

## Panay's Babaylan: The Male Takeover

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The Blair and Robertson compilation of historical accounts woven by the Spanish friars unfolds a rich tapestry of the early Filipino way of life and their form of worship. Spun in devil-dark threads were accounts of the native priestesses or *babaylanes*.

From the closing decades of the 16th century up to the early 1900s, Panay island in Central Philippines was disturbed by uprisings led by the *babaylanes* against the missionaries. Friars assigned in different parts of the island were poisoned or speared to death. Fray Juan Fernandez in his annotations identified the interior towns like Lambunao and Tubungan in Iloilo and Antique province as the stronghold of *babaylanes*.

Also known as *dailan* (from *dait* which means friendship/peace), the *babaylan* was mediator between the gods and the people and healer of the body and spirit. Mostly played by women, the *babaylan's* role bordered on the political as well, being a close adviser of the datu in almost all matters concerning religion, medicine, natural phenomena, etc. (Alcina trans. Lietz, 1960:212).

According to Alfred McCoy, "babaylan" is from a classical Malay word "belian", "balian" or "waylan" of Java, Bali, Borneo and Kalmahera which means "spirit medium". The commonality between the southeast Asian and Panay *babaylan* is not only in the root word of the terms but also in their rituals and roles in society (1982:144).

To be a *babaylan* is a gift to the person chosen by the spirit. This choice is manifested in dreams, visions, a lingering illness or strange events *happening to the chosen one*. The *babaylan* has the power to communicate to ancestral and environmental spirits and thus able to bargain or cajole the spirits for a person's captured *dungan*. In Panay, the *dungan* is a traditional concept which loosely means a person's soul or "double". A person is considered healthy when his *dungan* is prop-

erly nurtured and strengthened. However, spirits may capture or play with a person's *dungan*, causing the person to become sick (Magos: 1990:6).

The Hiligaynon "*babayi*" for woman shows a close relation to the term "*babaylan*". In Kinaray-a, an ancient language still being spoken in Antique and some interior towns of Iloilo, "*bayi*" and "*baylan*" are the terms used. In Kinaray-a, "*bayi*" is also used to refer to one's female grand elders. "*Babaylan*" then implies an age-old tradition embodied in the concepts basic to the culture and society of Panay.

### **Woman: The *Babaylan***

With the colonial rule came the Roman Catholic religion which resulted in the persecution of the native priestesses and their followers. According to Fray Diego Aduarte, the *babaylanes* were punished and their idols were confiscated and burned with the intention of wiping out their pagan practices. Nevertheless, vestiges of the native religion persisted and its followers troubled the ecclesiastical and civil authorities.

In 1580-1590, when Muslims invaded Panay, *babaylanes* like Dupinagay (or Dupangay), Monica Gapon and Augustina Hiticon took advantage of the situation. They rallied the people to return to their native faith but their efforts failed. From the early 17th to the late 18th century, a series of *babaylan* uprisings occurred in various parts of Panay but Antique was supposed to be where they originated and the province was earlier identified as the "hotbed" of *babaylan* practices. It was reported that 180 "diabolical women" gathered in the closing part of the 18th century to preach the old faith and disturbed the town of Sibalom (Fernandez trans. Arias, 1965:343).

Historical accounts reveal that traditional *babaylan* leaders were predominantly women. Notable among the *babaylanes* in Panay during the second half of the 19th century was Estrella Bangotbanwa. Believed to possess supernatural powers, Estrella gained a sizeable following as rite-officiator to ensure favorable weather for a bountiful harvest. She was considered as "*Tagsagod kang Kalibutan*" or "Caretaker of the World" (Vicente, Interview: 1995). Her most dramatic feat was when she performed a ritual to summon heavy rains which ended the three-year drought in the towns of Miagao and San Joaquin, Iloilo (Magos, 1990:35). To this day, *babaylanes* still invoke Estrella's name in their rituals.

A close look at the term "*babaylan*" indicates that it is identified with the female gender. "*Babaylan*" could be further interpreted as a corruption of two local terms: "*babayi lang*"—"woman only" which imply the gender-exclusive role of females as traditional rite-officiators and religious leaders. Hence, "*babaylan*" or a sisterhood of women with very special powers.

### **Asog: The Male Babaylan**

In his report on the Bisayans in the Samar-Leyte area, Fray Alcina noted that priests and sacrificers were commonly women, but there were also some male *babaylanes*:

...if there were some man who might have been one, he was asog  
... (Alcina trans Lietz, 1960:212)

Fray Fernandez also mentioned Tapara, an *asog* or male *babaylan* of Lambunao, Iloilo who dressed and acted like a female. Fray Alcina further explained the *asog* as:

...impotent men and deficient for the practice of matrimony, considered themselves more like women than men in their manner of living or going about, even in their occupations. . .

Though the term might sound alien to the younger generation, it is interesting to note that "*asog*" is still being used by older folks today to refer not to men but to sterile or barren women (Mulato, Interview 1996). In contemporary Hiligaynon, farmers use the term "*asog*" to refer only to female animals which are unproductive (Reforma, Interview: 1994). An out-of-print Visayan-English dictionary has a similar meaning. In Aklan province, the term refers to a female acting like a male or a "tom-boy" (Geremia, Interview: 1996).

In today's context, a more appropriate term for a male who dresses and acts like a female is "*agi*", "*bakla*" or "*gay*". Perhaps the friar-chroniclers were mistaken but they were recorders of a folk perception. The folk may have chosen a supposedly female adjective to describe this kind of male *babaylan* because he was perceived to be more female in manner and appearance.

From a folk perspective, the term "*asog*" then raises two points: the female gender as its basis and sterility. The *asog* may be female-like but not a true female where fertility is concerned. This implies that "*babaylan*" describes the biologically female who has a womb and there-

fore capable of producing an offspring. On the other hand, “*asog*” describes a biologically male *babaylan* who apes a female's outward characteristics. If “*asog*” refers to the inability to reproduce or give birth, then it is also an apt term for describing the male *babaylan* who has no womb and therefore, can never bear children.

In his notes on the Sambals, Fray Domingo Perez mentioned about male priests called *bayoc* who dressed like females. The term *bayoc* is close to the Cebuano “*bayot*” which refers to a male homosexual. Did the “*agi*” or “*bayoc*” define a male gender which was more female-like? Did the “*agi*” or “*bayot*” perhaps evolve from this *asog* or *bayoc* gender phenomenon of the *babaylan*? The *asog* or *bayoc* concept further raises more tickling questions. What was the folk perception of male homosexuality? Was male homosexuality accepted and tolerated in early Filipino society because of its link to the *babaylan* role? Is it because of this cultural link in the past that Filipino male homosexuals today tend to have closer friendly ties with females?

According to Alcina, the *asog* was considered deficient in the performance of his role as a male and thus deficient for matrimony. This might have lowered his worth or value in a society which expects males to enter matrimony and beget children. But it was also this deficiency—his being more female which qualified him into the *babaylan* sisterhood. As a *babaylan*, the *asog* raises his worth and gains honor in a society which might have been unwelcome for his kind.

Researcher Alfred McCoy did not mention the *asog* but he took note of two *babaylan* leaders who were reputed to be homosexuals. Ponciano Elofre, who was also known as “Buhawi” (God of the Four Winds) led one of the earliest of major revolts in 1887-1890 in Negros Island. In 1897, Gregorio Lampinio of Lambuanao, Iloilo joined the *pulahan* group of Hermenegildo Maraingan who attacked some towns in Capiz. Lampinio was a homosexual and one of Maraingan's influential secondary leaders.

Unlike the Japanese who had no distinct label for their male shaman, (Hori, 1983:181) the “*asog*” might qualify as Panay's distinguishing term for the male *babaylan*. With the “*asog*” concept, the *babaylan* “*babayi lang*” ended its being an exclusive sisterhood. The entry of the male gender through the *asog* phenomenon and his eventual acceptance

as *babaylan* perhaps served as a transition for the eventual male *babaylan* “takeover”.

### Where Were the Women?

A review of *babaylan*-led revolts against the colonizers reveals a succession of male leaders from Gregorio “Dios” in 1888 to Papa Isio in 1901 (McCoy: 1982). On the other hand, female leaders were unheard of except for Estrella Bangotbanwa who was remembered for her supernatural powers as rite-officiator than for leading an armed revolt. What happened to women, the original *babaylanes*?

It was perhaps the stiff rivalry between the male-led Catholic religion and the native faith which “ousted” the female *babaylanes*. The natives had to look for a religious leader parallel to the priest and the female *babaylan* was not the answer. She may have had a strong following as a leader but she was not male like the friar.

This might explain a sort of a folk compromise in the *asog* who was biologically male like the priest but possessing female qualities of the original *babaylan*. Hence the *asog's* acceptance as the *babaylan* until the natives saw the urgent need for a warrior leader. It was a period of persecution for the *babaylanes* who refused to give up their traditional faith and the natives were beginning to rebel against the heaviness of the colonial yoke. Aside from the crisis of war, there were epidemics and natural calamities which threatened the very lives of the natives. With his gift of healing, supernatural powers and the capability to lead and wage war, the male *babaylan* non-*asog* warrior eventually emerged and took over. Thus all revolts of *babaylanes* against the colonizers were led by the males.

Today, the *babaylan* tradition is still being kept alive with males in the lead. The male *babaylanes* today are not called *asog* anymore but they still wear the robe or a skirt-like garment when they perform their rituals. Like the *asog* in the past, is the male *babaylan* dressed like a female to acknowledge the woman-exclusive, original *babaylan*? What is in the woman? Is it because she has womb? Is it because she bleeds?

### Because of the Womb

According to Victor Turner, blood is a multi-vocal symbol (cited by Helman, 1986:19) and also the most potent symbol of life

(Kupfermann, 1979:53). A woman who menstruates signals her readiness to bring forth and nurture new life, an important yet mysterious power of women. Because of her womb, woman is life-giver-nurturer and her bleedings signify her power upon which the fundamental concept of existence and continuity of a tribe or community depends. However, a woman's bleedings also imply an ambivalence. If she possesses that life-giving potential, she also carries that threat to society's existence. As Valerio Valeri points out:

. . . these bleedings are the internal becoming the external, the normally hidden and therefore mysterious generative power of women made visible. . .

The womb which is her very strength becomes a liability since its vulnerability is exposed each time she menstruates. Bleeding women reveal their helplessness to control their own generative power. This helplessness is also shared by men whose very existence is dependent on women's womb-power. In central Panay, the local term for menstruation is "*paramulanun*" or "*monthlies*" from "*bulan*" to mean the moon or month. That the local term for menstruation is associated with the moon further supports Valeri's hypothesis that:

. . . the phenomena of female fertility, just like motions of the celestial bodies, is viewed as uncontrollable. That the connection with the lunar cycle reveals another feature of the life-giving power in women's wombs: that it is inextricably connected with death (1990:262).

The periodicity of the menses is likened to the moon's waxing and waning which signifies birth and death. Like her bleedings, woman becomes a paradoxical symbol of life and death.

Women may have the womb and they alone possess the power to bring forth new life but along with this is always a threat of the loss of this power. As such, the absence of female *babaylanes* in revolts was perhaps not so much in protection of women as life-givers but also more to hide the tribe's vulnerability. In her public role as *babaylan*, woman's womb and her role as life-giver-nurturer of the tribe or society was also made public. As a *babaylan*, the tribe or society was constantly confronted with the possible loss of her generative power.

Because of the *babaylan's* public role, the loss of women's generative power may also mean the weakening and eventual death of a tribe or society. Thus she has to cease becoming a public figure and the

powerful woman-exclusive “*babayi lang*” or “woman only” is given another reading to connote weakness which displaces her in the lead role. However, she remains a potent force in the background, always ready for the moment when she is needed once again as a life-giver.

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## INTERVIEWS

**Geremia, Lolita**, 65 yrs. old ret. school nurse, Sibalom, Antique, Feb. 1996.

**Mulato, Santiago**, 80 yrs. old, Hiligaynon lexicographer, Iloilo City April 1996.

**Reforma, Rolando**, 40 yrs. old, cattle buyer, Molo, Iloilo City, Sept. 1994.

**Vicente, Lucibar**, 84 yrs. old, farmer, Sibalom, Antique, June 1994.