

Historical Markers on Filipino Women's Sexuality During Spanish Colonial Times

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The intention of this research paper is to compile data about the Filipino women's activities, rituals and customs related to sexuality and mark its historical markers along the way from the 16th century up to 17th century.

The paper asks the following questions: What did the Spanish colonizers find out when they first saw the women? How did the Spanish colonizers view the Filipino women through time? What were the Filipino women's activities, rituals and customs that pertain to sexuality? How did they express their sexual desires? Why were polygamy, concubinage and abortion practiced? How did the Spanish colonizers wield the Christian Doctrine to conquer the so-called Evils that plague the Filipino women? What was the perception of the Filipino women of the Spanish colonizers?

Why sexuality? Why Historical Markers?

First, the researcher chooses the sexuality aspect of women as a topic because most of the materials gathered about womanhood focus on chastity, modesty, virginity, relationship with men and everything related to her being a woman that involves conception, childbearing, giving birth or failing to give birth.

Sexuality here as the Webster's Dictionary defines is the "possession of the structural and functional differentia of sex."

Second, the researcher sees putting historical markers on the important events related to women's sexuality using the historical process of Spanish colonization as a backdrop while putting forth forward the social issues that have arisen as past and present-day problems.

Third, the researcher categorizes the historical markers as nodal points in the meeting of two different peoples and cultures – the pagan native Filipinos and the Christian Hispanics – and discovers along the way a metamorphosed culture where can be threshed out specific issues of Filipino women related to sexuality.

The periodization, as the researcher discerns, is fluid. It means the event or symbolical object had begun or surfaced when the Spanish colonizers set foot on the islands in the 16th century and continued until the 17th century. Or may have been continuing up until the present time. Further study on the periods that are marked as nodal points in women's sexuality is a must in the future because it will provide explanations and clarifications as to what had transpired in the past that led the way to where the women are now in history.

Moreover, this is a challenging and an exciting journey for the researcher.

Historical Marker 1: Sagra , the Barrier (Before and After 1521)

Antonio Pigafetta, Miguel de Loarca, Antonio de Morga, and Fr. Ignacio Alcina had written about sagra at different times. Literally translated as "barrier" (sagka in Tagalog), Pigafetta wrote lengthily about it as a "gold or tin bolt as large as a goose quill" in 1521 which less than 100 years later will also find its way in Alcina's account.

What is more striking though was Pigafetta's interviewing the men to ask why do they have to suffer such pain – and a little drop of blood, at that – as they permanently keep the sagra pierced through their private parts. Pigafetta writes:

"They say that their women wish it and that if they did otherwise, they would not have communication with them."

Alcina attests Pigafetta's account:

"This was done for a greater incitement to carnal pleasure , not only on the part of the men, but especially the women."

Morga affirms Pigafetta's findings and also says the Spanish friars made a great effort to eliminate them:

"With this device, they have communication with their wives, and are unable to withdraw until a long time after copulation. They are very fond of this and receive much pleasure from it, so that, although they shed a quantity of blood, and receive other harm, it is current among them... strenuous efforts are being made to do away with these, and not consent to their use; and consequently the practice has been checked in great part".

Based on this experience, Morga opines that the women are “very vicious and sensual” and describes the use of sagra as “perverseness.”

The use of sagra had also been prevalent in Cambodia, Bengal, Malaysia and other parts of Asia. Pigafetta, Loarca, Morga and an anonymous writer of the Boxer’s Codex describe the early Filipinos’ version of goat’s hair as a sophisticated material for sagra different from that of other peoples. The natives also use 20 kinds of wheels for sagras. The Boxer Codex puts it to 30.

Its pervasiveness throughout the region can be proven in a royal request of a Cambodian queen who dissuaded her minions to stop using sagras for an unexplained reason but which Alcina describes as an “unnatural sin” and causes “virulent cancer.”

He even writes that some men died because of sagra but is not clear if women suffer, too, from the cancerous affliction. However, the cancerous infection as a result of foreign objects such as wood, tin or gold inserted through a body part during repeated sexual encounters should be the reason for reported deaths. Women demanding for this sexual satisfaction is beyond the colonizers’ world view that expects the women to be modest and chaste. While they cannot control totally what is happening between man and woman in their sexual trysts, the colonizers check on the men’s private parts and punish with beating the men who wore them.

Absence of the words sagra, sacra, sakra or chakra in the Diccionario compiled by Domingo delos Santos and Alfonso Mentrída is a silence that speaks a lot. Its visual existence and use was prohibited, and thus the word not spoken, lest the Spaniards punish the natives. The word has lost its use through time.

Related to this, women use lumay (Bisaya) or gayuma (Tagalog), herb mixed with drinks to seduce their beloved into liking them. Alcina admits in his account that he once gave a woman a “good whipping” for doing so.

Again, like the sagras, lumay or gayuma are representations of ancient Filipino women’s expression of sensuality and sexuality that have transgressed the boundaries of Western standards of morality. But unlike sagras that can be inspected in men’s body, the lumay or gayumas are herbs that can pass on as medicinal and taken internally upon prescription of an herbolaria, a witchdoctor or a babaylan. This survives until the present day in history.

Historical Marker 2: Virginité since 1604

The natives have no concept of virginité. Men are not concerned whether their wives are virgins or not. Men are paid to “deflower” the virgin girls. Pedro Chirino in his account says:

“...they did not value virginité, nor set any store by it, regarding it rather as misfortune and degradation.

Virgin girls are brought to the men whose work is to “ravish” them so that they are no longer virgins when they get married. The natives believe that virginité is a “hindrance” and an “impediment” for the husbands during the first few nights of marriage.

Loarca further emphasizes that it was a disgrace for any woman not to have a sweetheart because she is deemed as “ugly” or may be surmised as unwanted. Or is it because it is meant as completeness and wholeness? Alcina cites in his account that a woman who died a virgin or had only one husband is called a bingil (Bisaya) and buried with her is a half coconut shell and a pati (half-ax handle). What do the half coconut shell and half-ax handle mean? Why are they halves? Are round coconut and elongated ax mean the woman’s and man’s sex organs respectively? Can one-half mean there is a need for another half to complete the essence of each other’s being?

In line with this, ancient Filipinos circumcise both the male and female children. Female children are circumcised where a slit is made to ensure there is an opening in the girl’s private part. Again, the purpose of female circumcision is to prepare the girl for less painful sexual encounter during her first sexual act with a male.

But while the outright elimination of sagra is explicitly mentioned in the historical accounts, there is no single account that reveals the prohibition of female circumcision. Sagras had been replaced by the bolitas ; female circumcision was replaced by nothing. The Spaniards point to the Chinese as the source of sagra; they also blame female circumcision to the Moros who are said to be the “source of this Mohammedan practice.”

Historical Marker 3: Slavery of Women (Before 1609 and Onwards)

Fray Pedro de San Pablo, preacher and provincial minister of the Philippines Islands, wrote a long letter to Charles V in 1619 approximating the relatively “peaceful” life of the native Indians before Governor Don Juan de Silva established shipyards and fleets in 1609. The Governor, according to him, forced the Indians to work and conscripted them in “compulsory service” that made this grand plan of ship building possible.

Along the process, many natives were made slaves, “many others were killed” presumably when they refused to be part of the labor force and some escaped to the woods to save their lives.

An item in the letter reveals about the women slaves who were made to labor for the ship sailors and most likely act as sex slaves while on board the ships. Fray de San Pedro requests the Majesty in his letter this

numbered item:

“23. Item: That slave women be not conveyed in the ships, by which many acts offensive to God will be avoided. Although that is not prohibited by your royal decree, and it is also entrusted to the archbishop to pace upon them the penalty of excommunication and to punish them, this evil has not been checked; and many sailors – and even others, who should furnish a good example – take slave women and keep them as concubines. He knew a certain prominent official who carried with him fifteen of these women and some were delivered of children by him, while others were pregnant, which made a great scandal.”

Documents of 1609 that include among others a report of the Jesuit Missions confirms the prevailing abduction of women in the inner part of the islands to be sold later as slaves and prostitutes. The report quotes:

“XI. The attention of Ours at Tinagon has wisely been given to the women since they are more ready to take on an interest in sacred things, and are more seldom absent from the village – except when one or another makes her escape from the hands of some procurer, preferring to pass the nights in the forest and mountains in the midst of serpents, rather than at home to suffer danger to her chastity among men that are as deadly.”

Selling slaves – men and women – has been so rampant because it was profitable. Fray de San Pablo even urged the King to issue a Royal Decree to stop the trade as this is “evil” and may “destroy” Spain in the future. He continues in the letter:

“24. Item: That no sailor, and no passenger unless he be a person of rank, be allowed to take more than one male slave...”

He explains that slaves consume the food provision in the ship and also steal while on board. He discloses, too, that they are charged additional tax for each slave when they dock at any port.

Fray de San Pedro likewise narrates in the letter that ordinary seamen are not treated well and die of hunger and cold while working on the vessel. They are not given clothes (they are not used to wearing such because they are from the interiors of the land) so that they freeze and eventually die at dawn). If this is how the seamen are treated, the questions that come to mind are: How are the male slaves treated? How are the female slaves turned concubines treated too? His letter does not mention anything about how male or female sex slaves are treated thereat.

The preacher emphasizes in the letter toward the end:

“If he (the letter writer) were to tell them in detail the evil that is done to them, it would fill many pages. He petitions your Majesty to change your governor straitly to remedy this.”

What is surprising is that decrees have already been issued even earlier. Felipe II and Felipe III in two separate edicts in 1597 and 1608, respectively, prohibited the selling of slaves to Nueva España and ordered the limiting of the slaves’ number while on ship. Felipe III in particular issued Law LVI that says:

“It has been reported that the passengers and sailors of the trading ships of Filipinas transport and carry the slave-women who are the cause of very great offenses to God and other troubles. This should be prohibited and reformed (and more reasonably so in a navigation so long and dangerous)...For the remedy of this, we order and command...not to permit any slave-women to be transported or carried on those ships...”

Abducting a woman is also done to show political strength as what Governor Morales of Jolo did during the same period. He abducted the beautiful daughter of Salibanza, a local datu, that angered the father so greatly. Salibanza staged a conspiracy against Morales in retaliation.

Historical Marker 4: Concubinage (Before 1577 and Onwards)

The Spanish colonizers, secular or religious, keep the native women as mistresses. Sinibaldo de Mas notes in his short-stay in the Philippines that the general weakness of Spanish men is concubinage. They call them despenseras (stewardess) and later, queridas. They may be the laundrywomen, vendors, cooks, modistas, house or church cleaners – all women who serve and make the Spanish men’s lives easier.

Mas, a diplomat and a traveler exposed to so many cultures, has no ill words for the native Indian women but regards concubinage as a normal way of life. He allows the one he is reporting to read between the lines:

“Many keep a mistress...inside and outside the convent. The convent in Filipinas has no cloister, as it is a parochial house. And this fault, if one considers the climate of the country, the circumstance and the ideas of the natives, is to say, truth, the most excusable and the least harmful.”

Mas’ statement pointing to the “circumstance and ideas of the natives” on the issue of concubinage is highly palpable. He excuses the Spanish men from committing such and blames it altogether to the natives.

Earlier, 71 years before Mas’ report, a Pastoral Letter entitled Instruction to the Clergy was issued to the friars in the Philippines imposing rules on the conduct of the Spanish friars in their parishes. The Pastoral Letter in several numbered items reads:

“8. They shall not allow the dalagas (i.e., young girls) or any woman to clean the church; the sacristan must

perform this duty...

10. No woman shall enter the clergyman's house."

The need for this Instruction item numbers 8 and 10 reveals a situation that involves women and Spanish friars. What is this situation? Why are the dalagas not allowed to clean the church? What has been happening inside the clergyman's house? Why did the Instruction not mention the problem? Is it up to covering something?

Is the answer to the above questions the reason why the older women, Manang in many Filipino languages, the ones who clean the altar, arrange flowers and do other church chores up until this time?

For the Spanish soldiers who are not required by the Catholic Church's dictum of celibacy and are not regarded to become the vanguards of morality, Francisco de Sande was proud to write about their "improvement" as regards concubinage in 1577. He reveals:

"It is desirable that the soldiers should always lead honest lives; but as they are young, and the women in this country are so many and so bad, it is more difficult to correct this evil."

De Sande's description of "improvement" among the Spanish soldiers again reveals the existence of rampant concubinage in the Philippine Islands where the men are stationed. Much like Mas, de Sande justifies the sexual affairs but is outright explicit when he claims that because the men are young, the need for sex with women is only but natural. De Sande likewise is clear in blaming the native women's increasing population and state of being "bad" ("lewd," "unchaste" and "lustful") that the men cannot refuse them.

In 1594, a petition was presented to the Governor to act on widespread concubinage. The petition reads: "There are reports, and even numerous complaints from both the secular and religious sources, and for lack of means to pay the fees, many persons do not marry, but live in concubinage; the Jesuits think that this fee-system is wrong and that the priest should be content with his stipend, at least among the poor, whether Indians or Spaniards; this applies to both regular clergy and to friars; the bishop is urged to remedy this abuse. (The Petition Presented to the Governor by the City and the Encomenderos on the 15th of February 1591, BR Vol. 5, p. 317.)

There has also been cases of native Indian men committing concubinage. One such celebrated case that merited several pages in Alcina's accounts is Sumuroy's alleged having a querida. Alcina reports this act necessitated an "admonishment" that angered Sumuroy, a sacristan and son of a babaylan, to high heavens. He eventually abandoned his wife to live with his querida. The parish priest after hearing this, took the woman away and sent her to Catubig several miles away from Palapag. This angered the native and was reported as the reason for the Sumuroy-led uprising in 1649. He killed Fathers Miguel and Damian during the attack.

Kasaysayang Bayan: Sampung Aralin sa Kasaysayang Pilipino has another reason for the Sumuroy Uprising. It gets out of the old mold and traces the uprising to the general sentiment of the Samareños – having influenced by the native religion – against the conscripted forced labor that had sent many Bisayans (who are the best shipbuilders- Alcina) to Cavite dockyards.

Historical Marker 5: Marriage and Divorce (Before 1582)

The so-called uncivilized natives consider it a disgrace to bear a child out of wedlock. Children born outside of marriage, regardless of rank (datu, maharlika, timawa and ayuey), do not inherit anything unless the father or mother has no legitimate heirs or alive relatives of nearest kin.

Juan de Plasencia says the natives have a caste-like system and laws about inheritance by way of marriage are as varied and complicated. The slaves have a confusing strata that there are a "full-slave", a "half-slave";, a "quarter-slave"; aliping namamahay, aliping saguiguilid for the Tagalogs; and tumataban and tumatarampoque for the Bisayans.

They usually marry their relatives but cannot marry those belonging to the first degree of consanguinity. Thus, nieces and nephews are sometimes married to uncles and aunts.

No one marries below his or her rank in the Bisayas but there were cases of cross-marriages among the Tagalogs. A datu and a woman binukot marry in an elaborate marriage ceremony by joining hands together over a dish of rice in a makeshift venue that is made just for the occasion. People of other ranks do not do this ritual as doing so will be disrespectful for the datu and binukot.

The timawas finalize their marriage by drinking pitarilla in one cup. Marriage ritual is done after the symbolical drinking towards the evening. Rich and respectable slaves have this ritual too.

The ayueys or the slaves just say "Let us marry" and they are married without fanfare.

Upward mobility of rank happens when a free woman bears a child from a slave. The children of this union become free provided that the woman is not married to the slave.

Bethrotals of would-be children among friends are a way of life, says Loarca. Punishment and fines are imposed on those who cannot make true with their promise.

So-called heathens marry and divorce each other in ceremonies that is in accordance with their rank. Returning of the dowry of the one at fault (in case of adultery) to the one without blame is enough for divorce. Chirino emphasizes:

“Not even married women felt honor bound to remain faithful to their husbands, although the husbands deeply resented their wives’ adultery and considered it a very just cause for repudiating them.”

A datu can kill his wife and her other man caught in the act of adultery. Minor penalty and punishments are imposed on the slaves for same crime.

On the other hand, a datu who commits adultery pays the wife a handsome amount before final separation. In cases where he cannot pay, his relatives help out in the payment in according to degree in accordance with the kinship. Should the datu fail to pay for the retribution, he becomes a slave until such time that he can pay the ransom.

Dowries are given to the parents as a way to compensate for raising the daughters. Dr. Jose Rizal in his annotation of Morga’s account writes:

“This dowry of one may call it so, represented to the parents an indemnity for the care and vigilance that they had exercised for their daughter’s education. The Filipina woman, never being a burden to any one (either to her parents or to her husband), but quite the contrary, represents a value, whose loss to the possessor must be substituted...The Tagal wife is free, and treated with consideration; she trades and contracts, almost always with the approbation of her husband, who consults her in all her acts. She takes care of the money and educates the children, half of whom belong to her...”

In the Visayas and Mindanao, dowries are “returned” to the giver when the marriage is annulled. But when the parents are poor and cannot produce the dowry back, it is repudiated.

Historical Marker 6: Polygamy (Before and During 1604)

Chirino notes that some of the natives practice polygamy which is not a custom in Manila, Panay and other Islands. They usually have one wife or one husband. Datus and wealthy men are allowed to take on concubines if the wife cannot bear children.

But Chirino got the surprise of his life when he discovers a woman who has two husbands. He narrates:

“I was in the Philippines almost 10 years without knowing of a man married to several women, until I came to the islands of Ibabao and Leyte, for in Manila, Mindoro, Marinduque and Panay where I had stayed, I had not seen any such thing practiced. I had only been told by a certain Spaniard that it was the practice in a part of Mindanao, towards Dapitan, for one Bisayan woman (for the people of Mindanao are also Bisayans) to marry two husbands, and that having several wives was known only among the Mohammedans, who are settled in Mindanao and in Burney. The fact is that it is not a general practice in the Philippines to marry several wives, nor is it common even in those places where it is sometimes practiced. The more common and more widespread custom is to marry one wife only.”

This poses a problem to the priests in the conversion of the natives to Christianity. For if the datus and chiefs are the ones having more than one wife, the Spanish friars cannot dissuade their throng of followers to be baptized in the church. Alcina tells of his experience in his book where he was able to convince the local chieftain to choose his favorite concubine and leave his other wives and were converted to Christianity eventually.

Historical Marker 7: Abortion (Before 1582)

The undated Boxer Codex and Loarca in 1582 record the practice of abortion among the native women. It is universally practiced by ancient Filipinos, according to both of them. The Boxer Codex reports:

“There this calling (abortion) and by massaging the stomach and placing certain herbs the creature later dies and the pregnant woman aborts.”

The natives do not want many children and consider having plenty of them a “disgrace” especially when the man and woman are not married. It is the unmarried who are accustomed to this practice of abortion, reveals the Boxer Codex, for they consider it a “dishonor” for an unmarried woman to give birth.

The Codex likewise reveals that the Moros and the Bisayans “kill” the offsprings. Majority of the women are used to having many births but would like to have fewer children.

Loarca says that the division of inheritance among many children reduces the share of each child. He explains that “when the property is to be divided among all the children, they will all be poor, and that it is better to have one child and leave him wealthy.”

Conclusion: Historicity of Women’s Social Blueprint

The Trend in Historical Markers

Based on the data gathered, seven historical markers related to the Filipino native women’s sexuality had happened during the 16th century until the 17th century: sagra (before and after 1521), virginity (since 1604 and onwards), slavery of women (before 1609 and onwards), concubinage (before 1577 and onwards), marriage and divorce (before 1582), polygamy (before and during 1604) and abortion (before 1582).

Over-all trend during the identified historical markers shows coercion and physical abuse of the native women by the colonizers in the whole of the Philippine islands, regardless of the women's rank in society or age.

During the first nodal point, Spaniards conducted a virulent war against the babaylans, the embodiment of the paganistic beliefs visually seen in women's bodies, because they "made every effort so that the Spaniards might not set foot on land."

As the first nodal point proceeds to the second and third nodal points from 1521 up to 1604 and 1609, it can be gleaned that the colonizers immensely enjoyed the fruits of their sacrilegious labor as they reap left and right profits from selling women's bodies and taking in control of other people's lives. This created quite a stir among the native population and instilled fear to the women who do not hold weapons other than the bolos they use to cultivate the land.

Marriage and divorce customs from 1577 up to 1609 showed that the Philippine society regard women as equals with men and that they can freely express themselves sexually.

The colonizers lambast the women for not being virgins as the Spanish friars introduced Virgin Mary as the supposed role model for women and girls.

The names of Tapihan, Cariapa, Tuambaloca (queen of Jolo, 1649-50), and Oley may have claimed a space in the remote pages of history but they were only named because they allowed themselves to be baptized by the Spanish friars. More unnamed and faceless native women had been lost through time either because they remained to be themselves unaffected by foreign influence, refused to be baptized or they squarely faced the colonizers in uprisings and revolts.

Women slaves had been forcibly taken, sold, raped and impregnated. Trafficking of women for sexual gratification can be said to have begun in this landmark period.

Abuse is very common in the provinces. The friars whip the girls and women with a thong, even in the presence of their husbands, who dare not say anything. This is not done in Manila. Women are punished and whipped in public for not going to church even for a day, Le Gentil continues.

A women-blaming syndrome in the course of this research emerges. The blame has always been put on women because they are "many, lewd, lustful, lascivious, unchaste, immodest, immoral, deceptive, weak in mind" and so forth and so on. The concubines or the queridas are the reason for the men's uprising against the foreign colonizers, as in the case of Sumuroy's Uprising in Palapag, Samar.

Because of mentioned oppressions at different periods in history that has persisted for a long time, the native Indian women much like the babaylans, hate the Spaniards. Their actions and reactions – that need to be retrieved and again must be read between the lines – deserve another research.

Tracing the Women in History

Tracing the women in history is like separating the grains from the chaff – but this time the chaff is plentier than the grains. It is sieving through a wealth of information only to find out that there is a dearth of data about women that have to be read between the lines. Discovered data must be corroborated and confirmed by other existing authentic accounts as well.

Contribution

The periods are fluid as they are based on existing documents at hand but nevertheless will serve as a guidepost for any future researcher interested on history and women.

Marked event during a certain period establishes its presence and authenticity. The genuine characteristic of the experiences permanently etched in history's pages becomes now the social blueprint, hopefully, for future reference.

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