

*Intersection of Asian Supernatural Beings in Asian Folk Literature: A Pan-Asian Identity*

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## INTRODUCTION

Asian nations have a rich cultural and literary tradition, through these; we can see the common features that bind these nations. This commonality can be considered as the Pan-Asian identity. Folklore, as being mirrored in folk literature, is a rich source of a community's cultural values. Jansen notes that the other significance of folklore is that it provides a group's image of itself and images of other groups (Dundes, 1965). In the era of globalization, folklore serves its function in literary and cultural realm.

This study focuses on the cross-cultural intersections of Southeast Asian nations' folk literature in terms of names and descriptions of supernatural beings, and their functions in the society. The study will examine the commonality of terms and description of supernatural beings found in the narratives of folk literature (myths, legends, folktales and epics) of six nations (Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand). The countries stated above will be collectively called as Pan-Asia in this paper.

According to Foucault (1973), the study of space also known as heterotopia provides an avenue to describe places and spaces that function in non-hegemonic conditions. The usage of space in this study will investigate the area of Asian folklores as a new venue to root the unity among Southeast Asian nations.

Folklores in each nation offer logical explanations about the existence of things and order in nature highly unexplainable. During the ancient times, these valorized stories without being questioned served as lullaby and past time for all ages. In the global era, folklores are rich narratives of literature. Collections filling up libraries and influence source for contemporary children's storybooks, television program, films, and other digital forms.

This paper intends to investigate on the interconnectedness of folklores from Southeast Asian literatures. As early as 7<sup>th</sup> century, Asian kingdoms like Srivijaya and Majapahit. Some claimed that Chaiya, Thailand became capital of Srivijaya while Sulu was the northernmost part of Majapahit empire. Given this data, it bridged the assumption of the similarities of culture including folkloric themes in Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, as well as Laos and Cambodia.

The discourse on discipline and space will back-up the contention of the study that the field of folklores is a space to prove and establish Pan-Asian identity in the Southeast Asian region. Michel Foucault in 1984 delivered in his speech *Des Espace Autres*, the mirror as he sees himself in front of it,

“...makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.”

In the same manner folklores all seem to be products of imagination in the ancient times and serve a purpose to people in one period of time, and through focused examination of

all the similarities, profound meaning and valuing of Pan-Asian identity will be elicited.

The second principle of heterotopias states that at the history of society unfolds, it can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion. For each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another. This can be reflected on the experiences and history of Asia, in general. The ancient period in Asian history books told its readers the never-ending rise and fall scenario, ousting of king or leader. After the World War II, the struggles and establishing of most Southeast Asian countries in the context of establishing each own identities and components towards development and nation-statehood. The movement of uniting as a region is set for the economic, political and socio-cultural benefits for the present and future benefits. With this, the study on folklore is a quasi-space, or avenue to discover the interconnectedness of Southeast Asian region even way before the varied colonial and cultural experiences. Strong ties among its nations will strengthen the cultural and economic development. A strong history will result to better relationships among the nations in the region.

## **SOUTHEAST ASIAN FOLKLORE**

According to UNESCO (1989), folklore is the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group or individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms include, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, ritual, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts. It can be in the form of myths, legends, folktales, riddles, proverbs, folk song, etc. Since folklore is the expression of a community's identity and cultural uniqueness, this could serve as a space of convergence and divergence of beliefs and values.

Scholars did not explore much the study of these mythological creatures. Strange enough according to Maximo Ramos, a Filipino scholar who studied mythical creatures, that, being a part of the dominant culture in Asia, these topics were not given that much importance in terms of academic exploration, especially its correlation to literature and sociological study of a culture of a race or nation (Ramos, 1990). One reason for this perpetuation is the fact that believing in the lower mythology creatures is considered superstitious and undesirable. One can also point a finger to the attitudes of the educated and sophisticated people who think that it is a product of the simple, ignorant and uneducated country folk believe (Pacis, 1999). But even superstitious beliefs are relevant to the study of one's culture because this culture build up the components in which forms the identity of a nation.

According to Stith Thompson, there are no definite cultural boundaries and many of the concepts relating to supernatural creatures are found with little change over whole continents, and sometimes, indeed over the whole earth (Ramos, 1990). This study proves that folklores and culture go beyond the boundaries and converge through different

societies and nations.

In Southeast Asian folklore, there is a common motif of believing to supernatural beings. Supernatural being is defined as an incorporeal being believed to have powers to affect the course of human events. There are numerous varieties of supernatural beings in Southeast Asian folklore but this paper will focus on the two supernatural beings which are commonly found in the aforementioned six nations: these are the woman supernatural creature and child supernatural being.

## **PAN-ASIAN WOMAN SUPERNATURAL BEING**

### **A. Terminology and Etymology**

In Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos' folklore there is a woman supernatural creature that seems to be culturally related. This creature is called "Manananggal" in the Philippines, while "Penanggalan" or "Hantu penanggalan" in Malaysia. Both words literally may mean "to detach" or "to remove" since the two languages belong to the Austronesian language family. Same thing can be observed in "Krasue" (Thailand) and "Kasu/ Phi-kasu" (Laos) the terms seem to be cognates or almost similar in morphological structure. This creature is called "Ap" in Cambodia, "Leyak" in Bali, "Kuyang" in Kalimantan, and "Palasik" or "Pelesit" in West Sumatra, Indonesia.

Since geographically near to each other, it is not surprising that Philippines and Malaysia; and Thailand and Laos, share morphologically similar term for this supernatural being.

### **B. Characteristics**

The "Manananggal" of the Philippine folklore, is portrayed as a young or old woman (though there are instances of men) who looks like a normal person in the daytime except that she has no canal (philtrum) on the upper lip. At night, it separates its body into the upper and lower torso. In the upper torso, bat-like wings appear which enables it to fly to search for its victim. While the lower limb remains on the ground and hid somewhere. They leave their body in a banana grove which can camouflage the shape of the legs and therefore the manananggal is sure that it has her lower body to come back to. Formula and ointments are essential for the ritual of the Manananggal's transformation. Ill-smelling chicken dung with coconut oil is believed to be applied all over the body of Manananggal. It perches on the roof house of the prey, which are usually pregnant women. Manananggal uses an elongated proboscis-like tongue to suck the heart of fetus (unborn child). "Tiktik", a bird named after the sound it makes, is an indication of the presence of Manananggal. The fainter the sound, the nearer the Manananggal is. To kill the Manananggal, one should sprinkle salt or put garlic or sprinkle ash to the top of the lower limb, in doing this, the upper torso would not be able to reconnect itself and will die by sunrise. The Manananggal can also be killed by

striking a pointed bamboo stick in the flying body. Pregnant women can prevent manananggal by holy water, palm leaves, crucifix and incense.

The “Penanggalan” in Malaysian folklore can be either a beautiful old or young woman who obtained her beauty through the active use of black magic, supernatural powers, mystical, or paranormal means which are most commonly described in local folklores to be dark or demonic in nature. It also flies at night and detaching its head and other internal organs from the rest of the body. As it flies, the stomach and entrails dangle below it, and these organs twinkle like fireflies as the Penanggalan moves through the night. The other body is also remained on ground and before it rejoins its original body, it soaks her internal organs in a pre-prepared container filled with vinegar to fit back into the body. One can also identify a Penanggalan during daytime, when it is a normal woman, by its vinegar-smelling body. Penanggalan victimizes pregnant women and young children using its fangs. It perches on the roofs of houses where women are in labor, screeching when the child is born. The Penanggalan will insert a long invisible tongue into the house to lap up the blood of the new mother. It prefers the blood of a newborn infant, the blood of woman who recently gave birth or the placenta. Those whose blood the Penanggalan feeds upon contract a wasting disease that is almost inescapably fatal. Furthermore, even if the Penanggalan is not successful in her attempt to feed, anyone who is brushed by the dripping entrails will suffer painful open sores that won't heal without a bomoh's (shaman) help. To protect against a Penanggal attack, one should scatter the thorny leaves of a local plant known as Mengkuang (any of the subspecies) which have sharp thorny leaves, because it would either trap or injure the exposed lungs, stomach and intestines of the Penanggalan as it flies in search of its prey. These thorns, on the vine, can also be looped around the windows of a house in order to snare the trailing organs. This is commonly done when a woman has just given birth. However, this practice will not protect the infant if the Penanggalan decides to pass through the floorboards. For this instance, one can plant a pineapple underneath the house. The prickly fruit and leaves of the pineapple would prevent the Penanggalan from entering through the floorboards. Once trapped, a Penanggalan who attacks the house can then be killed with parangs or machetes. The pregnant woman can keep scissors or betel nut cutters under her pillow to prevent the Penanggalan because it is afraid of the said things.

In Thai folklore, “Krasue” is manifested as a beautiful woman usually young and beautiful, with her internal organs hanging down from the neck, trailing below the head. In the morning, it is a normal woman but at night, it severs its head with other internal organs from the main body. The throat may be represented in different ways, either as only the trachea or with the whole neck. The organs below the head usually include the heart and the stomach with a length of intestine. These also glow at night while Krasue is wandering. The Krasue hides the headless body from which it originates in a quiet place because it needs to reconnect to it before daybreak. The Krasue is under a curse that makes it ever hungry and always active in the night when it goes out hunting to satisfy



its gluttony, seeking blood to drink or raw flesh to devour. The Krasue preys on pregnant women in their homes just before or after the childbirth. It hovers around the house of the pregnant woman uttering sharp cries so that the people around will be afraid. It uses an elongated proboscis-like tongue to reach the fetus or its placenta within the womb. In some cases it may catch the unborn child and use its sharp teeth to devour it. In order to protect pregnant women from becoming victims before delivery, their relatives place thorny branches around the house. This improvised thorny fence discourages the Krasue from coming to suck the blood and causing other suffering to the pregnant lady within the house. After delivery, the woman's relatives must take the cut placenta far away for burial to hide it from the Krasue. There is the belief that if the placenta is buried deep enough the supernatural creature cannot find it. Krasue also attacks cattle or chicken in the darkness, drinking their blood and eating their internal organs. It may also prey on cattle, such as water buffalo that have died of other causes during the night. If blood is not available the Krasue may eat feces or carrion. Clothes left outside would be found soiled with blood and excrement in the morning, allegedly after she had wiped her mouth. Therefore villagers would not leave clothes hanging to dry outside during the night hours. One way of killing the Krasue is to crush the still headless body. If the flying head returns after hunting but rejoins with the wrong body, it will lead to suffer torment until death. If the top part of the body fails to find the lower half before daybreak it will die in terrible pain. The Krasue will also die if its intestines get cut off or if its body disappears or gets hidden by someone.

In Bali folklore “Leyak” is a creature in the form of flying head with entrails like lungs, heart and liver. It flies to find a pregnant woman in order to suck her baby's blood or a newborn child. Leyaks can be female or male in Indonesia. In daylight they appear as ordinary humans, but at night their head and entrails break loose from their body and fly. Leyak are said to haunt graveyards, feed on corpses, have power to change themselves into animals, such as pigs, and fly. In normal Leyak form, they are said to have an unusually long tongue and large fangs.

Based on these characteristics the Pan-Asian woman supernatural creature is a beautiful woman who seems to be normal at day time but with a distinct mark like having no philtrum or canal on the upper lip or having a vinegar-like smell body. This Pan-Asian creature detaches from its original body at night when it searches for a pregnant woman to victimize. Its weakness is when it could not go back to its original body before the dawn breaks out as well as sharp objects like plants with thorny leaves, pineapple or sharpened bamboo.

## **PAN-ASIAN CHILD SUPERNATURAL BEING**

### **A. Terminology and Etymology**

The Philippine “tiyanak” is known in Malaysia as the “Toyol”. In Thailand they call this creature “koman-tong” for male babies and “Koman-lay” if it's female.

In Cambodia “Cohen Kroh”. Though these terms do not share morphological similarities, these countries accounts almost the same characteristics of this creature.

## **B. Characteristics**

One of the most popular mythical creatures in the Philippines is the “tiyanak”. This creature imitates the form of a newborn baby. They usually lurk in the jungle and cry like a baby to haunt its victim. Once the victim picks them up, unaware of its true nature, they revert to their true form and attack the victim by biting their neck with their sharp claws and fangs (Eugenio, 2007). The arrival of the Spanish colonizers in the shores of the Philippines caused the banishment or change in the beliefs of the mythical creatures. In the case of tiyanak, Christianity assimilated the concept by saying that tiyanaks were supposedly the souls of infants who were not baptized before they died (Pacis, 2005). Popular culture also included the aborted babies trying to avenge their undue fate. Stories about tiyanak have evolved over time that different characteristics were told in different versions according to what town the storyteller came from. People from Pampanga, a province in Central Luzon, have a version of tiyanak having a brown complexion with large nose and red eyes and wide mouth. They don’t walk but gallop from one place to another or sometimes even fly when haunting for their prey. Another version which has circulated over the island of Palawan says that a tiyanak is somewhat close to the appearance of a dwarf or “dwende”. In this version the tiyanak looks like an old man with furrowed skin with a mustache and long white beard, and eyes as big as a golf ball. People from Palawan would agree with the Kapampangans that a tiyanak doesn’t walk because of its abnormal leg which is longer than the other. Stories has it that in order to defeat the tiyanak, one must always bring garlic and wear the rosary. They also don’t want deafening sounds like firecrackers and gun shots. These sounds would scare them away and will leave the victim safe from its devouring.

“Toyol” or “Tuyul” is widely known in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, as well as Singapore. A toyol appears as a naked child with red eyes and sharp teeth. It is kept by a human master in a bottle and trained to steal from others. The master of the toyol has to feed it every night by letting it suck blood from his toes. In these countries, a toyol can be bought and can be used for the advantage of the person who bought it. The host or master can make it steal expensive jewelries in an instant. It moves fast that people cannot catch it. It can be bought from people who practice black magic like the dukun or shaman in Indonesia and pawang from Malaysia. Since people can ask the toyol to steal things for them, it is also vital that they tame the toyol to have a better relationship with this creature. The toyol is like a baby that also should be fed with milk each morning. They are also delighted at the sight of toys, clothes and food especially candies.

Indonesian version of a toyol or tuyul involves not only the fright people get from these stories. Accounts have it that people are actually seeking for tuyul for

financial gain. With the help of some rituals to be performed by the dukun or shaman, one can instantly have the riches he dreamt for. This is in exchange of the blood the female member of the family can give from breastfeeding instead of milk. Accounts from people who actually had an encounter with a toyol say that its size is that of a new born baby but its appearance is scary with its red round eyes, pointed ears, sharp teeth and green skin color. They have the capability to climb high walls and even the roof of the houses and then steal from it. People who went from rags to riches are often suspected to have toyol in their houses. They are usually hidden in the jars inside the house of their host. Unlike the tiyanak, the toyol is not harmful and do not devour people and leave them lifeless. It is closer to the characteristics that of a child: playful and needy of nurturing home. Without a host or master a toyol will be happy and freely living in the woods. It is the host or master who can turn a toyol into a monster since toyol only take orders from its master. Just like any mythical creature, a toyol has weaknesses to. Since toyol really wants to play, toys can be a good distraction. The toyol can forget about stealing from the houses they've intruded once they see toys they can play with. The toyol also fears looking at their reflection that mirrors can also be an effective instrument to scare toyol away.

The "Koman-tong" (male spirits) and Koman-lay (female spirits) are popular in Thailand. These creatures share the similarity of having the form of a baby as with the tiyanak and toyol. Like the toyol, koman-tong and koman-lay serve as a good luck to their host or master. This spirit is said to have granted the wishes of people who bought it. In Thailand lucky charm stores sell the Golden Egg. It is an egg shape pot that inhabits a koman-tong spirit. The spirit inside the pot will grant the power to fulfill the wishes of the person who bought it. It can also keep them safe from negative energies and bad luck. The koman-tong belongs to the benevolent spirits that do not have selfish desires, and do not require a sacrifice or rituals in order to grant their master's wishes. They can also protect their master by informing them of the bad circumstances that might come along. These creature are said to be more beneficial than detrimental to people. In Thailand these creatures represent good spirits and good luck.

The belief in child supernatural creatures can be rooted from the belief, most especially in Asia, that all entities have a spirit or soul including a baby. The tiyanak, toyol and koman-tong are spirits, mischievous and sometimes disturbed, that takes the form of a baby. They suffered a bad fate that leads them to die even before they were born. They haunt the human world and became a part of the mind and consciousness of the people that in some instances they become real. Whether the accounts given by witnesses reveal the truth about these creatures, there is no denying the fact that these folklore form part of the reality of the people who believes in it.



## CONCLUSION

The common motif of woman and child supernatural beings in folk literature is a Pan Asian identity as seen in the discussion above. The similarities of physical creatures cross culturally, as well as the terms for these beings, reveal the cultural proximity of the said nations.

Folklores and supernatural beings can be seen as a form of disciplinary apparatus. Through this study, creature descriptions, supernatural powers and haven was examined to draw out how these crafted to create fear and warn the community and unwanted entry of people of different territory, race or identity. In the Philippines, belief in lower mythology creatures serves as a social function in many communities. Elders use it as a medium of control not only to the youngsters being formed to be obedient but also the village people who seeks the security it provides to them. The “manananggal” and “tiyanak” stories could make children sleep early or not go to a place as prohibited by their parents. Haunted places and aswang-infected places will go unexplored and therefore retain its mysticism in the eyes of the outsiders. The same thing can also be said to the penanggalan of Malaysia, leyak of Indonesia and krasue of Thailand. Toyol function’s is also to scare away non-members of their society.

Pan-asian women characteristics are mirrored in the physical appearances and the ability to show dominance by these creatures. Sharp claws, fangs and vigorous abilities make distinctive marks of Asian women’s supernatural powers which mirror social power in the ancient period while the Pan-asian supernatural children are always associated with the power of unborn creatures, seeking revenge or wanting to belong to the world of living.

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