

The babaylan lives in her story

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The Molo Church in Iloilo. Photo by Gloria Esguerra Melencio

The word had been hushed to silence and was erased in the everyday lingua franca of the Filipino, but the *babaylan* tradition – through war and peace – has persisted and its legacy passed on through time.

Babaylan is a Bisayan word that evolved from proto-Austronesian words in Southeast Asia such as *belian*, *balian*, *balyan*, *baylan* and *bagdan*. The Subanons call them *balian*, *balean* and *balayan*, women who lead the religious and death rituals in Mindanao. Its literal translation to English is ancient priestess or shaman.

The Cebuano word *babay*, recorded in 18th century Spanish-Bisayan dictionary, refers to a married woman. From up north up to down south, an elderly woman is respectfully called *Bai* followed by the woman's Christian name: It is Ba-i in Ilocos and Bayi followed by the word *Gurang* to mean an elderly woman in Mindanao epics. The Leyte-Samar Waray word *babayi* means a woman; *kababayin-an* is its plural form.

While the word *babaylan* connotes a woman, there had also been male babaylans who were called *asog* in the Bisayan society during the 17th century. These male babaylans had to wear women's clothing and pretend to be women so that the *Diwatas* may hear their prayers. Spanish friars described them as barren, incapable of procreating because they remain unmarried till old age, but the Bisayan society accepted them as they were, nevertheless.

The word had made a strong imprint in Dr. Jose Rizal that he had studied it as indicated in his letters to Ferdinand Blumentritt in the 19th century. In fact, he passed by the Molo Church in Iloilo on his way to his exile in Dapitan in 1896. He had known that this church has 16 female saints, standing tall on the left and right sides leading to its massive altar, a proof of strong babaylan tradition in the Bisayan region.

Spiritual leaders as they were, the babaylans had been the first to intuit and warn the Bisayans that the foreign colonizers will "uproot" them, will change their belief in the *paganito*, the ancient ritual worship of the ancestors, and their way of life.

Threat to the new Christian religion, the Spanish friars tried to win the babaylans with the Cross and exterminate them with the Sword. They made some of them, the *maestras* of datu's children, to teach catechism; many of those who refused were chopped to pieces, thrown to the crocodiles, beheaded or burned at the stake like they did with the so-called witches in Europe during the Inquisition.

The Spanish colonizers failed to eradicate the babaylans. While the Bisayans never say the word *babaylan* out of fear, they continue the rituals just the same. They continued to recite repetitively *gindadayaw ka namon* (we praise you) despite the friars' banning the early morning-till-noon praying and the healing *tambals* conducted during the cholera outbreak in the 19th century. There arose a "political sect of women" the Spaniards called *Babaylanes* even after the time of Pagali, Bangkaw's babaylan who erected their own native church in Carigara, Leyte but was pulverized with canons and burned to ashes.

Suspected *Babaylanes* had been imprisoned and thrown en masse with their families to Palawan, an island down south of Luzon that still bears the name Bangkaw-bangkaw as one of its localities to this day. These *Babaylanes* were women who were caught praying, clandestinely meeting in abaca farms, wearing white cloaks and distributing prayer booklets they called *libro secreto* to the consternation of the Spaniards who called them *libro de peste*.

The *agaw-tawag-bawi*, one of the healing rituals of the ancient babaylans, continues to this day in Luzon, Bisayas and Mindanao. William Henry Scott calls them “female shamans” in Bicol, who conduct religious ceremonies while wearing a small gold jewelry on the forehead, call the dead ancestors and spirits, chant and sing alternately.

The Babaylanes eventually transformed to Dios-Dios and the Pulahanes. This time they were bold-wielding men who believed they will gain spiritual strength in the power of prayers and continued to dream of independence and self-reliance against foreign oppressors. What cannot be faced head-on due to lack of weapons is tackled with a slow and non-confrontational strategy that saves and delivers the people to a common goal just the same.

The babaylan tradition remains to be the thread that weaves us all into one cohesive personhood in times of need. This is the reason why Filipino women remain to be one of the strongest peoples in Southeast Asia.

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