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**Viscera-Suckers and Female Sociality:  
The Philippine Asuang**  
RAUL PERTIERRA

The Philippines as an ethnological field of study has received relatively little attention since the early researches of Barton, Benedict, Christie, and Cole first drew to the attention of anthropologists both the variegation and the homogeneity of Philippine societies.<sup>1</sup> Although considerably more anthropological research has since been conducted, the Philippines has not received the specialized attention given to other areas of Southeast Asia. This scholarly neglect, among other things, has resulted in the almost total lack of comparative studies of the Philippine culture area. While this article is not principally an attempt at comparative analysis of elements of Philippine culture, it draws its material from diverse ethnological and historical sources, with the purpose of exploring structural continuities. The subject of its concern is a set of images and ideas prevalent throughout the Philippines but only loosely associated with specific social structures and whose specific idiom may vary significantly from one Philippine society to another. However, in all cases this set of concepts readily expresses fundamental threats to the conceptual and moral orders of each particular society. The extent to which such a conceptual complex serves as the idiom both for perceiving and expressing threats to the cosmos and society indicates the homogeneity of the Philippines as a culture area and delimits it as a proper field of ethnological study.<sup>2</sup>

1. See Roy Barton, *Ifugao Law* (Berkeley: University of California, 1919); Laura Benedict, *A Study of Bagobo Ceremonial, Magic and Myth* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1914); Emerson Christie, *The Subanuns of Sindangan Bay* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1909); and Fay Cole, *The Wild Tribes of Davao District, Mindanao* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1913).

2. See Johann P.B. Josselin de Jong, "The Malay Archipelago as a Field of Ethnological Study," in *Structural Anthropology in the Netherlands*, ed. J.P.B. Josselin de Jong and P.E. Martinus (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1977), pp. 56-85.

The set of concepts which I refer to as the *asuang*-complex is found in most lowland and many highland Philippine communities. For methodological reasons the *asuang*-complex will be used generically to examine the structural properties of a body of concepts present in many Filipino cultural-linguistic groups. However, the specific content of the *asuang*-complex differs for each particular community.

Terms such as *mananangal* and *mandurugo*, found among Tagalog and Bicol speakers; *mansaluan*, *wakwak*, *ongo* and *mangalok* used by Visayans; and the Ilocano *saan nakatawtawan*, are for the purposes of this study encompassed in the term *asuang*. Useful analytic distinctions might in fact be made by retaining the vernacular distinctions, but the large number of terms and their lack of clear differentiation lessen the advantages of adding yet more detail to an already complicated situation. In any case, the ethnographic data is often insufficient to justify a more detailed treatment, and the associated concepts are by no means as clearly delineated as may be implied by the distinctive terms.

#### CLASSIFICATION OF ASUANGS

For the sake of convenience I shall follow Ramos in his classification of *asuang*s.<sup>3</sup> As will become obvious, this classification is neither exhaustive, nor does it imply any form of logical disjunction.

Ramos classifies *asuang*s under the following headings:<sup>4</sup>

1. *Vampire*: a blood-sucking creature, often under the guise of a beautiful young woman, who marries an unsuspecting youth so that she can have regular sips of blood at his expense. Sometimes such creatures prefer to attack people in distant villages. Inter-village hostility may at times be expressed in this medium.
2. *Viscera-sucker*: a creature who by day appears as a beautiful woman, but who by night discards the lower part of her body, hiding it under the sheets, in a closet or among a patch of banana trees. The upper part then takes to the air, pro-

3. Maximo Ramos, *The Aswang Synchrony in Philippine Folklore* (Manila: Philippine Folklore Society, 1971).

4. Maximo Ramos, *Creatures of Philippine Lower Mythology* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1971), chap 1.

pelled by its long hair or by some magical process. Sometimes the creature takes the form of a black bird, or bat, or an unusual insect. In its new form the creature flies in search of people's internal organs, human foetuses, infants, or the phlegm and exuviae of sick people. It gains access to its victims by projecting its long tongue through crevices in the roof or between the bamboo slats of the floor.

3. *Weredog*: creatures who are often associated with men, and who are capable of transforming themselves into ferocious beasts in the form of outsized black dogs, pigs or cats. They are believed to waylay solitary travellers, tearing their flesh savagely (either literally or metaphorically). Weredogs are also often attracted by the smell of the sick.
4. *Ghouls*: creatures who share many of the viscera-sucker's food preferences but who seldom take on any definite visible shape, preferring instead to remain invisible. The smell of death attracts them irresistibly and they hover around houses where wakes are being held, waiting for a suitable opportunity to devour the corpse. Ghouls often start their meals even before the dead are buried, at times substituting for the real corpse one made from a banana plant. Although they are thought to inhabit the areas surrounding villages, their preference is for cemeteries. Being invisible their presence can only be detected by their fetid smell.
5. *Witches*: These are men or women, sometimes actually living within the community, who in their very being possess supernatural powers. They are assumed to be malicious and vindictive creatures who cause illness with or without provocation. They are generally regarded as anti-social characters preferring to shun the company of other members of the community. Witches are often carefully distinguished from sorcerers, the latter besides having knowledge of and contact with supernatural powers, are otherwise normal people.<sup>5</sup> One may occasionally have to use the services of a sorcerer, either as a healer or to cause harm to one's enemies. Witches on the other hand, are thought to be far too unreliable, unpredictable and inherently dangerous to have regular social dealings

5. See Richard Lieban, *Cebuano Sorcery* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967); and Frank Lynch, S.J., "Ang Mga Asuang," *Philippine Social Sciences and Humanities Review* 14 (1949): 401-27.

with them. While sorcerers fall within the social and moral order, even if disapproved of and feared, witches remain outside both domains. Often witches are said to possess peculiar traits, such as abnormal or inverted pupils, indicating their non-human origins. Witches may, however, start life as ordinary humans but at some stage undergo a sudden and total transformation that henceforth separates them from common humanity. In contrast, sorcerers generally gain their powers through a long and difficult period of apprenticeship involving the acquisition of esoteric knowledge that only gradually enables them to exercise their craft. The training of a sorcerer is distinguished from the transformation of a witch by the presence of *rites de passage* for the former and the absence of such rites for witches.<sup>6</sup> The transformation of a person into a sorcerer is a process of culture whereas a witch not only represents anti-culture but even constitutes an aberration of nature.

#### ILLNESSES AND REMEDIES

The asuang is not only feared, but also forms part of a system of reactions and references, in particular those involving illness and death. Vampires and viscera-suckers are associated with specific disease symptoms such as acute weakening, wasting and lassitude, regular discharges of blood (except menstrual blood), anemia, diarrhea and other seriously debilitating illnesses. Witches are supposed to cause serious stomach pains (as distinct from less serious stomach pains involuntarily caused, through mystical means, by otherwise respectable members of the community), painful swellings, various serious skin conditions and some otherwise unexplained symptoms. Ghouls and weredogs, although associated with illness, generally limit their activities to frightening people out of their minds. Asuangs wander out at night and are encountered in lonely and forbidding places such as heavily wooded areas and cemeteries. Their powers are considerably, and sometimes totally reduced during hours of day-light. They are generally afraid of any form of light and shun noise, although exceptional cases are told of asuangs actually joining noisy parties. Despite their powers,

6. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. Vizedom and G. Cafee (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1960).

asuangs can often be outwitted and many stories are told of brave men, women, children and even domestic animals successfully outwitting an asuang.

The list of remedies against asuangs is long, varied, and constitutes a class of objects or actions with significant cultural and symbolic value. It includes salt and most forms of spices, metal artifacts, ash, holy objects, the tail of the sting-ray, large crustaceans, vinegar, betel nut chew, urine, the reversal of the ladder leading into a house and lights kept burning brightly during such events as the lying in state of a corpse, child-birth and sickness.

Pregnancy, disease and death, universal human themes, are the ones around which the asuang-complex is most likely to occur. The asuang is used as an explanation for events occurring within these themes. An unexpected miscarriage, death by emaciation of a previously healthy-looking person and similar events can be explained in terms of asuang attacks. At other times, the concept acts as a rationale and stimulus to action. Pregnancy is associated with certain mimetic and symbolic rites such as the one described by Fr. Zuñiga where the husband, naked and exposing his genitals (i.e. his masculinity) remains under the house while furiously waving his sword to ensure that asuangs do not interfere with his wife's delivery.<sup>7</sup> In this case both the feigned aggressive actions of a brave man and a metal object are adequate defences. During wakes Filipinos are noted for the noise, and the spontaneous gaiety mixed with genuine grief which accompany such vigils. These wakes are carried out amidst the most brilliant illumination possible, to make sure asuangs do not steal or devour the corpse. A prolonged lying-in-state allows kin and friends to gather from distant places. For the more practically inclined, such vigils are also occasions for young men and women to develop their courtships and renew their friendships.

As a symbol the asuang allows the Filipino to communicate and express the states of fear, anxiety or apprehension felt during times of personal or communal stress. The symbol itself may be diverse and ephemeral, such as the presence of an unusual animal or insect, the experience of a peculiar noise, smell, taste or sight. Any of these stimuli under appropriate conditions may be convert-

7. Martin de Zuñiga, *Historia de la Islas Philipinas*, (1803) in Blair and Robertson, eds., *The Philippine Islands* 43: 113-27.

ed into a symbol with its associated scheme of action and conceptualization.

The efficacy of such a symbol may be judged by both its widespread use and long association with Philippine societies. Early Spanish writers describe the belief in *asuangs* in various parts of the country in the sixteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Its perseverance and generality justify including the *asuang*-complex in the class of concepts whose logical structure reveals basic orientations in Philippine culture. Aside from the reports of similar creatures in Melanesia,<sup>9</sup> their presence is reported in countries such as Indonesia and Cambodia.<sup>10</sup>

Lieban, in discussing *asuangs*, is careful to distinguish them from sorcerers.<sup>11</sup> Lieban sees sorcerers as real persons, carrying out specific actions that are believed efficacious both by the sorcerer and by his client. His actions may bring about undesirable consequences, but they are at least explicable in terms of vengeance or the desire to eliminate a rival. However, the harm caused by *asuangs* proceeds directly from their evil nature rather than from any explicable motives. Lieban also points out that the *asuang*-complex often involves a direct inversion of Filipino values or states of affairs. Hence, while Filipinos like spiced, cooked animal meat, *asuangs* prefer unspiced, raw human meat. Their unclean habits contrast vividly with the passion for cleanliness of most Filipinos. *Asuangs* are unselective of their victims, often striking within their own families, indicating a denial of strong kin obligations normally felt by Filipinos. Many stories told of *asuangs* accuse them of lewd sexual behavior. Female *asuangs* often expose their genitals, an unthinkable situation for normal women. The reflection in the pupil of an *asuang* is an inverted image.

Despite its prevalence, the *asuang*-complex is simply one element in the total belief system encompassing various kinds of supernatural and preternatural beings. Many of these are pre-Christian in their origins but others are re-interpretations and adaptations of

8. Miguel de Loarca, "Relacion de las Islas Filipinas," (1582) in Blair and Robertson, eds., *The Philippine Islands*, 4:34-188; and Juan de Plasencia, "Las Costumbres de los Tagalogs," (1589) in *ibid.*, 7:173f.

9. Bronislaw Malinowsky, *Magic, Science and Religion* (New York: Souvenir Press, 1954).

10. Douglas Miles, "Kichapi, The Animal Lover: A Political and Structural Analysis of Monkey-Business in Dayak Myth," 1981 (manuscript); Jan Swellengrebel, ed., *Bali: Studies in Life, Thought and Ritual* (The Hague: Van Hoeve, 1960).

11. Lieban, *Cebuano Sorcery*.

Christian ideas. The *lumilitaw* (ghosts) and the *matanda-sa-punso* (spirit-dwarfs) are examples of preternatural beings found throughout the Tagalog culture area. These beings may represent ghosts, lost souls or colonies of invisible little men living in or near termite nests, who normally are harmless but who can cause injury and sickness when disturbed. Illnesses caused by such creatures are dealt with and diagnosed by ritual specialists and healers who are consulted either in conjunction with or independently of orthodox medical practitioners.

#### THANKSGIVING SACRIFICES

A very common practice in both lowland and highland Filipino communities is to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving for particularly bountiful harvests, hunts or fish-catches. Hart describes a typical ritual, the *bood*, associated with the hunting of wild pigs.<sup>12</sup> The guardian spirits in the bush are asked for aid in catching pigs and offered a food sacrifice, either annually or after each successful hunt. In the *bood* rite, the hunter delimits a territory in which his success might be assumed. An outsider hunting in this area will not be lucky and the spirits might even cause his dogs to die. A particularly lucky hunter will often make a special *bood* consisting of the head, liver, heart and tail of each pig cooked without spices, and offer these to various spirits who are invited to partake of this meal, normally placed on a table under the house. After the spirits have had their share the meat is re-cooked with spices and consumed by the hunter's family. In explaining the practice of the *bood*, old men informed Hart that this represented a form of payment to the spirits for wild game caught in their territories, and also for the use of the land in cultivation. However, once the land has been under cultivation for some time and the wild animals formerly living there driven out, the offering of *bood* often lapsed. The transition from the wild to the domesticated determines the extent to which *bood* rites are performed. Wild animals and uncultivated lands are seen as the property and habitat of the spirits. Such animals when caught, or the use of such lands, require compensation in the form of sacrifice to the appropriate spirits.

12. Don Hart, "Barrio Caticugan," (Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1954), pp. 504-7.



The asuang-complex can be seen to fit quite well within the spirit ideology outlined above. Asuangs are morally and socially feral creatures and their habitats may often be associated with wooded, wild parts surrounding the cultivated village lands. But asuangs, like some other malevolent spirits, may also exist within the confines of the village itself, and because of their proximity they become more dangerous. Like certain feral creatures, asuangs are able to adapt themselves well to both urban and rural settings and reports of asuang attacks have occurred in large towns and cities. A feature distinguishing asuangs from other supernatural beings living in proximity to human habitation, such as the *matanda-sa-punso*, is the former's competitive and destructive relationship to man, in contrast to the latter who are organized like a human community, complete with quaint nineteenth century costumes and economic divisions between rich and poor, and who are generally content to lead a life of parallel and peaceful coexistence with man.

This distinction is clearly emphasized in the corresponding ritual. Rites against asuangs always stress expulsion and exclusion, while those performed for injuries caused by other spirit beings usually involve appeasement or compensation. Most malevolent spirits are offered sacrifices to mollify their injured feelings, but asuangs are, if possible, ruthlessly expelled.

A common expression of this cosmic and moral ideology is described for Malitbog where, despite two centuries of contact with Christianity and a nominal acceptance of the main tenets of this faith, pre-Christian beliefs and customs still prevail. For them the universe is divided into three major parts. The highest and most removed layers are inhabited by God and his favorite angels. They are thought of as kind and virtuous beings who have little effect on the daily affairs of man. The lower layers are inhabited by generally benevolent beings who are thought of primarily in terms of natural forces such as rain and wind. Christian saints also inhabit this region and are expected to respond to prayers and other propitiatory rites. The lowest layers of the sky-world, their limits reaching the ground, are inhabited by a myriad of spirits; formerly beings who resided in the uppermost layers but who were expelled by God for rebelling against him. These beings are closest to man and are primarily responsible for causing him serious diffi-

culties, although occasionally bringing him some relief. Finally there are also underground spirits, and these are thought of as malevolent beings responsible for pestilence, famine and other disorders.

Jocano writes:

The fear of contact with supernatural beings is brought about by the consequence which follows the encounter. Illness is said to result from all contacts. The ailments may take the form of severe headache, stomach ache, fever, loss of mind, and even death. The most dangerous of all preternaturals is the *asuang* because they are believed to eat human flesh and internal organs, especially the liver. Most of my informants who said that they had been attacked by an *asuang* refused to go out alone at night.<sup>13</sup>

It appears, however, that not many *asuang* attacks result in death and Jocano himself describes a successful rite performed to drive away an *asuang* that was molesting a young man.

Jocano then proceeds to describe the reports of contacts with supernatural beings. In his words: "These may be divided into two major categories: sensory and visual. The former includes olfactory, auditory and tactile contacts; the latter includes visual imagery and actual physical encounters."<sup>14</sup> He then gives several examples of such encounters, following the perception of some unusual olfactory, auditory, tactile or visual phenomena. The peculiarity of the language of sense impressions will not be developed here except to point out that a discourse of sense impressions as compared to a material objects discourse lends itself to a range of logical possibilities enabling it to simultaneously span ordinarily distinct levels of experience.<sup>15</sup> It is partly this logical flexibility which allows the *asuang*-complex to adapt itself to a wide range of explanatory paradigms.

#### ASUANGS AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Malitbog theology has assimilated parts of the Christian theology while retaining most of its own pre-Christian beliefs and rites. The Christian God is consigned to a relatively isolated, if exalted position, and few references are made to him. Below him are

13. Landa Jocano, *Growing Up in a Philippine Barrio* (Manila: Miranda and Sons, 1971), p. 105.

14. Ibid.

15. David Cooper, "Alternative Logic in Primitive Thought," in *Man*, new ser. 10 (1974): 238-56.

anthropomorphized natural powers similar to the gods of the Greeks. These powers are important and appropriate rites are necessary to assure that the rains, etc., come on time. Christian saints share the habitat of these powers and it is mainly through them that these natural powers are addressed. Next are the creatures of the lower atmosphere, of which the *asuang* is the most dangerous, and finally the creatures of the underworld who are malevolent and bring pestilence and famine.

Whereas meteorological phenomena are anthropomorphized and subterranean gods socialized, the creatures in between, with whom *Malitbogans* are most concerned, are personalized. The exception is the *asuang* who remains outside the order of culture. While imitative rites can be performed to bring about rain, purificatory rituals carried out to remove the curse laid on the land by malevolent underground beings, and personal negotiations and propitiatory offerings made to offended environmental spirits, the *asuang* stands out by its being beyond the control of human forces: a symbol of uncontrolled, unmitigated evil.

The ease with which the *asuang*-complex may be adapted to a range of circumstances is seen in an example given by Hart in *Caticugan*.<sup>16</sup> He describes how, when a typhoid epidemic broke out some years before his visit, people claimed to have seen or heard a headless nun going around the barrios, causing people to die from the disease if they answered her nocturnal greetings before she had uttered them three times. In other words if their sociability exceeds proper caution. Although *asuangs* are not usually associated with nuns, and while it is usually the upper part of the body that detaches itself and moves about, the change from a bodyless woman's head to a headless nun is easily accommodated within the system of beliefs concerning *asuangs*. It has been pointed out several times that the ideas constituting the belief, just as much as the contours of the belief itself, are by no means fixed or consistent. It is precisely this property that gives the system its flexibility and allows its integration within a varied range of associated sets of ideas.

A characteristic of both Christian and non-Christian Filipino religion is the bargaining and exchange relations Filipinos have with supernatural beings. Frake describes the rites performed by the

16. Hart, "Barrio Caticugan."

Subanun whenever a serious crisis occurs which cannot be resolved by empirical means.<sup>17</sup> These rites are modelled after existing social relations and are characterized by bargaining, manipulation and the exchange of contracts. The Subanun, like many other non-Christian groups, see religious rites as establishing alliances with the spirits which involve rights and obligations on both sides, including some coercion and manipulation by either side whenever possible. The bood rite described by Hart in a Christian lowland community illustrates this contractual tie; the hunter offers his sacrifice and says:

I am doing this (making the *bood*) because I have five dogs for hunting. I hope I can surely catch a wild pig because I have done this. Do not be selfish because I have done these things already. If there are other hunters who enter this area I ask you not to give it (pigs) to them. I hope also that their dogs will be hurt.<sup>18</sup>

This contractual supplication assumes that both parties acknowledge a common moral order, and although one party may be much more powerful than the other and hence require some form of formal obeisance, nevertheless the relationship is seen to be close enough to justify a form of gift-exchange similar to that between humans, e.g. landlord and tenant, political leader and client, senior and junior kinsmen.

None of these notions of reciprocity apply to the asuang. They are perceived as existing beyond or outside the moral order and rites involving them are not seen as propitiatory contracts. While Filipinos often have explanations for crises at the level of nature (floods, drought) and society (sorcery, war) within a commonly recognized cosmic and moral order, certain individual crises are seen as morally inexplicable. In these latter cases the asuang-complex forms part of a mechanism which restores order to otherwise incomprehensible experiences.

The argument I have so far developed is that asuangs are creatures who intrude into the most intimate affairs and spaces of life without acknowledging any basis for the rule of reciprocity. While there are other beings, both natural and supernatural, who can cause people harm, e.g. powerful and violent individuals, dan-

17. Charles Frake, "A Structural Description of Subanun Religious Behavior," in *Readings in Cognitive Anthropology*, ed. S. Tyler (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969).

18. Hart, "Barrio Caticugan," p. 507.

gerous animals such as snakes and wild pigs, certain malevolent spirits such as the lumilitaw and matanda-sa-punso, all of them are usually willing to enter into reciprocal relations confining their attacks to particular circumstances such as being shown lack of respect or whenever trespassing specific areas such as a forest or a cemetery. The danger these beings pose may be significantly reduced by conducting appropriate rituals which assume a common recognition of reciprocity. In contrast, asuangs deny any basis for a common moral order and in Turner's words "reduce the normal, healthy and ordered world of everyday living to a primitive chaos or primordial slime."<sup>19</sup> Asuangs symbolize individual and unpredictable spite which is the ultimate threat to structure and community. Normal boundaries between nature and culture, wild and domestic, private and public, stranger and kinsmen are not recognized by asuangs. They span normally discrete social and cultural domains, and hence they constitute the very essence of anomaly.<sup>20</sup>

#### ASUANGS AND FEMALE SOCIALITY

Although asuangs are not always associated with women, the two most dangerous supernatural manifestations of them are generally described as beautiful women who prey on unsuspecting men or who attack parturient women. These examples indicate the particular vulnerability of women as responsible for the untimely death of their spouse or for causing difficulties associated with childbirth. The latter may reflect the common practice of having female midwives or *parteras* assist at the birth. Parteras are often reputed to have unusual powers and may easily be suspected of causing miscarriages.

The close association between women and unusual powers is commonly found throughout the Philippines. Early Spanish writers frequently commented on the troublesome influence of female religious practitioners or witches (*hechicera*).<sup>21</sup> Contemporary scholars have confirmed the importance of female healers and ritual specialists or their transvestite equivalents in both low-

19. Victor Turner, *The Forest Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1967), p. 112.

20. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1966).

21. Eric Anderson, "Traditions in Conflict: Filipino Responses to Spanish Colonialism, 1565-1665," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sydney, 1976).

land and highland communities.<sup>22</sup> A common characteristic of healers and ritual specialists is a period of isolation, privation or mental illness prior to their gaining their powers or knowledge.<sup>23</sup> However, in most cases, their absence is only temporary and eventually they resume a legitimate position in the social order. Their powers are domesticated and socialized. Only asuangs persist in their asociality.

The untimely death of a husband is sometimes blamed on the wife due either to her neglect or to more direct means. Tensions between in-laws may manifest themselves through these accusations. Men are less likely to be suspected of employing clandestine methods for harming their wives since it is generally conceded that they are capable of resorting to direct threats or actions to bring about such ends. While these factors may contribute to the suspicion of women as asuangs, a more fundamental cause lies in the problematic position occupied by women in the social and cognitive structures.

It is well established that Filipino women occupy positions of authority and status both within the family and beyond it.<sup>24</sup> However, despite the autonomy that women exercise in certain domains, such as religion and the economy, Filipinos generally concede that the ultimate orientation of women is towards domestic matters.

While both men and women in many Philippine communities are active in the local economy, the use of family surplus is often determined by the concerns of each sex.<sup>25</sup> Men tend to direct surplus outside the household, reflecting their interest in establishing links with the wider community. Women prefer to re-invest surplus within the household in order to ensure the viability of all

22. Fay Cole, *The Tinguian* (Chicago: Field Museum Series, University of California, 1922); Esteban Magannon, *Religion in a Kalinga Village* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1972); and Alfred McCoy, "Baylan: Animist Religion and Philippine Peasant Ideology," 1982 (manuscript).

23. David Szanton, "Folk Diagnosis and Treatment of Schizophrenia; Bargaining with the Spirits in the Philippines," in *Culture-Bound Syndromes, Ethnopsychiatry, and Alternative Therapies*, ed. William Lebra (Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 1976), pp. 72-88.

24. Teresita Infante, *The Women in Early Philippines and Among the Cultural Minorities* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas, 1969); and Raul Pertierra, "Class, Status and Gender in a Philippine Municipality," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 15 (1979): 72-82.

25. Michelle Rosaldo, *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

its members. These different interests are seen as complementary, one (male) concerned with establishing political and social ties with other households, the other (female) ensuring that household members are adequately provided for. Women are expected to supervise and contribute to the household's resources thereby allowing men to use part of the surplus to build political links with the wider community.

The cultivation of political ties requires qualities defined in terms of social honor and public standing. Hence, the importance of activities such as lavish feasting, contributions towards public or civic projects, excessive generosity and the use of indirect and elaborate speech modes, all qualities closely identified with and controlled by men. Political ties ultimately revolve around the threat and control of physical violence, as a consequence of which elaborate strategems are employed to minimize uncontrolled combative encounters.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, domestic relations occur in an essentially private and non-violent context and hence, do not require elaborate safeguards against antagonistic encounters. Violent disputes between spouses is often regarded as a valid ground for separation and the physical chastisement of children is strongly disapproved.<sup>27</sup> While extra-domestic relations acknowledge the possibility of violence and attempt to mitigate or control it through various strategies, domestic relations presume the peaceful coexistence of its members. Hence, domestic conflict is often seen to manifest itself in covert and indirect ways, a form of behavior more closely identified with women. The notion of reciprocity is explicit and publicly validated in extra-domestic relations which men initiate. In contrast, women operate in a domain where reciprocity is implicit, delayed and often only privately validated. Women's sociality, at least outside the domestic sphere, is suspect. We have seen how excessive asociality is a characteristic of asuangs.

The active participation of women in the economy and other areas of public life is contradicted by their private domestic orientation. Their emphasis on domestic responsibility clashes with their public and communal duties. Unlike men, women have

26. Thomas Kiefer, *The Tausug: Violence and Law in a Philippine Moslem Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972).

27. Landa Jocano, *Sulod Society* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1968), p. 115.

not evolved complex strategems such as specialized discourses, social honors, and public standing to deal with the exigencies of political competition. Instead women deal in more individualized and covert strategies to accomplish their ends. Women's success in economic activities is often seen by men as achieving private gains through the neglect of the public good. On the other hand, the undoubted control of public life by men is vitiated by their lack of control over domestic life. In affairs of the household, the contribution of women, while underplayed, is too significant to deny. While men have carved out most areas of public life, women have achieved autonomy over large areas of private life. It is precisely in this domestic female space that asuangs operate. Like women, asuangs insinuate themselves into the privatized areas of life in order to wreck havoc largely through covert means. In public asuangs, like women, are meek, shy, easily intimidated and often outwitted. In private, asuangs threaten the very basis of the reproduction of social life — an activity which is the main focus of female life and which often excludes encroachment on the part of men. The private orientation of women is easily transformed into the individual spite of the asuang. Ultimately, asuangs are feared because they deny what is perceived as the basis for order, i.e., the possibility, however unequal, for a relationship based on social exchange. Unlike other dangerous beings, asuangs, and by implication women, do not recognize the basis for establishing social relations. The asuangs' habitat, like that of women, overlaps and intrudes into the most private domestic spheres.

#### REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

While female asuangs are more closely associated with certain regions e.g. Central Visayas and Bicol, their presence has been reported in most parts of the lowlands and in many highland communities. However, certain regions such as Northern Luzon and parts of Central Luzon are said to be relatively free of them. Areas such as the Northern lowlands and Central Luzon are characterized by a relatively developed small-plot intensive-cultivation cash economy while Central Visayas, the Bicol region and parts of Mindanao are essentially plantation economies characterized by seasonal labor migration complemented by local subsistence economies. Part of the argument developed in this article is that un-



controlled female sociality manifests itself in certain forms of the asuang-complex. In regions such as the Visayas and Bicol which pride themselves on the beauty of as well as the dominant qualities of their women, coupled with the division of labor in a plantation economy and the exodus of young women into urban employment, often as waitresses and barmaids, the control by men of female sociality is often threatened. In contrast, the Ilocos region and parts of Central Luzon have intensive-cultivation cash economies employing a high proportion of female labor. The Ilocanos and to a lesser extent the Tagalogs, give relatively less emphasis to female beauty in favor of industry.<sup>28</sup> Ilocano women who obtain outside employment enjoy a high reputation as hard-working and reliable domestics. While mid-wives in many Philippine communities are women, in the Ilocos region, they are frequently men.<sup>29</sup> Ilocanos are often portrayed as dour, thrifty, clannish and patriarchal, and contrasted with the jovial, frivolous, hospitable and matrifocal Visayans.<sup>30</sup>

These differences in regional economies and cultural configurations may help explain the forms and significance of the asuang-complex. Hence, while Ilocanos frequently assert the relative absence of the female-asuang in Ilocos, they readily confirm its presence in the Ilocano areas of Mindanao. Similarly, while the more common aspects of the asuang belief are not indigenously found in Northern Cordillera societies, their presence occurs in those Cordillera societies most affected by rapid social change brought about by the encroachment of lowland social and economic structures.

Despite the regional variations in the manifestation of the asuang, this paper argues that it is precisely the homogeneity of the Philippines as a culture area which allows this belief-complex to adapt itself to specific socio-cultural differences. Even in societies which have not indigenously reported its presence, asuangs easily become the idiom for expressing cognitive and moral threats,<sup>31</sup> as indicated by its widespread use in contemporary Phil-

28. Ricardo Galang and Antonio Maceda, *How We and Our Neighbors Live* (Manila: Ginn and Co., 1955).

29. William and Corrine Nydegger, *Tarong, An Ilocos Barrio* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966).

30. Nid Anima, *Ilocandia: Land of Contrasts and Contradictions* (Quezon City: Omar Publications, 1976); Florencio Riguera, "Ilocano Thriftiness," *The Ilocos Review* 2 (1970): 7-16.

31. Ramos, *The Aswang Syncretism in Philippine Folklore*.

ippine mass culture (e.g. cinema, press). The growth of urbanization, which brings together people of distinct cultural-linguistic backgrounds, facilitates its use as a common symbol of asociality.

Throughout the Philippines, social relationships and a large part of relationships with the world of nature depend on the principle of reciprocity and exchange (including, however, the possibility of mutual enmity). Asuangs fail to observe the notion of reciprocity and thus represent the gravest threat to both the cultural and natural orders. The activities of men dictate that much of their behavior not only publicly validates reciprocity but exaggerates its forms through lavish hospitality or sharing, specialized discourse and developed notions of social honor. Women, as members and reproducers of society must also conform to the rules of reciprocity, but their primary orientation seldom requires public validation of reciprocity and in many cases women are seen to restrict its application to the domestic context. Women operate in a context where reciprocity and exchange are so implicitly assumed (i.e. members of the household and close kin) that it is unnecessary to re-state its basis publicly. Exchanges between close kin may be delayed (e.g. children repaying their parents in the latter's old age) without risking a rupture in the relationship. In contrast, men operate in a domain where exchange must be constantly validated since its delay may risk the basis of social relationships. Although women's economic and religious activities often cause them to enter the public domain, they do so in respect of private interests, in contrast to men, who ideally transcend domestic interests. In this context, the valuation of female beauty is problematic since its possession by men is privately guarded but socially valued. Beautiful women, like asuangs, deny the principle of reciprocity since their social value is contradicted by the private control of their sociality (i.e. sexuality). Many stories are told of asuangs who, in the shape of beautiful women, lure men to their deaths. Filipinos readily provide examples of women who, by forcefully representing private-domestic interests, attempt to distract men from their extra-domestic orientations. A beautiful wife might easily induce her husband to neglect his public interest.

## CONCLUSION

This article has argued that a common response to fundamental threats to the conceptual and moral orders in many Philippine societies is expressed by a set of images and ideas known as the *asuang*-complex. The notion of the *asuang* represents a denial of basic sociality and a refusal to recognize reciprocity and exchange. *Asuangs* are dangerous not only because they deny the basis of society but also because they intrude into its innermost recesses. Their feral or wild nature allows them to operate in society without being part of it. The *asuangs*' physical traits, their food preferences and behavior are inversions of normal life. While other threats face the individual and society, none threaten both the cognitive and moral orders as thoroughly as the *asuang*.

Although *asuangs* do not always manifest themselves as women, their most virulent representation takes the form of beautiful women who lure unsuspecting men to their deaths, cause miscarriages by sucking out foetal fluids or are otherwise responsible for the death of infants. The problematic nature of the position of women has been mentioned. While women play prominent roles in public areas such as the economy and religion, they retain their primary orientation to the members of their household. Such an orientation often portrays women as individualistic, apolitical, and uninterested in the wider spheres of reciprocity and exchange. While women are at the very center of the reproduction of material and social life, they appear to deny the basic tenets of sociality, i.e. reciprocity and exchange. Their private-domestic orientation, which makes society possible in the first place, contrasts with their apparent lack of public-civic concern. Beautiful women are particularly problematic since their public valuation threatens what is properly seen as a private interest.

The extent to which the *asuang*-complex expresses fundamental threats to the social and moral orders varies from one Philippine community to another. Similarly, its manifestation in the form of beautiful women is more prevalent in some than in others. Empirical circumstances such as the extent to which the normally ordered local economy and society are faced with significant and uncontrollable change, and the respective roles played by men and women in the cognitive and structural domains constitute some of the factors which determine the way in which the *asuang*-complex

manifests itself, including its representational forms. Societies which are no longer able to comprehend individual and communal crises within morally inclusive paradigms may resort to the asuang-complex as a way of restoring order to otherwise inexplicable phenomena. When such crises are linked to the problematic nature of female sociality, one may expect the asuang-complex to manifest itself in the form of women.