

# The witch by edilberto k. tiempo

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The Witch By Edilberto K. Tiempo When I was twelve years old, I used to go to Libas, about nine kilometers from the town, to visit my favorite uncle, Tio Sabelo, the headteacher of the barrio school there. I like going to Libas because of the many things to eat at my uncle's house: cane sugar syrup, candied meat of young coconut, corn and rice cakes, ripe jackfruit, guavas from trees growing wild on a hill not far from Tio Sabelo's house. It was through these visits that I heard many strange stories about Minggay Awok. Awok is the word for witch in southern Leyte.

Minggay was known as a witch even beyond Libas, in five outlying sitios, and considering that not uncommonly a man's nearest neighbor was two or three hills away, her notoriety was wide. Minggay lived in a small, low hut as the back of the creek separating the barrios of Libas and Sinit-an. It squatted like a soaked hen on a steep incline and below it, six or seven meters away, two trails forked, one going to Libas and the other to Mahangin, a mountain sitio. The hut leaned dangerously to the side where the creek water ate away large chunks of earth during the rainy season.

It had two small openings, a small door through which Minggay probably had to stoop to pass, and a window about two feet square facing the creek. The window was screened by a frayed jute sacking which fluttered eerily even in the daytime. What she had in the hut nobody seemed to know definitely. One daring fellow who boasted of having gone inside it when Minggay was out in her clearing on a hill nearby said he had seen dirty stoppered bottles hanging from the bamboo slats of the cogon thatch.

Some of the bottles contained scorpions, centipedes, beetles, bumble bees, and other insects; others were filled with ash-colored powder and dark

liquids. These bottles contained the paraphernalia of her witchcraft. Two or three small bottles she always had with her hanging on her waistband with a bunch of iron keys, whether she went to her clearing or to the creek to catch shrimps or gather fresh-water shells, or even when she slept.

It was said that those who had done her wrong never escaped her vengeance, in the form of festering carbuncles, chronic fevers that caused withering of the skin, or a certain disease of the nose that eventually ate the nose out. Using an incantation known only to her, Minggay would take out one insect from a bottle, soak it in colored liquid or roll it in powder, and with a curse let it go to the body of her victim; the insect might be removed and the disease cured only rarely through intricate rituals of an expensive tambalan. Thus Minggay was feared in Libas and the surrounding barrios.

There had been attempts to murder her, but in some mysterious way she always came out unscathed. A man set fire to her hut one night, thinking to burn her with it. The hut quickly burned down, but Minggay was unharmed. On another occasion a man openly declared that he had killed her, showing the blood-stained bolo with which he had stabbed her; a week later she was seen hobbling to her clearing. This man believed Minggay was the cause of the rash that his only child had been carrying for over a year. One day, so the story went, meeting his wife, Minggay asked to hold her child. She didn't want to offend Minggay.

As the witch gave the child back she said, " He has a very smooth skin. " A few days later the boy had skin eruptions all over his body that never left him. Minggay's only companions were a lean, barren sow and a few chickens, all of them charcoal black. The sow and the chickens were allowed

to wander in the fields, and even if the sow dug up sweet potatoes and the chickens pecked rice or corn grain drying in the sun, they were not driven away by the neighbors because they were afraid to arouse Minggay's wrath. Besides the sow and the chickens, Minggay was known to have a wakwak and a sigbin.

Those who claimed to have seen the sigbin described it as a queer animal resembling a kangaroo: the forelegs were shorter than the hind ones: its fanlike ears made a flapping sound when it walked. The wakwak was a nocturnal bird, as big and black as a crow. It gave out raucous cries when a person in the neighborhood had just died. The bird was supposed to be Minggay's messenger, and the sigbin carried her to the grave; then the witch dug up the corpse and feasted on it. The times when I passed by the hut and saw her lean sow and her black chickens, I wondered if they transformed themselves into fantastic creatures at night.

Even in the daytime I dreaded the possibility of meeting her; she might accost me on the trail near her hut, say something about my face or any part of it, and then I might live the rest of my life with a harelip, a sunken nose, or crossed eyes. But I never saw Minggay in her house or near the premises. There were times when I thought she was only a legend, a name to frighten children from doing mischief. But then I almost always saw her sow digging banana roots or wallowing near the trail and the black chickens scratching for worms or pecking grains in her yard, and the witch became very real indeed.

Once I was told to go to Libas with a bottle of medicine for Tio Sabelo's sick wife. I started from the town at half past five and by the time I saw the <https://assignbuster.com/the-witch-by-edilberto-k-tiempo/>

balete tree across the creek from Minggay's hut, I could hardly see the trail before me. The balete was called Minggay's tree, for she was known to sit on one of the numerous twisting vines that formed its grotesque trunk to wait for a belated passer-by. The balete was a towering monstrous shadow; a firefly that flitted among the vines was an evil eye plucked out searching for its socket.

I wanted to run back, but the medicine had to get to Tio Sabelo's wife that night. I wanted to push through the thick underbrush to the dry part of the creek to avoid the balete, but I was afraid of snakes. I had discarded the idea of a coconut frond torch because the light would catch the attention of the witch, and when she saw it was only a little boy... Steeling myself I tried to whistle as I passed in the shadow of the balete, its overhanging vines like hairy arms ready to hoist and strangle me among the branches. Emerging into the stony bed of the creek, I saw Minggay's hut.

The screen in the window waved in the faint light of the room and I thought I saw the witch peering behind it. As I started going up the trail by the hut, each moving clump and shadow was a crouching old woman. I had heard stories of Minggay's attempts to waylay travelers in the dark and suck their blood. Closing my eyes twenty yards from the hut of the witch, I ran up the hill. A few meters past the hut I stumbled on a low stump. I got up at once and ran again. When I reached Tio Sabelo's house I was very tired and badly shaken.

Somehow after the terror of the balete and the hut of the witch had lessened, although I always had the goose flesh whenever I passed by them after dusk. One moonlight night going home to town I heard a splashing of

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the water below Minggay's house. I thought the sound was made by the witch, for she was seen to bathe on moonlit nights in the creek, her loose hair falling on her face. It was not Minggay I saw. It was a huge animal. I was about to run thinking it was the sigbin of the witch, but when I looked at it again, I saw that it was a carabao wallowing in the creek.

One morning I thought of bringing home shrimps to my mother, and so I went to a creek a hundred yards from Tio Sabelo's house. I had with me my cousin's pana, made of a long steel rod pointed at one end and cleft at the other and shot through the hollow of a bamboo joint the size of a finger by means of a rubber band attached to one end of the joint. After wading for two hours in the creek which meandered around bamboo groves and banban and ipil clumps with only three small shrimps strung on a coconut midrib dangling from my belt, I came upon an old woman taking a bath in the shade of a catmon tree.

A brown tapis was wound around her to three fingers width above her thin chest. The bank of her left was a foot-wide ledge of unbroken boulder on which she had set a wooden basin half full of wet but still unwashed clothes. In front of her was a submerged stone pile topped by a platter size rock; on it were a heap of shredded coconut meat, a small discolored tin basin, a few lemon rinds, and bits of pounded gogo bark. The woman was soaking her sparse gray hair with the gogo suds. She must have seen me coming because she did not look surprised.

Seeing the three small shrimps hanging at my side she said, " You have a poor catch. " She looked kind. She was probably as old as my grandmother; smaller, for this old woman was two or three inches below five feet. Her eyes

looked surprisingly young, but her mouth, just a thin line above the little chin, seemed to have tasted many bitter years. " Why don't you bait them out of their hiding? Take some of this. " She gave me a handful of shredded coconut meat whose milk she had squeezed out and with the gogo suds used on her hair.

She exuded a sweet wood fragrance of gogo bark and the rind of lemons. " Beyond the first bend," she said pointing, " the water is still. Scatter the shreds there. That's where I get my shrimps. You will see some traps. If you find shrimps in them they are yours. " I mumbled my thanks and waded to the bend she had indicated. That part of the creek was like a small lake. One bank was lined by huge boulders showing long, deep fissures where the roots of gnarled dapdap trees had penetrated. The other bank was sandy, with bamboo and catmon trees leaning over, their roots sticking out in the water.

There was good shade and the air had a twilight chilliness. The water was shallow except on the rocky side, which was deep and murky. I scattered the coconut shreds around, and not long after they had settled down shrimps crawled from boles under the bamboo and catmon roots and from crevices of the boulders. It did not take me an hour to catch a midribful, some hairy with age, some heavy with eggs, moulters, dark magus, leaf-green shrimps, speckled. I saw three traps of woven bamboo strips, round-bellied and about two feet long, two hidden behind a catmon root.

I did not disturb them because I had enough shrimps for myself. " No, no, iti. Your mother will need them. You don't have enough. Besides I have freshwater crabs at home. " She looked up at me with her strange young

eyes and asked, " Do you still have a mother? " I told her I had, and a grandmother, too. " You are not from Libas, I think. This is the first time I have seen you. " I said I was from the town and my uncle was the head teacher of the Libas barrio school. " You remind me of my son when he was your age. He had bright eyes like you, and his voice was soft like yours.

I think you are a good boy. " " Where is your son now? " " I have not heard from him since he left. He went away when he was seventeen. He left in anger, because I didn't want him to marry so young. I don't know where he went, where he is. " She spread the length of a kimona on the water for a last rinsing. The flesh hanging from her skinny arms was loose and flabby. " If he's still living," she went on, " he'd be as old as your father maybe. Many times I feel in my bones he is alive, and will come back before I die. " " Your husband is still living? " He died a long time ago, when my boy was eleven. " She twisted the kimona like a rope to wring out the water. " I'm glad he died early. He was very cruel. " I looked at her, at the thin mouth, wondering about her husband's cruelty, disturbed by the manner she spoke about it. " Do you have other children? " " I wish I had. Then I wouldn't be living alone. " A woman her age, I thought, should be a grandmother and live among many children. " Where do you live? " She did not speak, but her strange young eyes were probing and looked grotesque in the old woman's face. Not far from here--the house on the high bank, across the balete. " She must have seen the fright that suddenly leaped into my face, for I thought she smiled at me queerly. " I'm going now," I said. I felt her following me with her eyes; indeed they seemed to bore a hot hole between my shoulder blades. I did not look back. Don't run, I told myself. But at the first bend of



the creek, when I knew she couldn't see me, I ran. After a while I stopped, feeling a little foolish. Such a helpless-looking little old woman couldn't be Minggay, couldn't be the witch.

I remembered her kind voice and the woodfragrance. She could be my own grandmother. As I walked the string of shrimps kept brushing against the side of my leg. I detached it from my belt and looked at the shrimps. Except for the three small ones, all of them belonged to the old woman. Her coconut shreds had coaxed them as by magic out of their hiding. The protruding eyes of the biggest, which was still alive, seemed to glare at me---and then they became the eyes of the witch. Angrily, I hurled the shrimps back into the creek.