Reclaiming The Healing Arts of The Ancient Priestess: Babaylanism as Site of Southeast Asian "Feminisms"

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ABSTRACT

This article invokes – as a form of strategic essentialism – the figure of the babaylan, the ancient pre-colonial Philippine priestess as signifier for women's life-giving, nurturing and healing powers. By reclaiming her legacy, I will present the outlines of what could be a possible model for Southeast Asian feminist frameworks. Babaylanism revolves around embodied spirituality – a concept where the body is construed as an anatomical, spiritual, social and psychic space grounded on fluidity and wholeness, instead of hierarchy and dualities. Drawing from my ongoing study and engagement with contemporary women artists in the visual arts of Asia, I will present examples of how selected Indonesian, Philippine and Thai women artists articulate and embody the babaylan in their life and their works.

Keywords: *babaylanism, art and healing, feminist theory*

PROLOGUE: BABAYLANISM AS STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM

This article invokes – as a form of strategic essentialism – the figure of the babaylan, the ancient pre-colonial Philippine priestess as signifier for women's life-giving, nurturing and healing powers. By reclaiming her legacy, I will present the outlines of what could be a possible model for Southeast Asian feminist framework. This model revolves around the term babaylanism, – which I borrow from the historian Fe Mangahas and which I link with the notion of embodied spirituality – a concept where the body is construed as an anatomical, spiritual, social and psychic space grounded on fluidity and wholeness, instead of hierarchy and dualities. Drawing from my ongoing study and engagement with contemporary women artists in the visual arts of Asia, I will present examples of how selected Indonesian, Philippine and Thai women artists articulate and embody the babaylan in their life and their works. In the process, I put forward the following theoretical points.

My first point: Instead of positing Southeast Asia as a derivative of the Great Traditions (as in diffusion theories centered on Indianization and Sinification), it is more productive to demonstrate how certain practices from China and India were actively reconfigured, reinterpreted and TRANSFORMED. A case in point is the Goddess of Mercy *Kuan Yin*, a cult figure among Chinese devotees, believed to have originated in India, where she was called Avalokiteshvara, the personification of divine assistance and compassion. Known in Vietnam as *Quan Am*, her statue appears in countless forms and has come to dominate Buddhist and nationalist imagery in Vietnam.

My second theoretical point: Reclaiming the goddess in the name of nationalism can also be risky, as can be seen from two most visible examples in Japan: (1) The 1942 Kyoto symposium of intellectuals, academics and critics, which targeted "Japan's course of modernisation in terms of refuting Westernisation" (Munroe 1994: 24); (2) in the appropriation of Japan's first

ancestral goddess *Amaterasu* by Takamure Itsue – a pre-war feminist philosopher and historian (albeit with no professional training as one). According to Ueno Chizuko (in Buckley 1997), Takamure proposed the idea of a "maternal self" as a Japanese cultural ideal set in opposition to the Western "individualist self." By identifying herself and all Japanese women with the first, great goddess, she offered a feminist counterpart to a larger anti-Westernisation and counter-modernism project. Framed by what Ueno described as "reverse Orientalism," this maneuver led to Takemure's active participation in the war, which she justifies as a "sacred war" that fights for a rapidly disappearing maternal self, as seen for instance in individualist feminists' focus on such issues as the woman's vote, rather than on their feminine virtues, power to give birth, raise a family, lead and mediate between the community and individual.

Takamure is heir to the tradition of the first maternalist feminist – Hiratsuka Raicho – the founder of the first feminist journal in Japan. As early as the 1900s – at a time when the first women's association in the Philippines was also being formed – feminism was already present in Japan, and a debate was already raging between individualist feminists and maternal feminists, of which Hiratsuka was a key figure. She argued for a Japanese indigenous feminism distinct from Western individualism by asserting the specificity of womanhood and in more practical terms, by demanding maternal welfare from the state and the community. In effect, this debate in the 1900s defines and intimates the contours of similar fissures between feminists from the pre-war (Takemura's time) period till the present, as in for instance "radical" versus "liberal" feminism; between feminists arguing for legal reforms vis-à-vis those who have shifted attention back to the private domain of male-female relationships (Miya Yoshiko in Buckley 1997). There are also present-day "versions" of maternal feminism, exemplified by what Ueno (in Buckley 1997) calls "maximalists" or "ecofeminists," whose critique of Japanese industrial society resemble the maternal feminists counter-modernist and anti-western idealization of local virtues of motherhood, nature and nation.

We can see from the Japanese example an illustration of a postcolonial dilemma: when our feminism chooses to stress the feminine, as in the case of "maternalist" and "maximalist" feminists, we run the risk of essentialising and orientalising ourselves as "Asians" and as "natives" and in ghetto-izing ourselves as women and as feminists. In the case of Takamure, it can also turn the other way – to women's co-optation and complicit participation in a war that caused untold suffering to Japan's former colonies.

However, and this is my third point, uncovering, tracing and re-discovering an ancient past, as the pioneers Hirakuta and Takamure have done, may offer a challenge, which I admit is risky – to a dominant historical view that denied women's specific feminine form of power, creativity and pro-creativity. By reclaiming the goddess and the babaylan and by naming my feminism as *babaylanism*, I invoke what Gayatri Spivak famously termed as "strategic essentialism," a deconstructive position she summarised as "saying an impossible no to a structure that one criticises, yet inhabits intimately" (in Kelsky 2001).

In enacting such strategic essentialist and deconstructive reading, I follow the example of scholars like Chiba Kei, who offered a nuanced insight on the Japanese version of Avalokiteshvara – Kannon, Mother of Mercy. In a paper he read for the 9th Interdisciplinary Congress of Women in Seoul (2005), he presented an alternative reading of a painting by Kano Hogai, *Hibo Kannon* (dated 1888)*,* famous as a representative work of Japanese modern painting, and is often referred to as the Japanese Madonna. Chiba stated that rather than an unequivocal symbol of the "ideal" mother, this painting images Kannon as a "cross-dressing, hermaphroditic woman with a phallus and a beard," thus challenging dominant "Kannon-ical" interpretations hinged on compulsory heterosexuality and the State's ultra-nationalist agenda. This argument on Kannon and other cross-dressing women he cited like Amaterasu and the Empress Jingu deserves further study on my part and a longer discussion in another essay devoted to the subject of gender ambiguity.

Photo 1 *Kannon Hogai*

In the meantime, suffice it to say that indeed, Japanese goddesses are complex figures that challenge simple male-female dichotomies, and therefore do not lend themselves to easy binarist readings, especially those that insist that Kannon and Amaterasu can be easily coopted into the State's construct of women as nationalist and ideal mothers.

There is, in other words, space for opposition in Chiba's readings and in the readings of Southeast Asian women's works, I offer in this article. They only go to show that the structure that I inhabit intimately is not monolithic and is instead riddled by fractures and contradictions. It is from such gaps and fissures that I may find the spaces for forming empowering bonds and communities and for enacting maneuvers that interrupt official versions of history.

Let me now present my article by telling three stories. One took place in 1997 in Bali and another in Bangkok in 1995. The other happened in Manila in 2004.

STORY 1: RE-IMAGI(NI)NG SITA

The year was 1997, and the place was Ubud, Bali, the last leg of our research in Indonesia, which started in Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta in Java. One of the first women I met was Ni Made Sri Asih, whom I intercepted after her class with young girls at the Seniwati Art Gallery for Women – which was at that time the only gallery exclusively for women artists in the places I visited. (Perhaps it still is the only one of its kind in Southeast Asia until today). Before the interview, I saw a photo of one of her works at one of the catalogues at Seniwati, which appeared at first to be totally ordinary, as it was rendered in what I thought was "typical" Balinese style. Upon closer look however, I was to be proven wrong.

Hanoman's Task (1996) exhibits the characteristics of the Pita Maha school of Ubud, one of the competing schools of style and technique of Modern Balinese painting. While they may look alike on the surface, modern Balinese paintings are complex products of several stylistic schools, which are hybrids of precolonial and modern aesthetics brought about by colonial art academies, tourism and migrations, among others (Djelantik 1990). The stamp of Pita Maha

in Sri Asih, can be seen in the painting's monochromatic but lushly painted surfaces, well-planned linearity and well-balanced spatial orientation and arrangement.

In *Hanoman's Task,* Sri Asih depicted a popular scene which is often painted by famous male artists, most of which I saw at the Bali Museum. The scene takes off from the Ramayana, which shows Rama's envoy, the white monkey Hanoman, informing Sita that her husband, the newly installed king, is on his way to rescue her from the clutches of the evil god Rahwana, who kidnapped and held her captive for 14 years. The scene also captures the moment when Hanoman tries to find out from Sita, upon Rama's orders, if Sita is still chaste after years in captivity.

Informed by the "right-to-my-body" feminist framework of equal rights I inherited from western feminism, I was indignant, not only at Rama's jealous doubts, but also at the idea of Rama checking up on Sita's chastity (I assume, of course, that Sita is technically not a virgin, since she may have had a sex life with Rama before she was abducted by Rahwana) even before he can find out how she was after going through her horrible experience. I was more astonished to find out that Sita had yet to face another ordeal, when she had to go through fire to prove her purity, the moment she returns to her husband's arms.

It is this trial-by-fire of Sita's purity that Arahmaiani, an internationally well-known multi-media Indonesian artist, has challenged in her video *I Don't Want to be Part of Your Legend.* Well-known for her daring works which often get her in trouble with authorities, Arahmaiani produced this video as part of her ongoing critique of her country's unholy alliance with imperialism and globalisation, as well as its particular, Islamic brand of patriarchy and militarism. Referencing the Indonesian traditional theatre form *wayang kulit* (shadow play), this video shows a dry leaf shaped in the form of a *wayang* figure, which will slowly burn, as Arahmaiani's voice defiantly chants a lamentation in the background. The burning of the leaf

symbolises, not only Sita's refusal to be part of the patriarchal legend, but also the need to go through the cleansing power of fire, from which a renewed and stronger Sita will emerge.

From Sri Asih's point of view however, Sita need not be viewed as refusing to be part of the "legend" – she submitted herself for trial-by-fire, and we will not understand this if we view this seeming complicity within the framework of equal sexual rights and sexual liberation. According to Sri Asih, Rama was not acting out of typical male chauvinism. She explained that the most important value in Hinduism is the sacredness of the body, and it is demanded both of females and males. Because spiritual and physical purity go together, Sri Asih would not have respected Sita had she allowed herself to be violated by Rahwana, because she would have lost her spiritual integrity.

The faith in Sita's strength resonates in the painting, where Sri Asih shows the topless Sita (in the Balinese style), holding a keris (Indonesian sword). A passage from the art historian Astri Wright is instructive and I will quote her description at length:

> Sita here is not the tearful, passive abductee on the verge of losing hope so often encountered in Javanese versions (of the scene). Here, Sita occupies the center of the canvas. She is ready for battle, sitting erect on Hanoman's shoulder, her *keris* raised and ready in her right hand (although she no longer needed it now that she is safe with Hanoman), and her left hand in defensive posture enhanced by the dance convention of draping her *selendang* (shoulder cloth for holding things) between her fingers. She appears to be giving the monstrously featured white monkey the order to proceed, to carry her (even if that means touching her) across the waters (Wright 1996: 26–27).

Far from being the hapless victim, Sita had the power and strength of her individual volition. Had she succumbed to Rahwana, it was not because she was helpless and therefore blameless, but because she had somehow spiritually faltered along the way. From a symbol of fragile femininity and oppression, Sita – in Sri Asih's re-vision – became a symbol of a strong, courageous woman who withstood her ordeal of 14 years, tenaciously guarding her spiritual and physical purity.

Thus, when we talk of Sita, we have to bear in mind that body, spirit, mind cannot be separated; and the social person, specially in Southeast Asia, must be understood, not in fragmented ways, or through the sex/gender, mind/body, nature/culture dichotomies that form the key ordering principles of traditional western thought – both mainstream and feminist.

STORY 2: THORANEE AND THE MURAL PAINTER

My second story is about the Thai mural painter Phaptawan Suwannakudt, a pioneer, the first and until recently, the only woman mural painter in Thailand. Taking over from her father Paiboon, the leader of the traditional mural revival in Thailand, after his death, Phaptawan gracefully entered a male domain, traditionally off limits to women, and took the lead. And as American artist Ann Wizer, one of the commentators in the 1999 Women Imaging Women Conference put it: "She's somehow done all of this without rebelling or breaking from the traditional form of visual narrative…and without losing anything from the long rich history of Thai tradition" (in Datuin 1999). Her subversion also becomes even more significant when we also take note of the way she persisted in practicing an art form that has a low and peripheral status compared to the contemporary and academic "fine" arts practiced by her colleagues.

One incident that illustrates her initial difficulties happened when she was a teenaged apprentice to her late father's mural projects. It involves Phaptawan's *sarong* (Thai tube skirt), which she hanged out to dry in the workers' common bathroom. When one of the elderly male staff members saw the *sarong*, he angrily flung it out of the window. Phaptawan said that it was because her gesture offended the man, since women's *sarongs* must not only touch male skin; they must not be hung above men's heads, the most sacred part of the Thai human anatomy. Touching women's *sarongs* would contaminate men, since it comes in contact with menstrual blood, which is believed to be a polluting and destabilising substance that disrupts men's mental and spiritual equilibrium (Tanabe 1991).

The power of menstrual blood over men is very similar to that attributed to "monstrous feminines," whose female power men secretly but at times overtly and violently, envy, hate and fear. This is exemplified in the burning of witches in the middle ages and in the outlawing of native rituals presided over by ancient priestesses or babaylans in pre-colonial Philippines (I will talk about the babaylan shortly). The monstrous feminines are the Sirens and Medusas who kill unwary men, the female *vampiras* and *aswangs* (Filipino blood-sucking and meat-eating vampires), and *mangkukulams* (Filipino witches) who can cast a curse or spell on offenders.

To recollect that *sarong*-throwing incident and the painful lessons associated with it, Phaptawan fashioned an artwork by hanging several *sarongs* on a clothesline above waist level, in defiance of what she calls "age-old Thai beliefs." The piece was shown in Bangkok in 1995, in an exhibition called "Tradisexions," which put together some of the most active and militant women artists in Thailand. It was in the Tradisexions exhibit that I first met Phaptawan and it was during my conversation with her, right there under the *sarong* clothesline, when the idea for researching and documenting the lives and works of women artists in Southeast Asia occurred to me for the first time.

Tradisexions became the precursor of Womanifesto (www.womanifesto.com), an art event that occurs every two years, gathering women artists from all over the world. Starting out with an exhibition and artists' talks in 1997, it is said to be the first of its kind in Asia. Its recent activities went beyond "mere" exhibitions, including a ten-day Workshop in 2001, held in a remote setting of north-eastern Thailand with no formal exhibition of works planned thereafter. It involved an international group of 18 professional women artists, curators and art administrators including five student volunteers studying cultural management. They interacted and exchanged not only with each other, but also with the local community.

In 2003, Womanifesto produced a publication/box of stories called *Procreation/Postcreation*, which is about collecting/archiving/documenting personal stories, old and new beliefs and tales, medical facts, sayings, advice, taboos, recipes, lullabies, poems and more – before some of this knowledge gets forgotten and lost in time. It is also about exploring old and new myths surrounding both pro and post creation and how these myths have influenced our thinking in the past and, continue to do so today and into the future.

I have not been involved in any of the Womanifesto events, but I was there in 1996 when the Tradisexions group gathered to brainstorm and plan what was to become an important event for women artists in Thailand and beyond. I returned to the Philippines in 1997, after a two-year stay in the Thailand, and embarked on my subsequent researches in the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and recently, Korea, China and now Japan. But before I left Thailand, I journeyed with Phaptawan to the north to visit some of her murals. During that journey, one of the images that struck me most was that of *Thoranee*, the Earth Goddess, whom the Buddha called upon to bear witness to his right to enlightenment. In Phaptawan's reconstruction of the story of the Boddhisattva Subduing Mara at Wat Si Khom Kham, Phayao, 1990, she placed the Boddhissattva at the apex of the painting, his right hand on his knee, fingers pointing to the ground, summoning Thoranee. While the Boddhissattva seems to occupy the more dominant

position, his inert, meditative stance is set in striking contrast to that of Thoranee, who is shown effortlessly, sensuously, wringing her hair, thus unleashing a deluge on the forces of the evil Mara. While the Buddha connotes sublime tranquility, Thoranee is depicted as an active power – the embodiment of nature's capacity for creation and destruction.

STORY 3: INCARNATIONS OF THE BABAYLAN IN WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE PHILIPPINES

Let me now fast forward to 2004 at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), Manila, right before I left for this fellowship. During the opening of a major exhibition by women artists in the Philippines (which I curated), we invoked the many-breasted goddess we call *Mebuyan* through a performance ritual (led by Racquel "Kleng" de Loyola, and other young women artists Maan Charisse de Loyola, Ramona dela Cruz, Teta Tulay, Vivian Limpin and Lea Lim). In the ritual, Mebuyan moved with the spontaneous rhythm of percussions and guitar effects; and the chanting of prayers composed by participating artists – prayers that express women's deepest longings, desires and visions for the future. Mebuyan then proceeded to "paint" the empty wall with fluids squeezed out of the many breasts of her rubber latex body suit – signifying women's life-giving powers, capacity to nurture, create and re-create themselves by fusing the ordinary and sacred in art. As she turned on the lights of the gallery, the exhibit formally opened and Mebuyan welcomed the guests to a space, which was turned into a metaphorical house by more than 50 women artists, working on a wide range of styles, themes, images, artistic media and coming from diverse, geographic, artistic and philosophical locations.

Through movement, sound, and light, Mebuyan performed the theme of *embodied spirituality* where body is not just anatomy but a social, psychic and spiritual space that is characterised by fluidity and wholeness. Through Mebuyan, we summoned the figure of the babaylan, the ancient priestess/healer, a figure that compels us to remember that once upon a time, there were shamans who were mostly older or menopausal women, or men who aspired to be women or *binabae.* The babaylan is usually an older woman, because her expertise in rituals, including memorisation of songs, poems, stories, beliefs and complete medical knowledge required long years of training and practice.

Photo 2 Mebuyan de Loyola (Curated by Datuin, 2004)

According to the historian Zeus Salazar (in Datuin 2002), the babaylan was:

1. The central personality in ancient Philippine society
2. The spiritual and political leader
3. The vanguard and bearer of knowledge in the fields of culture, religion and medicine
4. A proto-scientist, the first specialist in the social sciences and humanities, who took care of religious ritual and the mythology of the *barangay*, the basic political economic unit of ancient Philippine society
5. An administrator, who also assisted the *datu*, the political leader, in running the barangay's political and economic affairs

The most practical route of transferring the society's knowledge is from a babaylan mother to daughter, who will continue, and add on to this inheritance through generations. Such accumulation of knowledge and its continuity was interrupted, when Spanish priests attempted to wipe out the practice of spirit or *anito* (Tagalog or Filipino term for spirit) worship with the rites and saints of Christianity. In the wake of their destruction, the colonisers imaged the babaylan as a "monstrous feminine" and labelled her as a sorceress, a witch, a *mangkukulam*, whose black magic casts evil spells.

In more thoroughly Christianised societies, especially in lowland urban areas, the babaylan's influence was significantly diminished, and her role in nation building, especially during the Propaganda and Revolution, was reduced to a minimum. In her more "benign" forms, the babaylan evolved into assistants of priests or *hermanas*, while others concentrated on being good housekeepers and caretakers of children. However, the babaylans continued to exist and enjoy a relatively high status and prestige, despite certain constraints, in secret societies. Vestiges of these groups are still present among communities in regions away from

the lowland urban centers, where women remained caretakers of the communities' native intellectual and scientific heritage.

Today, the babaylan's presence is seen:

1. In the *hermana,* who performs church duties
2. In the *manang* or unmarried aunt who acts as surrogate parents
3. The grandmother who looks after her grandchildren
4. Women weavers, faith healers, *herbolarias,* midwives, who continue to pass on their knowledge to their daughters
5. In women who entered areas formerly held by the *datu* and *panday,* or the native technologist – the doctors, psychologists, lawyers, historians, nurses, teachers
6. In women artists and writers and cultural workers, such as the women of Kasibulan, the group that staged the abovementioned exhibition, as their 15th anniversary celebration

The presence of modern-day babaylans in our midst gives us concrete examples of some anthropological accounts explaining the more fluid agrarian societies in Southeast Asia. In these societies, the binarist distinctions between say, public and public spheres, individual and culture are not pronounced, if they exist at all, because of these societies' egalitarian and complementary structures of kinship, assignment of roles, prestige systems and religious activities. Women in these societies are not publicly visible but they are not visible in formal politics or the great religions endorsed by the State, according to Wazir Jahan (1995). "Their inputs into politics and religion exist in the informal sphere; but this sphere is so visible and important that it is hard for social scientists to come up with a general statement to the effect that women are less important."

Food preparation, dressing and preparing the altars and votive figures for ritual, among other activities assigned to women, can be considered "peripheral," but only according to our definition of religious rituals as hierarchical and formal practice. In the context of day-to-day activities where relationships are flexible and fluid, it is difficult to say that gender roles in ceremonies necessarily imply hierarchies of power and dominance. Even if they do, it is also difficult to determine whether or not they are oppressive or favourable to women.

This fluidity of power relations can also be discerned in Jean Francis Illo's research on the *maybahay*, (literally owner of the house), a Filipino term used to define married women or housewives – "who do not work for wages," and do largely household work. Illo (in Wazir Jahan 1995) argues that women imbue the term with different meanings that transcend their definition as "housekeepers." To the maybahays, "economic and non-economic work are inseparable, and their being maybahay means being a total worker, producing both goods and labor." Such findings not only challenge existing concepts and policies of so-called development programs, they also compel us to consider the home – and its corollary terms nation, region and identity – as a highly ambiguous and problematic location. It is a space where women's self-concepts and lived experiences do not necessarily coincide with individualistic, largely Eurocentric, binarist models and definitions of oppression and liberation.

ALMA QUINTO: FIBER, CLOTH, NEEDLE

I discern this attempt to visually present a non-binarist model of life in Filipina artist Alma Quinto, one of the participants in the above mentioned CCP exhibition. In her works, Quinto reclaims the babaylan in various ways. In *Soft Dreams and Bed Stories*, which she presented as the Philippines' sole representative to the 2003 Havana Biennial, the babaylan took the shape and form of a bed, which connotes the restorative powers of sleep, the erotic realm of

the night, as well as the everyday routines of self-maintenance and domesticity. In *Ayayam* (a term used to mean "play" in the Ilocos region, Northern Philippines), Quinto's project for the 2005 Yokohama Triennial, where she also was the Philippines' sole representative, the babaylan incarnates as the woman who floats from the ceiling, with a cord emanating from her womb and vagina. The cord connects with one hundred breasts with wings scattered on the floor, which along with the other pieces in the space, can be touched, rearranged and played with. From her elevated height, the babaylan rules and surveys her realm with her life-giving presence.

We are enjoined to take comfort and warmth in this maternal presence and enclose ourselves within the sheltering warmth of her skin and womb (walls and mosquito nets). Through her birthing body, we lay claim to the power of our bodies and by reclaiming our bodies, we also recharge and take charge of our creativity and imagination and allow them to take off in free play and flight (winged breasts).

Such a flight is particularly resonant with the children of CRIBS PHILIPPINES (Create Responsive Infants by Sharing), a Manila-based NGO, where Quinto has been conducting art workshops for the last ten years now. After being abused at a very young age, the girls show signs of negative self-concepts about their bodies, over which they felt no control. They believe that their bodies are "monstrous feminines," causing fear, lust or even loss of control in adults – a logic that absolves their abusers of blame. The babaylan, with its "monstrosity" thus presents a figure that women can identify with, particularly for those who went through trauma. As mother figure, the babaylan nurtures and shelters; as signifier for creativity, she points to one possible outcome: that women and children be encouraged to understand, find pleasure, and regain control over their bodies, their selves. Through this process, the child learns that she is not a victim, but a survivor and victor.

The "monstrous" babaylan also challenges the dominant Catholic image of the docile Virgin Mother and Child, which presents a spirituality that pivots, not only on feminine obedience, but also on the purity of the physical body, which in Christian doctrine is a "mere" repository of the "soul" or "spirit." When Quinto presents the mother as babaylan with direct references to her birthing womb and vagina, she puts forward an alternative spirituality grounded on co-existence and communion, instead of conquest and castration; on restorative union, instead of abjection and victimisation.

By summoning and re-collecting children's unspeakable memories of trauma through cloth, and the figure of the babaylan, Quinto thus testifies to women's generative capacity, particularly their power to give birth, which produces the next generation, and their ability to weave, quilt and sew, which produces cloth. Using thread and cloth as her main medium, Quinto performs the role of the babaylan, which she reinterprets as her modern-day artist's function as mediator between and among women, and their psychic, spiritual and corporeal realms.

The power of cloth to bind and express women's creativity is also evident in another work at the 2004 CCP exhibition. *Puso* or Heart, the centre piece patchwork from which veins radiate towards the entire length of the floor and ceiling. The heart-womb originated from the women of Luna Art Collective, who distributed the veins to women from the communities of Cebu, a major island port in Central Philippines, which were in turn, extended by the artists in this show, who added their own veins, in ways that enact the additive and patchwork process of the "quilting bee."

This exhibition was held in connection with the 15th anniversary celebration of Kasibulan (Kababaihan sa Bagong Sining at Bagong Sibol na Kamalayan or Women in Art and Emerging Consciousness), a group of women artists in the arts (visual arts, dance, literature, theatre,

etc). It was formed out of a series of consultations with women in various professions in 1987, and formally registered as a non-stock, non-profit organisation in 1989.

Its founding members include a nun, who at that time was a designer and maker of handcrafted leather bags (Ida Bugayong, who edited and designed this guidebook), a sculptor (Julie Lluch) and three painters (Brenda Fajardo, who helped conceptualise the exhibition design and provided the sketches; Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, the founding president; and Ana Fer). They were later joined by terracotta artist Baidy Mendoza, who along with Sandra Torrijos, Lia Torralba, and Cajipe-Endaya, also served as president. The present president is Edda Amonoy, under whose able leadership this exhibition was planned and realised.

In a territory where the key players are men, and where the turning points for women hinge on their entry to movements and institutions initiated by men – such as the entry of the first woman student Pelagia Mendoza to the 19th century Spanish colonial art school, Academia de Debujo y Pintura and the token inclusion of Anita Magsaysay-Ho in the 13 moderns, the privileged list of pioneering moderns led by the Father of Philippine Modernism Victorio Edades – the founding of Kasibulan is a feminist art-historical watershed because it marks the first time women consciously decided to carve their own niche and tell their own stories, on their own terms. By banding and bonding together in their own space, the conscious stirrings and debates on feminist practice and theory emerged and took place among women artists, who fought for visibility and the right to represent themselves, in their own eyes and through their own voices.

Since its founding, Kasibulan has nurtured and continues to nurture a significant group of women artists through exhibitions, forums and other activities which not only challenged women's negative and stereotyped images but also questioned the very parameters of art and artistry as they are defined in mainstream culture.

In its many projects, the Kasibulan linked up with women in the communities (such as artisans in Paete), with women in non-art sectors (such as Filipina migrant workers, public school teachers of Marikina, street children of Malate), and women in other disciplines such as medicine, law and labour.

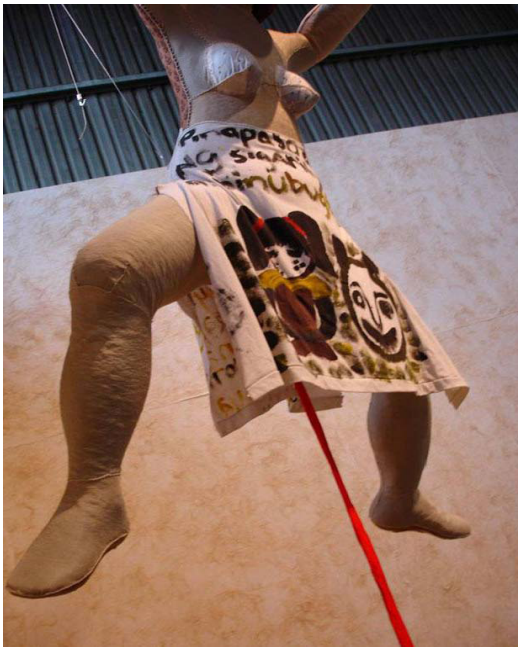

Photo 3 Ayayam 1 (Quinto, 2004)

Photo 4 Ayayam 2 (Quinto, 2004)

TOWARDS A SOUTHEAST ASIAN FEMININE/FEMINIST AESTHETICS: CROSSING THE SEX/GENDER DIVIDE

In the practices of Kasibulan, Seniwati Art Gallery in Bali and Womanifesto in Bangkok – three models from the Philippine, Indonesian and Thai examples – we see how women artists return the gaze of the patriarchal vision, not only by exercising the power to define and re/present themselves, but also by defining some of the contours of an emerging feminine aesthetic. This aesthetic is grounded on a "dialect" (Pollock 1988) that borrows from, as well as re-tools, the legacies of modernism, colonialism and globalisation, among others. This visual "dialect" recasts the slogan "the personal is political" through strategies that demonstrate, not just the political nature of women's private individualised subjections, but also the possible options for healing and empowerment for women in the region. In the artists I cited, one possible route is the celebration of an ancient female figure – whether it be the goddesses Sita, Mebuyan and Thoranee or the Philippine babaylan or ancient priestess. At

first glance, this strategy of reclaiming an ancient model seemingly transposes us back to the maternal benevolence of a "pre-cultural" and "pre-colonial" past of indigenous peoples. The recourse to the goddess constructs the female body as ancient, non-western, original, frozen in a timeless, inert space, existing outside the cycles of the seasons. Our bodies become one with the earth and its primeval guiding spirits, here represented by the Goddess – the high priestess-babaylan, Mebuyan, Thoranee and Sita – thereby assigning and consigning us to a reserved oasis of "nature," outside the flow of historical time, enthralling, timeless and never changing.

Alma Quinto, for example is aware that her combined use of the female body and figure of the babaylan might unwittingly support patriarchal constructs by upholding stable, essentialist categories of femaleness, and in this case, an essential Southeast Asian femaleness, as "counterpart" to the universal, Western, white femaleness. However, she also deliberately reclaims these images to articulate her longing for a female idiom, and distinctly feminine aesthetics grounded on a nonlinear or circular sense of history, which is noncompetitive and nonhierarchical. Her direct reference to the woman's nurturing body, her womb, her breasts, her navel, and her vulva or vagina, intimate her connection to the feminist project of finding a feminine space from and through which we can recover our inheritance from a past, not in the sense of reliving and recapturing it in its "authentic" and "original" form, because that is no longer possible. To recover the past means, to regain control, to repossess, to create again. The key term is "version" (de Zegher 1996: 199) – which the artist creates to provide a vehicle through which we can enact our own transformations, and find our direction, our action, our movement.

The return to the goddess may also have resonance with the body-centered approach which became a dominant feminist strategy among visual artists in 1970s North America (McEvilly 1989). Such strategy revolves around a mind/body, sex/gender, nature/culture binary frame.

In these women pioneers, sex is aligned with the body's anatomy, its biological and therefore universal given, while gender is aligned with culture, which determines how sex is going to be produced, accounted for and represented. However, as the "new feminisms" of the 1990s have taught us, and following Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, the body is not just anatomy, but a cultural and psychic space, which has a geographic and historical location. It is not a prediscursive, biological and politically neutral surface on which gender is inscribed. Sex is not to biology as gender is to culture, because sex itself is as culturally constructed and historically contingent as gender. My anatomical body itself is the object of study, the very battleground on which cultural constructions and practices compete (Butler 1990: 7; Foucault in Nettleton and Watson 1998).

Thus, as I choose to reread the women's works I encounter, particularly in Southeast Asia, and probably now, in East Asia, I see a refusal – at times conscious but more often unconscious – to sever the mind and the body, sex and gender, nature and culture. As Quinto puts it: "Whereas the colonizer emphasised the dualistic body and soul relationship, my work focuses on the unity and dialectical relationship between them. The soul dialogues with the body, and the body in the soul is there to enlarge the soul."

These women's works and words show that perceiving and articulating images is not only about sight, but also about gesture, disposition, volition and emotion. The body is not just the physical body, but a psychic and psychological feminine space, which is imaged and imagined, not as a place of comfort and reassurance, but a place of pain and disquietude, as well as of possible liberation through conflict, negotiation and confrontation. The interiors and interstices of the female body – the battleground of male creativity – are re-visualised in their own terms, in their own voice.

Within these developing outlines of a feminine aesthetics, we can redefine the "aesthetic," not as a function of pure form and the pure gaze (*pace* Bourdieu), which the critic supposedly perceives and relentlessly inspects for its sake. Instead, the "aesthetic" is all about *encounter,* affect, gesture and movement. Form embodies not just style, but also testimonies of struggle, pain, gains and triumphs.

I use "testimony" to emphasise the inter-subjective modes in which women retell their experiences and memories, through processes that transcend the confines of solitary "genius" or the domain of *bellas artes* aesthetics. Because their homes and bodies are contiguous with the art world and the "world," women offer testimonies that may not necessarily be overtly feminist, but take on various forms from a range of locations. In their own ways, these women offer a range of possibilities for resistance, both within a collective movement and within the mundane spaces of the everyday. In the process, we can begin to understand the power of art to transform the "world" by revealing their doubts and pains about that world, as well as their faith and joy in its possibilities.

Let me illustrate by citing a testimony from Phaptawan again, who relocated to Sydney in 1996, and has since moved on to produce individual art pieces about her life, but still within the stylistic parameters of Thai mural painting. In a text for a catalogue of her exhibition she sent me very recently, she talked about her father, her life as a pioneer's daughter, and her own displacements, first as a Thai child who grew up travelling and living in temples, where her father's projects were; and later, as a Thai mural painter who was frustrated with her studio practice in a foreign land. "Who would care for Thai mural painting anyway?" she asked. What soothed her homesickness was a private routine: She observed the trees and gave them Thai names. She expressed this routine in a "language I am most comfortable with. This language is not Thai, is not even my skill in Buddhist temple painting, and is not the secret tune in me I inherited from my father, but it is (all about) seeing the world with all that made

me who I am. I use it to explore the world. The reward was, no matter how personal and how secret, that as I walked and looked up at the trees, all of a sudden people in the streets were not strangers to me anymore."

Her latest work, *An Elephant Journey* refers to her relationship to her new home, and the way she locates herself in the Australian Bushland. Although the Australian geography and the elephant "do not belong to each other, they look into one another and see the reflection of each other. What elephants see and what the landscape reveals is the way I see myself attached to my new home. *Chang* (Thai word for elephant) was the nickname that my father gave me on the day I was born. It was also my father's nickname, known from the way he mimicked the elephant walk. I am most comfortable when thinking about myself being an elephant. I carry my name as my totem." The elephant and a secret tune her father taught her when she was a child "may echo forever in me and the elephant may never depart. While it may remain personal, it is my utmost emotional contact with the world and how the world makes sense to me. *An Elephant Journey* observes how this secret tune plays its part with the place I am in. I use it as a language to communicate with other people, and how I would see myself attached to the other secret tunes, that are mingling in the shared space."

Through cloth and fiber as seen in Quinto, through paint and brush we see in Phaptawan and Sri Asih, as well as in the secret tunes and personal totems of Phaptawan's dislocated universe, the personal and the private cross over to the public sphere, at the moment when women struggle to make sense of the "world" through thought, feeling and action: naming trees in a secret language, humming secret tunes, sewing cloth to remember and heal trauma and pain, and reimagining Sita as a commanding presence ordering the white monkey to move on. I daresay that women artists – modern day babaylans – may be able to tell us certain things about ourselves – as women perhaps, or as Asians, however those difficult terms are defined. As Malaysian artist Teoh Joo Ngee states "Art does not depict things as seen, but as

things to be seen" (Teoh, pers. comm, 2004). Women artists can make us see what is not seen but from a woman's point of view, shaped and nurtured in that highly-charged, constantly shifting geographic area called "Asia."

It is in this in the context of telling another history, and of creating other possibilities and constructing better worlds that we claim our legacy and our link to the goddess and the babaylan. And as the young Filipina artist Lea Lim (in Datuin 2004) puts it in her statement, the babaylan's "efforts have customarily gone unnoticed," although she is now "slowly realising reverence well-deserved." But if we have indeed come a long way, the fight ain't over yet: women continue to be imaged negatively and victimised in real and reel life (in movies, in fiction, in ads, in the visual arts). Women artists continue to labour away in silence and in the shadows, and that is why we continue to mount all-women's shows, conduct researches and write our compensatory histories on women artists. Such feminist art-historical, critical and political strategies are not without their practical and theoretical problems, and I have discussed this more fully elsewhere (Datuin 2002). But I take solace in the thought that we come from a long line of babaylans. As such we "persist" – again to borrow from Lea Lim – continuously doing what needs to be done, our hands as persistent as the wind, blowing the dust that wanders and settles again and again, quietly. Ceaselessly. (Roll VTR).

EPILOGUE: BABAYLANISM AS REMINDER FOR US NOT TO FORGET

As I write this article and as I sift through the boxes of materials I have amassed for the last ten years[1], one of the figures that strike me most is the figure of the Korean *mutan* or shaman as she is deployed in the works of Tomiyama Taeko. The *mutan* for Tomiyama is a central metaphor "who links the living and the dead, the present and the past, existing separate from the state or ethnicity…In the world of illusion, the shaman gives voice to the *han* or deep resentment and sorrow of the victims" (Tomiyama in Jennison 2003, 190). In her 1986 work

In Memory of the Sea the shaman is a principal figure and mediating image in the story of a Korean woman who is asking the "Spirit Miko" to search for her sister who was taken away during the war and forced into sexual slavery in the Japanese Imperial army. The shaman also appears in a series of paintings and collage in the 1980s dealing with Korean conscripted labourers and "military comfort women." This series became the multi-media slide work, *The Thai Girl Who Never Returned Home* in which the shaman bore witness to the events of the life of a young Thai woman, Noi, who becomes a victim of the so-called sex trade in contemporary Japan and Southeast Asia.

I cite Tomiyama because I am struck at the "self-critical gaze" she casts on herself and her own people "as an assailant," as the art historian Hagewara Hiroko puts it writing about Tomiyama's work (Hagiwara 1995). In her works, Tomiyama breaks the silence and disrupts the modes of official forgetting, through a strategy that *mourns* for the dead – not to melodramatically re-enact the suffering – but to publicly re-member and re-imagine the other and bring the dead "into social life." It is in this sense that Tomiyama, born in 1921, is a pioneer, "precursor to and in a sense in a continuum with, more recent projects by artists and curators who are creating spaces at the intersection of discourses on the representation of war history, visual arts and diasporic communities" (Jennison 2003: 186).

In the 21st century, we are all carrying an enormous traumatic weight, and it is in this context that feminist investigations into the visual poetics of shame and trauma have emerged in recent years. This field is still emerging, and hence still inadequately theorised, and it is an urgent theoretical agenda that I hope we will pursue in our present and future discussions. In this article, I contributed to this agenda in a very preliminary, maybe even circuitous way, by reclaiming the babaylan, the *mutan*, the priestess, and the goddess as figures that can mediate between past and present, bring the dead back into social life through public mourning, and

compel us NOT to tolerate, NOT to look away, NOT to turn our backs, and most importantly, NOT to forget. And thus, we persist, quietly, ceaselessly.

NOTES

1. The most recent leg of this decade-long research was in 2004–2005, when I conducted fieldwork in Japan and Malaysia for the first time and revisited Indonesia and Thailand, in connection with my API (Asian Public Intellectuals) fellowship, funded by Nippon Foundation.

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