



The Philippines

by Ruth M. Pettis

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The Philippine Islands are sometimes extolled in the West as a homoerotic paradise, to the point of having been promoted as a sex-positive destination for gay male tourists. However, the perspectives from Filipino glbtq people themselves are much more complex, as traditional tolerance--in certain spheres--has encountered and reacted to gay liberationist, feminist, and conservative thinking from abroad.

People and History

The Republic of the Philippines, lying 500 miles east of the Southeast Asian mainland, comprises over 7000 islands having a total land mass roughly the size of Nevada. The principal islands are Luzon, Mindoro, Negros, Cebu, and Mindanao. Luzon, in the north, is the site of the capital, Manila, which with its environs is home to 10 million people.

Most Filipinos are of Malay extraction, but indigenous tribal groups that predate Malayan immigration form minority populations. Intermarriage with Chinese, Spanish, and Americans has also affected the ethnic mix. As a result of 400 years of Spanish rule, 85% of the population is Roman Catholic. Protestants represent another 9%, with a Muslim minority--known as Moros--concentrated on Mindanao in the south.

The linguistic situation is equally complex. English and Pilipino are the official languages, the latter based on the indigenous Tagalog with Spanish elements. Cebuano is another important language, spoken principally among residents of the central islands. In all, an estimated 70 Malayo-Polynesian language varieties can be found.

Spain ceded the islands to the United States at the close of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Administered as an American commonwealth until the Japanese invasion of 1941, they became a republic on July 4, 1946. Martial law declared by Ferdinand Marcos in 1972 lasted until he was challenged successfully by Corazon Aquino in 1986. The current president is Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who assumed office in 2001.

Conflict plagues the southern islands, particularly Mindanao, where the Philippine army has been fighting Muslim separatist rebels belonging to the Abu Sayyaf group. Tourists were taken hostage in 2001 and 2002, and several were killed.

Gender Variance in Traditional Philippine Society

Despite the widespread observance of Catholicism, research undertaken among Cebuano speakers on the island of Negros in the 1950s and 1960s by anthropologist Donn Hart documented the longstanding presence there of gender-variant individuals. In most cases they were the subjects of gossip or amusement, but rarely of overt hostility.



Top: The Philippines and neighboring countries in 2004.

Above: An aerial view of Manila, the capital of the Philippines.

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Hart encountered "*báyot*" (sing. and pl.--best translated as "effeminate men") in both village and urban settings. An intricate terminology differentiated *báyot* by degree, from slightly effeminate (*dalopapa* or *binabáye*) to "true" *báyot* who cross-dressed and took female terms of address. The corresponding Tagalog term is "*bakla*."

In contrast, a single term, *lakin-on* ("masculine women"), applied to women in a wide variety of circumstances: heterosexual females who had masculine features, who preferred male clothing, or who performed typically male work; or masculine-appearing lesbians who took women as partners. Hart's informants described some as having a "brave look," who "smoke and drink like men."

One informant recalled *báyot* during her youth in the 1880s. Documents from Spanish colonial times mention the non-conforming gender behavior (cross-dressing) of Filipino male shamans. *Báyot* and non-*báyot* alike considered such conditions as natural and biologically inherited.

Modern Conditions

Homosexual activity is legal in the Philippines as long as it is not carried out in public places. Sexual contact by adults with minors under 18 is illegal. There have been attempts to pass legislation banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, but none has yet passed.

In 2009, the Armed Forces of the Philippines announced that gay men and lesbians would be permitted to serve in the military openly, though overt homosexual behavior would not be tolerated.

The fact that masculine-appearing men are not stigmatized by same-sex relations, and that *bakla* are willing to pay for sex with young males, has given rise to the "call boy" phenomenon. Owing as much to economic conditions as to sexual mores, working as a call boy is generally viewed as an acceptable supplement to family income. The availability of call boys in cruising areas frequented by gay male tourists has contributed to the perception of the Philippines as a gay-tolerant society.

The 1970s saw the popularization of a gay male argot called "swardspeak." Highly sexualized and depending on enunciation and delivery for effect, it became associated with the entertainment industry and bohemian lifestyles.

For Filipino gays the Tagalog phrase "pagladlad ng kapa" refers to the coming out process. Literally it means "unfurling the cape."

Progay-Philippines, founded in 1993, is the principal gay rights organization and has a predominantly male membership. It carried out the first gay march in the country in June of 1994. A lesbian rights organization, Can't Live in the Closet (CLIC), also began in 1993 and carries on a number of advocacy, service, and cultural activities.

Transgender activist Alyssa Sasot has reported online regarding the status of transsexuals in the Philippines. Sex-reassignment surgery is available, although as of 2002 there were only two physicians performing it. Male-to-female transsexuals are sometimes confused in the public eye with cross-dressing *bakla*. Likewise, "tomboy" can refer to a female-to-male person or to a masculine-appearing lesbian. The Society of Trans & Gender Rights Advocates of the Philippines documents incidents of discrimination and hostility against gender-variant Filipinos.

Cultural Interpretations

Some observers have interpreted elements of gender-variance in Filipino culture as analogues of queer expressions in the West. Whitam and Mathy, for example, after devoting enthusiastic attention to contemporary *bakla* and their prominence in decorative and theatrical professions, argue--with

unrestrained zeal--that such cross-cultural manifestations are evidence for the biological basis of homosexuality.

In an often-cited travel guide for gay men, Joseph Itiel--while acknowledging local ambivalence in sexual attitudes--nevertheless celebrates encounters with Filipino call boys and companions as indications of a characteristically "easy-going" sexual climate.

However, Filipino poet and essayist J. Neil Garcia warns against assuming parallels between the indigenous gender-crossed identity of the *bakla/báyot* and the Western concept of gayness. Observing that "gays get laughed at here a lot, but very rarely are they beaten up," he sees this phenomenon as an indication that gay men and lesbians are not taken seriously and thus not perceived as a threat to the social order.

For Garcia, a western-style gay movement has been difficult to establish in the Philippines because of an inherent "class conflict" between the effeminate *bakla* (who often work in pink-collar occupations) and their masculine partners. Because the latter escape any stigma associated with homosexuality, they do not have as great an investment in issues of gay rights. He cites the example of the first gay rally in the Manila area in June of 1994. While it received tolerant media attention, only 50 attended; weekend parties drew far greater numbers.

Garcia finds the Philippine situation a useful setting for examining the arguments between social constructionist (stemming from social conditions) versus essentialist (inherent) explanations of homosexuality. Dismissing Whitam and Mathy as "shamefully essentialist," Garcia sees the relationship of the *bakla* and his partner as grounded in indigenous patterns of gender assumptions, not easily categorized in Western terms. At the same time, he rejects a purely nativist approach, arguing that Philippine culture has undergone inevitable (and probably irrevocable) Westernization, making such arguments academic.

Eduardo Nierras thinks that neither constructionism nor essentialism alone provides an adequate vocabulary for Philippine gays. For gay male identity politics to have relevance in the Philippines, he notes, it must acknowledge (with respect to the West) their "different desires." Anthropologist Michael Tan also refutes the idea that the Philippines are an open society regarding homosexuality. He observes considerable ambivalence, with conservative right-wing values imported along with liberationist views.

In the Philippines as elsewhere, AIDS stigmatized gays but also galvanized community-building efforts, as it affects both *bakla* and their partners.

Filipina Lesbians

Recent anthologies, such as Anna Sarabia's *Tibok: Heartbeat of the Filipino Lesbian* (1998) and Santos and Villar's *Woman to Woman* (1994), have broken ground for expressions of contemporary lesbian culture. Unlike gay male writing, which devotes much attention to the traditional *bakla*, lesbian feminist prose in English has not invoked images of *lakin-on*, either as a romantic archetype or as a model for female assertiveness. Popular terms for lesbians such as "tomboy" and "t-bird" are obvious imports.

Many of the issues discussed by Filipina lesbians (visibility within the larger women's movement, family and religious pressures) will be familiar to western activists. The positions of lesbian organizations such as Can't Live In the Closet (CLIC) are phrased in terms linking them squarely within the contemporary global discourse on women's rights and economic emancipation.

As Aquino's and Macapagal-Arroyo's presidencies show, women have had important economic and political roles in Filipino society. However, as in other third-world countries, economic concerns often override other issues. Many Filipinas, regardless of orientation, face pressure to work abroad or marry well to help lift their families out of poverty.

Globalization of mass media influences has facilitated the importation of conservative religious views as well as liberal ones. For Filipino sexual minorities, preserving their traditional legacy on their own terms is an important challenge in the new century.

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