

LONGING FOR SNOW-COVERED PEAKS: DEITY POSSESSION IN THE PHILIPPINES

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I wrote this story based on my experiences in the Philippines and what I imagined.

"Roach!" Adriano screamed. I turned and saw him running naked out of the bathroom, desperately trying to cover himself with a towel. He ran into the room where Madi, the landlord, and I were watching a local show on TV.

"It won't bite you!" said Madi, standing up, looking annoyed. "I'll take care of this just this once. Next time, do it yourself." He then grabbed a broom from behind the door and went inside the bathroom.

"Why are you always angry?! We pay you 3,000 pesos a month," Adriano responded unhappily, which is how he usually talked to Madi. Quarreling was constant in the boarding house and small issues sometimes grew into fierce conflicts.

Adriano continued, "Madi, I tell you honestly that there's no reason for you to be upset. Unlike your previous boarders, I don't drink and I don't smoke. I even gave you 500 pesos for your daughter's birthday last month."

Adriano sat down next to me. He was barefoot and smelled pleasantly of shampoo.

Nobody said anything. Madi probably hadn't heard him. A moment later Madi came out of the bathroom. As he passed me on his way outside, I saw a flattened cockroach in his left palm. I hadn't expected Madi to unleash his anger on that innocent creature. I was so distressed that I rushed upstairs to my room. Adriano followed, stopped at my bedroom door, and said, "I'm going to move to another house. He's too..." he didn't know what word to use, but I'm sure he was searching for a negative one.

A bit later, Madi knocked on my door, opened it, and said, "We're going to have an exorcism at a neighbor's house. Last night

you said you wanted to come. Get ready. We'll leave soon."

"OK, I'll come downstairs immediately," I said.

I got up and opened the window. Warm air rushed into my room. I felt as though I were suffocating. Every time I felt burning heat in the air – which was quite usual where I lived – I recalled what a priceless luxury it was to have snow back home and to be able to enjoy the beauty of different seasons. Such weather and such scenes were entirely different from Manila's scorching heat and days and nights of constant rain. I showed locals pictures of snow-capped mountains whenever I had the chance, knowing that they had probably never seen snow. Sometimes, just looking at pictures of snowcapped mountains made me feel cooler, especially when the air was particularly hot. I thought at times that the heat in Manila was a physical thing that I might be able to destroy or remove. Nothing was enjoyable in such awful weather. Anyway, I was excited about going with Madi to observe a local exorcism.

I put on my clothes, quickly grabbed my camera, and went downstairs. Joe and Madi were already waiting for me.

"You'll be surprised by what you will see today," Madi said as we walked outside the house.

"Please surprise me. I already know how you do divination," I replied.

Even though I made it sound like a joke, I hoped Joe would comment on what I had said so that I could ask him more questions about his practice of divination. Many in the local community came to Joe for divinations – there were even visitors from distant cities. What interested me most was that his practice was like nothing that I had seen before. How he changed physically during his period of possession made it even more interesting. Oddly, I never felt comfortable asking him questions about his practice, even though I was burning inside with curiosity.

"So, what is the context here? Why do they want you to perform an exorcism at their home?" I asked, turning to Joe who was walking right side of me.

"Their baby was crying the whole night and the doctors couldn't find any reason. The child's father thinks the spirit of his

long deceased father is the cause. They want us to drive his spirit away," Joe explained cautiously, regularly turning to me and making gestures because his English wasn't fluent.

I was born and raised in a culture where religious philosophy penetrates every aspect of life. Religious rituals are highly valued and a critical part of community life. Participants' roles, ritual implements, colors, and so on are laden with meaning in my home Tibetan community. It was partly because of this that I noticed every detail that day. Joe, the master practitioner, was a serious man in his forties. He had never married. He often wore two strings of prayer beads on his left wrist and he carried a Bible wherever he went. He was very sincere, had a very impressive voice, and rarely joked, even when we drank together. He carefully chose each word he uttered and had a certain charisma that made him even more convincing and believable. This was especially true when he spoke to visitors in Tagalog, though I didn't understand what he was saying. His expression told me that he was serious about what he was saying.

This particular day he wore a pair of camo-shorts and a white T-shirt. There was nothing special about the way he was dressed. The same was true for Madi and Alex, who had come along to assist Joe. I noticed Madi had two bags. Alex was holding a stick that was about a foot long. I guessed it was not going to be a large-scale ritual. It was a short walk to the neighboring family we were visiting. There was no time to ask Joe more questions about what he practiced. When we arrived, a woman greeted us and led us into the sitting room where she left us.

I looked around and was both surprised and puzzled by what I saw. There were no overt signs of a religious nature – no sacred images, for example, which are quite common in the homes of Dela Costa residents who nearly all seemed to be Catholic.

The kitchen, dining room, and bathroom were all on the first floor. There was little free space to move around. A twenty-two inch TV, made in China, sat on a large wooden table next to the door against the window. The TV obscured most of the window. The room was dark. A fan mounted on the wall was above the window. In a hot place like Manila, fans made life bearable and this family had a fan in

every corner. Atop the TV was a huge Chinese hand fan for decorative purposes. Next to the TV was a porcelain vase holding beautiful flowers. When I went close to take a picture I was surprised to see 'Made in China' on one leaf.

In front of the TV was a small free space. I sat on the wooden floor and looked around the room. Joe was sitting in an armchair against the wall next to the door, getting ready to go into trance. Right above him was a picture of Filipino boxing hero, Manny Pacquiao.

"Come help me light these candles," Madi said as I was inspecting the room.

I opened one bag and found four small white candles, a fist-sized ball of wool, and a couple of small bottles. Meanwhile, Alex was making a fire in a small concrete stove on which he placed a kettle. Then he picked up the metal stick and rolled a piece of wool around the head of the stick. Joe instructed him to put small bundles of wool containing sacred objects in each corner of the room and above the door. I finished lighting the candles and placed them on a glass table next to where Joe was sitting. He was already beginning the ritual by this time.

Joe's eyes were closed and his hands were on his thighs with his palms up. Madi sat in a small wooden chair just in front of Joe. Madi opened the Bible he had brought with him and turned to a page marked with a slip of paper. He started reading. A few minutes later Joe's hands began shaking as he breathed heavily. It was frightening because it seemed the real Joe wasn't there anymore. Madi continued reading. It seemed he was instructing Joe, whose upper body was now trembling rhythmically, matching the changes in Madi's intonations.

Joe began sweating profusely and then, suddenly, he started murmuring. His eyes were still closed. Alex approached and seemed to understand what he was saying because he kept nodding his head. I couldn't understand anything, but it didn't sound like the Tagalog I heard every day in Dela Costa homes. Joe occasionally made faces as though he were in great pain or perhaps very sad because of his seeming inability to communicate. His eyebrows rose rhythmically as

his tone changed. His eyes remained closed throughout the entire process. His lips kept moving, though nothing that sounded remotely like a human language came from his lips. It seemed as if he was trying to say something but couldn't get the words right. It was all exotic but, at the same time, exhausting to see Joe sweating and struggling to speak.

I was reminded of a scene from one of my recurring dreams: I was being chased by a huge dog. I was desperately trying to scream for help, but it took tremendous effort to make a sound.

When exorcisms are performed back home, strange sounds of unknown origins are often heard and objects fall to the ground without human involvement. I looked around, wondering if something like that would happen here, but it didn't.

About a half hour later, Madi ceased his recitation. I waited anxiously to see who of the family might come, but they were never present. It seemed to be a rule that the presence of a concerned family member was forbidden. We then packed up what we had brought and headed back to Madi's place.

You probably were expecting something more dramatic. I was too. It was all quite tame. However, I was struck by how familiar the idea of the existence of evil spirits was, and also how these local people believed that it was possible to remove such spirits.

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A week passed. It was another usual, hot Saturday in mid-October. I was staying at a boarding house that belonged to a couple who had moved to the US. They left the house in the care of the wife's brother, who was married and had a daughter. However, he didn't live with his wife and daughter. He had quite a few friends who visited him on weekends to drink.

"Do you eat dogs?" Dori asked me in Cantonese. It took me few seconds to realize he was speaking Chinese that I could barely comprehend.

"No. Nobody from my community eats dogs," I said.

"Chinese people eat dogs," he said.

"Where did you see Chinese people eating dogs?" I asked, wondering if he had really seen people eating dogs or if he was just

curious about rumors he had heard.

"Did you ever wonder why I can speak Cantonese?" he asked with a dismissive smile. He was obviously proud to be able to speak Chinese. Later, I thought I should have shown more interest in his Chinese language ability.

"You look Chinese. I thought maybe you were from China," I said as he handed me a wooden chair. We then sat under a big tree at the local basketball court and chatted. He told me more about himself:

I was twenty-five when I first came to Manila. Life in the city was exciting, but I was at a loss. I didn't know what to do, where to live, or where to look for a job. One day as I was walking aimlessly in the city center, a man approached me and asked, "Are you looking for a job?"

I was excited and said, "Yes!" Then he took me to lunch in a nearby KFC. It was my first time to eat at a KFC. He kept talking while I was eating, but I didn't pay much attention. When I finished eating, I suddenly realized that such good things don't happen without a reason. I then tried to remember every detail of what he had said. This man was well-dressed and about forty years old. There was nothing remotely suspicious about him. He just seemed to be a nice guy who liked to help others.

"There is a good opportunity to make some money if you are interested," he said calmly. There was no sense of encouragement, as if he didn't really care if I said yes or no. That made me more uncomfortable. I would have felt much better if he had encouraged me a bit. Anyway, I said that I was interested.

A few days later, I was headed to China. There were fifteen of us from the Philippines on the same boat. We didn't know each other before but, during the several days it took to get to China on that boat, we got to know each other pretty well. It was exciting and, at the same time, worrying. We docked in the afternoon in October. It was cold. It had been burning hot back home, but it was freezing in China. We hadn't brought any warm clothes with us. We thought China was also going to be hot. Nobody had told us about the weather.

When I got outside, I looked up and saw a dim, red sun that resembled a fading torch. The dock was huge. There were hundreds of ships there. We waited anxiously. We had been told someone would meet us at the dock. Thousands of thoughts flitted through my mind. I tried my best to conceal them. It was obvious that everyone was worried about our uncertain future.

I looked around and felt comforted to see English words – USA, France, Canada, and the names of other countries – on gigantic containers that were piled up about seven floors high. I kept looking, hoping to see 'Philippines' and then meet someone from the Philippines. I believed that if I could meet them, they would help us. But there was no 'Philippines' anywhere. I felt kind of scared.

A few hours later, a man approached us and spoke to us in heavily accented English. It was really difficult to understand him, but we were happy that someone had finally come to meet us. All fifteen of us then got into a van. After leaving the dock, the first thing I noticed was the huge number of people. As we drove along a busy road, there were people everywhere. Sometimes all I could see was just heads. It was just like looking at a nest of ants. It was very crowded, even on the roads. I wouldn't have really believed what I saw that very first day except that I went back there a year later and it was just like before.

There were small restaurants in the open area that had gutted dogs hanging on hooks. It was a terrifying scene. Nevertheless, these small restaurants were crowded with customers. I felt like vomiting, partly because of the awfulness of this scene and also because I was worried about myself. I thought, "If I die here, will anyone know or care?" I had never felt so uncertain, but I did feel better when I saw that the others in the van had the same look in their eyes.

We did construction work in that town for three years. Then we had a two-year break and then returned to the same place and worked for another two years.

"Do you have plans to go back and work again?" I asked Dori, who now was lying on the ground on his side, supporting his head with his right arm.

"No. The work's too hard. I can't do such hard physical labor now," he said, sipping from a bottle that seemed to contain an inexhaustible amount of beer. He looked at the bottle and continued, "I could certainly tell you more about my experience if I had more beer."

I wasn't sure his story was worth the investment, but I knew I had to be diplomatic. "I can buy you some beer, but not today. You look tipsy already," I said. The basketball court was now full of kids and very noisy, so I retreated back to my room.

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"Really! That's why Adriano moved out?" asked Alex, "I thought both of you were coming with us. This is the holy mountain everyone visits. You will see lots of interesting things there."

"He couldn't get along with Madi," I said. "Maybe we can ask Joe for a divination to find out why they can't get along."

Everyone laughed hysterically at this.

A week later I was in a Jeep with Madi's friends on our way to Mount Banahaw, one of the Philippines' holy mountains. They insisted that I go with them because, as Alex said, "We do special religious practices there that you won't ever learn about if you don't come with us."

I have always been a curious person and was intrigued by what he said. Before I agreed, I went over a few things carefully in my mind. I was from a different religious background. Though this didn't stand in the way of our friendship and sharing ideas and experiences with each other, I didn't want to be caught between two different belief systems. That worried me as I participated in their practices.

"Tonight we will stay in the church and you can participate in the ritual or just watch," Alex said. There were six of us in the Jeep. One was a scientist who worked for the government. Another man drove a school-bus. We had set off early that morning. It was beautiful along the way. Everything was green and there were animals that I had never seen before. We were already in the mountains by four that afternoon.

"We will first visit the mountain deity," Joe said decisively, as fit his position as our group leader. "We will show our new friend real miracles today," he continued solemnly, suggesting that he would soon be involved in a serious undertaking.

This made me nervous because I didn't want to return home as a Catholic convert. I was not sure what power he really had and how he was going to use it. It was an uneasy moment. Madi, who was sitting next to me, giggled, as he always did when he saw me confused and uncertain. He enjoyed seeing people taken by surprise. I felt I was being taken advantage of, but I also thought I was being too protective of myself.

"Is there a mountain deity here?" I asked, trying to sound really surprised, to show how interested I was in learning more. I leaned towards Joe, who was sitting in the front seat.

"Yes, and we will speak to him today," said Madi as he patted my right leg a few times. "He recognizes and protects us."

"You can ask him to protect you, too," suggested Alex and laughed, as if he thought that this was an insane idea.

I usually enjoyed getting attention, but now I felt nervous and didn't like the fact that they were suggesting that I do this and that.

We drove over a narrow track to the mountain deity altar. The road was slippery and covered with bushes. I couldn't remember when the last time was that I had been on such a frightening, nerve-racking ride. The wife of the scientist continued repeating non-stop, "Jesus help, Jesus help..." in a trembling voice until we got to the mountaintop. This made everyone more worried.

When we arrived, I followed them to the base of a huge tree where two wooden boards were placed. Various food and fruit had been placed there. Everyone knelt in front of the tree and began praying. I sat on a big leaf and watched. Suddenly, it began raining. We all rushed to the Jeep and headed to the church.

A terribly frightening experience happened next. As I stood in front of the old church, I thought, "How will I sleep in this church tonight? They will go into trance and won't be aware of anything around us. What should I do?" A huge tree obscured my view of the church. It was now evening and the dim moonlight, the tree, and church blended together and seemed somehow to be a gigantic moving creature, peeking through thick trees. Small statues attached to the outside wooden walls of the church seemed to smile menacingly at each other, taking perverse delight in the presence of an unfamiliar face. I comforted myself by thinking that the statue of Buddha I had seen earlier by the two boards with food offerings would ensure my safety and protect me from harm.

"Come in! We're about to start," Madi called.

"Oh! Why did you yell? You scared me!" I said, no longer able to pretend.

It was around ten p.m. We put the benches in the church

together along one side of the room so that we could use them as a bed that night. Everyone sat in a circle close enough to be able to touch the person next to them. After fruitless attempts to persuade me to join them, they continued without me in their circle. Joe, the leader, sat on a chair close to the wall and gave instructions. There was no electricity in the church. Candles that we had brought were the only source of light. They flickered near the window.

I sat right next to Joe with my camera. I turned my head to look at the image of Jesus that hung in the center of the front part of the church. It looked very dramatic in the flickering dim light that danced on Jesus's face and upper body. There were two angels with their wings spread. One was on either side of the Jesus statue. They had looked lovely when I first entered the church, but now their faces had changed. I felt the presence of sorrow and evil. I can't explain exactly why, but I was afraid.

I couldn't sit still. I turned to my friends - their faces revealed utter peace and calm. They sat straight with closed eyes. It was a time of silence. Then I was aware of my breathing becoming louder and louder. Suddenly, images seemed to be closing in on me. I felt that I was being suffocated, as if the angels were flying near us. I could feel the wind from their flapping wings.

Without any forewarning, Joe began shaking wildly. I was so scared my arms went numb. The rest of the group began shaking. I regretted not joining them. If I had, I reasoned, I would not be so terrified. I raised my camera to take a picture, but then I thought I might see something truly terrifying through the lens so I put my camera away.

Alex was completely out of control. His upper body was swaying wildly and his arms were waving madly. A candle was knocked over. I rushed over and put out the candle. I stood, watching everyone shaking and murmuring. I again regretted not participating. Somehow, I regained a sense of the present and tried to hold Alex who, by this time, was banging his head on the floor. I couldn't stop him. I didn't know what to do. I went up to Madi and patted his shoulder, but he did not respond.

I went back to Alex and put a jacket under his head. Then the

scientist's wife started screaming and pulling at her hair. I jumped. I was totally unready for what I was experiencing and seeing. I went to Joe and hit his head with the Bible he had earlier placed by his side. When he returned to a more normal state, I was calm enough to observe a chaotic scene that was strangely miraculous. They had obviously been possessed by a spirit. There isn't any other way to explain how a normal human would jerk out their own hair and speak in a language that they did not understand, but made sense to Joe, who explained after the ritual what everyone had said while they were possessed.

It was amusing to watch Madi making all sorts of faces and gestures that so sharply contrasted with his usual personality. I couldn't control myself and laughed.

Joe waved me over and said, "A mountain deity has possessed Madi."

I believed that. It was all taking place in front of my eyes. I just couldn't believe the possibility that Madi, whom I had known for a year, was capable of putting on such an act.

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"Wake up, we're back home," Madi said.

"You didn't sleep last night. You look tired," Joe said, handing me my bag.

I got out of the vehicle and said, "I can't believe what happened last night. If we weren't unpacking from the trip, I would think it was all just a dream." I then sat down near Joe in the sitting room.

I had thousands of questions for my friends but, somehow, I never found the right time to ask them. I thought I was trying to deny something. It was a confusing experience, waking up thinking about what I had seen on the holy mountain, and then walking downstairs and seeing the same people engulfed in the same ordinary life dramas as everyone else.

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A few months later, we were drinking around a table. Before I became totally drunk, I asked them where that Buddha image on Mount Banahaw was from. I'm still looking for an answer to that question.