

We've  
gotMale



# Resisting Religious Repression through **Memory, Medicine, and Movements**

*An Interview with Dr. Michael Tan*

*Dr. Michael Tan, a Philippine medical anthropologist, shares his informative and unadulterated critique of the religious hierarchy. Albeit pockets of resistance exist even within communities of faithful, the Roman Catholic Church has effectively wielded its powers to control sex and sexuality for couples, especially on women in the Philippines and beyond. This, notwithstanding lessons from history, scientifically-proven facts and medical ethics and even human nature itself.*

**Women in Action (WIA): Are there historical accounts on abortion in pre-colonial societies?**

**Michael Tan (MT):** Definitely. It is not surprising because in hunting and food-gathering societies, people practised abortion and infanticide to regulate fertility.

It was only in agricultural societies when abortion began to acquire a stigma. Agricultural societies wanted bigger families.

Abortion existed in all societies in the era before we had medical abortion. It was practised for the longest time simply because it was the only available form of family planning. People recognised the need to restrict the number of children because they had to move from one place to another and they had to feed the children.

In hunting-gathering societies, whenever people moved, the older people asked to be left behind. It was because they felt they would be a burden.

**WIA: How would you describe the relationship between the human rights perspective and a medical perspective on abortion?**

“Before *Roe v. Wade*, there was an active underground railway, a system of getting women to places where doctors were willing to perform an abortion. Among the most active people in this underground system were the religious,”

**MT:** They overlap. I know doctors who say that they do not believe in abortion. But, they also recognise that it might be a patient’s right. Some doctors perform abortion because they believe it is their duty as doctors to respond to patients’ rights. And they consider “patient’s rights” to be part of human rights.

Much of the discussion on rights now revolves around the idea of autonomy such as the individual’s right to choose.

**WIA: How would you describe the relationship of medicine and religion on the issue of abortion?**

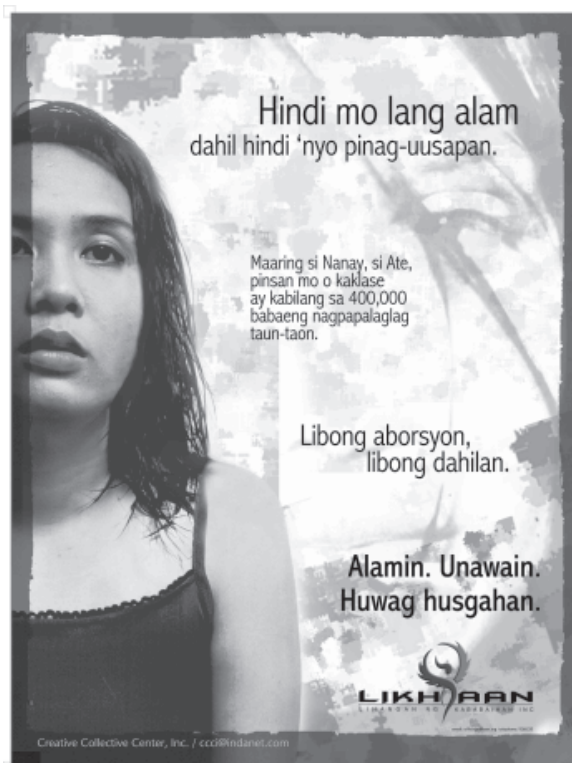
**MT:** Before *Roe v Wade*, abortion was illegal in the United States. But there was an active underground railway, a system of getting women to places where doctors were willing to perform an abortion.

Among the most active people in this underground system were the religious, such as Catholic and Protestant priests and ministers who believed that it was part of their ministry, of their work for social justice to get women their abortion services.

Thus, the link between medicine and religion, between abortion and religion is very, very strong. Unfortunately, what we hear now is a very cold and callous hierarchy that condemns women for abortion. But if more women and more doctors told their stories about abortion, people might become more understanding.

**WIA: What can you say about abortion in the Philippine context?**

**MT:** We are in a dilemma because there is a conservative Catholic hierarchy which does not want abortion but is also



*This particular Likhaan poster highlights the clandestine nature of abortion both as a subject and practice. Despite abortion's pervasiveness through the 400,000 estimated cases yearly, opportunities of discussing and understanding abortion as an issue of social justice are often denied.*

opposed to family planning which can prevent abortion. We are in a Catch-22 situation.

In the Philippines, legally you cannot get an abortion even for health reasons, not even when the mother's life is in danger. We are one of four countries in the world where abortion is not allowed under any circumstance. There are some people who say abortion can be performed in such cases.

From a clinical viewpoint, depriving a woman of abortion, particularly if her health is in danger, violates her right to health and survival.

**WIA: How about cases of rape?**

**MT:** *Bawal din sa atin* [That is also illegal here]. Some people say that a woman has the right to abortion when she does not want to bear the child of a rapist. But the Catholic Church disagrees. You see it very clearly in the Vatican's recent moves. It has been canonising women who died due to child birth. The Church views them as martyrs. The message there is *'Magtiis kayo* [Sacrifice], even when you don't want the child, even when it comes from a rapist. It is a gift. Accept it.'

**WIA: So should abortion advocates in the Philippines work to lessen the influence of the Catholic Church?**

**MT:** My stand is that the Church is the people of God. The Church is not the bishops. It is not the priests. It is the women and the men who form the Church. Therefore, it will be the Catholics themselves who will eventually come out and tackle the issues of family planning and abortion. There are so many Catholics who practise family planning, saying *'I am Catholic. My conscience is clear. I will practise family planning.'*

Abortion is a bit more difficult. But there are also Catholic priests and nuns who look at it as an issue of justice.

When you look at the campaigns right now, there is an appeal for compassion, for people not to be judgmental. Anti-abortion groups are too quick to judge the women who had abortions, attributing their decisions to the most frivolous reasons like vanity and selfishness.

To be truly Christian is to understand that these are difficult decisions. The decisions are made with so many considerations.

That's why Likhaan posters are instructive. One says, *'Puwedeng kapatid mo, puwedeng nanay mo, puwedeng anak mo... huwag batulan'* [it can be your sister, it can be your mother, it can be your daughter...don't judge her].

Another poster says that behind every abortion is a story. That is what bishops, priests, and anti-abortion groups do not see. If it were their own daughter, their own sister, would they be as quick to pass judgment?

I think the bigger picture is that the Roman Catholic Church has many problems dealing with sex and sexuality. The Church does not like women. That is the baseline. They see women as dangerous, as temptresses. All the strictures and prohibitions are really attempts to control women, to make sure that they continue to reproduce.

When you look at the history of the Church, the value of women has been reduced to that of a reproducer.

The Roman Catholic Church also does not like sex and sexuality. The only valid reason for sex is reproduction. This is a built-in ideology, preventing us to move to the next step of understanding that sex can be for pleasure, that it can enhance a couple's relationship.

The Catholic Church has to understand how current teachings propagate an ideology of male dominance. The idea that one's worth rests on reproduction encourages machismo among men, while reducing women to breeders. That is why the whole discussion around family planning has to be in the context of gender rights. ■

**Michael Tan**

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## Abortion in Pre-industrial Societies



Abortion was a normative practice in many societies prior to the development of sophisticated economic exchanges, including capitalism; the spread of colonialism; and the rise of the modern nation states. Various anthropological accounts indicate that abortion practices were largely defined by the dominant social relations in given societies.

In 1955, George Devereux compiled accounts on abortion from over 400 pre-industrial societies in order to “provide an objective proof for the valid and generally accepted—but, oddly enough, never systematically proven—axiom that cultural

*diversity demonstrates the tremendous plasticity and variability of human behaviour.”* His book, *A Study of Abortion in Primitive Societies* covers ethnic groups, mostly in the Andes, North America, Africa, Australia, and Polynesia. Women availed of abortion for various reasons, such as the following:

**NOMADIC LIVING** – Constantly moving from one place to another posed limitations to families. It was a custom among Cheyenne Indians not to have a second child until the firstborn was 10 years old. Pregnant women of Guaycuru (Brazil and Paraguay) resorted to abortion due to fears their husbands might leave them.

**FAMILY PLANNING** – Abortion was widely used then to control the number of children as in the cases of the Eskimos, Amazon Indians, Igorot (Philippines), Buru (Malaysia), Fiji (Fiji) and Malagasy (Madagascar), among many other societies.

**UNWANTED FATHERS** – Masai women (Kenya) availed of abortion when the fathers of their babies were alien, sick, or old. Pregnancy was also terminated in Tikopia (British Solomon Islands) when the father was unknown. Under the Japanese colonial law, Korea allowed abortion for pregnancies resulting from rape. Similarly, abortion was an option for Gunantuna women (Melanesia), whose children were fathered by close relatives.

Class structure also played a role in communities such as Sedang moi (Indochina), Tupinamba (Brazil), and Toradja (Celebes) when the father was a slave, and/or conversely, when a prince impregnated a woman slave. Abortion was also a recourse for poor Bali (Indonesia) women whose husbands were killed.

**CHILD-BEARING AGE** – Abortion was employed when pregnancies occurred among young girls who had not undergone puberty rites as in the case of the Maori (New Zealand), Masai, and Owambo (Namibia). In Formosa (now Taiwan), women were not allowed to conceive until they reached the age of 34 years and in some parts, 37.

Among the Chagga women (Tanzania), old age was also a ground for abortion. They were not encouraged to have babies after their daughters got married.

**DIFFICULTY IN CHILD BIRTH** - The Kai, Purari and Apinaye women (Papua New Guinea) dreaded pregnancy and the pains of childbirth. Purari women would climb the tall and smooth Pairu tree while Apinaye women created a compound, mainly consisting of tinguy shrub and urucu, and spread this on their bellies. Turkish women and native Americans living along the Zuni river (now a tributary of the Colorado river) likewise resorted to abortion once they foresaw that childbirth would be too difficult, especially in the case of triplets. There were also women such as those of the Chaco Indian communities who provoked a miscarriage during their first pregnancy to facilitate the delivery of their next child.

**DEFORMED FETUS**- There were instances when abortion was performed after the Efik mothers (Nigeria and Cameroon) learned the ill health of the babies in their wombs. Ethnic groups such as the Cocama (Peru) viewed a deformed fetus as a child of the spirits. Meanwhile, the Jivaro (Ecuador) and Dayak (Borneo) aborted their children when they were convinced that demons impregnated them.

**COLONIAL RESISTANCE**- Abortion was also used as a form of colonial resistance, especially in Australia, and in Spanish colonies in America. Apathy to the missionary activities in certain parts of what is now Australia and Samoa encouraged mothers to terminate their pregnancies. Abortion became rampant in Spanish colonies like Antilles and Guam, especially in cases where women were impregnated by the colonisers. There were also mothers who opted to have their babies aborted to save them from slavery. Devereux notes that *“these mass abortions went hand in hand with mass suicides, and represented a more or less definite attempt at race suicide.”*

Source: Devereux, George (1955). *A Study of Abortion in Primitive Societies*. New York: The Julian Press.