



Ways of the Babaylan by Katrin de Guia

Only those who truly love and who are truly strong can sustain their lives as a dream. You dwell in your own enchantment. Life throws stones at you, but your love and your dream change those stones into the flowers of discovery.

—Ben Okri

The babaylan

We talk about the *babaylan* and we mean a person who cares. Not in the sense of a do-gooder, such as the Christian missionaries and their like. Those reach out for Souls, intent to lead them to the bosom of God, but are blissfully blind to the fact that their venerated One has long been cashed in, en route to institutionalization. And nowadays, oh, so human powers wear Its benevolent mask. (Don't believe it? Watch Chris Marker's documentary *Trinkets & Beads*).

The *babaylan* can't help but deeply care for all humanity and every creature on earth. That is so because his/her home is the Otherlands—beyond good and evil, salvation and sin, heaven and hell. In those Fields of Eternal Light (and Sound) without shadow, spirits and powers, the past and the future, all blend into One limitless Now called Creation. That is where s/he dwells.

We talk about the *babaylan* and put her on a high pedestal and adorn her feet with flowers. But what we adorn has no gender. For how can we even try to enclose the wind and freeze it into fixed forms, as if its nature was not constant change?

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Diasporic healers

It happened one night in San Francisco, at an open forum on *How Indigenous Knowledge And Cultural Traditions Inspire Filipino Artists In The Philippines And The Diaspora*. Towards the end of a drawn-out discussion session, one cool young kid raised his hand. Twisted dreadlocks bounced defiantly, as he charged his question into a room filled with yesterday's pain. What had Filipino Indigenous Knowledge and Practices to contribute to global psychology, he wanted to know? Could it be the power of healing? His bold but honest smile mopped up the colonial fears that littered the discussion floor. It was learned that he was a young Filipino healer.

His message that night was this: "You cannot pour boiling oil into a damaged pot. It will crack! Likewise, you cannot hold a new consciousness, if your mindset is damaged by colonialization."

Angel Shaw is a media artist and educator from New York. Whether in her films or in the classroom, she puts needles into places where it hurts most, like a good acupuncturist. Her most acclaimed work is the experimental video *Nailed* [Mabuhay Productions, 1992]. Screened internationally, it was inspired by a primary *babaylan* from the Philippines who endured and survived annual crucifixion rites. This artist, too, knows pain first hand, the pain of a colonial subject. But she has learned to heal herself. She tells her Asian-American students:

The struggle for identity is an on-going process, a constant redefining and knowing one's individual and collective history within histories—as women/men, as Filipinos, Filipino Americans, Asian/Pacific Americans, and as human beings. When I was growing up, being Filipino was something I took for granted because my parents were Filipino. I was an American. That's what my birth certificate said. I didn't think about what being "Filipino" meant and I couldn't understand the concept of being Asian at all. Through the pain of racism, I became more conscious of racial differences. Through the pain of ethno-centrism and nationalism, I became conscious of Asian hierarchies and outsider-ness based on birthplace, mannerisms, language proficiency, and cultural differences. Through the pain of sexism, I became more conscious of gender differences. I was other, lived as other, outside of myself, before I even knew what "other" meant. And yet, deep down, I had pride in being of Filipino descent . . .

Her conclusion carries her full circle:

For me being a Filipina born in America or being Asian/Pacific American, means, locating the baggage, naming the baggage, and letting go of the baggage that just weighs me down.

Another *babaylan* in educator's garb is Leny Strobel, associate professor at Sonoma State University. The author of several books that map the path of de-colonization, she was also the convener of the first Babaylan Conference in the United States, held at her college in April. In one of her interviews, she said that it was

apparent that the affluent lifestyles the modern paradigms created for a fraction of people on this planet are not sustainable. Neither did they sustain happiness for them . . .

But mainstream society realized more and more that indigenous knowledge and practices offered ancient wisdom, which enabled people to survive the genocide and holocausts brought by modern civilizations. Addressing the Filipino diaspora in the USA, she said:

We can empower ourselves and our communities by learning about the Babaylan traditions....Deepening our connection with our Filipino roots can help us make choices that someday can benefit us and our communities.

Indigenous Filipino Psychology

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Indigenous Filipino Psychology (*Sikolohiyang Pilipino*) and how it relates to the *babaylan* experience was part of the discourse during this recent conference at Sonoma State University. What would such a psychology be about?

It started out in the late 1970s after America lost the Vietnam War. A growing awareness about fundamental differences in the intellectual traditions of the East and the West dictated new rules for social scientists, especially those in the Third World academe. In the Philippines, Virgilio Enriquez dug up ancestral worldviews, rooted in holistic ways, where people were connected with each other, with plants, animals, spirits, Mother Nature and the whole of creation. He called this (basically animistic) outlook *kapwa* (The-Self-In-The-Other) and showed that the behavior of many Filipinos was shaped by this including outlook in life. They defined happiness not merely with owning material things, and followed their intuition and their heart instead of logic and the rational considerations.

Sikolohiyang Pilipino (SP)

SP, then, started out as protest against the psychology that perpetuated the colonial status of the Filipino mind. It affirmed the native history, values and characteristics of the region, including the prehistoric folk practices of the *babaylans* (their indigenous ways of healing, etc.). SP developed theories, concepts and methods with the Filipino culture as the source. It also included the knowledge of popular religio-political

movements (see *Pasyon and Revolution* by Reynaldo Ileto [Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979]). The resulting culture-fair models in psychology were tried, tested and

compared with the standard academic theories as a step towards creating a truly universal world psychology.

SP is the first psychology of indigenous people taught at the university level. As a bridging psychology, it links the academe to the Indigenous Knowledge Systems & Practices (IKSP) of the Filipino people. And in the context of the older, including version of the Self (*kapwa*) the wellbeing of communities or families is equally important to the progress of the individual person.

What can a *kapwa*-inspired psychology contribute to the age of globalization? Healing. Why? Because the body is sutured back to the severed head of mankind! Not unlike Queen Isis, who found her brother Osiris dismembered at the bottom of the sea. Patiently, she reassembled the bones of her beloved and "balm" him back to life: the *babaylan* wisdom embedded in the *kapwa* psychology cradles all of life and humanity until it is whole and holds it up to the sun once more.

Death has never been a threat for the *babaylan*. Death is only temporary darkness, the absence of life. Death is never an option when things are seen with the heart. Life feeds on life. The Celtic people in Europe knew that. All first nation Americans still remember that and hence offer a ritual before taking warm blood to nourish their body. Life feeds on life, but there are always survivors. Survival and healing are aptitudes of the *babaylan*. How does s/he know what to do?

Indigenous cognitive styles

Knowledge in the East is the result of introspection and meditation—going within to see. Knowing is an inferential process: stilling all sensory perceptions, transcending the blabber of the intellect, visioning, probing, comparing—until only truth prevails. Far from the positivist methods of the West, with their statistical comparisons of material facts, the Eastern approach gains understanding through experiencing and not by setting up laboratory experiments to gather empirical data, the atomized splinters of facts. Non-Western perception favors catching the living, feathered chickens over pulling from the freezer a plastic bag with pre-fried, breaded chicken legs, so to speak. Among the *babaylans*, knowledge is verified by shared inner perceptions.

The West looks for truth outside the body. Information is gathered via the sense organs, not through visions and dreams. The accumulated data is rationally analyzed with the intellect, whose function is to discriminate, categorize and finally create a reality that consists of a system of abstract ideas, concepts and symbols. To Western theorists, elegance lies in linear sequential structures and either-or solutions, in the exact distinction of opposites (which can only exist in relation to one another and have to be rightly termed.) Ambiguities, blurring boundaries and messy overlapping either-and findings are undesired. (Although chaos theory has dented some of the mechanistic notions the Industrial Age stamped on our idea of reality.)

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Objectivity, then, is not absolutely essential for the *babaylan*. Any subjective revelation that raises a hearer's hair will do as well, for proof.

Round pegs and square holes

A young American mother took inventory of her parents' lifelong stormy marriage. Her mother was an American woman of German descent, her father a Filipino man who came to live in California. Why did their minds never meet again after the honeymoon was over? Why did her father never "make it" in his eagerly adopted New World, leaving his wife disappointed and mad? The young mother recalled one day meeting her father, tears flowing from his eyes. He said: "*Your mom's family has the brains. But my family has the heart.*" Round pegs. Square holes. Right? Or wrong?

Round pegs, square holes as cultural givens? Nativist blather or hidden truth? According to the cognitive scientists Vittorio Guidano & Giuseppe Liotti (the founders of constructivist psychology) two levels of knowing developed in the course of evolution. Each contributed a specific function to human understanding. The older cognitive style of humans, they say, is *tacit knowing*. It is knowing via feeling, sensing and intuiting. Dubbed the primary process, this kind of perceiving seeks recognizable patterns in an overwhelmingly complex and chaotic world.

The younger cognitive style of humans (the secondary process) is called *explicit knowing*. It recognizes contrasts and shores up rigid linear rules: Either black or white. Square or round. Either now or later, come or go! No lingering, doodling, or hanging around. *Explicit knowing*, say Guidano and Liotti, evolved later in our brains. It developed with human linguistic capacities.

The first priority of the *babaylan* is the community. This is what makes those individuals so precious, in a time of vanity and egotistic concerns.

Tacit versus explicit knowing divides the people of our planet today: some people say it with gestures, others say it with words. Words run into language barriers, while gestures are not read by those who rely on words.

Tacit knowing stands for the Eastern tradition, suggests the US psychologist Michael Mahoney. Represented by the Tao, which unites the contrasting Yin and Yang, it symbolizes evolving and constant change. On the other hand, *explicit knowing* corresponds to the Western ways and the Cross. As the lines of a cross interact in one single point only, this image symbolizes contrast, difference and separation: the good and the bad. The right and the wrong. Either you go to heaven or you burn in hell. Says Mahoney:

While the Eastern perspective seeks harmonic assimilation of opposites in its search for meaning, the Western perspective—rather than for consistency— looks for contradictions.

Culture as resistance

 Kidlat Tahimik is a multi-awarded filmmaker from the Philippines. A cultural warrior, he uses his art and his smart to make his audiences confront colonial encrustations—the unquestioned biases that thwart the Filipino mind. One of his quirky inventions is the *Sariling Duwende*. He explains that this is

a disposition to see and do things in a certain way, even if everybody around you sees and does things otherwise. This Indio-Genious Sariling Duwende*— this sensitivity towards one's liberated indigenous spirit, is the thing that distinguishes a contemporary Filipino culture-bearer from his or her peers," he says, and elaborates: "For a culture-bearer, indigenous knowledge is not knowledge about his or her culture. It is culture itself, the ways of their ancestors—a living thing that you cannot split from the person. You are born with it. You are born into it. It is you. It is inseparable from you like the shadow from a man!

* "Indigenous" was once misspelled by Kidlat Tahimik's wood-carver friend as "indegenuous." The filmmaker picked up on the mistake and reframed it into the favorable term "Indio-genious."

Here is a key to understanding the *babaylan*, whose lifestyle and worldview are anchored in ancestral IKSP.

The first priority of the *babaylan* is the community. This is what makes those individuals so precious, in a time of vanity and egotistic concerns. With collective survival compromised by ruthless business and puppet politicians, integrity is what we yearn for. Are we dismembered already at the bottom of the sea? Can we expect the healer soon? A 70-year-old devotee living on Mount Banahaw (a mystic mountain in the Southern Luzon area of the Philippines) answers:

From the bamboo shoot will rise a gold flag that can be seen all over the world and eternally to believers. The divine government is the consciousness of the people with divine hearts. It begins in the Philippines. It is not written on paper. We need no lawyers or senators.

—From *A Banahaw prophecy. Maricar Cinco, "Mysteries of faith abound in Mt. Banahaw", The Philippine Daily Inquirer [April 16, 2009]*

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