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In Search of the *Babayi*: A Quest for a Distinct Filipina Theoethics

Alfonso P. Suico, Jr.

Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University
asuico@scu.edu

Abstract:

This paper on methodology is an attempt to find a distinct Filipino theology and ethics by retrieving the sense of the babayi (woman). The babayi comes from the ancient Asiatic script called the baybayin. Inspired by the Filipina women's courage and resiliency, the goal is to map out a theo-ethics that is uniquely reflective of the Filipino woman within the broader feminist and liberation ethics. As a method, it critiques the prevailing framing of Western feminism common among Filipino women writers. Inspired by intersectionality, a paradigm that analyzes oppression as the crossroad of racism and poverty, this method locates the Filipina in the multiaxial framing of history, the struggle of poverty and discrimination, displacement, religion and dialogue, and ecology. This multidimensional approach considers the long history of oppression experienced by our people, reflects inherent Filipino values and provides a method for understanding the Filipina and her allies today.

Keywords:

Filipina, women, babayi, intersectionality, feminism, liberation

Introduction

Roselle is a mother of a five-month-old baby from the City of Marawi in the island of Mindanao. One morning in May 2017, while she was getting ready to bring her sick baby to the doctor, news came that a group of ISIS sympathizers, called the Maute, attacked the city. Despite the threat, she feared more for her child prompting her and her husband to seek medical help while dodging bullets in the ensuing gunfire. The bat-

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tle of Marawi drove many evacuees mostly the women, the elderly, and children whose lives were radically altered being threatened by violence, hunger, disease, and harassment. In times of conflicts and calamities, Roselle like many other Filipino women faced their helplessness with ingenuity and hope.[1]

We find, in these stories, the courage and resiliency of the *babayi* – the Filipino woman *Babayi* or *babae* is the appropriate term to refer our woman rather than *Filipina* which is derived from the name given by the Spanish colonizers. *Babayi*, as a concept, can become a starting point for discovering and developing an approach to a systematic theology and ethics that captures the sense of the Filipino woman emerging from her colonial and subjected past. Inspired by the *babayi*, this paper is an attempt to locate, within the broader framework of feminist liberative ethics, the distinct Filipina theology and ethics that considers into account the intersecting factors that have shaped her identity today: her long history, her experiences of struggles, displacement, dialogue, and the care for her environment. Retrieving the sense of the *babayi* with her rich religious, social, and cultural heritage, one can map out a theoethics that is uniquely reflective of the Filipino woman.

Method

This project is an attempt of drawing a methodological concept reflective of the Philippine experience based on a liberative key and feminism. Inspired by intersectionality, this paper analyzes and gives critical appraisals of feminism and liberation theology in contemporary Philippine context.[2] This work consists of four parts (1) Introduction to the *babayi* as conceptual paradigm. (2) Intersectional analysis locating Filipino women in the multiaxial framework of history, experience of discrimination and poverty, displacement, religion and dialogue, and ecology. (3) Critical appraisal of feminism and liberation theology. (4) Proposing a distinct Filipina theoethics reflective of the lived experiences and struggles of our women.

[1] Rachel Joyce Marie O Sanchez and Stephanie Ann Y Puen, "Deconstructing and Expanding Gender Roles: Theological Reflections on Women and Local Disaster Response," *Budhi* 19, no. 1 (2015): 49.

[2] Kimberlee Crenshaw, "Demarginalization the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," in *University of Chicago Legal Forum* vol. 1989, no. 1, Article 8 (1989): 139-167.

Babayi: The Face of the Post-colonial Filipina

Cultural Influences

Long before the arrival of the Spaniards, there were self-governing societies in the islands that made up the Philippines. They were ruled by chieftains or in some territories, by sultans. These thriving communities traded with other people from South and Southeast Asia: Malays, Hindus, Chinese, and Arabs. In these societies, women were regarded with respect and honor for her contribution to community life as she cares for the children and the home and works in the fields.

The *babayi* in Visayan or *babae* in Tagalog literally refers to a woman in b*aybayin*, the early script or writing system used by pre-colonial Filipinos. *Baybayin* is said to be derived from the *Brahmi* related to other ancient syllabic alphabets from like *Nagari* in India as well as to Hebraic, and Arabic alphabets.[3] The word *babayi* is closely related with the Proto-Austronesian word *bahi* or *babahi* for female.[4] A *babaylan* is a woman mystic and priestess.

The pre-colonial regional trades with their Asian neighbors resulted to the Filipinos as a mixed race seen in the his or her physical habitus, culture, language, eating habits, family dynamics, including superstitions. Embedded in every culture is the experience of religion, even if the culture itself is not explicitly religious.[5] Filipinos are no exception. With more than eighty-six percent of the population, Christian influence is evident in many aspects of life; Catholic values are deeply ingrained in the consciousness of most Filipinos, even if a minority belongs to different faith traditions.[6] Significant among them is Islam, which antedated Christianity by two centuries according to written sources (or by three centuries if one follows oral tradition). Islam spread mostly in the south-

[3] Jean-Paul Potet, *Baybayin, the Syllabic Alphabet of the Tagalogs* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu Press, 2014), 14-15: Comparing similarities of the Greek *beta* with the Nagari *ba* and the Tagalog *baba*.

[4] "Austronesian Comparative Dictionary - PAN Index," accessed November 18, 2017, http://www.trussel2.com/ACD/acd-pl_pan.htm#b.

[5] Christina A. Astorga, *Catholic Moral Theology and Social Ethics: A New Method* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 89.

[6] "Highlights of the Philippine Population 2015 Census of Population | Philippine Statistics Authority," accessed November 3, 2017, https://psa.gov.ph/content/highlights-philippine-population-2015-census-population; Jack Miller, "Religion in the Philippines | Asia Society," Asiasociety.org, accessed November 3, 2017, http://asiasociety.org/education/religion-philippines.

ern islands of Mindanao and Sulu and gradually spread the rest of the archipelago. Muslim Filipinos take pride that the Spaniards never fully conquered their people. But many Muslims continues to see Christianity continues as a colonizing power.[7]

A small, but significant fraction of the population belongs to tribal or indigenous communities locally called the *lumad*. The word *lumad* in Visayan literally means "native". Many *lumad* earlier converted to Islam or Christianity, but some adhered to *anitism* and traditional belief systems. The arrival of Christian settlers who took over the *lumad's* land, drove them farther inland. The struggle to reclaim their ancestral domains continues to this day when they are constantly threatened by paramilitary operations.[8]

Development of Philippine Feminism

Philippine feminism is patterned from Western feminism. The history of the feminist movement came in three waves that transpired primarily in Europe and the United States. In the the first-wave, women worked for reforms in the social and legal structure including education and the right to vote. The second-wave feminists fought for civil, equal pay, and peace. Different strands of feminism emerged in the second wave: Latina feminism, black feminism, liberal feminism, and lesbian feminism.[9] Third-wave feminism emerged in the 1990's and espoused the individual expressions of feminist action and identity. The third wave intentionally included various groups of women left-out in the past. Womanism, which developed from the limitations of the second, describes *the behavior, desire, commitment, and appreciation of the black feminist and feminist of color*.[10]

Feminist consciousness in Asia first developed within Christian circles with notable Christian scholars, even if Christianity is not a major faith tradition in Asia. Although there are many Asian women writing

[7] Lilian M Curaming, "Highlights of Muslim-Christian Dialogue in the Philippines," *Dialogue & Alliance* 14–15, no. 2–1 (2000): 91-92.

[8] Lisa Spear, "Philippine Tribes Under Attack, Rights Groups Say," Time, September 15, 2015, http://time.com/4028811/philippines-lumad-mindanao-indigenous-military-war-killings/.

[9] Michelle Tooley, "Feminist Liberative Ethics," in *Ethics: A Liberative Approach*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre and Ezra Chitando (Fortress Press, 2013), 172.

[10] Thelathia "Nikki" Young and Robyn Henderson-Espinosa, "Women of Color Liberative Ethics," in *Ethics: A Liberative Approach*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Fortress Press, 2013), 192.

in theology, according to Kwok Pui-lan, they don't call their works feminist or postcolonial. To them, feminism is associated with a separatist interest of the Western middle class.[11] Asian female theologians discuss strategies relating to problems affecting the church and theology often perceived as dependent on Western paradigms. Nita Nakashima Brook described Asian feminism as committedly and unapologetically Christian when compared to the Western ambivalence towards Christianity.[12] This gives Asian feminist movement in Asia a distinct characteristic that entails engaging in interreligious dialogue.

Filipino activists, scholars, artists, and authors adopted feminism and made it their own. It began in the 1930's when women were asking the right to suffrage. Women social activist groups have also been socially and politically involved in the country. Philippine literature is also enriched by the contributions of numerous authors, both men and women, writing on contemporary issues, many of whom are unknown outside literary circles.[13] In Catholic institutions, many women religious established schools and advanced the improvement of education and formation of children.

There are a handful of Filipino feminist scholars wrote on contemporary issues on postcolonialism and migration, interreligious dialogue and peace-building, women's rights and church-state relations, and moral theology and culture.[14] There are groups of women who are underrepresented: the Muslim women, women of other religions, and tribal women belonging indigenous communities. While there are authors who write on the experience of *lumads* and Muslim Filipinos, their history and culture are mostly written from a male perspective.

Intersections: The Filipina and Her Struggle for Liberation

Historical Domain: Colonialism and Revolution

To map out a Filipina theoethics, one begins with the domain of her history and postcolonial context. Postcolonialism is cognizant of the re-

[11] Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 126.

[12] Rita Nakashama Brook, "Asian Women Theologians Respond to American Feminism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3, no. 2 (September 1987): 104.

[13] Nick Carbo and Eileen tabios, eds., *Babaylan: An Anthology of Filipina and Filipina American Writers*, First (San Francisco: Aunt Laute Books, 2000), vii.

[14] In this paper, I will refer to works of Filipino scholars Agnes Brazal (postcolonialism and migration), Lilian Cumaring (interreligious dialogue), Eleanor Dionisio and Christina Astorga (women's rights, ethics and morals).

sistance to domination both during and after the colonial period. It seeks a balanced emphasis on resistance and creates alliances between men and women against sexism, imperialism, and racism. Postcolonial theology is a term used to include what was previously called as Third World theology. Related to postcolonialism is *decolonization* which happens when former colonial countries gained or regained their independence and the right to national self-determination. As an intellectual process, it resolves the deconstruction of old-fashioned perceptions and attitudes of power and oppression that were adopted during the time of colonialism towards social reconstruction.[15]

Philippine history was wrought by colonization and revolution. First visited by Magellan, the Philippines was later colonized by Spain. The three centuries of Spanish rule saw the arrival of other Western powers to Southeast Asia increasing European presence and influence in the whole region. There were several attempts for revolution, but none succeeded until the1898 Philippine Revolution. Historical accounts tell about the exploits of Filipino men, but women fought alongside their husbands, sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters in the revolution.

In the intervening years, the Philippines came under American occupation for forty years and under the Japanese during the WWII. There were reports of abuse perpetrated by the Japanese who abducted and raped "comfort women" barely out of their teens.[16] After the war, women were instrumental in the rebuilding of Philippine society. There was relative peace and progress until martial law happened.

When Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972, many were illegally detained or disappeared, among them were women who were tagged as rebels, communists, or threats to society. In 1986, Marcos was overthrown by the People Power Revolution and the country had a widow and mother as the new president in the person of Corazon Aquino. Regardless of how that chance of democracy was later played out, that year, the Filipino people chose a woman to lead them to a new beginning.

Experience of Struggle: Discrimination and Poverty

The second domain is the experience of struggle through discrimination and poverty. According to the 2016 report of the World Economic Forum, the Philippines ranked first among the most gender-equal countries

[15] Astorga, *Catholic Moral Theology and Social Ethics*, 356.

[16] Dominique Mosbergen, "The Harrowing Story Of Filipina Women Enslaved In Japan's Wartime Rape Camps," *Huffington Post*, May 18, 2016, sec. The WorldPost, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/comfort-women-philippines-m-evelina-galang_us_57232d48e4b0f309baf08490.

in Asia and seventh worldwide.[17] Men and women have equal opportunities in education, politics, career, and profession. The nation had two women presidents, two women vice-presidents, many senators and members of Congress, two women chief justices, and thousand others in public service. Despite being considered gender-equal, men are still the dominant gender in Philippine society.[18] Cases of violence against women continue: domestic abuse, marital rape, trafficking, and harassment in the workplace.[19] The causes of violence are multifactorial including cultural and traditional gender roles, poverty, and social impact of media and religion.

Women are also discriminated because of religion and or tribal affiliation. Christian Filipinos are biased against Muslims who are suspected to be traitorous, violent, and vindictive. More discrimination is directed to the indigenous people. *Lumad* women are treated basely accused of ignorance and laziness. Even within the indigenous communities themselves, biases exist against women with sons preferred to daughters. Based on some first-hand information from my interactions with the lumad, it is not a conscious discrimination against the female gender, but part of their communal structure which puts the women in the home caring for the domestic needs.

Poverty is related to women's discrimination. It permeates all the other social problems from the economy, corruption in government, peace and order, to lack of education and unemployment.[20] Poverty means inadequate healthcare for women and children who until recently, are prone to disease and malnutrition, increasing the risks during pregnancy and nursing. One of the hotly debated issues in recent years was the legislation of the Reproductive Health Law in 2012 that the Catholic

[17] Richmond Mercurio, "Philippines No. 1 in Gender Equality in Asia; 7th in World," philstar.com, accessed October 30, 2017, http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2016/10/26/1637479/philippines-no.-1-gender-equality-asia-7th-world.2017; Ken Ward, "Is Gender Inequality Really so Low in the Philippines?" *East Asia Forum* (blog), March 20, 2015, http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/03/21/is-gender-inequality-really-so-low-in-the-philippines/.

[18] Mercurio, "Philippines No. 1 in Gender Equality in Asia; 7th in World."

[19] "Statistics on Violence against Filipino Women | Philippine Commission on Women," accessed November 17, 2017, http://pcw.gov.ph/statistics/201405/statistics-violence-against-filipino-women.

[20] International Fund for Agricultural Development, "Rural Poverty in the Philippines" *Rural Poverty Portal*, accessed Sept. 11, 2016, from http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/philippines; "Statistics on Filipino Women and Men's Labor and Employment," Philippine Commission on Women, May 13, 2014, accessed September 19, 2016, http://pcw.gov.ph/statistics/201405/statistics-filipino-women-and-mens-labor-and-employment.

hierarchy opposed. The church's opposition on the reproductive health law was criticized because they were oblivious to the plight of the poor.[21] Instead, they focused on the issue of contraception, thereby effectively infringing on religious freedom by imposing Catholic teachings even to non-Catholic Filipinos.

Displacement: The Heart of Migrant Filipinas

The third domain is the experience of displacement. Displacement as experienced by some may be due to movement brought about by internal conflicts and wars. For many generations now, militarization and armed conflicts have caused internal displacement. Those affected are mostly women and their allies: the children, the elderly, and other men who are displaced when conflicts arise. But the more common form of displacement is due to migration. Darby Kathleen Ray describes an increasing trend among American families, which is the hiring of immigrant nannies to care for their children while the parents are at work. These nannies are usually women coming from developing countries seeking work elsewhere. Many of them are mothers who opted to leave behind their children to care for other's children showing their charges attention and care. Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild calls this heart-wrenching transfer of affection a "global heart transplant" since it extracts love from developing countries to developed countries.[22] The Philippines is among the top ten countries of origin with this kind of diaspora with more than three million Filipinos coming to the US.[23]

Agnes Brazal agrees with Hochschild and Ray noting the particular concern in the sending countries regarding the children left behind. Even with the presence of extended families assisting in caring for the children, those with migrant mothers tend to exhibit more anxiety and loneliness than those who do not. Still more worrisome is the creation of a "migration mentality" among the children of migrants. While migrant parents work to send their children to the best universities, they would

[21] Alfonso P. Suico, "Appraising Religious Liberty in the Philippine Reproductive Health Debates" Thesis, (Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, 2016), 98.

[22] Darby K. Ray, *Working*, Christian Exploration of Daily Living (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 34.

[23] Philippine Statistics Authority, "International Migration Data," 2017, accessed Nov. 22, 2017, https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/meetings/2017/bangkok--international-migration-data/Session%203/Session%203%20Philippines.pdf.

later opt to work as migrant laborers themselves.[24] The darker side of migration involves trafficking, which continues despite government and international efforts. There are also undocumented immigrants who work in undesirable conditions or receive less than the minimum wage but are unable to fight for a just salary for fear of arrest and deportation.[25] While there are some migrants with success stories, many more do not.

Religion and Dialogue: Filipinas as Partners in Interreligious Dialogue

As mentioned earlier, although the majority of Filipinos are Catholics, there are those who belong to other churches and faith traditions like Islam. Lilian Curaming wrote that interreligious dialogue is not only possible but is also the key to sustainable peace – dialogue is the path of peace.[26] Curaming holds that Catholic teaching includes interreligious dialogue to be a mission of the church. After Vatican II, the mission of the church includes engaging in dialogue, the kind that is not limited to religious leaders and scholarship discussion, but the weaving of stories, walking together in truth, and working for a common concern.[27] Curaming describes the various levels of dialogue: a dialogue of life happens when people strive to live in a neighborly spirit sharing joys and sorrows and concerns. Dialogue of action occurs when people work together for peace and solidarity. Finally, interfaith dialogue happens when persons, *rooted in their religious traditions, share spiritual riches, prayers, and contemplation, and ways of searching for God*. In these encounters, each one can speak of harmony, tolerance, and forgiveness.[28]

Considering academic dialogues happen in formal settings, do ordinary women have any role in it? My answer is a resounding yes. While it is true that Muslim women and *lumads*, are underrepresented in academic circles, at the grassroots they are actively involved. My own experiences in dialogue attest to this: in the communities and schools, our

[24] Brazal and Guzman, *Intercultural Church*, 13.

[25] Alex Tizon, "My Family's Slave," *The Atlantic*, June 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/lolas-story/524490/.

[26] Curaming, "Dialogue: A Path to Peace," 143.

[27] Curaming, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Mission of the Catholic Church," 29.

[28] Lilian M Curaming, "Religion: Source of Conflict, Resource of Peace," *Dialogue & Alliance* 16, no. 2 (September 2002): 65.

partners in dialogue are mostly women and they are just as hopeful as anybody in seeking out efforts towards a lasting peace.

Environmental Domain: Promoting Eco Awareness

The main ecological problems of the Philippines are pollution, deforestation, and mining. The consequence of a sachet economy makes the country one of the top ocean polluters throwing plastic rubbish.[29] Mining is also major environmental concern destroying ecosystems, at the same time, releasing toxic chemicals into the rivers and seas. While the problems seem grand and global, it is noteworthy that women at the grassroots are addressing environmental problems through their little contributions in the homes and their communities.

Christina Astorga describes ecofeminism as a critique of the hierarchical relations of dominance for women and for the earth drawing a new understanding of creation that tries to reformulate the relationship between God and humanity, within humanity, and between the human and nonhuman world.[30] Ecofeminism is liberationist; it sees a similarity between the destruction of nature and the oppression of women whose oppression is the consequence of patriarchal patterns of activity.[31] The inspiration of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* calls for an integral ecology that respects human, social, and the nonhuman dimensions.[32] In his other letter, *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis identified that the root of all the world's problem today is individualism that creates apathy on people to the social situation and environment. To counter this growing apathy, Francis identified the unique role of mothers as the antidote to individualism as their maternal love helps children grow in self-esteem, intimacy, and empathy.[33]

[29] Greenpeace, "Nestlé, Unilever, P&G among Worst Offenders for Plastic Pollution in Philippines in Beach Audit," Greenpeace International, accessed December 4, 2017, http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/press/releases/2017/Nestle-Unilever-PG-among-worst-offenders-for-plastic-pollution-in-Philippines-in-beach-audit/.

[30] Astorga, *Catholic Moral Theology and Social Ethics*, 57.

[31] David Schmidtz and Elizabeth Willott, eds., *Environmental Ethics:What Really Matters,What Really Works*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 153.

[32] Pope Francis, *Laudato Slogy i: On Care for Our Common Home* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2015), no. 137.

[33] Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia The Joy of Love: On Love in the Family* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist

From Intersectionality to Liberation

A Critique of Philippine Feminism

Agnes Brazal notes that the *contemporary Filipino theologians have been hard at work to provide spaces for those whose voices have been suppressed by colonial hegemonic discourse, rendering them inarticulate*.[34] Feminist theology falls within the overarching liberative approaches to theology and ethics. With the emergence of feminism, theological thought has been challenged and changed in different areas of specialization: biblical studies, systematics, moral theology, sacramentology, and spirituality. Feminism opened theology to the reality of diversity and plurality and posed challenges to a male-dominated theology.[35]

Feminism critiques power differential. Sandra Schneider's definition of feminism is rooted in women's (sexual) oppression, engages in a critique of patriarchy as an essentially dysfunctional system, embraces an alternative vision for humanity and the earth, and actively seeks to bring this vision to reality.[36] Anne Patrick defines feminism as fundamentally the belief that men and women are equal and the commitment of reforming society, including religion.[37] Lisa Sowle Cahill wrote that feminism is virtually ethics and essentially liberationist since it emerged from situations of injustice and sought social change.[38] We have already seen in ecofeminism, that the injustice and oppression done to women extends to Mother Earth.

From the preceding discussions, four characteristics describes Philippine feminism. First, feminism is rooted in inequality (e.g., sexual domination). The experience of exploitation common among our women is perpetrated by a male-dominated system prompting them to assert themselves and fight for self-determination. Second, the dysfunctional system is perpetuated by the same dominant gender. In the Philippines, men

Press, 2016), nos. 174–75.

[34] Peracullo, "Kumakalam Na Sikmura," 25.

[35] Astorga, *Catholic Moral Theology and Social Ethics*, 52.

[36] Sandra Schneiders, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 15.

[37] Astorga, *Catholic Moral Theology and Social Ethics*, 52.

[38] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Feminist Ethics," *Theological Studies* 51, no. 1 (March 1990): 50.

dominate women on two fronts: social structure and religion. Regardless of the high ranking in gender equality, the country's social structure, including education, employment, and politics, remain to be dominated by men. Religion reinforces this claim as well. The Catholic hierarchy is exclusively male. On these two accounts alone, the system is skewered favoring the men. Third, feminism has a vision for humanity and the entire earth. This vision includes uplifting the situations of women, children, and the elderly, but also of other men who are exploited because of gender or social status. Beyond humanity, the vision extends to the biosphere in caring for the environment. Lastly, it is the goal of feminism to see this vision become a reality.

Feminist methodologies include critique, retrieval, and reconstruction. The goals of which are to analyze the inherited situation of oppression, deconstructing prevailing norms that sustain them, discovering and interpreting alternative wisdom significant to the lives of women. Reconstruction implies a transformation of an existing social construct.[39] The works of the Filipina theologians discussed above fit this mold. Their contributions to the discourse on migration, church-state relations, dialogue, and ecofeminism advance, not only scholarship, but the betterment of the lives of women. The principal authors are mostly women but pro-feminist men too can be allies in the feminist movement.[40]

One can critique classic feminist framing for its Western construct, an assessment that other Asian feminists acknowledge well. An element that is wanting in this construct is the experience of struggle and revolution, as Western construct focuses on gender equality and social and political rights. At some point, black and Latina feminist criticized this construct as neglecting the diversity of history and culture. This is something echoes by Filipinos due to our colonial past. Using (white) Western constructs to describe Philippine situation are inadequate because of the difference in worldview, values, and culture. Also, Philippine feminism is distinctively Christian, composed of Christian writers and scholars, and uses Christian language.[41] Such constructs failed to include women of other faiths and religious traditions. The starting point is also problematic: feminism in the Philippines begins with imported Western paradigms that are then transplanted, translated, and appropriated to the Philip-

[39] Astorga, *Catholic Moral Theology and Social Ethics*, 54.

[40] Pui-lan, 127.

[41] Brook, 104.

pine situation. It lacked the situatedness of genuine Filipino experience. Not that it is wrong, but a Filipina theoethics ought to capture and give voice to her unique experience. Unlike feminism that is a foreign implant embraced and adapted by our theologians and scholars, the quest is for a trajectory that is grounded on the Filipino woman's life, struggle, and liberation.

Liberation Theology in the Philippines

Although feminism is liberationist, its classical themes are women's rights, gender equality, reproductive rights, and empowerment, rather than the struggle from poverty, discrimination, oppression, and marginalization which are at the heart of liberation theology.

Liberation theology and ethics perceives oppression and marginalization as injustices towards the poor, the women, and children who bear the unjust brunt of patriarchal systems.[42] A theology of liberation begins with the lived experience as a starting point. For example, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz' *mujerista* theology distinguishes lived experience from the other regular daily experiences since this is the experience of struggles or *la lucha*.[43] Lived experience as a starting point is consistent with other theological methods like the see-judge-act model, the pastoral circle, and the Wesleyan quadrilateral. Claiming one's identity is also crucial in liberation theology. In womanism, there is a confessional element where one claims the term womanist to herself, from her faith perspective, in eradicating oppression.[44]

The concept of *intersectionality* is relevant to women of color and their allies who share the collective experience of disenfranchisement.[45] Intersectionality is the *consistent acknowledgment that people of color and women exist at the intersection of social, cultural, economic, political, and religious categories*.[46] This serves as the foundation of womanist

[42] Alejandro Crosthwaite, "Latin American Liberative Ethics," in *Ethics: A Liberative Approach*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Fortress Press, 2013), 9–10.

[43] Ada María Isasi-Diáz, "Praxis: The Heart of Mujerista Theology," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 1, no. 1 (November 1993): 45.

[44] Emilie M. Townes, "Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Out Souls Must have," In Womanist Theological Ethics A Reader, eds. Katie Geneva cannon, Emilie M. Townes, Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 36.

[45] Miguel De La Torre, ed., *Ethics: A Liberative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 3.

[46] Young and Henderson-Espinosa, 189.

ethics providing a worldview that calls to attention oppression and injustice. Earlier, we saw how the Filipino woman is at the crossroads of five overlapping domains of history and culture, gender, migration, religion, and ecology. It is along the line of intersectionality that liberation ethical approaches are pertinent in the Philippine setting.

Liberation theology is not new to the Philippine. During the Marcos dictatorship, the rallying point was the gospel translated in upholding of the dignity and rights of persons, justice, and the preferential option for the poor. Church leaders and activists read the works of Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino as they reflect on the gospel message of freedom and justice. Faced with poverty, injustices, and human rights violation, the Catholic church adopted for itself the vision of a Church of the Poor and adopted the Latin American model of base Christian communities.[47] Philippine history recalls the cycles of armed conflicts, oppression, and discrimination that continues today. What liberation theology can teach us is how the Filipino women's marginalization become a starting point for their liberation.

Mapping a Theoethics of the *Babayi*

The claims of feminism are valid: there is the fight for equal rights and self-determination. While a Western framing of feminism has informed and formed the moral consciousness of the Filipino woman, my critique centers on its construct. The said framing does not adequately describe the Philippine situation neglecting the lived experience of marginalization, struggle, and liberation which are the appropriate starting points for theological reflection. A true liberative theoethics needs to be claimed by our people and not imposed from the outside. Western feminism is an imported and transplanted paradigm echoing traces of colonialism.

Given these observations, I envision a distinct Filipina theoethic methodology with the *babayi* as its conceptual title. This theological and ethical approach is liberationist reflecting Filipino values and the experience of the Philippine situation. It will critique oppressive structures and patriarchy (including hierarchy). I am not advocating that Filipino theologians adapt womanist or *mujerista* theologies, rather, with both liberation theology and feminism, it becomes possible to draw a genuine

[47] Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* 20 January – 17 February 1991, (Manila: Secretariat CBCP, 1992), 48-50; 52.

Filipino liberationist theology and ethics. It neither replaces feminism since it will use the tools and resources provided by feminism in fighting for equal rights and the quest for identity. Instead, the intersectional nature of a *babayi* theoethics will emerge from where the foundational constructs of feminism become limited. Lastly, this method begins with the multiaxes of the Filipina's of history, struggle, displacement and dialogue, and ecology. *Babayi* as a theoethics emerges from the roots of feminism and liberation distinguished by its situatedness.

My proposition of naming this methodology after the *babayi* is feasible. It is linguistically significant as the common word used for women. It is the identity she can embrace as her own, unlike *Filipina* that marks her as a captive of a colonial past. *Babayi* connects the contemporary woman to her pre-colonial past where she held power and honor as the mystic healer *babaylan*. *Babayi* also evokes solidarity with the women in history who fight alongside the men for liberation. *Babayi* represents the migrant women forced by economic reasons to leave home or displaced because of violence and conflicts. *Babayi* is commonly understood by the different cultures, tribes, and religions of the country making it a fitting symbol of a dialogue of life and dialogue of faith. Muslim and *lumad* women can identify with the *babayi* allowing them to claim a shared identity with other Filipino women. Finally, in ecofeminism, the *babayi* echoes oneness with creation when man and woman emerged from the split halves of the bamboo as equals.

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, we have seen that a distinctly Filipina theoethics named after the *babayi* is possible. The long contextual and historical exposition above was intended to build a strong grounding to my proposition of creating a theoethics based on discovering the Filipino woman's identity and origin. At the same time, taking into consideration the lived experience of struggle for liberation. Framing it with the *babayi* also opens the possibility for further study, analysis, and criticism. Within my faith tradition, one area that needs further study is on the genius of women advocated by Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis. I also intend to engage more with other postcolonial feminist and womanist authors who were intentionally excluded at this time. The best that could be said is that this is a work in progress. It is my hope to be given a chance to

pursue this topic and see if such a proposal to create a methodology for Filipino women is appropriate, acceptable, and applicable.

Reflection

Every woman has a unique role and contribution to the home and society that no man can fill. She is also a product of her environment, history, culture, and religion. At the crossroad, she stands and brings her allies, who like her, experience discrimination, violence, and oppression. All women have their stories. Filipino women too, have their stories. But how can she tell her story in a way that she can articulate with her tongue? Perhaps through a framing that is based on her original identity and not from an identity imposed on her by her colonizers. Maybe she can freely express herself through a framing that is her own and not from one transplanted from Western thinking.

This paper is my attempt at finding a methodology that genuinely describes the Filipino woman; a methodology that emerges from the venerable traditions of feminism and liberation theology. It is a work in progress, one that may not succeed, but all the same, an attempt of mapping a framework – a methodology that reflects her pre-colonial origin, her colonial past, and her postcolonial present.

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