

# HANDING DOWN THE MA-ARAM TRADITION: KEEPING THE BODY AND SOUL TOGETHER

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*This paper is largely based from the interview with anthropologist Dr. Alice Magos whose pioneering work on the babaylans in the Province of Antique in southern Panay brought to light the ma-aram (wisdom) tradition. There she observed how the babaylan is formed and initiated into the spiritual world of her/his ancestors in order to keep and hand on this wisdom tradition to the next generation. The babaylan provides the “institutional” or communal memory of the people as she/he narrates the community’s history, traces its ancestral lineage, and chants the stories that shape its people. This narrative could help frame the engagement in doing interreligious dialogue with the indigenous people as well as offer ways on how to convey the Christian tradition to a people whose heritage is closely linked to that of the babaylan’s, and with a worldview shaped by this indigenous tradition.*

*Key words: Babaylan, ma-aram (wisdom) tradition, primary oral culture, **sapi** or **magtabid***

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is based largely on the interviews with Dr. Alicia P. Magos, an anthropologist-educator and professor emeritus at the University of the Philippines Visayas (UPV). Dr. Magos is known for her work on the *Sugidanon* (from the Hiligaynon term *sugid*, to tell), a collection of epics from Central Panay. Her scholarly work with the *suludnon* (indigenous people in the interior parts of the mountain) or the Panay *bukidnon* (mountain people of Panay) spans almost five (5) decades. It started in the late 1960’s when she

delved into the *ma-aram*<sup>1</sup> (from the root word *aram*, a *Kinaraya* term for wisdom or knowledge) tradition of the indigenous people (IP) in Antique where she unveiled the ancient tradition of the *babaylan*, commonly known as a “healer” and a mediator of the spirits. Her pioneering work positioned the *babaylan* within the context of the wisdom tradition of the *Bisayans*, particularly those from the town of Mariit,<sup>2</sup> Antique, a province in Panay. Her work probed how the *aram* (wisdom, knowledge) of the village is handed down from one generation to the other. The villagers uniquely refer to their *babaylan* as *ma-aram* (knowledgeable, wise). Dr. Magos in her study and publication, uses the term *babaylan* alternately with *ma-aram*, and discloses how they are formed through the wisdom tradition of their ancestors.<sup>3</sup> In her years of study of this *ma-aram* tradition, she showed the unique practice of the Maritnon *babaylan* not found in their counterparts in the Philippines. Here she emphasized the importance of genealogy in terms of succession and transmission of the *ma-aram* tradition in the town of Mariit, Antique.

The first part of this paper deals with how the *babaylan* is called and prepared to perform his or her tasks as a mediator of spirits, a healer, and keeper of tradition. I hope that this section could offer some insights that may help us address the question on how we hand on the Christian faith tradition to a people whose heritage is closely linked with the *babaylan*'s and a worldview shaped by this indigenous tradition. This is important, as the history of Christianization in Panay involved the persecution of the *babaylans* as could be gleaned from the writings of the Spanish missionaries. Dr. Magos wrote that, “[i]dols were confiscated and burned while priestesses were punished with the intention of putting an end to the idolatrous practice of the natives.”<sup>4</sup>

The second part explores how the primary oral culture of the indigenous people, handed down from one generation to

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<sup>1</sup> See Alicia P. Magos, *The Enduring Ma-Aram Tradition: An Ethnography of a Kinaraya Village in Antique*, (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Dr. Magos, the name of the town, Mariit, is a fictitious one, as the IP did not want their location to be known to the general public. *Mariit* in *kinaraya* means dangerous.

<sup>3</sup> Magos, *The Enduring Ma-aram Tradition*, Prologue, xi.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

another, endures through centuries. Do we really cross the cultural border that seems to divide us? Or, do we simply revisit the primary oral culture that influenced most of how we see our world and the way we live in it? Here the interviews with Dr. Magos are crucial as her pioneering work gives us glimpses on how it is to act as a mediator between two seemingly distinct cultures that occupy the same space and history, like in Panay. This part also probes the question, “How could a scholar become a *ma-aram* (knowledgeable, wise) and grow into a mediator, a potential reconciler (*manughusay*) and a keeper of this primary oral tradition in a society that puts premium to literacy as the hallmark of an *alamun* (intelligent, knowledgeable)?”

The third part offers some pathways on how the Christian faith tradition could interface with the *ma-aram* tradition of the *babaylans* given that they were almost decimated in the country.

With these in mind, let me help unveil the making of the *ma-aram*.

### THE BABAYLAN

The *babaylan* in this paper, refers to the folk healer, mediator of the spirits, and community reconciler in a particular mountain town of Antique, one of the provinces in Panay, an island in Western Visayas. The *babaylan*, according to Dr. Magos, is an “integral part of the pre-Hispanic Filipino life” and still exists in some parts of the rural Philippines, including in some interior towns of Central and Southern Panay.<sup>5</sup> The *babaylan* in the pre-Hispanic Philippines is a spirit medium, a priest or priestess who could communicate with the spirits that could either harm or make the person well.<sup>6</sup> The term *babaylan* is derived from a classical Malay word “*belian*, *balian* or *waylan* in Java, Bali, Borneo and Halmaheram”; and this refers to a person who could contact the

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> See Fides A. del Castillo, “Christianization of the Philippines: Revisiting the Contributions of Baroque Churches and Religious Art,” *Mission Studies* 32, no. 1 (2015): 1-19, <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/15733831/32/1>.

spirits through an elaborate ritual in order to heal the sick.<sup>7</sup> Other than possessing spiritual powers, the *babaylan* likewise exerts political influence in the community. Historically in the Visayan islands, the *babaylans* were instrumental in leading the people's revolt against the oppressive rule of the Spanish colonizers who imposed Catholicism on the local population and suppressed the native religion deemed superstitious by the colonizers.<sup>8</sup> In the island of Panay from 1700's to 1800's, the Augustinian friars recorded the annual gatherings of the *babaylans* in the mountains of Tubungan in southern Iloilo.<sup>9</sup> According to this written document, the friars observed the organized and collective power of the *babaylans* which was then regarded as an obstacle to the proselytizing activity of the Spanish colonizers.<sup>10</sup> Then, too, because of the esteemed position that these *babaylans* held in their communities, the peasants turned to them in their revolt against the oppressive rule of the colonizers. Throughout the country's colonial history, the *babaylans* were not only perceived as obstacles in the flourishing of the Catholic faith but likewise seen as political threats to the American-supported revolutionary government in Negros and Panay that took over the rule from the Spaniards.<sup>11</sup> The political repression persisted even after the American rule, pushing out the *babaylans* and driving them further into the mountains. But since the *babaylans* are healers not warriors, they persisted to perform the rituals of healing to continue this tradition in the island of Panay and the province of Negros Occidental.<sup>12</sup> And because the people who abide in this tradition have been driven into the interior parts of the mountains, they are also referred to as *suludnon* (literally means people from the interior parts of the mountain), a term coined by the late Filipino anthropologist, F. Landa Jocano. It is worth noting that the indigenous people (IP) do

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<sup>7</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, "Baylan: Animist Religion and Philippine Peasant Ideology," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 10, no.3 (1982): 144, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29791795>.

<sup>8</sup> Magos, *The Enduring Ma-aram Tradition*, 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

not self-identify as *suludnon* as could be gleaned from the ethnographic study of Dr. Magos where the IPs referred to themselves as *tumandok* (native) of a particular town, like Mariit; or a *bukidnon* (mountain dweller). In this paper, the term *Mariitnon* will be used to identify the IPs from a particular town in Antique and Panay *bukidnon*, for the indigenous people who dwell in the mountains of Panay. Given their history and location, how did this *babaylan* tradition endure?

### UNVEILING THE WISDOM TRADITION OF THE BABAYLANS: WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

In the *ma-aram* tradition, the healing power of the *babaylan* comes from his/her ability to “see” or discern the presence of *dungan* in an individual person. *Dungan* (roughly translated as soul or *kaluluwa* in Tagalog, *kalag* in Hiligaynon) is what animates the person. This is also considered as the seat of emotion, knowledge, life, and well-being of the person.<sup>13</sup> It could also be considered as a “companion spirit”<sup>14</sup> as *dungan* in Hiligaynon also means togetherness.

This *dungan* could escape the body through the mouth, nose, or the ear and could be snatched by malevolent spirits causing maladies and illnesses in an individual. Other spirits could also possess an individual especially if the person’s *dungan* is weak. The power of the *ma-aram* or the *babaylan* lies in his/her mastery of identifying what maladies or illnesses are caused by a particular environmental or supernatural spirit. In this context, the power of the *babaylan* to heal comes from his/her gifts of being able to communicate or relate with these spirits.

Healing rituals are done to invoke the help of the ancestral spirits to mediate between the earthly and supernatural beings. The primary focus of the *babaylan* is the well-being of the human person thus he/she is concerned about the state of the person’s *dungan*. As

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>14</sup> See also the early works of F. Landa Jocano on the *suludnon*, in F. Landa Jocano, “The Sulod: A Mountain People in Central Panay, Philippines,” *Philippine Studies* 6, no. 4 (1958): 401-36, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42720408>.

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the term *dungan* also connotes togetherness, it could mean that the body and soul are together, or are one. Or, it could also be seen as the ancestor's spirit inhabiting (*magtabid* in Hiligaynon) the person is in sync with the *dungan* of that same person. It is in this context that the *babaylan's* mediation with the environmental and supernatural spirits could be better understood and appreciated.

The Panay *bukidnon* believe that the universe has seven layers inhabited by the creatures and the spirits:<sup>15</sup>

First layer	the base which is uninhabited
Second layer	comprises of water with sea-living creatures ( <i>tubignon</i> )
Third layer	made of soil and occupied by the <i>idalmunon</i> or the underground spirits
Fourth layer	the earth's center is inhabited by humans and other <i>engkantu</i> or <i>lupan-on</i> (spirits living on land)
Fifth layer	the atmosphere directly above the earth is inhabited by the environmental or supernatural spirits
Sixth layer	home of the spirits of the deceased ancestors (ancestral spirits), the "progenitors" of the present-day <i>ma-aram</i> . The angels and the saints share this space with them (they are referred to as <i>ibabaunon</i> , roughly translated as people living above; and <i>langitnon</i> , literally from the heaven who are close to the <i>Maka-ako</i> )
Seventh layer	the space occupied by the <i>Maka-ako</i> (Creator) or the Supreme Being

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<sup>15</sup> Magos, *The Enduring Ma-aram Tradition*, 51.

The *babaylan* or the *maaram* only deals with the fourth, fifth, and sixth layers and she/he is in communion with the spirits of the deceased ancestors. The spirits that inhabit the sixth layer are also believed to be the only ones who could communicate with the Supreme Being or the (*Maka-ako*). This solidifies the role of the *babaylan* as the mediator who could present the petitions of the mortal beings to the spirits who could intercede with the *Maka-ako*. From this perspective, the *Maka-ako* is a distant Supreme Being that could only be approached by the ancestral spirits.

The calling of the *babaylan* comes from these spirits and are known through a vision or a dream. An elderly *babaylan* helps an initiate interpret the message and the dream. The initiate undergoes an intense religious experience, and his/her successful passage from this state is critical for the well-being of his/her own *dungan*.<sup>16</sup> In my initial interview with Dr. Magos she also said that the training or making of the *babaylan* comes from closely observing the elders perform the diagnostic and healing rituals. Thus, in the *ma-aram* tradition, genealogy plays a very important role as the *babaylan* negotiates his/her roles in relationship and communion with his/her next of kins, both the living and the dead.

The environmental and supernatural spirits could usurp and overcome the *dungan* of the individual thus immersion in this *ma-aram* tradition is key towards growing into a good mediator in order to overcome or negotiate with the spirits inhabiting the earth and the atmosphere. The *babaylan* sees a malady or an illness as caused by the weakening of the *dungan* or the individual's willpower or soul. While the *babaylan* could also address physical illnesses borne by natural causes, it is in the spiritual realm where their healing is most known and sought-after by the indigenous people. And navigating this world of the spirits takes years of watching, listening, and assisting the elderly *babaylan*.

To become a *babaylan* and imbibe the wisdom of the tradition involves apprenticeship and immersion in the ways of the elder *babaylan*. When the initiate (apprentice) is ready to become the spiritual leader of the community and the bearer of this ancient

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3.

tradition, a ritual is held to mark the initiate as the chosen one who would carry the tradition of his/her ancestors (*surondan*). The *babaylan* binds the past with the present. But with the dwindling population of the *babaylan*, how is this *ma-aram* tradition kept alive in Panay?

**THE ARAM OF A PANAYANON ANTHROPOLOGIST,  
RESEARCHER, AND TEACHER**

The pioneering work of Dr. Magos on the *ma-aram* as well as the work of F. Landa Jocano on the *Hinilawod* epic brought other anthropologists, social scientists, and scholars to look into the world of the *babaylan* in Panay and Western Visayas. As a scholar and an educator, Dr. Magos becomes the purveyor of this ancient tradition, harnessing all forms of media to communicate the *aram* (wisdom, knowledge) of this indigenous group to a larger audience. Her aim is to raise the dignity of the Panay *bukidnon* and draw out their confidence in their own culture and way of being a Panayanon.

She emphasizes that provincial boundaries are artificial as the Panay *bukidnon* move from one mountain to the other that covers the areas of the provinces of Panay, namely, Iloilo, Antique, Aklan, and Capiz. She discloses that after immersing herself in the *ma-aram* community in Antique, she trekked the mountains of Panay to observe how the other *babaylans* in the area exercise their spiritual leadership in their community. She adopted the Mariitnon term of *ma-aram* to bring into the consciousness of other people that the *babaylans* do not engage in witchcraft or other dark magic but rather carry with them the wisdom and knowledge of their people, both the living and the dead.

She is not alone in this pursuit. Notable Philippine scholars like Grace Nono, an ethnomusicologist and a music performing artist, trekked the mountains not only of Panay but also the mountains of northern Luzon, other parts of the Visayas, and Mindanao to detail the lives of the *babaylans* found in other parts of the country. She not only documented their songs and chants, and healing rituals, but likewise sang and performed them herself



in collaboration with other artists. Dr. Nono's book, *Song of the Babaylan*,<sup>17</sup> is hailed by Dr. Magos as a first in *babaylan* studies that is both scholarly and artistic. Dr. Nono's contribution to the *babaylan* studies deserves a separate paper. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that her *aram* as a scholar, researcher, and artist brings alive the *babaylan* tradition that was silenced and suppressed throughout the country's colonial history.

In Panay, this tradition is expressed in a primary oral culture that remains unchanged in some interior parts of the provinces. Yet in some areas, this oral culture undergoes transformation with the formal education of the young *bukidnons*. Though her work is limited in scope and coverage, the seminal work of Dr. Magos on the *ma-aram* tradition paved the way for the emergence of other groundbreaking works like that of Dr. Nono's, and kept the tradition alive that has since been denied of its worth.

In her continuing search in the mountains of Central Panay, Dr. Magos uncovered that the former *binukot*<sup>18</sup> (cloistered or secluded maidens) who were married off, likewise performed the role of the *babaylan* in their villages. The *binukot* are mentioned in the Sugidanon epics of Panay as maidens who were kept secluded in undisclosed places to prepare them for marriage. In Central Panay, however, Dr. Magos explained that some of the former *binukot*, played important roles in their communities as the *babaylan*, *manughusay* (village reconciler), chanter of epic, and wives to men who are themselves rulers of their villages.

Her trek to the mountains of Panay led her also to document, record, and compile the Sugidanon epics into ten (10) volumes. As an anthropologist, scholar, and an academic, she did not only publish books and articles, but likewise co-established the first *Balay Turun-an* (School of Living Tradition) in Calinog, Iloilo (Central Panay) to hand on the *aram* tradition of the Panay *bukidnon*

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<sup>17</sup> Grace Nono, *Song of the Babaylan: Living Voices, Medicines, Spiritualities of Philippine Ritualist-Oralist-Healers* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> See the work of Maria Bernadette L. Abrera, "Seclusion and Veiling of Women a Historical and Cultural Approach," in *Philippine Social Sciences Review* 60, no.1 (2008): 33-56, <https://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/pssr/article/view/1274>.

to the next generation. And this *aram* include the arts, the epics, the chanting, the dances, theater, weaving, and embroidery. Here it is also worth mentioning that the Sugidanon epics of Panay are written in archaic *kinaraya*, referred to as the mother language of Hiligaynon, the language that is widely used in the City of Iloilo, in the coastal towns along northern Iloilo, as well as in the Provinces of Guimaras and Negros Occidental. *Kinaraya* or *Hiraya* evolved from the language of the ten Bornean datus who settled in Panay and this was widely spoken in the island before the coming of the Spaniards.<sup>19</sup> Now, *kinaraya*, the mother language is consigned as a dialect spoken by the people in Antique, in southern and central Iloilo, and some parts of Capiz. The preservation of this dialect is also important for the people whose lineage could be traced back to the early inhabitants of Panay where the *babaylan* culture originated and thrived.

What could be gleaned from the experiences of Dr. Magos, as one coming from the same island (Antique, Panay), speaking the same dialect (*kinaraya*), yet gaining her wisdom and knowledge from universities which intellectual ancestors could be traced back to Greek Philosophers? And the mode of communication with the “spirits” of these academic ancestors is through research and scholarship.

### THE ARAM OF THE SCHOLAR-RESEARCHER

#### 1. KINSHIP

The first close contact of Dr. Magos with the *ma-aram* (*babaylan*) was in 1966 when she became a *maninay* (godmother) to the daughters of two well-known *babaylan* in Antique. She also disclosed that some of her relatives are known to come from *babaylan* families thus she conjectured that this was one of the reasons why she was welcomed in the village when she did her

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<sup>19</sup> Leoncio P. Deriada, “Hiligaynon Literature,” *National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCAA)*, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/subcommissions/subcommission-on-the-arts-sca/literary-arts/hiligaynon-literature/>

ethnographic study of the *babaylan*. Being a *maninay* also made her kin, a crucial element into being invited into their community that allowed her to gain a more intimate view of their beliefs, practices, ideology, and daily activities. But how could a budding scholar with no kinship with them venture into the same study with the *babaylan* community?

## 2. HAVING THE FEEL FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND NETWORKING

One of the interviewing techniques devised by Dr. Magos is the act of introducing herself by doing genealogy. How is this done? Here, scanning the environment is important as it gives the researcher the “feel for” the place and the web of relationships that exist within the community. The researcher could situate herself/himself within this network though seeking referral from a member of the community. Kinship within the context of the Panay *bukidnon* covers relationships by affinity and association. This inquiry method of tracing one’s kinship, or genealogy in the case of Dr. Magos, gained the trust of the people and provided an opening for them to share their own folk stories and experiences. In her ethnographic study, Dr. Magos was able to map out the lineage of the *babaylan* in Mariit, Antique, tracing it to the person named Estrella Bangotbanwa, considered a heroine and liberator who saved her ancestral village from famine and hunger.<sup>20</sup> The genealogy of the *babaylan* in this particular community also carries some legendary figures, like Datu Sumakwel, the oldest and wisest of the ten (10) Bornean datus who fled to the Philippines to escape the tyranny of their king, Sultan Makatunaw.<sup>21</sup>

The lineage of the *babaylan* could also be traced in the indigenous oral epics that already have been studied and published. Here, the work of Dr. Magos provides additional insights as to the progeny of present-day *babaylan* in Panay. In the Antique folktales

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<sup>20</sup> Magos, *The Enduring Ma-aram Tradition*, 61.

<sup>21</sup> Although written and taught in schools as the History of Panay, this legend of the ten Bornean Datus who landed in Panay, was also handed down orally from one generation to the other. Datu Sumakwel landed in Hantik, now known as Antique, the province where the *ma-aram* tradition was analyzed by Dr. Magos.

she collated, there were male *babaylanes* mentioned who were considered as *busilian*, or mortals possessing supernatural-like powers, similar to those exhibited by Estrella Bangotbanwa. This is one of the major attributes of a *babaylan* in Antique. In her study, however, most of her *babaylan* informants were male and she explained that this was mainly because their *babaylan* parents had nine male older children where the first three continued the tradition. Their female sibling then was second to the youngest, and she did not become a *babaylan*.

### 3. BUILDING THE CONFIDENCE OF THE PEOPLE

To gain the trust and build the confidence of the indigenous people in their own culture that have been belittled by the early missionaries, Dr. Magos stayed in their community for three (3) years and lived among them. She again devised an interviewing method where she did not take notes or record the conversation in front of them. She did what the *tumandoks* (natives) do, listened to the stories of the elders and committed them to her memory. But since she is an academic and a scholar, she wrote what she heard and memorized after her meetings with them. This is where a primary oral culture meets with what Walter Ong would refer to as secondary orality, an oral culture that is based on literacy, the kind of knowing and learning that undergird the academic and scholarly world of Dr. Magos.<sup>22</sup> In this method, Dr. Magos gained a deeper appreciation of the *aram* of the indigenous people, especially in their capacity to retell their epics, in their artistry to relive their foundational stories, and the wisdom to hand on their tradition to the new generation aided only by their memories, yet immortalized in their epic chanting, dancing, the rhythmic pounding of their drums, weaving and embroidery, and healing rituals. As a scholar who adopted the way the people absorb and memorize their foundational stories through legends, folklores, and other forms of artistic expression, Dr. Magos showed how the

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<sup>22</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

people steeped in this *ma-aram* tradition retrieve, retell, and restore their heritage.

### THE PRIMARY ORAL CULTURE OF THE BABAYLAN TRADITION

In my interaction with Dr. Magos, one of the concepts that emerges that is worth probing is how a primary oral culture structures the consciousness of the indigenous people. I believe this field of inquiry is important not only in understanding the *babaylan* culture that was historically maligned and suppressed, but also in the way literacy shaped how we moderns see the world and treat those others whose way of life and worldview are still governed by this primary oral culture. In this form of culture, the people's beliefs, ideology, knowledge, and religious practices are not written but rather embodied, expressed in spoken, performing, and visual forms. If at all written, they are penned by researchers and scholars whose consciousness evolved from a theoretical world that may look more sophisticated than the lifeworld of the people who still inhabit the primary oral culture. Yet both the scholars and the indigenous people share this same foundation. Walter Ong points out, "Oral speech is fully natural to human beings in the sense that every human being in every culture who is not psychologically or physiologically impaired learns to talk."<sup>23</sup> It is no coincidence that scholars and researchers, even after writing their works, still have to present and defend them orally, exhibiting that those who straddle both the oral and literate world share something in common with those who only inhabit the primary oral culture.<sup>24</sup> Then too, in both literate and oral cultures, a medium is used to express the people's religious beliefs, ideology, knowledge, and way of life. The former primarily uses print and writing, and the latter, speech or spoken word. In this primary oral tradition, remembrance and memory allowed each generation to hand on the *babaylan* tradition and keep it alive. How does this instruct us and define the way we do theology with the *babaylan* who acts as a medium of the ancestral

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>24</sup> See Ibid., 113.

and supernatural spirits and binds the body and soul (*dungan*) of a sick person?

**IDENTIFYING THE PORTALS: THE INDIGENOUS LIFEWORLD  
AND THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW**

In her study of the *babaylan*, Dr. Magos already suggested interfacing with other disciplines, and she specifically mentioned religion and theology. Originally, she suggested looking at the paranormal phenomenon of the “spirit possession” or on altered states of consciousness of the *babaylan*. Also, in terms of healing that deals with *dungan* or the soul, she saw certain parallelisms with the Christian worldview of faith healing. Or, this may be akin to some beliefs of the Catholics of the healing powers of the relics of the saints, or the healing waters of Lourdes (France). Here she started raising the questions: “Why do “sick” people get healed when brought to a *ma-aram*? Is healing brought about by the *ma-aram*’s own knowledge and skills or is it through the aid of an unknown invisible force? But more importantly, since the *babaylan* is concerned about the wellbeing of the person, the *babaylan* performs rituals that could strengthen the person’s *dungan* so that the individual could counter the power of the environmental and supernatural spirits. However, these are some of the questions that simply are not within her field of study but could perhaps be explored with someone trained in this field.

**SAPI (POSSESSED) OR MAGTABID  
(TO COME INSIDE, TO BIND)**

This same question was posed by a Philippine theologian, Ferdinand Dagmang, when he was doing a study on the folk religion in Calumpang, Marikina.<sup>25</sup> In his study, the devotees of the Santo Niño gathered around their leader believed to be possessed (*sinasapian*) by the Holy Child. He traced this *sapi* phenomenon to the pre-Hispanic rituals of the *babaylans*. As mentioned in this

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<sup>25</sup>Ferdinand Dagmang, “Babaylanism Reconsidered,” accessed January 10, 2021, <https://www.academia.edu/9435743/Babaylanism>.

paper, the *dungan* or the soul, or the “companion spirit” defines the health and wellbeing of the person. Hence to be possessed by the spirit, benevolent or not, is rooted in the indigenous worldview of the embodied spirit (or ensouled body) where the *babaylan* plays an important role as a mediator between the person and the spirits. The *dungan* is in the body and not something that just hovers outside of it. In fact, one of the birth rituals performed by the *babaylans* involves presenting the newborn to the spirit(s) of the “ancestral deities” and they are invoked “to come inside the body of the child” (*magtabid*) so the child could grow in strength and virtues.<sup>26</sup> The dis-ease occurs when the *dungan* and the body are not in sync. The healing power of the *babaylan* lies in her gift of calling on the spirits to restore the *dungan* of the person. In the healing ritual, the *babaylan* becomes possessed herself by the spirits she called upon. Her body becomes the medium or the vessel of the ancestor spirits. Hence, the integration of the body and *dungan* does not only speak of wholeness and healing but also points to the sacred that resides within. The people place their trust in the *babaylan* as she becomes the medium of the spirits that have access to the *Maka-ako*.

It is from this indigenous spiritual worldview that Dr. Dagmang interprets *sapi* as a “liturgical drama” where the people encounter the divine “through a worthy medium”<sup>27</sup> open enough to welcome other spirits in her body, and strong enough to hold her own spirit. He further posits that this is the “indigenous ideal characteristic way of touching the divine and the ideal characteristic way of the divine touching people: immediate and sensuous.”<sup>28</sup>

### OF RITUALS AND STORIES

This is the same touch in the biblical story of the hemorrhagic woman in Mark 5:22-43 where a woman afflicted with a hemorrhagic condition shored up her courage to touch Jesus. She dared to tap into Jesus’ power just so she could be healed. The

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<sup>26</sup> Jocano, “The *Sulod*,” 414.

<sup>27</sup> Dagmang, “Babaylanism,” 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

touch initiated by the woman is stark and palpable. It immediately healed her and Jesus felt the power came out of him.

This is one other field of inquiry that Dr. Magos hoped that religion or theology could help unpack using a biblical model. The creation myth of the *ma-aram* tradition, for example, mentioned *Huminahon* as making a toy doll out of the sand and when he gave life to it, the doll became Adan. And while Adan was asleep a rib was taken from him, and Eba, his female companion came to being.<sup>29</sup> This creation myth bears semblance to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve.

In my interview with her, I asked her, “Was this taken from the oral folk history of the people or were later added when they heard the early missionaries talked about how humans were created by God?” Dr. Magos admitted she was not able to raise this question herself when she was studying the folklores in Antique. But this could be taken up by other researchers.

There were also practices of the *ma-aram* that could have been influenced by the early Christian missionaries especially the chants in Latin, Spanish, and *kinaraya*.<sup>30</sup> The angels and the saints were also included with their ancestral spirits, another indication that they have embraced some of the Christian worldview and incorporated it in their own belief system. Even the name of Jesus was included in one of their rituals, albeit placing him alongside the ancestral spirits, the angels, and the saints. The *samba* rite of the *babaylans* for the “economic benefit and general welfare of the community” were usually done in April during Good Friday, marking yet another Christian influence on the *babaylan* rites and communal activity to ask help for rain during planting season.<sup>31</sup> Dr. Magos also observed the attraction of the indigenous people to the biblical stories. She said that three (3) children of a *babaylan* in Central Panay, are now born-again Christians and seem to relish their new role as preacher-evangelizers (*manugwali*).

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<sup>29</sup> This is also recorded in Magos, *The Enduring Ma-aram Tradition*, 51.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.



## THE LIVING AND THE DEAD IN TOUCH WITH THE MAKA-AKO

The realm of the *Maka-ako* of the indigenous people is still unexplored. And perhaps here, the Christian theologian, like the *ma-aram* could help mediate the presence of the *Maka-ako* to the indigenous people. The communion of the saints, and the continuing relationship of both the living and dead could provide a pathway in exploring other means of dialogue and of rethinking ways in doing theology with the people steeped in *babaylan* culture.

The theologian might be able to glean from this primary oral culture of how the ancient biblical community has encountered their God through a mediator, like Moses, David, Daniel, Jonah, to mention a few. Dr. Magos explained that the story of the *babaylan* has a Mosaic motif. For example, *babaylan* Estrella Bangotbanwa was known for her prowess of simply raising her staff to “call for rain and strong winds” or striking a spear on a rock to draw spring water.<sup>32</sup> Oral accounts from the southern towns of Iloilo portrayed Estrella Bangotbanwa as having the power to invoke the ancestral spirits to bring rain in drought-stricken towns, hailing her as a heroine as she saved their land from famine. She was also acknowledged as the *busilian* (person with supernatural power) ancestor of the *babaylans* in southern Panay. In this case, the *babaylan* does not only make the person whole but likewise intercedes for the welfare of the community, like when it experiences natural calamities, such as the drought in southern Panay.

### RELIGION, POLITICS, AND THE ARTS

As could be gleaned from their history, the *babaylans* have shepherded the people toward their liberation from the Spanish oppressive rule. The *babaylans* in this regard, are both spiritual and political leaders. And there are biblical characters that could resonate with the people steeped in the *babaylan* tradition. For example, Joseph in Egypt who was put in charge by the Pharaoh to

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 34.

take care of the land because of his spiritual gifts (wise and discerning in the ways of God) and administrative skills (Gen. 41:39-48). There is also the call narrative of Samuel (1Sam. 3) that may find echo to those called to carry the tradition of the *babaylan*. Perhaps, it is time to reread the Scriptures from the lens of the indigenous people who understand the role of spiritual mediators in keeping their *dungan* well, whole, intact, and “in place;” as well as making their communities thrive and flourish amid the intrusion of the environmental and supernatural spirits in their daily lives.

The conversation with Dr. Magos dwelt with the biblical stories and how they could be retold and shared with the people steeped in primary oral literature. There may be other venues and pathways where the Christian faith could dialogue with the *babaylan* culture. But the importance of biblical stories was highlighted because the indigenous people of Panay have recorded, retold, and kept their tradition and history in their epics, the *Sugidanon*. Oral literature and the arts could provide a pathway of deeper engagement with the *ma-aram* tradition.

### REVISITING CHRISTOLOGY AND THE INCARNATION

The indigenous cosmic view could likewise provide an opening for rethinking Christology, sharpening the focus on cosmic Christ that transcends geographical boundaries. The *sapi* phenomenon as studied by Dr. Dagmang could provide an hermeneutic lens to unpack the importance of a medium that allows both mortals and the divine to touch each other; or one that invites the divine spirit to inhabit the body. Here the lifeworld of the people shaped by the primary oral culture could root us to our humble beginnings when the world was formed by a spoken word.

I have simply offered different points of entry and engagement based on my interview and dialogue with Dr. Magos. What is needed here is a framework that could mark these portals. I, myself, am just starting my apprenticeship in this field, trying to keep my own *dungan* as I mark my entry into the indigenous wisdom-world, wearing the mantle of my Christian baptism.

## CONCLUSION

As earlier raised in this paper, by peeking into the lives of the *babaylan*, I raised the question, do we cross cultural borders or simply retrace the primary oral culture that shaped the Filipino Christian worldview of the *Maka-ako*? The vestiges and remnants of the *babaylan* practices and beliefs, could still be seen on the way the Filipino Christians pray for healing and wholeness. In like manner, there are some Christian rituals that were appropriated by the *babaylans*.

The primary oral culture of the indigenous people may also help the theologians pay attention to the most basic and primary mode of accessing knowledge, wisdom, and transmitting culture. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this primary oral culture dates back to our foundational story when God created the world, and “God said... and there was...” (see Gen. 1:1-3), introducing God’s speech as the “first medium in the unformed world,”<sup>33</sup> which is also echoed in Jn 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Perhaps here, the role of the theologian as a mediator could be unpacked and a theological method could be evolved based on the *ma-aram* tradition and the primary oral culture of the Panay *bukidnon*.

*Helen C. Romero*

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<sup>33</sup> See Lance Strate, “A Media Ecology Review,” *Communication Research Trends* 23, no. 2 (2004): 31.