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**Becoming a Filipino Christian Psychologist:  
Reclaiming Indigenous Concepts of Faith and Spirituality**  
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## Abstract

There is a move within the Filipino church to rediscover indigenous Filipino music and dance and for incorporation within the highly westernized and anglicized Filipino worship service. Following this pattern, the author advocates for redemption of Filipino indigenous psychological concepts about faith and spirituality. This paper gives a historical account of the introduction of evangelical Christianity in the Philippines to set a backdrop for the current problem of a highly Americanized expression of Christianity and the denial of indigenous concepts as pagan and ritualistic. It showcases the changes in the area of worship music and theology to highlight the prospects of reclaiming indigenous Filipino concepts for incorporation into Christian life. Then, it explores the beginnings of the same redemptive project within the realm of indigenous psychological concepts pertaining to spirituality. It poses a challenge for Filipino Christian psychologists to do the work of redeeming aspects of our culture for application in everyday life and work.

Becoming a Filipino Christian Psychologist:  
Reclaiming Indigenous Concepts of Faith and Spirituality

When I first came to the United States in 2003, I was amazed at how comfortable I was worshipping in an American church. It was the same bare walls with a cross above the altar. I readily joined in the singing of hymns and choruses. I was able to anticipate the different transitions in the order of worship. I recognized the prayers. The special language used by the pastor was familiar to me. I felt right at home even if I had just traveled thousands of miles across the Pacific. I realize now that this was because the basic form of the evangelical worship service was transplanted to the Philippines when Protestantism was introduced to our land at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Filipinos have always been proud of the fact that the Philippines is the only Christian nation in Southeast Asia. Current estimates indicate that 92 percent of its nearly 84 million people adhere to the Christian faith (The World Factbook, 2003). A major factor in this demographic is the colonization of the Philippines by Spain for over three hundred years (1565 – 1898) and their establishment of Catholicism. Today, 83 percent of the population still belongs to the Roman Catholic Church. However, there is a strong and growing Protestant presence with 9 percent of the population belonging to one of many Protestant denominations that have been established in the islands. Five percent of the population adheres to Islam and the remaining 3 percent adheres to Buddhism and other religions (The World Factbook, 2003).

The growth of Protestantism in the Philippines can be traced to historical events at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that saw the end of the Spanish rule and the beginning of American colonization of the Philippines. To say that the face of Protestantism in the

Philippines is American is an understatement. Recent historical accounts about Protestant worship in the Philippines has shown that when American missionaries came they systematically eradicated indigenous music in worship claiming that it was pagan and even evil, and supplanted these with “proper” English hymns (Lapiz, 1997; Navarro, 2001). However, as early as the 1970s, there have been calls among nationalistic Filipinos to rethink this practice and to use indigenous Filipino music in worship.

I am advocating that just as the Filipino Church has been rediscovering indigenous Filipino music and incorporating this in Filipino worship, it also needs to reclaim indigenous psychological concepts of faith and spirituality. By plumbing the richness of indigenous cultures as recorded in history books and traditions, we can find models for how Filipino Christian psychologists should function in society. I am challenging Filipinos who say that they are Christians and who are also psychologists by profession to a new way of doing and being that is more attuned to the Filipinos’ concept of faith and spirituality, and of healing.

I have divided this paper into three parts. First, I will provide a historical context for introduction of Christianity in the Philippines. Second, I will discuss the development of a movement towards the incorporation of indigenous Filipino music within worship as a model for indigenizing other aspects of church life. Third, I will suggest ways we can start this process of reclaiming what is Filipino in the context of the Church’s understanding of spirituality and psychological healing.

### Historical Context

Anthropological and historical studies have shown that the early settlers of the Philippine Islands had a well-developed society with a government system run by local

chieftains called “datus,” their own language system, a deep sense of spirituality, various forms of art, and flourishing trade with their neighbors in Asia (Agoncillo & Alfonso, 1960).

However, with the Roman Catholic expansion in the world during the 1500s, the Philippines was colonized by Spain from 1565 to 1898. Because they were in the Philippines for over 300 years, the Spanish influence on Filipino culture and values was quite pervasive. One can still see this not only in the kind of Catholicism that we inherited with a lot icons and added rituals but also in the architecture, language and other aspects of life. For example, every town in the Philippines has a patron saint and on the feast day of this saint, the whole town celebrates what is called a “fiesta” or feast, where people serve the best foods and invite guests from other neighboring towns. Even Filipinos abroad are known to come home regularly for their town fiestas. This phenomenon is duplicated around the country, which makes coming to the Philippines a delight because there is always a fiesta being celebrated literally right around the corner.

In 1896, the Philippine revolution was sparked by continued abuse of power by Spanish friars. Protests led by local clergy and spurred by the liberal ideas of Filipino intellectuals eventually led to a revolution that was almost successful in overthrowing the colonial master. But the Spanish-American war broke out and with the Treaty of Paris in Dec. 10, 1898, the Philippines, together with Guam and Puerto Rico, was ceded to America for \$20 million. The Filipinos did not want another colonial master to occupy the archipelago so war broke out between the Filipinos and Americans. However, the Filipinos were no match to the numbers and firepower of the Americans. So, again the Philippines was occupied by another colonizer, this time the Americans.

The American occupation was much shorter than the Spanish occupation, only 42 years compared to the over 300 years that the Spaniards stayed in the country. However, its influence on Filipino culture is much more pervasive than the Spaniard's influence. This stemmed from the principle of "benevolent assimilation" where the Americans thought that it was the "white man's burden" to transform savage natives under their charge like the Filipinos to educated, civilized, that is Americanized, people. Indeed, a missionary named Brown said, "But whatever classification may be adopted, the general fact remains that, according to Anglo-Saxon standards, only a few of the Filipinos may fairly be called civilized. A much larger number are half-civilized, presenting a curious mixture of Spanish manners and Malay savagery, while a vast multitude are really heathen with a thin veneer of Arabian Mohammedanism or of medieval-Spanish Romanism, and sometimes without even that" (Brown, 1903).

Therefore, the Americans established the Philippine educational system and patterned this after the American educational system using English as the medium of instruction. Soon English became the language of the academe, government and business. We had a system where children from all over the Philippines were learning the American national anthem before their own national anthem and where they were being taught from American textbooks about snow and daffodils when all they experience is the scorching heat of the sun and the frequent monsoon rains, the kind of environment where daffodils can never flourish. Although a lot of Filipinos acknowledge the good that the educational system has done for the country, a growing number of historians are now calling this phase of our history "the miseducation of the Filipino." Whorf (1956) said that language shapes culture. Language is not benign. It shapes what

we perceive and how we value things. Filipinos learned vicariously and times directly that anything that comes from America must be good, and conversely that anything Filipino must be second-rate. This has been termed “colonial mentality” (Rimonte in Root, 1997). Enriquez identified this denigration of anything Filipino as a phase in cultural domination where the colonizers denigrate the host culture while it tries to highlight its own. This denigration is widespread and insidious. It covers Filipino looks (the whiter the skin, the taller the nose and stature, the more beautiful one is), products (anything with a tag saying “Made in the USA” or any other developed country is better than products that say “Made in the Philippines”), all forms of art (that the Filipinos don’t have an indigenous body of literature and that Filipino movies are looked down upon compared to Hollywood blockbusters), and Filipino identity and values (that the Filipinos have a damaged culture and a flawed personality) (Enriquez, 1994).

### Worship and Theology in Protestant Churches in the Philippines

It is against this backdrop that we come to an understanding of why the Filipino evangelical movement in the Philippines is very much Anglicized. Armed with the belief in the “White man’s burden”, missionaries came to the Philippines to “civilize” and Christianize Filipinos. From the initial ten denominations that sent missionaries at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a point after World War II when there were 200 denominations representing 3 percent of the population (US Library of Congress). Indeed, Navarro (2001) noted in his review of music in the Philippine Protestant Church from 1960 to 2000 that the Protestant service is a virtual transplant of the American church music experience. The missionaries banned indigenous music because these were

held as pagan or ritualistic. They perceived this kind of music as having neither connection or redeeming value for the liturgy. Navarro cited the Filipino's accommodative nature and the systematic education and indoctrination of Americans as the reasons for the wholesale adoption of the American pilgrim tradition as the standard music in Filipino fellowships. He said that because we lacked a sense of identity and because of our sense of indebtedness to Americans, we unwittingly allowed Filipino culture to be subservient to the dominant American culture of music in worship.

In the 70s, with the rise of nationalism as a result of the student movement, there was a wave towards more Filipino music in the churches. Filipino composers started penning worship songs in the vernacular using melodies of popular Filipino songs. Although these songs made inroads into some churches, they still paled in comparison to the popularity of hymns in English. For the most part, these songs were relegated to youth group meetings or to the "praise and worship" time before the formal liturgy started (Navarro, 2001).

More recently a Filipino pastor named Ed Lapiz (1997) started a newer trend in reclaiming indigenous Filipino music for worship. In his book entitled "*Paano Maging Pilipinong Kristiano*" (Becoming a Filipino Christian), Lapiz outlined his program for redeeming Philippine music and dance for Christian worship based on the following principles: 1) Created arts, especially music and dance, came from God to be used for God's glory. Therefore, the impetus or impulse of Philippine music and dance, like all created endeavors, come from God; 2) Philippine music and dance forms are neither pagan or evil. As non-living things, they are incapable of morality and immorality. It is the heart of the musician or dancer and the object of worship that define the "morality" of

the art form. Therefore, Philippine music and dance performed by Christians for the Lord Jesus Christ, become holy vessels of worship; 3) Ministry or service to God is defined by spiritual giftings (1 Cor. 12); 4) The Church should minister to the Filipino people through cultural tools and expressions that are natural, inherent, indigenous and responsive to them; and 5) National identity is part of global worship. Tribes and nations should worship, serve, and glorify God with their culture! (Rev. 5:9-10).

Pastor Ed Lapiz's vision for the role of the Philippine Christian church in the preservation of art and culture is expressed in this quote from his book:

What will happen to our cultural heritage if all Filipinos embraced Biblical Christianity? If the march of culturally insensitive, if not outright destructive "evangelism" were not tempered by enlightened cultural preservation, Western-style Christianity will totally obliterate Filipino culture and identity. In this case, every forward step that the Filipino spirit makes would mean a backward step for the Filipino soul. These need not happen if today's Filipino Christian would revive, preserve, promote, and propagate the *Subli*, *Pandanggo sa Ilaw* or *Paunjalay* and use the *agong*, *kulintang*, *kubing*, etc. for use within and under the nourishment of the Christian Church. With careful and caring redemption, adaptation and contextualization, Filipino cultural forms will flourish, not die, with the march of Christianity in our country. Then, Christianity will be the sanctuary, not the cemetery, of Filipino cultural heritage. (1997, p. 108)

It is an uphill climb for Pastor Lapiz and his program, but I think that they are on target in this plan to reclaim a very big piece of Filipino heritage and culture, and to put this task in terms of “sin” language because it would really be a great disservice to God if a whole cultural heritage is obliterated in His name.

It is not only in the area of worship that Filipinos are beginning to reclaim indigenous concepts and traditions. A few Filipino theologians are also starting to plumb indigenous resources to come up with an indigenous Filipino theology. One example is George Capaque’s (2005) work on the problem of evil in the Filipino context. He explains that the Filipino worldview is transpersonal, meaning: 1) There is reality other than matter, for example, “spirit” and “spirits”; 2) The world is ultimately run by Spirit, variously described as God, mind, Providence or the Force; and 3) Humans are part of a larger collectivity. He describes how this worldview is expressed in the idea of *Bathala* (God) who is the chief among the spirits and sovereign over all. According to this worldview humans should seek harmony between themselves and God, spirits, nature and the whole universe. Well-being is both a physical and spiritual matter. Spiritual harmony is achieved through appeasing spirits. Maintaining harmony is a moral obligation, which, if violated, may lead to sickness, misfortune, or suffering. Therefore, evil is a disturbance of universal harmony manifested in neglect of religious duties, forgetting God, violations of his commandments, harm against fellow human beings, abuse of nature, and the like. Those people who are being punished for neglecting God (*pinarusahan dahil nakalimot sa Diyos*) or those who have a wandering soul (*naligaw na kaluluwa*) need the help of an *arbularyo* (spirit-healer) to bring back their soul.

This perspective on the importance of universal harmony, Capaque (2005) also discovered, affects the Filipino attitude toward suffering. Filipinos are able to withstand prolonged suffering because *walang nangyayari na hindi kalooban ng Diyos* (nothing happens apart from the will of God). A study of the language reveals expressions such as *itinadhana ng langit/iginuhit ng tadhana* (designed by heaven; fated; destined) that affirm the belief and acceptance of heavenly influences in everyday affairs. For Filipinos, “life is not just a series of natural events but also of spiritual events” (Capaque, 2005, p. 103). Related to this is the idea of *kapalaran* (destiny, fate). Many Filipinos picture life as a wheel (*gulong ng kapalaran*). If there is suffering, there is bound to be well-being, too. In the face of evil or suffering they implore God’s mercy: *may awa ang Panginoon* (God is merciful).

Based on Capaque’s discussion it can be gleaned that there is a difference between Western conceptions of evil that is usually situated in the misuse of individual free will or equal to sin and Filipino conceptions of evil that is seen as an existential problem to cope with. For Filipinos, evil is part of human existence. All that one needs to do is find a harmonious equilibrium between God and the spiritual realm. People and their actions engage a greater reality fixed by divine order.

### Redeeming Indigenous Psychological Concepts

Parallel to this move to reclaim Filipino indigenous music and dance for worship and Filipino theological concepts is a move to rediscover indigenous psychological concepts pertaining to faith and spirituality. Spearheaded by the movement called “*Sikolohiyang Pilipino*” (Filipino Psychology) and its founder, Dr. Virgilio G. Enriquez,

and his students most notably Violeta Bautista and Melba Maggay, this move to redeem indigenous concepts that point to a highly spiritual people that have in their language and traditions a deep reverence for one God and creator. Research in this area has focused mainly on the indigenous concept of god and creator in *Bathala*, the role of priests/priestesses called *Babaylan/Catalonan* and various other concepts referring to a rich spiritual life.

One of the first things that Dr. Virgilio Enriquez did when he set up this indigenous movement in psychology was to correct the distorted image of the Filipino as painted by Westerners who studied Filipino character and values and compared these with their own western concepts. He decried the token use of the native language in describing these values without delving deeper into the role of these in the Filipino culture. These concepts are then bandied about as definitive facts about Filipinos and placed in textbooks, perpetuating myths about Filipino personality and culture.

A concept that Enriquez sought to redeem is the popular expression “*Bahala Na.*” Bostrom (1968 in Pe-Pua & Marcelino, 2000) said that this was akin to “American fatalism.” He described this as the Filipinos attitude that makes him accept sufferings and problems, leaving everything to God. Enriquez (1995) cited the work of Lagmay, another prominent Filipino psychologist, who comments on the improvisatory personality of the Filipino which allows him to be more comfortable with unstructured, indefinite and unpredictable situations. In their research into the root of common expressions like *Bahala na*, Enriquez and his students discovered that this is a phrase that has its roots in the pre-Hispanic concept of deity, *Bathala*, who created and sustains everyone and everything. Filipinos use it when they have done everything in their power to prepare for

or remedy a situation and at the end of it acknowledge that the rest is in the hands of God, *Bathala*. It is as if the person is saying “*Bathala*’s will be done.” Quite contrary to what Bostrom said, *Bahala na* is actually determination and guts in the face of uncertainty rather than a passive, fatalistic attitude. Lapiz (1997) notes that *Bahala na* is not fatalism but is actually faith, not only putting complete trust in God’s wisdom, but also a total surrender to His will and power.

It is also interesting to note that the Filipino word for government or governance –*pamahalaan* -- is rooted in the concept of *Bathala*. When Filipinos say, “*Bahala ka na*” we mean, “You take over, you do it your way, you rule or you govern.” In like manner, when we say, “*Ako na ang bahala*,” we mean, “I will take charge of it, I will rule or govern.” The Filipino word for governance or *pamahalaan* is rooted in the word *pamamahala*, which in turn can be broken down to being *bahala*, and *bahala* has its roots in *Bathala*. Therefore, whoever is *bahala* or in command is a manifestation of *Bathala* and should be characterized by *Bathala*’s attributes namely power, wisdom and also uprightness, love and tenderness (Lapiz, 1997). This is a thoroughly biblical and sophisticated view of governance!

Another strand of research in this area is on the concept of Babaylanism. Enriquez and his students (1994) discovered that the first Filipino “psychologists” were healers and priestesses from different ethnic groups – the *babaylan* from the Visayas, the *catalonan* from Central Luzon and the *baglan* from Northern Philippines. These were the individuals that local people went to when they were seeking spiritual ministrations, when they needed counseling, or just someone to talk and pray with. Researchers have

found that the *dalangin* (prayer) and *bulong* (whisper) of these priestesses were a rich resource of Filipino sacred knowledge and psychology.

It is interesting to add here that the *babaylan* are praying women, which tends to highlight the prominent place that women take in spiritual leadership in indigenous contexts. This is quite contrary to the Western male-dominated clergy which has only recently allowed women into leadership positions.

The most significant contribution, thus far, in redeeming indigenous concepts for the furtherance of the gospel and the contextualization of Christian concepts in the Philippine milieu is that of Melba Maggay, a former student of Enriquez and founder of Institute for Studies of Asian Church and Culture (ISACC). She points to two concepts in Filipino personhood that are key in the task of contextualization -- the Filipino idea of *tagapamagitan* or a mediator and the value that Filipinos place on connectedness. She rightly observes in Filipino culture the concept of mediator serves several functions: the *tagapamagitan* stands in our place and pleads for us, especially when we need some favor from the powers, delicately sets forth our case when negotiating or when healing ruptures in relationships, and speaks for us when we need help in advancing our cause during courtship or when expressing feelings that are sensitive and best sent indirectly. She suggests that Jesus' role as a go-between, one who mediates the presence and power of God, has to be emphasized in light of the need in the culture to make God more accessible to humans.

Second, she noted that Filipinos feel a sense of connectedness even to our dead ancestors. This is seen in the rich ritual surrounding burial and remembering our loved ones who have gone before. In such a culture, it is good to emphasize themes like being

surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1) or being a part of great community of faith that stretches through generations. We then live our lives to honor their legacy. She calls for the renewal of the nation, incorporating the rich resource of the Filipino personhood with Christian concepts. She says: “The *loob* (innermost being) is the place where we return for healing and recovery of identity. It is where genuine conversion takes place, the stage upon which our own Damascus experience as a people happens. It is there that we truly turn from idols to the living God” (Maggay, 2005).

It is in the same spirit that Maggay has critically looked at culture and Christianity that Filipino Psychologists must look at their own work and examine how they can redeem elements of the culture for the service of the gospel or act as a bridge for the proper contextualization of Christian belief in the practice of psychology. This is the challenge that is facing the Filipino psychologist of today.

I echo Filipino theologian Evelyn Miranda-Feliciano’s perspective on this task of redeeming our culture for the Kingdom:

Basically, I believe, we love our art, our culture, our people and our country. Deep within, Christians would like to be as Filipino as possible and deeply committed Christians as well. However, we need to be aware that the Christian faith came to us with many cultural trappings which up to this day we are still carrying. We look and behave like aliens in our own land. These trappings have to be set down and carefully examined... We have a creativity that is uniquely ours, and the source of this beauty and art is Jesus Christ Himself, the Creator of all that is pleasing, artistic and beautiful. Let us then show forth his beauty. The

time has come to look into the beauty and art that is within the Filipino soul. (1990, p. 119)

### My own journey

I started this paper with a recollection of how it was when I attended my first service in an American church and I was able to follow the order of worship because it was essentially the same as my evangelical church in the Philippines. Strangely enough, it was the same experience attending my first Psychology class at Fuller. The topics were the same, the textbooks were familiar and medium of instruction was the same. I had no problems adjusting to the academic demands of graduate American education because our own Philippine educational system was patterned after this. However, because I was so clearly different from my classmates (being one of only two international students in our cohort), I knew that my being Filipino had to have an impact on the way I do integration. Thanks to classes like “Integration” and “Diversity” and professors who challenged their students to look within to see how the mixture of experience, culture, ethnicity and faith are contributing to the shaping of our identity as Christian psychologists, I have come to appreciate my own culture. Through the courses I have taken, the papers I have written and the discussions I have had with classmates, I have come to understand more and more my heritage as a Filipino. Maybe because of our long colonial history and our continued economic woes, Filipinos have made it a pastime to criticize our culture and find fault in anything Filipino. Through my Fuller sojourn, I have learned to value elements of my culture that I have always taken for granted – our deep sense of community, love for family, spirituality, resiliency and warm, welcoming

nature. I don't think I would have gotten so interested in discovering what it is that makes me unique as a Filipino if not for the experience of being in a multi-cultural setting such as Fuller. This is something that I will forever be grateful for, which I would not have gotten if I stayed in the Philippines to do my doctorate there.

Another good thing that has come out of my being in Southern California for my training is the privilege of working with Filipino-American clients. I get to compare how different it is to be working with someone from my cultural background from those of another background. I am currently working with a 16-year old Filipina who immigrated to the United States not too long ago but was raped by her own father. She is now in foster care and has been referred by the courts for counseling due to posttraumatic stress disorder. There was instant connection between us because she was delighted to learn that I spoke her language (Tagalog) and that she could share her deepest thoughts and fears in her native tongue. She lost no time in sharing with me the horrors of her experience and all the different feelings surrounding her severed relationship with her father. In one of our sessions she shared with me that she was awoken in the middle of the night by a tap on her shoulder. After determining that it was not her roommate, she concluded that it must have been her dead mother (her mother died a few years earlier) trying to make her presence felt – *nagpaparamdam*. If I were of a different cultural background, I would have reacted the same way that my supervisor reacted, sitting up and running through the different symptoms for schizophrenia to rule out a psychotic break. However, I know that in the Philippines it is common to have experiences such as these with dead relatives. As explained earlier, Filipinos have a strong belief in a parallel spiritual world and in an ongoing connection with the dead. Instead what I did was

acknowledge the fact that she missed her mother dearly and asked her what her mother might have been trying to communicate to her. She started to cry and she recalled how her mother used to prepare breakfast for her and pack lunch for her. She said that she missed her mother's caring and comfort.

This illustrates how the understanding of indigenous concepts of "spirits" and the connection to the dead could be used in a therapeutic way even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and right in the therapy room in Southern California.

However, I know that my training in Fuller has not only equipped me for working with Filipinos but also for being a culturally competent psychologist. I remember working with a 55-year-old African-American male who was in drug rehabilitation. He had been in and out of jail. He often talked about the loneliness he experienced in jail and shared fond memories about his estranged daughter. I asked him questions about how it was growing up in the South, what his family was like and what his dreams were for the future. With each question I learned more about his culture and discovered that we shared a lot of cultural elements – our love for family, a deep sense of spirituality and a "never-say-die" attitude even in the toughest of times. I was also able to relate to his feeling marginal, which was my experience being an international student. However, I know that he is still a unique individual with experiences that I can never fully understand. It was then that I realized that being a culturally competent therapist does not mean erasing every vestige of my culture on my person because doing this would be tantamount to stripping away the very elements that could potentially make me a more empathetic and astute therapist. Rather, it is allowing the other person room to be authentic, to show his or her true personality shaped by the wonderful mixture of color,

culture, creed and circumstances. And to allow myself to be vulnerable, to be touched, even changed by this mysterious other sitting across from me.

I believe that our God delights in diversity and he likes it when people from different cultures come together. And to the extent that therapy is always a coming together of the horizons of two cultures, then I know we are doing God's work here – the extension of God's reign and kingdom to encompass all peoples and to bring healing and wholeness to all.

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