Male Homosexuality in the Philippines: a short history

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. Swirling their hips from side to side, nothing seemed to threaten these thriving dimwits except their heavy pancake makeup, which could run at any moment under the sweltering tropical sky.

When visitors to the Philippines remark that Filipinos openly tolerate and/or accept homosexuality, they invoke of course the country’s long-standing discursive tradition in which cross-dressing and butch-y, cross dressing men (bakla) swishing down streets and squealing on television programmes with flaming impunity. This is sadly misaligned. 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 parorinos (beauticians) for instance, and during carnivalsque celebrations and fiestas. In fact, Filipinos have yet to witness the kind of mass transvestism as legitimate in ‘serious’ professions – male senators filibustering from the podium wrapped in elegant, two-toned parasols, or CEOs strutting around open-air malls wearing 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 be able to display affec- tion in public. They would be able to dress as women, act like women, see not just flaming transvestites sashaying down Manila’s busy sidewalks in broad daylight. Swiveling their hips, skirts and designer leather pumps. Despite this, Filipinos have yet to see transvestism thriving, even threatening, as they were considered lepers and figures of authority. To their native communities they were babaylan or catalonsan: religious functionaries and shamans, intermediaries between the visible and invisible worlds to whom the local ruler (pata) deferred. They placated angry spirits, foetuses, the future, healed infertility and were the ones who married the cross dressed couples and tribes.

Donning the customary clothes of women was part of a larger identity for them not only assumed the outward appearance and demeanor of women, but were granted social and symbolic recognition as ‘somewhat women’. They were com- parable to women in every way except that they could not bear children. Osiwi- cas tell us they were ‘married’ to men, with whom they had sexual relations. These men treated their womanish part- ners like concubines; being men, they had wives with whom they had their obligatory children.

Gender crossing

We know from Spanish accounts of encounters with conquistadors and the archipelago’s various islas that gen- der crossing is a part of everyday life, a cultural feature 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, bayguin, bayot, agi-ngin, eung, bido and binabur. They were significant not because they crossed male and female gender lines. To the Spanish, they were aston- ishing, even threatening, as they were respected leaders and figures of author- ity. To their native communities they were babaylan or catalonsan: religious functionaries and shamans, intermediaries between the visible and invisible worlds to whom the local ruler (pata) deferred. They placated angry spirits, foetuses, the future, healed infertility and were the ones who married the cross dressed couples and tribes.

Donning the customary clothes of women was part of a larger identity for them 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. Osiwi- cas 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.

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.

While his effeminacy and transvestic displays place him in a long line of excep- tional 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 half-heartedly propagated through the con- fessional. Such acts were nevertheless temporary and surmountable, a weak- ness 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 con- demned by men with men, women with women, and men and women with ani- mals. Even so, the gender crossing’s sex- ual predications for and acts with men simply attended – and did not deter- mine – her redefined status as ‘woman-

like.’ This status denoted what was more properly a gendered rather than a sexu- alized form of social being. By contrast, by plunging with his swishy ways in a helplessly macho cul- ture 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 ‘politicised’ Filipino gay writers and artists. These ‘gay texts’ demonstrate how the very people who have been pathologized by the Ameri- can sexualogical 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 ascep- tances of those 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 ‘affirmative homosexuality’ among the Philippine’s Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilongo and Tausug ethnic communities.
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