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## Shamans, Witches and Philippine Society

FRANCISCO R. DEMETRIO, S.J.

The *aswang* or witch is one of the givens of the Philippine cultural scene. The witch was very much in evidence in the Philippines past, pre-Hispanic, Hispanic and American. Dr. Maximo Dumlao Ramos and other scholars have made extensive collections and studies of them.<sup>1</sup>

This note is neither strictly folkloric nor ethnographic. However, it presupposes studies and investigations of this nature undertaken by other scholars. The note treats the topic from the perspective of comparative religion. In order to understand the phenomenon of the witch, it is placed side by side with another ancient phenomenon, shamanism. In this way the structure of witchcraft or witchery stands out more clearly.

Thus the witch is understood to be a perverse, isolated being who resolutely refuses to enter into the normal interaction with fellow human beings, with the world of things and animals, and the natural processes of transformation taking place in them—transformation which subserves the preservation and growth of life in the cosmos. Yet it is not only with the world of humans, animals and things that the witch refuses to enter into communication. He also refuses to interact with the wholly other or the Divine. He renounces obedience to the Transcendent because he wants to be free to immerse himself in his immanence and finitude.

1. Witness his books like *Creatures of Philippine Lower Mythology* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1971), p. 390; *Creatures of Midnight, Faded Deities of Luzon, the Visayas and Mindanao* (Quezon City: Island Publishers, 1967), p. 101; and *The Aswang Syncrasy in Philippine Folklore*: with illustrative accounts in vernacular texts and translations (Manila: Philippine Folklore Society, 1971), p. 108. An American scholar, Richard Warren Lieban, has also written on the *aswang* in his *Malign Magic in Southern Philippines, Cebuano Sorcery: Malign Magic in the Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). Alfred McCoy in his article "Baylan, Animist Religion and Philippine Peasant Ideology," *Philippine Quarterly of*

It is an old paradox that true freedom and spontaneity can be won by submission to the commands of the divine order which spring from the Otherness of life and which also express that Otherness. To refuse to submit is to remain self-defined and self-determined, locked up in personal and ultimately destructive and obsessive finite systems. It is that very refusal to recognize the controlling power of Otherness which is at one and the same time the extreme of banality and the extreme of demonic evil.

### SOME PRELIMINARY PRINCIPLES

I am convinced that shamanism and witchcraft are two fundamental responses that man can make with regard to the Other or the Holy. Second, as a result of creation, there has been established a sacred order in the cosmos. This sacred order is expressed in cosmic laws and norms such as, for instance, unity in the various levels of existence: spiritual, human, animal, natural or mineral. Third, these various orders are related to one another, and that they are meant to subserve life, not only of the beings beneath man but also of man's own life. The fourth fundamental truth is that man, despite his personal life is also meant to live in society or community, and that he becomes more human precisely by engaging in dialogue and cooperation with his fellowman under the principle of justice and truth. The fifth important truth is that man interacts with his fellowman most intimately through the exercise of his sexuality which, however, is subject also to the fundamental law prohibiting incest and union among members of the same sex. The sixth fundamental truth is that the other intimate human interaction is through food-taking, and this again is moderated by the law against cannibalism and the norm of feeding on non-human flesh. In the interaction of man with the beings below him, the earth is not only the womb of things, it is also meant to be the tomb. But within this tomb, through normal processes of transformation, life, human and otherwise, is intended to be sustained and increased. The seventh fundamental religious truth is that man is made to worship his creator, that this worship is expressed first and foremost by love and obedience to his laws written in the cosmos, in society, and in man himself, as well as in the natural laws which all things follow.

*Culture and Society* 10 (September 1982): 141 ff., has also touched on the topic. An earlier work and a good one at that was by the late Frank F. Lynch, S.J., "Ang Mga Aswang, a Bicol Belief, Field Reports and Analyses," Naga City, Atenco de Naga Bicol Area Survey, 1963. See also "Viscera Suckers and Female Sociality: The Philippine Asuang" in *Philippine Studies* 31 (1983):319-37.

## THE SHAMAN

The shaman is a human being, man or woman, whom the spirits call (in a manner that cannot be refused without very tragic results) to become their intermediary with the world of human beings.<sup>2</sup> Through his initiation the shaman is thereby introduced into the world of spirits, and is gradually familiarized with it so that he can enter into it and get out of it with ease. He becomes endowed with special powers, magical, moral, physical and spiritual which we shall discuss in greater detail later.<sup>3</sup>

The shaman accepts the totality of the sacred order. As elected by the spirits to guard and foster human life, the shaman is present at the most significant events of personal and social life, at initiations (in many traditions, shamans themselves help out in the initiation of future shamans, or at least, serve as master of the apprentice),<sup>4</sup> in marriage, in conceptions and pregnancies, at birth, in times of sickness as well as at death.<sup>5</sup> In marriage, pregnancy and birth, the shaman's presence is needed to support and sustain life at its inception. In sickness, when life is threatened, the shaman looks for the soul which has gone astray and lures it back to the body of the sick one in order to bring back health,<sup>6</sup> or he goes to consult the supreme being or the Master of animals and things (as in the case of the Palawan shaman) in order to learn the precise medicine or sacrifice to effect curing. In death when life is changed not ended, the shaman escorts the soul of the dead to the land of the dead, so that it can rest in peace and not harm the living, and be ready to be returned to life again when the time for it to be reborn in another body is come.

The shaman is also the repository of the lore and tradition of the tribe. His special gift of mind and heart and body, his special experiences with the world of spirits, animals and plants, his expressiveness in verbal and

2. Edward P. Dozier, *Mountain Arbiters* (Arizona: Tucson Arizona Press, 1966), p. 174; John M. Garvan, *The Manobos of Mindanao* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1929), p. 200; Hubert Reynolds and Fern Babcock Grant, *The Isneg of the Northern Philippines* (Dumaguete City: Anthropology Museum, Silliman University, 1973), p. 268; and Alfred McCoy, "Baylan," pp. 144, 161-62.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 158, 162.

4. E.P. Dozier, *Mountain Arbiters*, p. 174; also Raymundo C. Hilot, "The Mandayan Balyan System," *Readings in Philippine Religious Values* Part II, ed. Edward Gerlock (Davao City: Pastoral Renewal Center), p. 171.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 172-73; also Fr. Emmanuel Nabayra, "Balilig: A Study of the Religiosity of the Mandaya," *Readings in Philippine Religious Values* Part II, p. 70 ff.; Garvan, *The Manobos of Mindanao*, p. 122, ff.

6. Dozier, *Mountain Arbiters*, pp. 165-66, 175-78.

nonverbal communication, make the shaman a teacher par excellence in any group. Among the Palawan of the Makagwaq and Tamlang valleys, he is also a highly gifted bard and an inspired poet.

How does a person become a shaman? Through initiation. He falls sick, and the ordinary means for curing fail to effect a cure.<sup>7</sup> This sickness is part of his initiation. The spirits who issue the call are generally his own shaman ancestors, although it could also be that other shaman ancestors not related to him do the inviting. The sickness could be a protracted one. He is usually cured, either at the end or during the process of the initiation. The shaman ancestors provide him with spirit familiars who come in the shape of animals. These become his guides and guardians in his arduous journeys to the spirit world, up to the sky, down to the underworld or any other part of the cosmos where the dead are said to settle.

The initiation of the shaman is equivalent to undergoing the experience of death. He disappears from home and finds himself in the forest, a cave or a mountain, far removed from human society. There in the wilderness he attains unity with the nonhuman sources of reality. He begins to understand the language of birds and animals, he learns the various kinds of diseases and the spirits that control these diseases.<sup>8</sup> In the course of initiation the shaman is torn apart, his flesh scraped off and consumed by ancestral shaman spirits or the disease-controlling spirits who thereby become his servants and assistants in his curing activities.<sup>9</sup> The scraping off of his flesh until he becomes a skeleton, the taking out of his brains and his eyes, the disgorging of his intestines is to assimilate him to the divine or the spirits. He is therefore given a new set of organs, the organs of a spirit. The result of these experiences is the ability "to see spirits," to become at ease in dealing with them. For what purpose? So that he can serve the community. The shaman is called not for himself but for others. He is truly a man for others. In his initiation he dies to himself, but he returns to life equipped with new powers—clairvoyance (the ability to penetrate the heart and intention of people), prophecy, counsel and healing (of physical and psychical or spiritual) ailments.

A significant characteristic of the shaman then is that he gets sick. But he is also able to cure himself through the help of the spirits. The shaman

7. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

8. Zuesse, "On the Nature of the Demonic," *Numen* 18 (December 1971): 217.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

thereby serves the divine order on all levels. He promotes goodness, well-being and life, not only for the individual but also for the community.

### THE WITCH

The witch is the exact opposite of the shaman. He does not serve the divine order. In fact, his one single aim is to oppose it with all his might. To achieve his intention, he constructs an antithetical order and he inverts the normal in order to sustain the abnormality itself.<sup>10</sup>

Like the shaman, the witch is very much in evidence during times of liminality, that is, when the individual or the community is in transition from a lesser to a more heightened stage in the cosmic order. The presence of the witch is to obstruct the workings of the cosmic order. Thus when the grain is ripening he is around, not to bless the harvest, but to blight it with rain or hail. At marriage he is there not to celebrate but to cast an evil eye, especially on the bride.<sup>11</sup> At conception and pregnancy he tries to jeopardize the coming to term of the fetus.

Filipinos have many beliefs and observances prescribed to foil the machinations of the witch. The pregnant mother should not sleep with her back flat on the floor or bed. She should sleep sideways so that the witch's elongated tongue which penetrates the thatched roof cannot reach her belly and suck out the fetus. If pregnant women go out at night they should use their long hair to cover their stomachs. If a pregnant woman smells like *nangka* to a witch, he is liable to molest her.<sup>12</sup> In sickness when life is under a strain, the witch is present as a *manunungod*, a witch who stations himself under the room of a sick person, causing the sick to become restless or ill at ease. The prescribed antidote is to stick a sharp iron bolo through the slits of the bamboo floor and let the blade hang there. Iron comes from the earth, and earth seems to be a hostile element to the witch.<sup>13</sup> At initiation time, the witch tries his best to frustrate the successful integration of the initiates into the divine cosmic order. In times of death, the witch tries to steal the corpse, and substitute a banana stalk for it, so that he can feast on it.<sup>14</sup>

10. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

12. Fr. Francisco Demetrio, S.J. *Dictionary of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs* Book II (Cagayan de Oro City: Xavier University, 1970), p. 245.

13. Zucesse, "On the Nature of the Demonic," p. 224.

14. Ramos, *The Creatures of Midnight*, p. 49; also F. Lynch, "Ang Mga Aswang," p. 406.

The witch manifests his opposition to the divine order by practising 1) incest and bestiality and 2) cannibalism and by 3) his penchant for human *exuviae*.

First, incest. Ordinary human norms of society require that marriage be exogamous.<sup>15</sup> Marriage between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, even between first cousins is tabooed. Incest is almost a universal taboo because its practice is detrimental to health and ultimately to the life of the race. It is also the normal human practice to have sex between persons of opposite sexes, between man and woman, not between man and man or woman and woman. The sexual partner should be of the same species. In other words, sex with animals is also taboo under the norms of the divine order.

On the other hand witches are known to use their own close relations as sexual partners.<sup>16</sup> They are also known to engage in sexual indulgence with animals.<sup>17</sup> Even in European witchcraft, the height of the witches' coven was reached when the devil in the guise of a goat had intercourse with his devotees.

Witches are also known to have animal familiars like birds (*kikik*, or *wakwak*), dogs, black cats, pigs.<sup>18</sup> In Cagayan de Oro a particular witch is said to transform herself into a sow wearing a pair of *bakya* (*ang anay nga nagbakyaq*). This motif underlines the witch as belonging to the wild. Unlike the shaman who is also linked with the wild, the witch does not master the wild. He allows himself to be mastered by it, by succumbing to its chaotic nature and lack of order. His lack of discrimination in choosing his sexual partners is in imitation of the animals and is a protest against ordinary cultural norms of human society.

Second, cannibalism. Man develops his humanity in line with the designs of the divine order by eating nonhuman flesh or animals and fish, as well as the plants and the fruits of grain and tree. The witch in his opposition to the divine cosmic order is not satisfied with these non-human food. One with the animals, he preys on living man himself.<sup>19</sup> Again, like the brute, the witch devours human carcasses or corpses.<sup>20</sup> Ordinarily the dead man is either buried or burned. In this way the dead is made to reenter the cycle of existence and to undergo the law that the grain must fall to the ground if it must yield a rich harvest of life.

15. Zuesse, "On the Nature of the Demonic," p. 225.

16. Ibid., p. 228.

17. Ibid., p. 229.

18. Demetrio, *Dictionary of Philippine Folk Beliefs*, p. 239.

19. Zuesse, "On the Nature of the Demonic," p. 229.

20. Demetrio, *Dictionary of Philippine Folk Beliefs*, p. 250-51.

Otherwise it will remain alone, isolated and unproductive.

Third the witch's penchant for human *exuviae*. This is closely related to the motif of cannibalism. Ordinarily blood, especially menstrual blood, voided phlegm, haircuttings, nail parings, clothing soaked with human sweat, vomit and excrement are left to fall to the ground and decay. Thus they are all taken up in cosmic processes of transformation, and in turn become sustainers of life. These *exuviae*, or leavings of ordinary human living, signify man's historicity, that he is a creature of time, that he is subject to the changes that time brings about. But the witch does not allow these *exuviae* to return to the ground and be taken up in the cycle of transformation. He gathers these leavings, sometimes including his own excrement, and uses them as powerful medicines to harm the living. He will bury these waste matters in the yard of his intended victim, or will take his vomit or saliva or phlegm, dry it, reduce it to powder, and mix it with the food or drink of the intended victim.<sup>21</sup> The witch makes strong medicines out of these *exuviae* because of the incantations of hatred he employs when preparing them.

Thus, by manipulating human *exuviae* for purposes of harm, the witch obstructs the natural processes of reciprocity and transformation that should obtain in the cosmos. Both he and the victim are isolated from these reciprocities. But the witch seems to boast of his isolation, and endeavors to render others isolated.<sup>22</sup> Thus he becomes more and more confirmed in his witchcraft.

How does one become a witch? Like the shaman he too undergoes a kind of initiation. But his initiation does not make him rise higher in the scale of divine order. Rather it imbeds him in his witchcraft more deeply. Because the witch denies transcendence or the beyond quality of reality, he is buried in his own banality and finiteness. He is generally regarded by people as a sick man. Thus when one contracts witchery he is said in the Cebuano Bisayan dialect to be *natakdan* (from *takod* which means to contaminate), or "contaminated."<sup>23</sup> He becomes a witch by receiving into his mouth the witch-substance which is passed on to him by a dying witch relative. This witch-substance (the African call it *mangu*) is imagined by Filipinos to be similar to the yolk of chicken egg.<sup>24</sup> It lodges in the belly of the would-be witch. As it matures and begins to put on wings, the witch becomes more and more established in witchery. The winged bird within enables him to fly. However, so long as the witch-substance is still fresh,

21. Zuesse, "On the Nature of the Demonic," pp. 229-30.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

23. Lieban, *Malign Magic*, p. 69.

24. Zuesse, "On the Nature of the Demonic," p. 220.



it can be expelled by rendering the witch dizzy by whirling him around in a hammock so that he can vomit it out.<sup>25</sup> Then it must be set on fire, and the person will be freed from the curse.

The witchery contagion can also be caught unwittingly, by drinking from the same cup which a witch has used. Here it is the saliva of the witch which causes the contamination. Sometimes one becomes a witch by a witch blowing upon the nape of his neck.<sup>26</sup> It seems that this action can induce the witch-substance to materialize on the inside of the intended victim. In these last two cases, the person unwittingly becomes a witch. In these cases it is much easier to dislodge the witch-substance from the body. Is it possible for a person to catch the contagion without willing it, and eventually acquiesce to his condition?

The shaman in his initiation offers himself to become the victim of the divine beings who devour him alive or of his ancestral shaman ancestors. He is also partaken of by disease-spirits who thereby become his trusted assistants especially in effecting cures of diseases. Thus the shaman in initiation offers himself in order that he may become useful for others. But the witch in his initiation makes no personal sacrifice. It is an inversion of the shamanic initiation. The witch novice often provides the victim for his initiation from among his own kinsmen, his own "flesh." Through this feast he joins the witch society.<sup>27</sup> His own body is not dismembered. His own body is not slowly devoured by the witches. It is someone else's, other than the witch.

The witch, therefore, in his initiation is sick, and, after the initiation, remains sick. He is not healed again to be of service to society. He remains isolated, on the periphery of social life. He is confirmed in evil as he continues to practise witchery.

#### THE POWER TO FLY

Both the shaman and the witch are credited with the ability to fly, as well as to sustain the extremes of both heat and cold. Shamans among the Bilaans (they are called *almoos*) can walk without harm over burning embers. Witches were also known even in the time of Juan de Plasencia to emit flames from their bodies under the houses of their intended victims who were expected to die on the morrow.

25. Demetrio, *Dictionary of Philippine Folk Beliefs*, pp. 247-48.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 241.

27. Zucses, "On the Nature of the Demonic," p. 217.

The shaman's power to fly either physically or at least spiritually or psychically (through ecstasy or trance) is an act of spirituality. Eliade writes:

Magical flight is the expression both of the soul's autonomy and ecstasy . . . It is also related to the symbolism of ascension. This myth of the soul contains in embryo a whole metaphysics of man's spiritual autonomy and freedom; it is here that we must seek the point of departure for the earliest speculations concerning voluntary abandonment of the body, the omnipotence of intelligence, the immortality of the human soul. An analysis of the imagination of motion will show how essential the nostalgia for flight is to the human psyche. The point of primary importance here is that the mythology and the rites of magical flight peculiar to shamans and sorcerers confirm and proclaim their transcendence in respect to the human condition; by flying into the air, in bird form or in their normal human shape, shamans as it were proclaim the degeneration of humanity. For as we have seen, a number of myths refer to a primordial time when *all human beings* could ascend to heaven by climbing a mountain, a tree, or a ladder, or flying by their own power, or being carried by birds. The degeneration of humanity henceforth forbids the mass of mankind to fly to heaven, only death restores men (and not all of them!) to their primordial condition. Only then can they ascend to heaven, fly like birds, and so forth.<sup>28</sup>

It is while in ecstasy that the shaman is enabled to do much good to the community. But witchery is the meditation of the demonic and negative side of the nostalgia for absolute freedom.<sup>29</sup> The witch's ability to fly (physical or psychic) is not freedom from the shackles of space and time. For the aim of the witch in his flight is never spiritual. It is either incestuous or cannibalistic. Thus the witch is buried in the material, in the finite. And this seems to be his imprisonment and condemnation in this world.

The witch then is a person who out of selfishness, and utter self-will, has inured himself in evil, isolating himself from the normal run of human interaction with fellowmen, and aims only at doing what is destructive of life and moral and natural goodness. He is indeed without God. For he refuses to submit his life to the other. Like Lucifer he worships his own finite will which he staunchly sets up in opposition to the divine.<sup>30</sup>

28. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Bollingen Series 76 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), pp. 479-80.

29. Zuesse, "On the Nature of the Demonic," p. 217.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 237.