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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.¹

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 Syncretism 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.² 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.³

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),⁴ in marriage, in conceptions and pregnancies, at birth, in times of sickness as well as at death.⁵ 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,⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.

