

# THE PRINCE-CHARMING SYNDROME: CASE HISTORY OF AN IMAGINARY SUITOR\*

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## *Introduction*

Of the many creatures of the Philippine spirit world, attention is directed to the group called *tamao* in western Negros, and *ingkanto* in eastern Negros, in the Visayan Islands. The term is unsatisfactorily translated variously as "fairy" or "elf." Lieban (1962:307) describes the *ingkanto* of the Dumaguete area as "spirits which can assume human form." He continues: "Generally *ingkantos* remain invisible, but sometimes observers see them in dreams or visions . . . [They] often are not only handsome or beautiful; they are very rich and powerful as well. They also are dangerous, and it is thought that contact with them may lead to illness or death."

The presence of such creatures is not new to the folk history of the Visayas. Millington and Maxfield in 1906 discuss the "tamawos" as one of three kinds of spirits found in the Visayas at that time. These men (Millington and Maxfield 1906:205) add that the *tamawo* (or *tamao*) "are not especially bad, although sometimes mischievous, and accustomed to kidnap children, in order to make them like themselves." About their residences, the authors note that they "contain handsome furniture, and usually have in them beautiful young ladies who do their utmost to induce the child whom the *tamawo*

has captured to partake of their food, since if a mortal once eats of their food he becomes for all time a *tamawo* like themselves.'

The *tamao* are considered a different order of creature from the *aswang* (witches), and are not to be confused with the latter and more feared category.

Of the several types of *tamao* described by informants during the author's 13-month residence in two rural barrios of the western Visayas, only one kind will be considered here. As described further by Lieban (1962:308), these "attractive *ingkantos* generally are seen by human beings of the opposite sex, and sexual motives often are expressed in relationships which people have with *ingkantos*." This could be the "Prince Charming" type, as it was subsequently labeled by Pal (1965).

The above descriptions match well those encountered by the author in the town of Ilog, Negros Occidental, in the lowland barrio of Maayo (a pseudonym), where the informant in the present case study was a resident.

## *Background*

The informant, who shall be called Maria, was 23 years old, unmarried, and a graduate of the town Catholic High School. She was born and raised in the barrio. Her community consisted of about 100 families whose main source of income was from wage labor on the nearby sugarcane farms. Maria lived (and slept) with her widowed mother in their bamboo home, which they shared with her older married

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brother, his wife, and their eight children. In 1965, Maria was to enter a regional Catholic college to train to become a high school teacher.

Her mother reported that she (the mother) had been visited by a male *tamao* prior to her own marriage years ago, but that these visits had ceased when she married. The mother explains her own facial deformity as the work of the *tamao*. She claims that when she was 14 years old, and was picking a certain kind of leaf that turned out to have belonged to a *tamao*, her mouth began hurting. Soon her lower lips developed permanent slits in them. Given the mother's own encounters with the *tamao* as a background, the story of Maria can be turned to, with much of it given in her own words.

### *Informant's Story*

Maria states that "things" began to happen to her from the age of 16 years. At that time, she woke up one morning to find a man peeking at her. She was frightened and woke her mother. When they approached him, he vanished. None of the neighbors who had passed by had seen him. The next morning, they both saw a woman with long hair looking at them, but she, too, vanished. Other times strange things happened around their house. For instance, a bunch of bananas would disappear, clothes would start shaking, or food which Maria prepared would become lost.

The main event of her story happened when Maria was 18 years old, and attending her *barrio* fiesta dance. Except for the changing of all names, this is her story as she told it.

While we were standing there, near the band, there was a gentleman approached me to dance. . . . I was excited 'cause it was my relative by the name of Manong Sisong, I was so happy, we joke [each] other, but finally he said to me that "I came here only to visit you."

So I was so frightened, I don't know what shall I do. He said to me again that he know[s] me already. . . . I become warm or sometimes cold, and tremble. But I don't mind [i.e., I ignore] it. So we continued on dancing. My nervous[ness] started again when I saw Manong Sisong dancing with the other girl. So I said to myself that this man [with] whom I was

dancing is not Manong Sisong anymore. I immediately said to him that we will sit down, even though the music is not yet finished. He also go[es] with me without any words, but when he was about to go, he said: "You will not dance any more, ha? I'll meet you again." Then he disappeared. . . . after while I left my group and went alone around the dancing hall. "I want to see him again," I said to myself. I stand near the gate and waited for him to pass by, but nothing. I did not dance any more, to obey him. I might be sick or whatever may happen to me.

We went home 'cause it is already 4:00 o'clock in the morning, but when we reached home I don't want to sleep. . . . I have not told anybody about my story. I put it into a secret. Three days passed after our fiesta. I told my story to one of my best friend[s]. And she was also surprised, that when I told her that I dance[d], she will not believe[d] [me] because she did not see me dancing that night. Some of my friends said that they saw me there but I'm not dancing. . . . I fell sick for almost one week. I was brought to a *tambalan* [local folk healer] named Tiya Rosa. She said that the man [with] whom I dance[d] is not a real human being like us, but he is different from us, in other words he is a *tamao*. She said that this *tamao* is in love with me.

Later on, Maria was sick with a high fever, and she saw the same man again during her illness. She described this meeting as follows.

That man approach me, the second time that we meet again. He is very handsome, tall, white complexion, with curly hair. He invited me to go to their house, so I went with him also. We play in their yard; they have a beautiful house. I was introduced to his parents, they invited me to eat, but, thanks to God, I did not taste any of their foods. He introduced also his name as Raul, without a family name. While we were playing in the swing, he said to me, "Maria, just take away your [Catholic] medallion." But I will not take it [off] so he ran away. Then I was surprised because I was already sitting in a jackfruit tree.

Three other people have seen Raul too. This happened two years later, when Maria was 20, and was boarding with her mother's sister in the town in order to attend high school. Raul came one time to call on her there. He was seen by Maria's aunt, uncle, and niece. Maria was not at home, and when Raul learned she was at school, he went there, found her, and walked with her to the river bank. She reported:

"This *tamao* said to me that we will meet again. He is taking [studying] medicine. He is studying in France. Sometimes I laugh 'cause it is so unbelievable, but it is true."

Shortly after this incident, her aunt became so concerned about the many unexplained

noises, voices, and vanishing food around the house that she sent the girl back to be under more careful watch of her mother in the barrio. Both the aunt and the mother were worried that Maria would become "lost", i.e., would be taken by the tamao and become one herself. If so, she would be at least invisible to her family, if not dead.

### *Analysis*

Some of the reasons why Maria may have accepted the existence of a tamao as a suitor can be examined in light of her local culture. The author here considers four such likely motivations.

1. *Wish-fulfillment.* An examination of the characteristics of the tamao reveals him to be tall, white, and with curly hair. These are all scarce, but (rightly or wrongly) desired characteristics among Maria and her friends. Also, he had a beautiful house and much food, in contrast, again, to her own subsistence-level community. Finally, he was a medical student, and was studying in France. Medicine is a valued occupation among the barrio people, and Maria herself has expressed a desire to travel to foreign countries. Thus the qualities of her Prince Charming would be similar to those which many a barrio girl might daydream about, tamao or not.

2. *Sex-related expression.* This feature may overlap the previous category of wish-fulfillment. But it becomes more specific when involving an eligible young girl who is expected to be shy in speaking of, and being with, men who are not her relatives. Maria accepted the dancing partner (she had not yet danced in public), thinking he was her "older brother" (manong). When she realized it wasn't, she asked to sit down. Later, however, she wandered around to look for him, a very uncharacteristic behavior for a country girl. When she was able to speak of him, she talked openly of a fine young man desiring her companionship. This tamao then provided her with an opportunity to think and talk about a man more boldly than would be accept-

able, if he were real. It may also have enhanced her self-confidence as a prospective mate.

3. *Explanation of illness.* Maria reported being sick for a week after she first met her tamao. She sought a folk healer to cure her. This tambalan advised her not to keep such experiences to herself, as she might go insane. While the latter advice may be good psychology, the former explanation may not be good medicine. It is possible that she could have been coming down with an illness the night she went to the dance. This might have made her more susceptible to imagining things or even hallucinating. It will be remembered that the second time she saw Raul she was sick with a high fever. No modern medical help was sought, as the cause was attributed to the tamao, whose workings are not considered within the realm of the modern M.D. It was also in keeping with the barrio residents' reluctance to approach distant and expensive strangers for medical help.

However, physical illness would obviously not suffice as the sole explanation of the existence of either the Prince-Charming syndrome or the tamao in general.

4. *Dependency.* The acknowledged existence of the tamao suitor by both Maria and her mother, has drawn the two closer together. They, and especially the mother, are worried about their forthcoming separation for Maria's first year of college. Her mother is afraid Maria will become "lost" to the tamao. Perhaps this can be compared to the "separation anxiety" many parents and children feel when the young ones leave home for the first time to go off to college or to get married.

Regarding the latter, Maria's mother has told her she can never get married because any potential suitor would be scared off by the mysterious works of the tamao. Her mother tells her she is destined to remain single. Thus with no husband or eventual children to distract her, Maria's chief emotional dependency can be expected to remain longer with her mother.

### *Dealing with the Tamao*

In attempting to cope with her Prince Charming, Maria has sought the advice of her mother, the tambalan, and her priest. Her mother, as a firm believer in the creatures, reinforces Maria's belief in them. She is inclined to continue offering explanations of unusual happenings and noises to the work of the tamao. She encourages Maria to go to the tambalan to get further help and support whenever she needs it. The tambalan offers practical suggestions, "home remedies," and folk rituals to be performed to fend off the undesirable works of the tamao.

But the Catholic priest is another matter. He told Maria that to believe in the tamao is just a superstition. He insisted that the creatures are not real. To believe in them is not only against the Catholic religion, but is also a sin against God. The priest gave her a special blessing, advises her to pray, and to wear her scapular and medallions all the time. These serve as reminders of her Catholicism and to protect her from the tamao.

### *Follow-up Interviews*

As a postscript to the above events, it might be interesting to report that the first follow-up interview, after Maria's first year of college, revealed a more mature and self-confident young woman. She had experienced a few unusual episodes during that first term, but none after the end of the first semester. Raul had not been back to visit her at all since that day on the river bank. She thinks she has discouraged her Prince Charming "by means of praying." She does not think he will be coming back to bother her any more. She wears her medallions all the time.

Although she did not say so, it can be inferred that her exposure to a slightly more educated group of people at the college and the associated religious activities has strengthened her Catholicism. An equally important factor would seem to be her diminished contact with the local barrio people, especially her mother. In her home place, if she were disturbed by an unexplained incident, she would have sometimes

to wait as long as a month for the local priest to come to the barrio. Even then she could only have a hurried consultation as others waited. The tambalan, on the other hand, was close by. In college, she had daily access to a priest, and her "family tambalan" was farther away. The stimulation of her classes and busy extra-curricular activities may have left less time for her to dwell on any potential incidents. These same incidents might have taken on a tamao-related meaning had she been back at her more leisurely life in the country, with her mother, and near the tambalan.

A second follow-up interview took place in 1969, after Maria had graduated from college and was in her first year of teaching. She was teaching science and Pilipino in a newly-organized Catholic barrio high school up in the mountains of central Negros. During this interview, Maria expressed even more self-confidence in her mastery of the distractions of the tamao. She could easily say that he has been permanently discouraged and would not be coming back any more. He had not reappeared to her at all in the intervening years, nor does she expect him to.

Immediately after imparting the above information, Maria volunteered that her main problem now is with some of her male students—those who are taller and older than she. She has been able to maintain discipline, but it has been difficult. One of the problems has been that they tease her with aswang stories of their area. But she alleges that she does not believe these stories "because of science."

She has been able to get back to her home barrio to see her mother only when the school has a long vacation period. At the time of this last interview, she had no plans or prospects for marriage, at age 27.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

To summarize, the main motivating features of the Prince-Charming syndrome were suggested to be wish-fulfillment, sex-related ex-

pression, explanation of illness, and dependency. It will be noted that most of these features can be found in many families, whether a belief in the *tamao* is present or not. The features become significant only when they are attributed to a preternatural being, who is available as part of the cultural heritage. As part of a *tamao* complex, the above-mentioned characteristics tend to support and perpetuate belief in the creatures. These motivating features are so ordinary they are easy to accept. Because of this, at least a partial explanation can be offered why many rural Filipinos are reluctant to give up their beliefs in such spirits as the *tamao*, in spite of the teaching of the Church.

In Maria's case, her continuing contact with the priests and other educated Catholics, and her diminishing contact with her family in the

barrio are seen as the significant factors in helping her overcome the influence of her Prince Charming.

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