Decolonizing *Kaagian*: Babaylanism in *Agi* Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes *Agi* poetry and utilizes the Panayanon concept of power called *gahum* as its critical framework. Philippine gay literature unfurled after the publication of *Ladlad: An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing* (1994) and continues to reach higher grounds. However, gay criticism has been too focused on the discourse of the Manila *bakla* and not much has been said about indigenous models of queerness in the regions. As agi is an indigenous articulation of homosexuality in Panay in Central Philippines, this paper traces the connection of the agi's attendant performance (*kaagian*) with the indigenous tradition of *babaylanism*. By investigating the strong presence of *babaylanic* imagery in agi poetry, this study attempts to unravel the connection of kaagian with a pre-colonial form of power called gahum, which is deeply attuned to the animist spatiality of Panay. The babaylan is a shaman, culture bearer, and political leader that embodies physical and spiritual gahum that go beyond the human realm. By exploring the interconnected concepts of kaagian, gahum, and babaylanism, this critical study reveals that agi writers champion the image of the babaylan to subvert colonial-imposed hegemonies and decolonize the agi identity.

Keywords: Philippine gay culture, West Visayan gay literature, babaylan, decolonization, agi, indigenous sexuality

The Panayanon universe is a place of mysticism. It is where animism collides with logic, where the spiritual is always connected with the physical, and where many binaries are blurred and refunctioned. However, the promulgation of colonial institutions and western ways of theorizing create binaries that impose restrictive dichotomies and invalidate indigenous ways of living. The patriarchal hegemony results in the clash between the *self* and *other*, logic and superstition, and the physical and spiritual. In spite of such panoptic control, counter-hegemonic practices still surface to subvert the domination of the ruling body.

Babaylanism is a concept referring to a nativism which is attuned to animism. It functions as an anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal tradition that upholds animistic and indigenous beliefs embedded in the cosmogony of the Panayanons. Babaylanic

studies in the Philippines owes much credit to the groundbreaking research of Alicia Magos on the *Ma-aram* (binabaylan) tradition of Panay. Magos defines the *babaylan* as a religio-initiated person who has undergone a deep religious experience (35). A babaylan is a priest who officiates in rites involving supernatural beings. The babaylan holds a prestigious status in the community by means of being a folk therapist, folk philosopher, and transmitter of culture. Aside from mastering chants and incantations, she can communicate with environmental and ancestral spirits. As a "favored" person by ancestral spirits, the babaylan has a connection with the *surog* or "spirit guide" whom she can invoke during rites to heal particular illnesses (Magos 3). The babaylan can make supernatural spirits enter and leave her body at will. She officiates the ritual called *samba*, a rite performed for the general well-being of the people—for rain to fall, for harvest to be plentiful, for a good catch, and to ward off pestilence or diseases that may be brought by the arrival of malevolent spirits. She could travel long distances by foot and control the forces of nature. Looking at the accounts of Spanish chroniclers like Morga and Alcina, Magos highlights the nature of Panay as the most animistic place in the Visayas where babaylanism plays a central role in the lives of the people:

> Babaylanes were found in different places of the Bisayas (as well as in other parts of the archipelago) and were found to be quietly or peacefully performing their animistic practices during the earlier part of the Spanish regime. The babaylanes gather annually and also once every seven years for a big ceremony at a designated place. The religion which was believed to have been brought to Panay Island by the Bornean datus was referred to as "bangos-banwa." (12)

In *The Song of the Babaylan* (2013), ethnomusicologist and indigenous studies scholar Grace Nono explains that babaylanism is not only present in the Visayas, but in other areas of the country as well. She traces the existence of the babaylan phenomenon across the Philippine archipelago: "The *bailan* or *balian* is further referred to as *daetan, catooran, mamumuhat, diwatero*, in Visayas and Northern Mindanao; as *catalonan* and *anitera* among the Tagalogs and in Northern Luzon; as *dorakit* or *anitowan* among the Isnegs; as *alopogan* among the Tinguians, among many other names" (16). This mediumship between the human and the spiritual is not just exclusive in the Philippine context, but also present in many Asian countries. Mindanao Studies historian Francisco Demetrio, SJ discusses that shamanism is a phenomenon shared among many Asian countries. He identifies the *okojwnu* of the Andaman Islanders as the one who speaks from dreams, the *sibaso* of the Batak as a shaman who performs through spiritual possession, the *duku-a* of Sumatra as a diviner and medium who can see spirits and become invisible at night, the *manang Bali* of the Sea Dyak people as a sexless medium, the *balian* or female priestess

and *basir,* an asexual priest-shaman of the *ngadju Dyak* of Southern Borneo, and the *bajasa* or male priestesses in women's clothing of Celebes. Demetrio notes that in the Philippines and its Southeast Asian neighbors, "The shaman always has a special relationship with the spirits or the gods, particularly with the supreme beings who dwell in the sky. We have seen, too, that the shamans could be either men or women" (130).

Despite centuries of colonial rule, the babaylan tradition manages to survive. Nono explains why the babaylan remains one of the most enduring feminist symbols deployed by contemporary decolonization movements in the Philippines as a symbol of liberation from neo-colonial regimes in the global and local spheres. This nativistic stand becomes an act of defiance and an articulation of pre-colonial power. As Nono argues, "The rise of these movements that invoke the babaylan as icon may be viewed as symptomatic of a social condition of alienation and powerlessness among Filipinos emerging from centuries of colonization and patriarchy, now thrust on the global stage where social inequalities continue to loom large" (345).

Although babaylanes still exist in remote communities, babaylanic attributes have crystallized in modern spaces such as art and literature. The rising trend of babaylanic imagery in West Visayan Literature[1] is a strong manifestation of a conscious effort among writers to deconstruct colonial archetypes that perpetuate the subjugation of the feminine. This phenomenon in West Visayan writing aligns with Magos's discussion on the importance of academizing our animistic past:

> Indeed, this revival of interest in the binabaylan phenomenon by scholars from other sciences should be welcomed. The interest in this direction has been brought about by this realization: that if Filipinos want to evolve a psychology that is reflective of their culture and a history which truly mirrors the role of their traditional leaders in their political struggle, then it is high time for them to view from their own perspective, not only the historical aspect of the past, but its mythical facet as well. For truly, every nation must come to terms with its mythical tradition. (2)

As an effort to decolonize literary production, the re-emergence of the babaylan in literature unfetters feminine power from male-centric definitions. The strong articulation of babaylanic imagery in West Visayan gay poetry (which will be referred hereon as agi poetry) signifies a deconstruction of the patriarchal outlook that feminine power is inferior and dangerous. Following the legacy of the powerful babaylans that have come before them, agi writers claim their own narratives and create a space of power to subvert patriarchy.

In reading kaagian as an embodiment of babaylanism, this study wishes to examine the ways by which agi poetry carries Panay's babaylanic tradition in engaging with forces of patriarchal domination. The discussion will be limited to two poetry collections which embody a strong babaylanic theme. The first collection *Kung Ang Tula ay Puwedeng Pambili ng Lalaki* (2006) is written by one of the important figures in agi poetry: John Iremil Teodoro. The collection marries homoeroticism and animism and uses a strong babaylanic voice that reveals the deep connection between kaagian and babaylanism. The poems in the collection were written between 1994 to the early 2000s, a "coming out" period for agi literature, perhaps resulting from the publication of the *Ladlad* anthology and the emergence of many gay writers across the regions. While some poems were written as early as the mid 1990s, they only saw publication starting the year 2000 when agi writers had already created a name for themselves and built ties with publishing houses and the academe. The second collection that will be analyzed is by Leonard Francis Alcoran, the youngest West Visayan writer to win the prestigious Palanca Prize for Short Story in Hiligaynon. His poetry zine *Kinaray-a* (2019) celebrates the different facets of Kinaray-a knowledge, folklore, and tradition. As a writer from the millennial generation, the presence of strong animistic imagery in Alcoran's poetry is a powerful manifestation of the enduring babaylanic tradition in Panay.

The discussion of the poems will focus on the identification and critical reading of babaylanic elements in agi poetry. Studies by researchers in the field of Philippine Studies like Magos and Nono are used to create a Panayanon-oriented critical framework to analyze local culture and belief system, and to further understand the uniqueness and complexities of local gender constructions. The analysis of the texts will be guided by the articulation of babaylanic *gahum* in agi poetry. The Panayanon term *gahum* instead of western concepts of power is deemed more appropriate in a study that focuses on the animist and counter-hegemonic evocations of the babaylan. Gahum, which roughly refers to the ability or command to dominate is harnessed to maintain power dynamics in personal and political spaces. In a Panayanon sense, gahum is not purely about physical force and domination, for it carries animistic beliefs and traditions as well. In *The Hiligaynon: An Ethnography of Family and Community Life in Western Visayas Region* (1983), anthropologist F. Landa Jocano defines gahum as a force that gives an entity the capacity to influence, control, or command other entities within a given environment, and the person capable of manipulating such force is known as a *gamhanan* (233). Jocano adds that gahum may be attained through a particular social status or position within a community and that these positions are acquired based on intellectual, economic, or social standing (233). While Jocano's discussion is seen exclusively from a political standpoint, this paper will try to tease out the dynamics of gahum by examining

it from a gender standpoint: how a marginalized class (the agi) achieves power by embracing babaylanic practices and ideology.

In examining the connection between kaagian and babaylanism, this paper raises the following questions: (1) What is agi and kaagian in Western Visayas? (2) What are the parallelisms between the agi and babaylan as seen in the poems? (3) How does the babaylanic gahum provide liberation for literary representations of the agi?

Locating Kaagian in Philippine Gay Culture

J. Neil Garcia's study on Philippine gay culture plays an important role in shaping this paper. Garcia presents a historical mapping of the different same-sex relations in pre-colonial Philippines and highlights the image of the babaylan as the great grandmother of the gay movement in the country. Garcia posits that some babaylanes are men who performed the roles of women by way of male-to-female gender crossing. This transvestism is supported by historical accounts of chroniclers and religious historians. Looking at the accounts of Spanish conquistadores, gender-crossing was present in pre-colonial and early-colonial Philippines. Local men who dressed up in women's clothes and acted like women were called agi*, agingin, bayoguin, bayok, bido,* and *binabae,* depending on the region where they lived. They were shocking and threatening figures to the Spanish colonizers because they did not just cross the lines of gender, but also played a vital role in their society. Spanish chronicler Ignacio Alcina describes them as mostly women and (effeminate) men in women's clothing. "They are sacrificers… generally agreed and scarcely doubtful (to be) mostly women, not men. And if there was some man who might have been one, he was called asog" (qtd. in Garcia 212). Garcia argues that the babaylan's transvestism was held in esteem by Visayan society as he was respected as the privileged mediator between the community and the spirits. "In this case, the actual physical homosexuality of the male babaylan—for as Alcina notes, the asog 'consorted' with men and took on husbands—was still considered appropriate by the members of the community because he had already become 'a woman with whom a man could interact socially'" ("Philippine Gay Culture" 224). Garcia emphasizes that the kind of gender-crossing exhibited by male babaylans is not just a matter of cross-dressing, but an act of taking on a symbolic role. This act of gender-crossing did not diminish one's identity since either of the sexes was recognized as comparable to one another. While Garcia's research historicized the early articulations of homosexuality in the archipelago, this study aims to focus only on the island of Panay. Doing so will provide an alternative history of homosexuality in the Philippines by decentralizing the discourse of the Manila bakla, the default image of Filipino homosexuality. By studying the agi's indigenous expression of

sexuality which is highly influenced by the Panayanon's reverence for the feminine, this study aims to nuance the Filipino gay question.

Philippine society slowly became sexualized in recent history by way of the media, church, government, and academic discourses. Male homosexuality became identified with effeminacy alone. This sexualization categorized indigenous sexual orientations like the agi, bayot, and bakla as homosexual, reducing the cultural meaning and distinct characteristics of the different identities. Garcia discusses the role of the neocolonial city in the formation of gay identity and argues that the city serves as a space where "perverse implantations of global genders and sexualities take root and fructify" ("The City" 6). The Americanization of many cities in the Philippines has socialized Filipinos into the western matrix of sex and gender. This implies the beginning of the sexualization of native identities like the agi, bakla, and bayot through a western lens. The westernization of institutions like education and medicine has widely influenced the reconstruction of the homosexual identity. Gay is no longer just synonymous with kabaklaan or kaagian, but it is also applicable to masculine men who desire other men. The best way to understand this is to look at the absence of indigenous terms for the masculine homosexual man. This would indicate that such identity did not exist before the westernization of Philippine society. Westernization has pluralized the discourse of sex and gender in the country and has led to the labelling of various gender orientations and sexual preferences. Filipinos started identifying as gay, bisexual, trans, queer, etc. While the agi remains nativistic, Panayanons who have ventured into more cosmopolitan spaces such as Metro Manila and the diaspora have abandoned the agi identity and embraced western performances of sex and gender.

Anthropologist Michael Tan echoes the points of Garcia on westernization but adds how the term "bakla" can be a limiting force. Tan discusses how the bakla as a symbol of the effeminate homosexual has divided the gay community. He equates the terms bakla and gay with class divisions and states that many gay men in the metropolis identify as "gay" in contrast to to the lower class bakla/*parlorista*[2]. This group is far from homogeneous and can basically be divided into those from the middle-class and those from high-income groups. "Unlike the bakla, this gay population remains partly in the shadows. They socialize in gay establishments in urban areas and keep it discreet at home and in the workplace" (Tan 45). He argues that contemporary society champions the term gay over local identities. Indigenous models of homosexuality such as agi, bayot, and bakla evoke particular class notions: of being low-class beauticians, entertainers, hustlers, and female impersonators. Tan points out that the growth of gay politics through the rise of AIDS awareness increases the shift in self-identification of many homosexuals who identify as gay instead of bakla.

Based on the mentioned studies on Philippine gay culture, gay liberation in the country is patterned after western constructions of class and power. The arguments of Garcia and Tan focus on the idea of empowerment from a class standpoint and see the bakla's emancipation as connected with his educational and economic standing. Empowerment is defined by one's education, exposure to cosmopolitan culture, and queerness, while emancipation is connected to one's westernization and radicalization. This theorizing does accommodate a local framework that can be used to empower indigenous models of homosexuality.

Art Studies scholar Felipe de Leon Jr.'s call for a return to pre-colonial knowledge systems aims to decolonize academic discourses by addressing the legitimacy of indigenous traditions. Traditions like babaylanism are not just mere "superstitions" and "pagan practices" but ways of living and lived realities among indigenous societies.

> The moment we begin to view ourselves through western eyes, what we held sacred suddenly becomes worthless, our virtues turned into vices, our strengths turned into weaknesses, and our triumphs into failures. We could no longer be proud of anything truly our own and began to regard anything native as primitive and underdeveloped. (de Leon 62)

Following de Leon's framework of decoloniality, this study on kaagian aims to interrogate Western Queer Studies and reveal that there is empowerment in embodying indigenous ways of living. By tracing the connection between kaagian and babaylanism, a discourse on the West Visayan agi aims to subvert the totalizing gaze of "westernized queers" and reclaim the narrative of the agi as a narrative of power, resistance, and liberation.

Agi! Agi! may putay sa dahi[3]*:* Nativism as Resistance

This derogatory expression has been passed down from one generation to another, a proof of the predominance of patriarchal thought and its attendant homophobic views in Panayanon society. As the discourse of heterosexuality is normalized, indigenous narratives of gender identities are under threat of erasure. Moreover, the naturalization of heteronormative binaries intensifies the subjugation of those who do not conform to the norms. Patriarchy and heteronormativity work hand in hand in maintaining male-centered power structures that valorize the male experience as the standard human experience. Native to Panay in Western Visayas, the agi exemplifies bravery and defiance amidst patriarchy. Commonly described as an "effeminate man," the agi is a highly-feminized homosexual identity although kaagian can never be truly encapsulated in one image. Kaagian varies from minimal to theatrical articulations of femininity. There are various levels of gender

expressions and performances attributed to kaagian. While some agi just move and speak demurely in an effeminate way, others resort to hormonal treatment and flamboyant displays of femininity to assert their lived identities. Unlike the western transgender identification, the agi does not see himself as a woman. A trans person does not identify his/her own gender with the sex they were assigned at birth. Most transgender people in the LGBTQ community seek to bring their anatomy into alignment with their gender identity. This western and relatively-new gender identification is slowly changing the landscape of queer identities in the Philippines. For the agi, there is no sense of disconnect that can be fixed by gender reassignment because he does not see himself as wrongly-bodied. Kaagian is defined by feminine desire and orientation. Although he acknowledges himself as a man, his projection of self and articulation of desire are very much woman-like. The most common element that binds the agi is their desire for a masculine partner, or for the love of a real man. The feminization of the agi and his desire for a macho partner reveal the strong heteronormative dynamics of this relationship. Despite falling into such binaries, though, the agi finds fulfillment as he solidifies the articulation of his femininity whenever he is with a real man.

While the discourse of kabaklaan in Metropolitan Manila has slowly evolved[4] due to westernization and the introduction of queer politics, the agi of Western Visayas remains hesitant to radical changes in the construction of his gender identity and sexual desire. Uniquely Panayanon in its perception of self and adherence to femininity, the agi is defined by the spatiality of Panay as an animistic, feminine-centric locality. While the western idea of homosexuality (i.e., men who have sex with men or MSM) has slowly changed the dynamics of homoerotic relationships in the Philippines, the agi as a hyper-feminine identification and performance of self remains resistant to such western intrusion.

The Panayanon worldview plays an integral role in the formation of gender identities. In the context of kaagian, desiring a non-masculine partner is unimaginable because it is an indication of failure of one's gender actualization. Since the agi's desire is feminine-oriented, its target is a masculine figure. Desiring another agi is inconceivable because in doing so, the masculine/feminine orientation that balances the articulation of pleasure in this relationship is lost. For the agi, yearning for another agi is an abominable way of consuming his own kin, a cannibalistic act that tarnishes the sacredness of such sisterhood. Despite operating in binaristic sensibilities, these masculine-feminine dynamics are sensible and empowering for the agi because his Panayanon worldview considers women equal to men. Thus, the very idea of embracing his femininity does not make him the weaker partner. The agi as a feminine man feels powerful by becoming feminine because the cosmogony of his space does not denigrate the forces attuned to womanhood.

This connection between space and self explains how kaagian is not essentialized, but is a performative act. One's self-identification has the possibility to change when one leaves the Panayanon space. Looking at real-life occurrences and observing some literary depictions of the Western Visayan gay experience, it can be argued that some agi choose to leave their indigenous self-identification once they enter urban and westernized spaces such as Metro Manila and the diaspora. Kaagian as a nativist articulation of self loses its dominance outside Panay and enters fluid, westernized, and postmodern identifications such as gay, queer, and non-binary. The works of agi writers from the diaspora like those of Peter Solis Nery and Alex Delos Santos mirror this "queering phenomenon."

Garcia presents the status of Philippine gay liberation after the publication of *Ladlad* in 1994. He argues that writings of the past three decades ('70s-'90s) on the subject of homosexuality show a systemic "miscomprehension" on the idea of homosexuality by limiting the question of homosexuality to the effeminate bakla alone ("Theoretical Notes" 87). He continues with the periodization of Philippine gay literature and presents an analysis of its "Coming out stage" and the "Gay Liberation stage." Garcia discusses that "the texts during the "Coming out stage" manifest anguish over the revelation of their gay characters' homosexuality while the "Liberation stage" features more politicized literary representations of the homosexual identity" ("Theoretical Notes" 104). This argument strengthens the nativist effort of agi writers to create a political resistance by reclaiming their own history, creating a conscious regional identity connected with babaylanism, and opening new spaces of representation and emancipation.

While Garcia's works were crucial in paving the way for gay studies in the Philippines, this study aims to differ from his queer framework by examining kaagian as an indigenous articulation of homosexual identity and power. More importantly, this study aims to answer Garcia's call to intellectualize the different regional gay cultures and literatures, a project that should involve ethnographic research and translation work. This task should be undertaken by gays from the regions because "there are already a number of regional gay writers whose works remain unpublished because of both the sexual nature of their themes, and the marginality of the languages in which they are couched. Getting these samples of regional homosexual literature published is therefore another important concern, as these are also works of gay self-representation" ("Theoretical Notes" 104).

An important project that seeks to decentralize the monolithic position of the Manila bakla in Philippine gay studies is Francis Luis Torres's Master's thesis *Handumanan sa Usa ka Bayot Boang- Inscribing the Bayot in Cebuano Literature (Pre-colonial period to 1945)*. Torres's study analyzes the inscriptions of the Cebuano *bayot* as forms

of subversion against dominant narratives. It traces the bayot's representational history by focusing on how the bayot has been written in Cebuano history and culture. Similar to the role of the agi in babaylanic narratives of Western Visayas, the Cebuano bayot as argued by Torres "is a metaphor of subversion, which haunts commonsensical values and norms that constitute our communities, especially the ideas of gender, history, and culture" (92). Analyzing two books of conduct, a comedy, three short plays, and nine short stories published from the Spanish colonial period to 1945, Torres notes that the inscriptions of the bayot changed from shaman to nationalist leader during the Spanish era and from an effeminate invert to a metaphor of the nation during the prewar American period. Parallel to the role of agi as babaylan, Torres's analysis of the constructions and peculiarities of the bayot elucidates how the two Visayan gender identities embody defiance and play marginal and central roles at the same time. While the agi engages with patriarchy and Catholicism in West Visayan Literature, Torres's study suggests that the bayot "has revealed the shortcomings of Catholic and universalist agendas during the Spanish period and also the modernizing project of the American colonizers" (92) in Cebuano Literature. Exploring the nuances of the bayot, Torres's study argues that such identity is produced by its culture, within a specific time and space. A genealogical investigation reveals that he, "together with sexualities and concepts associated with him, does not have a stable meaning. The need to reassess and recuperate histories and narratives remain crucial in the bayot's identity formation" (Torres 97). The bayot's openness to change challenges the agi's continuous refusal to radicalize its performance by remaining nativist and feminine in its projection of the self. The differences between the agi and the bayot can be accounted for by the spatial conditions of the physical and cultural locations of the two identities. While religious Cebu remains steadfast in upholding its Hispanic heritage in embracing the changes of the modern times, animistic Panay continues to uphold the babaylanic in its collective imagination. The agi might pluralize itself in the future, but its highly-feminized performance will remain strong.

Kaagian in Literature: Writing the *Self*

While pre-colonial gender crossing is portrayed in the female-male and male-female transmutations of Nagmalitong Yawa[5] in the great Panayanon epic *Hinilawod*, the Catholic colonial hegemony deeply instilled the masculine-feminine binaries in Panayanon society. Thus, no strong articulations of homosexuality emerged in the literary productions of Panay from the time of the Spanish colonization until the highly sexualized decade of the 1980s. While it cannot be denied that homosexuality has been present in the Philippines for centuries, it was only in the 1980s when writers started to articulate their homoerotic fantasies in fiction and

prose. The emergence of writing workshops, literary grants, and competitions such as the Palanca Awards gave writers avenues for their work. The mighty presence of Leoncio Deriada, hailed as the "Father of Contemporary West Visayan Literature," catapulted the careers of many writers in the region. He established writing workshops and started mentoring young writers, which led to the blossoming of contemporary West Visayan Literature. Agi writers, on the other hand, started to write about their homoerotic desires in subtle and metaphorical ways. Despite the fierce feminist movement of that time, early agi writers were still hesitant to write about strong homosexual representations, afraid of the possible backlash from religious and conservative sectors of society.

In a personal interview with two of the "foremothers" of agi poetry, John Iremil Teodoro and Alex Delos Santos, they reveal that the publication of *Ladlad* in 1994 motivated them to write about their experiences without fear and hesitation. The courageous subversion and success of *Ladlad* sent ripples that reached the provinces. The strong gay voices in *Ladlad* validated the homosexual experience and claimed its own rightful place in the literary world. The mid-1990s until the early 2000s witnessed the fruitful publication of many gay texts in Western Visayas. Kaagian found its niche in the literary space as represented by the strong and defiant literary heroes who paved the way for agi literature: Felino Garcia Jr., John Iremil Teodoro, Alex Delos Santos, and Peter Solis Nery. While the first generation of agi writers continued producing poetry, fiction, and criticism revolving around kaagian, they also explored different themes such as the concept of nationhood, feminism, social injustice, diasporic experiences, and history. The second blossoming of agi literature started in 2015 as the Iloilo Zine festival, spearheaded by a new generation of Ilonggo writers, created a wider platform for emerging writers. The festival made West Visayan literature more accessible to a wider audience by bridging the gap between high art and pop culture. It brought literary awareness to the non-literati audience by holding public lectures and fora on West Visayan literature, art and writing workshops, poetry reading, and other cultural gatherings. West Visayan Literature witnessed a shift from university-based publishing houses to independent publishers that released zines and chapbooks. Literary production was no longer limited to academic institutions as online platforms like *Balay Sugidanun, Karaykaray,* and *Hubon Manunulat* started to feature the works of many emerging writers. New talents emerged as the second wave of agi literature unfolded with Noel Galon De Leon, Macky Torechilia, and Leonard Francis Alcoran offering new representations and bold voices that showcase the diverse facets of kaagian in the contemporary period.

Kaagian and Babaylanism: Reconstructing a Lost Voice

The entrenchment of the colonial religion in Panayanon society has demonized same-sex relations for centuries, regarding them as a source of sin and moral decay. For the Catholic colonizers, the gender-crossing babaylan was a threatening force that must be eradicated. As new religious impositions emerged, the ways of the babaylan were pushed into obfuscation, *othered* and demonized by the Spanish friars and their legions of newly-converted *indios*. Catholicism played a major role in the promulgation of patriarchal and colonial supremacy in the country. With the promise of divine salvation, Spanish colonizers used their Catholic faith to destroy pre-colonial customs, traditions, and belief systems. The colonial governed by religious laws and patriarchal codes demonized the animistic ways of the babaylan.

Catholicism has penetrated every aspect of life from the personal to the political as all things connected to Catholicism are good, and everything outside it, evil. This black-and-white framework created rigid dichotomies in society, even transforming the once fluid view of sexuality into the male-female, dominant-submissive categories. Thus, a study on kaagian will be impossible without a critique of one of its sources of oppression: a religious hegemony that continues to invalidate and persecute those who do not fit the masculine-feminine narratives.

In the process of reclaiming feminist and queer history in the Philippines, the babaylan has been used as a symbol of authority and liberation because she personifies a powerful femininity free from patriarchal control. While traditional structures perpetuate the devaluation of the feminine, the babaylan defies patriarchal conventions and narratives, making her the most enduring feminist and queer symbol in Philippine history. United States-based professor of Philippine history Mina Roces discusses why the babaylan became the mythological mother of the feminist movement in the Philippines:

> Of all the alternative role models proposed by activists, the babaylan remains the most powerful icon. Perhaps because she was a woman with religious power, she offered an alternative construction of the feminine distinct from the colonial definition (the beautiful, domestic, long suffering woman) as well as the contemporary activist. The babaylan mystique, her imaginative power, could be traced to her unique subject position as mature, wise woman with religious power- three characteristics that have yet to be associated with the cultural constructions of the feminine in the Philippines. (34)

Agi poetry's reconstruction of a lost animistic memory and the use of babaylan as a rallying point deconstructs the Catholic, colonial, and patriarchal demonization of the feminine. Agi writers redefine kaagian by challenging male-centric ideologies, critiquing sexist and homophobic archetypes, and unraveling indigenous definitions of power by embracing the animistic ways of their babaylan grandmothers. Kaagian as an embodiment of babaylanism is even more threatening to the patriarchy because a masculine body harnessing feminine energy to achieve power is unimaginable.

Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine: The Babaylan as Counter-religious Icon in the Poems of John Iremil Teodoro

Teodoro is one of the early writers who legitimized gay writing in West Visayan Literature. During a time when other gay writers wrote about the gay experience in subtle representations, Teodoro was already writing about powerful articulations of kaagian without any fear and hesitation. Inspired by the publication of *Ladlad* in the early '90s, he wrote about the struggles and tragedies of an agi through his favorite and most dominant imagery, the *kataw*[6].

In his collection of poetry *Kung ang Tula ay Pwedeng Pambili ng Lalake* (2006), Teodoro incorporates mystical elements immortalized in the collective unconscious of Kinaray-a culture to challenge masculine and religious forces. He frames these entities as guardians of nature, occupying feminine spaces and embodying the babaylanic gahum. In the poem "Karimu," Teodoro explores the superstition of turning a person into an *aswang*. This *pagtigbaliw* or transformation is rendered not just in a mystical, but also in a very erotic way. He positions kaagian as fearful and as threatening as the *aswang*, and begins the poem by comparing a ball of hair with the persona's love for his aswang lover. This image encapsulates the Panayanon belief that once an aswang rolls his/her hair into a ball and gives it to a mortal, the latter will be transformed into an aswang:

Syempre ikaw ang aswang	Of course, you are the *aswang*
nga nagpasuk	Who inserted
kang dyang karimu kanakun.	this *karimu* in my body
Kang nag-inum kita	When we drank
kang mga talinghaga sa baso	The words in a glass
kang mga binalaybay	of love poems.
Kang paghigugma.	

The tone of the poem is both homoerotic and mystical, presenting the *pag-yanggaw*[7] not in a monstrous way, but as a sexually pleasurable experience. Teodoro describes this transformation in an erotic manner:

Indi ako makaturog kon gabii	I could not sleep well at night.
hay ginasabadan ako	I feel restless
kang manamit kadya	because of this
nga paghirab.	ecstatic feeling.
Indi man ako kakaun ka husto	I could not eat well
hay daw masuka ako pirme	because I always vomit
sa sobra nga kakunyag.	When I feel this thrill.

The lines disengage from traditional depictions of monstrous transformations that involve struggle and suffering. For Teodoro's persona, it is a moment of utter pleasure and sensory overload. The poem gives a clear image of mysticism in Panay. The belief in the supernatural, the gahum, and the healing powers of the *sorhano* (shaman) adds to the babaylanic theme of the poem.

Duro run nga sorhano	I went to many shamans
Ang akun ginparapitan.	even the most powerful
Bisan ang pinakasampat kananda	of them cannot heal me.
Indi makapaayad kanakun.	Their ginger and oil
Wara't mahimu sa imong gahum	are powerless
Ang andang luy-a kag lana.	Over your *gahum.*

The lines note the powerlessness of the sorhano over the gahum of the aswang. These mystical symbols in the poem introduce the reader to the animist worldview of Panay. Considered as a community healer in contemporary Panayanon society, the sorhano functions like the babaylan but unlike its predecessor, the sorhano is only concentrated in the realm of healing, and has no political power. The sorhano practices folk-Catholicism, unlike the animistic ways of the babaylan. The aswang's triumph over the sorhano shows the animist force's victory.

Sa sunod nga pagbilog	During the next
kang bulan,	moonrise
imaway run kita	we will
sa paglupad	fly together
sa pagpangita	we will hunt
kang una nga biktima	the first victim
kang atun paghigugma.	of our love.

Teodoro ends the poem with a powerful image of an aswang, ready to sow fear and challenge seats of power such as the church and the patriarchy. Teodoro's use of the aswang imagery as a figure of agi liberation functions as a subversive "turning-around" of colonial, catholic narratives that demonized the feminine *other*. The use of aswang imagery in agi poetry deviates from the traditional, patriarchal assumption of an effeminate agi being weak and submissive. The aswang, just like the babaylan, is a threatening female/feminine figure that conjures mystical forces and occupies a space of power beyond the reach of the patriarchy. In Teodoro's poem, the agi as aswang becomes a gamhanan figure; hypersexualizing it adds depth and complexity to its image of subversion, which is now being used in reclaiming sources of power long-vilified by the patriarchy and the Catholic church.

Continuing the counter-religious trope in his poetry, Teodoro's "Ikaw ang akun diyos" ("You are my God") is written in a style of a homoerotic prayer. Bridging the sacred and the profane, the poem rebels against the doctrines of Catholicism by worshiping a different masculine figure: the beloved. The persona begins by comparing his love with divine omnipotence.

Ikaw ang akun Diyos.	You are my god
Ang imong kupkup lamang	It is only in your embrace
ang makapatiraw kanakun	where I can feel
kang matuod-tuod nga pagpalangga.	the taste of true love.

Teodoro presents this expression of love not just as an ethereal experience, but as a process of liberating the body. "Ikaw lamang ang makagisi kag makahukas/ Kang damul nga bayu kang kahadluk/ Nga nagaputos sa raw-ay ko nga lawas" (You are the only one who can tear/ The thickness of fear that covers/ My ugly body). The poet incorporates the image of the human body as a site of shame. This approach to sexuality is deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition of policing and restricting the body from enjoying earthly pleasures. A celebration of sex is only allowed between heterosexual married couples for the sole purpose of procreation. Teodoro's portrayal of homoerotic love as a liberating, empowering experience rebels against the Catholic ideals that define it as an unholy act. The agi persona elevates his desire for the beloved by elevating him to deity-status, conjuring a prayer-like reverence for the body and the beauty of his muse.

Ikaw ang akun Diyos-	You are my God
ang nagaisarahanun nga laki	the only man
nga liwat-liwat magaula kang dugo	who can spill blood
sa mahigko nga lupa	on this dirty earth
agud luwasun ako sa akun mga sala.	to save me from my sins.
Sa imo paghimugtu sa akon hita,	As you take your last breath,

putson ako kang kasanag	between my thighs
nga magatugro kanakun	a light embraces me
kang kabuhi	and leads me
nga wara't katapusan.	into an everlasting life.

These lines create a unique picture of sexual euphoria and divine glory. The use of "paghimugtu sa akon hita" (take your last breath between my thighs) that leads to the persona's divine ecstasy shows the poet's radical undermining of Catholic moral codes. Shocking and sacrilegious in the eyes of religion, Teodoro's sacred approach to homoerotic love functions as an ultimate defiance of patriarchal norms and religious ideals. The agi persona elevating the beloved to god-like status rebels against the Judeo-Christian writings that prohibit idolatry in various forms and practices. Imitating a prayer-like style in writing this poem, Teodoro subverts the very ideals of the church and reconstructs power from a very carnal, homoerotic perspective. The poem presents sex as an act of primeval worship, where power is harnessed to experience the divine. Gahum is embodied in the act of sex, as it functions as an ancient form of worship exchanged between two bodies. This defiance of patriarchal and Catholic laws recreates and repositions homoeroticism as an unshameful, liberating, and euphoric experience.

In "Tatlong Babaylan ng Pag-Ibig" ("Three Babaylans of Love") Teodoro incorporates the babaylanic in the discourse of kaagian. He opens the poem with a poignant declaration "wala tayong karapatang magmahal kapag sumisikat ang araw" (we do not have the right to love when the sun rises), a vivid articulation of how hegemonic systems of power, especially the Church and the patriarchy, invalidate homosexuality. The male centric Catholic doctrines champion heterosexuality and heteronormativity, and behaviors outside such classifications are deemed abnormal. Teodoro continues to describe the persona's subjugation and names the government, the church, and society as sources of oppression.

Kalaban ng tibok ng ating puso	Enemy to our heartbeats
Ang mga batas ng pamahalaan	are the laws of government, church,
simbahan at lipunan.	and society.
Walang pangalan ang ating pagsinta	Our love is nameless
Sapagkat marami ang kumukontra.	because many are against it.

Teodoro describes how kaagian is "unnamed" in these patriarchal spaces where masculine rules define the world in binaries: male/female, self/other, good/evil. The invalidation of kaagian comes from the agi's defiance of his masculine form and the sociocultural performances expected from him. The Church as the looming panopticon among the three oppressive structures symbolically holds the greatest power, influencing every aspect of life. Since the feminine mystique is a threat

to Catholic patriarchal supremacy, the amalgamation of *agi-gamhanan-babaylan* functions as the ultimate subversive move against the Church. Teodoro's use of darkness attuned to the babaylanic clashes with light as a beacon of Catholic supremacy. In the following lines, the persona harnesses babaylanic powers that challenge the omnipotence of the Catholic God.

Kayang-kaya nating pasabugin	Together, we can destroy
ang buong daigdig.	the entire world.
Hawak natin ang lupa, dagat, at ulap.	We hold the earth, sea and sky.
Lumalakas ang ating kapangyarihan	our powers get stronger
sa bawat lungkot at kabiguang	with every sadness and pain
ating madanas.	that we experience.
Hala, maghawak-kamay na tayo	So let us hold hands
itakda na natin sa isang sumpa	and start the curse
ang katapusan ng langit at lupa!	to end heaven and earth.

Teodoro's vindictive tone reveals the shift of the agi voice in poetry. From traditional depictions of a subjugated and silenced entity, the agi is empowered with an enraged voice; there emerges a babaylanic gahum. The persona reveals the Panayanon belief that babaylans hold mystical power that positions them as almost-divine. This apocalyptic, animistic threat to destabilize the world order harkens to a *busalian*[8] past, a time when the highest level of babaylanic power was able to control the forces of nature. This kind of counterhegemonic defiance was exemplified by the babaylanes in their subversive attacks against the colonizers and the church, also seen in Magos's foregrounding of babaylanism as an anti-colonial movement in her discussion of the babaylan revolts in Negros. The babaylanes used their busalian abilities to resist Spanish domination. She describes the revolts of babaylan leaders like Ponciano Elorpe and Papa Isio as "nationalistic" and "nativistic" in nature (14). The babaylanes as folk heroines use *anting-anting* or amulets and incantations to strengthen their body. Their gahum shows their mystical abilities like creating fire and calling for rain.

Teodoro's poetry encapsulates the babaylanic spirit of the Panayanon space. He presents the agi as a gamhanan entity which embodies the babaylanic gahum in defying the oppressive and colonial rules of Catholicism. On one hand, he uses homoeroticism to challenge male centric superiority narrativized by religion. On the other, he maximizes the power of the sacred feminine in challenging the omnipotence of the Judeo-Christian God. His use of superstitious beliefs, animist practices, and elements of the night presents darkness as a space of the feminine other. This counter-religious narrative engages with the Catholic idea of light as a force of goodness and healing. The dark in a babaylanic sense rebels against the

Catholic demonization of such space, and looks at it as a place of sexual splendor and liberation. Following the tradition of his babaylan foremothers, Teodoro's conscious use of babaylanic imagery echoes Magos's discussion of babaylanism as a nativist and anti-colonial movement:

> The oppressive sociopolitical structure and the worsening of the peasants' economic conditions provided a fertile ground for the emergence of native religious leaders. The babaylan was the only person they could turn to and strong enough to lead them. Using their physical might they imbued their struggle with magical practices taken from their cultural reservoir. (14)

Kaagian and Animism: The Ma-aram Cosmogony in the Poems of Leonard Francis Alcoran

The use of babaylanic elements that clash with Catholic supremacy is also present in the poetry of a new generation of agi writers. As one of the emerging voices in contemporary Kinaray-a literature, Alcoran's [9] poetry displays a strong endurance of animistic memory embedded in Antiqueño culture. His poetry collection *Kinaray-a* (2019) critiques the supremacy of capitalism and Catholicism in the modern age. For both capitalism and neocolonialism, ushering in technological and industrial progress means building megacities and erasing primeval practices. Alcoran's poems offer an escape from the dystopic, capitalist reality of modern life by presenting a glimpse into the animistic world of Antiqueños. He explores sexuality and superstition in juxtaposition with the physical and cultural explorations of Antique. In this bountiful province where the mountains meet the sea, the distinction between logic and superstition is blurred as people continue to practice ancient traditions that revere the deities of nature and their ancestral spirits.

In the opening poem "Nagasala man ang *manugluy-a*" ("The manugluy-a can be wrong too"), the persona addresses the connection between shamanistic practices and the belief in supernatural beings. The *luy-a* (ginger) in the Panayanon belief system works as a talisman against sinister forces. Magos's ethnographic record of a babaylan's ritual in a barrio in Antique shows that the process of *pagluy-a* heals someone from mysterious illnesses and strengthens his/her *dungan*[10]:

> The ma-aram curer gets hold of a small piece of ginger and holds it just over the head of the patient. He blows over it and murmurs some prayers. The curer will know which part of the patient's body is ailing because he can feel it in his own body. In pulsing, for instance, the pain seems to connect from its origin in the patient's body to that of the healer. (71)

The poem begins with the *manugluy-a's* (healer) statement that the addressee has touched something invisible and is thus running a high fever.

Ginalagnat ikaw kadya	You are feverish
kay may natandug ikaw	Because you touched
sa likod kang balay ninyo,	Something in the backyard,
hambal kang manugluy-a.	according to the *manugluy-a.*

The expression "may gintandug" pertains to carelessly disturbing, or inflicting pain on supernatural beings unseen by the human eye, and so in return, pain—usually in the form of a disease that cannot be explained by science— is inflicted on the offender. In these situations, people would usually call the manugluy-a, the community healer in contemporary Kinaray-a society. Although not as powerful as their babaylan predecessor, the manugluy-a takes on the babaylan's role as healer, diviner, and medium between humans and the spirits of nature. Usually women, these modern-day shamans practice animism and folk Catholicism. They use herbs and recite Latin incantations to heal the sick. Unlike the babaylan who holds political power in pre-colonial times, the manugluy-a's power is exclusive only to the healing arts. In the context of the poem, the manugluy-a reveals that the sick did not touch any supernatural entity, but himself.

Ugaring wara man ikaw	However, you did not touch anything
ti gintandug nga iba kon indi	but yourself.
ang imong kaugalingon-	A bottle
Botilya nga buta	full of rainwater.
kang tubig ka uran.	

The erotic twist reveals that the "hilanat" or fever that struck him is not caused by any supernatural force, but by feverish libido waiting to explode. Alcoran's poem reveals how Panayanons look at shamanistic practices as sources of knowledge in a world of superstition and other unexplainable phenomena. The babaylanic emerged as an enduring practice that survived colonialism and religious persecution. It counters religious hegemony by offering an alternative world view and knowledge formation. Despite religious domination in all aspects of life, the babaylanic still surfaces once religious or scientific logic fails to account for the many peculiarities that compose the Panayanon realm. People always go to the sorhano, the babaylan, or the manugluy-a whenever science or religion cannot solve their problems. This shows that the belief in the babaylan's gahum will always be embedded in the collective unconscious of the Panayanons. Alcoran's poem crystallizes the idea that the babaylanic as an integral part of the Panayanon DNA can never be erased.

Alcoran writes about desire alongside superstition in his poem "Pangalagkalag sa bus" ("Seeing spirits on the bus"). Describing a scenario of a typical bus ride in the countryside, he employs a mystical tone to give the poem a surrealist atmosphere. He fuses the homoerotic and the superstitious gaze. Supernatural beings are used both as metaphorical symbols for the men he encounters on the bus and as references showing the dominance of an animistic belief system in the collective imagination of Antiqueños. The persona starts his exploration of superstition and sexuality by describing a sexual heat that consumes him upon seeing another attractive guy.

Kay man may nagatuhaw	Heat arises in every word
nga kainit Sa tagsa ka tinaga nga ginabata	that enters my mind
Sa akun paminsaron kon makakita ako	whenever I see
ka kon ano nga taglugar	an entity.

He calls his men "taglugar" or entities residing in certain natural abodes such as trees, streams, and hills. Because of the Kinaray-a belief that nature is a sacred space as it has its own spirit, people are taught to harmoniously coexist with it, show respect, and sometimes offer presents to its unseen inhabitants. The persona then continues to enumerate the supernatural beings inside the bus, gazing at them one by one with a bit of fear, admiration and even, sexual intensity. He describes the men as a pantheon of folkloric characters starting with the *tayhu* (a half-man, half-horse entity) with shimmering arms:

Mga braso nga nagahining-hining,	His arms shining,
mata nga may lumay kag mga alima	eyes filled with love potions
nga sarang makakuga okon di gani	and hands that can grab
makahapuhap kang akun buhok	or caress my hair
sa idalum kang lunok.	under the lunok.

The poet marries the erotic and the mystical by incorporating the Panayanon concept of *lumay*, or love spell. The lumay symbolizes the use of supernatural (if not babaylanic) gahum for romantic or erotic purposes. Here, nature is not just a site of healing, but also becomes a sexually-charged space. These erotic encounters are set in the solitary spaces of nature depicted as spaces of liberation. There is a deep connection between animism and sexuality; sex as a raw and organic act is synonymous to primordial worship of the environment.

Ugaring kang sangka tion may	But one time,
nakasakay ako	I shared a ride
nga maranhig halin sa San Jose.	with a *maranhig* from San Jose
Kag sa amo nga tyempo mapiritan ako	Which forced me

nga magdara ka luy-a,	to bring a ginger
mapabatak ka dungan kag indi	strengthen my dungan
magbarabarilikid sa ginhalinan.	and never look back,
	where I come from.

The symbol of the *luy-a* as a talisman against bad entities reflects the endurance of animism in Antique. Alcoran presents a world governed by superstition, a testament to how colonialism and Catholicism have failed to eradicate the pre-colonial ways of Kinaray-a culture. While the poem presents supernatural beings as sinister, it also shows that the only force that can combat them is not the patriarchal workings of the church, but the animistic practices attuned to babaylanism. In this highly-mystical space, people do not resort to Catholic prayers and saints when fighting the supernatural, but return to the older, babaylanic ways of their ancestors. The use of *pagluy-a, pagbatak-dungan*, and other babaylanic practices show a collective imagination resorting to familiar, nativistic ways, rather than incorporating the Catholic, colonial ways.

The last poem in the collection is a total celebration of the babaylanic embodied and performed through dance. Alcoran's "Paghiwit"[11] ("Sorcery") is a short, eight-liner poem that navigates around the struggles of a persona wanting to break free from the pains of unrequited love. Short, but full of powerful images of the babaylan, Alcoran's poem presents the undying tradition of babaylanism in Antique. The performance of babaylanic rituals has not just appeased the spirits of nature or worshipped the divine, but has also shaped the communal *self* and the creative imagination of the people. The poem opens with strong babaylanic imagery: the persona dancing under a *lunok*[12] tree, invoking supernatural spirits to heal him from the *hiwit* or curse of love.

Tubtob karon ako mahinugyaw,	Until later, I will be dancing
sa idalum kang lunok pagatawgun	under the *lunok*
ang mga surog nga baskug	I will call the strong spirits
si Pagsalig, Pagtuo kag Pagpadayon.	Hope, Faith, and Persistence.

Imitating the trance-like performance of the babaylan, the persona spirals back to the primordial, animistic faith to find healing and solitude. Through dance, he harnesses a pre-colonial space of power. Using the healing forces of nature and the powers of spirit guides, the persona follows the tradition of the babaylan as healer and medium between the physical and the mystical. Alcoran incorporates the concept of *daga*, an offering of blood, food, and other valuable items to appease or ask a favor from the spirits of nature.

Akun karon pagadagaun ang kasubo	I will shed sadness
kag ihalad ang sapal nga ginraha sa	and offer it with the *sapal* cooked in tears
luha agud maayad ako sa pagkahiwit	so that I can be healed. From the curse
kang mapintas na nga tagipusuon.	of his cruel heart.

Gahum is positioned within the babaylanic space, as the persona ignores any Catholic and patriarchal incantations in his healing process. Nono discusses the healing modalities of the babaylan, as "an obligation to the forces of life, health, and well-being. Assembling the faithful in a collective act of praise, devotion, and supplication, the rituals are performed in times of deprivation, as well as of plenty" (343). She describes rituals as mechanisms for the renewal and restoration of harmonious relationships among humans, and between humans and spirits. "Rituals required no other reason than to strengthen relationships with gods and spirits, in the same way neglect was believed to bring out illness and misfortune. In the continuing renewal of sacred relations between humans and spirits, and between humans and humans, ritual played a critical role" (343). The ritualistic performance in the poem incorporates various healing modalities used by babaylanes. These modalities include words that are sung, chanted, or recited to comfort people during hours of darkness and ignite embers of hope in their hearts. The strong presence of the babaylanic gahum in Alcoran's poetry is a manifestation of an undying pre-colonial memory. This poetic project of unearthing and continuously using the babaylanic gahum undoes colonial narratives that always associate power with patriarchy and Catholicism. Despite centuries of colonization both political and religious, the ma-aram ideology such as the belief in gahum and the presence of animistic practices are deeply embedded in Kinaray-a culture, playing an important role in shaping the everyday life of contemporary Antiqueños.

Alcoran's poetry foregrounds the deep interconnections between kaagian and babaylanism. His agi personae harness the babaylanic gahum from healing to protection. Just like their babaylan foremothers, they continue to embody the animistic ways of coexisting and paying reverence to nature; they treat nature as a mystical space. This feminine space is worshiped through chants, dances, and rituals as old as time. In Alcoran's depiction of the babaylanic, the feminine is no longer dark, monstrous, and evil. The strong presence of babaylanic elements in his poetry shows the endurance of the old practices in the people's collective memory. Alcoran's poetry solidifies the claims of this paper that babaylanism in Panay has survived and coexisted with contemporary ways of living.

Conclusion: Kaagian and Emancipation

The powerful presence of animism in agi poetry shows the persistence of the babaylanic tradition despite centuries-long religious subjugation that stripped the agi of his powerful voice. Framing kaagian as close-to-nature, the empowerment of the agi from a once-marginalized voice is synonymous to the acknowledgement of nature as a feminine space of power. It is not just a source of life, but of ancient knowledges, traditions, and mystical elements that make sense for the communal imagination of the Panayanons. Agi writers play a powerful role in subverting the religious hegemony by featuring the babaylanic gahum as a force that emancipates kaagian from different structures of oppression. Teodoro's use of supernatural and animist elements in his poetry projects alternative sources of gahum. It decentralizes the Church as the only source of power and presents nature as an equally empowering and liberating space. Incorporating folk knowledge into his writings, he projects his home province of Antique as a nativist space where colonialism had failed to completely eradicate the babaylanic ways of life.

Meanwhile, Alcoran's poetry shows a strong use of animist elements that continuously play a vital role in Kinaray-a culture. From writing about a trance-like dance under a lunok tree to the use of pagluy-a as folk medicine, he reveals the enduring animistic consciousness of his people. In her study of babaylanism in Panay, Magos analyzed historical accounts by Spanish chroniclers like Morga and Alcina and discovered that the babaylanes gathered annually to collectively perform their animistic practices. "The same records mentioned that in the years 1701-1800, there were 180 diabolical women who gathered in the town of Sibalom, Antique. Antique was specifically identified as the most superstitious of all other towns" (11). Alcoran's conscious use of babaylanic imagery shows that the indigenous ways of his Antiqueño ancestors survived religious and colonial subjugation and still play a major role in constructing the collective imagination of the community up to the present time.

Feminist and Babaylan Studies scholar Leny Mendoza Strobel proposes a framework of decolonization to enable the colonized to understand and overcome "the depths of alienation and marginalization caused by colonization" (64). Decolonization is a journey of questioning a reality constructed by colonial narratives. To decolonize is to be able to name internalized oppression, shame, inferiority, confusion and anger. To decolonize is to recover one's cultural memory and reclaim the body. To decolonize is to recognize the orality of Philippine culture and develop a critical consciousness that can understand the consequences of silence and invisibility

(Strobel 64). This critique of power structures leads to the interrogation of religion and patriarchy as informed by colonial ideology. The babaylan becomes a model of womanhood and spirituality that is not defined by her suffering or connection with a greater masculine force. The use of babaylanic voice in agi poetry harnesses pre-colonial power to subvert colonial-imposed definitions of heteronormative masculinity and femininity. The strong presence of babaylanic imagery connected with erotic and animistic elements in agi poetry is a manifestation of a strong and conscious decision among agi writers to deconstruct oppressive colonial archetypes of female powerlessness and subjugation.

The analysis of the poems has shown that kaagian as a distinctly Panayanon and a nativist embodiment of homosexuality functions as a hyper-feminine identification of self. This embodiment subverts colonial ideals of power that always connects supremacy with masculinity. The Panayanon animistic cosmogony shapes its tradition of orality, and thus informs the people's sense of selfhood. Eliodora Dimzon's study *Pagtigbaliw sa Sugilanon: Transfigurations of the Babaylan in the Selected Hiligaynon Sugilanon* (2020) elucidates that the oral narratives of Panay are deeply rooted in the world of the supernatural. Stories of gods, epic heroes, and entities of lower mythology play a vital role in the world building of Panay, and cannot be detached from the Panayanon imagination. "Most of the Panayanon busalian or heroic tales tell of the supernatural exploits of folk heroes who have figured prominently in protecting their communities from the excesses of colonial authorities, the bandits from outlying communities, and natural calamities like drought and famine" (6). The babaylan as community healer and champion of folk tradition continues to transmutate or *tigbaliw* in various Panayanon literary traditions as a manifestation of the enduring animism in this West Visayan island.

De Leon discusses the process of decolonization as the "key and first step towards healing. We must acknowledge, look deeply, and enter our wounds in order to transform our suffering into compassion" (62). As a primary bearer and transmitter of indigenous culture, the babaylan aids to the process of decolonization through collective healing and reclaiming ancient knowledges that have been silenced in the pages of history. The agi follows the legacy of the babaylan as a gender-bending, counter-masculine bearer of culture. His nativist stand amidst western ideological intrusion and his function as a repository of indigenous knowledge harken to the babaylan's anti-colonial efforts to preserve Panay's imagined community. It is in the process of unearthing the babaylan from the Catholic narrativization of history that patriarchy is challenged and deconstructed.

Despite occupying a marginalized status in contemporary West Visayan society, the effeminate agi still holds a uniquely powerful space. This sense of power is deeply rooted in Panay's collective unconscious where reverence for the feminine has endured centuries of colonial subjugation. The poems of Teodoro and Alcoran epitomize the strong babaylanic connection between humanity and nature, and highlights that the soul of a culture lies in its orality. Significantly, "to decolonize is to recognize the orality of Filipino culture" (Strobel 64). Magos explains the importance of orality in preserving the animist worldview of the Panayanons, as ma-aram practices continue to define the reality of the people:

> There are several reasons that can be put forward to explain the maintenance and survival of ma-aram practice. First, the ma-aram practice endures and has been maintained because there is a supporting ideology behind it. It thrives in an ideological context and is constantly nurtured by a vibrant oral tradition, myths, legends and folk beliefs of great antiquity which tell about the origin, structure, cosmogony, the sacred places and spirit beings that inhabit the different layers of the world. Stories about the father of the primeval pair, and the hero-liberator of the people's ancestors find credence in the lores perpetuated by these folk specialists, thus according to the ma-aram position the elements of respect and high esteem. (114)

Agi poetry reinforces the tradition of orality by capturing the Panayanon traditions and preserving them in written form. Exploring the richness of Panayanon cosmogony, belief systems, and tradition, agi poetry becomes a vessel of preservation of the Panayanon mythos. While the babaylanes carry in their bodies oral traditions that shaped centuries of indigenous knowledge and ways of living, agi writers use their works as a repository of babaylanic memory. The babaylan as a mystic, healer, and leader challenges the omnipotence of hegemonies like the patriarchy and Catholicism by reclaiming the sacred feminine buried in male centric narratives. In a time of toxic masculinity that perpetuates the persecution of women and the LGBTQ, the image of the babaylan becomes more relevant as it personifies the many resistances and the collective power of those who existed in non-patriarchal spaces. The babaylan as a symbol is an ideal metaphor for LGBTQ liberation because it rejects patriarchal core values and uses an alternative definition of power. Through a strong and conscious construction of babaylanic imagery, agi poetry creates a new cultural understanding that decolonizes discourses surrounding kaagian. The awakening of interest in babaylan studies is a powerful preamble for future agi writers. It directs them to follow the path of their babaylan foremothers and write bravely to recuperate the voices that have been silenced.

NOTES

1. Theorizing the legacy of the babaylan in Western Visayan Literature, Eliodora Dimzon's study *Pagtigbaliw sa Sugilanon: Transfigurations of the Babaylan in the Selected Hiligaynon Sugilanon, 1998-2015* (2020) establishes the deep interconnections between animism and the Panayanon identity. Exploring the concept of *pagtigbaliw,* Dimzon's study looks at metaphorical transfigurations of the babaylan as forms of subversion against hegemonic narratives on gender, class, and ethnicity. Dimzon argues that "the babaylan and traditional beliefs and practices are foregrounded and given relevance in the continuing Hiligaynon narrative production" (114).

2. The *bakla parlorista* or beautician is an archetypal image of queerness in Philippine Gay Culture. Reigning over the realm of the beauty parlor, the parlorista expresses himself through effeminacy, cross dressing, and swardspeak. Philippine's "Comedy King" Dolphy popularized this image when he started playing parlorista roles like Facifica Falayfay, Fefita Fofongay, and Dioscoro Derecho.

3. "Gay! Gay! You have a vagina on your forehead!" A homophobic slur prevalent in Western Visayas that shames homosexual men for being effeminate.

4. The bakla archetype has transformed and diversified from the effeminate parlorista to the masculine gym-buff *beki* (a contemporary queer terminology that is no longer limited to descriptions of effeminacy alone. Some masculine gay men in metropolitan spaces identify as beki due to its non-binaristic connotation.)

5. Nagmalitong Yawa Sinagmaling Diwata is one of the most beautiful goddesses in the Panayanon cosmogony. Wife of the god Saragnayan, she is known for her seduction and shapeshifting skills. In one of the great adventures of the god Humadapnon, Nagmalitong Yawa transformed herself into a man in order to save the epic hero from the charms of the monstrous Ginmayunan.

6. A half-human, half-fish supernatural creature that resembles the mermaid, the kataw represents the masculine and feminine forces that create the agi identity. The oppression that the *kataw* (half-human, half-fish entity) experiences mirrors the predicament of the agi in a world ruled by patriarchy.

7. *Pag-yanggaw* is a cultural term that describes one's attraction towards someone or something. In the context of Panayanon folklore, pag-yanggaw denotes one's strong liking for the aswang's behavior and practices. It is believed that a person

who ingests the aswang's saliva will undergo the transformation process and become an aswang.

8. Anthropologist Alicia Magos describes the full extent of the busalian's gahum in her documentation of the legend of Estrella Bangotbanwa, a diviner, healer, and priestess who is considered to be the most powerful babaylan in Panay. Aside from the usual gahum of the babaylan, the busalian could travel long distances by foot, raise her arm to produce waves, and "is said to have the ability to call for rain and strong winds by having her hair hang loose and raising a hand" (34).

9. A proud son of San Jose, Antique, Alcoran holds the distinction of being the youngest Palanca award-winning writer in Western Visayas. In 2018 at the age of 20, he won the third prize in Hiligaynon short story for his work, "Ang itlog nga wala nagabalibad."

10. In Panay's animistic belief system, the *dungan* is a concept which loosely translates to a person's "soul" or "double". One is considered healthy and/or powerful if his/her dungan is strong. It is believed that one who possesses a weak dungan can easily get sick or be influenced by supernatural forces. Thus, the practice called "*pagbatak dungan*" or strengthening the dungan is performed by the babaylan.

11. The concept of "*hiwit*" is close to sorcery, although it is not the closest English translation. Often practiced by sorcerers and witches, "*pag-hiwit*" pertains to causing harm or evil through charms and spells. A person who suffers from such bewitchment experiences different kinds of pain that may lead to death. In order to cure the hiwit, a *sorhano* or babaylan is called to perform various rites to get rid of the witch or sorcerer's gahum.

12. The Lunok or Balete tree in Panayanon lore is believed to be *mariit*, an enchanted place where supernatural beings such as t*amawo*, *kapre*, or *engkantos* reside.

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