Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific
Issue 48, November 2022

Gender Fluidity and Shamanism in the Spanish Philippines

Kai Ngu

The history of the *babaylanes,* or shamans, of the Philippines has been fairly well-documented in scholarly and public literature. What has not been as carefully examined are records of the gender-bending, feminine shamans (*bayog, asog*) in seventeenth-century century 'Philippines.' The anthropological consensus surrounding them is that these shamans are subservient to female shamans and that they appropriate femininity, which is seen as the source of shamanistic power. The historical consensus is that the increasing numbers of men in the role of the *babaylan* is reflective of the Spanish Catholic intervention and colonisation. While I do not disagree with these conclusions broadly speaking, I seek to complicate both of these narratives, arguing that it is too simplistic to view *bayogs/asogs* as men in women's clothes who 'appropriate' feminine spiritual power, that their femininity can be equally valid, and the spiritual power of all the shamans is manifest in both 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviours. I do so primarily by offering a close analysis of the historical sources of *bayogs/asogs* with a theoretical lens that privileges 'gender' over 'sex,' as much of the scholarship on these sources was published twenty years ago.

Gender liminality and shamanism in the Spanish Philippines

The relationship between gender fluidity and religious power among shamans in Southeast Asia has been well-documented by anthropologists. As the argument goes, people who occupy the liminal space between the two genders have historically been accorded special religious and ritualistic powers and responsibilities. However, nuances vary by location. In the Philippines, for instance, some have argued that although there are many accounts of 'effeminate men' who play the role of 'shaman' and are mostly referred to in various sources as *bayog* (Tagalog) or *asog* (Visayan), they were the exception to the rule.[1] The shaman role is predominantly held by women. One must interpret these 'men' as only able to access shamanistic powers insofar as they access femininity. This argument is advanced most strongly by Carolyn Brewer, a feminist historian whose crucial book on gender, shamanism and Catholicism begins from when the first Spaniard descends on the shores, 1521 until 1685.[2] Her feminist analysis lays the foundation for her historical argument: That precolonial Philippines practiced religions led by feminine people, and the Spaniards reversed this, introducing a religious system in which Spanish men ruled. In this argument, she singles out the *bayog/asog* as 'men' who adopted femininity to access power within animist religious contexts, and then dropped it to access power in the church.

Let us begin with the question of the gender of the *bayog/asog.* A fundamental assumption that Brewer makes, by constantly referring to the *bayog/asog* as men and with he/him pronouns, is that they are 'men' by virtue of their sex anatomy. This is consistent with the literature published in the late 1990s and early 2000s about the *bayog/asog*; William Henry Scott refers to them as 'male transvestites,'[3] J. Neil C. Garcia as 'gender-crossers' with he/him pronouns.[4] It is impossible to know how internalised 'womanhood' or 'femininity' is to *bayog/asog* in the seventeenth century but referring to them as men is not a neutral stance. Instead, it reflects a particular stance, one that takes the sex anatomy of the *bayog/asog* as their most salient gender-marker. In Brewer's eyes, the performance of femininity was a practical choice, one that gave 'the male shaman status and authority in a sphere that would have been denied to him.'[5] Brewer allows no possibility of any feminine subjectivity by *bayogs or asogs.* In her conclusion,

she writes, 'The female/feminine shaman was doubly marginalized by both her femaleness and her femininity, the male shaman who dressed as a woman was doubly advantaged in relation to his maleness and his appropriation of the spiritually powerful feminine.'[6] Notably, it is only female shamans whom she describes as 'feminine.' In contrast, a *bayog* or *asog* is described not as feminine but as a 'male shaman who dressed as a woman' who employs an 'appropriation of the spiritually powerful feminine.' Brewer's interpretations, along with Garcia's, clearly analytically privilege 'sex' (as defined anatomically) over 'gender' (the roles and norms that fall under the labels of masculinity or femininity). What can we discover if we adopt an analytical framework that privileges 'gender' over 'sex'? Might we then take the feminine performance of the 'male shaman' as equally deserving of the designation of 'femininity'?

In this paper, I review all the available records (see note 1) of gender-bending, feminine shamans, as well as the context surrounding them, with this updated analytical framework in mind. There are two broad points I am making: the first is that the source of shamanistic power may not land as squarely in the hands of 'women' or 'femininity' as Brewer argues. For starters, while some sources indicate that the shamanistic role is mostly held by women, a handful of sources cite both men and women holding the roles without indicating who is more dominant. Moreover, it is too simplistic to frame the shaman's gender-performance as 'feminine' as Garcia would argue. A closer examination of Antonio Pigafetta's oft-cited ritual of a *babaylan* spearing a pig in 1521 indicates that there are arguably 'masculine' components—or at least non-stereotypical feminine components—to the shamanistic performance. Second, while I am not trying to disagree with Brewer's argument that Spanish religious read *bayogs/asogs* as "male" and encouraged "male" religious leadership overall, I argue that we cannot draw a straight line from the actions of the colonizers to the actions of the colonized. There are many examples that demonstrate the agency of indigenous women in appropriating Catholicism and ignores *bayogs/asogs* who led revolts against the Spanish. Towards the end, I point to a possible avenue of research: To trace possible links between *bayogs/asogs* and gay and/or effeminate 'male' *babaylanes* who led peasant revolts in the late 1600s and —acknowledging this is beyond the time period that Brewer examines—also the 1800s. Ultimately, I reject the narrative that the *bayogs* and *asogs* were just men trying to appropriate women's sacred, feminine power; why should their performance of femininity be considered less than the performance of femininity by women? My thesis is two-fold: That gender liminality, and not just femininity, is part of the source of shamanistic power in seventeenth century Philippines; and that the *bayogs* and *asogs* were not unique 'gender traitors' who shed their femininity upon the establishment of the church, but that they, much like the female *babaylanes,* had a range of varied responses.

First, a word on why I use they/them pronouns when referring to *bayogs* and *asogs.* Is this a case of revisionist history—an anachronistic imposition of modern, transgender 'identity' markers?[7] While it is impossible to know how these shamans understood themselves, as most descriptions of these shamans simply describe their appearances and behaviours, there are a few instances in which the Spanish go further. In 1589, Juan de Plasencia enumerates a list of twelve offices or types of priesthoods of the devil, beginning with the *catalonan.* Each entry on the list is a description of a role or profession ('preacher,' 'soothsayer,' 'sorcerer') except for the last one, which describes the '*bayoguin.*' Here, Plasencia describes the *bayoguin* as 'a man whose nature inclined toward that of a woman.' It is striking that in contrast to other entries, there is no enumeration of the activities of the *bayoguin.* Their femininity is inherent to their 'priesthood.' Furthermore, Plasencia does not describe the appearances and behaviours of the *bayoguin,* and is content to speak of their 'nature.' A century later, Francis Ignacio Alcina, a Jesuit brother who arrives in Manila in 1632, writes his extensive *History of the Bisayan Islands* in 1668. Alcina writes that 'the Asog *considered themselves* more like women than like men in their manner of living, or going about, or even in their occupations [emphasis added].'[8] Here we see a potential glimpse into not just how the *asog* dressed and behaved, but how the *asog* considered themselves: Not 'as women' or 'as men' but 'more like women than like men,' meaning they occupied a liminal position, tilted towards women, in the gender-binary. Lastly, while English and Spanish employ gendered pronouns, local languages at this time did not. For all these reasons, I have adopted 'they/them' pronouns in discussing *bayogs/asogs* within the English

language.

Shamanism in precolonial Philippines: Do women dominate?

Brewer argues that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the shamanistic role (the role is termed 'babaylan' in Visayan and '*catolonan/catalonan*' in Tagalog) was dominated by women.[9] These are the examples she cites: The earliest recorded ritual of a *babaylan* in Cebu by Antonio Pigafetta (companion to Ferdinand Magellan) during 1521, in which Pigafetta writes that 'only women' were allowed to perform this ritual; a description by Alcina in 1668 of how the *babaylan* were 'ordinarily women' and only sometimes men performed the office; and the 'Bolinao manuscript' in the 1680s detailing a Spanish missionary investigation of *catalonans* in the central Luzon province which turned up 145 women and three *bayog.*[10]

But other sources indicate that the *babaylan/catalonan* roles may have been held equally between the genders. Fray Juan Plasencia, in 1589, describes, twice, the 'catolonan' as an office held by either 'a man or a woman' among the Tagalogs.[11] The men who held this office were not necessarily, and most likely not, effeminate, as Plasencia has a separate entry for the religious office of the '*bayoguin,*' or men with womanly natures. Five years later, Jesuit father Pedro Chirino published *Relacion* in 1604, a text that is heavily cited by Brewer and other scholars. In it, he writes on how the 'Indians' had both 'priests and priestesses, whom the Tagalogs called '*catolonan*' and the Bisayans '*babailan.*'[12] Having spent twelve years in both Tagalog and Visayan regions, he makes no indication that priestesses predominate in either region and refers to both priests and priestesses throughout that chapter. What is more, in Central Luzon among the Zambales peoples, Fray Domingo Perez writes in 1680—admittedly, a century after the Spanish have arrived—that while the Zambales have 'priests and priestesses,' the main priest is called a '*bayoc* and he dresses like a woman,' for he wears a skirt or *tapis* and 'ties his hair like a woman.'[13] These sources call into question the 'woman dominance' narrative of the shamanistic role.

The second part of Brewer's argument is that while *bayogs/asogs* existed, but that they played a subservient role to women shamans. For this, she turns to the Boxer Codex, an anonymously penned manuscript published in Manila circa 1590, and which was transcribed and translated in *The Philippine Journal of Science* in 1958 In the 'Manila manuscript,' as Brewer terms it, the anonymous author describes the 'priests and priestesses' of the 'Indians' scattered across the Philippine islands. The priests, the author notes, are called '*bayog*' and 'are so effeminate that one who does not know them would believe they are women.'[14] The author also describes them as 'impotent … thus they marry other males and sleep with them as man and wife.' Here is how the author differentiates between *bayogs,* or the 'priests,' and the female shamans:

> The priestesses are usually old and their function is to cure the sick with superstitious words, and invoke spirits of ancestors for conducting ceremonies which we shall see. The function of the priests is to help in all occasions; in general, to help the priestesses invoke the spirits, although with more pomp, ceremony, and authority.[15]

Brewer zeroes in on the word 'help' and argues that this proves that *bayogs* were subservient to female *babaylanes.* Never mind that this is the only source I have found that indicates they play a subservient or 'helping' role. She acknowledges that the author says the priests had 'more pomp, ceremony, and authority,' but she reads that as evidence of Spanish bias. 'This assertion was doubtless influenced by Spanish cultural norms of the day, which equated authority with a male rather than a female voice,' she writes. But her portrayal of Spanish norms, which link femininity to the devil, is incomplete.

It is arguable that if femininity is so despised, the one thing worse than being a woman might be someone who is not born a woman but chooses to lower themselves to be one. Richard Trexler is a Renaissance historian who has written on Spanish treatment of '*berdache,*' in the Americas primarily during the sixteenth century. His book, *Sex and Conquest,* provides an interesting parallel to the Spanish

colonisation of the Philippines and treatment of the *bayog/asog* at this time. Although the *berdache* is certainly not equivalent to the *bayog/asog* figure, there are some similarities. Trexler defines the *berdache* as 'the permanently transvested male who, when he was sexually involved, always assumed the passive role in homosexual relations.'[16] In analysing Spanish attitudes during the early modern period towards the passive berdache, Trexler cites a report on New Spain by Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún in the mid-1500s in which Sahagún writes: 'the passive sodomite is abominable … because of the nausea he brings upon men. He shows himself womanly and effeminate in everything, in walking or in talking. For all this he deserves to be burned.'[17] Analysing this report among many others, Trexler writes that what rankled the Spanish the most was the 'passive demonstration of self as totally womanish and effeminate—a crime of representation more than a sexual crime.'[18] Given this bias, while the Spaniards came from a world in which only men held religious authority, it is unclear if this bias would have necessarily led to a privileging of 'effeminate men' over 'feminine women' in determining who held power.

Gender and the source of sacred power

Another main argument that Brewer advances is that 'spiritual potency was dependent, not on identification with a neuter 'third' sex/gender space,' but rather on identification with the feminine—whether the biological sex was female or male.'[19] Brewer points out that while there are effeminate male shamans, there are no recorded instances of 'masculine women' who take up the role of shamans. This proves that femininity, not any kind of third-gender status, is what is linked to sacred power. J. Neil C. Garcia makes a similar point, arguing that since gender-bending moves from masculinity to femininity, not the other way round, the shaman's role must be considered as 'fundamentally female.'[20] He argues that this may be because the work of the *babaylan* was 'most probably perceived by [people] to be a protective and/or "nurturing" undertaking.' Painting the *babaylan's* role as simply 'protective' or 'nurturing,' and thus as feminine, is far too broad of a stroke.

In response to Garcia, the trance-possession that the *babaylan* undergo indicates a hybrid display of masculininity and femininity. William Henry Scott, an eminent scholar on prehispanic Philippines, describes the *babaylanes* among the Visayan peoples as 'shamans or spirit mediums, given to seizures and trances in which they spoke with the voice of *diwata* or other spirits and acted out conflicts in the spirit world, brandishing spears, foaming at the mouth, and often becoming violent enough to require restraint.'[21] First, if the *babaylan's* role is to speak as the god who is possessing her, and the god is masculine, there is a valid possibility of gender-play in which a female babaylan is acting as a masculine spirit or god.[22] Second, the verbs and adjectives deployed here—particularly 'brandishing spears' and 'becoming violent enough to require restraint'—certainly do not connote a protective, nurturing femininity, and are arguably connote an aggressive masculinity. Later on, Scott describes a well-analysed scene, reported by Antonio Pigafetta in 1521, an Italian companion to Ferdinand Magellan, of a ceremony in Cebu.[23] A spear is given to the presiding *babaylan,* who feints at a bound hog on a grass mat several times and increases the speed of her movements in a frenzy, before she stabs it 'through the heart with unerring aim.' Pigafetta writes that only women are able to perform this ceremony, which Brewer takes as evidence of the predominance of women in positions of religious authority. But this is a reading that only examines the biological 'sex' of the *babaylan,* instead of examining the 'gendered' nature of her performance. The usage of the spear is arguably a masculine move given that 'bladed weapons were an ordinary part of Visayan male costume,' as Scott notes, and warfare was strongly tied to men.[24] Piercing a hog might still be considered a 'feminine' behaviour since pigs are domestically raised, but my larger point here is that the work of the *babaylan* often involves violent warfare, albeit in the spiritual realm. Scott uses the word 'dramatic' to characterise how Spanish dictionaries described *babaylan's* healing powers:

> *agaw,* to carry off by force, was to snatch a pain from the sufferer; *tawag,* to call someone out, was to summon the spirit that had kidnapped the soul; and *bawi,* to rescue, was to free the invalid from the grip of the afflicted spirit.[25]

This language is not just dramatic. It is violent as it transpires amidst conflict and coercion—spiritual warfare, in other words. Thus, even if the shaman is most commonly a woman, as Scott argues, her performance of 'gender' is more ambiguous and ambivalent, bordering upon masculine. Her actions cannot be restricted to traditional domains of 'femininity,' especially of the 'nurturing' variety, to quote Garcia. At the very least, acknowledging the masculine components of her ritualistic performance troubles traditional delineations between masculinity and femininity. Perhaps the gender distinction does not hinge on who uses weapons, as Scott notes, but on the primary purposes for which one uses weapons: spiritual or material.

In addition to the gender-play of the *babaylan,* there is at least one instance in which what is emphasised about the *bayogs/asogs* is not their femininity, but their simultaneous masculinity and femininity. In 1680, Perez writes of the Zambales in Central Luzon that their main priest is a '*bayoc*' who 'dresses like a woman … although above the *tapis* [skirt] he wears and girds his *catan,* on the left side, and on the right side, his *yua* [dagger] as other men.'[26] The *bayoc's* appearance of feminine clothing with masculine weapons evokes other gender liminal counterparts in Southeast Asia, such as the *bissu* among the Bugis people in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. As priests who draw their sacred power from being both/neither male and female, the *bissu* wear a sarong like women do and attach a kris, or a sacred dragger, by their waist as men do.[27] Although this example of the Zambales' *bayoc* is the only recorded example of gender-fluidity that I have come across, it opens the door to wonder whether there are other markers of masculinity that Spaniards missed due to cultural gaps of translation.

To summarise my arguments so far, I am questioning whether or not 'femininity' plays as dominant a role in the precolonial shamanistic context as Brewer has argued, both in terms of the numerical distribution of women vs non-women, and also in terms of the performance of gender. While I do not dispute that femininity is the main thing that the shamans recorded have in common, I want to interrogate what this 'femininity' entails and examine how it incorporates aspects of masculinity. Now, onto the historical question of change: How have the gendered shamans of the Philippines responded to Catholic missionisation efforts? This is a broad question that I do not have full space to answer, so I will frame my arguments in response to Brewer's.

Bayogs/asogs: Gender traitors?

Brewer appears invested in the subordination of *bayogs/asogs* in pre-Hispanic Philippines because it allows her to make this historical argument of change: That the Spanish introduced a new 'worldview that in relation to sexual pleasure, women's bodies, and women's position in society contrasted diametrically with the conceptual foundation of Animist Filipino peoples.' To this end, she spends the last chapter in *Holy Confrontation* elaborating how the priests in Bolinao recruited boys to schools and pressured them to 'tell' on their aunts and grandmothers who were secretly keeping animistic practices. 'From a gendered perspective, the dissemination of basic Catholic doctrine by young boys represents a reversal, on many levels, of the manner in which esoteric knowledge was passed down in the Animist tradition,' Brewer writes, in which knowledge tended to be passed from grandmothers to mothers.[28] But she also, more relevant for this article, interprets the figure of the *bayog/asog* as a lynchpin of this transition. She argues, in her conclusion, that the 'male shaman who dressed as a woman was doubly advantaged in relation to his maleness and his appropriation of the spiritually powerful feminine.'[29] To that end, she highlights instances in which a few *bayog* convert to Catholicism and become 'important collaborators with the Spaniards against the *catalonan.*'[30] She argues that Catholicism, with its elevation of men over women in religious office, gave the ex-*bayogs* the 'option of building on the privilege their new-found maleness gave them.'[31] Catholicism introduced a conflict between *bayogs* and *catalonans* where there was not one before. But in Brewer's argument, the adoption of a 'new-found maleness' is not necessarily an aberrational behaviour on behalf of the *bayog,* as she uses the word 'appropriation' to describe how the

'male shaman' related to the 'spiritually powerful feminine.' In other words, she implies that the 'male shaman' consistently employed a strategic or appropriative deployment of gender to access religious power, whether in an animistic or Catholic context.

Overall, Brewer is trying to paint a narrative in which, on one side, are old female *babaylanes* who are persecuted by the Spanish church, and on the other side, are male Catholic converts, including *bayogs/asogs.* This narrative is complicated by what Brewer omits: The numerous instances in which women also collaborate with Spanish missionaries, including former *babaylan/catalonans.* There are too many to cite, but in brief, here is Alcina describing the central role that ex-*catalonans* played in converting others:

> '[They] rendered no little assistance to the fathers in the teaching of doctrine to their Visayan compatriots; they have been *maestras* as we call them here. They have been most useful in the many conversions of many of them, both men and women.'[32]

One prominent example that Alcina provides is Tapihan, a noblewoman and former 'priestess' whose conversion and miracle of provisional sight (she was blind but, through prayer, was able to see enough to weave Visayan looms at night) attracted 'many men and women to frequent the sacraments.'[33] Alcina clearly marvels at her spiritual prowess, describing how 'she preaches to as many as may come and go to her house to see her, and they are numerous.' When people hide their sins from priests, he remarks that Tapihan 'tells them what she knows and condemns their sins,' concluding that 'quite a few through her influence have made good confessions.' Tapihan appears to informally adopt many roles of a priest, performing them better than priests do. Alcina does not condemn her for preaching or essentially hearing confessions, despite her arguable violations of Catholic orthodoxy, perhaps a reflection of how missionaries were glad to have any assistance they could have out in the fields. Alcina cites Tapihan's former reputation in her youth as a 'priestess' or *babaylan* as a credit to her now, concluding that 'thus her example makes the greatest impression on all.' The female *babaylan* vs male priest divide, in conclusion, ignores the agency of women like Tapihan and the informal power they can accrue in the mission fields of the Catholic church.[34]

Amiss from Brewer's narrative of female *babaylan* vs male priest or *bayog/asog* is also the story of Tapar, who is described by Fray Casimiro Diaz in 1667 as a man 'in the garb of a woman, on account of the office of the babaylan and priest of the demon.'[35] Leading a few towns to rebel against the Spanish rule, Tapar, from Iloilo in Western Visayas, drew followers through Tapar's syncretic blending of animism and Catholicism. While making offerings to various indigenous gods, Tapar also designated themselves as God the Eternal Father and others to be the Son, Holy Spirit, and Mother Mary. Tapar exhibited both masculinity, through their self-designation of the Eternal Father, and femininity, through their garb; could their simultaneous display of both genders be relevant to their religious and political power? It is unclear, but regardless, this is a far cry from Brewer's claim that 'transvestite male shamans' who rejected Catholicism 'still had the option of building on the privilege their new-found maleness gave them.'[36] It is notable, however, that Tapar led what eventually became a violently defended revolt, leading to the killing of a priest. According to historian Alfred McCoy, there have been two major waves of babaylan-led revolts against the Spaniards, first in the mid-seventeenth century and again in the late-nineteenth century, almost all of which were led by 'men,' or at least, non-women.[37] I will address this phenomenon towards the end of the paper.

To sum up this section, Brewer's singling out of *bayogs/asogs* as essentially traitorous figures who have the power to adopt or discard femininity in order to get the religious power they want is, I argue, unwarranted. I do not deny that some did shed their feminine appearances upon conversion and attained elevated statuses as men, in ways that their female counterparts could never attain. But such a phenomenon has to be situated within a broader context of change moving in multiple directions. Women were also shedding their former religions and attaining benefits and powers within the church, and

bayogs/asogs were also possibly maintaining their femininity while leading rebellions against the church.

The question of Spanish bias towards bayog/asog

One defense of the reading of the *bayog/asog* as male is that this is how the Spanish saw them. Brewer argues, from her analysis of the 'Bolinao manuscript,' a collection of folios in the Zambales province published between 1679 and 1685, that the Spanish investigation of pagan practices in the town, Bolinao, treated men 'very differently' than women.[38] The 217 women interrogated were placed under much more suspicion than were nineteen men; of the nineteen, three were *bayog,* two of whom collaborated with Spaniards against the *catalonans.* Steven Fluckiger provides his own examples, contrasting how Alcina and Chirino treat *bayogs* more favorably than *catalonans.* For example, he contrasts Chirino's narration of the conversion process of a *bayog* leader living in the mountains, in Chapter 20, to Chirino's description of how a 'gang of disreputable Catolonan women,' were treated as described in Chapter 22.[39] While the *bayog* and his group of *catalonans* were brought in 'with utmost gentleness' and persuaded to convert, the group of women were hunted down with their idols confiscated; they had to publicly renounce their errors in church.

I do not find the comparison so persuasive. The group of *catalonan* women had exhibited strong, secret dominance over a town, San Juan del Monte, for multiple years, while the *bayog* and their group, who lived in remote mountains, had far less influence and were less threatening. That said, I do find noteworthy how Chirino describes the fate of this group of *catalonans*: They 'retired to a place where … they could not lapse back into corruption and were entrusted to devout and Christian persons.'[40] Clearly, they were still treated, post-conversion, with suspicion that they might 'lapse' back into idolatry and thus had to be 'entrusted,' like children, to devout Christians. This is not a unique suspicion; the fear of indigenous peoples lapsing and retaining pagan practices permeates Spanish missionary accounts.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that there are multiple examples of ex-female *babayalanes/catalonans* who convert but nevertheless are still placed under suspicion by priests. For example, in chapter 70, Chirino quotes a letter from Father Gabriel Sanchez, dated 1600, who worked in the town of Bohol, located in central Visayas. Sanchez writes that many *'catolonas, o sacerdotizas*'—presumably all women given the feminine ending—had come to the priests and 'have given such proofs of their good intentions that we have not been able to deny them Baptism.'[41] Sanchez is evidently suspicious of these female *catalonans'* intentions, which was why he asked for proof. He then tells the story of an old woman who had been a 'great public sorceress' but desperately wanted to convert. Sanchez writes that he only baptised her after 'having first exacted many public tokens that she detested her sect.'[42] The cloud of suspicion did not fully depart post-conversion. After describing how he accepted the conversions of two women or ex-*catalonans,* he concludes that 'they did no damage to our church,' indicating that they were still under watch (he adds, 'although I am told they disinterred some dead'). In contrast, I have not found examples of *bayog/asog* converts in Chirino's text who were held under the same suspicion. Why might that be?

There are a few explanations for why the converted *bayog/asog* might be treated with less suspicion than their female counterparts. For Brewer, the answer is anatomy. She analyses Chirino's aforementioned account of the converted *bayog.* The *bayog* wore their hair long 'like a woman's in token of his profession,' but they took the initiative of 'shearing it off publicly (like the Magdalen), and with it the power of the devil that had held him captive.'[43] Brewer writes that while this *bayog* 'could easily be relieved of his attractiveness to the Devil by having his hair cut short,' women, no matter what they did to their hair, would always be seen by Spaniards as inherently subject to the Devil's attentions.[44] She cites, as evidence of the Spanish bias against the feminine, a popular 1486 handbook on witchcraft, *Malleus Maleficarum,* which argues that witches are more likely to be women than men because 'women are feebler in both mind and body,' more carnal, and thus more susceptible to the devil. Women could never escape the suspicion of the church because of their anatomy. In essence, in this argument, the Spanish, due to their

imposed reading of the *bayog* as 'male' and *catalonans* as 'female,' favoured *bayogs* over *catalonans.*

Garcia provides a different interpretation: A shared affinity between Spanish priests and *bayogs/asogs.* He cites an interview with Scott who tells him that 'a great many of the Spanish priests and friars were of the opinion that the native priests were celibates like themselves.'[45] He also cites Zeus Salazar, an historian, who traces a line of continuity between the 'native effeminate pagan priest and the colonial Christian padre: both were supposed to be celibate with regard to women.'[46] Indeed, we see traces of this affinity between priest and *asog* in a few instances.[47] In his account, Alcina demonstrates an extraordinary affection for a celibate *asog.* Alcina is full of praise for this *asog* who 'never allowed himself to be touched, nor would he ever bathe in front of others.' This person was so chaste that even the mention of the sixth commandment, the prohibition against adultery or sexual immorality, during confession was enough to make 'him cover his eyes with his hands as though ashamed of such things.'[48] Garcia points to an even more explicit account, written by Francisco Combes (1620–1665), a Jesuit missionary. In it, Combes details his encounter with a *'bido,'* who is part of 'a class of men who profess celibacy' and are the 'hermits of [the] religion' among the Subanos, an indigenous group in Mindanao, the southern islands of the Philippines. Not only are they celibate, 'their dress is throughout like that of the women, with skirts of the same fashion.'[49] As Garcia notes, Combes was so interested in meeting a *bido* named Tutor Tuto, who was a healer and weaver, that he commanded the villagers to summon Tuto to him, threatening to summon the governor if not. Here is Combes' description of his encounter with Tuto: 'I found in my presence him who I desire so much. He, seeing the love with which I received him … immediately offered himself for baptism.' The erotic undertones of this passage are very striking, and Combes evidently felt some kind of attraction to the *bido.* If female *babaylan* who converted were placed under a cloud of suspicion by some priests, I agree with Garcia that gender-liminal *bayogs/asogs* were placed under a cloud of attraction by some priests who perhaps felt an affinity with them.

Gesturing towards the gender status of the shaman after the seventeenth century

Many scholars have pointed out that the *babaylanes/catalonanes* tend to be described as female during the seventeenth century, and as male in proceeding centuries. Brewer gestures to texts, such as Evelyn Tan Cullamar's *Babaylanism in Negros: 1896–1907,* in which the *babaylan* in Negros, a large island in the Visayas, are virtually all male. This pattern supports her historical argument that Spaniards reversed the gender hierarchy even within animistic religious systems. Much of the literature on *babaylanes* in the nineteenth century focuses on their role in leading peasant revolts against the Spaniards during a time of waning Spanish power; notably, the *babaylanes* are almost all described as men. In 'Panay's Babaylan: The Male Takeover,' Maria Milagros Geremia-Lachica asks: What happened to the female *babaylanes?* She speculates that perhaps 'natives had to look for a religious leader parallel to the priest and the female babaylan was not the answer … she was not male like the friar.'[50] Some scholars attribute the male predominance in these revolts not to Catholicism but to the masculine associations of war. Alfred McCoy, a Philippines historian, observes that 'while the traditional religious babaylan were predominantly women, all of the babaylan revolt leaders were male, indicating that these movements may have recreated the magical *datu* war leader from elements of a once coherent magical world view.'[51]

While exploring the nineteenth century is beyond the scope of this paper, I want to engage this argument briefly because it illustrates the 'stakes' of the current arguments about gender and shamanism in the seventeenth century. For now, suffice it to say that I do not believe descriptions like a 'male takeover' or 'all of the babaylan revolt leaders were male' is fully nuanced and accurate. One of the revolt leaders in the late 1800's was Poncian Elopre, who went by the name 'Buhawi.' Garcia describes Buhawi as 'the most famous gender-crossing *babaylan.*'[52] Described by one informant as a *bayut-bayut,* or a 'somewhat feminine-acting male,' Buhawi led one of the earliest major revolts in Negros Island, adjacent to the sugar districts, and organised great numbers of people to retreat to an independent mountain

community where they refused to pay colonial taxes.[53] Could Buhawi be read as a reprisal of the *bayog/asog* figure? Perhaps another paper can take up this question.

To be clear, I do not disagree with Brewer's main conclusions: Femininity is generally central to the indigenous shamanistic role in the Philippines, and the Spaniards elevated men over women in church leadership. But my goal is to examine the same sources that Brewer analyses with a lens that privileges 'gender' over 'sex.' That is, instead of simply saying that on one side are 'female/feminine' shamans, and the other side are 'male shamans who dressed as women,' I want to consider the possibility that if both are performing a kind of femininity, then both can be considered feminine. Simply put, gender is performed and thus cannot be reduced to anatomical 'sex,' which itself also has to be culturally interpreted. My other goal is to bring in other references with which she does not publicly engage. The number of references to gender-bending, feminine shamans is very limited, admittedly, but that makes it all the more curious why there has not been more interest in re-examining these sources with a new lens. Why have we allowed 1990–2000's feminist scholarship, as influential and pathbreaking as it was, as the final word? I hope this article invites more attention to these scant sources that others may go further. Ultimately, my hope is to break open 'foregone' conclusions and gesture towards different possibilities and interpretations of gender fluidity in the early colonial, shamanistic history of the Philippines—for the sake of scholarship and for the sake of contemporary transpinays and trans people of the Nusantera who might desire to see themselves reflected, even if askew, in the mirror of religious history.

Notes

[1] By my count, there are seven references cited in the primary literature on the figure of the effeminate male, or trans feminine, religious shamans from the 1500s to the 1600s. Five of the seven references are in Tagalog: 'Bayoguin' (Plasencia, 1589), 'bayog' or 'bayoguin' (Boxer codex, Manila, 1590), 'Catalon' (Chirino, Antipolo, 1604), 'Bayok' (Perez, Zambales, 1680), 'Bayoc' (Salazar, Zambales, 1683). The two other references are in Visayan and Bikol: 'asog' (Lisboa, Bikol, 1628) and 'asog' (Alcina, Visayas, 1668).

See: Juan de Plasencia, 'Customs of the Tagalogs (1589)' in *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898,* ed. Emma Blair and James Robertson, vol. 7, Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1903, p. 192; 'A late sixteenth-century Manila Ms (Boxer Codex: 1590),' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society,* April 1950: 429–30; Pedro Chirino, *Relacion de Las Islas Filipinas,* trans. Ramón Echevarria, Manila: Historical Conservation Society, 1969; Domingo Perez, 'Relations of the Zambals (1680),' in *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898,* vol. 47, p. 300; Vicente de Salazar, 'Historia de La Provincia de El Santissimo Rosario de Philipinas, China, y Tunking, de El Sagrado Orden de Predicadores,' in *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898,* vol. 38: 1674–1683, n.d.; Marcos de Lisboa, *Vocabulario de La Lengua Bicol,* Manila: Est. tip. del Colegio de Santo Tomás, 1865; Francisco Ignacio Alcina, *The Muñoz Text of Alcina's History of the Bisayan Islands (1668),* Part 1, Chicago, IL: Philippine Studies Program, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1962, online: http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015041383947, accessed 15 Oct. 2022; 'En San Gabriel Extra Muros de Manila en primero de Septiembre de mil seiscientos y ochenta y cinco años, Bolinao, Zambales,' Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Filipinas, 75, N.20, J, 1 September 1685, otherwise known as 'Bolinao Manuscript.'

I was not able to find significant regional variation between the figures of *bayog* (and all variations of it) and *asog* in descriptions of the figures. For what it's worth, the anonymously penned Boxer codex manuscript writes, to introduce the section on 'pagan rites and ceremonies of the indians of the Philippine islands': 'Although it is true that in these islands of Luzon, Panay, and Cebu there is an infinity of languages … almost all agree as to pagan rites and ceremonies; and if in some parts they differ somewhat, the degree is so slight that it would inconvenient to dwell on each nation of these people and thus we can reach a conclusion on all of them' (1590, p. 428).

[2] Carolyn Brewer, *Holy Confrontation: Religion, Gender and Sexuality in the Philippines 1521-1685,* Manila: St. Scholastica's College, 2001.

[3] William Henry Scott, *Barangay: Sixteenth-Century Philippine Culture and Society,* Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1994.

[4] J. Neil C. Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture: The Last Thirty Years: Binabae to Bakla, Silahis to MSM,* Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1996.

[5] Carolyn Brewer, 'Baylan, asog, transvestism and sodomy: Gender, sexuality and the sacred in early colonial Philippines,' in *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 2 (1999), para 38, online: http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue2/carolyn2.html, accessed 12 Oct. 2022.

[6] Brewer, *Holy Confrontation,* p. 355.

[7] I do not attempt to put this history in dialogue with contemporary transpinays, but others have recently begun to do so in scholarly contexts, notably, Brenda Rodriguez Alegre's 'From asog to bakla to transpinay: Weaving a complex history of transness and decolonizing the future,' *Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies,* (2022): 51–64.

[8] Francisco Ignacio Alcina, *The Muñoz Text of Alcina's History of the Bisayan Islands (1668), Part 1,* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1962 [1668], p. 214.

[9] Shamans is our modern-day translation. Spanish sources tend to use '*sacerdotas'* or '*sacerdotes*' meaning 'priests.' The shamanistic office of the *babaylan* or *catalonan* is not the only religious office by any means, but it is generally seen as the most important and powerful one.

[10] Brewer, 'Baylan, asog, transvestism, and sodomy.'

[11] Juan de Plasencia, 'Relation of the Worship of the Tagalogs, Their Gods, and Their Burials and Superstitions (1589),' in *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898,* ed. Emma Blair and James Robertson, vol. 7, Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1903, p. 181.

[12] Pedro Chirino, *Relacion de Las Islas Filipinas,* trans. Ramón Echevarria, Manila: Historical Conservation Society, [1604] 1969, p. 300.

[13] Domingo Perez, 'Relations of the Zambals (1680),' in *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898,* ed. Emma Blair and James Robertson, trans. James Alexander Robertson, vol. 47, Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, n.d., p. 300.

[14] 'A Late Sixteenth-Century Manila Ms (Boxer Codex: 1590),' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* April (1950): 429–30.

[15] 'A Late Sixteenth-Century Manila Ms (Boxer Codex: 1590),' p. 430.

[16] Richard Trexler, *Sex and Conquest—Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the America,* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 6.

[17] Trexler, *Sex and Conquest,* p. 170.

[18] Trexler, *Sex and Conquest,* p. 170.

[19] Brewer, 'Baylan, asog, transvestism and sodomy.'

[20] Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture,* p. 166.

[21] Scott, *Barangay,* p. 84.

[22] According to Scott, Visayans had a 'pantheon' of gods and goddesses that each had different names based on the place. 'Individual shamans during seances named different ones with whom they were in communication or who took possession of them,' he writes. For Tagalogs, while there appears to be a belief in a creator god, Tagalog shamans invoked a 'multitude of deities, spirits and ancestors' as 'objects of worship in their own right.' See Scott, *Barangay,* pp. 79, 233. Thus, it is quite likely that a shaman would be channelling a male or female spirit/god at any given time.

[23] Scott, *Barangay,* p. 85.

[24] Scott, *Barangay,* p. 149.

[25] Scott, *Barangay,* p. 85.

[26] Perez, 'Relations of the *Zambals,*' p. 300.

[27] Sharyn Graham Davies, *Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam and Queer Selves,* London: Routledge, 2011.

[28] Brewer, *Holy Confrontation,* p. 322.

[29] Brewer, *Holy Confrontation,* p. 355.

[30] Brewer, *Holy Confrontation,* p. 316.

[31] Brewer, *Holy Confrontation,* p. 355.

[32] Alcina, *History of Bisayan Islands,* p. 225.

[33] Alcina, *History of Bisayan Islands,* pp. 120–26.

[34] I am grateful to Steven Fluckiger at the University of Hawai'i for pointing this example out and more of how indigenous women played an essential role in Christianising the Philippines, especially through syncretic means, through his thesis, published in 2018, 'She serves the Lord: Feminine power and Catholic appropriation in the Spanish Philippines.'

[35] Casimiro Diaz, 'In Otón (Panay); 1663,' in *The Philippine Islands 1493–1898,* ed. and trans. Emma Blair and James Robertson, vol. 38, Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1906, p. 218.

[36] Brewer, *Holy Confrontation,* p. 355.

[37] Alfred McCoy, 'Baylan: Animist religion and Philippine peasant ideology,' in *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 10, no. 3 (1983), 141–94, at p. 166.

[38] Brewer, *Holy Confrontation,* p. 317.

[39] Chirino, *Relacion,* p. 302.

[40] Chirino, *Relacion,* p. 304.

[41] Chirino, *Relacion,* p. 434.

[42] Chirino, *Relacion,* pp. 435–36.

[43] Chirino, *Relacion,* p. 294.

[44] Brewer, 'Baylan, asog, transvestism and sodomy.'

[45] Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture,* p. 175.

[46] Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture,* pp. 160–61.

[47] Whether the *asog/bayog* were completely celibate, is unclear. They are generally described as 'impotent' by Alcina in 1668; the *asog* in Bikol are described as 'unaccustomed to marriage with women' by Marcos de Lisboa in 1628; and among the Tagalogs, the *bayog* are said to 'sleep with men' in the Boxer Codex, written in 1590.

[48] Alcina, *History of Bisayan Islands,* p. 215.

[49] Francisco Combes, 'Historia de Las Islas de Mindanao,' in *The Philippine Islands 1493–1898,* ed. and trans. Emma Blair and James Robertson, vol. 40, Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, n.d., p. 192.

[50] Maria Milagros Geremia-Lachica, 'Panay's babaylan: The male takeover,' in *Review of Women's Studies* 6, no. 1 (1996): 53–60, at p. 57.

[51] McCoy, *Baylan,* p. 166.

[52] Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture,* p. 184.

[53] Donn V. Hart, 'Buhawi of the Bisayas: The revitalization process and legend making in the Philippines,' in *Studies in Philippine Anthropology in Honor of H. Otley Beyer,* ed. Mario D. Zamora, 366–94, Quezon City: Alemar Phoenix, 1967, at p. 373.

MAIN

Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.
URL: http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue48/ngu1.html

Page constructed by Carolyn Brewer
Last modified: 4 Dec. 2022 1801