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BEATA



# Women Who Usher in Ease and WellBeing

by Marianita C. Villariba

discovered three years ago in San Juan, Metro Manila, a woman who is able to move people into wellness. She touches and hears their organs, then molds these into shapes approximating the beauty with which these people were born. She whispers, sings and moves the spirit to guide her and the other person through illness and impairment.

Every broken bone, every strained muscle, every frayed nerve are treated all together like elements in a composition. She works with her hands, elbows, feet, toes and torso to bring the person back to a state of rhythm.

Her skill is such that she can even diagnose and heal by listening to a person's singing or talking through the telephone, and by creating a link which allows healer and healing person to release energies that move them from a crisis into a transformative state of wellbeing.

She calls her practice "chrysalis" and believes it her mission to make people conscious of their beauty, from cocoon to full butterfly. She is a *babaylan* or *katalonan*.

## THE BABAYLAN IN THE PHILIPPINES

In ancient Philippines, the *babaylan* was part of a socio-economic community with four key leaders (Salazar 1989). The *datu* was the political and economic leader, the *panday* was the blacksmith who specialized in welding tools and implements from iron, the *bayani* mastered the art of military defense, while the *babaylan* specialized in culture, religion, medicine and all kinds of knowledge about nature.

The root word of *katalonan* is *talon* which is an ancient Tagalog word for forest. It is used also to refer to waterfalls.

Forests were seen as sacred and appropriate venues for performing rites and rituals.

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They could carry the culture to a stage of psychic coherence and

*Babaylan* by Marianita C. Villariba  
and Ed de la Torre

mediate between the divine and the human. Their healing powers covered everything, from personal to social ills. They mastered not only the rituals, but also the myths, epics and other lore of their people. They sang, danced, created poetry and brought people to a state of wellbeing. They were the soul of indigenous religion.

The *babaylan* worked with the *datu* on the economy by deciding the time for clearing the forest in preparation for planting. Through her knowledge of astronomy, she recommended the system for agricultural work, the *kaingin* (slash-and-burn method), and also determined when to harvest (Salazar).

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The other function where the *datu* worked closely with the *babaylan* was the custom of headhunting, which was part of the agricultural system and guided by mythology and religious beliefs. In mythology, the ancient Filipinos lived in three realms: heaven, earth and the underworld. For bountiful agriculture, it was necessary to integrate the world of man on earth, in the sky and the world beneath. It was important to make the three worlds meet for one to attain cosmic perfection, and this was achieved by collecting the head of humans. The *babaylan* presided over the practice of headhunting, which served as insurance for a good harvest.

The *babaylan* also was in charge of the mythology of the *bayan* or town, the basic political unit in pre-colonial Philippines. The myths, which included the community's songs and epics, would grow in number and depth.

These also had a practical use—when they were used as rituals, of which there were many, ranging from those performed for personal to medical needs.

Virginity was not at all important for a woman to become a *babaylan* (Veneracion 1992). Rather, the requisites were her wisdom, beauty and talent, specially when she performed the song, dance and drama ritual. She would emulate the movements of the snakes and reptiles, considered sacred creatures from the underworld. The *babaylans* were women of menopausal age for it took them a long time before a *babaylan* could master the religious, cultural,

medical and other knowledge of their ethnolinguistic groups (Salazar 1989).

The *babaylan* was not just a literary head but also a healer and a psychologist. Knowledge of the psychological beliefs was imperative. For the *babaylan*, each person has a body which has a *kaluluwa* (soul) and *ginhawa* (wellbeing). The soul becomes the *anito* or spirit that leaves the body when a person dies. But death does not have to take place for the soul to leave the body. For example, when a person sleeps, the soul may travel or wander. Dreaming leads to wondering, which may lead to wandering or being captured by bad spirits or *aswang*, the frequent cause of sickness. The *ginhawa*, the spirit of life, remains within the body and should always be maintained and protected. This is located in the solar plexus.

### THE BABAYLAN AS SHAMAN

Demetrio (1990) and Eliade (1974) consider *babaylans* as shamans who, capable of engaging the spirits in order to determine the healing action—prayer, sacrifice, ritual, extraction of a harmful substance, or an ecstatic journey to retrieve a lost soul—were known as master healers.

Rahman (1959) and Eliade (1974) describe two types of shamans: "the masters of the ecstasy" and those capable of being mediums. The shamans of the first type are active agents. They could go into ecstasy and seek an astray soul, lead a dead soul to the land of the dead or cure the sick.

The soul journey is the most distinctive of the shaman's altered states of consciousness (ASCs). It is an ecstatic state and includes visualization.

She could go into a light trance and create vivid imagery. She could also go into a deeper trance state, taking a long journey where she may find the lost soul of a human and beckon this to follow her so it can return to its body.

With the second type of shamans, the ASC is a possession trance where they are taken over by spirits and become mediums.

Philippine shamans share many traits with other Southeast Asian shamans. Most, for instance, conduct their seance at night where the shaman starts by dancing and ends up unconscious. At this point, their soul goes in search of a stray soul or engages a spirit in dialog to find out the cause of illness and the appropriate cure. A predominant conception throughout the Indonesian area is that sickness is due to the flight of a person's soul (Eliade 1964).

The powers possessed by the *babaylans* could not simply be acquired by will. According to Jaime



Veneracion (1992), there were women who could secure this distinction only by undergoing tests such as surviving a long and serious illness or near-fatal accident.

### THE BABAYLAN WITH THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE 16TH CENTURY

The *babaylans*, being women and having the duties which priests performed, became the natural targets for conversion to Christianity. As Salazar noted, "the chemistry between the priests who should not relate with women—*babaylan*, who in turn would not relate to men—was a most titillating subject not only in terms of sexuality but also on the level of culture."

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The *babaylans* who were converted were relegated to marginal roles in church, taking charge of processions and preparations for altar rituals or serving as priests' assistants or maids.

Those who rejected the colonial worldview became revolutionaries and established messianic groups in cooperation with the *datu* and *bayani*. The *datus*, *bayanis* and *babaylans* mounted more and more rebellions, in the process preserving the *babaylans'* knowledge and traditions.

By their rebellious and anti-colonial tradition, these groups have managed to remain autonomous, identified now as tribes, cultural communities or indigenous peoples. They remain faithful to the functions presided by *babaylans*, and one can find them in Mt. Banahaw in Quezon province, in the Cordilleras, in Lumad communities, in Palawan, and wherever else one finds pre-colonial epics, songs, dances, drama and the whole mythology of the communities woven into the women's daily lives.

### THE BABAYLAN IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

In the Philippines, there are reports describing how female shamans experience the soul journey. The following is an excerpt from an interview conducted in 1975 by Finnish anthropologist H. Arlo Nimmo with Laisiha, a woman shaman in Tawi-Tawi, Sulu:

*It was early morning as I waded through the low*

*tide waters of the morrage, trying to decide a profitable but not too strenuous way to spend the day..*

*..I saw my friend Laisiha, an old female shaman, sitting at the end of her houseboat, looking extremely tired and under the weather. Out of genuine concern for the old woman, I asked if she [was] feeling well.*

*"Not at all," she replied as she spat a mouthful of betel juice into the water.*

*"What's the matter?" I asked.*

*"The evil spirits. They are up to no good again."*

*"What have they been doing?"*

*"They have tricked my grandson into going to Borneo."*

*"Tricked him?" I asked.*

*"Yes." said the old woman, shifting her cud of betel. "He had been away for almost a month, and we did not know where he went. I asked the spirits where he was and they said they tricked him into sailing to Borneo. But I didn't believe the spirits."*

*She went into a long discourse about the lying trickery of the spirits and the danger of ever believing the things they say.*

*"So I had to go to Borneo last night to see for myself."*

*"You went last night and are back now?" I asked cautiously. The round trip to Borneo normally took a week by Badjau boat.*

*"Yes. That's why I'm tired this morning."*

*"I see. How did you go?" I ventured.*

*"I flew," she said sharply, as if any fool would know that.*

*"You flew? By yourself?"*

*"Yes. Flying always makes me tired, and it was even worse last night because I was flying into the wind."*

*"And how was your grandson?" I asked.*

*"He's well. He is working there and will probably not be home for another month..."*

*I was to learn many more of Laisiha's fabulous experiences: trips to the bottom of the sea, journeys inside other person's bodies, visits to the invisible world, as well as her more mundane everyday conversations with the spirits. When I first heard of Laisiha's adventures, I thought that the old sweet woman must be either a charlatan or a bit over the edge of senility.*

*But by the end of my stay in the Philippines, I came to believe that perhaps Laisiha and her fellow shamans were able to communicate with a realm that most of us never experience.*

**T**oday, there are women who experience paranormal events that lead them to the path of the *babaylan*. During one of her mountain-



climbing expeditions, a noted local architect found, to her astonishment, the trees that she had earlier been greeting talking back to her and guiding her. Incredulous, she would ask for wind or rain as a form of reality check. Still the immediate environment would produce exactly what she had asked. She remained perplexed until she saw a rainbow that had appeared in her path multiply. She eventually realized that natural elements around her—the wind, sun, rain, trees and rainbow—were the signs of the spirit guiding her. The rainbow is her shaman icon, she says, which appears whenever she embarks on a task to lead her to complete a mission and provide the link to a realm best summed up as *kensho* or enlightenment.

The *babaylan* is still alive today but the great majority of women who perform some of her functions have yet to grasp the overarching elements of present times. On the other hand, the tradition of drawing from the best in our culture, and of synthesizing religious and medical elements with the workings of modern society's economy and politics are only vaguely evident, if at all, among our women doctors, healers, psychologists, teachers and religious leaders. The *babaylans* of the grassroots have yet to realize a community and achieve a level of discipleship where they can recreate a culture adapted to the present times.

### MODERN SCIENCE AND FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

The process of psychic healing has been and still is the subject of many scientific studies. A most interesting development in this area was the discovery of the link that the psychosomatic network establishes between emotions and the immun-endocrine network.

The popular belief that the immune system not only fights infections but also does the actual healing may have basis. In the early '80s, scientist Ed Blalock discovered the presence of peptides, including endomorphins, in immune cells. Shortly after, another scientist, Michael Ruff, found that the behavior of immune cells was largely influenced by receptors found in that part of the brain associated with emotions. These findings lend credence to the notion that emotions have some biochemical foundation—that when we experience feelings, our cells produce such neuropeptides and receptors.

Thus, from a medical perspective, it can be said that the shaman, by creating vivid images or inducing altered states of consciousness conducive to self-healing, has a direct therapeutic effect on a patient.

The idea that emotions can influence one's

physiology and move him or her towards either wellbeing or disease has convinced some researchers such as Candace Pert and Fritjof Capra to think of the "consciousness or the spirit coming first and the molecules second."

The *babaylan's* approach of establishing a soul and an afterlife provide people with meaning and symbolic action. It helps them endure many things, as Carl Jung discovered, and through this "creation of meaning, a new cosmos arises." Her practice of leading people into a ritual process can be seen as a merging of the unique self into a community both human and sacred, or what Charlene Spretnak calls entering a "state of grace." ♪

### Sources

1. Most of the *babaylan-katalonan* narratives were taken from Dr. Zeus Salazar's study "The *Babaylan* in Philippine History," translated from Pilipino by Proserpina Domingo Tapales, in *Women's Role in Philippine History: Selected Essays*, first ed., Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1989.
2. Citations from Demetrio, Eliade, Rahman and the interview of Nimmo with Laisiha were taken from *The Soul Book* by Francisco Demetrio, Fernando Zialcita and Gilda Cordero-Fernando, Quezon City: GCF Books, 1991. This book is rich with information on the ancient folk religion of the Filipinos and is highly recommended as a basic reader on pre-colonial religion.
3. The meaning of *babaylan* or *katalonan* was discussed by Jaime B. Veneracion in his study "From *Babaylan* to Beata: A Study on the Religiosity of Filipino Women," from *Review of Women's Studies*, Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1992.
4. Discussions on modern and alternative science were culled from "Candace Pert, PhD: Neuropeptides, Aids, and the Science of Mind-Body Healing," an interview by Bonnie Horrigan found in *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* 1, no. 3, July 1995. The findings on neurological states of shamans are presented in "The Interconnectivity of Mind, Brain and Behavior In Altered States of Consciousness: Focus on Shamanism," Peggy Ann Wright, also in *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* 1, no. 3, July 1995.
6. Numinous experience involves awareness of a holy presence apart from the self, whether through an encounter with an awesome numen (the holy) or a loving relationship with a personal "other." The term, coined by Rudolf Otto in 1917, has been adopted by many scholars. For further discussion on feminist spirituality and its critique of post-modernism, read also *States of Grace* by Charlene Spretnak, San Francisco: Harper, 1991.
7. "Why Women Need The Goddess" by Carol Christ in *Reader in Feminist Knowledge*, edited by Sneja Gunew, New York: Routledge, 1991.

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