

Exploring the Contemporary Urban Legend of Maria Labo

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They say that she is a vampire, and it was towards the end of summer that she came to town. In these days when split-second text messaging is the norm, the urban legend that is *Maria Labo* spread like the proverbial wildfire. Sensational reports of vampire sightings filled radio airwaves. Grainy photocopies that gave the vampire the face of a lank-haired lady with eerie eyes and a distinctive facial scar were eagerly passed around. The more cautious opted to stay indoors after sunset to be on the safe side. Incidents of violent encounters between rival juvenile gangs dwindled to almost nil, a welcome respite from the escalating outbreak of nightly disturbances courtesy of the restless young denizens of the downtown streets of Davao City (Sienes 2002, 8; Tesiorna 2002, 1). One night, the police reportedly apprehended a man dressed in a dark cape who attempted to break into a house. When a local paper bannered the vampire's alleged cellular phone number, many people called the number to be thrilled by a recorded howl before being disconnected (Matela 2002, 6). The experience took less than six seconds. The server network registered it as a "dropped call." It cost nothing.

What's the story on Maria Labo? Why is she on everybody's lips? Why does my 8-year-old daughter want to go next door to "exorcise" Maria Labo from the premises? Why is my soon-to-graduate student who is majoring in Psychology seeking reassurance that vampires in general, and Maria Labo in particular, are not real? Why is the local television talk show calling to ask me to give a three-minute sociological take on the vampire phenomenon? Why does my editor want me to do a story on this?

Labo, pronounced in Davao with the accent on the first syllable, means vague or unclear in Visayan. *Vague Maria* doesn't sound like the kind of *bansag* that Filipinos would use, given their penchant for monickers that evoke more obvious visual recall (Medina 1991, 20), like *Pepe Pilay* (Lame Pepe) or *Trudis Liit* (Little Trudis). This became a nagging issue until, in the course of my research, I found that the Maria

Labo legend is actually a migratory legend. Local media practitioners¹ who traced the origins of the Maria Labo story have it that she got to Davao from Digos; before that, from General Santos; before that, from Koronadal; and before that, from a town called Surallah in South Cotabato where descendants of Ilongo migrants reside. I can only surmise that these Ilongo settlers have maintained ties with their relatives back in Iloilo as the Maria Labo story, according to my mother whom I left behind in the city of my youth, was talk of the town there towards the end of 2001. Ilongos pronounce labo with the accent on the second syllable, and it does not mean vague or unclear. It means 'to chop with a bolo.' Now, that sounds a bit more typical of bansags.

An urban legend is a widely dispersed rumor that essays the origin of an urban social phenomenon. It therefore consists of unsubstantiated and unverifiable information spread informally, often by word of mouth (Macionis 1999, 612-614). Tales like Maria Labo especially thrive in this atmosphere of ambiguity because an audience that has very little definitive knowledge about vampires—what they look like, what they can do, and how to become one—would naturally find the topic fascinating to discuss. The fascination takes hold and fuels in turn an exponential increase in recipients. Some people just cannot help sounding out friends and acquaintances in a vain search for conclusive and authoritative explanation. They also cannot help tacking on a humorous and fanciful spin to the story as they pass it along, thereby enhancing the general appeal of the continuing intrigue by raising more questions faster than answers could be given. But, while some urban legends have the potential to build up mass hysteria, I somehow suspect that the speculative rumor mill will stop grinding the Maria Labo story when the novelty wears off, much in the same way that the effect of a milder form of viral infection tapers off after it has run its course.

It is amazing how some details of the Maria Labo story have remained consistent as the legend spread around. The stories from friends and strangers alike repeat similar particularities, a tribute to the reliability of instant text messaging technology that is decisively replacing the relatively slow "word of mouth" with the digital velocity of the "word of thumb." But perhaps what is more of note to students of social behavior is the nature of the information that people find worthy to pass along when they have the means to do so. Here is a general outline of the legend that is Maria Labo:

Maria was a nurse or a caregiver to a rich old man in England. Racked by homesickness for the two children she left behind ten years

ago, she asked leave from her employer to go home. The boss, so the story goes, was a vampire who was soon to die. He took pity on Maria, but would only allow her to go home if she would promise to turn the Philippines into a land of vampires. For this, the old man allegedly gave Maria two million pounds and a magic stone that, when swallowed, would turn her into a vampire.

Maria went home to her husband and children. One night, she swallowed the magic stone and it caused her to cut up her children with a bolo. Her husband, a policeman, wrested the bolo from her and delivered a chopping blow to her face. Gravely wounded, Maria fled the house. Maria, now marked by a distinctive facial scar from the bolo, is reported to resurface every now and then to attack people.

It is interesting to note that strains of rural mythology litter the urban legends in the Philippines.² Consider the snake twin supposedly kept in the basement dungeon of a local department store. Rumor has it that unwitting users of the fitting rooms provide the snake's daily requirement for fresh blood.³ Remember the *aswang*⁴ stories in Tondo in years past? Or the white lady along Balete Drive in Quezon City? Until our generation, children learned of these preternatural creatures and their ilk from our *yaya*'s bedtime stories. These days, the television, that ubiquitous electronic nursemaid, has supplanted the human ones as purveyors of this cultural heritage. Not only do kids get to hear of these mystical beings, they actually see some inspired interpretations by the art crew behind the television camera. Some *yayas* enhance the scare value of TV fare to entertain and, more often than not, discipline their young charges through role-playing and imaginative storytelling. Since visual images are retained longer and stronger in our memory, these elements of folk belief are likely to live on and become part of our lives as a people. On black nights—courtesy of the local government's effort to trim its energy costs by switching off every other streetlight (Maxey 2002, 4)—the legions of the dark are likely to be brought out from our collective psyche, with our without help from Maria Labo.

The vampire is not a part of indigenous Filipino folk belief. It may have been introduced to our national consciousness in the late 1940s, perhaps through the vampire films of Bela Lugosi. In the 1950s, the vampire was used as a psy-war weapon against the communist-led Huk rebellion.⁵ Lt. Col. Edward G. Lansdale, then Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) station chief in Manila, ordered a study of Filipino superstitions, lore and myth (Smith 1976, 84-85). The OPC was known as the "dirty tricks department" of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and was tasked to "conduct covert psychological warfare, covert

political action, and covert paramilitary action” (Smith, 55)- including sabotage, countersabotage, and plain, good oldfashioned rumor mongering. What Lansdale did was to kill a communist guerilla, puncture his neck with fang marks, and leave the dead body under the balete tree for residents to find in the morning.⁶ It was designed to make the residents flee from their villages out of fear of aswangs and thus dry up support for the Huks. The American-concocted vampire had blended with the local aswang. This may explain why the Philippine vampire today is a woman, instead of a man as usually portrayed in the West.⁷

But, Maria Labo does not really meet the requirements for a vampire. She did not drink vampire blood to become a vampire, for one. Her supposed powers come from a stone that sets off a schizophrenic transformation similar to what turns Mars Ravelo’s girl-next-door *Narda* into superheroine *Darna*.⁸ Vampires are supposedly immortal and their aging process gets reversed every time they feed (Kalogridis 1994). The image then of an old, decrepit vampire languishing on his deathbed and begging to be free from this cruel world is incongruous, to say the least. Maria’s boss did not have to die or be on the brink of death to pass on his powers. This is more in keeping with the local myth on the rule of succession for aswangs and *maranhigs*⁹ (zombies). Moreover, where vampires can purportedly fly, pass through walls or translocate, Maria tracks the highway to the city, imitating the observed pattern of increasing rural to urban migration of the human variety. Vampires go for the jugular with their fangs. They do not need to chop up people to get at the blood. Just watch them on *Angel* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* weeknights on TV. Or rent the movie adaptation of Anne Rice’s *Interview with a Vampire* (Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, and Antonio Banderas!) or, more recently, *Queen of the Damned*.

The human mind holds a morbid and compulsive fascination for the mystical (Baigent, et al. 1989, 133-201). This explains why it is a popular subject for the big and small screens. But one danger spawned by these popularly available cinematic renditions of vampiric legend is that the visual images they present become subject to personal perception. They are poor avenues by which to expound on the vampire mythology of the West because the viewer who is unfamiliar with the subject is likely to take it in by filtering it through the pattern resonances in his worldview, and to translate and adapt it to his own world of experience (Cridler, et al. 1983, 110).

For academicians therefore, it pays to hear the Maria Labo story with a Filipino ear. There is no mother out there who cannot empathize

with Maria’s homesickness and longing for the babies she left behind, especially in the time of the feminization of migrant labor when more and more mothers are leaving their homes to work abroad, often as nurse or caregiver (Bruce, et al. 1995). Wherever they are, people who have been raised in Filipino homes are likely to inject personalism to business relationships with their employers. Terminating the employer-employee relationship has to be formalized. We do not walk out on people even if our contract of services may have long expired. Reared in rigid social structures, we are likely to take as *utang na loob*, a personal favor that needs to be repaid, the consent of our employer for us to do what is within our right to do. Much more so when our employer, to whose commands we have always acceded, makes a *pakinsap* or a gentle request (Panopio, et al. 1995). The mission becomes especially binding when the request is made and paid for by a dying man. If folktales be valid indicators of expected cultural behavior, it seems like relatives and caregivers could not deny the suffering of dying aswangs and maranhigs. So why should Maria not accord the same courtesy to a dying vampire?

Maria’s tale resonates with the social values we all grew up with. The storyline, absurd as it may seem, plays out these values as motives that inexorably drew Maria to her tragedy. We are familiar with these nonrational excuses for behavior. Everyday, cheap telenovela fare keeps many of us hopelessly riveted and entangled in heaps of improbable situations and the emotion-laden moral dilemmas modern fictional heroes and heroines must contend with.¹⁰ These elements enter into our subjective reality, and as we mull over dinner these fictitious characters’ latest escapades and the imbroglio they get into, we talk about them as if they live right next door, such that we are privy to their reasons and motivations. We even take sides. This is not surprising as, closer to home, nonrational motives characterize our very own modes of operating as we cope with everyday reality (Quisumbing, cited in Ortigas 1995, 148-154). Art imitates life. Life imitates art. And so long as fiction echoes shades of our real selves, we can relate and find it both plausible and appealing.

What has Maria’s story brought to us aside from clearing up our streets of prospective victims and perpetrators of juvenile mayhem? My vegetable vendor, for one, is especially pleased that her teenage sons stay home at night sending text messages to friends about the latest on Maria. But beyond this, the vampire legend has delivered more utilitarian benefits that may be responsible in part for its propagation especially these days when Davao City households have a lot to worry about. In

the last quarter, fuel prices have gone up by an average of five percent (Davao City Price Index '01-'02). Rice now sells at P28 from P21 per kilo four months back, an exorbitant rate of increase that demands much microeconomic contortions from even the most creative homemaker. In May when students started enrolling, school dues went up by an average of 10 percent. Every six weeks thereafter, the family has to tighten the constricting belt further to pay the dues for exams. With no great economic miracle looming in the horizon and seemingly no hope of government support in the form of price controls over these indispensable items on the family budget, the less fortunate among us are feeling the pinch (BAYAN, et al. 2002, 11). Maria Labo, with her immediate visceral appeal, serves to divert our attention from the monotonous worry over our life situation that stubbornly refuses to be within our power to alter for the better. Here, at least, is a matter we can do something about, if only to pass her story along. At the same time, the fear she brings up to the surface relieves us of the vague stirrings of subliminal anxiety caused by our very real daily concerns.

And as befits any story sketched by a collective of Filipino minds, the tragedy that is Maria has trite, moral counterpoints simmering below the surface: *Wealth has a price. The price is one's soul*. Somewhere at the back of the minds of this story's listeners and propagators alike lurks a degree of fatalistic acceptance, if not downright satisfaction, for their more deplorable lot in life. Maria helps us settle down to cope with our unrelenting financial worries. We would rather deal with this familiar drudgery than take on the moral dilemmas that being a vampire brings, inheriting two million pounds notwithstanding.

And as summer draws to a close, Maria comes to town. Maybe, like the sources of our collective anxiety, she too is here to stay.¹¹

Notes

¹The Davao-based ABS-CBN talk show *Misis.com* featured the Maria Labo sensation on 30 August 2002. Interviewed were reporters Joel Ramirez of ABS-CBN AM Radio Davao and Andy Teodoro of Cotabato Inquirer who reported on the story extensively. The show ran out of airtime due to the deluge of phoned in questions and reactions.

²To my mind, this suggests that people never totally leave a place—that they psychologically bring it along as inertia of mindset as they go through changing environments—such that if one were to convert Juan's barrio into a city, Juan will still be "barriotic" to some degree.

³A psychic life connection purportedly exists between the snake and his human twin. The relatives are constrained to keep the snake alive lest the human twin dies. Snakes feed by eating their victims whole. But an interesting twist I've heard about the department store snake is that it had earlier on developed a taste for human blood and that it is a diet of fresh blood that keeps it alive.

⁴An *aswang* is a mythical creature believed to be an old hag with scraggly, unkempt hair, bloodshot eyes, and a very long tongue. Mostly, she lives deep in the forest. She's a shape shifter who eats human flesh.

⁵Huk was short for Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon (Hukbalahap – People's Army Against Japan) which was organized by the communists during the Second World War. After the war, it was renamed Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan (HMB) and waged an unsuccessful revolution to topple the government. The Huks were defeated under the Magsaysay Administration. See Taber 1977.

⁶I regret to report failure at chasing down the reference for this allegation. I especially remember this because it was part of my final exam in Filipino Psychology in Diliman.

⁷Woman leader Luz C. Ilagan contends that the belief that aswangs are women are a legacy from misogynist Spanish conquerors' successful attempt to vilify the *baylan*, women spiritual leaders held in high esteem in pre-colonial communities, in order to supplant their ascendancy with Catholic dogma and power structure.

⁸Darna is a local comic book superheroine, since adapted to the movie screen by the likes of Vilma Santos, Sharon Cuneta, Nanette Medved, and Anjanette Abayari.

⁹In the Hiligaynon tradition, the *maranhigs* are seemingly dead during the day, but are awake and active at night. They suffer from an adverse condition of their *dungan* (sleep spirit), and the only way they can be freed is when someone volunteers to take over their condition. It is advised to bury the maranhig head over heels during the day so that he could not get up and roam at night.

¹⁰Recurrent plots, for example, involve the unwitting reunion between mothers and their daughters who got lost or stolen at birth. One could not help but wonder if we can trust Filipino mothers to keep their baby girls within their line of sight.

¹¹The Maria Labo scare went on to Iligan City around July and Zamboanga City in October this year, around the time of the bombings that killed a US soldier among others. The macabre joke going around in Zamboanga is that people are more afraid of Maria than they are of the Abu Sayyaf. That many people are opting to stay indoors after dusk seems to indicate that there is some truth to it.

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