

The Problem with Superstitions.

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When you take a bus trip from Negros to Boracay, chances are your going to pass the town of Cadiz. I remember when we passed this town from a trip to Boracay, the bus made a scheduled stop from a gas station in Cadiz City so passengers can have taken a leak since it still too far before we can reach the town of Caticlan. As we stop at the gas station, some vendors approached the bus and started to sell us some food. The bus conductor told us not to buy any food being sold by street vendors. He even closed the windows.

I asked the conductor for his reasons. He said that most vendors are not human but “aswang” in disguised and the food were human viscera. If we eat those food we will become aswang like them.

No one really knows when it all started but the province of Cadiz becomes well known, not because of its food or handicrafts like other Philippine provinces. Cadiz turns out to be famous because of the aswang...The Philippine Boogey man!

Just like Siquijor, the Philippine town which is famous for witchcraft, Cadiz was the center of the folklore of the “aswang”. The aswang is a night creature who is known to eat human guts. It sometimes took the appearance of a large black pig or large black dogs. The power they possessed is called lycanthropy – The magical ability of a creature to assume the characteristics of an animal, like a wolf. Unlike werewolves, you will not become an aswang after being bitten by one. They say those aswangs were passed from generations to generations. If your parents are aswangs, by the age of sixteen they will pass this powers to you, in a form of a black chick. You have to swallow this chick and you will become an aswang. Another way of becoming an aswang is when you accidentally ate their food. Old folks say that an aswang food is camouflage as ordinary food and they will gladly offer it to you. Sometimes they say that restaurants and food stalls in Cadiz serve these food to guests and you will never even know that you are already eating human innards.

In order for a person to distinguish an aswang food, he must squeeze some lime or kalamansi juice on the dish. It is said that if you place lime juice in an aswang food, the disguise will melt away to reveal its true form.

The whole tales about the aswangs were really folklore, yet it’s giving the province of Cadiz economic troubles. It’s very hard to open an eatery store in Cadiz or to sell food on passing visitors from other towns. People always assume that those foods were tinted. Abandoned old folks seem to have more difficulties because most are stereotyped as aswangs. I sometimes blame the media for blowing more air to the fire. Cheap horror shows here in the Philippines hire old performers to play

the part of the aswang. So instead of helping them and providing them with their, people seem to avoid old folks living in the remote parts of the province.

The superstition has created unjustified trepidation from the local people. Maybe Filipinos are too gullible. The United States even used this to their benefit. When the Philippines were still under US rule in the early part of 20th century, the Americans used the beliefs of the aswang to flush out insurgents hiding in the mountains. They place two cadavers in the mountains side with peculiar holes in their neck. Then they spread a rumor to the town folks about an aswang roaming around the mountainous region. The plan worked well. Within a month or so insurgents came rushing down in fright and eagerly surrendered to the American forces.

It's so easy to accept gossips and urban legends, and people seem to bite such stories even without doing a little investigation about it. That's why the bus conductor considers it even without reflecting of the results it will create to those honest street merchants. Because of that absurd belief about the aswang, those street peddlers will not bring in anything to provide for their families.

Superstition is described as an irrational belief arising from ignorance or fear. Some justify superstition as part of customs and traditions. I do not even know of any culture in this world that does not have any form of superstition.

Here in the Philippines, we have different superstitions from the time of our birth till we get married until we die. I think it's quite natural for religious people. Superstitions prosper because of fear factor. They believe that when you ignored superstition. Say you ignore a black cat crossing the street; you will be having many dreadful misfortunes. So people will be compelled to believe it, because of the foreboding of bad lucks, while other says that there is nothing to lose if you believe it. Well you might say that these beliefs are harmless...Maybe?

Have you received a chain letter? The chain letter works like a superstitious belief. You are told to copy the letter 100 times and to send those entire letters to different people in the span of a month. If you failed to comply you will die or your family will suffer series of bad lucks. However, if you accomplished what the letter says, you will gain a lot of blessings. So a typical sucker will believe this letter and will produce 100 letters, consuming all his productive time, not to mention pen ink (or electricity if he is using a computer), paper and stamps (Internet time which of course is not without charge here in the Philippines). He will send these bogus letters to 100 people gaining what? I bet he even lost his self-respect because he was lead to believe by a spurious message because of fear.

So is superstitious belief harmless? Let's take a look at the Filipino Fiesta tradition. Filipino travel brochure promotes the tradition of Fiesta as a symbol of Filipino hospitality. Yet the superstition behind the festive atmosphere of the Philippine Fiesta is really disappointing. Our ancient ancestors believe in the powers of different gods and goddesses. In every human activity, a deity always watches. There are fertility goddesses, rain gods, war gods, rice goddesses, sea goddesses and so on. When the Spaniards came and introduced their Christian god to the Philippines, well those "pagan gods and goddesses" only transformed into what we now known as "saints." The rice god becomes the patron saint of agriculture. When a childless couple pray for a miracle, they go to Obando, Bulacan to dance for Santa Clara...Something like our ancestors does for Libugan – the Goddess of fertility.

The rule with fiesta is that you have to serve up many food to guests to receive bountiful blessings. That means you have to beg, steal or borrow just to push this tradition through. So after the occasion, what then? You are up to your neck with debts you cannot pay, much for bountiful blessings.

In what extent do these superstitions will rule or ruin our lives?

Religion is the mother of all superstitions, and nothing can be a best example of the irrationality of fear promoted by superstition than religious doctrines and dogmas. For example, members of Christian Science will reject all form of medical treatment in the grounds that God alone will provide salvation from sickness. Jehovah's Witnesses will not accept blood transfusion even in emergency, life-threatening cases.

Take a look at the issues concerning the Witch Hunt. These hideous acts were justified by superstition. In 1484 Pope Innocent VIII produced his Bull against Witches. Two years later two infamous German monks, Heinrich Institoris Kramer and Jakob Sprenger, produced their incredible concoction of anti-Witchery, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witch Hammer).

Gradually the hysteria kindled by Kramer and Sprenger began to spread. It spread like a fire—flashing up suddenly in unexpected places; spreading quickly across the whole of Europe. For nearly three hundred years the fires of the persecutions raged. Humankind had gone mad.

In 1586 the Archbishop of Treves decided that the local Witches had caused the recent severe winter. By dint of frequent torture a “confession” was obtained and one hundred twenty men and women were burned to death on his charge that they had interfered with the elements.

The following is a typical scenario:

In 1595, an old woman residing in a village near Constance, angry at not being invited to share the sports of the country people on a day of public rejoicing, was heard to mutter something to herself, and was afterwards seen to proceed through the fields towards a hill, where she was lost sight of. A violent thunderstorm arose about two hours afterwards, which wet the dancers to the skin, and did considerable damage to the plantation. This woman suspected before of witchcraft, was seized and imprisoned, and accused of having raised the storm, by filling a hole with wine, and stirring it about with a stick. She was tortured till she confessed, and burned alive the next morning. – C.Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. The End of Faith, Sam Harris.

Here is an excerpt from an invaluable compilation, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*, by Rossell Hope Robbins:

One might glance at some of the special tortures at Bamberg, for example, such as the forcible feeding of the accused on herrings cooked in salt, followed by denial of water— a sophisticated method which went side by side with immersion of the accused in baths of scalding water to which lime had been added. Other ways with witches included the wooden horse, various kinds of racks, the heated iron chair, leg vises [Spanish boots], and large boots of leather or metal into which (with the feet in them, of course) was poured boiling water or molten lead. In the water torture, the *question de l'eau*, water was poured down the throat of the accused, along with a soft cloth to cause choking. The cloth was pulled out quickly so that the entrails would be torn. The thumbscrews [gresillons] were a vise designed to compress the thumbs or the big toes to the root of the nails, so that the crushing of the digit would cause excruciating pain.

A rough estimate of the total number of people burned, hung or tortured to death on the charge of Witchcraft, is nine million. The last execution for witchcraft in Holland, cradle of the Enlightenment, was in 1610; in England, 1684; America, 1692; France, 1745; Germany, 1775; and Poland, 1793. In Italy, the Inquisition was condemning people to death until the end of the eighteenth century, and inquisitorial torture was not abolished in the Catholic Church until 1816. The last bastion of support for the reality of witchcraft and the necessity of punishment has been the Christian churches.

The whole anti-Semitic belief in Europe prior to World War 2 was kindled from superstition.

Like witches, the Jews from Eastern Europe were often accused of incredible crime. Christian believes that the Jews are responsible to Jesus' death. Because of this crime, they are just being penalized. An added reason here is that Christians just cannot stand hearing Jews as "God's favorite people." Because of these beliefs brought by the Bible stories, different superstitions were created by ignorant Christians. The most known is the superstition surrounding the concept of "blood libel."

Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews were accused of murdering Christian infants. Christian believes that Jews need the blood of an innocent Christian blood of a newly baptized child to replenish their lost stores during menstruation. They also believe that Jews use the blood to cure themselves from terrible hemorrhoids and oozing sores as a punishment for murdering Jesus Christ on the cross.

Jewish babies were also believed to have their fingers attached to their foreheads and only the blood of a Christian baby can cure it.

Christians often blames atheism as the cause of the Holocaust. That is not true. It is out of this history of theologically mandated persecution fire upped by the irrational superstitions against the Jew, with the justification of the Christian Bible that secular anti-Semitism emerged. The result: 6 million people lost their lives.

So when you believe that superstitions are harmless...think again.