



Babaylan **Women** as **Guide** to a **Life** of **Justice** and **Peace**

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Marianita (Girlie) Villariba is a sociologist who practises 'babaylan' (mystical women) work. Girlie, as she is fondly referred to in Isis, talks about the indigenous ways of remembering and honoring personal and community wellness. She is in the midst of gathering bouquets of remarkable lives and presenting them in ways where common people can claim them as part of the legacies. This one-on-one with Girlie, tells of the origins of babaylans in the Philippines, the practices among babaylans that made such women powerful and significant parts of ancient indigenous Philippine society. And presents seven values for discovering babaylan consciousness.

Who is the Babaylan

Who is a babaylan? The babaylans, predominantly women, were mystical women who wielded social and spiritual power in pre-colonial Philippine society before the coming of the Spanish conquerors in the 16th century.

In his research on pre-colonial women, anthropologist Dr. Zeus Salazar described the babaylan as “a specialist in the fields of culture, religion, medicine and all kinds of theoretical knowledge about the phenomenon of nature.”

How did babaylans become babaylans?

Women had dreams and experienced life-altering events that led them to become babaylans of their specific communities. The traditional path in babaylan formation was to be called by a mystical source or to inherit the role from an elder babaylan. The sacred call would come in a dream or the person would experience a life-threatening illness, be healed by prayers and then experience a change of consciousness, or what is called *sinasapian* (a spirit possessing the self). But this possession is just a signal. What is important is the continuing transformation which gave the babaylan the ability to widen her circles of concern and learn her multiple functions in society.

In this writer’s interaction with members of Lumad communities in Mindanao, especially the Matigsalom, she learned that the practice of choosing a babaylan is a lifelong process. Any woman or man who could identify and solve the problems of the community can be chosen a babaylan. She had to demonstrate her leadership in solving its problems as they arise and mature. In

other Lumad communities, a woman or man must be able to wield a sword or a weapon in defense of the community. Once proven as a warrior, she would develop further her role as a babaylan. The education of a babaylan is lifelong and she becomes a full fledged babaylan when she understands and embodies the multiple functions of priestess, healer, sage and seer. That is why babaylans are already in their maturing years when they assume the mantle of babaylanism.

What is the relevance of the Babaylans in the 21st century?

Precolonial babaylans have inherited practices and worldviews we could all learn from: praying, chanting and singing in native tongues, inviting and asking the Divine Source for bountiful harvests and protection from harm. Babaylans live and breathe the belief: *I Dios egga nittam nganun!* (God is in all of us!)

The babaylans believe that God understands us in our native language. Praying the Mangurug, the Ibanag Apostles’ Creed based on the Christian prayer and Ba-diw Ibaloi chants, are appropriately sacred.

For many decades, the mystical women in Mt. Banahaw have been going on pilgrimages and meditating in sacred places called *pamumuesto*. Babaylans acknowledged the belief that God is in all nature.

There are babaylans who ask that God should not be removed from nature. The Lumads have no human image of God or *D’wata* because they believe God is all. Because God is embodied in all nature, they think that people should stop destroying forests and polluting the air and water. They practice discernment

by meditating in caves, hills or mountains. They can sense destruction or disaster with their intuition and tacit sensing called *pakikiramdam*.

Protect the land, water and air as common heritage. In the lament of a Subanen babaylan, “When they took away our forest they took away God from us.”

Babaylans are sensitive to the causes of natural calamities, and they have risked their lives to stop logging and mining operations in their resource-rich dwellings.

How is babaylanism linked to peace?

Babaylans are inherently peacemakers and ecologists, especially when challenged by power wielders of capitalism and materialism. Babaylans believe that we are all one breath and that the God is in all of us. This interconnectedness leads them to uphold



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justice and peace as vital to the life of the earth. Among the Aytas, the original inhabitants of the islands, the education of peacemaking starts with the very young. Each child learns how to handle conflict among her/his peers and the elders, babaylan, and *datus*, allow them the freedom to learn. Peacemaking is at the core of the babaylan’s legacy, and

violence and wars are anathema to a holistic community life.

Almost all babaylans have healing powers and they understand the relationship between the supernatural, natural, and human beings, a sense of Gaia long before people in the West understood the earth as a living being. Healing is not merely treating the infection or the illness. The babaylan’s healing rituals enliven and manifest the weaving of various notions of divine laws and of natural laws with those of human laws. This is the reason why healing is performed as a sacred rite in a communal setting.

In the province of Capiz, Central Philippines, there are communities that perform the babaylan healing rites up to this day. The healing preparation of their babaylan is extensive and expensive. The date for healing is set and all the people in the community are informed. Animals are slaughtered and food prepared for a whole week of healing. The babaylan goes on fasting and praying for the Divine Source. Once she knows the Spirit is present in her, she chants, dances and wields the power that heals. The people gather to be healed, be blessed and once the cure is evident, all the people celebrate in a feast usually sponsored by the babaylan’s family.

What lies at the core of babaylanism?

Loving unconditionally in this life and beyond so one can cross with grace into the next life. The belief in another life is at the core of loving. Babaylans believe that one crosses, *tumatawid*, to another life after death and that love helps the person to find those who will guide her/him to the next life.

Is it really possible to discover the Babaylan consciousness within us?

It is possible to discover the babaylan consciousness within us and realize the mission of building a life of justice and peace for all. A dialogue on seven core values based on *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* and *Pantayong Pananan*; Philippine Psychology is recommended. Philippine Psychology was developed by Dr. Virgilio Enriquez and his peers as a remedy to the colonial education of the Filipinos. *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*, SP, as it is known in the Philippine academe, is multifaceted and rooted in the history, language, arts and collective experience of the Filipino people. Its concepts and methods are culture-fair and its mission is to contribute to establishing a truly universal psychology in the service of humanity, while stressing its service to the Filipino people. SP must have been inspired by the babaylan legacy of service and

struggle to preserve the wisdom of our ancestors.

Sikolohiyang Pilipino SP is open to interfacing with the sciences and philosophies of industrialized nations. I will weave its values with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) learning goals for the 21st century and Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences.

Many keywords are in Filipino because their meanings are rooted in Filipino historical and spiritual cultures. ♪

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Values for building a culture of justice, peace, and spirituality

First Value: KALOOBAN at PATOTOO

Learning to be, being a human being as defined by our intrapersonal, interpersonal, and spiritual intelligences

Loob is the inner Filipino self, and *patotoo* is manifesting the truth or the integrity of one's motives and action. In this inner domain, individual and social natures fuse. In this domain of *kalooban*, the sense of right

and wrong, *budhi* (conscience) plants its seeds, growing with tacit knowledge of stories, sentiments and dreams. This is the locus of the identity of Filipinos which should be shared as humanity, *kapwatao*. People describe the openness and inclusivity of one's identity in sharing ones' resources, as in the value of *kagandahang-loob* (good inner-self).

The act of receiving the will of God is eloquently sung, chanted and danced by babaylans. When all are in tune with the will of the Divine Creator, *nasa atin ang Kalooban ng Diyos* (the inner being of God is in us), the problems of life are worth bearing, and becomes the wellspring of knowledge, crossing into *pagpatotoo na pagkatao*, realizing one's true self and becoming a human being.

In modern sense, these intelligences were the attributes of the babaylan because they could

understand their own personal mission, understand other people's psychology, and bring it to the attention of a divine Being.

If we are able to catch a glimpse of God in our genetic make-up, we are divine and all that we are should observe the sacred and moral nature. The babaylans knew this when they claimed that God is in all of us as practiced in Cagayan Ibanag's daily greeting that gives thanks to God: *Mabbalo ta Dios*.

Howard Gardner presents this as spiritual intelligence—a general regard and respect for the Divine Creator. Developing our spiritual intelligence will move us towards *ginhawa* (comfort) whose daily operative meaning can be living, loving others as *kapwa* (neighbor), rearing daughters and sons, working and learning with an “imagined community” that is growing in *kaginhawaban*, a comfortable and marvelous life for all.

Second Value: KABUHAYAN at KAALWANAN

Learning to do, nurturing our life-sustaining intelligence

Popular economics builds on a holistic sense of life as the core concept. The household is the base unit and is part of a larger household-nature. *Paghabanapbuhay* is lifemithing to achieve *kaalwanan*. The goal of work is to live and enjoy the ease of living. Health and wealth are connected.

Kaalwanan is a vision of simple comfort as opposed to the materialist and wealth-acquisition drive of other peoples. This comfortable life is a concept that is linked to the principle of reciprocity. Take the practice of many Filipinos who are below the poverty level. Their comfort is linked to the comfort of the country, which means that workers and citizens collectively make a nation rise beyond survival. The unique feature of *kapwa-tao* is the peeling of layers between the self and the other, expanding into a larger whole and allows for inclusivity, no matter how much plurality there is in ethnicity, gender, age, and class.

Third Value: KARUNUNGAN at KAALAMANG-BAYAN

Learning to learn, nurturing our collective heritage and traditional knowledge

Life teaches us to learn. All learning in life matters and even our mistakes and confusions offer valuable lessons. Lessons will be repeated unless learned; confusions help us to think clearly. We must learn to learn and influence our people.

The *Karunungan* framework guiding social practice and mode of learning leadership is based on inclusive learning about humanity. It operates in three domains of lifewide and lifelong learning:

- 1) from personal life experiences with family, kin, close friends, and community networks;
- 2) from the roots and channels of consciousness and meanings, the tacit and explicit knowledge long ago organized for the community ; and
- 3) from emerging learning modalities in local, national and global networks.

These three domains of learning lead to a wholeness and integration of identity, making the Filipino personality an expanding womb of intelligences. Relevant here is the framework of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, namely, kinesthetic-bodily, linguistic-verbal, mathematical-logical, musical, visual-spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligences.

In the literacy study of Dr. Maria Luisa Canieso Doronila, the literacy of indigenous people, despite being poor, made explicit the tacit knowledge of mathematics, linguistic-verbal, kinesthetic, musical and visual intelligences that are evident in their economic work. As a whole, the level of literacy is functional within the context of *Kaalamang Bayan at Kagawian*, linking knowledge of social structure, tradition, ritual, technology and oral knowledge. Knowledge is shared and expertise is recognised.

Fourth Value: KAPWA at KAPATIRAN

Learning to live and work together as a compassionate people

Social intelligence is interpersonal intelligence—the ability to relate in a sensitive way to other persons and groups, small and big. It assumes that one is living in a diverse community with various ethnicities, classes, age and sexual orientations.

Feminists reflect on their gender sensibilities and deeds. In gender courses I have conducted, the narrative life story sessions culminate in a *Panata* ritual, where leaders pledge to change patriarchal practices into nurturing gender fair actions. The *kapwa* terms of interaction are nonsexist and nonhierarchical.

Fifth Value: PAGKAKAISA at PAMATHALAN

Learning to realize a collective vision and strategy

“None of us is as good as all of us.” This is why we need a collective vision and strategy to overcome the obstacles to democracy.

The popular politics practiced by the grassroots and indigenous communities have developed *fronesis* which is Aristotle’s term for political knowledge. *Fronesis* is the ability to understand and interpret the situation at hand and decide about actions. It is part of our social intelligence called *pakikipagkapwa-tao*, inclusively interacting with people as fellow humans.

When babaylans worked with the *datu* (chiefs) and *kawal* (soldiers) of pre-colonial political units, the relationship was based on *fronesis*, where people learned their rights and responsibilities on the path towards reason and goodness. The legacy of grassroots babaylans and datus was how to engage elite power-holders who were not applying the values of truth, reason and justice in their work. When the colonial powers subjugated the people, the babaylans took the brunt and developed both

confrontative and accommodating strategies to survive. In the realm of justice, there evolved a sense of graded justice because the rule of law does not always benefit the people as colonial powers imposed laws to protect their own interests.

The Filipino concept of graded justice is illustrated in the story of *Patring*, a peasant woman. *Patring* exhibits the historical attitudes of babaylan women in justice-seeking. She had been a tenant since she was born in the 1950s. Her peasant husband died, leaving her with eight children to support. Since only men are recognised as tenants/landlords in the Philippines, she had to struggle for her right to farm her small piece of land. In 1994, *Patring* learned her skills in communications and negotiations with the group Education for Life. For two years, she persisted in her bid to own the land she tilled by taking the road of truth and justice, demanding a handful of grains of justice, eloquently stated as “*kabit kaunting katarungan*”. She finally won her legal claim to her land in 1996 and now has her name on the certificate of land ownership. But having her name on the document does not provide her with the resources to live off the land. This will mean another level of struggle, *lakas* and *tibay ng loob*, the courage to face challenges and uncertainties.

Sixth Value: LAKAS AT TIBAY NG LOOB

Learning about sustainable spirituality

Lakas at tibay ng loob is Filipino strength of character, the courage to be and to risk all in the name of a cause. There is a need for re-organising our motives to serve while surviving the pitfalls of cynicism and avoid getting burned out.

In the 70s, I worked with the people who struggled against repression and resistance. Under martial rule, the virtue of courage (*katapangan*) became dominant. *Pakikibaka*, the politics of resistance, and critical thinking developed in me and among activists. Becoming an activist enabled me to know myself deeper as a feminist. Knowing oneself became my definition of personal intelligence or intrapersonal intelligence.

When people power changed the political landscape in 1986, it ushered a paradigm shift from the politics of resistance to the politics of participation and engagement. Our vocabulary expanded, from critical collaboration to advocacy for good governance. This paradigm shift challenged our secular political intelligence.

My lifetime partner, Ed dela Torre and I reflected on how we rediscovered and organised our spirituality over four decades of social movement work. Ed wrote in his journal:

“Traditionally, we were taught to ‘purify our motives.’ This is true both in the religious tradition and the progressive tradition. What happens is we either fail to purify our motives to achieve the most noble one of either “*ad majorem Dei gloriam*” or “total commitment to serving the people,” or else we deceive ourselves that we have purified our motives and fail to recognize the truth that we are driven by many motives. Many, but not mixed. Many spirits, but one Spirit. For example, looking back at particular moments of my life, I was initially driven by righteous anger against injustice, a sympathetic solidarity (even “*awa*”) for the poor, some shame or guilt feeling for being more privileged, and a sense of companionship and friendship with fellow activists.”

Rather than purify our motives which means eliminating apparently less noble ones and retaining only the noblest, we may “recognise” our many motives and ground ourselves in truth. But then, we need to “organise” our motives so that the more noble ones lead, and the others are subordinated, though not eliminated.

Periodically, however, we need to “reorganize” our motives, and this is important for avoiding cynicism and burn out. For example, the “lead motive” of righteous anger against injustice may need to yield to another lead motive of celebrating the actualisation of the human potential of the poor. The anger does not go away, and should not, but it is not the lead driving force. Or maybe the sense

and experience of fellowship with fellow activists and being part of a community that is committed to justice and to “exalt the lowly” becomes more dominant than wanting to “put down the mighty from their throne.”

Seventh Value: BATHALA NA, Developing the gift of final perseverance

Bathala means God. Babala na is the Filipino determination in the face of uncertainty. *Bathala Na* is courage and fortitude as the impending action is for God’s honor and glory.

The gift of final perseverance is the challenge of developing a lifetime commitment to the cause of justice, peace and God’s honor through the many changes in our contexts and in ourselves. For Christian activists, the gift of final perseverance is a spiritual gift because the work to achieve justice and peace has become complex. Being peace activists and citizens, we believe that this gift of final perseverance can sustain our commitment.

In democracy and citizenship, Pamathalaan, is a necessity. *Pamathalaan* is a systemic philosophy that is based on unity and nurtured by love of God, country and fellow human citizens as well as respect for nature. Political integrity is guaranteed since the political will of the leader is anchored on ethical will. The observance of agape and the moral law is assured when leaders govern according to the tenets of Pamathalaan. In the legacy of pamathalaan, the earth is sacred space, the home of diverse peoples. Its aim is to be a model government that respects all ethnic groups, all religions, and all social strata.

In cultivating Pamathalaan, the development of critical masses of leaders and citizens is an imperative, which in the words of Ed dela Torre should be “big enough to have impact on governments and markets, yet small enough to be within the boundaries of imagination and capacities of the grassroots.”