

Binukot at Nabukot: From Myth to Practice

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ABSTRACT

Age-old tales, epic chants, and even contemporary television soap operas tell about the *binukot*, the well-kept maiden of the Panay Bukidnon, the highland inhabitants of Panay, Philippines. This article examines the binukot through myths and practices found in the people's expressive culture: from the *sugidanon* (epic chants/chanting), to the *tigbabayi* (solo woman's dance) of the *binanog* (hawk-eagle music and dance tradition), to *panubok* (traditional embroidery), where the binukot is illustrated or exemplified. From various representations, the article moves to essay the binukot's actual practice, including her present life living as a *nabukot*,¹ a transformed status she gains when she gets married. I interlace my ethnographic observations regarding these states as part of a reconsideration of feminism from both Western and indigenous perspectives.

Keywords: Myth to practice, indigenous feminism, Binukot, gender, Panay epic

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the phenomenon of the well-kept maiden in the Panay highlands in Western Visayas, Philippines. Called binukot² in the local language, *Kinaray-a*, she is "inclosed or confined; ... secluded from the outer world" (*binocot* in Kauffman 125). She is the chosen one among the female siblings; the one cared for by a nursemaid; and of course, the fairest (Bolante 4). Inside a room, she is taken care of and nurtured; for instance, being wrapped in a blanket (*bocot/binalucot* in Cabonce 42) or figuratively nestled in "a basket woven of palm" (*un cesto tegido de palma* in Mirasol microfilm, n.p.) while she learns about the culture of the community. Even if "she remained veiled and secluded in history" (Abrera 33), she exists in the world of oral narratives, particularly in the *sugidanon* (epic chant, both as text and as performed chanting) where her power is recounted and her magical charm glorified. However, other than the folk stories about her, she also lives outside the

confines of the imaginary. In the Panay Bukidnon community, her life exists and operates at a nexus of values, roles, traditions, and transactions.

The community of the Panay binukot, the Panay Bukidnon, can be found in the province of Capiz, in a handful of municipalities including Tapaz, Jamindan, Bingawan, and the northern part of Iloilo province such as Janiuay, Lambunao, and Calinog; some are in the neighboring provinces of Aklan and Antique. In clusters or in remote spaces from each other, people are used to living in areas where the sources of food are available and plentiful. The wild, or the least explored terrain, is preferred in getting more greens and river food. In some ways, people who live inside these places may well fit the term that Jocano (Sulod Society 5) used to refer to them: the “Sulod,” or those inhabiting interior areas; specifically, these areas include Maranat, Siya, Buri, and Tacayan along the Panay River banks between Mt. Kudkuran and Mt. Baloi in Central Panay. In a personal conversation I had with him (2002), he explained that he used this as a general term; a collective to describe people who lived in the mountainous regions of Panay. In particular, people called themselves by different names depending on their proximity to particular land, water or other topographical features. For instance, the Iraynon are those living near the *iraya*, or the “headwaters of the river”; and those living near the *halawod*³ (the lowland rivers that merge with the ocean) would refer to themselves as *Halawodnon* (Sulod Society 4). To have a collective name, he borrowed the term “Sulod” from people living adjacent to Panay Bukidnon communities.

It is in this natural environment that the binukot is nurtured. However, inside the *burukutan*, or room, she is nurtured by voices of the wise, the cultural elders, or mentors appointed by her parents. Tradition, the mundane, and the transformational circulate around her. She lives her early years under strict limitations; and yet, she is seen as elevated, in many ways, and not at all oppressed or subjugated. Through courtship she attracts attention, meaning she is no longer hidden. In marriage, she enters into a wider range of roles, many of them typical, but some, because of her upbringing and specialized training and learning, deeply meaningful and even magical and transcendental. After being married her official status changes: she becomes a *nabukot*, or a woman who was a binukot. She plays pivotal roles in passing on and animating the cultural knowledge she has absorbed and practiced for decades.

One living nabukot is Modina Castor-Damas, known as *Balanak*, or White Fish. In a documentary film entitled, *Ga Sibod Dai-A!* (Muyco 14’55”-16’45), she relates that

she was twelve years old when her parents introduced and wed her to the man of their choice. Her parents took good care of her physical appearance. As she was growing up, they carefully limited her exposure to the sun. In this way, she remains fair-skinned and her hair, as the natives say, becomes *bulawan*, or golden (perhaps due to lack of melanin activation). At nighttime, family members assist her in going out to bathe, either by the river or pond. Today, she said she is no longer a binukot as she can be out in the sun, works on the farm, and helps her husband provide food for the family. However, her husband once in a while treats her in a precious way: he spoils her with the privileges of a binukot, allowing her to stay in a room without having to work and encouraging her to dance the *binanog* (hawk-eagle dance) when she wants. She also uses nonworking time to learn about and pass on cultural knowledge and insight to any member of the community.

Feminist analysis typically wrestles with women's multiple roles, shifting contexts, and daily life struggles (e.g., civil rights and labor equality) (Friedan 21-30, Camagay 29-34), structures of domination (Smith 2-20), power relations (Claudio 32-79), constructed identities (Butler 16-25), sociocultural roles (Friedan 15-32), and shared labor (Magos 50-51).⁴ Others see a different, sometimes larger picture, and build on less direct and subtler ways to embattle gender imbalances. For instance some feminists encourage their fellow women to strengthen their logical or critical powers to configure themselves in the sites of power men built (Donovan quoted in De Beauvoir 130). My analysis of the binukot's roles and functions touches on these perspectives and approaches, but also embraces definitions and interactions that fall outside of these frameworks, not least because her positioning transforms in response to the call of circumstance. I root this changeability—inasmuch as something in flux can be rooted at all—in the lore and cultural expressions of the Panay Bukidnon. Thus, given the specific conditions that can arise among well-kept females in a local community, I ground my inquiry in “indigenous feminism,” which is endemic to Philippine precolonial cultures. This type of feminism looks into the practices of a community including the various dynamics and flexibilities at play, in liberating a woman from the chains of convention.

Writings about “indigenous feminism” in America (Smith para. 5-7, Green 23) focus on racial and colonization issues, and at the same time on the negotiation for egalitarian rights within indigenous communities. However, my stance comes closer to the way Grey (27-28) positions “indigenous feminism” as a grounded and internally valued concept that addresses the changing roles of women. In particular, she tries to understand the lives of Inuit women and explores means by which their traditional education and upbringing help them to cope with modern-day challenges. My article

adds to Grey's stance in that the situation of feminism in an indigenous society such as the Panay Bukidnon works around local practices that regulate the network of challenges specific to their roots and cultural identity. For instance, in a *burukutan*, or room where she is kept, the binukot learns the music and dance culture of the community, its rituals, chants, stories, and beliefs. She holds the genealogy and historical memory of the family line, and by extension, that of the whole community. In some cases, she even learns herbal medicine and healing rites, performing rites as a *babaylan*.⁵ Thus, she is a keeper of the community's local knowledge, a significant role not only in the maintenance of cultural practice but also in the legitimization of the community as a recognized cultural entity. I will explore the relevance of this recognition later in my discussion of ancestral land and ownership.

Along the lines of indigenous feminism, I interlace my ethnographic observations with my "reading" and imaging of the binukot in and beyond the Panay Bukidnon oral literature and expressive culture. From their *sugidanon* (epic chants), to the *tigbabayi* (solo woman's dance) of the *binanog* (hawk-eagle music and dance tradition), to *panubok* (traditional embroidery) where she is illustrated or exemplified, I discuss The Binukot as a female construct defined by her physical characteristics (e.g., fair skin, light hair) and her various skills and powers—and on the other side, as a demystified wife: the one who lulls a child, serves a tired husband who walked home from the farm, or as a farm worker herself. I also examine The Nabukot who still lives like a binukot: the one who does not do basic chores and farm work, being kept, valued, and engaged as a culture-bearer.

This binukot-to-nabukot transformation still anchors a woman in a socially proscribed role, but also allows her to enter into a flow of change. Economist Titus Levi (personal conversation, July 2014) maps this kind of change within the language of economics, describing her beneficial roles in two ways: "as stocks and flows" (Nordhaus and Samuelson 135). He explains that the flow component hinges on her special role as a culture-bearer; she embodies a form of "cultural capital", which Bourdieu (17-26) explicates as an investment of all time derived from years of acquiring skills, habits, and accumulated knowledge and practice. In the case of the binukot, this allows her to gain a social status in the society. This earned distinction is a stock and various actions and interactions flow from it. When she performs and shares her skills in chanting, dancing, and other cultural traditions to her community, she activates this stock. How she functions as an asset explains the "flow" component mentioned above.

These capital flows and stocks take shape in at least two intertwined aspects: the symbolic status of having been a binukot as well as the knowledge and skill she exercises in these various roles. Within the Panay Bukidnon framing she has prestige: she is freed from work, given access to servants, and belongs to a family with the economic surplus needed to provide her these things. The binukot's economic roles slip the restrictions of subjugation and restriction—being kept in a room and being given to a man offering the greatest bride-gift, which typically consists of “antique” coins, usually fashioned to make necklaces as part of the traditional garb; a relevant accessory for dancing or attending important community events; gongs; and/or a traditional sword with a carved wood scabbard called *sanduko*. Note that culture frames this exchange within a conceptualization of gift-giving, not as a price. These gifts within the Panay Bukidnon community have cultural meaning and are part of generational continuity. She is not objectified at all within this framework. Rather she operates through, not just within, systems of status and exchange. Thus, she is a “subject” embodying and acting on tradition and the local, material community where she lives. That is, as a nabukot, she will be enacting the very values of a culture taught to her and this reveals how she becomes a woman of agency, a person who asserts difference in helping her community root and grow culturally.

Based upon my recent fieldwork, no parents anymore keep a child hidden or restrain her from making her own choices; the tradition of developing the binukot has waned and fallen out of practice.⁶ Therefore, she has become a historical artifact. There are only a few middle-aged and old women scattered about the highlands who had been binukot in their younger years. These older women, who had been kept hidden and carefully cultivated, are now nabukot who have become part of the common *tao* (people).

Throughout this exegesis I argue that inasmuch as she takes the role of an ordinary wife, transformed in appearance and function after being married off, she was and still is the female who embodies various forms of value⁷; a walking source of cultural economy; and an heirloom to a tradition that sees sacrifice, if not compromise, as a privilege of the chosen few.

So in my discussion of “indigenous feminism,” I describe the real lives of those who believed in and embodied the ideology behind *bukot*, the act of keeping or secluding one to nurture knowledge and practice. This kept-maiden practice is a combination of belief and embodiment. With belief come different modes of production such as cultural models and myths. These form the foundation of local understanding of the binukot tradition. I then link the tradition to contemporary action. The mythic,

the typical, the transcendent, the traditional and the aesthetical intersect in her presence and work. Seeing this tradition through a local perspective and understanding is one of my main aims in this paper.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The *History of Panay* (Regalado and Franco 87) tells about the Malayan settlement of Panay and the leadership of datus, which produced influences on languages, customs, and traditions: “The Borneans, resplendent in their native costumes, danced their *sinulog* and displayed their *dinapay* ...”.⁸ These bird dances are to this day part of the Panay Bukidnon tradition and the binukot is trained to know these dances well. In modern historiography, materials are lenses to look at the past, a form of *material histoire* (understanding the past through tangible materials) that links us to the missing parts of the historical narrative; a continuity. In this regard the aforementioned historical source mentions the bamboo flute called *tulali*. According to my earlier research (109-113), this is the musical instrument of the binukot and has a particular use in exercising charm and power (more on this later in the discussion of the “Alayaw” epic chant). In their community, a binukot can communicate with enchanted beings and spirits through the music she plays on this instrument.

The Panay Bukidnon binukot—as part of the larger Panay native populace—has a diverse genetic heritage. Lago (1-25) traces the lineage of her people, at least in part, to the Ati, or Aeta (dark pygmies who largely came from Papua New Guinea or the other islands near Micronesia). Other authors such as Bolante (3-5) write about the first wave of Indonesian migrants as the ancestors of the present-day Panay Bukidnon, while Regalado and Franco (87) describe the long-term occupation of Malaysians in Panay. These genetic influences can be seen in the range of physical features they have: kinky hair from the Ati; the straight hair, brown skin and “almond-shaped eyes” from the Indonesians and Malays; or in some cases, fair skin and keen noses from the *Siyaw*, or the Spanish invaders who had encounters with the natives; and even monolid eyes, possibly from Chinese traders who have traveled to and lived in Panay. However, Jocano (37) points out that we could not discount the possible presence of early settlers (aside from the ones mentioned) who were really natives rather than migrants.

Regalado and Franco (2-4) relate the origins of Panay and its geographical and island features taking into account the legends about its people. Regalado and Franco include legends as part of “history.” The relevance of this arises through

featuring the “longest epic poem of Panay, *Hinilawod* [where] ... the fourth of the eighteen parts into which the poem is divided explains the origin of Panay” (3) as an important springboard to see the other details of its narrative even though they do not include the binukot in their discussion. This source provides contemporary histories with various details about Panay life; for instance, the travails of characters and lineage in the epic, by which the binukot is very much part of: as heroine; enchantress; and partner of a *datu*, a man of position/power. Earlier than this, Eugenio Ealdama, a Filipino scholar, wrote one of the earliest accounts regarding the ballad of the *Monteses* (mountain people) in Central Philippines. He writes: “The most popular ballad is entitled *Si Labao Dongon*” (Ealdama 138).⁹ Manuel (17) points out that Ealdama had found more than a ballad; he had encountered a full-blown epic.

Panay Bukidnons chant and perform this cycle of epics called the sugidanon for a long stretch of time, sometimes beyond a week. And in these epics, the presence of the binukot forms part of these narratives. Jocano (Sulod Society 107, 150; *Hinilawod* 7-8, 10-186), Villareal on Barte (12-13), and Magos have further made research and documentation about the Panay epics with the binukot as a vital persona.

Scott’s discussion of sixteenth century houses, mentions the binukot as part of a large household of a *datu* (leader, rich/powerful man).

Contrary to the claim of Panay Bukidnon today that they usually choose one daughter to become a binukot, Scott refers to binukot “daughters” to mean that a datu may have more than one kept-maiden. Scott translates the kept-maiden as “princess,” or “the secluded daughters of upper-class men ... never set foot on the ground” (46). Alcina’s 1668 historical account about the binocot (his spelling) notes that these women were considered *principalias*, or those belonging to the upper caste of the community” (37-38). On the other hand, Bolante claims that “she did not belong to the native blueblood for she can be any ordinary child of the native” (4). However, the present-day Panay natives underscore this privileged status of the family as a relevant factor to be able to afford raising a binukot.

Whether in a form of land, manpower or labor assets, the family possesses resources to spare a girl-child from working.

HER IMAGE IN CULTURAL FORMS

The binukot of history is told differently from the binukot of myths and folk stories. In *The Sugidanon* (a body of Panay epics), she is featured as a female partner of a

hero; a lovely, fair daughter of older datus; and is kept to learn magic, to charm men and spirits, and gain wisdom for posterity. These depictions as seen in F. Landa Jocano's "Labaw Donggon: Epikong Sulod" (93-103) and the article "The Sugidanon of Central Panay" (2-4) present her as a female character of great prowess. She matched certain heroes and completed their adventures. Furthermore, in reference to Jocano's aforementioned article, Corazon Villareal writes about the fair-skinned child (binukot), who has a flute-like voice, passion for singing, and keen memory (13).¹⁰ In the Panay epic, she can be found in a golden tower by which she has a golden bed. However, this pedestal imaging of her has a downside; she can be the cause of conflicts among men of power (14).

Datus in the sugidanon (referred to as "men of power") have great physical strength and are projected as heroes. However, these epics also say that the binukot does not only imbue power but embody it—the power to transform into different physical forms, the power to call on the wind, and the power to convince even the most stubborn of the strong datus, high positioned men of inherited wealth and prowess. Relatively, datus and binukots are equal in spiritual power, influence, and status; they complement one another. In an excerpt from a Panay epic below, some binukot women are considered *enkanto*, or enchanted creatures. They live in caves, where they practice magic and cultivate their power. *Humadapnon sa Tarangban* (Humadapnon in the Cave) commences with a sea journey that includes stories detailing their supernatural capacities:

Humadapnon, at the prompting of Taghuy, a spirit being, sails out in search of Malitong Yawa, or Mali, the beautiful daughter endowed with powers and who alone can match his stature and is worthy to become his wife. He undertakes a long sea journey in his golden boat, or *biday*, taking along his brother, Dumalapdap. Before they sail, they are warned by their parents, Duranoon and Mungsod Burulakaw, not to land at any place.

But in spite of the warning, Humadapnon gives in to the enticements of a beautiful binukot enkanto, who, together with other binukot enkantos, live inside the tarangban. Humadapnon is trapped there for seven years, but is freed by Malitong Yawa or Mali, who disguises herself as a man named Sumasakay ... (Magos 7)

Matan-ayon's binukot daughter Malitong Yawa, transformed herself into a man to rescue Humadapnon out of the tarangban, or cave.¹¹ While most people would think love motivated her rescue effort, Jocano's version (129-142) of the story makes it

clear that she did this out of honor and obligation to her spirit guides. However, she does have personal motives: being with Hamudapnon completes her, and she, him. This gives her strength and allows his strength to reach its potential as well. Freed from the cave, he can pursue her and eventually bond with her. In this way they are a kind of a “spirit double”; the destiny of each leads, inevitably, to the other.

In the Introduction of this article, it was mentioned that a bride-gift is required for a man and his family to win the favor of parents who held a binukot and to earn her hand in marriage. In this version, the binukots served as gifts themselves. As Labaw Donggon triumphed in stealing Amburukay’s golden pubic hair, he received a surprising reward for his bravery. The two binukots, Matan-ayon and Suranggaon, became his wives.

Amburukay, the hermit-sister of Makabagting, asks for Paiburong’s daughters, Matan-ayon and Suranggaon, in payment for the bamboo cut down by the Datu. In her house, the two maidens are cared for as if they were Amburukay’s own daughters. They are locked in a golden chamber (*burukutan*, or enclosed structure) and become *binukot* (well-kept maidens). Amburukay vows that her adopted daughters will marry only those who succeed in stealing her gold pubic hair. One day Labaw Dunggon, a courageous man and a good guitarist, breaks one of his guitar strings. Hearing about Amburukay’s pubic hair being a good replacement, he undertakes the theft; he is successful ... (Magos 5)

The binukot is also a symbol of triumph and victory. She is considered as the most sought-after, coveted trophy of heroes who achieved difficult trials and challenges. Magos (The Suguidanon), relates the Panay Bukidnon’s story of *Derikaryong Pada*:

Before Matan-ayon, the binukot daughter of Paiburong and Bulawanon, was born, she had already been betrothed to Labaw Dunggon, the son of Duranuon and Paubaya. As a mark of that promise, her father, Paiburong, had been given a gold medallion by the parents of her husband. But when she was of age, she was pursued by Sinagnayan, a brother of Paglambuhan who had stolen the heirloom sailboat of Matan-ayon’s parents. Whoever among the suitors could retrieve the sailboat and give it back to Matan-ayon’s parents would have her hand in marriage ... (5-6)

The Panay Bukidnon associate wind instruments with the spirit world: they can communicate with unseen entities, and the sound travels from one cosmic world to

the next. In the epic *Alayaw* (named for the yellow flower-bearing tree), binukots dwell in enclosed spaces, which exist in the *ibabawnon* (upper realm). When the binukot play the *tulali* (bamboo flute), those in the lower realm can sense their presence. The Panay Bukidnon believe that the breath is associated with physical life and life-force, both in the player and throughout the physical, earthly realm. Music from the flute is said to *sibod*, to flow and connect; the breath blown into the flute is balanced and met with the air from outside of the instrument. This air moves in a cycle, *ga-sabat* (responding), and is heard as sound (Ga Sibod Dai-A!, 16'50"-17'14"). Thus, the player is seen as a channel between the physical and the spiritual realms of the world.

Aside from being projected in stories, the binukot is also associated with dances and the wearing of accouterments. Revealing her is a point of excitement in Panay Bukidnon communities. As she is first introduced to the public, she dances a solo dance called *tinigbabayi*, which is one type of binanog (hawk-eagle dance). To distinguish her from other women, she wears a *takurong* (facial veil). In this dance, she displays her grace and knowledge of various dance steps such as *repasso* (unaccented steps) and *sadsad* (accented/stomped steps). The rhythm and shape, or phrasing, of these steps depends on correctly using linguistic phrases in one's thinking and following them physically (Sibod in Binanog, 188-208). Sometimes, she only thinks of the phrases; sometimes we can see her mouthing the phrases. An example of a phrase is: *gi-ri-ling gi-ri-ling gi-ri-ling Linda*, which roughly translates as "beautiful Linda spins and gyrates when she dances." In my article "Gendering Rhythm" (97-98), I note how the tinigbabayi music and dance are gendered as the dance is executed in a female rhythmic mode.

In a canvas, the binukot's skill becomes tangible. She tells her stories and the stories woven by her community through *panubok* (traditional handmade embroidery). Shawls, neckbands, and other accessories used in the binanog incorporate panubok and characters in the sugidanon are featured along with traditional flora and fauna designs. The example below shows the *tubok* (embroidered cloth) of the late Lola Concetta,¹² essaying the presence of these powerful binukots in the story of *Amburukay: Matan-ayon and Suranggaon*.

The aforementioned imaging of the binukot through the cultural traditions of storytelling, music-making, and embroidery are examples of how she is projected as a woman not limited by the confines of the *burukutan* (room) where she was kept. In these stories, she comes out radiant and empowered, highly productive, and manifesting connections with the physical and spiritual world. From someone who



Figure 1. Concetta Gilbaliga embroidered this shawl's seam. Melissa Exmundo commissioned the shawl embroidery.

was originally perceived as obedient, having almost no agency to the choice of her husband, and compromising to the plans of her parents, the images of her in these cultural forms are inspiring of “the woman to be.” The Panay Bukidnon contribute this life example of the binukot to the scholarship of indigenous feminism by showing that a woman who comes out from a culturally-restricted form of “nurturance” will eventually brave the world. Armed with her local knowledge, she will challenge even the fiercest figurative mythical hero, bending his nature at will. And yet, as exemplified by her flute-playing and her ability to communicate with spirits, her strength lies inward, keeping the community’s balance and continuing the flow of life source.

THE BINUKOT IMAGE IN MEDIA AND MODERN STORYTELLING

During the 2011-2012 season, the GMA Network, one of the biggest national television networks in the Philippines, ran a nightly television series entitled *Amaya*. The plot features the story of a binukot. This rendering of the story produced controversy; the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) received

complaint letters from viewers who were offended by the inaccurate and inauthentic telling of the story including visual elements integrated into the series. Panay Bukidnons stated that, for instance, costumes were immodest, causing the binukot to appear as a sex symbol. Note that even though the binukot is a desirable and beautiful woman, pushing sexuality to the fore violates traditional understanding of her value and her role. And even though she participates in many adventures, the Panay Bukidnon felt that the television series portrayed her simply as an action hero. The television script stripped away the context giving her adventures meaning (Modern Technology Media 5-6).

According to University of the Philippines (UP) Professor Vic Villan, one of the researchers tapped by GMA during the story development process, GMA received well-documented material grounded in the epic stories. However, program producers and scriptwriters exercised artistic license by developing stylized costumes, make-up, and other innovations common to twenty-first century television production conventions in the Philippines (personal conversation, October 2013). He added that the GMA production staff wanted to make the binukot more of a general Asian heroine; placing her specifically in a Panay, or even Philippine context, would limit the marketability of the program. Given that other Asian cultures have special, reserved, or hidden females in their traditions, GMA sought to connect with these traditions.¹³

THE LIVING NABUKOT

Although most persons know the binukot through these media-enhanced portrayals, one can still learn about the tradition directly by talking with women who lived as binukot. A group of these women gathered for the Panay Arts Festival held in Calinog, Iloilo in May 2012.

One of these women said this about her former status and its relationship to her current status: “True we’re not binukots anymore in the literal sense (as we do not merely dwell inside a room), but our nurtured spirits we admit do not die with our status change” (personal conversation with a group of binukot awardees during the Panay Arts Festival, May 2012). A binukot is always a binukot even if her hands were exposed to farm work, says Aurelio Damas, the husband of Modina Damas, the aforementioned nabukot (personal conversation, May 2012).

The living testimony of a nabukot reveals her earlier life. Her special experience as a youth imbues her with respect for and expression of cultural knowledge. All of



Figure 2. From left, photo shows Tina Jimenez, the daughter of nabukot Magdalena Jimenez, cultural leader Federico Caballero, Chairman of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) Felipe de Leon, Jr., anthropologist Alicia Magos, nabukot Lising Jimenez and Feliza Castor, National Commission on Indigenous Peoples community officer Vima Latoza, nabukot Concetta Gilbaliga, and the author, Maria Christine Muyco.

the former binukot that I have met take their role as elders seriously because they are responsible for cultural knowledge, keeping this knowledge alive, in practice, and passing it on.

Concetta Gilbaliga, whose *pat-ama* (mountain name) is Angkuran,¹⁴ was one of the four siblings in the family of *mal-am Puno* (elder Puno) and his wife Angkurid, a shaman-healer. She was the niece of Amang Badlis, a known *manughusay* (arbiter) living in Barangay Nayawan. Two of her aunts, Ulak and Tin-ak, exposed her to chants and needlework.

Angkuran was the only girl among her siblings. Her parents kept her as a binukot. Even in later life, her fair complexion and long attractive hair marked her as different.

She was sickly but had a strong creative spirit. She chanted, played the *tulali* (bamboo flute), performed dances with great skill, and completed a large volume of *tubok* (finished embroidered cloth). From her aunts, Angkuran learned various embroidery designs, her favorite being the Alayaw mentioned in the sugidanon (epic). This flower is associated with Mali, the beautiful heroine who caught the heart of the strong and powerful Humadapnon, the son of Labaw Donggon. Angkuran translated and captured other episodes and characters from the epic in her embroidery.

Angkuran's husband Imas was an ideal husband for her. He let her stay in the house to embroider and play instruments, and did not ask her to cook for him, wash his clothes, or carry out other household chores. According to her granddaughter, Rolinda Gilbaliga, she never learned how to light a fire, meaning that she could not prepare food. Even though she remained dependent on others, she outlived her husband, reaching the age of 86.

After Imas's passing in 2006, her nephew Roger Gilbaliga took her from Barangay Nayawan to Barangay Garangan, which is about a 4-5 hour walk on rugged highland footpaths. Her presence proved crucial to Roger's household, and even to Barangay Garangan. In 2006, she taught all his children, especially the granddaughters, from 6-year old Jally Nae, Angily (aged 13), Rolinda (aged 16), and Glenda (aged 18), chanting, dancing, instrument playing, and embroidery. Even their brother Alben learned the art of embroidery. She welcomed learners from different households and taught them without asking for any fee.

In 2008, I had a heartfelt talk with her when she told me about her sad past. It was during the 1940s when the Japanese soldiers came to the highlands and she had just given birth. The soldiers captured and bound all her household members. When they saw her, she believed they wanted to rape her. She ran and hid in the *talon* (forest). Her knowledge of the forest allowed her to evade capture. After a few days of hiding, she decided it was safe to return and she went back to the family house. She saw that her baby, the infant she left when she fled from the soldiers, was dead. She said she lost her mind; she wandered around the Panay mountain ranges for two years without any sense of herself. It was after two years when her husband finally convinced her to come home and live a normal life again. She resumed her embroidery and other traditional art making after that.

This personal experience aligns with other experiences of highland women as documented by anthropologist and University of the Philippines Visayas (UPV) Professor Emeritus Alicia Magos, who has devoted long periods of time to research



Figure 3. Back row, from left to right, Angkuran, Rolinda Gilbaliga, Wilson Lastrilla; front row, left to right, Alben Gilbaliga, Jally Nae Gilbaliga, Gleceria Gilbaliga, Cenia Lastrilla, and Rose Caballero.

on the culture of Panay. Within this research she studied the cultural phenomenon of the Panay binukot. In her article "The Binukot (Well-Kept Maiden) In A Changing Socio-Political Perspective"¹⁵ (1995), she documents case studies of these women and their lives. As part of this documentary process, she learned that Japanese soldiers had raped some of them during the occupation of the Philippines. The soldiers targeted binukots since the Japanese sought physically beautiful women with particular characteristics, such as fair skin. Although targeted for rape, no record exists documenting that women in the Panay highlands became "comfort women."¹⁶

As a nabukot, Angkuran felt that she had much to give in Barangay Garangan. Even so, she missed her loved ones in Barangay Nayawan. Finally, she got what she wanted: relatives fetched her and returned her to Barangay Nayawan. She passed away there in 2012.

With the coming in of different religious sects into different parts of Panay highlands, some kept-maidens experienced crises on their tradition and faith. In Barangay Siya, Tapaz, Capiz, nabukot Lising Jimenez is admired as a *subing* (jaw's harp) player and flutist. Lising taught her children and grandchildren chanting, dancing, and instrumental performance, including performance on the *agung*, a hanging gong. She is especially admired for her *dinumaan* (old; traditional) techniques in binanog (hawk-eagle dance). A relative of hers, Magdalena Jimenez, or "Magding" as she is known, is a nabukot who used to be proud that she belonged to a family of chanters and healers. Now, with her constant interaction with Christian groups who frequently visit their area, she has become ashamed of her abilities. She was told that her healing practice that invokes ancestral spirits might lead her soul to Hell. She shared her fears in continuing the traditions she learned as a binukot as this may imperil her soul in the afterlife. She is a known babaylan in this barangay and she traces her skills to her ancestors, particularly the great women mentioned in the *sugidanon*. In her elder years, even as she was able to transmit her knowledge to Tina Jimenez, her daughter, and to other family members including her grandchildren, she felt unaccomplished and afraid. She now doubts whether the whole idea of rearing a binukot is right or not.

Panay Bukidnon individuals look at the binukot tradition differently. Gawad sa Manlilikha ng Bayan (GAMABA) awardee Federico "Tuohan" Caballero is grateful for his mother, the late Preciosa "Susa" Catamin Caballero, who was raised as a binukot. She became one of the great epic chanters of her time. She was a mother of sons who have grown into some of the leading chanters in the highlands. In 2000, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) recognized his ability to continue an important tradition and so he was given that award equal to that of "A Living National Treasure" or National Folk Artist in other countries. He sees the traditions his mother taught him as valuable and is proud to say that without her, his award might not have been made possible.

From Tuohan's generation and onward, many have benefitted from the support of the NCCA. His award included funding for a School of Living Tradition where he continues to teach and train other cultural educators. Neighbors and other community members attended this school, and still do. Even though he has not kept one of his fairest girls as a binukot, he has found a way to extend the concept of a culture bearer—from one who is reared in a "private" domain—to that of the public. The private domain refers to the cultural training of someone inside the house, or in the privacy of one's home with family members. For instance, Tuohan would call for children around their neighborhood to listen to his chanting while lying on a *duyan*

(hammock) after supper. Encircling him, they would listen and repeat his lines as he instructs them. When he is invited in festivities, he would bring his good chanters and let them chant in front of guests; this is his version of bringing their tradition to public.

Education inside one's home is the choice of Modina "Balanak" Damas who exposed her children to various cultural traditions. Her sons all play the jaw's harp and her daughters are admired binanog dancers. Balanak is one of the youngest living nabukots (now in her late 40s). As proof of her binukot days, she showed me her fair, unblemished legs. "See," she said, "I was kept in a room since childhood and these feet barely saw the sun." She has continued the tradition by imparting to her children the value of music and dance. She is married to Aurelio Damas, a well-regarded drummer and binanog dancer. She is proud of them thinking that somehow, the Panay Bukidnon tradition is made known to the public through her children.

One who enjoys being in public is Feliza "Lugpian" Castor, a nabukot. She claims to be more than one hundred years old. When I met her, she was proud to show me her *batong-batong* (body tattoos). A woman ahead of her time, she inspired members of her community with her many talents. She is a chanter as well as a healer, a player of the bamboo flute and percussion instruments, and costume-maker. Often she uses recycled materials in adorning her dance clothes, particularly her *saipang* (blouse with bell-shaped sleeves). Found objects such as foil from cigarette packs and candy wrappers, scrap cloth, strings, buttons, and other items find their ways into her finished work.¹⁷ She noted the privilege she experienced against the other seven wives of her husband Bangkuhan.¹⁸ She received a greater share of his love and attention as a nabukot when he was still alive.

Lugpian laments the passing of the binukot tradition. Looking at the present condition of her community, Lugpian sees children in her neighborhood exposed to television, radio, and other media. Given her age, she lived through the period when these media first appeared in highland and adjacent communities. Alongside the introduction of media came public governance and public education. Taken together, these systems have had multiple impacts on the binukot tradition. First and foremost, the range and kinds of choices children and families make, and their underlying motivations, have shifted. The trait of obedience common to the binukot in the prewar era has dissipated. This has contributed to a major decline of the practice. However, these are not the only forces having a negative impact on the tradition.

Many factors have been eroding the binukot practice. Work pulls young women out of the highlands and into nearby towns, such as Calinog, and regional hubs, such as Iloilo, and more distant destinations. Their parents see this as good—it is the way of the world, a pathway to a so-called “better” life, and a way to cope in postmodern societies. In order to start down this path children move out of their homes and into temporary quarters closer to public schools or workplaces. They may stay for several days at a time, or go back and forth between their highland homes and temporary domiciles. The irony here is all too pointed: these children agree to stay inside a room for a week or two at a time, constrained by poverty, fear, and the lack of a social network, to gain an education with limited prospects and payoffs. In doing so they trade away the binukot’s life of being sheltered, valued, and taught a deep, rich body of knowledge and skills from kinfolk and tribal elders.

Tuohan is caught betwixt and between tradition and economic reality. When his daughters entered and studied in schools, he knew that eventually they would belong to the workforce of the larger Philippine society. His daughter Nancy Caballero has gone even beyond her dream of working in Manila, the Philippine’s capital city. As she insisted on broadening her array of work options, she accepted a job as a domestic helper in Hong Kong, which she said would open doors to apply for work and immigration to Canada. She has accomplished her plans and has since moved there.

Television, radio, and online networks have distracted young people from cultural learning, but media workers have also come looking for culture-bearers, such as the binukot. During my immersion in various Panay Bukidnon communities in 2001 and 2002, and since, I have interviewed Panay Bukidnon elders about this. One such interview stands out: while in Barangay Garangan (Calinog, Iloilo), Tuohan told me that a television reporter (identity undisclosed) visited their neighborhood looking for a binukot. He found this interesting and wondered: “Why the interest? It is a nonexistent practice.” Both of us knew that only nabukot remained, and most of them had become quite old by this point. Bemused by the reporter’s interest in this matter, he said, “The reporter will not find her, but probably will create one [binukot]” (personal conversation, April 2004).

THE BEARER OF CULTURE IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS FEMINISM

In closing, I revisit my notion of “indigenous feminism” mentioned in the introduction. While Western writings about “indigenous feminism” (Smith para. 5-7; Green 23) mostly focus on race, colonization, and postcolonization issues, as well as egalitarian

rights within indigenous communities, this culture-specific study looks at indigenous feminism within the mold of confinement as a pathway to liberation. This article shows us a flexible mechanism in a practice by which the paradox of “confinement and liberation” can be privileging.

The binukot, having been molded and rooted in age-old traditions, seeks emancipation from particular restrictions within this system as she reaches for and develops her own “voice.” Once she opens herself to the world, to various realities, she will see and realize that her voice has always been there, the one nurtured in the way of the confined, disciplined learning. Even as she crosses the bridge to another stage of her life through the rites of exchange and marriage, she is still the same person. As a nabukot, her identity is part of her cultural expressivity, being told and retold in storytelling, performance, and material culture. And so, she continues these stories, weaving her new tales in words, dance, music, embroidery, and fundamentally, as a visible icon; one who reminds the community of the importance of cultural transmission.

In both—as a girl binukot and a nabukot woman—she lives the community’s ideals of femininity (obedience and compromise) but puts into practice certain principles of feminism such as the exercise of agency. Even as her years of confinement took part of her will and choice, she gains these back in the fruition of her adulthood in marriage. She has many advantages: her skill and knowledge, as well as her looks, grant her status and privilege, as well as responsibility. In a community that takes cultural practices such as chanting and storytelling, playing music, dancing, and making various craft objects as central in identity construction and cultural continuity, she becomes iconic. But beyond this iconicity she operates as a living treasure and master artist (NCCA website 2000). This mastery, and the accumulated cultural knowledge demanded by it and expressed through it, gives her value in the sociocultural economy of highland communities. In this way, the girl becomes a form of exchange, or currency. She also becomes a living asset, or repository of value and means for generating future streams of value. In this way, she is a person, as well as an heirloom, or *panublion*. As a nabukot, she translates these assets into action, passing on and enriching cultural knowledge.

The binukot also contributes to indigenous feminism the idea of transcending gender boundaries. In myth, we see her power of transformation when she switches genders (e.g., Mali in *Humadapnon sa Tarangban* from the previous page) in order to save a life. In reality, there are men who take on her tasks and roles as culture bearer. In order to save the declining practice of chanting, music instrument-making and playing,

and ritual dancing, men such as the Caballero brothers (the sons of nabukot Susa Caballero) animate her role in continuing the practice of traditions—the lifeblood of the community.

Nowadays, both men and women represent their people in seminars of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, conferences such as the Sugidanon Conference held annually at the University of the Philippines, Visayas, during summits of indigenous peoples, such as the biannual KAPWA gathering in Baguio, Philippines, and the activities of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples. When they do so, they stand out as women and men of wisdom and value, even in academic settings. Their “mastery and authority” speak for themselves. Their chants, their bodies, and their voices show and tell that a binukot—and the binukot spirit—has come out in the world.

Revisiting the epistemology of the word binukot as “inclosed or confined; ... secluded from the outer world” (*binocot* in Kauffman 125), wrapped in a blanket (*bocot/binalucot* in Cabonce 42), or nestled in “a basket woven of palm” (*un cesto tegido de palma* in Mirasol, n.p.), I see her wrapped as a fetus even as she was out of her mother’s womb. This womb is extended to the burukutan, or room where she continues her growth. What she has learned is part of her formation within that household womb. This is why when she found her deliverance through marriage, she reminds everyone that there is great value in learning and living traditions. Her message lives on even to the Panay Bukidnon youth of today who are exposed to a relentless barrage of postmodern styles, thoughts, and behaviors.

In the Introduction, I mentioned that the binukot has a significant role not only in the maintenance of cultural practice but also in the legitimization of the community as a recognized cultural entity. The current Philippine administration requires that for a community to be called “indigenous,” it needs to provide a documentation to prove that it has a body of local knowledge, genealogy, and ancestral memory. Only then can the government, through its arm, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), issue the CADTI, or the Certificate of Ancestral Domain title, to that community. This is an important certificate in protecting communities from land grabbing or the claim of informal settlers over their land; a proof of ownership of the whole familial generation not only to a place of dwelling but to a site where rites of passages are made. Because of her specialized knowledge, the nabukot is able to represent her community in today’s battle for legitimacy. Even as articles of indigenous peoples’ rights exist, such as the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA), the landless and displaced are muted (“Silence of the Lands” 392-436).

Those without a voice sometimes take up arms in order to be heard; blood has been spilled over ancestral land claims. Some of these claims, and challenges to them, continue as I write. Strong, clear, empowered voices, such as those of the nabukots named here and their students, provide a means for engaging governmental and economic power structures effectively. As other challenges to indigenous rights emerge, this foundation of practice in cultural rootedness and discourse with prevailing power structures and institutions will come to the fore again and again, bringing the wisdom and insight of the nabukot into play directly as elders and speakers, and indirectly as teachers and cultural bearers. This process extends beyond local concerns affecting the Panay Bukidnon to include a range of issues affecting many indigenous peoples throughout The Philippines.

All of this hinges on breaking out from *balucot* (being wrapped; fetus position) into the world at large in the process described in this paper. The binukot-turned-nabukot continues to exist in myth and in reality, a gentle yet powerful reminder that her stories will continue to weave tales, as her music and dance, engage the senses to live the knowledge, inside of her community, between her community and the world at-large.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Panay Bukidnon say “Nabukot dun” (has been kept/confined) or sometimes “Ginbukot dun,” or its shortcut *nabukot*, using the term as a verb rather than a noun (or subject). Though not commonly used to refer to married binukots, I use the term “nabukot” in this article to distinguish their status as married women who had been binukots.
- ² In anthropological linguistics, affixations in words construct meaning. Thus, in the word *binukot*, the infix “in” in the root word *bocot* (hidden) situates one who is in a state of being kept/hidden. This term has the connotation that the hidden state is temporary. A reviewer examining an earlier draft of this paper refers to the idea of *bengbeng* as *bocot* or *bukot*, and most probably, the present Ilokano word *benembeng* as a translation of the Kinaray-a/Aklanon/Hiligaynon/Bikolnon/Cebuano/Bol-anon word “binukot.” He sees these connections in dictionaries (Carro, 1956; Mentrída n.d.; and Sanchez, 1771) using the vernacular lexicon.
- ³ During a conversation with ethnomusicologist Anthony Seeger, he described this topographical feature as a “delta” (January 2007).
- ⁴ Magos looks at the *apid*, or *dapli*, as an important appendage to the family in terms of her practical role as helper in household and farm work, besides being taken in as the second or the later wife. This construct, as enacted by this woman sharing labor and receiving legitimacy (as member of the family), makes for an interesting phenomenon in the family structure.

- ⁵ This, of course, takes into consideration a spiritual intervention as this role is ascribed to someone chosen by the spirits, not merely prodded into studying the work by one's parents. A babaylan is also a spiritual medium and shaman; the Panay Bukidnon believe that illness arises from spiritual as well as physical imbalances.
- ⁶ Note, however, that this has yet to be verified in some remote barangays and communities in the Panay highlands.
- ⁷ Sociologist Irving White (1938) remarks that values have significance as they can enhance the importance of an individual as seen through the eyes of others; and eventually, a design for an individual life-pattern that can be harmonious to a way of life. Kalberg on Weber (1155-1156) notes that this life-pattern is ordered or organized from actions through clusters of values and agreements, rather than through the valuation established in any one opinion. This process of socially constructed value applies to such things as wealth, status, or power. In relation to the "form of value" as I used it here in this article, a community that gathers for the public appearance of a binukot produces a deep sense of communality, and this communality is a social value that cannot be quantified within standard economic evaluations such as prices (e.g., the bride gift). Dancing, music-making, and food feasts, or *punsyon*, are integrated in this process of valuation; that is, a celebration of cultural continuity as expressed through life-cycle markers such as marriage birth, living, death, and life again, clearly has value, but this value reaches beyond any kind of neat price or asset valuation. Furthermore, this spectacle of the kept-maiden's emergence and introduction connects to this broader set of values and evaluation processes.
- ⁸ Panay Bukidnon refers to binanog also as the *sinulog* in reference to their hawk-eagle dance; also used for courtship. Another term for bird dance is *dinapay*.
- ⁹ My research participants told me that the story is about *Labaw Donggon*, not *Labaw Gonggon* as written by Ealdama.
- ¹⁰ Villareal based her sources on an interview with Panay epic researcher Gina Barte; also from her analysis of Jocano's research about the *Hinilawod*.
- ¹¹ As noted by Magos, binukots enticed Humadapnon inside the cave dwelling. Once there, they charmed and trapped him, bending his will to their wishes. Only a binukot stronger than those who had trapped him could set him free.
- ¹² In an official document, her niece (Gleceria Gilbaliga) wrote the spelling of her name as Concetta Gilbaliga. However, in some written sources (newspaper, online articles), she is referred to as Conchita Gilbaliga. The pronunciations of Concetta and Conchita are the same.
- ¹³ I perceive GMA's move to be a little more than an excuse for appropriating the barebones aspect of the story and feeding it into the standardized story production system of postmodern corporate television. The resulting hodgepodge of elements taken from the Panay epic, standard soap opera fare, and other projections about women serves to fix attention and "give the people what they want," but this bears almost no relation to the Panay epic.

- ¹⁴ She is also referred to as Anggoran. There are cases when people interview her and hear the name Angkoran rather than Anggoran, or vice versa. Sometimes, Panay Bukidnons are not very particular with the exact spelling of their names.
- ¹⁵ ca. 1850s-1994 published in the journal *Edukasyon–UP-ERP* Monograph Series (Vol. I Number 4, October-December 1995).
- ¹⁶ Using females as comfort women is not unique to the Philippines. Other countries, such as Korea, have come out with news and accounts of Japanese soldiers' sex slaves. The term "comfort women" softens the tone, but not the meaning.
- ¹⁷ Her use of such material reflects a desire to make the best use of any material, as well as a deep respect for the environment. While she is not the first artist to elevate "trash" into art, she has taken this approach farther than other Panay Bukidnons I have met.
- ¹⁸ He was a renowned wealthy man whom the people regarded as a reliable person with whom they can leave their money for savings or can borrow money from; thus, the word *bangkuhan*.

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