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Exploring the Signs and Objects in Aswang Accounts and Descriptions in Academic Texts: A Semiotic and Critical Interpretation

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Abstract: Aswang narratives have vigorously permeated online spaces of intellectual discourse, such as books, journal articles, and films, a testament that this indigenous folklore is a cultural capital vividly establishing its position in the literature, preserved for the Filipino heritage and traditional knowledge to live on. I performed a critical reading of 28 articles on aswang and utilised Peircean semiotics as a lens through which aswang significations are captured in my interpretation. Seven striking themes that stand for something bigger (signs) emerged in my reading, with their possible interpretations (objects). First, both old and current aswang articles have predominantly described typologies, classifications, or categories of aswang, which had resulted in aswang's multifaceted nature signifying the continuity of the myth. Second, Filipina shamans and priestesses during the Spanish colonisation, who had been heavily maligned and demonised, along with aswang appearing prevalently as a monstrous female, signifies oppression, subversion, and Othering of women in an unabatingly patriarchal society. Third, the ubiquity of aswang as a symbol of invasion, manipulation, and colonisation suggests a call to awareness and discernment as a way of breaking the contorted belief that it exists if in reality it does not, as well as imploring the Filipino people to see the "real" aswang right in front of their eyes.

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Believing in the myth and perpetuating this belief appears to be a social ill, suggesting delusion, self-deception, and an unfortunate acceptance of ignorance or enslavement by a distorted logic. Moreover, the ominous and appalling audibility of sounds and soundscapes in aswang descriptions, along with their gruesome images, suggests that aswang is a metaphor for an abusive, dysfunctional, deviant, perverted, and corrupt society in which we live and the perpetuation of abuse of power. However, descriptions in current literature have displayed aswang's shapeshifting, hybrid, liminal, and transcendent nature (i.e., the traditional aswang as a blood-sucking female creature versus modern-day aswang as blood-hungry dominant men in politics and power), urging us to believe that we can reinvent our logic and imagination by carefully noticing our very reality rather than dwelling on the myth. Both in its folkloric understanding and transcendent nature, aswang emerges to be a symbol of fear, anxiety, intimidation, terror, and trauma, illustrating the destructive nature of aswang embodied by a subtle but insidious hegemonic power in an increasingly dysfunctional Philippine society. Nonetheless, despite the horrors of aswang symbolised by colonialism and trauma, there remains the courage of the Filipino to arrest such painful experiences in memory by continuing the act of remembering. This is possibly because, as a people, they are drawn to revisit distant pain and grief despite how aswang has vehemently destroyed their very consciousness. The Filipino people somehow dwell with distant pain and suffering rather than forget, because dwelling with pain is their way of healing.

Keywords: aswang, signs, objects, Peircean semiotics, critical analysis

Introduction

Aswang is a multifaceted fictional character in Philippine mythology and folklore that constitutes these equally mythical creatures, such as *tikbalang, tiyanak, manananggal, manggagaway, wakwak, bampira, kapre, sigbin, santelmo, kikik, tiktik, engkanto, diwata, duwende, nuno sa punso, masamang espirito, maligno, white lady, and mumo,* to name a few. As an all-encompassing term, aswang and the many versions of its stories, depictions, illustrations, and anecdotes are feared by most children and youths in the Philippines who are introduced to this folkloric, mythical, and supernatural creature at an early age. These stories of aswang as a demonic monster have pervaded the Philippines' rich mythology and folklore since the earliest times of human settlement in the Philippines. The permeating oral narratives about this grotesque, evil, and mysterious creature had since been heard as early as the 13th century when Malayan people came to the Philippines for trade and commerce and brought with them their supernatural beliefs; the impact of which had some bearing on the lives of the Filipino *babaylans* and the Filipino people's belief in *maligno, diwata, bathala* and *anito* (McCoy, 1982; Nadeau, 2020; Scott, 1988; Ramos, 1969). These stories had tremendously gained traction and popularity in the 16th century when the Spanish conquerors created the first record of this monstrous being in written form making the aswang the most feared creature in Philippine folklore perhaps due to its ugly, hideous, and mutilated face shared in strikingly visual forms in written accounts (Lynch, 1949; Pertierra, 1983; Ramos, 1969; Scott, 2018). Driven by their colonialist motives (Derain, 2021; Nadeau, 2020), the Spanish friars sowed immense fear of this creature which had grown enormously because not only could the Filipino people hear stories and create images of aswang in their minds but more vividly, they could see these images teeming with gothic representations in distinctly visual forms and shapes.

Stories about aswang are tremendously diverse and constantly changing across the Philippine archipelago, considering the vastly segregated islands where almost 90 languages are spoken. These stories are almost always thrilling, mesmerising, yet sinister and scary to many Filipinos, especially to children and the youth. These stories are shared by various communities and are retold among members of these communities. Through word of mouth, these stories are passed on from one storyteller to a listener, who later becomes the new storyteller, and from one town to another, and the cycle does not stop. These stories cannot be attributed to any one specific author or community, yet their authenticity and seemingly twisted sense of power are drawn from their ghostly quality as an effective means of relaying horror and fear (Bender, 2021; Vicerra & Javier, 2013). These stories naturally

come out during supper, and such stories become even more frightening when told in the eerie, dark, and quiet evenings in the remote islands or provinces in the country, compared to hearing them in cosmopolitan, well-lighted cities. Aswang accounts and narratives also permeate those occasions such as All Souls Day, All Saints Day, Halloween, Holy Week, or when there is a death in the family, of which the family of the deceased, their relatives and neighbours converge for 40 days of wake. These are times when all we can do is listen attentively to what unfolds in the aswang story, in which all our senses are awakened, paranoid of the prying eyes of the gruesome creature gazing at us from an uncanny, and dark distance despite it being a myth constructed by the Spanish conquerors who wanted to perpetuate their power over the Filipinos.

This article intends to enliven the interest, curiosity, and critical thinking of the Filipino people by revisiting the many stories, accounts, depictions, or descriptions of aswang in academic literature. In this modern day and age in which we are experiencing a rapid loss of traditional knowledge and cultural beliefs and practices, it is epistemologically, ontologically, and praxeologically imperative that we explore the symbolic and metaphorical representations of aswang as a creature, object, concept, myth, and symbol as our way of performing, preserving, and appropriating a Filipino heritage that is deeply entrenched in the Filipino psyche and way of life, and more importantly, as our way of problematising this phenomenon with the intent of breaking the shackles of ignorance, deception, and distorted logic, and demystifying the discourse of power and hegemony.

Guided by semiotics as a methodological and theoretical lens, exploring the symbolic tropes, characterisations, and representations of aswang in the academic literature will also help us ascribe value, validity, meaning, and suspicion to this ancient belief that has established its baleful presence and influence in our political, sociocultural and sociopsychological traditions, and constantly permeates both conversational and intellectual occasions for which we engage in meaningful discourse, debate, and contestation. Some of us question its position and legitimacy in narratives and communities, and view its existence in our lifeworld as suspect, while others sincerely believe that the myth is real, for which contention and dispute, although warranted, lose grounding and meaning. It is also the intent of this article to map the change in how the Filipinos perceive aswang with the passage of time as well as with the drastic changes in the ways in which we view aswang as we continue to face these rapid changes, and as we constantly make sense of such difficult challenges in human settlements in particular, and the social, cultural, and political world in which we live in general.

Semiotics as a Theoretical Framework

This study is framed within the semiotic tradition of communication theory, which views communication (e.g., accounts, descriptions of events, phenomena, objects, or concepts such as aswang in academic literature) as the intersubjective mediation by signs (Craig, 1999). Communication theorised in this way explains the use of language (written, spoken, or nonverbal), symbols, icons, images, portrayals, and other sign systems to mediate between different perspectives (Craig, 1999). Intersubjectivity refers to the common-sense meanings constructed in interactions; in this case, how those articles about aswang are in conversation with each other, what patterns emerge, what insights they share, and what reactions you and I have as readers gleaning over these articles. Intersubjectivity is used as a resource to interpret deeper meanings that permeate our social, cultural, and political life. Semiotics posits that signs construct their users or subject positions, that meanings are public and indeterminate, that understanding is a practical gesture, and that codes and media of communication are not merely neutral structures or channels for the transmission of meanings (Craig, 1999), but possess sign-like properties of their own, i.e., the code shapes the content and the medium itself becomes a message, or *the* message (McLuhan, 1967).

Semiotics takes advantage of the power of descriptive and narrative accounts about an object, concept, event, or phenomenon captured in the hermeneutic code (Allen, 2003). In Roland Barthes's words, the hermeneutic code implicit in descriptions and narratives offers a sombre yet palpable and scathing enigma for the readers, making them react through questions and deeper interpretations (as cited in Felluga, 2015). The vibrant lifeworld of descriptions of lived experiences and narrative accounts suspends or delays surprise, deliberately evades truths, prolongs the offering of answers, and acknowledges insolubility. Discourse must be open to arrest and sustain the enigma that narratives and descriptions must possess. Semiotics, according to Barthes, bodes well with narratives and descriptions of phenomena because it allows interpretants to seize deeper structural principles that help organise and categorize meanings by way of intersubjective mediation by signs (Craig, 1999) which can emerge in forms of words or speech utterances, antithetical terms, or a mixture or conciliation of such terms, codes and other sign systems in the material and intangible culture for deeper meanings to come to the fore (as cited in Felluga, 2015).

In a broad sense, descriptions and narrative accounts are deeply immersed in our way of life, and they are a semiotic representation of a series of events semantically related in a temporal, causal, historical, cultural, symbolic, and meaningful way. Stories, accounts, descriptions, images, portrayals, and anecdotes about aswang can be constructed using a

wide range of semiotic environments: the written and spoken word in narration, visual images or illustrations, gestures and actions, symbolic representations and nuances in text, specific vocabulary and metaphors, or a combination of these, bringing with them the enigma that continuously excites the imagination of the Filipinos. Any semiotic construct, anything made of characters or captured in written forms or oral traditions, such as aswang as a mythical creature and a concept, can be called a text. Consequently, texts can be linguistic, non-verbal, theatrical, pictorial, graphic, filmed, or symbolic (Allen, 2003). That is, all texts that we experience have a story of their own. All texts that we experience create semiotic representations or sign-object connections because of the vivid descriptions that they carry. Examples of these texts are published articles, documents or written accounts that share imposing narrations, descriptions, and explications of aswang being a popular topic, object, concept, or myth shared among Filipinos, either in informal conversations or intellectual discourses or within the intersubjective psyche of the individual.

Chatman (1978) argued that by creating conditions in which an event, character, concept, or setting emerges, a meaningless text becomes meaningful, a vague text becomes understood, or a boring text takes some shape, form, and substance. For example, those grotesquely striking visual representations of aswang in comic books, magazines, and journals will have some bearing and will create meaningful discourse when introduced in specific contexts and for specific purposes, e.g., creating a learning module in a Philippine mythology course, conducting a community storytelling event attended by children, or facilitating a simple storytelling at home by a parent to a child for educational, cultural, psychological, and disciplinary reasons.

Peircean Semiotics

In uncovering the signs and symbols in narrative accounts in the larger body of texts, Peirce (1955) suggested a simple strategy: to determine the sign (signifier), the object (the signified), and the interpretant. In one of his many definitions of a sign, Peirce (1955) shared a fundamental view: "I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former". Peirce claimed that signs consist of three interrelated parts: a sign, an object, and an interpretant.

In theoretical and interpretive studies such as this study on aswang, one might argue that an individual's strong advocacy and passion for aswang studies and stories (sign) signify his deep care and responsibility (object) to raise people's consciousness of the real aswang that aggressively, deliberately, and sadistically destroys the very humanity of its

people. The object is best thought of as what is signified, e.g., the object to which the written or uttered word attaches, such that a Filipino citizen's visceral anger (sign) towards a corrupt government suggests something deeper, i.e., he has great concern for justice and the common good and he truly cares for his people and desire for their better lives (object). If anger is the sign, care for others is the object it signifies. Therefore, a sign is anything that stands for or represents something else. It can be a word, image, object, or gesture. The object is the entity or concept that the sign represents. It can be anything that exists in the physical and abstract world, driven by our interpretation of the sign. The interpretant, the most innovative and distinctive feature of Peirce's semiotics, is the understanding that arises from the sign-object relations (Atkin, 2013; Craig, 1999). The interpretant is the mental representation of the sign that is created in the mind of the person interpreting it. The sign triggers an interpretation in the mind of the observer, which becomes the interpretant. The interpretant is influenced by both the sign and the object it represents. It also mediates the relationship between the sign and the object. The importance of the interpretant is the stance that signification is not a simple dyadic relationship between sign and object: a sign signifies only in being interpreted. This makes the interpretant central to the content of the sign, in that the meaning of a sign is manifest in the interpretation that it generates in sign users (Pharies, 1985).

These elements, the sign, the object, and the final interpretant in semiotic interpretation, emerged helpful in my critical analysis of 28 articles (journal articles, book chapters, theses, reviews, and essays) narrating, describing, and analysing aswang as a creature, object, concept, and mythical phenomenon in many different ways, some literal, some metaphorical, some critical, some rhetorical, some cultural, some political, and some sociopsychological.

Myths and Semiotics

In *Myth and Meaning*, Claude Levi-Strauss (1978) postulates that, as myths abound in different parts of the world, permeating different cultures, parallels of mythical categorisations can be discerned, allowing us to make sense of the world through our human senses. Myths are complex systems of meaning that reveal deep structures of human thought. Like language being governed by the underlying structures of grammar and syntax, myths are also governed by underlying structures and organising systems enabling the human mind to grapple with fundamental questions about the self, existence, society and the natural world. Although symbolic and interpretative, myths utilise cognitive processes to represent different ways of organising and interpreting beliefs, symbols,

concepts, and experience. Although metaphorical, myths employ categorisation, analogy, and binary oppositions to arrive at an idea, thought, or explanation. Myths are concerned with particularities and relationships between phenomena. Mirroring Peirce (1955), mediation is central to understanding myths; they do not simply reflect oppositions that are observable in life, but also actively work to resolve them through symbolic means, creating a sense of order and coherence in a world that is bombarded with chaos, disruptions, contradictions, and conflicts (Levi-Strauss, 1978). Myths are a way of thinking about the world that invites people to make sense of binary oppositions and their experiences in the lifeworld (e.g., war-peace, men-women, chaos-order, fantasy-reality, escape-confrontation). Myths are not bound by chronological time, but they exist in a kind of eternal present - transcendental, enduring, and cyclical - where the past, present, and future are entangled, thereby addressing perennial human concerns that are not limited to a specific historical moment or period of time. Myths transcend space, place, and time because they deal with universal dilemmas, and they capitalise on interpreting signs and symbols that trigger human thought. When cultures and peoples address them, myths become relevant across generations and time. Thus, myths transform historical events into symbolic narratives that, despite their complexities, allow societies to integrate historical experiences into their collective consciousness, giving meaning and significance beyond their immediate context. Since myths abound in different parts of the world, permeating different cultures, parallels of mythical categorisations can be discerned, allowing us to make sense of our dispositions and worldviews. For instance, *aswang* in the Philippines meets a categorical equivalent of *pontianak* in Malaysia and Indonesia, *krasue* in Cambodia and Thailand, *jiangshi* in China, *chedipe* in India, *obayifo* in West Africa, and *clarimond*e in France, to name a few. Different contexts and cultures create versions of their vampires or witches as products of their folkloric, symbolic and metaphorical signification of the chaos, disruption, and complexity of the world in which they live.

However, in an attempt to discover the universal and transcendental nature of myths, their metalanguage might take over reality, as Roland Barthes (1957) theorised. Myths have the power to deform and de-historicize the original connection between the signifier and the signified. In an attempt to "empty" or distort reality, myths can establish a world "without depth" and can "naturalise" history (Barthes, 1957). For example, in the post-World War II era, the French bourgeoisie can present their own ideas, interests, and motives as those of the nation as universal, although looking deep within, this denotes serving the purpose of ideology, in naturalising all forms of oppression, marginalisation,

and subjugation into what people think of as commonsensical, and therefore, valid or legitimate. Because myths are beliefs or conceptions of what used to be, we might fail to see what lies underneath, such that a society that presents its own ideas, interests, and motives as those of the nation being universal can lead to creating a faux sense of community as it conceals almost all forms of oppression, marginalisation, and subjugation into what people think as commonsensical even if they warrant interrogation and debate.

The Limitations of Myths

Malinowski (1926) argued that if we want to understand myths, we look at what myths *do,* not what they *say.* Aswang, for instance, as a mythical creature, seems to be a disciplinary tool of some sort because telling stories about it keeps children from wandering in the evenings. Because aswang seems to be deeply entrenched in the minds of children, believing it is true, and fearing an encounter with it, children stay inside their homes for their own safety. This increasing perception of aswang, shared and passed on to various communities in the Philippines, has bearing on the sociology, religion, customs, and outlook of the Filipinos, making them discern what this story means to them as natives of their country and how it can permeate their very lives. What the aswang myth does is teach children to follow the order of their parents to stay indoors when darkness comes. It does not only instil discipline but also sows fear. A more potent level of meaning exists not from the mythmaker but from how what is spoken is received or understood (metalanguage), how the aswang myth affects children, and how it functions in the larger society (Malinowski, 1926).

However, bodily experience seems to summon children to be in sync with their reality. Context might determine the meaning of the aswang myth derived from the meaning of words constituted in the language and perpetuated in the stories of the locals (metalanguage), but reality posits the non-existence of aswang in the natural world – it is not seen nor heard in its empirical, physical or material sense. It is only a figment of the human imagination, made more sinister in stories. Acknowledging this binary of existence/non-existence of aswang is one step away from delving into deception or delusion, teaching children to question the aswang's existence both in their minds and in the real world.

Malinowski (1926) asserts that society is better off if people believe what myths portray, even if false, rather than if people lose such hope in reunion with lost loved ones and the existence of an afterlife. Such myths keep human hope alive, and with it, human society seems to thrive. So long as people need the noble lies that Malinowski (1926) equates with myths, and so long as people live through self-deception, then taking his words to

heart can be powerful for people to carry on with their struggles. However, in the context of aswang stories in the Philippines, a pervasive spectral delusion (de Leon, 2012; Rafael, 1996) emerges that stymies the power of the Filipino mind to investigate, probe, and question. What can thrive is deception rather than truth perceived in the reality of experience, and delusion rather than a critical consciousness emerging from an awareness of the suffering of the human condition. Perhaps it is not hope that the aswang myth affords, but an escape from the clamant chaos of the world and the suffering of man. Nonetheless, the Filipino mind cannot always choose to escape when things go awry; they have to face the perils of a troubled world and the painful reality of existence to emancipate their minds and souls. Aswang seems to be a social ill (Cabodil & Tango, 2022) and a spectral delusion that warrants an awakening of the Filipino spirit so that its grim impact on the Filipino mind, life, and experience is curtailed.

Myths, therefore, have limitations. Mythology seems to harmonise with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create. It renders itself ambiguous as it claims to understand reality, yet has some complicity with it. As Barthes (1957) expressed, the metalanguage of myths "acts nothing; at the most, it unveils – or does it? To whom?" (p. 156). Any myth with some degree of generality is, in fact, ambiguous because it represents the very humanity of those who, have nothing, have borrowed it. The Filipino poor, for example, who hope and wish to make their lives better, and hold on to the enigma and metalanguage of myths, muddled and excessive in form, can be viewed as either sarcastic or delusional. Delving into the myth of aswang, which is hugely folkloric and fictitious, unveils unimaginable solutions and an unforeseeable synthesis to the Filipino mind, the latter being a critical way of viewing how the world works, grounded in the reality of existence, and the truths behind their living conditions. Some communities that rely on the symbolic meanings of myths may take for granted natural, geological or meteorological explanations for disasters, thereby slowing down the adoption of modern science and promoting fatalism and inaction. For instance, seeing disasters as divine punishment, a bad fate, or the work of supernatural beings might develop the idea that nothing can be done to mitigate these disasters using human intervention, a fatalistic view that can cloud reality and action. It is not only from the chaos of the public and enormous social ills that one becomes estranged or alienated, but it is sometimes also from the very object signified by the myth (Barthes, 1957). The mechanic, engineer, or scientist speaks about the object from an empirical perspective, the mythologist is somehow condemned to metalanguage – an ideologism, a set of beliefs attributed to a person or group of people, especially those held for reasons that are not purely about belief

in certain knowledge, in which practical elements are prominent and salient rather than abstract or symbolic ones. Ideologism and metalanguage as ways of symbolically viewing phenomena might produce a reticence of a reality inaccessible to ideology; it can resolve the contradiction of alienated reality by an amputation, not a critical synthesis (Barthes, 1957) that drives deeper consciousness and an emancipated mind.

According to Barthes (1957), the fact that we "cannot manage to achieve more than an unstable grasp of reality doubtless, gives the measure of our present alienation: we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it, but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified" (p. 159). It would seem that, as we continue to navigate myths in our lifeworld, "we are condemned for some time yet always to speak excessively about reality" (p. 159). This is probably because ideologism and its opposite are types of behaviour which are still magical, terrorised, blinded, and fascinated by the growing social divide. And yet, "this is what we must seek: a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between a signified metaphorical object and knowledge" (Barthes, 1957, p. 159).

Malinowski (1926) postulated that, sometimes, what people wanted and believed lay at a great depth, beyond what they were usually aware of at a given moment. Biological drives and instincts that seek hidden, unconscious functions suggest that when these unconscious levels were peeled back, we would see humanity grappling with its most elemental biological problems (Strenski, 1992). Self-deception and lack of introspective skills are common enough for us to take such things seriously, but to generalise these traits to all conduct and the phenomenon of myth would itself be a dangerous self-deception. As Strenski (1992) argued, myths were latter-day "noble lies," but ones without which common folk would be unable to cope with the final meaninglessness of human existence. Thus, although myths are functionally or pragmatically useful in stilling human fears—mere biological palliatives— they are utterly without basis in reality. Myths act in this unconscious and direct way, speaking subrationally to our deepest instincts for survival, fuelled by our will to believe (Strenski, 1992).

Literature Review

Three key themes emerged in my review of the mythical aswang in the body of literature, namely: ignorance and entertainment, awakening and skepticism, and vulnerability and confrontation.

Ignorance and Entertainment

Past literature on aswang appeared to be hugely vivid descriptions of it and its typologies, classifications, or categories, from ghouls to viscera suckers, to weredogs, witches, vampires, and other classifications distinct in different regions of the Philippines such as *sigbin, manananggal, manggagaway, tiyanak, tikbalang, kapre, duwende, nuno,* etc. (Jocano, 1983; Lynch, 1949; Ramos, 1968/1969/1971; Sibley, 1970). Aswang is visually yet disturbingly striking both in text and images created as early as the 16th century until the 1960s to the late 1970s, and even until today. Mystique, vile, and horror are central to these aswang stories conveyed largely through oral narratives within diverse communities in different parts of the country, crystallising the psycho-geographic nature of this fictitious and folkloric creature (Cakirlar, 2023; Katarina de Jesus, personal communication, November 2023). Idiosyncrasy appears to be aswang's defining characteristic which has been foregrounded by vivid descriptions of the different desires and motives of each of these aswang species (e.g., a *tiyanak* disguises itself as an abandoned baby in order to suck blood from a mother's neck, while a *manananggal* or viscera sucker's sharp, firm, thick, and elongated tongue is always hungry for an infant's blood especially during full moon). This belief in the myth seems to be solidly entrenched in the Filipino psyche even though this remains a myth unless those sightings of aswang collectively told during family gatherings or shared in writing are proven to be true using empirical evidence. This is not to say that the authors during those periods are innocent or ignorant; rather, the persistent belief of the Filipino people in this mythical figure largely represents a disturbing form of ignorance among the Filipino people, as it galvanises a distorted logic among local communities. Such ignorance (believing in and perpetuating the myth) illustrates how many Filipinos have become unfortunate victims of self-deception and spectral delusion (Cabodil & Tango, 2020; Clark & del Rosario, 2011; de leon, 2012; Rafael, 1996) exacerbated by the Spanish friars' strong colonialist resolve to demonise Filipina shamans and priestesses as a way of curtailing their strong influence to their local communities, and for Christianity to prosper (Derain, 2021; Snow, 2023; Svetich, 2005) affirming the power of mythical storytelling as a double-edged sword. These myths (the ways things have always been or believed to be true) are broadly shared among the Filipino people with little acts of resistance. Religious pursuits in the Philippines have penetrated deeply into the Filipino consciousness, and using aswang as a monstrous evil that penalises believers for their sins emerged successful in proliferating such a myth in the Filipino ideology (Jones & Flaxman, 2017; F. A. Oclarit, personal communication, April 2024). Self-deception and lack of introspective skills become common

enough for the Filipinos to take such things seriously, but to generalise these traits to all conduct and the phenomenon of myth would itself be a dangerous self-deception. As Strenski (1992) argued, myths were latter-day "noble lies," but ones without which common folk would be unable to cope with the final meaninglessness of human existence. Nonetheless, a rather positive outcome of the strong belief in the aswang myth happens to delineate its creative, mystifying, and entertaining capacity despite the horror it brings, and how such stories congregate children at home at the twilight of day, a subtle yet effective disciplinary instrument of some sort (Imran, 2017; Mitchell & Mitchell, 2011). However, such fascination and gravitation to aswang stories could aggravate people's misconstrued belief in the myth (de Leon, 2012; Rafael, 1996), especially children who are more vulnerable to flawed reasoning and misconstrued understanding, and at the same time exacerbate spectral delusion and deception making it a social ill that continuously plagues the public (Cabodil & Tango, 2020; Rafael, 1996).

Awakening and Skepticism

Since the early 1970s until now, aswang texts draw upon the increasing relevance of skepticism: the power to question what is collectively perceived to be true, the ability to discern, and the capacity to interrogate and contest one's beliefs, to consider them suspect, and to reflect on them. Colonialism emerged as a key theme in aswang literature, surfacing both in old and contemporary articles. A metaphor in itself, aswang represents something bigger, which depicts the sociopolitical ills of a colonial Philippines (Cabodil & Tango, 2020; Derain, 2021; Villarea, 2010). Colonialism and the horrors and brutality of war (Sipin, 2017; Snow, 2023; Svetich, 2005) as an aswang trope are a wake-up call for the Filipino people to discern between a mythical creature and a real aswang, the latter taking the shape of a human being, hiding in broad daylight, clothed in uniform, and holding a high position in government, willing to utilise their power and influence to silence voices through violent means – inhuman, bloody, nocuous, and grotesque (Arumpac, 2019; Macapagal, 2021; Balce et al., 2020). This modern aswang appears to be a dominant male hungry for human blood. Unfortunately, most of these men hold positions and power in politics for which the possibility of spreading horror can be lethal to the Filipino spirit.

To be skeptical is a favour a Filipino can give to his fellow Filipinos. To be skeptical is a way to discern, to awaken one's senses, and to emancipate the mind. As a myth, aswang is a social ill (Cabodil & Tango, 2020), a chimaera, a delusion, and a deception that warrants elimination from our psyche; however, aswang's deeply rooted position and the gravity of its influence in the minds of the Filipinos have always been a nemesis never been defeated. It

is etched in the Filipino psyche, and removing it seems to be a futile endeavour. To be awakened is one thing; to act on this awakening, driven by a skeptical mind, is another; yet to educate and change the ignorant mind has always been a huge challenge to bear. Nonetheless, this perversion of the mind (Villarea, 2010; Christopher Lo, personal communication, July 2023) can be reduced if the Filipino people do not stop asking questions and scrutinising one's beliefs and mores in juxtaposition to their appalling reality. Such enslavement of a flawed mindset can be overcome when an awakened mind does not go back to a beguiling slumber, ready to be deceived again by the allure of escapism and an imagined, utopic world (de Leon, 2012). Skepticism, therefore, fuels contestation, dispute, and rationalising one's beliefs betwixt the painful, grimacing reality.

Vulnerability and Confrontation

Current literature on aswang (Arumpac, 2019; Balce et al., 2021; Cabodil & Tango, 2020; Casibual, 2022; Derain, 2021; Snow, 2023; Torralba, 2021) foregrounds the relentless vulnerability of the Filipinos, children, women, and men, about the increasing but disturbing metaphor, that is, aswang normalising violence (Arumpac, 2019), and escalating intimidation, terror, trauma, and fear (Cabodil & Tango, 2020; Macapagal, 2021) as exercise and perpetuation of hegemonic power manifested in coercive, corrupt, and draconian leadership. Then and now, the Filipinos are defenceless and unsafe against the tyranny of a corrupt government wrapped in the symbolism that is aswang, yet they carry on with their lives for survival. Such a corrupt government that is hungry for power emerges to be a male-dominated aswang, also becoming hungry for human blood oozing out from the dead bodies of the vulnerable through [1]*tokhang* and riding in tandem operations. The palpable audibility of sounds produced both by the written texts about aswang (Arumpac, 2019; Macapagal, 2021; Torralba, 2021) amplifies this sense of vulnerability, especially among those children in the streets of Manila, Cebu, or Davao, along with their parents who try to earn a decent sum each day to live another day. The children of the slums of Manila are vulnerable not to the mythical creature who, in its folkloric sense, is perceived to devour their flesh and suck their blood (i.e., the traditional aswang as a female witch), but by the ontological reality of aswang in the very shape and form of a human being, priding themselves of their political positions, and clothed in uniform with full armoury (i.e., the modern aswang appearing to be a male full of machismo and misogyny while remaining

[1] Local terms for knock (tuktok) and plead (hangyo) describing widespread operations that were launched by the Duterte administration in July of 2016, involving police officers going door to door to root out drug-related offenders (Asia News Network, 2019).

blood hungry), ready to shoot anyone with their guns, including the vulnerable children who are helpless victims of the rampant drug trade in the country. The real aswang lives in big cities, ready to make the lives of the poor and the vulnerable more miserable. The real aswang devours the dead, the living dead, and many more living dead.

Nonetheless, the Filipinos can fight the aswang by believing in their human senses and holding on to their awakened consciousness. "For us to see, smell, taste, and feel the tragedy happening around us—we must listen" (Arumpac, 2019). Not even children are spared by the aswang. This painful reality must indeed encourage us to "stand up and look the monster in the eye" even if we are afraid (Arumpac, 2019), and even if the last option is to run away. The transcendent aswang that continues to bully the weak by sowing terror and trauma deserves a bold confrontation and tenacious bravery. The Filipinos must fearlessly look this monster in the eye with full attention rather than look away because of being conditioned to look away (Balce et al., 2020). The voices of justice and freedom cannot find solace and cannot be amplified when aswang is always free to spread horrors to the Filipino people, both in body and in mind. "Kailangan siyang harapin!" (We need to confront it!) said Arumpac (2019).

Research Questions

In this paper, I attempted to answer the following research questions:

(1) What signs do descriptive accounts of aswang in the academic literature signify, and what objects do these significations suggest?
(2) How do these sign-object representations accomplish awareness and understanding of aswang as an intangible cultural knowledge?
(3) How do these sign-object representations change the way we perceive aswang as a popular mythical creature?

Methodology

I read and thematically and critically analysed 28 articles listed and cited on Google Scholar about aswang, sequenced from most cited to least. This was between March 2022 and January 2023, before this study was presented at the Philippine Studies Association National Conference held in Central Bicol State University of Agriculture in Pili, Camarines Sur, Naga, Philippines in March 2024. The articles are journal articles, book chapters, theses and dissertations, online magazines, reviews, and essays published in different journals, publications, websites, and new media. Key themes or insights from these articles proved helpful in arriving at honest, sincere, and profoundly illuminating interpretations guided by the fundamental principles of semiotics (sign-object identifications by Peirce, 1955) as a

hermeneutic empiricist approach to qualitative data analysis (Anderson, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Thematic Analysis

As a grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1999), thematic analysis requires qualitative researchers to code, a process of assigning value to a foundational text of words, an interaction, description, speech, narration, or conversation (Anderson, 2008). Coding invokes researchers to engage in a tedious process of reading and rereading narrative texts so that concepts, patterns, themes, and even anomalies will come to the fore. Such concepts and themes can be broken down into subthemes, or they can be brought to a higher level of categorising by coalescing them and creating overarching thematic concerns or splitting them up to see how subthemes can emerge. Anderson (2008) and Lindlof and Taylor (2011) called this process axial coding, in which researchers dig deep into textual data, make further categorizations of subthemes emerging from the narrative data, build connections, break down core themes into more specific and interconnected categories, find revealing patterns of thought, capture illuminating insights, and decide which major themes warrant a space in the analysis. For example, after listing down significant details, codes, or themes, one can pick three or four of these themes that are most interesting, related, or revealing so that a pattern can be noticed or an overarching thematic concern can emerge. For instance, if we put together the themes "aswang as monstrous, selfish creatures", "aswang has an insatiable penchant for foetuses and human blood", "aswang is deceitful", and "aswang as a master of disguise", we can make a contention that in the sociopolitical context of the Philippines, aswang signifies fear, dread, and trauma (sign) implying a bigger sociopolitical illness of the country which is endemic greed and corruption (object). In short, aswang is an allegorical representation of a social anxiety (sign) that has grown immensely out of a scrupulous, corrupt governance (object).

Critical Analysis

Critical analysis, on the other hand, is a process that seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power, conflict, oppression, marginalisation, or subversion (Anderson, 2008; Craig, 1999), thereby intentionally revealing the destructive nature of power, power play, and its pervasive practice. In the texts being analysed, the role of the researcher is to figure out the dominant interests of social and political power (Anderson, 2008). In critical analysis, the author and authorship both recede. The author is simply the agent of the dominant. Does the article participate in the construction of the marginalised, the disadvantaged, the subaltern, and the subjugated Other? Does the tone and point of view of the narrator

question or support this perpetuation of power and hegemony in the text, such that they emanate in the written word? If so, then it rings true to how critical analysis allows us to unravel the discourse of power and hegemony that are deeply rooted in texts. Critical analysis, therefore, enables researchers to explicate and surface the oppressive nature of power and hegemony in texts (Anderson, 2008) for readers to unveil and react.

Using thematic and critical analysis and constantly mindful of the fundamental elements of semiotic interpretation, these themes and patterns emerging from descriptions in texts, along with how power, hegemony, and domination surface in those texts, helped me capture signs and symbols of aswang (ideas that stand for something bigger), and the objects they signify (their possible interpretations or concepts that the signs represent), with me, the reader and researcher, making sense of these sign-object relations and crafting an interpretant as the understanding of these sign-object relations (Peirce, 1955). I was one with the texts in this interpretive journey. I have arrived at an understanding (interpretant) that we have of this sign-object relation, and this understanding is captured both in my mind and the reader of this text right now (insofar as understanding is happening within the psychological and cognitive capacity of the reader and their awareness of the topic and context). This interpretant is influenced by both the sign and the object it represents, which, in turn, mediates the relationship between the sign and the object.

Results and Discussion

Two specific questions remained constant in my consciousness and interpretation: (1) What signs do these ideas about aswang suggest? (2) What do these signs mean? I maintained trustworthiness, fidelity, honesty, and sincerity in my thematic interpretation and semiotic exploration. I tried to sustain an honest, sincere, and truthful understanding as a reader and researcher who belongs to the diasporic Filipino community for which aswang narratives are collectively shared. As Peirce (1955) echoed, “That every thought is an external sign, proves that man is an external sign… constituted by his community”. I am an external sign insofar as aswang is an external sign, and my critical interpretation matters in the process of signification and meaning-making. Table 1 shows the signs and objects emerging from the thematic and critical analysis of texts. These are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Table 1. Signs and Objects in Aswang Literature (1960s to 2023)

Sign	Object
Aswang typologies and classifications permeate the academic literature, past and present	Continuity or constancy of the myth
Aswang is constructed as a monstrous female	Oppression, marginalisation, and Othering of women
Aswang as a symbol of colonialism	Constantly calls for an awakening of the Filipino consciousness
Persistent belief of the Filipino in the aswang as a myth	Deception, delusion, and the propagation of a distorted logic
The ominous audibility of aswang soundscapes as a symbol of fear and trauma	A representation of a corrupt and dysfunctional society, and the perpetuation of abuse of power
Aswang is hybrid, liminal, and transcendent	Calls for a reinvention of the imagination
Keeping aswang in memory and consciousness	An apt illustration of nostalgia (being drawn to distant pain and suffering)

Typology and Classification of Aswang as Continuity of the Myth

Aswang categories, classifications, and typologies permeate both old texts and current texts in the literature, in this study, from the 1960s to 2023 (see Lynch, 1963; Jocano, 1983; Ramos, 1967/1969/1971; Gaverza, 2014; Jala, 2016; Zarka, 2019; Derain, 2021). These typologies consist of the most common and popular – from *manananggal* to *kapre, tiyanak, wakwak, ghouls, weredogs, bampira, sigbin, tiktik, maligno,* etc. Typologies are accompanied by specific descriptions pertaining to the insatiable desires of each of these monsters, e.g., a tiyanak disguises itself as an abandoned baby in the woods to victimise a woman and suck blood from her neck; a manananggal or viscera sucker's sharp, firm, thick, and elongated tongue is always hungry for an infant's blood, especially during full moon; while a ghoul sneaks into a house of a dying person to satisfy his nostrils with the pungent smell of a dying human body, or dig the grave of a buried cadaver to taste its cold, dark, and thick blood.

Manananggal illustration by Gian Bernal (as cited in Lopez, 2021)

If these classifications and typologies were a sign of something bigger, then what does it signify? I figured that the strong presence of these typologies in past and current literature suggests how fluid, positioned, and constant the aswang myth was in the minds of the Filipino people then and now. There could have been a reason for this perpetuation of the aswang myth in the minds of the Filipino people. It could have been that myths are sacred narratives reproducing prima facie the natives' own classification and nomenclature, playing a "highly important cultural part" (Malinowski, 1926). Myth functions unconsciously as far as the actors in question are concerned. It functions as "an indispensable ingredient of all culture"; it fulfils objective, even biological, needs essential to the survival of the culture in question. All the elements of a cultural whole serve a necessary practical function for the survival of the institution (Strenski, 1992). However, believing in this myth rather than investigating why it came about in the first place turned out to be an unfortunate irony. It illustrates how ignorance, delusion, and enslavement by a distorted logic can happen amongst people despite the availability of science, technology, and digital information to help them verify whether their beliefs are fact or simply a cacophony of myths and superstitions. This constancy of the myth broadens the continuity of ignorance and triumph of self-deception. This continuity of the myth perpetuates the very fuel of such myth: the act of storytelling, creating thousands of versions of the aswang phenomenon in almost every Filipino home and on many online platforms. The myth is constituted in the very stories about aswang spreading throughout the archipelago. Storytelling is the fuel perpetuating the myth. Perhaps the dark tone and horror of these aswang stories, intensified by the centrality of conflict, contradiction, ambiguity, fear, and moral dilemma, have become the insidious yet pervasive source of power that such mythical stories of aswang bring.

The Construction of Aswang as a Monstrous Female Is a Form of Oppression

History shows that Filipino women shamans and priestesses were heavily maligned and demonised by the Spanish friars because of the latter's guileful desire to spread Christianity among the locals (Derain, 2021; Nadeau, 2011; Rafael, 1996). Respected by their local communities for their indigenous knowledge to heal the sick both physically and psychologically, these shamans and priestesses became victims of hegemony, coercion, manipulation, abuse of power, and patriarchal ideology, such that they were denigrated into monstrous witches hungry for human blood (Derain, 2021; Nadeau, 2011). Worse, for some women who stood up for their rights and voices, the Spanish colonisers irreproachably hired vagabonds to destroy these women both physically and morally by imploring these vagabonds to rape and kill them (Nadeau, 2011; Young, 2017). This could explain the

construction of aswang as a female gender, rather than being a male, and a monstrous female at that, but such monstrosity only finds hedonistic pleasure in myths, not in real life. Their perceived monstrosity was an outcome of deceitful patriarchal motives deeply ingrained in the male-dominated colonising power, hungry to spread more horrors in their colonised land. With the intent to subjugate and disempower local women, these Spanish friars emerged to be the real aswang.

Image illustration of a tiyanak or demon baby (Netflix/Trese, 2021)

Nonetheless, we wonder why it was so easy for the Spanish colonisers to disparage women and deprive them of their right to express their beliefs and practise their indigenous knowledge in their own country. What does this sign suggest? My interpretation led me to capture one idea: oppression. This evil construction of women into guileful witches illustrates an insidious patriarchal power, most fitting and beneficial for Spanish colonisers to achieve their selfish motives. These women were marginalised, subjugated, subverted, and silenced. They were an Other to the Spanish colonisers and the relatively strong patriarchal hegemony. In its mythical and folkloric sense, the aswang possesses immense power to destroy machismo, misogyny, and patriarchy illustrated by those grotesque images of seducing men, devouring them in the flesh, and sucking their blood until they die, but in the real sociopolitical world that is dominated by powerful men, the aswang depicted as a woman emerged weak, lethargic, muted, and helpless. Her voice suppressed, her rights violated, and her identity and individuality shattered. She is a subaltern. The female-gendered aswang is an object of ridicule and mockery, not a subject with the power to assert

its agency and position in the world. This Othering of women, illustrated by the evil aswang, represents how colonial power has triumphed over nationalistic spirit and consciousness, how colonial power destroyed the very humanity of the Filipino, and how colonial power has become a force of oppression, coercion, and subversion that continues to silence women until today.

Aswang illustration by HubPages/SilentReed (2013)

Aswang as a Symbol of Colonialism Calls for an Awakening of the Human Senses

Colonialism emerged to be a prevalent symbol of aswang both in ancient and current literature. Aswang became a metaphor for struggle, horrors, pain, and trauma caused by colonisation and war driven by the intense desire of the West to invade the East (C. C. P. Jean Lee, personal communication, March 2023). Aswang signifies colonialism in its ontological, epistemological, and figurative sense. Almost 65% of the articles in the literature reviewed for this study draw on how colonialism has embodied the idiosyncratic characteristics of aswang – demonic, evil, sinister, insidious, and a killing machine (Arumpac, 2019; Macapagal, 2021; Derain, 2021; Nadeau, 2011). The Philippines is not alien to the aspect of colonisation. For more than three centuries, it was under the control of the

Spaniards, followed by the Japanese, and then the Americans. Colonisation was never a thing of beauty. It brought tremendous horror and pain to the Filipino spirit. It caused so much trauma to the point that the Filipino consciousness and identity became ambiguous, ambivalent, disjunctured, and fragmented. Colonialism symbolically appeared to be an aswang lurking in the shadows of the Philippine archipelago, sowing terror and trauma to every Filipino soul in every home. Colonialism destroyed the peace and tranquility of the Filipinos.

Nevertheless, colonialism signifying aswang has created a collective narrative that became a wake-up call for the Filipino people to emancipate their minds. Colonialism embodied in the aswang mythical character has become a staunch warning for the Filipino people to question their existence, to interrogate and reflect on their conditions and position in the world, to contest ideologies, and to awaken their senses to the realities of their sacrifice and struggle. Colonialism, as a personification of aswang, signifies that the Filipino people must summon themselves to be skeptical of the ways the foreign invaders were running their land and maltreating their people as the rightful owners of such land. Therefore, the object signified by colonialism is for the Filipino consciousness to be awakened, and for this awakening to find meaning and purpose, they need to start the habit of contesting ideologies and questioning ideals and principles, fuelled by skepticism. Skepticism matters here because it is grounded in the desire to know the unknown, to discover knowledge, and to arrest truths. Isn't it a liberating act to pursue truth if aswang implores us to free our minds from the shackles of ignorance and the dangers of misconstrued reasoning?

Believing in the Myth Is Delusion, Deception, and a Distorted Logic

Myth seems to be the nemesis of science. If science pursues knowledge by testing hypotheses through empirical evidence, the power of myths is propelled by its very own menacing nature: the allure of the human mind to find solace and escape by dwelling on the supernatural and the superstitious. Myths are latter-day "noble lies", but ones without which common folk would be unable to cope with the final meaninglessness of human existence. Thus, although myths are functionally or pragmatically useful in stilling human fears—mere biological palliatives— they are utterly without basis in reality. Myths act in this unconscious and direct way, speaking subrationally to our deepest instincts for survival, fuelled by our will to believe (Strenski, 1992). Any myth with some degree of generality is, in fact, ambiguous because it represents the very humanity of those who, have nothing, have borrowed it. The Filipino poor, for example, who hope and wish to make their lives better,

and hold on to the enigma and metalanguage of myths, muddled and excessive in form, can be viewed as either sarcastic or delusional (Malinowski, 1926). Delving into the myth of aswang, folkloric and fictitious, unveils unimaginable solutions and an unforeseeable synthesis to the human mind, the latter being a critical way of viewing how the world works, grounded in the reality of existence, and the truths behind their living conditions.

The real danger of the habit of believing in myths lies in how people and communities share such myths in forms of stories and gossip (Azuma, 2012; Baes, 2017; F. A. Oclarit, personal communication, March 2024), and how these baseless stories inflate in large proportions constantly shared among people making such myths credible to the general but unquestioning public. These stories and gossip, constituted in the act of storytelling, perpetuate the myth and distorted logic. Using intersubjectivity as a lens, if people share a strong belief in the myth, then there is a higher chance that such a myth will be treated as real. The myth becomes reality. The imagined becomes the seen, or something that is bodily experienced by the very nature of human senses. The abstract becomes concrete despite the very fact that, until today, no one has ever seen an aswang in its ontological, material, bodily, and empirical sense. No one has ever seen it in the flesh. Every story, every sighting, every incident, was and is largely fuelled by the belief that the creature exists, if in reality, it does not. Every story, every sighting, every incident was and is make-believe. Such inciting incidents woven into these mythical stories provoke vogue following and persuade people to engage in the heightened fixation to believe without question.

If believing in the myth that is aswang is a sign, then what does it signify? My constant musing led me to argue that this strong belief in the myth is a form of spectral delusion and self-deception (de Leon, 2012; Rafael, 1996), and what makes this utterly disturbing is that the general Filipino populace does not seem to realise that the myth renders them delusional and self-deceived. They do not seem to realise that they are holding on to and spreading a distorted logic made more sinister and devastating because it victimises the very innocence of children at home, further transforming and extending ignorance into a dangerous form of folly that transcends place, space and time.

Aswang concept by Leo Angelo Art and Illustrations (2016)

They become unfortunate slaves of their subconscious, telling them that aswang is real, while the conscious mind is being pushed to silence and mockery. Such an unfortunate paradox angers those of us who dwell on empirical data and documentary evidence as our way of understanding phenomena and arriving at truths. If to see is to believe, then why do the majority of Filipinos believe in the things they haven't seen? Why don't they stop believing in those things they haven't encountered in the physical world? Why can't they see the real aswang in its human form, hiding in broad daylight, clothed in uniform, and has coagulated a strong position in politics, powerful enough to destroy their very humanity? Why do the Filipino people continue this deception if they can stop it, because it is actually possible to do so?

The Ominous Audibility of Aswang Soundscapes Symbolises Fear and Trauma Representing a Corrupt and Dysfunctional Society, and Perpetuation of Abuse of Power

Palpable both in films and documentaries about aswang is a cacophony of sounds and soundscapes that are ominous, eerie, dark, and frightening. Even those written texts about aswang carry sounds with them if only we try to pay attention. They are horrific sounds, disturbing to the human soul. Although most of these ominous sounds are copied from the natural world (e.g., sounds of birds mimicked into sounds of aswang as perceived by people) (Derain, 2021; Ruiz & Derasin, 2019), they inject a debilitating fear into human consciousness. Such a dark and dire tapestry of sounds is intensified by grotesque images and horrific descriptions, with villains appearing to be apathetic killers of the innocent and the helpless (Arumpac, 2019; Macapagal, 2021).

Baua or balatiti, a bird considered a bad omen (Jordan Clark, 2021)

This discordant mixture of sounds seems to mimic those ghastly sounds of war, colonisation, violence, torture, and abuse of the Filipino people, which had brought them intense fear, terror, and trauma that they cannot seem to forget. It stays within the deepest recesses of their minds, for which to absolve such pain in history seems nearly impossible. The lucid audibility of the sounds of war and colonisation is an allegorical and metaphorical representation of aswang, despised and dreaded by the Filipino people, yet haunts them pervasively in their sleep. Many of the Filipinos experienced the horrors of repatriation, abuse, and torture brought by colonisation and war (Nadeau, 2011; Snow, 2023). They endured the pain brought by violence, intimidation, and injustice by the Japanese, and withstood barbarism and deceit brought by the Spaniards who came and conquered the Philippines with their own religious and political agenda. Locally, in contemporary Philippines, the Filipino people are also facing the horrors of a draconian government that uses violence and intimidation to silence dissent and mute their voices. The rise of extrajudicial killings has created horrendous soundscapes in the contemporary era (e.g., thumping and knocking on doors, loud sirens, muzzling gunshots, and nonstop wailing of a mother who lost her son in a raid or *tokhang* operations) becoming a bold testament of such abusive and violent form of power to put the public into lethal paralysis, and live life in constant fear as a way of maintaining social order. This lingering cacophony of ominous soundscapes has made the Filipino people vulnerable to fear, abuse, and trauma. The modern-day aswang underscores subservience to authorities; if not, one's life is at stake. Dissent has become a memory. Voice has become fear.

What does this allegorical symbolism of the aswang as fear, terror, and trauma signify? What does it mean? Thinking deeply into this, one cannot deny the object that this

symbol reveals: a government that is dysfunctional and corrupt, using draconian leadership that is driven by perverted logic and abuse of power to suppress the voices of the people and perpetuate their reign. A government that is despotic and tyrannical, that does not seem to honour fundamental human rights such as fairness, freedom of expression, equality, equity, and justice. A government that harbours cruelty and oppressive tactics to debilitate public discourse and incapacitate dissent, human agency and autonomy.

The real aswang is a tyrannical leadership that disrespects human rights and silences the voices of the people. This aswang has not only been a mythical creature lurking in the shadows of the human imagination (traditionally represented by a female witch) but it is right in front of people (maybe in front of you right now as you read this page in the city of Manila), clothed in uniform, hiding in broad daylight, powerful enough to destroy the very humanity of the Filipino – a modern-day dominant male defying the female aswang gender stereotype and appearing stronger, more sinister, and more evil. In a democratic nation, it is unfortunate to witness that aswang embodied as draconian, incompetent leaders are put into power by the very people who suffer from aswang's atrocities. The hero, personified by a competent, humane, compassionate, strategic, and transformative leader, seems to be pushed into the peripheral margins of society, their voice muted, their dignity maligned, their identity destroyed. Paradoxically, the very people who put these draconian leaders in power are expecting real change in governance, if change is elusive because it is hindered by the very ignorance of the people. The suffering that they experience is an adverse effect of their ignorance, an unfortunate boomerang that aggravates their misery. However, some of us are already noticing these ominous soundscapes. Some of us are already understanding the increasing audibility of these sounds, such that we are now able to listen. And to listen intently is the first step to look aswang in the eye (Arumpac, 2019), to face them, to confront them despite how scary they can be.

Aswang's Hybridity, Liminality, and Transcendence Calls for a Reinvention of the Imagination

Aswang possesses the shapeshifting power of occupying a space between past and present, or logic and myth. It crosses a threshold between the imagined world and the real world, between the mythical and the literal, between the material and the abstract, between the displaced and the static, and between the female and the male gender. Aswang constitutes hybridity as it evolves in the contestation of a mixture of what is make-believe and what is empirical, of what is supernatural and what is known, of what is unseen and what is seen. Its transcendence is seen in the way that our consciousness leads us from the

mythic and folklore to the real suffering and struggles of the Filipino people in a corrupt and dysfunctional governance that uses tyranny to silence the voices of the masses. Arumpac (2019), Derain (2021), and Macapagal (2021) argued that we can recognise aswang's transcendent capacity from the mythical to the real if we only learn "to listen", "to notice", and "to see" as we envision to make a change in our lives and our communities unless we decide to remain fascinated and enamoured by its mystique that will continue to dissuade us from seeing the real aswang and from taking real actions.

Illustration of aswang transformed into a false beast by HubPages/SilentReed (2013).

Arumpac (2019) and Macapagal (2021) summoned us "to look aswang in the eye" despite how scary it can be, rather than look away because we might have been conditioned to look away. A transcendent aswang calls for a transformation of what and how we, as Filipinos, think about the world in which we live and why we think that way, and to reclaim our place in the sensemaking, valuation, and validation of a sociocultural object that somehow blinds us to our ontological reality and truth. To reinvent the imagination means making sense of our very reality – a world where inequality, poverty, oppression, subversion, perversion, and corruption permeate our very lives. These are the real aswang that most of us do not seem to see and hear. These are the real aswang that most of us do not seem to feel because we seem to have been fascinated by the very myth and the superstition that feeds into our unfortunate ignorance and numbs our sensibilities. These are the real aswang that somehow cloud our collective judgment and muddle our capacity to introspect.

Aswang's shapeshifting power, liminality, and transcendence are signs that implore a modification, reinvention, and reclaiming of our imagination that veers away from superstition and fake stories muddying our very reason. The continuity in the belief of a distorted logic behind aswang stories and accounts remains an unfortunate irony for which many Filipinos become prisoners of their seemingly flawed logic. To reinvent our imagination warrants persistent skepticism and constant interrogation of our very conditions. It calls for critical thought and an awakening of our senses. In Arumpac's (2019) words, "Gumising ka sa nakamamatay na bangungot. Magmasid. Magmunimuni. Basagin mo ang iyong pag-iisip." (Wake up from your nightmare. Observe. Introspect. Challenge your thinking.).

Source: Arumpac/The Museum of Modern Art (2024)

Keeping Aswang in Memory Despite Its Pain Illustrates Nostalgia (Being Drawn to Distant Pain and Suffering)

Despite all the pain, fear, and trauma that aswang brought to the lives of the Filipino people (personified by more than three centuries of colonisation, abuse of colonial power, and perpetuation of oppressive practices of corrupt governance), there remains a strong desire of the Filipino spirit to keep aswang and the horrors it brings deep in their memory and consciousness. Some may think this is self-induced sadism or self-incriminating behaviour, but something deeper must explain why the Filipino people keep aswang (symbolised by the horrors and pain brought by war, invasion, and colonisation) in their collective memory, deeply buried in their consciousness. "What object does this signify?" I asked myself once again in the act of sensemaking. In the words of Peirce (1955), "That

every thought is an external sign proves that man is an external sign… constituted by his community". My persistent questioning bears witness to the interpretation that emerged crucial in understanding why many of the Filipino people are drawn to distant pain and suffering.

One with the texts in deep thinking, I encountered a thought that somehow signifies this deliberate act of keeping aswang in collective memory, that is, aswang illustrates nostalgia, that strong yet complex emotion for which people are drawn into the distant and painful past, trapped in that horrific past, while struggling to make sense of the present and the future. We seem to push ourselves into the pit of longing and sorrow. As Mang Caloy uttered, "Kahit na masakit, hindi siya nawawala sa isipan. Patuloy tayong kumakapit sa nakaraan" (We don't let go of pain. We keep clinging onto the vicious, torturous past.) (as cited in Delante, 2021). Clay Routledge of TED-Ed (2016) described nostalgia as a complex emotion of pain and sorrow, longing for home and the past, and an interplay of sadness and joy. In musing, I further asked myself: "Why do the Filipino people hold on to this nostalgic feeling despite the pain and trauma it brings? Why can't they let go of suffering?" A revelation came to life: that this constant act of remembering aswang symbolised by colonisation, war, invasion, and trauma is a nostalgic force that illustrates the Filipinos' penchant to savour pain and suffering as their way of emotional catharsis. We engage in a laborious purgation of our painful emotions as our way of healing, relief, and rehabilitation. To cleanse oneself is to savour the pain. We are driven to move forward, yet when we remember and feel the pain again, we engage in the process of emotional catharsis, because to dwell with renewed wounds is to savour the pain again, no matter what it takes. Such pain somehow remains in memory, moving back and moving forward like a helix. The Filipino people cannot afford to forget aswang; they cannot afford to ignore it; they cannot afford to erase it from memory because the act of remembering is much more powerful than the act of forgetting. Despite the pain, they recall; despite the trauma and horror, they remember; despite the hurt, they hold on and forgive. Such an unfortunate irony to fathom that the Filipino people decide to arrest aswang in memory because of their attachment to pain and grief, of their act of romanticising what hurts and what is ugly, more than what is beautiful. Isn't it true of the human condition that holding on to distant pain and suffering brings grief and sorrow, yet despite it all, we cling to the very act of holding on to the excruciating past because it heals us?

Theoretical Implications

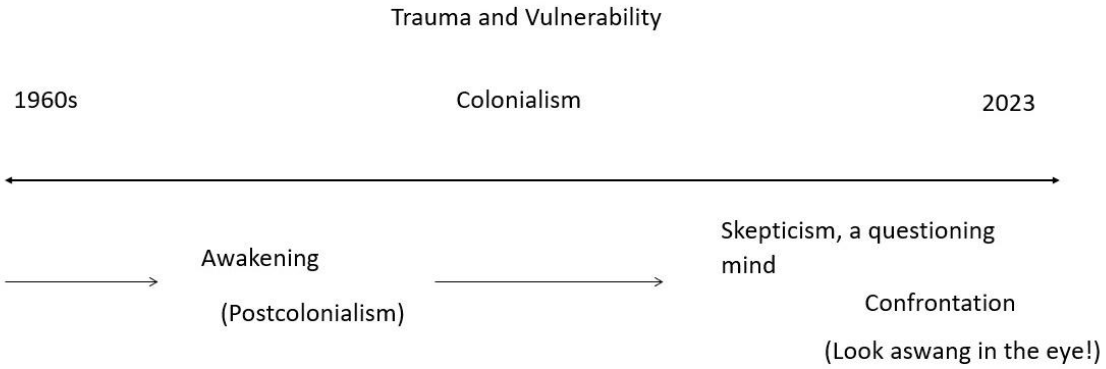
Semiotics draws us into the power of hermeneutic empiricism, intersubjectivity, and sensemaking that is grounded in texts and subtexts – its elements, contexts, discourse, and meanings that constitute its totality (Anderson, 2008; Craig, 1999; Pharies, 1985). Semiotics also encourages us to see the world as symbolic of the struggles of the human condition; that there is an alternative yet valid way of understanding the world such as understanding texts that matter to our existence and are within our capacity to interpret by pinning down the signs and the objects they signify, and crystallizing how they relate to our experience in the lifeworld.

One theoretical implication we can derive from semiotics is to be more cognizant of ideas that stand for something bigger (signs), for which possible concepts or interpretations (objects) can surface. Texts contain narrative accounts and descriptions for which signs and symbols are inherently present, waiting to be deciphered. When objects are captured and arrested in crucial conversations, then critical thought is stimulated, and knowledge is discovered. To Roland Barthes (1972), as readers of stories, we need to find that enigma and hold on to that, to be patient when it is prolonged in the text because descriptions and narratives that are made more vivid, reminiscent, mesmerizing, and teeming with life and suspense is what makes them powerful and illuminating to the human soul (Felluga, 2015). Nonetheless, we need to be cognizant of which texts we are analysing semiotically and the impact of which on our sense of reason. Myths, for instance, are rich sources of ideas that allow us to make sense of our cultural beliefs and traditions, and they actively work to resolve conflicts and oppositions in observable life through symbolic means, creating a sense of order and coherence in a world that is bombarded with contradictions and confusions (Levi-Strauss, 1978); however, myths can also render themselves ambiguous as they claim to understand reality, yet have some complicity with it (Barthes, 1957). The metalanguage of myths, muddled and excessive in form, can be viewed as either sarcastic or delusional. Metalanguage as a way of symbolically viewing phenomena might produce a reticence of a reality inaccessible to ideology; it can resolve the contradiction of alienated reality by an amputation, not a critical synthesis (Barthes, 1957) that drives critical consciousness.

In my semiotic and critical interpretations of aswang texts, I realised how colonialism appeared constant in the discourse between old texts (aswang articles in the 1960s through 70s) and current ones (until the later part of 2023) (Figure 1). Colonialism, as a representation of aswang (invasion, marginalisation, oppression, and perpetuation of abuse of power), exists in a continuum, occupying old and current narratives in academic texts. This holds

bearing to the fear, trauma, and vulnerability that also appeared incessantly in old and current aswang texts and my interpretation of them. The Filipino people remain exposed to the dangers of tyranny and draconian leadership in which abuse of power is perpetuated and the voices of the marginalised are continually muted. Along with a deeply distressing and disturbing experience of living life every day, the Filipino people are not given sufficient choices to pursue freedom and liberty; rather, choices were and are made for them with or without their knowledge, and courage, strength, and resilience are somehow forced into their throats (Docot, 2024).

Figure 1. Critical Movements Captured in Aswang Texts Between 1960s and 2023



Source: Author

Nonetheless, it is interesting to note how the Filipino people are waking up from the nightmares brought by the horrific forces of colonialism. They started to realise the horrors of colonial power that continued to linger in Philippine society and how this had poisoned critical thought, reasoned judgment, and imagination. Post-colonial era, writers of aswang and the texts they produced tend to have gradually developed skepticism, a mind that questions and interrogates their conditions, a mind that contests ideologies, an emancipated mind, so to speak. However, to be skeptical is not enough; action must be taken for real change to happen, and this necessitates confrontation of the social ills symbolised by aswang, rather than keep looking away, bravery rather than retreat, courage and hope rather than despair. As Arumpac (2019) and Macapagal (2021) asserted, the Filipino people must look aswang straight in the eye. No blinking. No winking. No whining. They must gaze at them with fury accompanied by a loud scream for the aswang to realise that the Filipino is ready to fight for what is right and just.

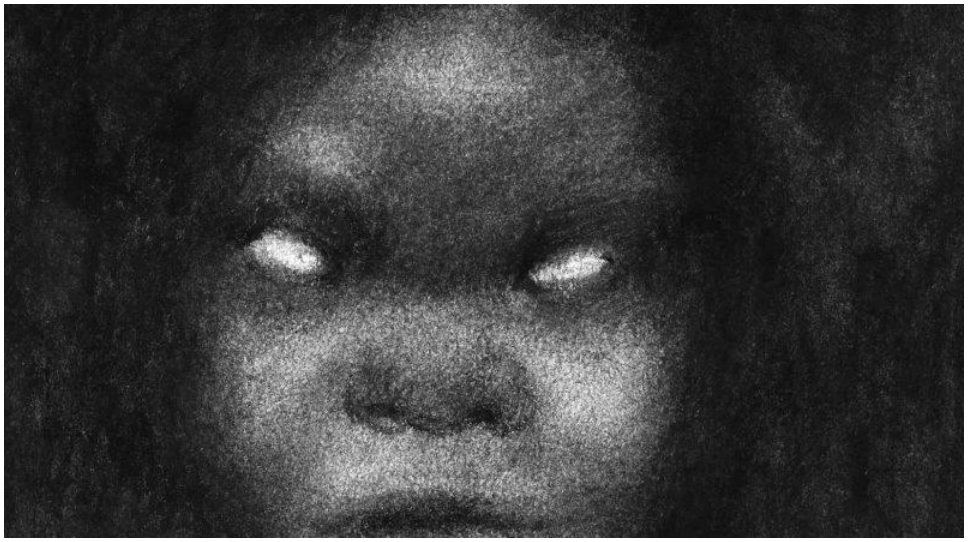
The power of semiotics as a theoretical lens in collaboration with critical analysis is always available to be exploited. All we need is to be mindful of the signs in text, or even the

signs in our environments, in our ecologies, in our lifeworld. All we need is to notice these signs because noticing them can resurface and foreground crucial periods in history that depict the struggles and suffering of our ancestors. Noticing them can also bring to light those deeply held emotions and memories etched in our very consciousness as a people. Noticing them can mobilise action and drive collective decisions with the intent to free the Filipino mind from fear and oppression.

A Deceptive Settlement of the Mind

The Filipino people's pervasive belief in aswang appears to be an unfortunate deception and a ventral curse that settles not only within their shared communities and culture but also in the deepest recesses of their minds. The Filipino people's predilection to believing in aswang, despite not having seen one in real life, poses immense danger to this subtle yet expansive settlement in the deepest recesses of their minds. This ignorance is palpable and irreparable because aswang is assumed to be "just the way things have always been", it is assumed to be a part of a strong culture of myth and superstition, and this assumption constituted in the very stories they share is the very fuel for aswang to perpetuate in the myths and to pervasively settle in the minds of the Filipinos.

"Like God, people just seem to believe that aswang is real even if they don't see it in the flesh or hear it", expressed Fraulein Oclarit (personal communication, March 2024) and was seconded by another interviewee in Clark and del Rosario's (2011) documentary. The myth's constant presence in the mind of its growing believers amplifies its position and continuity in the shared myths and folktales, magnifying the myth and debilitating critical and pragmatic thinking. Storytelling is the fuel for such continuity of the myth because stories are constituted in aswang conversations. Such allure to stories of the unknown and the mythical propels the mind to create a seemingly utopic world in their imagination as a way of escaping a world of madness and chaos, only to be imprisoned by this very act of illusion, ignorance and deception. Arumpac (2019) could be right. She summoned the Filipinos, "Gumising ka sa nakamamatay na bangungot. Magmasid. Magmunimuni. Basagin mo ang iyong pag-iisip." (Wake up from your nightmare. Observe. Introspect. Challenge your thinking.).



Dream about aswang by Layne Sheridan (2022)

Pedagogical and Practical Implications

Storytelling does not age in time. It was and still is a fascinating medium to captivate our interests and awaken our senses through the power of a simple but compelling phrase that says, "Once upon a time" (Anderson, 2016). Storytelling has been the dynamic instrument used by writers in aswang narratives. It is the force for which scholars are able to appeal to readers' emotions and perplex their thinking through its enigmatic effect. It is through storytelling that narratives and descriptions about aswang pervade both the oral traditions and the written accounts of the Filipinos. However, storytelling appears to become a double-edged sword as it emerged to be a vehicle in which gossip, assumptions, misconstrued opinions, and make-believe narratives about aswang are etched in the very conversations of the Filipino people, and through which the myth is perpetuated in the communicative act of telling stories, thereby galvanising and continuing flawed reasoning. The act of telling and spreading these stories happens in local communities and in schools, in which folk literature has a role to play.

This study, therefore, warrants that we revisit and rethink the practices of teaching mythology and folklore in schools and universities in the Philippines. In the past, in the context of aswang storytelling, stories were told not only to sow fear but also to highlight the need to believe in the act of prayer so that one can be protected. Today, aswang stories are told to underscore subservience to authorities dominated by men in power. Does teaching mythology and folklore as a form of art have limitations to consider, or should it be driven by the very liberty that teachers enjoy, such that the fascination of children with the myth is perpetuated despite the risk of crippling critical thought, corrupting sense of reality, and obscuring truths? Why do we teach mythology and folklore in the first place? What is our

pedagogical intent? What happens if, in the growing mysticism, illusion, and interest of children, we fail to make them think critically about the very conditions and circumstances in which their lives exist? What happens if children would rather believe in the myth as it is perpetuated in the very stories shared about aswang because they lack the ability to question, interrogate, and just accept the myth as it is, because it is just the way things have always been? What, therefore, happens if teaching mythology and folklore creates learners who become clueless victims of delusion and self-deception, and children who seem to accept ideas or concepts at face value? These questions warrant a careful examination of the pedagogy surrounding mythology and folklore as a course that still finds its place in higher education curricula in the Philippines.

Another pedagogical implication draws on the power of rhetoric in telling stories. Aristotle defines rhetoric as a practical art of discourse and a faculty and ability in a particular case to see the available means of persuasion utilised by people consciously or unconsciously. To perform the act of persuasion in storytelling, we can argue that rhetoric plays a role in convincing people to believe in the myth by revitalising the very stories that promulgate its believability and authenticity. If this is the case, rhetoric here appears to defeat its very purpose of promoting truth and reason (Campbell et al., 2014; Keith & Lundberg, 2008). However, if rhetoric invites people to utilise reason and the credibility of the sources of information through which aswang stories pervade, we can somehow postulate how reason and persuasion are in the right direction to foster critical thinking as a way of arriving at truths. If storytelling is a double-edged sword, so too is rhetoric when its users are driven by their own selfish goals to serve their very interests. This begs the question, "Sino at ano tayo bilang tagapagsalaysay ng kwentong aswang? Saan tayo nanggagaling? Anong prinsipyo at kahalagahan ang ating ipinaglalaban?" (Who and what are we as storytellers of aswang? Where are we coming from? What principles, ideals, and values are we fighting for?).

In schools and communities in the Philippines in which aswang stories permeate, what teachers can do is to give children a safe space to share their opinions about aswang stories and use that very space to create an open and meaningful discourse. As a system of possibilities for the creation of knowledge and meaning (Foucauldian sense of discourse), such a safe space will be an immense opportunity for children to think, to question, to contest their thinking and imagination, to interrogate their beliefs and their very conditions, and to engage in sensemaking. Isn't this a more desired direction we want our learners to take? Isn't this the essence of education?

Conclusion

In attempting to decipher the signs and objects present in aswang articles guided by Peircean semiotics and critical analysis, this study is able to contribute to the growing discourse and understanding of aswang as a concept, phenomenon, myth, and a sign that represents bigger ideas. Seven themes emerged as signs (ideas that stand for something bigger) with their objectifications (possible interpretations or conceptualisations) (Table 1). The sign-object significations include the following : (1) pervasive typologies, categorizations, and classifications of aswang in the literature signifies constancy and continuity of the myth, (2) the construction of a female gender into a monstrous aswang signifies Othering and oppression of women, (3) colonization, colonialism, and war as symbolic of aswang signifies the perpetuation of abuse of power and the myth itself, as well as aswang's liminal and transcendent nature that calls for a reinvention of the Filipino imagination, (4) the pervasive belief of the Filipino people in aswang despite the absence of facts and empirical evidence signifies delusion, self-deception, and a distorted settlement of the mind, (5) the ominous and lucid audibility of soundscapes in aswang narratives signifies fear and trauma therefore galvanizing the perpetuation of abuse of power by a tyrannical government, (6) aswang as being symbolic of colonialism and machismo calls for an awakening of the senses and skepticism, and (7) keeping aswang deep in memory symbolic of the terror, trauma, and pain brought by war and colonization signifies the Filipinos' attachment to a distant yet painful past for which the act of remembering is stronger than the act of forgetting, for which holding on is favoured than letting go because to go back to the past is part of an emotional purgation that relieves the troubled Filipino spirit.

Theoretically, semiotics proves helpful in surfacing the intersubjective mediation by signs in aswang texts published between the 1960s and 2023. Peircean semiotics has been very instrumental in decoding the signs and their objects through an interpretant that is one with the texts, and the understanding derived from sign-object significations. As a reader and researcher, I was engulfed in analysing aswang texts and articles confirming the sincerity, validity, subtlety, and trustworthiness of my interpretation. As Peirce (1955) echoed, "That every thought is an external sign, proves that man is an external sign… constituted by his community". I am an external sign insofar as aswang is an external sign, and my critical interpretation mattered in the process of signification and meaning-making. I was one with the texts in this interpretive journey. I was the understanding that we have of this sign-object relation, and this understanding is captured both in my mind and the reader

of this text right now (insofar as understanding is happening in the cognitive capacity of the readers, and their awareness of context).

Critical theory also proves useful in my attempt to unmask and demystify the forces of power, hegemony, marginalisation, and oppression innately present in the aswang texts. Through critical theory, I realised how colonialism appeared constant in discourse between old texts (aswang articles in the 1960s) and current ones (until 2023, as of this writing). Colonialism, as a representation of aswang (invasion, marginalisation, oppression, and perpetuation of abuse of power), exists in a continuum traversing old and current narratives in academic texts. Moreover, colonialism transcends the real world through the power of the written word in aswang narratives, connecting the past atrocities and the present forms of abuses of power that victimise the ordinary Filipino people. This is a testament to the perpetuation of abuse of power in the colonial era until the current government that pervasively traumatises the Filipinos and makes them vulnerable victims of oppression, marginalisation, and corruption. Such a testament is engraved in writing.

Practically, this study draws on the scathing power of storytelling. Aswang stories pervade the Filipino consciousness because the very nature of conversations fuels the power of stories to make a lasting impact on the minds of listeners, despite how distorted these stories can be. Storytelling is the fuel perpetuating the myth, and this myth gathers more power through the sense of enigma and suspense that these aswang stories hold. Perhaps the dark tone and horror of these aswang stories, intensified by the centrality of conflict, fear, and moral dilemma, have become the insidious yet pervasive source of power that such stories bring. Pedagogical intent, choice, and decisive action matter here on the part of a teacher who teaches mythology and folklore in schools and universities. Utilising the power of storytelling is one thing; perpetuating myths in the classroom with little attention to criticality is another. The former nourishes the latter, while the latter, when taught through the lens of liberal education that contests ideologies and questions the very conditions and circumstances of the people, might lead to an empowering insight and a logic that promotes reason and truth.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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Bionote

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