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FROM ASOG TO BAKLA TO TRANSPINAY: WEAVING A COMPLEX HISTORY OF TRANSNESS AND DECOLONIZING THE FUTURE

Brenda Rodriguez Alegre

ABSTRACT. As we look into the last five hundred years of our history in the Philippines, it is profoundly challenging to trace the history of transness and queerness. However, it cannot be denied that in our pre-colonial times, our society was more matriarchal as well as inclusive and celebratory of otherness. The baylans or asogs as usually referred to in the Visayan are reflective of our transgendered past. They were shamans and leaders, revered and feared. But the colonial years seemingly decimated them, erased, silenced. Then later the bakla became the narrative of post-colonial queerness. Then in the age of intersectional feminism, transpinays claimed visibility in various spaces, which sometimes celebrate her but mostly harmed her. This essay attempts to weave a complex history of transness and explore our narratives within Philippine society where identity politics is amnesiac of our glorious queer past, selfish of our repressed present and unaffected by our uncertain future. As a transpinay, I position myself among these narratives and speak from the power of the truth as well as weave a tapestry of transcendent transgender experiences that bravely begins to decolonize their future.

Why Trace Transness?

When I was thinking about what to write about for this special 'Beki' issue, I realized, how do I make sense of history if for one, I am not a history expert for I am a trained Psychologist and a Gender Studies Scholar not a historian, and secondly I feel ambivalence towards our colonial past? Then I realized why not write about transpeople in pre-colonial times and that this would prove to be very challenging since our history books in the Philippines are usually not inclusive of narratives about transness and queerness during the colonial years.

But why do I want to trace transness¹ as far back as pre-colonial times and eventually weave connections and tapestry of trans historicity? My simple answer is that I am trans myself, a transgender woman, a transpinay. And I have always felt people like me were absent in our historical archives or probably erased or sublimated? I want to write about how I have reconnected with my trans ancestors, my TransCestors, hope this word sticks around. I want to reflect on my interpretations of how we have been present in our history's past but nearly decimated from existence for a long time in the colonial years and have made a resilient comeback in the post war years? Did we really disappear? Were my transcestors murdered? Did they hide? Did they detransition? In the end, I know I have something to write about because transness is part of our culture and society, then, now and forever.

TranSisters of Herstory

Looking across Asia, the Hijras of South Asia have withered tumultuous experiences of colonialism yet their presence in society has not been erased, reduced perhaps but not erased². They were once revered and feared, seen as being able to bless and curse. Hinduism acknowledges the Hijras and as having integral roles in society. Even the Ardhanarishvara, the half-woman God or the man-woman deity of Hinduism is testament that in Ancient times, faith and ideologies are inclusive. Today, although Hijras are now legally recognized as third gender people in South Asia, the reverence which they enjoyed in their pre-colonial years seem reduced. Some people do not respect them the same way and many of them are forced to mendicancy and sex work. One could surmise this is partly due to the colonial experience which viewed Hijras as outsiders of society. Victorian British laws have contributed negatively to the reduction of importance of the Hijras. I have met many Hijras over the years and some of them have become my friends and fellow human rights activists. I learned so many things from them and their history as much as learning about their knowledge of Hinduism. Seeing and knowing them in person and being so connected with them sometimes make me feel like I am like a Hijra too, maybe I was in another lifetime.

In Southeast Asia, we share some historical narratives with most of our South East Asian neighbors, just like Thailand and Indonesia. Included in these is our Indianized history and culture. Even during the Khmer times, Kathoey in Thailand, were already present and part of society. It was noted in the traditional Thai Buddhist scriptures like

1. Alexandre Baril, "Transness as Debility: Rethinking Intersections Between Trans and Disabled Embodiments." *Feminist Review. Debility and Frailty* 111 (2015): 59-74.

2. Serena Nanda, *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. (California: Wadsworth Publishing 1999). P119.

Tipitaka, that kathoeyes are third gender people and are as essential in society as men and women. Ananda, one of Buddha's cousins, also revered in Thai Buddhist practices, is said to be a kathoey. However, over time, some locals of Thailand began to view kathoeyes following their interpretations of Buddhist reincarnation beliefs, to be a karmic result of their past. Today, many kathoeyes are called 'ladyboys' and highly involved in doing sex work. Thailand itself promotes kathoeyes and the red light districts which accommodates both cis and transwomen³. I just learned from recent years being in Bangkok and doing advocacy work that although indeed Thailand is quite 'queer friendly', kathoeyes also suffer a great deal there from rejections and lack of recognition.

The Bugis tribe of Sulawesi Indonesia are survivors of history. They have a five gender system in their society, the makkunrai or comparable to today's cisgender women; the oroane or cisgender men; calalai, comparable to transgender men; calabai, comparable to transgender women and the bissu who are considered Middlesex or intersex or genderless⁴. The bissu are usually assigned the shamanistic roles for their more androgynous embodiment which is perceived to be a compartment of both the masculine and feminine and a genderless spirit. The bissu among these five gender system, is considered to be the most critical for if you embody the propensity towards spirituality, you are considered to be the conduit and intermediary between society and the deities. However, with the increasing influence of Islam as well as the entry of colonization by the Portuguese, Dutch and British as well as modernization, the bugis tribes have been threatened and reduced. Some have converted to Islam or Christianity and some virtually disappeared. But the bugis tribe has not fully disappeared. They have remained enough to be rediscovered and spark some reconnection to their undying presence in Indonesian society.

My Transcestors: The Asogs, the Catalanans and the Babaylans

Just like South Asia, Indonesia and Thailand, our pre-colonial society in the Philippines reflected gender plurality and diversity. In an age where Western concepts about transness and gender was still taking shape, the Philippines among other societies, then reflected the beauty, peace, and power of diversity, inclusivity and plurality in terms of gender and sexualities. It is said that pre-colonial Philippines was considered to be matriarchal before becoming patriarchal. There was power in the feminine as the feminine was not just about the body

3. Peter Jackson *Performative Genders, Perverse Desires: A Bio-History of Thailand's Same-Sex and Transgender Cultures* (Australia National University 2003) retrieved online: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue9/jackson.html>

4. Leonard Y. Andaya, "The Bissu: A Study of a Third Gender in Indonesia," in *Other Pasts: Women, Gender, and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Barbara Andaya, ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 27-46.

but the embodiment⁵. Social roles were considered more pre-eminent to the determination of your status in society rather than how your corporeal form appears. We were once animists in our society just like some of our neighboring countries back then. In animism, the belief that there is spirit in every life and the thing around us, very much like how the 1993 theme song from Pocahontas, Colors of the wind describes: "...every life has a spirit, has a name..."

Pocahontas could possibly be a two-spirit person from then pre-colonial Americas. Two-spirit people of North America, once referred to as berdache, used to be very visible in their society until colonialists nearly decimated them. Two-spirit people acknowledge the power of not just one but two aspects of spirituality in their being, that which could be called the masculine and the other the feminine. It is like a yin and a yang, an anima and animus and similar to Ardhanarishvara of Hinduism, a co-existence and this co-existence is powerful and celebrated⁶. So if in two-spirit societies they revered and protected nature and that the power of healing flows through a shaman, this is quite comparable to our very own shamans in pre-colonial Philippines. They may be referred to most often as the babaylans, but because the Philippines is an archipelago, each region may have ways of referring to the same kind of person. Mostly babaylans are women and that male babaylans are referred to variably depending on the region. Baylan or baylian, asog, bayok, catalonan, mumbaki or itneg are just some ways to call the powerful babaylans.

In matriarchal Philippines, that which was once animist, women were revered because of the power of procreation and that with this power comes an extended ability of healing. Women were then potentially seen as bringers of life or in some ways, have the ability to commune with the spirits to bring forth life and extension of life. That is why in terms of social roles, which you may sometimes consider to be gender roles these days, women were mostly elevated to a class of shamans. As shamans their powers come two-fold, that which can heal and commune with the benevolent forces of nature and that which can curse and seek wrath from the malevolent forces. That is why in the structure of society, the babaylans were seen as second only to the Datu or Rajah if not an equal⁷. The Datus themselves respect the babaylans. But babaylan as a class of women were not only priestesses, they were trained warriors too, somehow comparable to the mythical Amazons of Greek Mythology. Therefore during pre-colonial times, being a woman was not about domesticity and complacency, it was

5. Baril, Alexandre, "Transness as debility: rethinking intersections between trans and disabled embodiments." *Feminist Review. Debility and Frailty* 111 (Sage Publishing London 2015). Pp. 59 - 74

6. Devdutt. September 16 2005 ARDHANARESHWARA. Retrieved online: <https://web.archive.org/web/20101121175321/http://devdutt.com/ardhanareshwara-the-hierarchy-of-halves/>

7. Marianita Villariba. "Babaylan Women as Guide to a Life of Justice and Peace." From *One on One. Women in Action* No. 2. (2006) Pp. 55- 60.

about life, creation, mitigation and extension. Such amazing powers. At a time when communicating with animals, plants and streams would not be seen as a Western defined state of psychosis, but as a gift that a few can master to protect their greater society.

Although Philippine history books have not totally shunned out the babaylans, what was not well explored were that some of the babaylans were not born females⁸. Some were born males and possibly in between, Middlesex or people with diverse sex characteristics (intersex). The ascension of these men and other gender diverse people to the shamanistic route also depends on their embodiment and potentials to fulfill the great rituals that only true babaylans can perform. Modern society trying to make sense of these abilities might translate to abilities like nursing, medicine, psychotherapy, counseling, midwifery, mediumship and wicca. But what was known then was that old Philippine society did not discriminate based on gender (or their idea of what is gender then). It's like saying if you are born one, you are one or if you can perform the babaylan roles then you are a babaylan. But the gender transcendence was not only bound among the mortals, but the immortals. Though there were several deities celebrated then and vaguely remembered now, among these are queer deities. Bulan and Sidapa are known as male lovers and revered in the Visayan region while Lakapati or Ikapati from the Tagalog region is considered to be female sometimes but is most likely trans or intersex⁹. Lakapati could be our closest equivalent to Guanyin or Kuan Yin, or the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy revered in East and some of South and Southeast Asia. Guanyin is known to have naturally or organically transformed from male to female, what modern society might refer to as transition¹⁰. But at a time when this happened, it seems like East Asian cultures were more than permissive if not celebratory of this. Hence there is a renaissance of faith towards Guanyin in the past years especially by how trans and queer people are reclaiming Guanyin as our Goddess. Guanyin and Ananda are only two of the most renowned stories of gender fluidity or transness that was accorded reverence but Lakapati is as comparable to them regardless of the trans erasure that is being invoked by the conservative historians. Furthermore, the male babaylans, or mostly referred as asogs in the Visayan region, bayog or bayok in some parts of Luzon and catalona or catalonan in the Tagalog, are exceptional members of our society then because even if they are

8. Carolyn Brewer, 1999. "Baylan, Asog, transvestism, and sodomy: Gender, sexuality and the sacred in early colonial Philippines." *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, 2, 1-5. Retrieved online :

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200212210957/http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue2/carolyn2.html>

9. Stephania Gancayco, 2016. "Lakapati, Transgender Tagalog Goddess of Fertility & Agriculture." Published online on November 2016. Hella Pinay. <https://www.hellapinay.com/stephanie-gancayco>

10. Chandra Lokesh The Origins of the Avalokitishvara. Pp 189- 190. https://web.archive.org/web/20140606205922/http://www.indologica.com/volumes/vol13/vol13_art13_CHANDRA.pdf

men, feminized men or likely in some case, intersex, their embodiment of the feminine spirituality and talents similar to a female babaylan allows them to fully fulfill the powerful shamanistic roles.

Magellan and Transerasure

When Magellan was taught to us in our formative years, having studied in a Catholic university, Magellan was positioned as somehow a hero and a savior. That it is through his Portuguese nature working under the Spanish conquistadores that the enrichment of our culture will be reached. My history and social studies teachers all through what we called elementary, secondary and tertiary classes of education were silent about the decimation or casting out of the babaylans. Not once have I heard about babaylans being also males or genderfluid people. The slight mention of the babaylans is seemingly reflective of the actual events that unfolded in our history, that this group of people all of a sudden were snubbed and nearly inaudible. But since the traditions of the babaylans and the people themselves managed to survive, the oral traditions of which is a deeply ingrained aspect of our culture and not to mention the annotation of Hispanic historians like Juan de Placencia and Francisco Alcina, it can never be denied that the babaylans exist and must be redeemed in our memories.

When colonization formalized, so many aspects of our culture has changed. Queerness was made an abomination, a sin, and any forms of homosexuality and gender pluralities became unacceptable. Our names started to end with Os and As, meaning we have become gendered. The binariness of gender was so restrictive and cuts across all aspects of our way of life as fortified in those 300 plus years of colonial life.

The Christianization of our country also resulted in widespread fearmongering if one violates the ideologies being invested in our culture including the unqueering and dequeering of our peoples¹¹. The babaylans, most especially the male babaylans, like the asogs were among those who likely suffered the suppressive regime. They were expected to either relinquish their beliefs and practices, and accept the Christianization as some were murdered or scared away by the Spanish. Consequently, the animistic and other indigenous practices were compartmentalized, suppressed, diluted or reformed to accommodate the new Christian beliefs. An example of this is how the aswang narratives have been shaped. In pre-colonial times, the aswang were believed to be malevolent spirits or angry spirits who in some cases spewed wrath on humans for disgracing nature or for not

11. Edicio dela Torre, 2019. "Marxism and Religion: Experiences of Filipino Christians. Introduction: Marx on religion." Pp 2 -17. *Development Academy of the Philippines Conference Paper · April 2019. Published in Marx Bicentennial Lecture Series 9. Published online by Researchgate.*

performing their offertory rituals properly. Later on, in the Spanish period, the revisionists added to the folklore that the aswangs are beyond malevolent spirit, they are possibly unbaptized people, or demonically possessed because of sin and wrong doings or punished by God, and that the only redemption is by strong Christian faith. It is also interesting that although certain aswangs like the tikbalang and kapre are usually males, more of the aswangs like the tiktik, the manananggal, the mangkukulam, among others are females¹². This could be a reflection of the colonial narrative towards women, that women are like Eve, the temptress therefore the roots of sin, as some emphasize or that women are weaker thereby more susceptible to accommodate the spawn of evil and to be set free, one must invoke deep Christian faith to cast out the evil. This demonization of some folklores also affected the way LGBT Filipinos are treated and if examined carefully in our history and social studies in the Philippines, are virtually unnamed, absent, or implicit. How one wishes a trans Katipunero or a non-binary Propagandista or later in the twentieth century, a queer Hukbalahap.

Transcomforting: PostWar Baklas

When the Thomasites started to reform the educational system as well as enculturate the Philippines with Americanisms, queerness and otherness remained unheard and unseen by the colonizers. The resurgence of queerness came in the form of performance and one that is on stage, Vaudeville or the early form of musical theater. Queerness was used as satire and comedy, to elicit laughter and most likely portrayed by non-queer people (or rarely the closeted queer). The emergence of the word bakla is not accurately clear and it is believed it is a derivative of the bayok or bayoguin forms of the suppressed groups of male babaylans. It is believed that bakla is a melding of the phrases babaeng akala ay lalaki or a woman thought to be a man or vice versa. But around the pre and post war years, bakla is generically a term referring to gender but later in the twentieth century would also mean sexuality.

The stories of comfort women who were raped and some even murdered by the Japanese soldiers and perhaps even by some American soldiers, did not only focus on cisgender women but on baklas. These baklas in their later stories described themselves as having the interiority of femininity, a feminine psyche but the exteriority of masculinity. The expression 'pusong babae' or with a heart of a woman simply meant femininity or effeminateness. The most famous account of baklas who were abused during the wartime was that of Walterina Markova whose life was documented

12. Bliss Lim Queer Aswang Transmedia: Folklore as Camp. *Kritika Cultura* 24. (Ateneo Press: 2015).

several times including a feature in former senator Loren Legarda's docu series which would later inspire a biopic aptly titled *Markova: Comfort Gays*¹³. Yes, gays, because for the most part when English became our second language, bakla was elected to be translated as gays in the absence of the word transgender which Virginia Prince and Leslie Feinberg would later introduce. Markova described herself as bakla but one who often dressed as a woman because of her feminine interiority. She said that there were few others like her who also were very effeminate and feminine even if not dressed as women that they often get to attract straight men, locals or foreigners. But it is through "cross-dressing" that is dressing as women, that they felt most appropriate and attractive. They partly work as night time entertainers dressed as women sometimes entertaining soldiers but would later be forced as sex slaves by the Japanese occupants pressured by threats to their lives. Markova must have implied that someone like her must have similar experiences during her time, partly beloved and partly ostracized by society, partly masculine partly feminine, partly happy partly sad. They lived these dualities in their lifetime because of the absence of gender recognition, the promotion of hatred and exclusion towards queerness, the invalidation of their lived experiences, the colonial exploitations and the invisibility of our suppressed ancestors, the asogs. In the 2000s when *Markova: Comfort Gays* the movie was released, it was cismale superstar Dolphy, dubbed as Philippine's king of comedy who portrayed Markova with Dolphy's sons Eric Quizon and the younger Epi Quizon portraying Markova in her younger years. This is the usual case in the Philippines giving a nod to the 2020 Netflix Documentary produced by Laverne Cox, *Disclosure*. That in many cases, queer people on screen and on stage were portrayed by non queer people, that in the process made those for the commercial appeal and mainstreaming of these media.

Transpinays Transitioned: Journeying to Now

As I mentioned earlier, I was born in Samar but grew up in the streets of Sampaloc, Manila and would later move to Quezon City before moving to Hong Kong. I could attest that growing up, there are many baklas in the Philippines as there are also many tomboys. The bakla would represent the gay men, crossdressing men, the non-binary and the trans as the tomboy represents the opposite. It is of course probably questionable for some to hear that as they would first ask 'how do you know that they're baklas or tomboys?' The truth is we just know. Growing up in the Philippines had this silent and unlabeled experience whereby we got trained to discern and identify who are queer among

13. Mikee Inton-Campbell. "The bakla and the silver screen: Queer cinema in the Philippines". Pp 1 – 203. Doctor's Thesis Submitted to Lingnan University, Hong Kong. Retrieved from: http://commons.ln.edu.hk/cs_etd/30/

us and it is not probably because we live in a very repressed society. Perhaps to compare, Hong Kong is more repressed, and in my short visit to Seoul, they are more repressed. But the Philippines just like Thailand is quite loud and about with queerness, transness and otherness. We are less subtle, and more obvious. Perhaps I could describe our sociality as a paradox, that there is power in numbers but in those numbers we are powerless. We are known and seen but at the same time unheard. That we are tolerated but not accepted. To date in the Philippines there is no gender recognition law, as there is no equality union law and no anti-discrimination law. There is no divorce law as well and there are no clear protective laws towards sex work whereas the Reproductive Health law is quite new and unpopular and gamely contradicted by the Catholic Church because of how it circumvents the biblical declarations of go forth and multiply¹⁴. The spotty presence of municipal or city approved anti-discrimination ordinances like one in Cebu, Davao, Bacolod and Quezon City among others are not enough to protect LGBT Filipinos against discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identities and expressions as well as sex characteristics (SOGIESC) hence the shift from anti-discrimination to SOGIE Equality Bill¹⁵. But an oppositional force to this bill is the Catholic Church, which by now we know was brought by Magellan and friends, hahaha smiley face here 😊.

Did Spain do us good? Was Magellan really a hero over our own skin kin Lapu Lapu? Was that Mactan cross planting a sign of redemption or was it our own crucifixion? This is where the ambivalence I mentioned earlier coming in. Mind you I was raised Catholic, poor but educated and Catholic. As a child I loved the stories of the bible especially during my childhood when it was told from the point of view of TV animations like Superbook and Flying House. I will never forget the best version I ever saw of the Sorrowful mysteries of the life of Jesus but that this Jesus actor's face was never revealed.

Younger me always wanted to be an angel, a female angel inspired by the Sabado de Gloria and Resurrection festivities which are still popular in the Philippines except for the last two seasons due to Covid- 19. The female angel or young girl would sing “*Reyna ng Langit magalak ka aleluya, aleluya*” or “Queen of Heaven rejoice, Alleluia, Alleluia.” I would sing this repetitively during Lenten seasons and incidentally I would also develop a strong affinity to music and singing greatly influenced by cisfemale Divas whose voices turned many queer men in the Philippines into sounding like castrati or countertenors or sopranistin if you must. Regine Velasquez, would become the Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, Cher, Whitney Houston

14. Sharmila Parmarand, ‘The Philippine Sex Workers Collective: Struggling to be heard, not saved’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 12, 2019, pp. 57-7

15. Aloysius Cartagena 2015. “Religion and Politics in the Philippines: The Public Role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Democratization of the Filipino Polity.” Pp. 846-872. *Political theology*

all rolled into one of my generation. She for the most part raised the bar in singing especially the literal pitch of queer Filipinos. I learned my head voice and falsetto placements just to reach some of her pitch. Her discography may have helped in the modern queering and that in beauty pageants for transwomen, her proverbial sound feminized our voices¹⁶. There is also Roderick Paulate, another childhood hero. He is an actor who emerged in the late 60s and in the 80s, he is the queer of Philippine entertainment. His brand of queerness is one that appealed to most of the masses. He was the only excuse to have queer protagonist. Although Paulate is long rumored to be gay, he never came out, but his portrayals of the queer became the most iconic. The characters he played in *Kumander Gringga*, *Bala at Lipistick*, *Jack en Poy*, *Binibining Tsuperman* among so many others were integral to the empowered representation of queerness in local media. Like I mentioned, there are many baklas, in entertainment, but unfortunately, they were mostly in the sidelines and backend meaning serving as writers, assistants, stylists if not the supporting characters or film extras¹⁷. Paulate's best film for me was *Charot* which was clearly inspired by Dustin Hoffman's *Tootsie*. Although the major difference is that *Tootsie* like *Yentl* and *Victor/Victoria* is a cisperson who cross dresses and pretends to be the other person to gain access to opportunities. On the other hand, *Charot* is really a transgender woman, who in the absence of acceptance from society, pretends to be a ciswoman to fulfill her heart's desire. Incidentally, although the film was not much of a commercial success and less popular among Paulate's films, it is this character that has become one of the most popular sward speak utterances even appropriated by non queer people. *Charot* means, just a jest, a joke, I'm kidding. Do Filipinos really know the etymology of *Charot* since this is a near forgotten film even within the queer community. The lack of film preservationist culture or sometimes our own general lack of historical preservationism or probably selectivism or social queerphobia altogether are reasons why we don't know as much as we speak.

Velasquez and Paulate who are not trans or queer have such strong influences to queer culture locally but the shaping of transness in modern times has its roots in the beauty parlors and beauty pageants. We have such strong pageant culture and obsession with beauty in the country but upon closer look, is very Westernized, colonial. The mestizo and mestiza if not the hybrid look is the most desired. This pervasive idea has deeply made transwomen very insecure hence the more popular surgical transitioning among transwomen locally is on the face and not the genitalia. There drive seem more to please the wider audience than the self. Many can wake up and look at the mirror,

16. Retrieved online from : <https://entertainment.inquirer.net/348205/regine-velasquez-when-gay-fans-start-idolizing-you-then-youre-an-icon>

17. Retrieved online from: <https://www.pep.ph/photos/494/roderick-paulate-mr-nice-guy>

but the insecurities lie on the nose, the skin tone, the hips and the breasts size. The omnipresence of whitening adverts and products cheap or expensive is as much a pervasive experience for cis as for transwomen and likely everyone in between.

I have joined beauty pageants for about five years and around 100 in total. Mind you that does not compare to some other friends I know who have been joining pageants for twenty years and must have joined about 2000 plus and won around 300 crowns. I too was forced to copy a mestiza beauty queen and actress and went by that persona. I too had to use whitening make up onstage such as Kokuyu's Jade and the favorite whitening powder in the Philippines, Etta's¹⁸. I used to be so insecure about a lot of things about my body but not as much as when other transpinays pointed out those imperfections or at least what they hold to be the golden standards of beauty among women and transwomen in the Philippines. I too learned about hormone therapy but not through doctors but through other transpinays in beauty parlors and pageants. They said if we take more it will be more potent. I loved those years joining pageants, it also brought in some financial solutions in those times we needed money. It also played with my ego but strengthened it more times than broke it.

When I started looking for jobs, I discovered it was so difficult. I applied to fifty jobs to only land the last one by accident. In between I was told to cut my hair, dress and act masculine and to not flirt with boys. So to interpret that, I should not be queer. This experience is particularly shared with many other friends especially the queerest looking amongst us, most effeminate, most feminine looking and most embracing of our queerness. It was later I would realize that prejudice and discrimination took shape in my journey to find jobs and perhaps earlier, even scholarships in university. Those pink slips given out in Catholic schools are indeed true, they discriminate against the queer¹⁹. I had a close friend who was shunned out of a then famous disco bar in Mandaluyong for alleged cross dressing. She cried heaps and went around to tag friends to join her in filing a case or at least making some noise about it. Alas only I heeded her call. I joined her in our rounds to media outlets to talk about her experience. I think it was that time, in 1997 when my activist spirit was awakened. I felt that we must indeed fight for our basic human rights. Her slogan cried "I just wanna dance" and that was mine too and more. Suddenly Whitney Houston's I wanna dance with Somebody was on rotation in my head as I figure out how I can become an activist.

The birth of UP Babaylan, the first university recognized LGBT organization in the country, as well as national LGBT human rights organizations like Can't Live in the Closet (CLIC) and Progressive

18. Retrieved online from: <https://ettaswhiteskin.com/Ettas-Skin-White-Mask-Powder-1000-Click-to-see-170g-Jar.htm>

19. B. Alegre, *From Bakla to Transpinays*. Pp. 864- 871. *Routledge International Handbook of Schools and Schooling in Asia*. Edited by Kerry J. Kennedy, John Chi-Kin Lee. (2018).

Gays of the Philippines (Pro-GAY Philippines) among many others gave a new presence for LGBT Filipinos. Our insertion to the mass collective issues such as the e-VAT (extended value added tax) was our own Kimberle Crenshaw moment, that was our own introduction to intersectionality. And although there were infamous detransitioning stories in the 1990s that spoke of the evils of transitioning and the redemption through Christianity reformation, trans representation took greater heights with the formation of STRAP, The Society of Transsexual Women of the Philippines in 2002. Four self-identifying transwomen became public figures and their introduction of lexicon then unknown to the baklas would give rise to the trans identity. STRAP introduced the word transpinay, very much our Mak Nyah moment. Mak Nyah was introduced in Malaysia in the 1980s as an indigenous term for their transwomen. So finally, by about 2005, transpinays, became more visible in public as experts, educators and activists. This time, being bakla or now transpinay, is not only about being in the beauty parlor or pageants. For indeed we are proud to work in salons, and we join hundreds of trans pageants in our lifetime and some of us do sex work but by now Filipinos are discovering that we can be doctors, researchers, nurses, lawyers, athletes, policewomen, teachers and actresses.

Go around the Philippines and now more Filipinos, but surely not most, would understand what trans, transgender and transpinay means and this is a long way from the 80s or prior when the only way to call us is bakla and that was confusing because bakla was not seen as an umbrella of possibilities but as a variation of one identity, gay. We can surmise that trans activism greatly catalyzed the naming of the experience as much as the representation. Unfortunately, in spite of all these, deadnaming and misgendering and misrepresentation still happen every day and one of the most tragic was that of Jennifer Laude. Laude was a transpinay sex worker who was heinously murdered by an American Marine corps member Joseph Pemberton. Laude was nicknamed Ganda, which means beauty in Filipino. Laude's death and the events that unfolded reflected the poor state of trans rights in the country. However, her murder brought the local LGBT collective closer as well as propelling our public presence to greater heights but it also came with backlash from the public. Not only was Laude constantly misgendered by social media and our citizens, LGBT rights were questioned and overturned.

Transpeople in the Philippines including other gender diverse people experience prejudice and discrimination everyday but the worst type is the most violent type, murder. Laude is only the poster child of trans hate but there are others. But when foreigners murder queer people, Filipinos do not have a united front of protectiveness towards one of their own. There is a sense of division in this collective. Some of the unforgettable quotes towards Laude by locals is that 'she deserved her death' for deceiving a man into thinking that she is a

woman. So this is a post-colonial theme of transness, that transness is a form of deception.

Transcendence: Look into the future

So looking into the past and introspecting about our present, transness that includes living as a transpinay, means our lives are never easy even for the most privileged amongst us. I used to think that my PhD and bilingual skills would allow me to navigate life easier but now I realized it is harder than I thought. Being reminded of intersectionality and understanding of layers of oppression every human may face in their lifetime, I am unearthing every vulnerable layer I have. I just realized bilingualism is not enough, if you want opportunities, being a polyglot gives you better chances especially if you want to live in countries that are safe for transpeople. Having a PhD is not enough, even if I studied in one of the best universities in our country. I just discovered if I want to work in what we usually call back home as “first world” or “Western” societies, you need to have university or post grad degrees from those places as well. As a trans scholar and trans activist, I may have invaded global spaces but obtaining further opportunities is totally different. We can get invited and speak for free and rarely remunerated but they see your voice as adding to the collective not necessarily being heard beyond that. And these ruminations don’t even dissect the early insecurities I faced as a transpinay back home wherein I discover each and every bit of my body parts are not feminine or beautiful enough. Even within our communities there is brutality and privileges or hierarchy.

I want to continue on my journey of personal decolonization and promote that same to my community so together we can unburden ourselves of expectations that bear us down. As simple as loving my own skin and being prouder of it each day. Now every time I walk into cosmetic stores in Hong Kong where I now live, I will not easily be offended whenever they offer me whitening products and instead I can indignantly express “Oh I love being brown thank you.” I can keep educating transpinays that our transness does not have to fit a mold especially if it is not one of our own. They are slowly discovering the babaylans and slowly embracing the glorious trans past we once embodied. They need to learn more about the bantuts and the Teduray people²⁰ who still live among us. Bantuts are very much like the Fa’afafines of the Samoa or the Mak Nyahs of Malaysia, the Calabai or Warias of Indonesia or the transpinays of modern Philippines it is just that they are quite unfazed by colonialization²¹. And within the Teduray tribes of

20. Retrieved from: <https://outragemag.com/learning-from-the-teduray-people-valuing-self-determination/>

21. Mark Johnson “Beauty and power: Transgendering and cultural transformation in the Southern Philippines.” (Oxford & New York: Berg: 1997).

Maguindanao, they protect and respect the gender fluid and gender free amongst them as it is part of their nature and culture to transcend gender. If they have been like that before colonization why can't the rest of society learn to decolonize and reconnect with our beautiful genderless past²²? As a Christian I do not like to be pressured with how I will exercise my faith and ideology. If they sometimes preach about 'loving others as you would love yourself then that should be more than enough. Now I discovered I can pray to Lakapati and Guanyin and the Ardhanarishvara in the same breath as I would invoke Mother Mary and Jesus. Because I thought if we believe in co-existence among humans why can't Gods? To the asogs and babaylans, I want them to come back and reclaim spaces they once lost. I wish for my people back home to fully rediscover them and appreciate them and protect them. To our government and politicians back home, decolonize your own minds and trust in your silenced instincts that queer people are normal. Protect us and do not allow your own people from killing us or using us as clickbait or laughing stock. To history teachers back home, Magellan was not a hero and that cross in Mactan should not just be about glory but pains and erasure, that our glorious past must be honored and restored in some ways that meet the promise of a brighter future. And to everyone else, just like those good old days in joining trans beauty pageants....World peace 😊.

End

22. Retrieved online: <https://ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/subcommissions/subcommission-on-cultural-communities-and-traditional-arts-sccta/central-cultural-communities/the-teduray/>