

Song of the Babaylan: Living Voices, Medicines, Spiritualities of Philippine Ritualist-Oralist-Healers
Grace Nono. Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2013, 400 pp. ISBN 9789719517030.

Divided into three major sections, *Song of the Babaylan* attempts to reintroduce the nearly forgotten *babaylan* practices of healing, divination, and spirit possession to modern readers. In the first part, “Invocations,” Grace Nono shares her exposure to the Philippine shamanistic tradition. In laying down her research methods, she informs us that she selected resource persons from the Kalinga, Ibaloi, Maguindanao, Manobo, Ibanag, Tagbanua, Cebuano, and Tagalog ethnolinguistic groups. On her methodology, she claims that “instead of beginning with the theoretical problems, the ethnographer can begin with informant-expressed needs, then develop a research agenda to relate these topics to the enduring concerns within social science...” (33).

Moreover, Nono situates the *babaylan* in a historico-cultural frame, narrating the history of the *babaylan* across pre-Hispanic, Hispanic, and American eras. It also shows the present-day *babaylan*, re-casts them in a more positive light, and challenges the accounts of the colonizers of the Philippines who described the *babaylan* as servants of the devil. She quotes from several authors to support her claim of the *babaylan*’s potency as healers and community leaders vis-à-vis Western medical practitioners.

The second section of the book, “Song of the Babaylan,” features transcriptions of ritual performances, as well as pedagogic illustrations, while the third part, “Reflections and Recommendations” organizes and features Nono’s interpretation of her data.

The transcriptions of the ritual texts are undeniably valuable, but I have some reservations on Nono’s framework and methodology. First, while explaining the role of the *babaylan* in the history of the Philippines, Nono makes a sweeping claim that they were fierce defenders of the land (13). This may be true to a certain extent, but many *babaylan* also

embraced the Catholic faith and became devout Christians or *hermanas* (literally “sisters” in Spanish) [Salazar 1999, 23] lest they be relegated to the margins of society.

Second, Nono states that she “purposely sought the participation of those who have upheld their pre-Christian and pre-Islamic practices” (36). The book attempts to place *babaylanism* in its proper historical context and its rootedness on its pre-Hispanic past, but this endeavour is undercut by the fact that the interpretation and translation of the data she gathered reveal that such practices are already tainted with the very influence the researcher wanted to avoid—Christianity/modernity. Gone are the “foaming in the mouth, fiery eyes, hair standing on ends, etc.” (Placencia, 190) that Christian missionaries observed when the *babaylan* were under spirit possession. And that the *babaylan* uses the combined texts of the prayers “Hail Mary,” “Our Father,” “Glory Be,” and calls to the soul of a departed (182–188, 190–191) shows that Christianity has already altered the vocabulary of shamanistic rituals, which, then as now, take on both Catholic and folk characteristics.

Third, I also find the blurring of boundaries between the “self and other” (39) equally problematic. This blurring is part of Nono’s attempt to free herself from the rigors of traditional Western anthropology. The author emphasizes *pakikipawa* (interpersonal relationship) which she adopted to Filipinize her approach. She quotes Obusan, who writes that “[T]he emerging picture of the Filipino *mananaliksik* or researcher is... not as an objective bystander, zealously guarding his/her data against contamination. The Filipino *mananaliksik* is one who sees the *kapwa* (neighbour, fellow man) not as a mere subject, but as a *kapwa*-Filipino who carries indigenous knowledge within him/herself” (ibid.). Nono claims right away that “I am that *mananaliksik* whom Obusan refers to, and the *babaylan*/carrier of indigenous knowledge is my *kapwa*-Filipino... (39)” Furthermore, Nono cites Kisliuk, who says that “[t]he most in-depth and intimate field experiences intersect with both a researcher’s life stories and a researcher’s subject’s until self-other boundaries are blurred” (ibid.). However, self-other boundaries will always remain. No matter how deep the conversations

and interactions become, there will always be differences in perspectives—everyone is separated by a number of culturally-specific endowments, like language, education, religion, worldview, etc.

Despite these inconsistencies, the work is still among the very few scholarly pieces that cover great archipelagic areas that cradle the babaylan, the *daitan*, the *catalonan*, the *balyan*, et. al. The babaylan has been hidden under the cloak of Westernization and the trappings of Christianity and modernity, but the murmurs, the prayers, the people, especially modern women (feminists), are once again summoning and highlighting pre-Christian images of the babaylan—a cultural leader, medicine man/woman who establishes a link between the here and the hereafter.

The accompanying CD to the book presents an interesting mixture of sung/chanted “pedagogic/al illustrations” (63, etc.) and actual ritual texts transcribed in the second section. It gives the reader/listener an idea that however Westernized some of the prayers/texts have become, the forms, melodies, and performances that embody the rituals continue to adhere to the praxis of the pre-Hispanic society in the Philippines. Nono admonishes would-be listeners “to listen with respect and an open heart” (inside back cover) before they “enter” the world of the babaylan.

Song of the Babaylan is a personal crusade as much as it is a scholarly endeavor. And as it is about ancient religious practices that came under attack through the Westernizing gaze of Catholic Spain, it is therefore wise to take time to look back, read and listen, as spirits might still be at hand to fill gaps in our modern worldview. Nono admits to her being an advocate of the babaylan tradition, which her book admiringly aims to preserve. It narrates the past and present of this cultural practice for future generations so that they can appreciate the remnants of a tradition that is still fighting for survival and recognition.

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