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A CRYPTID FOR CATHOLICS AND COMMUNISTS:
THE ASUANG AS AN APPARATUS FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTROL IN THE
HISTORY OF THE PHILIPPINES

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HONORS PROJECT

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In 1950, four years into the insurgency of the Filipino communist militant group
Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan (HMB or, in English, the People’s Liberation Army), known
colloquially as the Hukbalahap or simply “Huks,” a small group of insurrectionists made camp
on a hill near a small town in central Luzon. While planning how to hold out against the local
government defense bastion, they patrolled the area on clear paths. On a night like any other, a
patrol returned to camp with news of a missing member of their party. Intent on finding the
missing man, the patrol retraced their path through the area, until finally stumbling across the
lifeless body of their fallen brother in arms. On his neck were two puncture wounds, and every
drop of blood appeared to have been drained from his cold, pale body. The group returned to
camp in terror. One man then remembered the rumors of a horrible creature known as the asuang
being in the area that had been spoken of by the people of the town. Every single member of the
patrol feared for his life, now believing that if they remained on that hill, they themselves would
be the next victim. Within a day, the entire group of rebels cleared from the area.¹

Of course, there was no segmented, flying, viscera sucking creature hunting these
insurrectionists. Rather, it was a group of Filipino government soldiers under the training of
Edward Geary Lansdale, a US Air Force General and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)
operative. They were the ones who had spread the rumors of the creature in the area before they
had snatched the man out of the back of the group and drained his blood through the puncture
wounds in his neck. In his memoir, Lansdale notes, “To the superstitious, the Huk battleground
was a haunted place filled with ghosts and eerie creatures…Goosebumps rose on my arms on
moonless nights in Huk territory.”² Even Ramón Magsaysay, the Secretary of Defense whom
Lansdale worked with at the time, believed in some of the creatures of myth. Where some would

¹ Edward Geary Lansdale, In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia (New York, NY: Fordham
² Ibid.
dismiss the superstition as cautionary tales for children, Lansdale saw an opportunity. Widely regarded as one of the pioneers of the Central Intelligence Agency’s psychological warfare operations, he was faced with a difficult situation. Ramon Magsaysay was planning to mobilize troops from defensive garrisons around Central Luzon in order to create a more aggressive and mobile brigade combat team (BCT) in the war against the insurrectionists. However, local politicians were adamant that Magsaysay not move troops from around the town because there was a camp of Huk rebels known to be occupying the hill nearby. If the troops were removed, they feared, the rebels would swoop into the town and murder the politicians. The agreement the two sides ultimately came to was that if the rebels were removed from the area, then the BCT was free to be moved at the discretion of Magsaysay.

Lansdale was not afraid of using the folklore beliefs of the local population to diminish support for the Huks, just as the Spanish Catholic missionaries before him had contorted the asuang myth to demonize female religious leaders during the over three hundred years of Spanish colonization in the past. These missionaries and friars used the superstitions of the native population to oppress them and remove their trust in their religious leaders. However, unlike the Spanish Catholics, Lansdale’s approach did not come from an attitude of racial superiority or out of an ill-guided attempt to “civilize” the population. Looking at the long and tumultuous history of the asuang, it is clear that it has been used by oppressors throughout history as a method of scaring the rural populace into compliance. While calling Lansdale the oppressor in the case of the Huk rebellion may seem to be a conflation of past American imperialism, the administration he worked for was notoriously corrupt. This essay will argue that General Lansdale’s exploitation of the asuang myth came from his novel approach to psychological warfare and his desire to fight communism, as opposed to the Catholic

3 Lansdale, In the Midst, 72.
missionaries who used local folklore as a method of religious control over a people they saw as racially inferior.

The majority of Western studies into the folklore and beliefs of the Filipino people did not reach a substantial point until the early 20th century, after the Spanish retreated from the islands at the end of the Spanish-American War. Fletcher Gardner’s article in the 1906 issue of the Journal of American Folklore is an informative collection of tales and descriptions of the creature known as the *asuang*. While written in 1906, it utilizes interviews with native Filipinos to inform the discussion of the various aspects of the cryptid. This information became crucial to subsequent analyses of the *asuang*, and was further developed by later authors. Over half a century later, Maximo Ramos’s “The Aswang Syncretism in Philippine Folklore” was written as an indirect continuation of Gardner’s work from the perspective of a native Filipino, attempting to categorize the *asuang* in the European folkloric taxonomy. Ramos's essay, though published in 1969, remains among the most informative academic essays on the *asuang* yet published. Approaching the legend from a folklorist's perspective, Ramos examines the origins of the myth and works to clarify the convoluted aspects of the folklore that come from the numerous oral traditions and rich cultural differences of the various areas of the Philippines.

Following these analyses of the *asuang*'s origins, scholars began to critically examine the various aspects of history that may have influenced the Filipino oral tradition. In “Explorations in Philippine Folklore,” Herminia Meñez Coben takes a critical look at the development of the *asuang* legend from a historical perspective and argues that many of the characteristics of the creature comes from a demonization of female shamans, or *baylan*, as a method of control by

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occupying Spanish missionaries.\textsuperscript{6} Kathleen Nadeau’s later article “Aswang and Other Kinds of Witches: An Analysis,” expands upon Meñez Coben’s article by arguing that while the modern perception of the \textit{asuang} may have been influenced by the friars and missionaries of Spain, it still retains a large part of its deep rooted origin in cannibalism and implied dangers to the institution of the family. She discusses the \textit{asuang} in comparison to various European creatures of lore and finds that it remains heavily influenced by regional threats to the family unit, rather than being particularly impacted by the Spanish and Portuguese creatures of a similar vein.\textsuperscript{7}

Narciso C. Tan, an independent researcher, also provides a detailed history of ritual cannibalism, headhunting, and human sacrifice as well as a potential origin of the \textit{asuang} myth from the Javanese in his book \textit{Púgot: Head Taking, Ritual Cannibalism, and Human Sacrifice in the Philippines}. He examines the various ethnolinguistic groups of the islands and utilizes primary sources from Spanish colonizers to provide an explanation as to why and how these groups practiced the rituals they did.\textsuperscript{8}

Concerning the Hukbalahap Rebellion, Major Lawrence M. Greenberg’s \textit{The Hukbalahap Insurrection: A Case Study of a Successful Anti-Insurgency Operation in the Philippines} proves an invaluable source for its historical coverage of the events prior to the insurrection and the insurrection itself. He details the various ways the communist Huks were demonized by American reports and intelligence in the 1940s, and outlines the various operations and events of the uprising from a military perspective.\textsuperscript{9} This, combined with a declassified CIA document titled, “The Pattern of Communist Movements in Southeast Asia: A Brief Survey of International

\textsuperscript{6} Herminia Meñez Coben, \textit{Explorations in Philippine Folklore} (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996).


Communist Operations in Six Countries,” creates an in-depth picture of how the United States intelligence community understood the situation in the Philippines.

The most critical source for this time period, however, was Edward Geary Lansdale’s memoir. He details the entirety of his time in the Philippines, from his initial assignment before Philippine independence in 1946 through his opinions on American policymakers and their responses to the Huk insurgents and the economic issues the Philippines were facing, all the way through the end of the rebellion and the election of 1953 that saw the removal of the corrupt President Quirino. In addition to these sources, there are numerous references to the asuang attack as recounted by Lansdale as well as descriptions of the asuang itself. Unfortunately, however, many of the recent descriptions of the asuang are to be found in digital media format, such as videos and podcast episodes, which are intended for popular audiences and mostly lacking in academic standards. As such, Gardner, Ramos, and Nadeau remain the essential academic works for any serious inquiry into this subject. There is also a distinct lack of government documentation of the operation available to the public, making the only firsthand account from Lansdale himself, and thereby making confirmation of his story difficult or impossible otherwise.

When discussing “the superstitious” in his memoir, Lansdale does not give any particular opinion on the validity of the superstition, nor does he seem to fault any of the rural Filipinos for their belief. He saw the folklore and legends as an opportunity to achieve his goals, a means to an end. Ever the unconventional planner, he had heard tales of the asuang and used it to his advantage. In his memoir, he writes:

Conventional military men think of combat psywar almost exclusively in terms of leaflets or broadcasts appealing to the enemy to surrender. Early on, I realized that psywar had a
wider potential than that. A whole new approach opens up, for example, when one thinks of psywar in terms of playing a practical joke.\textsuperscript{10}

A practical joke is an apt characterization of what Lansdale was doing to counter the Huk guerrillas. His tactics offered a low budget, low tech, and easy to implement method of psychological warfare against the long-established forms of psywar that his opponent was using. While the communists took more traditional approaches to psychological warfare, such as mass propaganda campaigns using slogans and fliers, the men who worked under Lansdale were much more creative in their efforts. Huk propaganda was heavy on slogans, such as “Land for the Landless” and “Bullets, not Ballots.”\textsuperscript{11} Slogans were a common communist method of influencing the masses, as a key component of the communist revolution is the support of the peasant class. There was much more of a risk with what Lansdale was doing, however, because the reason leaflets and slogans were considered “conventional” is because they were proven to work. The tactics of the Civil Affairs Office, created by Magsaysay as a psychological warfare division at the request of Lansdale, were meant to out-psywar the insurgents. The main goal was twofold: to perform psywar in combat conditions and to improve the behavior and attitude of the military towards the civilians they were supposed to be protecting, thus raising the people’s opinion of the government – what, in other words, would later come to be known during the American war Vietnam as “winning hearts and minds.”\textsuperscript{12}

The Huks themselves had a long history in the nation, beginning as the Partido Komunista de Pilipinas, or the PKP. However, the earliest organizations in the movement were the Union Obrera Democratica de Filipinas (Democratic Labor Union of the Philippines) and the

\textsuperscript{10} Lansdale, \textit{In the Midst}, 74.
\textsuperscript{11} Greenberg, \textit{The Hukbalahap}, 53.
\textsuperscript{12} Lansdale, \textit{In the Midst}, 70.
Congreso Obrera de Filipinas (Philippine Labor Congress). The PKP was formed in 1930 after several splits between these labor parties, and communism was ruled illegal in 1932 by the Filipino government. It was not until 1942 that the Huk party was created through an alliance of other radical groups in order to fight against the occupation of the Japanese during World War II, but the guerrillas were quickly driven to the mountains by the invaders. The guerrillas went relatively quiet until 1944, when they declared a policy of active aggression against the Japanese. This was at the same time as the American invasion, which led to the Japanese being attacked on two (unallied) fronts. According to Major Lawrence M. Greenberg, a member of the US Research and Analysis Division’s Analysis Branch, “As the Japanese withdrew before American forces, Huk squadrons moved into villages and barrios declaring liberation.” This would become a common occurrence, as the Huks would move into areas that the Japanese had retreated from and declare them liberated through the efforts of the guerrillas themselves. The people, it appears, did not care who claimed to have liberated them, only that the Japanese were removed. As such, the Huks gained the favor of the Filipino citizens for their “efforts.”

In the post-war era, the party grew stronger with only a few leadership disputes to disrupt their activities. From January to October 1950, the party was at its peak, being ruled legal by President Elpidio Quirino in 1949. It reorganized its guerrilla units and renamed itself the Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan (HMB). A report submitted in the mid-1940s by General Douglas MacArthur’s headquarters, GHQ Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA), painted the Huks in an incredibly unflattering, aggressively anti-American manner. Greenberg explains that while the

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16 For purposes of clarity and cohesion in this paper, however, much like how the Filipino people did after the renaming, they will continue to be referred to here as the Huks. “The Pattern,” 33.
report was correct in its description of the group as the largest, most powerful, and best organized group in central Luzon, it misrepresented them as “willing to accept arms and assistance from the Japanese in order to fight American units.” Their connection to the Japanese was grossly misinterpreted, with the report saying that the guerrillas were led by violent, dangerous former Sakdalistas (pro-Japanese terrorists and thugs) with the objective of establishing a communist regime after the United States left the islands. To anyone who knew of the Huks’ history, this is outright incorrect. However, this report helped to shape much of the United States’ foreign policy in the Philippines at the time.

The years from 1944 until 1946 were tumultuous for the Philippines. The transition of the Philippines from a US commonwealth to an independent nation was fast approaching on July 4, 1946, a result of the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act, and American policymakers were scrambling to complete reforms and remove themselves as colonial occupiers as soon as possible. However, the reforms that were passed often did nothing to help the struggling Philippine economy, and this only fueled the fires of Huk propaganda. The majority of the time, the Huks were seen as no more than armed civilian groups, and the leadership was oftentimes arrested and disarmed without addressing the real issue of the appeal of communism in the time of economic collapse. Even General Douglas MacArthur was sympathetic to the Huk cause, telling his biographer William Manchester that if he himself were Filipino, he would absolutely support the Huks. The guerrilla insurrection would continue to gain support from the peasant class as the ignorant American policymakers underestimated how influential the Huks truly were. The majority of Americans did not understand the Huk movement or how to stop it, and those who

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18 Ibid., 35.
did were not particularly politically influential. One man who did have an understanding, however, was Air Force Major Edward Geary Lansdale.

While Lansdale describes Secretary of Defense Magsaysay as a moral man, the same could not be said for President Elpidio Quirino, his administration, or the national military. According to Eva-Lotta Hedman and John Sidel, two scholars in Asian-Pacific politics, “President Elpido Quirino was widely seen as having won election in 1949 through unparalleled electoral fraud and violence…Reports of rampant electoral manipulation and voter intimidation led to widespread disaffection with the electoral process.”\(^{20}\) While this was all alleged, for the people of the Philippines it was enough to rapidly increase support for the Huks. Not only was the government itself seen as rampant with corruption, the military was arrogant and engaging in fear mongering, matching the atrocities of the Huks beat for beat with violence against civilians. In the beginning of the 1950s, public support for the communists far outweighed the support for the government.

It was not until Ramón Magsaysay was appointed Secretary of Defense that changes began to be made. From the very first day of his administration, Magsaysay began to enact change through personal example. He lived on a modest government salary, refused special treatment, and immediately began to go out to the countryside to talk to the citizens and address their issues on the spot if possible.\(^{21}\) His goal was to restore faith in the military and in the government, with a particular focus on incorporating the military into social reforms and public service. Lansdale, ever the proponent of treating civilians as people whose opinions matter, strongly agreed with Magsaysay’s reforms. When he arrived in the Philippines for the second time in 1950 as an advisor to the secretary, he, like Magsaysay, immediately went to the people

to learn why support for the Huks was so strong. A particular story he discusses in his memoir is when he ventured to Tarlac, a town around seventy miles outside Manila. He had heard about a Huk attack on a military hospital there, killing twenty-three injured soldiers and seven civilians. When asking his contacts what had happened, he learned that the Huks had infiltrated the town during the day and came out at night. They had politely asked the civilians to please go inside, because there was going to be shooting and they did not want to hurt any of them.

Lansdale was horrified. His informants were lauding the communist guerrillas as heroes despite their atrocities! When he voiced his criticisms, he was told that he had been away in America for too long to understand, that the government was cheating the people out of their lives. Government troops who went to towns in search of insurgents more often than not ended up hurting the civilians. When they had gone to the ballots in 1949 to elect representatives who would change the problems within their country, Quirino seemingly cheated his way into victory. According to Lansdale’s contacts, “The only thing left for the people to do was use bullets, not ballots, to get a government of their own.”

The people were desperate for reform, and most did not believe that Magsaysay’s moral compass alone was enough to truly bring about lasting change. They were oppressed by the government and according to Lansdale they would continue to be oppressed under the Mao-influenced Huks if the communists were to win the war. In Magsaysay he saw an opportunity to create lasting change in the Philippines, and used his own novel ideas to get the man into power.

The asuang, regionally known as the aswang, wakwak, or ustuang, is a creature of Filipino folklore that is difficult to categorize in a Eurocentric folklore taxonomy. According to the “Dean of Philippine Lower Mythology,” author and teacher Maximo Ramos, the asuang belongs to five potential categories of mythical monsters or “cryptids” including the vampire, the

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22 Lansdale, In the Midst, 28.
viscera-sucker, the weredog, the witch, and the ghoul.\textsuperscript{23} The vampire, in European folklore, is a bloodsucker, while the ghoul, weredog, and viscera suckers are all consumers of the flesh by their nature. The ghoul in particular prefers to consume the dead over the living. All of these descriptions may contradict one another, and yet all share common characteristics with the \textit{asuang}. In an attempt to configure the creature with their own worldview, many of the early American and European colonizers thought of the \textit{asuang} as a kind of ghost or demon. Neither of these are necessarily accurate. The \textit{asuang}, in the early days of colonization in the Philippines, was understood as a sort of human who obtained its powers by consuming the human liver. American folklorist Fletcher Gardner describes it as, “a compound of a vampire and a ghoul, for it may fly like the vampire and live on human flesh drawn from the living, and…it may feast on the flesh of those who have died natural deaths, like the ghoul.”\textsuperscript{24} The one aspect that the majority of scholars agree on is that the \textit{asuang} can be either a woman or a man with a tube-like tongue for viscera consumption. Moreover, they can fly and detach their torso from their lower half to do so.\textsuperscript{25}

One particular story in the \textit{asuang} folklore is the tale of a woman who unwittingly became an \textit{asuang}. She had married a man who, unbeknownst to her, was one himself, while she was not. Suspecting her husband of adultery after he regularly disappeared at night, she left her baby with her mother and went off in search of him. In her search, she went to their farm in the country, where in the farmhouse there was a large pile of meat. With no husband in sight, she was tempted to taste it. As soon as she consumed the meat, she was transformed into an \textit{asuang}. The woman returned home and killed her baby, cannibalized its arm, then ran away when the infant’s grandmother returned. The \textit{asuangs} fled to another village where they lived.

\textsuperscript{23} Ramos, “The Aswang,” 238.
\textsuperscript{24} Gardner, “Philippine (Tagalog),” 193.
\textsuperscript{25} Gardner, “Philippine (Tagalog),” 193.
inconspicuously until their neighbors noticed how they never slept. A man who was “learned in the ways of the asuang” went to the house and found the lower halves of the two, indicating they were indeed such creatures. He placed ashes on the halves, preventing them from rejoining, and when the asuangs returned they found they were unable to reattach themselves and flew away for fear of what would happen to them when the dawn came. The man then removed the ashes, and the asuangs returned just before dawn and returned to their human forms. They left the village in shame, and never bothered anyone again.26

This tale is of particular note because it indicates several aspects of the asuang condition that were previously unclear. Firstly, this story indicates that the flesh consumption for transformation does not have to be fully voluntary, as the woman did not realize she was eating a human liver. Second, there is no consequence to the asuangs for their state of being or their actions. They are not depicted as being damned like the European undead, nor are they being outright hunted. In European folklore, there is an emphasis on the deaths of creatures like ghouls and vampires, with explicit directions on how to kill them. In this particular case of the asuangs, the man who was knowledgeable of them took the necessary action to prevent them from rejoining with their lower halves. However, he did not hold them to this for long, removing the ashes and allowing them to return to their normal forms. In return, the asuangs did not retaliate against the man, but instead left in shame.

There are several methods of warding off an asuang, including holding garlic in the hand and placing ashes on the stump of the divided form. As described in the previous tale of the married asuangs, they are unable to reattach to their lower half through the ashes and must remain in their winged form. Other materials that can be used to prevent reattachment are vinegar, spices, and salt, all of which force the asuang to fly around until they can convince a

26 Gardner, "Philippine (Tagalog)," 199.
human to take pity on them and wash the substance off with water. Also much like in the above tale, it is never truly clear what would be the fate of an *asuang* who cannot return to human form before dawn. The fate, surely a terrible one if the reactions of the husband and wife are any indication, is only vaguely hinted at in the legends.

However, like many other Filipino creatures of legend, the most effective method of holding an *asuang* at bay is by wielding the tail of a stingray. This weapon, known as the *buntot ng pagi*, in addition to being a method of fighting off curses and creatures of legend, is a formidable martial arts weapon that creates festering wounds through its whiplike strikes. The *asuang* is allegedly terrified of the tail of a stingray, and it is customary in some areas of the Philippines to beat the air and the ground with one to ward off the *asuang* during times of sickness or after the birth of a child.

Not only are there ways to defend against the *asuang* as well as kill it, there is actually a cure for the condition altogether. According to Gardner, “The *asuang* may be cured by binding him hand and foot and placing him by a vessel of water, which must be perfectly clean and clear. Worms, beetles, lizards, and the like, issue from the mouth and nose, and the patient is cured.” While several steps of this cure seem to be unclear, it can be assumed that the cure is performed while the *asuang* is in its human form because the bisected creature does not necessarily have attached feet to bind. The fact that there is a cure for the condition, as opposed to the only “cure” for a European style vampire being a wooden stake through the heart, suggests that while the *asuang* is a fear-inducing creature there is still a recognition of its existence as a human. This may explain why the learned man in the story allowed the *asuangs* to reattach themselves and

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28 Gardner, "Philippine (Tagalog)," 194.
30 Gardner, "Philippine (Tagalog)," 194.
31 Ibid.
continue living, and why the asuang couple left in shame instead of retaliating against the man. It appears that there is still some sense of humanity within the more recent tales of the creatures, even as they consume the viscera of humans.

The origin of the asuang legends is a point of much speculation among folklorists. One explanation is that it has an origin in Hindu mythology. According to Narciso C. Tan, an independent researcher who spent a decade researching the ethnolinguistic groups of the Philippines, the Javanese spirits of the sawan and sarap are similar to the asuang in that they take the form of animals and pose threats to young children.\textsuperscript{32} Not much is known about the early folk migrations of the Philippine islands, but around the third century the islands (notably southern Luzon where the asuang legends are particularly prominent) were conquered by various Indo-Malayan and Javanese empires.\textsuperscript{33} This implies a degree of influence of the Javanese on the folk legends of the Filipinos of southern Luzon, but Gardner believes that the more modern (late nineteenth and early twentieth century) depictions of the asuang come from a societal taboo against cannibalism that was brought in by the Spaniards. From the ancient ghouls and witches to the Portuguese bruxa, cannibalism has been ritualistically practiced by humans and folk creatures for thousands of years, but became viewed as primitive and barbaric in Western society. There is a very obvious taboo within even the singular story of the asuang couple, where the wife unwittingly consumed a human liver and instantly became a monster. She had not knowingly nor willingly done this, and yet the transformation occurred which implies that no matter the method, the consumption of human flesh is never permissible. In the Philippines, according to Gardner, it is quite probable that there were some groups of people who participated in ritual cannibalism, and even that the stories of the asuang may have given rise to some of...

\textsuperscript{32} Tan, Púgot: Head, 313.
these rituals in return. He writes, “at least some of the tribes at a remote period may have been anthropophagi, especially as there is much evidence that it has survived in the form of ceremonial cannibalism...among the wild tribes of northern Luzon.”  

Tan concurs, explaining, “Usually, the ritual eating of human parts by the indigenous peoples of Luzon was part of the human sacrifice and head-taking traditions...Within the first half of the twentieth century, ritual cannibalism was no longer a regular practice.”

Firsthand accounts of ritual cannibalism are rare because of how sacred they were to the people of the Philippines. However, there are accounts of ritual human sacrifice to appease the asuang from the Bicolano of southern Luzon during the late sixteenth century. Described by Franciscan missionary José Castaño in 1895 and quoted in Tan, the cult of the asuang believed that the creature was an evil spirit who needed to be placated through ritual sacrifice. He writes, 

The worship of Asuang was very common and widespread...This worship...was for the most part expiatory; for since they considered him the spirit of evil and the efficient cause of every injury and harm they suffered, it is not surprising that they tried to placate him, using all the means within their limited power, even the savage and barbaric shedding of human blood.

Several key notes come from this observation. Firstly, the people of Bicol feared this creature to the point of ritual human sacrifice to appease it. This demonstrates how very real this threat was to them and explains why the folklore has persisted in some capacity to this day. The other is that, in nearly all of the descriptions of the monster from early records, it is described as a “he.” It is not until later, after the Spanish missionaries began to really focus on religious conversion and colonization, that the asuang is described as female.

In her book Explorations in Philippine Folklore, Herminia Meñez Coben argues that the current understanding of the asuang comes directly from Spanish missionaries during the time of

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34 Gardner, "Philippine (Tagalog)," 194.
36 Ibid., 124.
the Spanish colonization of the Philippines. Her main evidence for this argument is that the *asuang* as a viscera-sucker has a “remarkable popularity in lowland Christian communities, especially the Visayan and Bicol regions.”37 Within these communities, the creature is gendered as female, whereas in the rest of Southeast Asia it is non-gendered and is described as a sort of bird or doglike creature. She suggests that the Spanish priests inverted the traditional roles of the Filipino shamaness or *babaylan*, who was traditionally a powerful woman in their society, in order to demonize them to the general public and permeate the culture with their own Christian ideas on religion, family values, and attitude towards women. These *babaylan* women were, according to Meñez Coben, imperative to the preservation of indigenous belief in the face of Christian conversion, and removing them from power was essential to the missionaries’ agenda of converting the populace. The main aspects of the *asuang* she discusses are the targeting of pregnant women and fetuses, physical attributes such as scent, and the overall inversion of traditional Filipino family roles. All of these served to demonize the indigenous religion and the women who perpetuated it. The *asuang*’s desire for human flesh and fluids is described by Meñez Coben, describing the way that with her long, thin tube-like tongue she “drains the fetus out of the womb or, more dramatically, incises a pregnant woman’s belly with her long fingernails to remove the infant.”38 This appears almost a perfect inversion of the baylan’s role of midwife.

Kathleen Nadeau takes this parallel one step further by explaining how the segmentation of the *asuang* from its lower half separates the woman from her sexual organs, following in line with the “dark and repressed attitude” the Spanish Catholics held towards sexual behavior.39 However, she does not agree with Meñez Coben that the myth came exclusively from the

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37 Coben, *Explorations in Philippine*, 86.
38 Coben, *Explorations in Philippine*, 89.
39 Nadeau, “Aswang and Other,” 255.
Spanish Catholics. She explains that the closest relative to the *asuang* in Spanish folklore is the Spanish *bruja*, or witch. Nadeau writes, “When compared to the early Spaniard’s images of witches, the similarities include the aspect of flying, feasting on children, and/or drinking blood, being horrible to see, operating primarily in the dark of night, and being unsuspected by day.”\(^4\)

The similarities to the *asuang* stop here, however, as there are too many differences to ignore between the two. This does not mean that Meñez Coben’s argument is incorrect, though. There was absolutely some manipulation of the *asuang* legends by the Spanish, but they built upon beliefs that were already deeply ingrained within the population.

Nadeau’s article provides not only a comparison to the European witch, but also the European vampire. She writes, “The real fear of the Europeans may be based on the fear of uncontrollable women. In contrast, the fear in regional Southeast Asia may be of something or someone who may represent a danger to their children.”\(^4\) The fear in the Philippines of the *asuang* most likely comes from the taboo of cannibalism, and also potentially extends to the idea of someone who can influence their children into this taboo. In fact, this influence is evident in the story of the woman who married the *asuang*. She did not knowingly consume the flesh of another human, but was instead influenced, albeit indirectly, by her husband. One of the traits of the *asuang* is said to be that they can disguise their meals as something more appetizing and less human, and as such are able to tempt others into their same fate. If Gardner’s claim is correct, the tribes who participated in ritual cannibalism posed a very real threat to the non-anthropophagous Filipinos. This threat came in the form of both being eaten and being convinced to consume human flesh, something that is particularly simple to do if the unwitting participant is a child.

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\(^4\) Nadeau, "Aswang and Other," 256.
\(^4\) Nadeau, "Aswang and Other," 258.
Returning to the differing gender roles that Nadeau discusses in her article, she addresses the commonality of male vampires in European folklore. These vampires are able to feed on everyone, as opposed to female vampires only typically feasting on children. Nadeau believes this idea comes from the societally understood gender roles of the time and area, as the “female domain” is viewed to be childbirth and childcare, while the male is the “rational governor of the female’s actions.” These strict gender roles likely had a strong influence on the Filipino asuang through the Spanish colonization, particularly as the missionaries worked to discredit and demonize the indigenous female religious leaders. In Southeast Asia, particularly the Philippines and Indonesia, such gender roles are not strictly enforced and women historically share more equality with their male counterparts in Southeast Asia than their female ones in Europe. The folklore reflects this, as the hypersexuality commonly found in female European vampires is not as prevalent in those of Southeast Asia. Nadeau explains, “The female undead of the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and in other areas of this region are represented as using sexual appeal primarily as a means of disguise, but the creature’s goal and function do not indicate that hypersexuality is an innate aspect of its character, nor a required means of attack.” While both male and female vampires of European legend are hypersexual beings who utilize their supernatural seduction abilities to lure their prey to their demise, Southeast Asian creatures such as the asuang have no use for such skills in seduction because their primary targets are not typically adults.

In the case of the asuang operation, Lansdale fit the creature’s image to his own purposes, rather than trying to create a monster that perfectly matches up to the long history of the asuang legend. As discussed previously, the asuang is typically known to drain the viscera.
and fetus from a pregnant woman using its long, tubelike tongue. In addition to the numerous ethical problems with treating a pregnant woman in such a manner, to have this attack happen on a civilian would not send the desired message to the Huks on the hill. While there potentially could have been some fear instilled in them when hearing about such a gruesome attack, it would have been a less risky gamble to directly attack one of their own. There also appears to be a minimum of research into the asuang itself by Lansdale, as he repeatedly refers to it as just a vampire in his memoir. In his recounting of the attack, he writes, “They punctured his neck with two holes, vampire-fashion, held the body up by the heels, drained it of blood, and put the corpse back on the trail.”\textsuperscript{45} To a Western reader, this is a clear sign of a vampire. The two puncture wounds from the teeth, the bloodless corpse, both signs of a traditional, European vampire. They are not, however, the signs of an asuang.

Such a difference in attributes created the necessity of rumor. For the Huk insurgents to truly believe they were being hunted by the viscera sucking, bisected creature of myth, the idea of such a monster being in the area had to be planted. It is unclear how Lansdale accomplished this at the time, but there are mentions of the combat squad who perpetrated the attack starting the rumors. Infiltration was a very important angle to the Philippine Army, who sought to sow discord within the ranks of the guerrillas. One major example of this was an operation known as “Operation Cover Up,” which was undertaken by Company C of the 7th brigade combat team (BCT). These men were heavily trained in impersonation of insurgents in every possible type of special operation and were dispatched to the area around the village of Pandi in central Luzon. Through the counterinsurgency efforts of these four teams, seventy Huk officials were designated targets of “snatch” operations and were removed from the area.\textsuperscript{46} This operation most

\textsuperscript{45} Lansdale, \textit{In the Midst}, 72.
\textsuperscript{46} Greenberg, \textit{The Hukbalahap}, 120.
likely occurred after the *asuang* attack, but it demonstrates how the Philippine forces, particularly those in the Philippine Army’s research and development team, affectionately nicknamed “Department of Dirty Tricks,” were fully capable of these large scale infiltration operations.

It would be incorrect, however, to assume that because Lansdale understood the *asuang* to be more akin to the Western idea of a vampire that he was altogether uneducated on the folklore of the Philippines. In fact, in a separate operation he had ordered an exhaustive study of the superstitions of the rural Filipinos, including their lore, myths, and taboos. He then used a small aircraft and air-to-ground communications equipment to fly over rural areas that Huks were known to inhabit. Under the cover of clouds, aircraft broadcast curses in Tagalog, threatening anyone who provided support to the insurrectionists. While it is unclear what exactly these curses consisted of, the plan was a general success, with some Huk units being starved into surrender.47 This vignette demonstrates that Lansdale understood the importance of the folklore of the common people in his psychological operations campaign. He used any means necessary to obtain their support, or at the very least diminishing their support for the Communists.

When Lansdale’s psywar squad used the *asuang* attack as a method of scaring the Huks off of the hill in central Luzon, it did not just affect the rebels. The rumors had to get to them somehow, and the indirect channel that was used was the rural citizens of the area. For the *asuang* to only have attacked the Huks creates the idea that Huk sympathizers may also be in danger. By creating this creature to attack the communists, Lansdale was also creating the idea that the Huks were doing something wrong and as such any supporters were also wrong. To be attacked by an *asuang* in the old legends was to be struck with severe misfortune, and solidified the moral argument that communism was wrong. Legends are often used to teach a moral lesson,

such as the European vampire generally being an unruly, hypersexual woman who oversteps her bounds. Her punishment for this is being killed or being a damned, undead creature of the night. The same can be said for the *asuang*, with its heavy draw on anti-cannibalistic morality. To be an *asuang* or to be attacked by one indicates a level of breaking the moral code of society.

Unlike the Spanish Catholics who inhabited the Philippine region in the past, Lansdale appears to have had no sense of racialized superiority or Kiplingesque “white savior” mentality towards the Filipino people. Lansdale’s mission was to prevent the people of the Philippines from falling under the sway of the Huks, but having spent so much time there among the common people, it also seems that he developed an affinity for them and genuinely wanted to help. Lansdale writes in his memoir, “My eyes had been opened to the world outside my own country…to possibilities for an American in military service that I hadn’t imagined…There were examples all about me in the Philippines of what a previous generation of American military men had done there.”

American interests in the Philippines span all the way back to the late nineteenth century, with the joint defeat of the Spanish occupiers of the islands by American and Filipino forces. Following this allied victory, the American forces did not accept Philippine independence, leading to the brutal, four year long war of “liberation” which officially ended with the capture of leader Emilio Aguinaldo in 1902. It was not until the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934, also known as the Philippine Independence Act, that it became the Commonwealth of the Philippines. Lansdale’s initial time on the islands from the end of World War II until 1948 took him through the enactment of the Tydings-McDuffie Act that granted full independence to the Philippines in 1946, and he remained there for such an extended period due to his appointment as the American command’s public information officer. His duty was to resolve the friction between the newly independent Filipinos and the remaining American soldiers. While

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this was certainly a tall order, he describes it as a period of rare education, one where he was able to learn about the people and their struggles. Despite the “ugly American” trope that would later emerge as a result of diplomatic failures in Southeast Asia, Lansdale clearly was empathetic toward the Filipino people and attempted to understand their culture.

In addition to his belief in the importance of his time with the citizens of the Philippines, Lansdale placed a large emphasis on the need to create for Filipinos heroes to look up to. After an interview with Lansdale in 1985, Cecil B. Currey, professor of military history, writes, “He would rather let a deserving person in the Third World receive credit where it was due rather than to claim it for himself when he might easily have done so.” 49 Throughout the entirety of Lansdale’s memoir, his retelling of events is consistent with this description. Even in the asuān operation, he gives all of the credit to the psywar squad who spread the rumors of the creature and completed the operation, rather than speaking at length about his own role. Currey writes, “Trusting the Filipinos, allowing them to form their own solutions to their problems with a minimum of interference, and always treating them as equals were Lansdale’s key to success.” 50 He fully credits his success to his dealing with both Ramon Magsaysay and the Filipinos as friends and equals, rather than as former constituents of the United States who were incapable of handling the communist uprising on their own. His main goal was to assist the counterinsurgency effort without being overbearing.

Lansdale’s emphasis on the importance of the Filipino people having their own heroes to admire during the Huk insurgency is in stark contrast to the white supremacist approach of the Spanish friars during their occupation. Spain first settled on the islands in 1565 after their “discovery” by the explorer Ferdinand Magellan in 1521, which began a nearly uninterrupted,

50 Greenberg, The Hukbalahap, 98.
three hundred year rule that was maintained by a relatively small number of soldiers, officials, and priests.\textsuperscript{51} Catholicism was a major influence on the native peoples, as by 1606 there were numerous different factions of Christians and Catholics on the islands. This included Augustinians, Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans, Augustinian Recollects, and, at the end of the nineteenth century, Benedictines.\textsuperscript{52} There was no separation of church and state, and as such religion and law was tightly interwoven. This, coupled with the white supremacist and “white man’s burden” ideas of the time, led to the oppression of the Filipino people and attempted erasure of their diverse native cultures.

In the 1902 article “The Work of the Friars,” by Stephen Bonsal, a well-known apologist for race-based imperialism, he explains how the friars brought civilization to the inherently flawed native Filipinos, educating them, building roads, and putting down anti-colonialist insurgencies. There is no regard for the systems that the people had successfully lived with for thousands of years, and nearly every aspect of Filipino life was degraded as primitive and drastically changed. One example of the exploitation of the native peoples was imposing a policy of forced labor in order to build roads and highways. According to Bonsal, the first major issue that the friars faced was a lack of roadways through the dense jungles of the islands. Their solution was to impose corvée labor, a system through which every person was required to work a certain number of days out of each year on these roads, and if they were unable they had to send someone else in their stead.\textsuperscript{53} Another example of the missionaries’ colonialist attitudes that the friars had towards the Filipino people was the educational system they introduced. Bonsal argues that, contrary to those who claimed there were very few schools on the islands and those

\textsuperscript{51} "The Philippines," 3.
\textsuperscript{52} James Alexander Robertson, "Catholicism in the Philippine Islands," The Catholic Historical Review 3, no. 4 (1918): 377.
that did exist were poorly managed, the failure to establish a Western-style education system with successful schools was really the fault of the indigenous people, not the colonizers. He writes,

The Dominicans who presided over the destinies of the University were and are men of the very highest intellectual attainments…nevertheless, it must be admitted that in three hundred years not a single pure-blooded Filipino of the thousands that they have graduated has distinguished himself or left a considerable name in any walk of life…Some of the friars told me once that their education efforts had failed because of the invincible ‘passivity’ of the Indian.54

The friars saw the native Filipinos as inherently lazy and unable to be educated, and their biases were confirmed as these people who had never received a true Western formal education were unable to reach the friars’ idea of an educated citizen, let alone an intellectual.

The white supremacy of the Spanish friars in the form of a “white savior complex” extended to their approach in quashing what they deemed to be sedition. They saw themselves as the natural leaders of the “primitive” native peoples and believed it to be in the best interest of the people to continue to live under their oppressive, exploitative rule. There were a number of uprisings during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the friars were called “the most relentless and vigilant enemies to those who conspired against monastic rule and the suzerainty of Spain.”55 They were able to catch the majority of attempts at rebellion in the early stages of planning through their “deep knowledge” of the Filipino people, according to Bonsal. The argument of the friars’ unpopularity being due to this strict oversight of the indigenous people is one that can also be applied to the later American intervention in Filipino affairs. The economic reforms and aid that were planned by US policymakers prior to the 1946 independence agenda were what Westerners thought the Filipino people needed, but their attempts, too, were at best misguided.

55 Ibid, 457.
By comparing the tactics employed by Edward Lansdale amidst the Huk rebellion to the historical manipulation of indigenous beliefs by Spanish Catholic missionaries, a complex narrative of psychological warfare emerges. Unlike the missionaries who wielded folklore to suppress and control the general population, Lansdale's utilization of local superstitions stemmed from an understanding of human psychology rather than a sense of cultural superiority and targeted only a small, select group of ideologically driven individuals. His strategic approach, epitomized by the use of the *asuang* legend, represented a departure from conventional military psywar, emphasizing creativity over conventionality. Beyond his psyop tactics, Lansdale also sought to cultivate a more positive relationship between the military and civilians, thereby bolstering support for the government and the US presence. His approach, while unorthodox at the time, reflected an awareness of the power of psychological warfare and its potential to influence both perceptions and behaviors in a conflict-ridden landscape.
Selected Bibliography


