part of Southeast Asia. This is one group of people with one culture who end up moving about the region for as long as possible. Not as one body, but with some divisions, mind you. And these groupings would start showing some cultural variation, but as environmental and other factors make these divides harder to navigate, connections become more scarce, and the process of developing a small group identity was then sped up.

The connecting threads between Southeast Asian myths and the canon of myths that make up the aswang are stronger than anything that may connect the lore of the Philippines and the lore of Spain and Portugal or Europe more broadly. And it might end up being the same source for Spain and Portugal, just one that has been lost to time.

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At a more basic level, the issue of femininity ends up being a smoking gun, of sorts. Spanish witches are tied to the home, the same place where women are tied. These are creatures who may have died in childbirth and have returned to prey on children as a way of reclaiming what should have been theirs and/or was the only thing that could have ever been theirs. But the witches of Southeast Asia, because initial gender roles were more fluid, weren't direct threats seeking ownership of children. Their nature wasn't defined either by their sexuality or their ability to produce. Rather, they were the embodiment of worldly vices. Not even the capital vices, mind you. In this case, a vice was anything that could unravel relationships within the social order.

Otherwise known as the bad habits that you really don't want children to pick up on. That's the type of predation seen here: misleading children, taking them away in a more figurative sense than a literal one.

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Does this mean Meñez should be criticized for this part of her argument? For her comments on the aswang at all? Obviously not. Approaching the subject from different angles will provide different clues and conclusions. Because, above all things, I think the role of the aswang in Filipino life goes far beyond that of a typical legend, and that's what everything on this RSS feed is meant to be about.



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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.

Sources:

1. Nadeau, K. (2011). Aswang and Other Kinds of Witches: A Comparative Analysis. *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*, 39(3/4), 250-266.
2. Landsdale, Edward Geary. *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia*. New York: Fordham University Press. 1991.