

Male Homosexuality in the Philippines: a short history

Research >
Gender Crossing

The folk wisdom that Filipinos are a gay-friendly people must have first been mouthed by a wide-eyed tourist one lazy orange afternoon, assaulted by the vision of flamboyant transvestites sashaying down Manila's busy sidewalks in broad daylight. Swiveling their hips from side to side, nothing seemed to threaten these chirping damsels except their heavy pancake makeup, which could run at any moment under the sweltering tropical sky.

By J. Neil C. Garcia

When visitors to the Philippines remark that Filipinos openly tolerate and/or accept homosexuality, they invariably have in mind effeminate, cross dressing men (*bakla*) swishing down streets and squealing on television programmes with flaming impunity. This is sadly misinformed. To equate Philippine society's tolerance for public displays of transvestism with wholesale approval of homosexual behavior is naive, if not downright foolish.

While cross dressing exists in the Philippines, it is allowed only in certain social classes and within certain acceptable contexts, among entertainers and *parloristas* (beauticians) for instance, and during carnivalesque celebrations and *fiestas*. In fact, Filipinos have yet to see transvestism as legitimate in 'serious' professions – male senators filibustering from the podium wrapped in elegant, two-toned pashminas, or CEOs strutting around open-air malls wearing power skirts and designer leather pumps. Second, and more importantly, cross dressing is very different from homosexuality: the one does not necessarily entail the other. Observed more closely, the two have very different stories to tell.

Tolerance

If their society was truly tolerant of (male) homosexuality, then Filipinos would see not just flaming transvestites shrieking their heads off in TV sitcoms and variety shows, but local men, sissy or otherwise, frenching and erotically manhandling each other in steamy 'gay telenovelas'. There would be as many gay pick-up bars as straight bars, and both the femmy *pa-girl* and butchy *pa-mhin* would be able to display affection in public.

At the heart of the idea of homosexuality is sex, no matter the sartorial style of the persons indulging in it. Thus, to historicize homosexuality in the Philippines, we must recognize the fundamental difference between gender and sexuality. More specifically, we need to disarticulate the presentist and commonsensical connection between gender transitive behaviors and the identities of *bakla*, *bayot*, *agi*, and *bantut*! on the one hand and the discourse and reality of homosexuality as typically 'gay' same-sex orientation and/or identity on the other. The history of the former stretches into the oral past not only of the Philippines, but the whole of Southeast Asia. The latter is a more recent development, a performative instance and discursive effect of the largely American-sponsored biomedicalization of local Filipino cultures.

Gender crossing

We know from Spanish accounts of encounters between *conquistadores* and

the archipelago's various *indios* that gender crossing and transvestism were cultural features of early colonial and thus, presumably, pre-colonial communities.

Local men dressed up in women's apparel and acting like women were called, among other things, *bayoguin*, *bayok*, *agi-ngin*, *asog*, *bido* and *binabae*. They were significant not only because they crossed male and female gender lines. To the Spanish, they were astonishing, even threatening, as they were respected leaders and figures of authority. To their native communities they were *babaylan* or *catalonan*: religious functionaries and shamans, intermediaries between the visible and invisible worlds to whom even the local ruler (*datu*) deferred. They placated angry spirits, foretold the future, healed infirmities, and even reconciled warring couples and tribes.

Donning the customary clothes of women was part of a larger transformation, one that redefined their gender almost completely as female. We may more properly call them 'gender crossers' rather than cross dressers, for these men not only assumed the outward appearance and demeanor of women, but were granted social and symbolic recognition as 'somewhat-women.' They were comparable to women in every way except that they could not bear children. *Cronicas* tell us they were 'married' to men, with whom they had sexual relations. These men treated their womanish partners like concubines; being men, they had wives with whom they had their obligatory children.

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Gender crossers enjoyed a comparatively esteemed status in pre-colonial Philippine society simply because women enjoyed a similar status. Women were priestesses and matriarchs who divorced their husbands if they wanted, chose their children's names, owned property and accumulated wealth.

Spanish machismo

This was the state of affairs when the Spanish arrived. Over the centuries, as the status of women progressively deteriorated, gender crossing in the traditional sense became more and more difficult, with the gender crosser suffering from the ridicule and scorn which only the Spanish brand of medieval Mediterranean machismo could inflict. From being likened to a naturally occurring species of bamboo called *bayog*, the

native effeminate man (*bayoguin*) in the Tagalog-speaking regions of Luzon slowly transmogrified into *bakla*, a word that also meant 'confused' and 'cowardly.' Unlike his formerly 'destined' state, *kabaklaan* was a temporary condition away from which he might be wrested, using whatever persuasive, brutally loving means. Nonetheless, despite Catholicism – with its own sacramental frocks worn by its 'men of the cloth' – and three-hundred years of Spanish colonial rule, cross dressing, effeminacy and gender transitive behavior never really disappeared in Philippine society.

Western sexualization

The American period, in which arguably the Philippines remains, saw the expansion of the newly empowered middle class, the standardization of public education, and the promulgation and regulation of sexuality by means of academic learning and the mass media. This discursive regulation inaugurated a specific sexological consciousness, one that was incumbent upon a psychological style of reasoning hitherto unknown in the Philippines.

We can reasonably surmise, following academic accounts of how Western psychology took root in the Philippines,² that this 'sexualization' of local mentality, behavior and personality accompanied English-based education in America's newly acquired colony at the beginning of the twentieth century. The force of this imported 'psychosexual logic' has grown and become entrenched since then; present generations are subjected to levels of sexual indoctrination

unheard of in previous decades. In other words, by virtue of American colonialism and neocolonialism, Filipinos have been socialized in Western modes of gender and sexual identity formation, courtesy of a sexualization that rode on different but complementary discourses of public hygiene, psychosexual development, juvenile delinquency, health and physical education, family planning, feminist empowerment, gay and lesbian advocacy, and the corporally paranoid discourse of AIDS.

The new sexual order

The result is a deepening of sexuality's perverse implantation into the local soil, accompanied by the exorbitation of the 'homo/hetero' distinction as the organizing principle in the now heavily-freighted sexual lives of Filipinos, especially those in large urban centers where



Crispulo 'Pulong' Luna (1903-1976). A Filipino *bakla* or gender crosser from Paco, Manila. Luna is seen here in a native Philippine costume.

Victoria Studios, Paco, Manila. Reproduced with the kind permission of Patricia A. Callasan and family.

Westernized knowledges hold sway. Thus, the effeminate *bakla* is also the 'homosexual': a genitally male *man* whose identity is defined as a function of his sexual desire for *other men*.

Nonetheless, it's important to qualify that residual valuations of gender persist, and have simply served to modify the new sexual order. For instance, though the *bakla* has sex with the *lalake* ('real man'), for many Filipinos it is only the former who is 'homosexualized' by the activity. This means that the process of sexualization, while increasing in alacrity and perniciousness, has not been consistent. In fact, the process has been skewed towards the further minoritization of what had already been an undesirable, effeminate, 'native' identity: the *bakla*. While the terms *bakla* and homosexual are far from congruent, many Filipinos use them interchangeably because they entail the same social effect: stigmatization.

While his effeminacy and transvestic ways place him in a long line of exceptional and 'gender anomalous' beings in Philippine history, the present-day *bakla* is unlike any of his predecessors in at least one respect: he is burdened not only by his gender self-presentation, but also, and more tragically, by his 'sexual orientation', an attribute capable of defining his sense of *self*.

During the Spanish period, a religious discourse of 'unnatural acts' grouped under the rubric of sodomy was halfheartedly propagated through the confessional. Such acts were nevertheless temporary and surmountable, a weakness to which heirs to Eve's original transgression were vulnerable. Sodomy was not a discourse of identity but of acts: non-procreative, non-conjugal and 'non-missionary' acts that were committed by men with men, women with women, and men and women with animals. Even so, the gender crosser's sexual predilections for and acts with men simply attended – and did not determine – her redefined status as 'woman-

like.' This status denoted what was more properly a gendered rather than a sexualized form of social being.

By contrast, as though coping with his swishy ways in a helplessly macho culture was not enough, the *bakla* must now contend with the private demons of pathological self-loathing, primarily on account of his intrinsically 'sick' desire. Nonetheless, the pathologizing of the *bakla* into and as a homosexual has resulted in encouraging narratives of hybridity, appropriation and postcolonial resistance from 'politicized' Filipino gay writers and artists. These 'gay texts' demonstrate how the very people who have been pathologized by the American sexological regime are ironically enabled by this very stigma.

We may therefore conclude that 'gay identity' and 'gay liberation,' as Filipino gays currently understand, live and champion them, are as much the ascriptions of these histories of cross gender behavior and homosexuality as the expressions of the various freedoms and desires these selfsame histories have paradoxically conferred. ◀

Notes

1. These are culturally comparable words for 'effeminate homosexual' among the Philippines' Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilongo and Tausug ethnic communities.
2. See: Alfredo V. Lagmay, 2000. 'Western Psychology in the Philippines: Impact and Response' in *Journey of a Humanist*. Quezon City: College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines, 163-180.

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