

The complementary roles of the Mandirigma and the Babaylan

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by Perry Gil S. Mallari



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While Philippine society became heavily patriarchal under Spain, a balance between the roles of male and female was more evident during pre-colonial times.

Warriorship was highly valued during pre-Hispanic period and was a pursuit intended almost solely for men. This norm resulted to the emergence of an elite warrior class who was looked upon by the tribe as its protector and avenger.

A balancing factor to this development was the similar degree of prestige and respect enjoyed by the babaylans. The babaylans were spiritual leaders during pre-colonial times revered for their supernatural abilities among them healing and foretelling the future. A babaylan could be a male or female though the majority of them were women before the coming of the Spaniards.

The pre-Hispanic Filipinos put equal importance on warriorship and spirituality hence there was gender symmetry between the warrior or mandirigma and the babaylan – the female ritualist. Regardless of fighting prowess, a band of warriors was considered half-ready without performing the appropriate war rituals and the initiation of this was reserved exclusively to the babaylan, “They had no certain days established throughout the year for their sacrifices, but made them as time and opportunity offered. They were punctual in offering these when they were going to fight. War was their universal inclination, because of their bestial and ferocious appetite to rob and to go on raids, committing depredations on the neighboring islands, and making slaves of all the people who came to their hands.

They also offered sacrifices in sickness, the beginnings of their sowings, the building of their houses, and for other necessities. The duties of priest were exercised indifferently by both men and women, called baylanes [babaylans]. They made use of superstitions, lots, witchery, and other ceremonies,” wrote early Spanish chronicler Fray Luis de Jesus in his essay General History of the Discalced Religious of St. Augustine.

A similar balance of roles was observed by author Herminia Quimpo Meñez among the Isnegs of the highlands of Cordillera. A small portion of the Isnegs was already Christianized but the majority of them are still animists. The tribe no longer practices headhunting but the tradition is still represented in enduring rituals such as the say-am. In the latter, the role of the female shaman is revered even today, “Headhunters and shamans were the idealized roles for Isneg men and women—roles which defined gender complementarity and equality in Isneg society. The say-am, their principal public ritual, makes explicit these relations in a three-part sequence: first, the sacrifice of a dog’s head; second, the splitting of mature coconuts by male warriors while reciting raiding boasts, and third, the climactic ritual dance of the tungtung, which the Isneg themselves consider the most important part in the sequence, and one which requires the presence of the entire community,” wrote Meñez in her book “Explorations in Philippine folklore.”

Meñez noted that female shamans enjoyed the same level of prestige as headhunters in Isneg society because of the former’s supposed spiritual potency.

They were venerated, “ not by killing human enemies but by vanquishing dangerous spirits in the forests and in the world beyond.”

The say-am, Meñez observed, is ripe with symbolism of masculinity and femininity, “Life giving and life taking—usually treated as bipolar themes—receive a different treatment in the say-am, where the climax especially dramatizes the complementarity and unity rather than the opposition between hunting and agriculture, between man as killer and woman as nurturer.”

The attributes of the mandirigma and the babaylan were evident in the lives of many traditional masters of the Filipino martial arts (FMA). Like the pre-Hispanic mandirigma, a traditional arnisador believes supernatural components should augment his physical skills hence the acquisition of an oracion (magical prayer) or an anting-anting (an object of magical powers) was an integral part of the old practice of arnis.

The pursuit of spirituality and healing abilities was looked upon by the arnisadores of yore as a balancing component to their lethal skills—if one knows how to kill, he must also know how to heal. It is for this reason that many old FMA masters were also skilled in hilot—the Filipino method of bone-setting and therapeutic massage.

Their skill in hilot came in handy for treating injuries sustained from training.

A good example would be the late Antonio “Tatang” Ilustrisimo who was revered during his time not only for his fearsome fighting prowess but also for his mystical powers. It was not uncommon for Ilustrisimo to use an oracion to heal a student suffering from an ailment.

The characters of the mandirigma and the babaylan therefore, examined within the context of FMA practice represent man’s attempt to adapt to the nature of the cosmos, which is essentially an eternal interplay of opposites—male and female, hard and soft, night and day.

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One Response to *The complementary roles of the Mandirigma and the Babaylan*

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deva kumar says:

November 17, 2013 at 6:49 pm

Enlightening though i think we must now assert our country’s original or generic name. We were called Maharlika before the colonization. Habang ginagamit natin ang pangalang bigay ng dayuhan mahihirapan tayong ma-realize kung sino talaga tayo bilang isang bansa. Katulad ng taong binansagan ng ibang pangalan hindi makikila sa palayaw ang tunay ng pangalan at pinagmulan ng isang tao.

Napakgandang pangalan ng Maharlika na ang ibig sabihin ay Malayang nilikha o pwede ring Mahal na likha. Kung ang Israel ay sabi nilang lupang pinangako ang ating bansa Maharlika naman ang Mahal na likha ng Panginoong Maykapal. :D

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