

(Music fades in)

The fifth face of the aswang is one that is, in some ways, harder to see. It lurks in the shadows of the world we know, waiting for a time that we all want to avoid or put off or just not think about. It exists in our daily lives but well-compartmentalized out of convenience. Or that's one way to think of it. Really, though, when it comes to city planning, the cemeteries that house this type of aswang aren't too far removed from the daily lives of Filipinos, particularly when compared to the cemeteries that you might know. It all depends on where you live, but to tell you my truth, I don't even know where the closest one is to me. That's the sort of thing I could easily look up on Google, but you know what I mean. When I visit my family in the Philippines, I have a vague understanding of where the two nearest cemeteries are. And only one of them has any of my relatives in it.

Death isn't a farflung moment Filipinos live in denial of. In certain communities, given the nature of poverty, it is a stark and very present reality. But across the islands, there is this unspoken but known truth that goodbyes are painful but inevitable. And they are handled with a great deal of ceremony and reverence. In particular, there's something about the body that makes it indispensable and very nearly sacred. The soul is gone, many would say, though I recognize some might not like that terminology. But the spark of life, the person you would talk to, that's gone. The physical body, the thing you held and what held you, remains. And it deserves a degree of respect and reverence. Your emotions tell you this. The idea of further harm coming to what you have left is beyond distressing for many, cultural roots aside.

Which is why the ghoul is seen as such an evil foe. The ghoul takes one of the worst moments of your life, as you could call it, it takes the moment of loss, pain and mourning, and makes it so much more worse by feasting on the body of the one you love.

(Extended - Music fades out. Footsteps on broken glass)

Sh-- Ah. F---. Sorry. I'm trying to hold it together.

Oh and the place is a mess. Sorry about that, too. Although... (*Sigh*). Things get... Well, look, I don't know what you were expecting. I don't know what I was expecting. But for me, this mess certainly wasn't expected. What? I'm sorry. Oh, I'm... I was raised in the US. I was born in California, actually. My parents are overseas Filipino Workers. Is that the terminology? OFW? Right, you get it. I was born there but to Filipino parents which super complicated my citizenship, but the short of it is that I can come and go from the Philippines fairly easily. So I've been maintaining my status because it's kind of convenient. (*Lip smack*) Well, what with Lolo being sick, I just... I just didn't have much of a choice, you know?

Yeah, we knew it was coming. It doesn't make it any easier, but we knew it was coming.

That was about all I knew. My partner's grandparents died not that long ago, and that was a whole mess, but it was a different sort of mess. Wills and estate planning, that sort of song and dance. If you listen to American Country music, you'll hear that tune a lot. The one about family members ripping things off the walls before the body's even cold. That's the sort of chaos I was expecting. Not this.

(Extended - New music fades in)

The most notable trait of the ghoul is its food source: human corpses. A great deal of the ghoul's identity comes back to that. For one, it determines their hunting ground or lurking ground; they are most drawn to the cemeteries where they are fairly likely to find a fresh meal. Well, a fresh meal that isn't being so carefully guarded.

Supposedly, ghouls do live in human communities, almost among us, but rather than being a tactical advantage, it seems to be more out of convenience. It makes it easier for the ghoul to find their next meal and get a sense of when it might be available, through tracking the lives and more especially the deaths that happen day to day.

It's not just the town gossip that helps them track the dead. The ghoul is able to hear the groans of the dying, so it is said, from across a great distance. Never mind the scent of death that can unleash a frenzy within them, spurring them to go after the mourners as well as the dead indiscriminately.

(Extended - Music fades out)

Look, I... I know what you're getting at. I think everyone's grandparents around here believe in the old ways, right? It might even be island-wide. Whether or not they shouldn't isn't the point. They cling to the world that bore them, and the world that our grandparents came... (*inhale*) it's almost unrecognizable to you and me. I mean, my grandparents were old enough to have actually learned Spanish in school. It's all English now.

At least it is for my cousin's kids. But I'm sure there's some sort of... what's it called, a sociology study or something that can prove or disprove this. But in our community, modernization and globalization came somewhat recently and aggressively.

The amount of changes I would see from trip to trip when I was growing up was... Well, it was almost sort of stupid. It's like no one around here had a chance to catch their footing or their breath. Like, one day, one day, they paved over the roads, right? Which was needed because we had the old metal cars that handled the dirt road okay but were starting to show their age a bit. And then that new road led to a new supermarket, which had the chips and snack foods the kids like, but eventually the old market struggled to keep up with the competition despite having fresher food and being run by the vendors you knew your whole life. And then came the new cars, fixes to the church, a projector in that church, and then a movie theatre, which was exciting but bizarre in many ways. One of my uncles had only just gotten a TV maybe two years before, but then you think about that and realize that maybe the order doesn't even matter on that front. It was just a lot pretty quickly

It was a lot, and it was quick. So... I always thought my uncles and aunts jumped onto that bandwagon with their parents' generation. I always just assumed they were panicking because of how quickly their world was changing to something they couldn't fully understand. The amount of times I've had to run remote tech support for them would make you cringe. They just can't seem to get it. And I try to be sympathetic, but they would get frustrated and snap at me, which I didn't take well.

I take ownership of that bit. I'm not always a good niece. Add to that, they wanted me to be better than good because a lot of Filipino kids raised abroad don't come back, and they were scared. Overcompensating to the highest degree, I know. There's reason to hold the leash tightly, even though it keeps choking me.

Once again, I'll own my own mistakes. I could have been better about a lot of things. I never really listen to what they say. I know the general gist of it all because it's the same old world story you hear all over the world. No, I--I didn't mean it that way. I mean, that this way of relating to the world: of retreating back into the old world and old beliefs of their ancestors because it's less frightening than what's happening around them. You know, those things that everyone else left behind, those are the familiar things. The world's moved on, and that scares them. They weren't ready to move yet, so they overcorrect, I guess you could call it.

So I knew my grandfather's death was going to hit extra hard. He's the family patriarch, and everyone looks to him when it comes to any major decision. I can't tell them how to cope with that, but I don't want to step into their delusion. Sorry, if that's offensive, but I mean... This is absurd, right? This whole thing about the aswang. I just--  
*(Sigh)* I went from not knowing this creature existed to having to fortify this house. You saw the slates we had to put into that fencing, right? And that second line of fencing is completely new. And I asked about it. I asked if there was an uptick of crime or something, something to justify all the effort we were putting into making these defenses and barriers and stuff. I just needed some sort of reason. Anything but this ghoulish nonsense.

Lie to me, I practically begged. Just lie. Because anything is better than that.

But nope. It was all about this ghoulish, and I admit I lost it a bit at them. I'm not proud, but it happened.

*(Extended - Music fades in)*

The ghoul can pass for a human being when it shows itself, which it seemingly tries to avoid. The smell it carries is harder to mask and could be a major reason why the ghoul would be so inclined to keep itself scarce. Their nails and teeth--though longer and pointier than a human's--are much easier to hide.

In some ways, this makes them enemy spies of sorts, on the wrong side of the battle line. And the way the Filipinos keep them from their homes where the dead often lie in wake feeds into this imagery, relying on fires and loud noises to keep them away. Large weapons never seem to be too far from hand at night.

Vinegar and pepper do help to keep the aswang away. While Ramos is quick to say that these also preserve food, which could be an explanation for their prevalence. The fact that they feed into this aswang mythology cannot be ignored. In this case, rather than ensuring that their food supply can last longer, preventing famine or starvation, the body of the deceased is treated with these things to further keep the ghouls away. It's quite a bit of effort, true, but it is worth it, many would say.

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

Oh, I'm perpetually frustrated with them. It's my one setting. I love them. Genuinely, but that doesn't take you as far as you think. It's like putting gasoline in a car that's has three flat tires: I don't know what you're expecting, but common sense should tell you something very different.

*(Sigh)* Anyway, I needed to go for a walk. It was late, but if I stayed inside something bad was guaranteed to happen. And going out might not have been the best idea because of what could happen, but there was a chance it wouldn't. Besides, I

wasn't going to go too far, and this is a pretty secluded area. Everyone knows everyone, so it had to be safe, right?

I didn't get too far before I saw a person in the distance. Or the silhouette of the person. I don't know what I saw, exactly. But I smelled something terrible. It turned my stomach.

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

The fear of the ghoul is... Well, there is an intensity to it brought about by the nature of this horror. Ghouls might have preferred the taste of the dead, which was horrifying in its own way, but they seemed content to make their own food source if it came to it. So, no, not even the living were safe. The dead served as a lure that could bring about the end of an entire family. By some standards, it was a plague. Or it provoked a similar level of hysteria. And it used to be that a family would abandon or even burn down their homes, no matter how new or well built, which discouraged having a well-built home.

To a great extent, efforts to keep the ghouls away are more subtle now. And maybe the exact reasoning for the traditions that are still practiced today has fallen out of the popular consciousness because of their subtlety. But modern funeral parlors keep the bright lights on the dead, and oil lamps bear an unspoken burden: deterring the evil that lurks in the trees past cemeteries. But above all, the most enduring effect of the war against the ghoul, is the loud nature of Filipino grief.

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

Okay, no. I don't know what they told you I saw, but they're full of it. I don't know what I saw, okay? It looked like a person. It was distinctly person-shaped. No, I didn't look at the hands.

There was a person in the distance, and as a woman out at night, I knew that was not a good sign of things to come. So I started to take off, and... And well, it--it--it--it lurched after me. It came at me, and it doesn't matter what it was. (*inhale*) That's also not a good sign. So I started running back.

But by then, my family had noticed I had left the house and was coming out en masse to yell at me about it. I can't believe that they saw it too. But there was like... There was half moment where everyone got silent, just to recognize what was happening, and then they immediately got louder. I'm talking full yelling, screaming... I--I thought I heard gunshots. I don't know it was... (*inhale*) It was a lot. I had to crouch down and cover my ears because (*inhale*) I'm sorry I have a limit.

When I looked up, the thing was gone, and one of my uncles was talking about burning down the house, which was stupid. And I hope you can tell them that. Because that is incredibly dumb. I don't know what's going on, but I know that much, okay?

So what if there's some creepy person in the neighbor? You could probably 'process of elimination it,' right?

It's not... It's not that big of a deal. It can't be. I don't care what he says. I know stuff like that isn't real.

(Extended - Music fades in)

Gatherings of Filipino people are known to be a bit boisterous, and hey, they'll say it themselves. But Ramos proposes that the cultural memory of aswangs fearing



sound is a part of this tendency. Filipinos can work together to keep ghouls away through their socializing, through connecting with other people. Symbolically, it's almost like Filipinos can raise their own army against this evil force in their lives.

But then again, you might not be inclined to agree. It all depends on what you believe.

(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:

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

Sound effects:

"Footsteps on broken glass from user" - tatianafeudal on Freesound.org

Music from the Sounds like an Earful music supply on [soundslikeanearful.com](http://soundslikeanearful.com)