

Shamanism and animism were traditional to the Philippines. When the Spanish first arrived there in 1521, they found traditional shamans that were known by various names, in the different languages found across the group of islands that make up the Philippines. Some of the more common names were babaylan, katalonan, diwatera and tambalan. In this article we will refer to them as babaylan, and give a brief introduction to their traditions.

As in many shamanic cultures across the world, the first signs of becoming a babaylan is a 'shamanic sickness,' often with symptoms such as fits, tremors, convulsion and insanity - to some degree or other. This, of course, very much fits the worldwide pattern of shaman sickness, although with the babaylan, temporary blindness was also considered a sign that an individual was selected by the diwatas [spirits].

Sometimes it is said the babaylan-to-be vanishes from the world and goes to the spirits for a time, before being returned, and when this happens the babaylan-to-be are said, when found again - to often be sitting beneath, or sometimes on top of, a balete tree, which is considered a sacred tree and a gateway for the spirits to come into this world. The balete is said to be the home of fearsome spirits, and there are many hair-raising folk tales about the trees, which is, in part, why many people refuse to cut them down, fearing the revenge of the spirits.

Once identified as a babaylan, the young person is then trained, having to memorise complex forms of ceremony, ancient oral epic stories and chants, and other aspects of the tradition. All this takes several years, and during this

period there are a series of initiations to prepare the apprentice.

Upon entering the training, an elder babaylan woman pours sweet-scented oil on the head of the new student and presses special beads on the student's forehead, blowing over them through her cupped hands. The spirit of the lineage is then

transmitted from the elder to the student, and the apprenticeship begins.

The babaylan tradition is mostly a female one. There were, and are male babaylan, but they are much rarer than women ones. It is explained that a babaylan

*Bottom left:* children gather in front of a balete tree

# CALL OF THE BABAYLAN



## Women's Shamanism from the Philippines

Nicholas Breeze Wood







**Traditionally, male babaylan, in order for them to be accepted into the tradition, have to undertake a symbolic gender transformation, so they can be accepted and viewed by the community as female, and thus eligible to be babaylan**

symbolises the Mother Goddess, represents nature, fertility, creation and destruction; the Mother Goddess being both the giver and the taker of life.

Traditionally, male babaylan, in order for them to be accepted into the tradition, have to undertake a

Above: a male babaylan makes offerings before a sacred waterfall

Right: a young male babaylan sits beside a baleta tree

Far right: male and female babaylan sit with sacred objects in front of them



symbolic gender transformation, so they can be accepted and viewed by the community as female, and thus eligible to be babaylan. This is still very much part of the tradition, and may be one of the reasons there are still relatively few male babaylan today.

When the Spanish first encountered the babaylan in the C16th the chronicler Friar Alcina described the male babaylan as: "... impotent men, and deficient for the practice of matrimony, considered themselves more like women than men in their manner of living or going about, even in their occupations..."

Male babaylan were sometimes called *asog*, which is also the word for a sterile woman.

The training of a babaylan is seen as a series of seven stages: I: *Baratakan* - the first level, where a young babaylan is connected to their own spirit helper, which acts as a guardian. The main job of the apprentice at this stage is to assist an elder babaylan perform rituals and ceremonies.

II: *Sanguban* - during this level the apprentice is taught different plant and herb lore, and given instruction in basic medical diagnosis.

III: *Hangdugan* - where the apprentice learns how to conduct ritual offerings to their own spirit helpers by sacrificing black chickens

IV: *Tagbungan* - where the apprentice studies the rituals, ceremonies and dances that a babaylan must perform, but the babaylan is forbidden to actually perform these.

V: *Hagbayan* - this is where apprentices take on larger helping

roles in ceremonies. They will be known as a *merku*, and will be given the responsibility to deal with minor cases in their community. The relationship with their spirit helpers is greatly strengthened during this period. VI: *Turupadan* - where the babaylan is fully equipped with the knowledge of the ceremonies, medicines and magic they need, and the apprentice is given the authority to conduct rituals under the supervision of an elder babaylan. At this point the sacrifice rituals increase from a single black chicken to seven red chickens, which are given to their spirit helpers.

VII: *Banawangon* - this the last level of apprenticeship, where the student is recognised as a full babaylan by an elder babaylan in front of the village menfolk. The apprentice offers a black pig to their spirit helper, and the new babaylan is now given their *piling*, a collection of large sea shells, attached to a cord - a sort of ritual badge of office. This is ideally passed from a dead babaylan, and not newly made from fresh shells.

The fully initiated babaylan will be held in a mix of awe, fear and high regard, being seen as having great supernatural abilities, which although are generally used to heal and cure those in their community, can be used against people if the babaylan so wishes.

#### THE WORK OF THE BABAYLAN

Babaylan work with a variety of spirits, including ancestral spirits, nature spirits, lesser gods and a host of dangerous spirits who either accidentally, or intentionally, inflict pain, curses and injuries to humanity. These harmful spirits belong to





three main groups, living in each of the three worlds of their cosmology. Each of these is responsible for a particular ailment. These spirit classes are the *ibabawnon*, who are upper world beings, causing epidemics and plagues; the *dutanon*, who are middle world spirits, dwelling invisibly among humans; and the *idadalmonon*, who live in the lower world. These are known as 'the death bringers.'

One of the main jobs of a babaylan is to appease and communicate with these spirits, and give sacrifice to them, so that they will be more benevolent towards the human community. Two other main tasks of a babaylan are to exorcise harmful spirits from people or places, and seek lost souls, whom these harmful spirits have captured and made off with,

The offering of sacrifices plays a major part of all traditional babaylan ceremonies, and their nature varies, depending on the spirits being called. Pigs and chickens generally play a major role in these ceremonies, but rice wine - and more recently tobacco - cakes, flowers and many other things are also very traditional offerings. These are often given in groups of seven, which is a sacred number in this tradition, and during these ceremonies the spirits are called to and invited, using a secret language - glossolalia - known only to the babaylan. The babaylan are often taken over in trances, where

the spirits enter their bodies, and at those times the spirits speak the same glossolalic language.

Like most shamanic traditions world wide, the babaylans work with many forms of sacred objects. Their shamanic musical instruments include bells, drums, large metal gongs and bamboo trumpets, and they use a wide variety of charms, made both of metal and natural materials

But one of the more interesting objects they work with are diamonds - both diamante (raw) and brilliant (refined) - as well as more regular quartz crystals.

They use these in ways quite different ancient to the crystal therapies of modern western new age culture, crystals and diamonds are gazed into, in order to see the spirits of illness, but as they are seen as magical power and protection objects, they are inserted under the skin, normally being pushed into the flesh of the arms, and sometimes they are also swallowed by the babaylan. This incorporation of crystals is said to give the babaylan more power, and also make them impervious to the work of harmful spirits and magicians.

Like all shamanic traditions around the world, those of the babaylan are changing fast. Accounts of ceremonies held in the 1950s show little difference from those recorded in the 1650s, but

what state the traditions will be in when we reach the 2050s is anyone's guess. Some people in the Philippines think the tradition has already been consigned to history and are surprised when they meet a modern day babaylan, but the fact that there still are modern day babaylan gives, perhaps, hope for the future.

*Below: babaylan Mendung Sabal makes prayers*

*Bottom: a traditional altar*

