

# Seclusion and Veiling of Women

## A Historical and Cultural Approach

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*A very select group of women existed in indigenous Philippine society which has hardly merited any account in history. These women were daughters of datus or rulers who were kept hidden in special rooms and were not allowed to be seen by any man. They remained secluded from society but their beauty and prestige were widespread. Their seclusion contributed immensely to their near-invisibility in history, except that their presence dominates the narratives of almost all the Philippine epics. In these epics, these secluded women are described in length, from their physical beauty to their abilities in the spiritual realm. The description of these young women, desired by warrior-heroes and rulers as their wives, are an uncanny guide in a closer reading of the historical texts where we find glimpses and hints of their presence once their characteristics are discovered from the epics. Even the description of the houses as well as the architecture of the Maranao house give evidence to the presence of these secluded young maidens. This paper utilizes the initial historical evidence available to show the presence of the binukot woman in indigenous society, weaving the narrative with those found in the epics and in ethnographic accounts in order to glimpse through the veil and reveal the binukot. However, it has only served to show how much she still remains secluded and veiled in history.*

The study of pre-colonial Philippine society remains to be a challenge to scholars: not only are the sources scant and meager, but

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those that have appeared have been mediated and filtered by the compiler or recorder, almost always a foreigner viewing a strange event or ritual or observing local conditions in passing that they may appear unimportant. Likewise, this witnessing is recorded in the foreigner's language which is bound by its own culture, categories, and meanings so that the record may appear to be describing the indigenous subject who may actually manage to remain unseen and unheard. This "silent and invisible place of the native"<sup>1</sup> in the written account gives rise to methodological challenges in the effort to push back the horizon of the historical account in order to outline Philippine society prior to colonization. There is likewise the danger of familiar paradigms and easy dichotomies that may hinder a genuine attempt at understanding the indigenous set-up. In this current topic on women and the practice of seclusion in indigenous society, the challenge becomes doubly formidable because this particular group of women was precisely intended to be hidden. This reveals the widening awareness of the extent to which Philippine indigenous culture and history remain unknown to us.

Historical studies of women in indigenous Philippine society have dealt with a particular group of women who have been most visible in the accounts, the *babaylan* (animist shaman). The *babaylan* dominates most accounts of prehispanic society, and they were a particular target either of vilification or of conversion by the friars and priests. The *babaylan's* presence continues to be recorded in the ethnographic records of various Philippine groups. The *babaylan's* role in the animist society has been clearly designated, particularly since animist practices and rituals require mediators between the physical world and the spiritual realm. *Babaylans* have been studied in relation to the animist belief system and its influences on agricultural communities in the Visayas, including its political role in history.<sup>2</sup> The "farther Indian" origin of peasant animism was traced as it had consequences on Philippine social and political history and may indicate a wider and deeper influence in the country.<sup>3</sup> The *babaylan* role in Philippine history

has according to her functions in indigenous society and her transformations during the colonial period.<sup>4</sup> From the perspective of gender and religion, it was not so much her role as her overall presence in society that was traced from the time of European contact, as the process of her “negation and elimination” marked by conflict and resistance.<sup>5</sup> The babaylan were organized and they were organizers of social and political movements and they abound in the historical narratives with their rituals and resistance.

This paper depicts another group of women, young maidens who are unmarried but are destined for marriage; more often than not, they are unseen in history. They have been intended precisely to be hidden from view, even in indigenous society, the practice of which gives them their name, *binukot*.

There is very sparse mention of the *binukot* in the historical accounts, thus making them unaccounted in general Philippine history books. They have not been rendered as a separate class or group in any of these histories, let alone recognized. Their historical presence is mentioned primarily by Fr. Francisco Alcina, SJ and only very briefly, with regard to their physical appearance. It is from Fr. Alcina that we also have what seems to be the only illustration thus available of the *binukot*.<sup>6</sup> This indicates the greater depth of Fr. Alcina’s immersion in Visayan culture. The term *binukot* exists in the vocabularies, and W. Henry Scott makes various scattered references to the *binukot* in Visayan society, although he does not treat the topic separately.<sup>7</sup> Historically, they have remained indistinct due to the elusive nature of this group. There is a brief, undated ethnographic account of the *binukot* tradition in Capiz provided by Jose P. Bolante in order to explain the culture surrounding the *binukot*.<sup>8</sup> The anthropologist Alicia P. Magos, who has studied extensively the *ma-aram* (babaylan) tradition in Antique, first inquired into the phenomenon of the *binukot* from a socio-political perspective, as practiced by the mountain dwellers of Central Panay.<sup>9</sup> Magos also mentions the role of the *binukot* as she is depicted in the

epics gathered from the Bukidnon of Central Panay.<sup>10</sup> A documentary on the *binukot* practice in Panay was aired on television, which featured one of the remaining *binukot* women in the Panay highlands.<sup>11</sup>

It is in the epics that the *binukot* is depicted and described, appearing there as a select group of women who were highly regarded for their beauty and influence. Not all epics identify them directly, but the practices of these high-born women as described in these epics are very similar. This group hardly was composed of young women who were kept secluded in separate rooms and as such were not generally perceived to be a presence in pre-colonial society if one were to go by the colonial documents. However, the fragments of evidence and the glimpses we get from these thin accounts, supplemented by the surprisingly strong presence of this class of women in oral history, can supply us with the initial picture of who these women were and the power they wielded in pre-colonial and indigenous Philippine society. Ginzburg has shown that “a few leads can convey a greater historical reality, provided (they are) pieced together correctly.”<sup>12</sup> This will involve a multidisciplinary approach involving comparison. The sources available will be read against the backdrop of the indigenous belief system about which more material is available. However, one can rightly assume that the phenomenon was more complex than what is presently understood through this article. This paper is an initial attempt to gather the historical references to the *binukot* and postulate an understanding of their role in indigenous society. It seeks to contribute to widening this lead towards this group of women who were not intended to be seen.

### **A GLIMPSE OF THE SECLUDED MAIDEN**

The secluded women were kept from view from even the native men, thus the strangers would have been kept in the dark about these women. However, there are a few glimpses, notably from the vocabulary compilations of the friars. It is only through the vocabulary

terms that one can attempt to search for these maidens historically. It cannot yet be concluded that seclusion and veiling was a general practice in indigenous society, as ethnographic and other cultural evidence are not found in all ethnolinguistic groups.

The general term for this group of women is *binukot*, a word which is still used in the Philippine island of Panay<sup>13</sup> and where the practice exists to this day, although only in the remote and mountainous villages far from the urbanized centers.<sup>14</sup> *Binukot* is indicated as an adjective that means confined, secluded, restricted.<sup>15</sup> Its root, *bukot*, is denoted as “be blanketing, be swaddling oneself” while *bukotán* is a verb that means “to blanket, swathe, swaddle” much like an infant or a sick person.<sup>16</sup>

Francisco de San Antonio (+1624) who recorded one of the earliest vocabularies of a Philippine language, indicated that the Tagalog *bocot* meant *encerramiento como monja* “to be cloistered, like a nun”.<sup>17</sup> This was repeated in the 1754 vocabulary list of Noceda and Sanlucar, *bocot: encerramiento como de monja*, but other related terms were listed such as *magbocot*, to enclose or seclude; *bocotan*, the place of seclusion; *magpabocot*, to ask to be secluded; *ipabocot*, to closet or seclude. Both the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Tagalog vocabularies indicate a second meaning for *bocot* as a noun, which was *un cesta tegido de palma*, a basket woven from palm leaves; *pagbocotan* was where it was put, while the *bocotan* and *sangbocot* both meant *un cesto*, a basket.<sup>18</sup> This would be related to the use of the word *bocot* meaning “to entrap” such as an animal or a fish, which is still current in the Kiniray-a language in Panay island.<sup>19</sup>

Alonso de Mentrída (+1637), writing on the languages in Panay, defines the root word *bocot* as “to have daughters who do not go down from the house, or to have them in seclusion: the room or the retreat”.<sup>20</sup> In another Philippine language, Bikol, *bukot* had a synonymous meaning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “to cloister daughters so that they do not

leave the house, as practiced in the olden days".<sup>21</sup> *Binobocot* further meant to be cloistered and placed in a *clausura* or secluded place, while either the place of seclusion or the trap itself was called the *binobocotan*. From various historical sources, Scott gives the general impression of the *binukot* as a lady or a royal princess who is secluded and inaccessible. Their high position in society lends their name to a type of small, fragrant bananas called "*todlong binokot*" or ladyfingers.<sup>22</sup> It is the *datu's* daughters who become *binukot*, as indicated in the description of the wooden partitions cared with foliage in high relief that separate the *datu* and his wife's chambers from that of his *binukot* daughters, concubines, and slaves.<sup>23</sup> The term is also indicative of sexual chastity or virginity.<sup>24</sup>

Thus we see that *bocot* was practiced only for daughters, and it involved keeping them confined within the house; specifically, within a room from which they did not leave. The images which the colonizers had written about the *binukot* are revealing, for they provide us with a metaphor with which these secluded maidens were associated by the observers. These are the San Antonio's and Noceda and San Lucar's comparison with nuns, and Lisboa's reference to the cloister or "*clausura*", which was a place where lived women of a religious profession. The primary difference between the *binukot* and the cloistered religious would be the means by which they maintained their function: the *binukot* was secluded precisely so that she could be married to a man of political and social standing, whereas the nun foreswore marriage upon being thus professed. However, just as the spiritual-religious dimension was the definitive motive in cloistering the nuns, so was it the hidden characteristic in the seclusion of the *binukot*.

The image of a *binukot* is a female who is veiled or covered, hidden from view. As a matter of fact, there is fortunately an historical illustration of this hidden group, from the record of Francisco Alcina of Samar and Leyte in 1668<sup>25</sup> (see Figure 1). She is labeled as "*binocot*

*ó principala*”, indicating that she was a secluded maiden or synonymously, a female member of the principal class. Her ankle-length skirt and long-sleeved blouse appear to be richly embroidered at the collar, cuffs, and hem. She is veiled, reaching down to her knees, but her face is shown. She holds a native hat on her right hand. She appears opposite the “*dato ó principal*”, the male ruler of the community. The *datu* carries a spear and a long shield, wears a *potong* or cloth around his head, wears a long sleeved shirt, and appears to be tattooed on his face, neck, and legs. This is an historical indication of the social class of the *binukot*. She belonged to the elite and was esteemed as equal in rank to the *datu* or ruler.

Figure 1. Illustration of “*binocot ó principala*”  
(a secluded maiden or a female member of the principal class).



*Datus* desired *binukot* maidens for their wives, a practice that is more than reflected in the epics. William Dampier, cruising Mindanao in 1687, records some snippets which are useful about the practice of seclusion. The Sultan in Mindanao that they visited had many daughters by many women, but it was his one daughter by his wife who was a *binukot*.

“He has one daughter by his Sultanness or Queen and a great many sons and daughters by the rest. These walk about the streets, and would be always begging things of us; but it is reported that the young princess is kept in a room, and never sirs out, and that she did never see any man but her father and Raja Laut her uncle, being then about fourteen years old.”<sup>26</sup>

Once married, the wives appear to have remained secluded, although some restrictions may have been lifted. Again, Dampier notes in his travels that, “the richest men’s wives are allowed the freedom to converse with her *pagally* (male friend) in public... Even the Sultans and the general’s wives, who are always cooped up, will yet look out of their cages when a stranger passes by... to invite him to their friendship...”<sup>27</sup>

The idea conveyed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century illustration that the *binukot* is the female counterpart of the male ruler finds corroboration in the oral tradition. Field data reveal that men of social standing in traditional Panay society desired to have *binukot* maidens as wives, as it added to their prestige.<sup>28</sup> All the heroines in the Philippine epics – sisters, wives, or love interests of the heroes – are secluded maidens. The three wives of the Panay epic hero Labaw Donggon were *binukot* maidens from the world on the earth, under the earth, and in the sky.<sup>29</sup> The seclusion is described in the episode “The Maiden of Buhong Sky” (*Mangovayt Buhong na Langit*) of the Bagobo epic. The hero Tuwang has been summoned to another place, there having arrived a mysterious maiden. He calls his sister to tell her of his mission; she states her surprise at being called out of her room since he had never done so “ever since the founding of the town.”<sup>30</sup> As if to prove that indeed she had never ventured out of her room, the door hinges “wail like hungry pigs and herons” when she tries to open the door.<sup>31</sup> The lock on the door, too, was gravely rusty and issued a high-pitched sound that “seemed to be the shrill cry of the hornbill” about to lose its food.<sup>32</sup>

It is in the Philippine oral historical tradition that references and descriptions of the *binukot* are abundant. Aside from *binokot*, they are



called "liyamin" in the Maranao epic *Darangen*, "linamin" in the Tagbanua epic *Kudaman*, and "ba'i" in the Bagobo *The Maiden of the Buhong Sky*. The liyamin is the princess,<sup>33</sup> a term based on the root word *lamin*, "a tower in the palace which is non-accessible".<sup>34</sup> Another derivative is *laminan*, also referring to the tower where the princess is kept in seclusion.<sup>35</sup> In the Mindanao epic *Agyu*, the reference to a lady of nobility was Yaga or Mayaga,<sup>36</sup> which resembles the Tagalog *dalaga* and the Bikol *daraga*.

The 1668 account of Fr. Alcina gives a description of the physical characteristics of the *binukot*. The Bisayan women, he states, are "more fair in complexion... even more especially the principalas who are called binocot."<sup>37</sup> To Alcina, *binocot* meant to remain at home, which was why in their isolation and seclusion they had "white features... as fair as the Spanish women".

He remarked that both men and women filed their teeth so that these were perfectly aligned, and in ancient times dyed the teeth black. The women then placed a triangular golden peg in every tooth, both upper and lower teeth. They drilled though the center of each tooth and fitted the tooth in with a small nail in each triangular peg, thus making it look like the natives had gold teeth.<sup>38</sup> He noted further that upon the introduction of Christianity, the practice became scarce and persisted only in the non-colonized areas.

Grooming the hair appeared to be a particular concern especially for the *binukot*. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century women grew their hair so long it touched the ground, and while women generally took extreme care to treat their hair with flowers, fragrant oils and aromatic herbs, "the principalas massage it with civet, ambergris and musk, so that they always have a pleasant scent".<sup>39</sup> The hero Labaw Donggon caught a glimpse of his first wife Abyang Ginbitinan of the earth-world, while she was playing the guitar by the windowsill, and notices that she had long, flowing hair. However, it would appear that even these indigenous maidens were ingenious in adding to their allure, for their

hair could be embellished with artificial switches called *panta* or *talabhok*.<sup>40</sup> It was a great offense to touch this hairdo, and to cut it was a sign of deepest mourning or a punishment.<sup>41</sup> In the Boholano epic, when Datung Sumanga finally gets exasperated with the demands of the *binukot* Bugbung Humasanun, he threatens to personally remove her hairpiece and make it a *sombol* (plume) for his ship.<sup>42</sup>

Remarkable is the heroine's beauty, as spoken of in the epics. It goes beyond mere fairness or physical beauty, but speaks of radiance. The epics from the Bukidnon (mountain dwellers) of central Panay begin with the narration of the origins of the most beautiful and most powerful woman, Matan-ayon, whose beauty was much sought after by prominent men.<sup>43</sup> In the Maranao epic Darangen, the first ruler's wife is Aya Paganay Ba'i which means "first among all the ladies" because she is the most beautiful, the richest, and possesses the finest character to whom no one could compare.<sup>44</sup> In the Bagobo epic, the hero Tuwaang's secluded sister was "more radiant than the rising sun", "an erect standing young golden tree", who looked like a "white heron". Indeed, such was her loveliness that she radiated charm like the rays of the rising sun.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, the maiden he had gone to rescue had arrived "shrouded in darkness", indicating that she was veiled and spoke to no one. But when she removed the "net of darkness" covering her, she was like the sun, and not a single woman the world over could excel her beauty.<sup>46</sup> As for the hero Tuwaang, he too was likened to the sun, a gallant, golden hero. It is striking that when he smiled, he revealed filed teeth that were blackened with the sap of a tree<sup>47</sup> and yet the mountains seemed to have been lit by fire "by the glint emanating from" his teeth. This may indicate the presence of gold fillings or the gold pegs that were indicated in 1668 by Alcina for the principal class.

The fairness of the *binukot* is likewise seen in Labaw Donggon's three wives, all *binukot* from their own respective worlds. Of the first

wife, her complexion was compared to the *hikay*, a large white shrimp, as well as to the *balanak* fish that is known for its white meat. Her legs were smooth and flawless, sleek like a banana trunk, and as white as the bamboo when split open. His second wife, a *binukot* from the world under the earth he saw in a dream, whose sway when she walked resembled the movement of the treetops in fluidity. Her skin was fair like the *balanak* and flawless too as a banana trunk, and was renowned in the use of weapons.<sup>48</sup> The third wife was carefully watched over by her retinue of servants while she slept in a hammock as her husband had strictly instructed that that no fly should be allowed to come near to disturb her rest. The radiance of their beauty was renowned and brought men to seek them out. In the Boholano epic, Bugbung Humasanun was "the most renowned among all the beauties...(who was) so secluded and enclosed in her chamber that nobody ever saw her except by sheerest chance. Her visage was like the sun when it spreads its first rays over the world or like a sudden flash of lightning, the one causing fear and respect, the other, joy and delight."<sup>49</sup> So desired was this *binukot* of great reputation and fame that she was sought particularly by a great chief, Datu Sumanga. However, the *binukot* obviously knew her great value so that she managed to rebuff his suit and require him to go on several *mangayaw* raids, as far south as Jolo and as far north as China, receiving each time the spoils and captives he obtained from these lands.<sup>50</sup>

The upper class women were fairer in complexion than the rest, as Dampier attests. "These young ladies (the Sultan's nieces) were very richly dressed... They were fairer than any women that I did ever see there, and very well featured..." His statement though does not directly indicate whether the fair complexion was a result of seclusion. In the contemporary period, ethnographic studies reveal that the secluded maiden was usually the comeliest, the parents' most beloved, or sometimes the only daughter.<sup>51</sup> In the ethnography of the people of Panay island, young girls begin their seclusion at the age of

three to five, which could explain their fairness of complexion.<sup>52</sup> In the historical records and in the epics, fairness of complexion was attested as a characteristic of the upper class women and appears as the standard of beauty in these accounts. This certainly gives us pause to think about the perception that the desire for white skin is a result of colonial mentality, as it is shown to have roots before the colonial period.

### **THE SECLUDED MAIDEN'S TOWER**

To keep the daughters secluded meant having a separate room for them. This is evidenced in the Maranao epic Darangen where the "princess", or *liyamin*, makes her home. The Maranao term for her is actually *liyamin*, literally, one who lives in the *lamin*. Her name classification is derived from the tower or *lamin* where she is kept. She lives in the *lamin* of the *torogan* or royal house with her female consorts who assist her and keep her company.

Growing up in a *bokot*, or room, the secluded daughter most often passes her time doing weaving and eventually embroidery. Almost all the clothes of the men in her family are woven by the *binokot*, from her father to her brothers. The epic hero usually has his clothes done by his sister. In the Darangen, the *liyamin* occupies herself with weaving. The inspiration for the design comes from nature: what is around them, including the colors used. A usual embroidery design is the *banog*, hawk. From field data in Panay, the *binukot* does *tubok* or needlework.<sup>53</sup> By tradition, the Visayan *binukot* is not given heavy work such as planting, but remains in her room to weave.<sup>54</sup>

In modern day royal houses, there is a secret room or *gibon* constructed for the unmarried daughter of the sultan and the door leading to it is located near the sultan's headboard. The *liyamin* ("princess") seeks refuge in this secret room when there are male visitors in the house. A glass window may be provided from where the maiden may view the guests while she herself remains out of sight.<sup>55</sup> The *lamin* itself, as described in the epic Darangen, resembles a tower similar to

that pictured in a book on Philippine architecture (see Figure 2<sup>56</sup>). The *lamin* is a larger room than the *gibon* and it is located above the *torogan* or royal house. Like the main house, the *lamin* is decorated ornately with *okir* or carved designs; the tower is hung with embroidered colorful cloth (*mamandiang*), curtains (*lalansay*) and beneath the curtains, an embroidered strip of cloth (*somandeg*).<sup>57</sup> In Central Panay where the practice persists, a small room is built specially for the young girl who is to be secluded.<sup>58</sup>

Figure 2. Illustration of a tower in Philippine architecture.



In the Maranao epic, *Darangen*, there is a mythical boat that can accommodate the entire community with all its buildings and there is a special place for the *binukot*. In the middle of the boat is a special tower made of glass specifically for the Princess and her ladies.<sup>59</sup> This is symbolic of the power and the prestige accorded to the *binukot*.

It is through the structural description of the *lamin* as tower, where the *liyamin* spends her time weaving clothes and linen, that we are able to interpret the late 16<sup>th</sup> century document of the Jesuit priest Pedro Chirino, where he states:

*Not until we went to Taitai did I learn that in many of the houses there was another one, but smaller, made of cane, as it were a little tower, fashioned somewhat curiously, to which they passed from the main house by a short bridge... In these were kept their needlework and other works of handicraft, by means of which they concealed the mystery of the little house.<sup>60</sup>*

We can associate this “little tower” in the Tagalog houses to the tower of the Maranao royal houses for the *datu*’s daughter. Finding the needlework and handicrafts in the room indicated that women occupied the “mysterious little house” which was hidden from view. Considering that *bocot* was present in the 16-18<sup>th</sup> century Tagalog vocabularies, it may be concluded that the Tagalog secluded maidens were also kept in these tower-rooms that were connected to the main house. In other parts of Southeast Asia, there is an inner room for women such as the bower (*malige*) in the old Nias houses off the western Sumatran coast and the “curtained divans” called *lamming* by the Bugis.<sup>61</sup> Thus the idea and practice of seclusion and veiling prior to Islam across the Southeast Asian region may be comparatively studied.

### **THE POWER OF THE SECLUDED MAIDEN**

Tradition persists that the *binukot* must not be seen by any man from childhood until puberty.<sup>62</sup> Only the family members and the female servants called *apid* may come face to face with her. In order to keep her away from men’s eyes, as well as shield her from the sun, she bathes in the river in the evening. A makeshift enclosure may also be made for her in the river for this purpose. No man actually would dare to look at a *binukot* as there was a threat of punishment by death to anyone who would violate her by looking. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was recorded that a person who caused a high-born woman to lose her robe “or somehow causing it to fall off” so that she was left uncovered was considered to have committed “a great offence: tantamount to murder, adultery or theft, and punishable by slavery”.<sup>63</sup> She would be secluded until her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, when she would then

be brought around the entire village through a fluvial procession.<sup>64</sup> Having been secluded, she will fetch a larger dowry this way upon her marriage. The *binukot* remains in her room with female relatives or female attendants looking after her needs. In her field research in Antique, Magos states that the *binukot* was occasionally brought by her parents to big gatherings such as weddings where young men could appreciate her beauty and she could perform a ritual dance.<sup>65</sup> Other than these times, she remained in her room.

Being a *binukot* was considered as a daughter's obligation to her parents.<sup>66</sup> Having a *binukot* in the family brought honor and fame to the parents of the young lady, who were then recognized as members of the social elite.<sup>67</sup> This was due to the fact that a *binukot* was not permitted to do any work either at home or in the field, and had to be provided with female servants. Thus not anyone could afford to have a *binukot* daughter. This prestige and recognition is evident in the epics. In one occasion, all the rulers (*datus*) came to Bembaran to make the *okir* for the royal house. Arriving at the house, they stopped in order to let their wives enter while the gongs were sounded and the cannons fired in welcome of the *ba'i*, *Ba'i a Dagoyanan (Lalawanen sa Solog)*.<sup>68</sup>

Epics, having thus been the most productive source in describing and revealing the *binukot*, also help by providing material that may be utilized in an initial understanding of the meaning and relevance of this practice. The Maranao Darangen gives a significant clue. The *binukot/liyamin* utilizes almost all of her time weaving. It is significant that the epic gives an indication that the weave of the *binukot*, including her knowledge of weaving, is different from the rest and that it is "exclusively hers".<sup>69</sup> Among those that she weaves are the ritual clothes of the hero which he wears to war. In one story, before the hero leaves for battle, he calls on his sister in her *lamin* and she hands him his battle clothes which are kept in a wooden box in the *lamin*. Then the *liyamin* prays to the guardian spirits to keep him safe and successful in the fight.<sup>70</sup>

The Maranao, in the epic Darangen, believe in their access to a treasure which brings wealth, as it attracts gold and can foretell the future.<sup>71</sup> It is in the shape of a golden lizard with two heads which can also assume the shape of a snake or a golden living doll. This treasure of the skyworld is guarded by a maiden, Magara'ay Anonen, who brings it down to anyone of the ruler's descendants who asks for it. It is noteworthy that the most precious amulet that is obeyed by all the spirits, is guarded in the highest layer of the skyworld by a maiden, Walain Katolosan.<sup>72</sup> Possession of this amulet ensured victory in every battle; one would never suffer defeat. Even more striking, in order to obtain that amulet, the hero Prince Madali had to ask his guardian spirits to transform his looks temporarily into a woman, so that he could obtain the amulet under guise.<sup>73</sup> Thus it is the secluded maiden, in her tower, who has access to the powerful spirits that guard the community and from whom she can obtain supernatural help for the hero. Even when the hero is off to other places, the community can be defended and kept secure by the power of the amulets that the *binukot/liyamin* can access. In one episode, the battle is conducted between the prince and the *liyamin* of the place, but the struggle is purely supernatural and conducted by means of their amulets while the *liyamin* remains entirely in her tower throughout the fight.<sup>74</sup>

The *lamin*, in the royal house, is eventually discovered to be the center of the community. In times of war or conflict, it is the final stronghold that the community secures so that it does not fall into the hands of the enemy. It is the secluded maiden that holds the amulet whose power can save the community, she who can call on the spirits and gain access to the heavens where powerful amulets are stored. This power from the spirits is also alluded to in the fact that it is the women who prepare and serve the betelnut chew. It added to a man's honor and prestige if it were the wife or daughter of the *datu* or ruler who served him. Betelnut is seen to be the food offered in the skyworld, which the *ba'i* in the highest layer of the sky offered to her visitor.<sup>75</sup> In



the Bagobo epic, the betelnut chew whom the hero Tuwaang was offered by the maiden brought back to life all the people who had been killed in battle.<sup>76</sup>

A historical source gives an account of a 16<sup>th</sup> century pre-Hispanic riverine ritual when a young girl reached puberty. When the first day of her menses came, she would be shrouded in a blanket and all the windows shut, believing that if a wind blew on her she would become crazy.<sup>77</sup> She would be blindfolded in order to prevent her from seeing anything that would bring her harm, and she was forbidden from speaking to anyone but the *babaylan* or priestess. If the girl belonged to the *timawa* class of freemen, this ritual took four days but if she came from the noble *maginoo* class, the ritual lasted a month and 20 days. During the four days, she would eat nothing but two eggs and four spoonfuls of rice, in the morning and at night. In the morning, she was brought to the river and immersed eight times, then is made to sit by the riverbank. Upon returning home, she was wiped with oil and perfume.

It has been surmised that the maiden's fertility is the purpose of the rituals she undergoes upon reaching puberty. It is likewise her ability to bear children that is safeguarded by secluding her in a physical environment that would resemble the womb.<sup>78</sup> As with other indigenous beliefs and practices such as wearing charms and amulets, this would fall within the category of mimetic magic. The capacity to bear children was highly prized and more so among the secluded maidens who would be wives of the *datus* and warriors. The power of these maidens arose from their spiritual and the physiological capabilities to nurture and safeguard life in these realms.

Seclusion brought prestige and economic gain; it earned the *binukot* a pick of suitors better off than most. The underlying reasons are intertwined with the indigenous worldview, something that will need further clarification as the *binukot* tradition emerges. The changes in the socio-political context slowly eroded the basis of the practice.<sup>79</sup>

## THE HISTORICAL BINUKOT

This paper is a preliminary attempt to put the *binukot* in history, who was previously unseen and unrecognized. The *binukot* in history still largely remains shrouded in mystery, and we are only now slowly lifting the veil in order to understand her proper role. Her actual historical presence is a fact which opens up the necessity to reread the sources as well as the events and see where the *binukot* had gone. Her function in society still has to be delineated and this is quite of interest as it may lead to interesting theories that could challenge existing ones about our conception of indigenous society, their relations, and their concepts of power, women, and creation. This understanding involves understanding as well the entire worldview of pre-colonial society: the cosmology and the relations among the parts of this cosmos as well as the inhabitants of each part. This multidisciplinary approach will be necessary to determine the extent of the *binukot's* role in the cultural and historical landscape. The activities of the *binukot* that have so far been revealed were weaving and epic chanting. These activities had religious overlay in indigenous society and these are activities that the *binukot* shares with that other, more popular group of women, the *babaylans*. Weaving was not a simple economic activity but an important cultural phenomenon in animist society, as it provided a spiritual connection with the departed ancestors. As the data show, the *binukot* is different and distinct from the *babaylan*. The power of the *babaylan* is overt, she performs in public ceremony and rituals, and her domain extends from the spiritual to the medicinal to the political. The power of the *binukot* beyond the economic realm is yet to be determined as she is only beginning to emerge in history. *Babaylan*-led revolts have been recorded from Tamblot in 1660 to the Pulahanes from the 1920s until the 1940s. In contrast, the *binukot* do not group together, much less organize, the people in a social or political movement, but she appears in the literary and ethnographic accounts to be an organizing factor in the community. The *babaylan* is selected

by the *diwata* (ancestral spirit) through an intense spiritual experience such as a trance or a lingering illness.<sup>80</sup> For the *binukot*, the method of selection is not supernatural. The parents chose either the eldest, or the most beloved, or the fairest, or the most beautiful to make into a *binukot*. The *babaylan* in most accounts are older women but the *binukot* are young. They begin seclusion as children and emerge in adolescence at the time of marriage. The *babaylan* are not veiled, although they veil themselves during the rituals. The points where *babaylan* and *binukot* intersect, in ritual and in history, need to come to light in order to grasp their roles as well the social and political structure. The tradition of both *babaylan* and *binukot* are still evident up to the present time in Panay.

The presence of the *binukot* in Philippine history and society will have to be reckoned in revisiting the woman's role, her power in society, and the relations within the family and within society. Chastity in indigenous society will likewise have to be reviewed in terms of the *binukot*, for while fertility was the bigger value in determining marriage so that virginity was not necessary, the chaste *binukot* maiden carried great value and desirability.<sup>81</sup> The extent of the phenomenon of seclusion among the daughters of the political and economic elite has also to be established. As already indicated, more work will have to be undertaken in order to know which ethnolinguistic groups practiced seclusion and veiling.

It would also be necessary to eventually separate seclusion from veiling. Austronesian groups in Southeast Asia and Oceania are not known to practice veiling, thus an investigation of seclusion would have to be separate. Muslim women are veiled but in contemporary society are not secluded. The relation between Islam and veiling is currently evident but Syrian high-born women practiced veiling even before Islam.<sup>82</sup> One would have to inquire whether veiling in the Philippines, in terms of the *binukot*, was of Islamic influence. The history and origins of seclusion and veiling poses a methodological challenge

as well, since the documentary evidence is not only sparse but also limited in time, appearing only in the colonial sources. The epics do not present a definitive time frame if one were to seek a more specific period for its genesis. The Islamic practice of veiling can serve as an initial chronological marker, but the linguistic data is not yet available to determine if it had Arabic roots. Comparative data from Southeast Asian groups, both Austronesian animist and Islamized, will be necessary to state with a degree of certainty the Muslim influence or even origin of this phenomenon, if such were the case.

At the moment, while we have caught a glimpse of the mysterious *binukot*, she still remains secluded and veiled in history.

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, "Baylan: Animist Religion and Philippine Peasant Ideology", *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*, Sept. 1982, pp. 141-194.

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<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Brewer, *Holy Confrontation. Religion, Gender and Sexuality in the Philippines, 1521-1685*. Manila: Carolyn Brewer and the Institute of Women's Studies, St. Scholastica's College, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> *History of the Bisayan People in the Philippine Islands. Historia de las isles e indios de Bisayas 1668 por Ignacio Francisco Alcina, SJ*, Vol. 1. Translated, Edited and Annotated by Cantius Kobak, OFM and Lucio Gutierrez, OP. Manila: UST Publishing House, 2002, p. 97. The illustration is reproduced on page 643.

<sup>7</sup> William Henry Scott, *Barangay. Sixteenth-Century Philippine Culture and Society*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1994. Specifically, the *binukot* is mentioned on pp. 41, 49, 60, 101, and 140.

<sup>8</sup> Jose P. Bolante, *A Comprehensive History of Capiz. In Search of Identity. A Cultural Tribute of the Buklod ng mga Kabataang Kawani to the Province of Capiz*. (Capiz: Capiz Provincial Government and the Buklod ng mga Kabataang Kawani, n.d.

<sup>9</sup> Alicia Magos, "The Binukot (Well-Kept Maiden) in a Changing Socio-Political Perspective (ca. 1850s-1994)", *Edukasyon (Gender Issues)*. Diliman, Quezon City: Center for Integrative and Development Studies UP-ERP Monograph Series, Vol. I, No.4, October-December 1995. pp. 61-77.

<sup>10</sup> Alicia Magos, "Ang mga Kaganapan sa Dagat na Makikita sa mga Epiko at ang Tradisyon ng Paggawa ng Baroto ng mga Bukidnon ng Sentral Panay," *Isinafilipino ni Randy Madrid*, Paper read at the 10<sup>th</sup> Conference of the ADHIKA ng Pilipinas, Calapan City, Nov. 28-30, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Philippine television Channel 7, "I-Witness: The Last Princess" aired on July 19, 2004, 11:30 PM.

<sup>12</sup> Trygve Ruser Gundersen, "Carlo Ginzburg on the Dark Side of History" in <http://www.eurozine.com/article/2003-07-11-ginzburg-en.html>

<sup>13</sup> Eduardo A. Makabenta, *Binisaya-English English-Binisaya Dictionary* (Quezon City: Emandsonz, c1979), p. 24. There is no entry of either "bocot" or binukot" in Elsa P. Yap and Maria V.R. Bunye, *Cebuano-Visayan Dictionary* (Honolulu: Univeristy of Hawaii Press, 1971).

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<sup>15</sup> Makabenta, *Binisaya-English English-Binisaya Dictionary*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Tomas V. Hermosissima, *Dictionary Bisayan-English-Tagalog* (Manila: Pedro B. Ayuda & Co., 1966), p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> Francisco de San Antonio, *Vocabulario Tagalo. Tagalog-Spanish Vocabulary*, edited by Antoon Postma (Quezon City: Pulong Sources for Philippine Studies, Ateneo de Manila University, 2000), p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Juan de Noceda y Pedro de Sanlucar, *Vocabulario de la lengua tagala* (1754), Reimpreso en manila: Imprenta de Ramirez y Giraudier, 1860. p. 54-55.

<sup>19</sup> Information from Prof. Dedina Lapar, PhD, Department of History, University of the Philippines, March 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Alonso de Mentrída, *Diccionario de la lengua bisaya, hiligueina y haraya de la isla de Panay* (Manila, 1842), p.69.

<sup>21</sup> Marcos de Lisboa (+1628), *Vocabulario de la lengua bicol* (Manila: Establecimiento Tipografico del Colegio de Santo Tomas, Reimpreso 1865), p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> Scott, *Barangay*, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> Scott, *Barangay*, p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> Scott, *Barangay*, p. 140.

<sup>25</sup> Alcina, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> William Dampier, "A New Voyage Around the World", excerpted in *Travel Accounts of the Islands (1513-1787)*. Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1971, p. 52-53.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Prof. Randy Madrid, UP in the Visayas, conducted at the Nawawalang Paraiso Resort, Tayabas, Quezon, on 29 November 2004.

<sup>29</sup> "Labaw Donggon, Epikong Sulod," text gathered by F. Landa Jocano, translated by Rosella Jean Makasiar-Puno, *Antolohiya ng mga Panitikang ASEAN. Mga Epiko ng Pilipinas* (Quezon City: Komite ng Kultura at Kabatiran ng ASEAN, 1984), p. 131 et seq.

<sup>30</sup> E. Arsenio Manuel, *The Maiden of the Buhong Sky. A Complete Song from the Bagobo Folk Epic Tuwaang*. (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1958), p.28, stanzas 346-349.

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<sup>32</sup> Manuel, *The Maiden of the Buhong Sky*, p. 22, stanzas 152-169.

<sup>33</sup> Howard P. McKaughan and Batua Al-Macaraya, eds., *A Maranao Dictionary* (Manila: De la Salle University Press and the Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1996), p. 176.

<sup>34</sup> McKaughan and Macaraya, *A Maranao Dictionary*, p. 163.

<sup>35</sup> McKaughan and Macaraya, *A Maranao Dictionary*, p. 163.

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<sup>38</sup> Alcina, *History of the Bisayan People*, p. 99.

<sup>39</sup> Alcina, *History of the Bisayan People*, p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> Scott, *Barangay*, p. 101 and 27.

<sup>41</sup> Scott, *Barangay*, p. 26-27. Francisco Baltazar (Balagtas) was imprisoned for having cut a woman's hair.

<sup>42</sup> Scott, *Barangay*, p. 103.

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<sup>44</sup> "Notes," *Darangen, in Original Maranao Verse with English translation* (Marawi City: The Folklore Division, University Research Center, Mindanao State University, c1986), Vol. I, note 22, p. 65.

<sup>45</sup> Manuel, *The Maiden of the Buhong Sky*, p. 22-26, stanzas 180 -200, 210-220, 270-280.

- <sup>46</sup> Manuel, *The Maiden of the Buhong Sky*, p. 45-46, stanzas 850- 882.
- <sup>47</sup> The *bunggay* tree which produces a black substance when a piece of its wood is burned, and used to color the teeth. See Manuel, *The Maiden of the Buhong Sky*, p. 25-26, stanzas 260-268.
- <sup>48</sup> "Labaw Donggon," *Antolohiya ng mga Panitikang ASEAN*, p. 144, stanzas 526-531.
- <sup>49</sup> Scott, *Barangay*, p. 101.
- <sup>50</sup> Scott, *Barangay*, p. 103.
- <sup>51</sup> Alicia Magos, "Pag-apidanay sa Pangabuhing Bukidnon (Sentral Panay)," *Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> Conference on West Visayan History and Culture* (Iloilo City: Center for West Visayan Studies, UP Visayas, 1996), p. 50.
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- <sup>63</sup> Miguel de Loarca, "Relacion de las Islas Filipinas" in Blair and Roberston, *The Philippine Islands*, V: 145. Cited in Andaya, *op. cit.*
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<sup>67</sup> Bolante, *op.cit.*

<sup>68</sup> "Kambembaran," *Darangen*, vol. 1, p. 74-76, stanzas 83-100.

<sup>69</sup> "Kapmadali," *Darangen*, vol. 1, p. 105, stanza 575 et seq.: "*Ka aya romba' o sayaw/na gowani panagayan/na pikolambowan mesod.*" [Of clothes that were usually made/in deep secret as the weaver/kept her art exclusively hers.]

<sup>70</sup> "Kapmadali," *Darangen*, vol. 1, p. 109, talata 697-708.

<sup>71</sup> "Notes," *Darangen*, Vol. I, note 25, p. 65.

<sup>72</sup> "Kapmadali. The Story of Madali," *Darangen*, p. 189 et seq.

<sup>73</sup> "Kapmadali. The Story of Madali," *Darangen*, vol. 1, p. 189 et seq.

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<sup>77</sup> Boxer's Codex, "Customs of Moros," in *The Philippines at the Spanish Contact*, edited by F. Landa Jocano (Manila: MCS Enterprises, 1975), p. 203.

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<sup>80</sup> Magos, "The Bisayan Babaylan...", p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> Scott, *Barangay*, p. 140.

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