

## HUNTING THE ASWANG

*MICHAEL GROSBERG ROAMS THE COUNTRY IN SEARCH OF THE TRUTH BEHIND THE MYTHICAL CREATURES, THE ASWANG*



When I mentioned that I was researching aswang (pronounced ah-swung) to the driver at my hotel in Manila, he responded matter-of-factly that his cousin was one although, he added, not the sort to eat people. He said he had seen many aswang throughout his childhood and had even chased after a few with a stingray tail – the recommended weapon. His earliest memory is of being woken up in the middle of the night as a six-year-old, and opening his eyes to find himself staring at the face of an aswang. “Don’t bother us,” he shouted. “We know you!” Although reluctant to tell people in Manila about his aswang associations, he’s nevertheless anxious to inform an interested foreigner all he knows about the legendary creatures. He even volunteers to sketch a picture of one in my notebook. After leaving the van, I glance at the drawing more closely; to me it looks like a bird spitting fire.

### The beginning of A legend

Not surprisingly, like other folk beliefs around the world, the origin of the aswang is rooted in a specific historic moment. History professor Ephraim Areno of West Visayas University in Iloilo City explains that, in an effort to isolate Filipinos who opposed the occupation of the islands, the Spaniards claimed that “holdouts” who were forced to flee to the mountainous interior were in fact witches in disguise. When you take into consideration that colonization always first takes place along the coastline, it’s not surprising that rugged, mountainous interiors become actual and metaphorical places of refuge and mystery. Traditional beliefs are more easily preserved as these places are harder to get to and farther from the reaches of modernity and technology.



Another way of understanding the emergence of this sort of belief is in the context of the clash between Christianity and traditional belief systems. During the pre-Spanish period in the Philippines, babaylan, or shaman, fulfilled important roles as political advisers to chieftains and spiritual conduits for the people. They tended to be women. With the arrival of the Spanish and the introduction of an alternative religious and political system, their power base was threatened and lives put at risk. As a result, they were influential in resisting the Spanish and therefore likely targets for a surreptitious campaign of slander and innuendo.

### Common characteristics

As aswang is often used as a generic term to describe any of the many shape-shifting, ghoulish creatures in the menagerie of Filipino folklore, it’s hard to establish any uniform physical description or standard behavior. While specific qualities are almost as varied as the number of accounts, features commonly cited

are red, bloodshot eyes; bushy, unkempt hair; a long pointy tongue and sweatiness. It's also believed that wild dogs and pigs can transform themselves into aswang, and that the top half of the creature has wings.

A close relative of aswang, the manananggal, has bat-like wings, long nails, lots of hair and is able to leave it's lower half behind before launching into the night air. A lit candle underneath your bed, while certainly a fire hazard, reportedly helps to detect whether there's a manananggal hovering over your rooftop.



The aswang has seen its share of movie dramatizations. From the very first sound film in Tagalog, *Ang Aswang* (1933), to a joint Canadian/Filipino project, *Aswang: A Journey into Myth*, a pseudo-documentary currently awaiting a distributor, there have been about as many celluloid versions of the aswang as there are vampire films from the West. Others include *Darling ko'y aswang, Ang* (1977) directed by FH Constantino, *Aswang* (1992) starring Alma Moreno as a beautiful aswang that changes from woman to crone to cat, and well-known Filipino director Peque Gallaga's *Aswang* (1999). There's even an American production entitled *Aswang* (1994) curiously enough set in rural Wisconsin.

### Impacting communities

However, as Professor Areno explains, there's a beneficial impact to this type of belief in spirits. "The concept of dangerous zones, for example, where you can't cut down trees because spirits live in them, actually helps preserve the environment." For example, *magtitima* – invisible beings who live in balet trees – allow those they favor to harvest the wood, but punish those they dislike with illness. The *laman lupa*, part of the dwarf family of creatures, live underground and behave similarly to trolls guarding their territory and prohibiting certain uses of the land. To placate these spirits, farmers are expected to make offerings before planting and after harvest time – a practice that has existed in one form or another since time immemorial, helping to foster a necessary respect for the land.

Much like Dracula or werewolves, or other mythological creatures in rural parts of the world, the aswang developed into a symbol that urban dwellers can use as shorthand for the threats and dangers of the countryside. Over time, claiming someone was an aswang became a way for a community or individual to ostracize a person they found objectionable for other reasons. The consequences of being accused are severe: marriage is unlikely with a local person and the accused might be forced to leave their village.



It's not unusual for tabloid newspapers in the Philippines to run headlines like "Boy Survives Aswang Attack" above a blurry night-time picture of some ambiguous-looking creature with press-on nails and wig. But the persistence of the myth is due less to media exploitation than typical bedtime stories mothers and fathers tell their children.

I met a retired *manoglu-y-a*, a sort of lesser version of a shaman, in a small village.

She slowly opened up to me after she was convinced that I was sincerely interested in learning about what she once did. If a villager complained of an illness, she placed ginger on their forehead in order to determine whether there was a simple medical cause or whether it was the result of an aswang. In the case of the latter she referred the person to a babalan, whose treatment is to place eggplant leaves on the sufferer for several days.

They also enlist the powers of good spirits to counteract the aswang's curse. Babalan are said to know who the aswangs in the community are but don't reveal their identities, as to do so would be unethical.

In villages like these there are almost daily stories of aswang attacks, not violent or dramatic, but often a way of explaining why someone's neighbor or father or mother has suddenly become ill.

I soon realized that it is also an effective way to demonize an entire village when my guide pointed across an empty expanse of uncultivated no-man's land, which separated his village from one where an aswang was said to live. Naturally, there were other more mundane issues at the heart of the conflict – land use borders, etc – but the aswang accusation seemed a handy means of gaining the moral high ground.

### **Celebrating culture**

Methods of protection against aswang include a pinch of salt in the window before sundown, amulets hung above doorframes and worn around the neck, crosses drawn in the soil with a piece of metal and a broomstick placed by the front door.

Aswang are prototypical shape-shifters, relatives of vampires, their more famous brethren. Believed to be especially powerful during Holy Week, they are more of a threat to the already vulnerable: pregnant women and children, and are symbolic of the dangers awaiting those who stray too far from home at night. Known also by the sounds they supposedly make ('tik-tik' is the soft noise they make so they appear further away and 'wak-wak', the signal to the master that the aswang has entered the house and the victim is home) the darkness is their hunting ground and they are silent and undercover during the daytime.

For the last three years, at the end of October, the city of Roxas has celebrated the aswang with a raucous three-day Mardi Gras-style celebration. Billed as a tourist attraction, residents dress up in their personal vision of an aswang (similar to Halloween costumes) and dance and parade joyfully and with a sense of humor about this creature – real or imagined, for better or for worse – that has come to be a part of their lives. This is a celebration worth catching as once again, Filipino pride, honor and ability to look on the bright side is exemplified – wherever you are in the country.

Ref.: <http://www.cebusemile.com/2007/10/01/hunting-the-aswang/>