



Knowledge Cultures, 12(1), 2024
pp. 70-89, ISSN 2327-5731, eISSN 2375-6527

Kapwa as Queer Inclusion

Eunice Gaerlan

eunice.gaerlan.price@aut.ac.nz

Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau/Auckland University of Technology
Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand

ABSTRACT. *Kapwa* is a core Filipino value and refers to a sense of shared identity, being-with-others, an inner self shared with others. It is a value that Filipinos are proud to embody as it signifies unity and supports collectivist ways of being. In this article, I problematise *kapwa* in relation to the queer other in the Filipino family and in community life. I consider how social strategies of silence, erasure and invisibility are used as ways of relating to the Filipinx queer other, which may instead serve to undermine the lived practice of *kapwa*. In doing so, this article will also explore the influence of Spanish Catholic colonisation on Filipinos' core values, such as in Filipino beliefs about queerness, leading to a syncretisation of precolonial *kapwa* with Catholic sociocultural doxa. I will then engage with precolonial Filipino understandings of queerness, Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Indigenous Filipino psychology), as I attempt to deconstruct erasure-as-*kapwa* as a primary way of dealing with the Filipinx queer other. Through an autoethnographic approach, which will include creative written vignettes interspersed with scholarly discussion, this article seeks to be a hopeful reinscription of *kapwa* to include queer Filipinx people in the shared self of a Filipino family and community.

Keywords: *kapwa*; queer; decolonization; Sikolohiyang Pilipino; inclusion

How to cite: Gaerlan, E. (2024). *Kapwa as queer inclusion*. *Knowledge Cultures*, 12(1), 70-89. <https://doi.org/10.22381/kc12120245>

Received September 24, 2023 • Received in revised form January 10, 2024
Accepted February 23, 2024 • Available online April 1, 2024

Introduction

The Philippines is a beautiful country. In travel photography, it is often represented by its miles of white sandy seashore and clear blue water. The country is renowned for its beautiful, generous people. These are the people that I belong to, culturally, and whom I love. But anyone who has a more than surface knowledge of this exotic region will know something of its long and complex history. It is a country

that has survived two periods of conquest and colonisation. This alone has wrought seemingly irreversible change on the religious, political and cultural landscape. This has also meant that once-included members of the social fabric, such as LGBTQIA+ people, now experience exclusion and discrimination.

In this article, I want to explore my relationship with the Philippines through my family relationships and the experience of coming out. Navigating this difficult journey has offered opportunities to re-engage with Filipino culture from a different position. In this, I am having to relearn and reconstruct my identity as a 'lesbian' Filipina woman and remember/relocate myself in relation to the Philippines and the wider Filipino diaspora. This article is organised around five vignettes. In these vignettes, I share memories and reflections from my coming out journey. Unpacking these vignettes, I offer some background to Filipino history, the impact of Spanish colonisation and Christianisation. I explore core values of Filipino culture and engage with Filipino researchers like me who are exploring how these values might be reinscribed to include LGBTQIA+ Filipinos.

Unang Kwento: The First Story

Subject: Your lifestyle

Content: You're not ~~welcome~~ here

I'm a 45-year-old queer woman born to Filipino parents. I haven't always identified as queer. But maybe I might have felt queer in other ways.

We immigrated to Aotearoa when I was four years old. At that point, I had already lived in 3 other countries: Singapore, where I was born, the Philippines and Mexico. But NZ became home. I spent decades in Aotearoa working to feel 'welcome here.' With careful social navigation and white adjacency, maybe I've managed it.

But to receive an email from my own family after coming out in my 40s saying, 'You're not welcome here' because of my choice to live true to my orientation, it felt like I had become invisible. Granted, it was from my Filipina mother's German husband. The Filipinos I knew would never outright say it. But they'd show it, slowly they'd show it ... by erasing you from their mouths, from their inquiries, from their memory; by pretending you no longer exist. You're not ~~welcome~~ here.

Pagpapahalagang Pilipino: Filipino Values

The Philippines is known to be a collectivist society where the emphasis is on interpersonal relationships and maintaining harmonious relationships between people (Triandis, 2001). The desires of the wider collective are more important than that of the individual. Where these may misalign, the group's goals should be prioritised. This contrasts with more individualistic societies, such as the United

States and, to a lesser extent, Aotearoa/New Zealand, where the individual is heralded as the more important subject (as opposed to the group), and ideas about being ‘your own person’ and pursuing ‘your own goals’ are internalised beliefs (Triandis, 2001).

In the Philippines, what is known as collectivism can be better understood through *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*, an Indigenous psychological framework that emerges from the experiences of the Filipino *tao* (people), *kalinangan* (culture) and *salita* (language), as conceptualised by Virgilio G. Enriquez (David, 2013; Enriquez, 1994). Enriquez (1994) describes the core values of *kapwa* and *pakikiramadam* and surface values of *hiya*, *pakikisama*, *utang ng loob* and *bayanihan*. In this section, I explore these values as I begin to make meaning of my experience of being a queer Filipina.

Enriquez (1994) highlights *kapwa* as a core Indigenous Filipino value; that is, a value that forms the foundation not only for other values but for the fabric of Filipino life itself. It can be translated as ‘both-’ or ‘fellow-being’ but essentially refers to one’s personhood, which is always in relation to others (David, 2013). *Kapwa* is a shared identity, a shared inner self with others, and the orientation that one cannot ‘be’ if separated from others. *Kapwa* is a sense of unity and being-at-one with other people. ‘The *ako* (ego or self) and the *iba sa akin* (others) are one and the same in *kapwa* psychology: *Hindi ako iba sa aking kapwa* (I am no different from others)’ (Enriquez, 1994, p. 45). De Guia (2005) gives further insight into *kapwa*, recognising that those who are guided by this value can be characterised by ‘their genuine, people-centred orientation, their service to those around them and their commitment to their communities’ (2005, p. 28). *Kapwa*’s Indigenous heart also suggests the ties that bind go beyond the interpersonal (which includes familial, cognitive and affective dynamics) to the cultural, historical and spiritual (Strobel, 2023).

Another core value is *pakiramdam*, which is the ability to sense or intuit others’ feelings, needs, moods, desires and intentions. Akin to the collectiveness of *kapwa*, *pakiramdam* is a form of shared inner perception where one can sense the internal state of the other (David, 2013; de Guia, 2005; Enriquez, 1994). In English, this may be crudely translated as having sympathy or empathy, but it is more than this. Having *pakiramdam* stems from one’s intuition and it is an adept ability to interpret invisible, non-verbal cues with accuracy (de Guia, 2005).

Although there are many other values in Filipino culture, those that are included in *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* include *hiya* (shame), the idea, within a collectivist society, that *mga tao* (people) must act in such a way to avoid bringing shame to the group (David, 2013). *Pakikisama* (companionship) refers to the importance of ensuring our behaviours, words, and decisions support the continued harmony within the group. It is one’s ability to get along with others and avoid conflict. *Utang ng loob* translates to debt of the inner self, which is akin to the feeling of gratitude after having received help from another person and, thus, a non-obligatory desire to reciprocate (David, 2013). It can be understood by the idea of filial piety. Linked to

utang ng loob is *bayanihan*, which is a form of altruism that focuses on helping others without expecting anything in return. *Bayanihan* is about ‘mutual aid; cooperative behaviour; cooperation’ (Enriquez, 1994, p. 61).

These values operate in an interrelated dynamic with *kapwa* in the centre and *pakiramdam* as the connection to *hiya*, *pakikisama*, *utang ng loob* and *bayanihan*. One cannot express the surface values without the core value of *kapwa* and without the skill of *pakiramdam*. For example, to have a *bayanihan spirit*, one must feel connected to others to want to come to their aid without expectation of reciprocity (de Guia, 2005). Conversely, a sense of collective identity is needed for the value *utang ng loob*, a sense of indebtedness, as it calls forth the ways in which *ibang tao* (other people) have been in service to us. Without *pakiramdam*, one cannot sense another’s interiority, which will make it hard to care if one’s actions bring *hiya* to the group. Without *pakiramdam*, it may make it difficult to sense when one’s actions are contrary to *pakikisama*, the value of keeping the peace and getting along (David, 2013).

At the heart of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* is *kapwa*. It is the core value of the Filipino *tao* that ‘determines the extent to which a person is a person – or a human (personhood or *pagkatao*)’ (David, 2013, p. 113). Essentially, according to Enriquez (1994), it is what makes one human through a Filipino Indigenous orientation. So, without *kapwa*, without that sense of shared identity, a Filipino/a/x ceases to be.

I see now that my orientation and identification with these values as a second-generation diaspora Filipina was at stake when I received the email that I wrote about in the first story. These values structure my interactions with my Filipino family and community and thus form an intricate part of my identity. I felt devastated when my mother turned away. I might have even been surprised, at the time, by the depth of my grief when I received this email from my mother’s husband on behalf of them both. The implicit message, ‘You’re not welcome here,’ struck me far deeper than I had imagined in terms of a worst-case ‘coming out’ scenario. It took the form of an immediate severance of my connection to my Filipino identity. Like many diaspora Filipinos, I already felt like I was hanging onto my Filipino-ness by a thread, but this email was like a cut of that final thread.

The content of the email implied I had behaved contrary to all the above values and that I was the author of my own alienation. I was the one that severed myself from this collective lifeline, the connection to my family. The deeper message was that I had *walang kapwa*, or ‘no *kapwa*,’ because I had thought not about how my actions would affect my Filipino community. I had made the unforgivable misstep of following my own desires and needs.

Pangalawang Kuwento: The Second Story

Bayanihan. The word ‘*bayan*’ in Tagalog refers to a nation, town or community. Literally, *bayanihan* means ‘being a *bayan*’ – coming together, in unity, working

collectively towards a common goal or purpose, serving another without expectation of return. For me, bayanihan was how I understood my place in the world as an immigrant child to diasporic Filipino parents.

I could count on my hands the number of Filipino families in Auckland when we first arrived in the early 1980s. I remember my parents very quickly sought to belong with these other Filipino families. Having left a large and close-knit extended family in the Philippines, my parents recreated an extended family in NZ. As more Filipinos migrated, this organic seeking out of like people turned into the formal creation of the Bayanihan Club (incorporated society). For the next 10+ years, my family's life revolved around the Bayanihan Club, and through the Bayanihan spirit, the handful of families turned into hundreds and eventually into thousands. My parents devoted much of their time to creating community not just for us but for the many other diasporic Filipinos seeking a better life in NZ.

This decade of my life saw me moving between two worlds: during weekdays, the world of my predominantly white primary and high schools, and on weekends devoted to all things bayanihan. I learned a social savvy that would allow me to fit in both worlds.

Over the years, my 'kiwi accent' developed, and I spoke English more like the Pākehā kids at my school and less like my Filipino parents, who spoke with an American twang on their r's and a tendency to mix up their fs and ps. I found this a great source of embarrassment. I hated my parents' accents. It made it so obvious that we weren't from here. One day, my primary school teacher invited my dad to speak to the class because we were doing a project about the Philippines. As he talked about the 'Pilipeens' to my Pākehā classmates, I couldn't sink deeper into my seat if I tried, and my face was a constant red. This was only relieved by one of the girls in my class turning around to me and saying, 'Your dad has such a cool accent.' I suppose that was a positive, but I'd rather he had no accent.

I also remember looking so different to my classmates, who all seemed to have beautiful blonde hair, ivory coloured skin and these refined facial features. I was brown-skinned with black hair and a flat nose. I used to run home sobbing, telling my mum I wanted a pointy nose and white hair and skin like the girls in my class. She would say that pointy noses are hard to manage – they wouldn't fit into drinking glasses very well. Then I started growing a random patch of grey hair from the age of 12, and Mum said it was because I wished for blonde hair, and God was granting me my wish. But, the longing for white skin, I wasn't alone. It seemed like every Filipino coveted lighter skin.

At the weekends, there was always some Filipino event on, whether a party or gathering to attend at a friend's house or perhaps one we would host, Sunday

Filipino mass followed by food, being sosyal (socialising) or a major Bayanihan Club event like a basketball tournament, beauty pageant, Independence Day weekend, hosting a visiting Philippines president – just your average weekend in NZ. These weekends ensured I was surrounded by the language, tagalog, the food and the values.

By the end of high school, I was walking the two worlds with relative ease. I'd played the assimilation game well enough that, had it not been for my actual physical appearance, I would have passed fully as white. I was definitely what we called a 'coconut' or a 'Bounty Bar' [a chocolate-coated coconut-filled candy bar] – brown on the outside, white on the inside. But I knew enough about the Filipino game, too; I could still understand Tagalog, so 'I couldn't be sold' as the horrendous Filipino saying goes, and I had perfected the Catholic good girl and academic success personas so well that I was held up as a shining example to the rest of the community of how to be the ideal Filipina young woman. Oh, except for that time I was at an 18th birthday party and danced too hard to Lenny Kravitz's 'Are You Gonna Go My Way?' – my mother reminded me that good Filipina girls are a bit more demure.

Kasaysayan ng Pilipinas: History of the Philippines

The Philippines is an archipelago made up of more than 7,000 islands divided into three main geographical areas: Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. It has a remarkably diverse history, including a precolonial period followed by 300 years of colonial rule by Spain in the 1500s, occupation by the US from 1898 and, finally, independence from 1946 (Hopkins, 2021).

In the precolonial Philippines, in the centuries prior to the arrival of the Spaniards in the mid-1500s, there is evidence that the Indigenous *tao* of the land had a highly developed and diverse society (Agoncillo, 1974; David, 2013). According to Hopkins, 'The history is rich and extensive, but it is also diverse and localised. The Philippines had numerous states of different sizes and structures but no single, unifying polity that covered a large part of the archipelago' (2021, p. 807). Together, each of these states had rich and varied cultures with their own art, music and literature. The precolonial Philippines had its own system of writing (*baybayin*). The islands' structure of governance was also well-developed (Agoncillo, 1974; David, 2013).

The pre-colonial spiritual belief system was a form of animism, with the Indigenous *tao* living in balance with nature and seeing it as divine. These beliefs involved the worship of multiple gods and goddesses who were likewise linked to the various elements. For example, Mayari (goddess of the moon and of women), Agni (god of fire), Balangaw (god of the rainbow), Lalahon (goddess of the harvest) and Apolake (god of the sun and of war). These deities were governed by a supreme god, Bathala, who was believed to have created the universe, including *mga tao*, humanity (Agoncillo, 1974; David, 2013).

Prior to the arrival of the Spanish, Indigenous *tao* had their own government and an established legal system organised around the *baranggay*, which were tribes or villages consisting of approximately 60 families. Each *baranggay* was led by a *datu* (chief) and a council of elders. These councils and chiefs established the laws for their individual *baranggays* and would also collaborate with other *baranggay* chiefs and councils to attend to the welfare of their people. Men were commonly chiefs, but the system did not preclude women from becoming chiefs in the absence of a male heir (Agoncillo, 1974; David, 2013).

While *datu* were commonly men, the precolonial Philippines is considered by some scholars to have tended towards greater gender equality, with some suggesting that there are parts of the Philippines that may have been matriarchal. According to Agoncillo (1974), women owned their own property, worked in industry, and held other revered positions within society, including as *babaylan* (healers, shamans, wisdom-keepers, philosophers and spiritual leaders). According to Alegre, 'being a woman was not about domesticity and complacency; it was about life, creation, mitigation and extension' (2022, pp. 54-55). The *babaylan* (women and feminine-presenting *tao*) and the *datu* (mostly men) would often work together on important activities for the good of their *baranggay* (Ildefonso, 2022). Along with women, gender-diverse people were visible in public life and played particular roles and belonging in society (Agoncillo, 1974; Alegre, 2022; David, 2013).

The Spaniards arrived in the Philippines in 1521. Over the three centuries of Spanish rule, Catholicism became the primary spiritual belief system and persists today, with 90% of the population identifying as Christian (Nadal, 2011). Patriarchal beliefs were standard in Spanish society. Machismo, a form of toxic masculinity and aggressive masculine pride and superiority over women, was actively expressed (Ildefonso, 2022). A binary approach to gender identity and gender roles was also enculturated (Ildefonso, 2022).

The Philippines declared independence from Spain in 1898 after the Spanish-US war when it was ceded to the United States. From 1898-1946, the Philippines was occupied by the United States, which resulted in an Americanised government and education system. Socially, this era opened doors to women, and they were able to access education. This was huge progress as, under Spanish rule, women were relegated to religious and vocational teaching (Ildefonso, 2022). However, by this time, a colonial mentality had embedded itself in the psyche of many Filipino *tao*, which could be understood as an internalised desire for white adjacency and implicit beliefs of the superiority of Western ideals (David, 2013).

Reflecting on the second story in relation to this history, I begin to see the impact of Spanish colonisation and how that shaped my upbringing. My family was very Catholic. The prioritisation of Catholic beliefs as a kind of virtue comes from my maternal line. My earliest memories are of the Catholic mass. Our family values were Filipino values, but they were mediated through the texts and

traditions of the Catholic church. Catholic beliefs were prioritised and put a new slant on precolonial ideals.

In terms of gender roles, my family was patriarchal, and while my father did not express machismo, my family had clear expectations around gender roles. It was structured by a compulsory gender binary. Looking back, I wonder what it was like for my father, trying to make his way in New Zealand society, having to prove himself in a different country to his birth, to be accepted and succeed there. Unlike traditional Filipino family structures, both my parents worked outside the home. This was a concession to be able to afford the lifestyle we wanted. Though Mum was employed full-time, the burden of domestic life still fell on her. Dad was a leader in the expat Filipino community and in business. Mum supported but led in her own ways. She carved her own niche as a woman leader within the community. A colonial mentality meant that some Western ideals were privileged over Filipino ones per se. As a child, I was given the best possible Catholic education and supported into university.

Pangatlo Kwento: The Third Story

Once I was at university, my involvement in my parents' world lessened and I was carving out my own space in the world. My friends were diverse, and, much as in high school, my interest in boys was simply a social expectation – I liked guys because that's what girls are supposed to do. Truth be told, I just wanted to hang out with my girlfriends or gay boyfriends (they were far more interesting to me) and have a good time. I loved the drag queen scene and became a 'fag hag' groupie, idolising Bambi Slut, Shanice van Dyke and Buckwheat. Work hard, play hard was my motto. And after the playing was done, find a nice (religious) white boy, get married, settle down, have Eurasian babies and be a tiger(-ish) mum who's great at karaoke – I didn't come up with that list. That was just the story I thought I wanted. By the time I finished university, got partying out of my system and started my career as a teacher, I was heavily involved in a Christian church. Not Catholic, but at least I was close to Christ, which soothed my very Catholic mother. Settling down in expat Filipino culture means Christ, then a husband and then babies in a baby carriage, just like any Filipina girl.

A History of Queerness in the Philippines

The Philippines' relationship with and inclusion of queer people is influenced heavily by its colonial past. In this section, I explore the place of queer *tao* across the Philippines' history from precolonial times through to Spanish colonisation, the American occupation and the contemporary era, including specific literature on the experience of lesbian Filipinas.

For scholars like Alegre (2022) and Ildefonso (2022), the precolonial Philippines was a time when plurality in sexual orientation and gender expression was accepted and common. The revered *babaylan* (wise shaman-warriors) were not

restricted by gender. Though they were most commonly women, men and transgender *tao* also played this role if they could show they could perform the associated duties (Alegre, 2022). It was thought that some of these male *babaylan* were gay as some of the words associated with the role are traditional terms for gay men, such as *asog*, *bayoguin* and *binabayi* (Alegre, 2022; Ildefonso, 2022). Because the role of the *babaylan* was closely associated with women, it was believed that only those who were women or feminine-identifying could connect with the spirit world. Men and transgender *babaylan* would thus be required to wear feminine clothing and act in a feminine manner (Ildefonso, 2022). According to Garcia (2004), this was not just about dressing as a woman, but it expressed a reverence and respect for the role that women occupied.

In addition to cross-dressing and effeminate men, same-sex relations and marriages were also not considered out of the ordinary (Ildefonso, 2022). This gender fluidity and pan-sexuality can also be seen in the deities of the precolonial era. For example, Sidapa and Bulan from the Visayan region were male deities who were purported to be lovers, and the goddess Lakapati from the Tagalog region is considered to be transgender or intersex (Alegre, 2022). These beliefs and expressions of self were considered part of Filipino life until the Spanish settled on the shores of the Philippines in 1521 (Ildefonso, 2022).

Over the course of 300 years, the Spanish colonisation of the Philippines resulted in the Christianisation of society and the suppression of Indigenous ways of life. Because of the strength of the patriarchy in Spanish society, any practices that threatened machismo were severely regulated through Catholicism. These included the pluralistic gender expressions and sexual practices, along with roles and structures that supported the matriarchy – namely women, *babaylan* and *asog* (Ildefonso, 2022). Through acts of violence, scaremongering and oppressive tactics by the Spanish Catholic church, the plurality of gender and sexual expression in the precolonial Philippines was eradicated. In its place was a culture of ‘unqueering and dequeering’ of its peoples (Alegre, 2022, p. 56) and a labelling of all forms of such plurality as an abomination in the eyes of the Catholic god. Those that suffered most seemed to be the *babaylan* and the *asog*.

According to Ildefonso (2022), in her genealogical review of LGBTQIA+ history in the Philippines, the Spaniards, upon arrival in the Philippines, were left confused and threatened by the *babaylan* who exhibited none of the characteristics of male leadership that the Spanish were accustomed to. Specifically, whether man or woman or transgender, they were effeminate in their mannerisms and dressed in extravagant clothing.

The Spanish priests believed the Indigenous *tao*, particularly the *babaylan*, were influenced by demons and needed purification. In doing so, the *babaylan* were themselves demonised and were forced to renounce their practices or risk being murdered by the Spanish (Alegre, 2022). The Spanish replaced the Indigenous *babaylan* with their missionary priests as the source of spiritual power, and, instead of Indigenous animist spirituality, Catholicism took hold with its Christian

doctrines and the Ten Commandments providing a strong moral compass for the *tao* of the Philippines (Ildefonso, 2022). With commandments such as ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery’ and ‘Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife,’ some of the sexual freedoms once experienced by precolonial *tao* were outlawed.

The impact on women was particularly felt. Any Filipina woman seeking to engage in premarital or same-sex sexual exploration was labelled as depraved, lascivious and perverse. Filipinas had less freedom to explore their sexuality, and their bodies were regulated through the Catholic practices of abstinence until marriage and regular confession (Ildefonso, 2022). Indigenous men, particularly *asog*, were also subject to the policing of their sexual behaviour. They were forbidden to engage in same-sex relationships and would be severely punished if caught, including, in some instances, death by execution (Ildefonso, 2022). What was once a highly revered role (*asog*) and a term that connoted strength and respect eventually evolved into a weaker term (*bakla*), which suggested a timidity aligned with a more suppressed role of effeminate men in Spanish society.

By the 1800s, almost 7 million Filipinos had converted to Catholicism. There was a marked decline in the number of *babaylan* and *asog*, and, ‘together with the unawareness that sex and gender equality started in the precolonial era, was proof that machismo was successfully imposed and integrated into the Filipinos’ minds’ (Ildefonso, 2022, p. 219).

Another key turn in the Philippines’ history is the American occupation, which lasted for approximately 50 years, offering the Philippines a more modern take on gender and sexuality (Ildefonso, 2022). As the American occupation began its reforms, particularly the reformation of the Philippines’ education system, some ‘Americanisms’ began to be habituated by the *tao*. They were eventually exposed to American social ways of being, and, although queerness remained unseen among the common public, there was a renaissance of sorts through the arts, such as in musical theatre, vaudeville-esque shows and comedy. ‘Queerness was used as satire and comedy, to elicit laughter, and most likely portrayed by non-queer people (or, rarely, the closeted queer)’ (Alegre, 2022, p. 57).

Over time, gay men became once again more visible among the *tao* beyond using queerness as a form of entertainment. In 1932, it was stipulated through the Penal Code of the Philippines that homosexuality was to be seen not as a criminal act (unless violence and intimidation were involved) but, rather, as a health issue. In particular, it was treated as a disease. Regardless, same-sex relations and LGBTQIA+ identification were (and are still) seen as repugnant and would be treated with hostility (Ildefonso, 2022).

The Second World War, with the influx of the American military in the archipelago, established a thriving male prostitution industry (Ildefonso, 2022). Interestingly, the post-war Philippines saw an acceptance of sorts of male-to-male relationships. Two studies (Foe, 2014; Tan, 2001) explored this post-war gay experience. Respondents in Tan’s study commented that gay men in the 1960s tended to be of upper-middle class status, many of whom had returned to the

Philippines after having studied in the United States or Europe and were seen as ‘decent’ and occupied an ‘elite’ position (Tan, 2001, pp. 123-124). This was supported by the findings from Foe’s (2014) study, where participant responses suggested gay men were from the upper class and were considered more intelligent than their homophobic straight counterparts. In fact, these men worked hard to be respected, often to compensate for being gay.

Filipina Lesbiyana

While accounts of gay men are more prevalent in historical discourse and research, what is conspicuously absent are the accounts of Filipina lesbians (Diaz, 2015; Ildefonso, 2022; Marin, 1996; Nadal & Corpus, 2013). There is a suggestion by Villar (2000) that one well-known figure in the precolonial Philippines, Princess Urduja, was a lesbian. Princess Urduja was an intelligent warrior and highly skilled in combat. She refused to marry unless the person could defeat her in combat. She never married. Likewise, there was no evidence to suggest she had any same-sex relationships. A similar suggestion was made regarding the existence of women-only communities in Southern Luzon, without any specific proof that these women engaged in same-sex relationships (Ildefonso, 2022; Villar, 2000). Accounts of lesbian Filipinas during the Spanish colonisation era are similarly scant, perhaps due to the omission of women in general from historical documents by colonial historians (Marin, 1996). Even Filipinas’ active participation in the revolution was de-emphasised and revised ‘from being autonomous agents to stereotypical roles such as mothers and sex objects’ (Ildefonso, 2022, p. 230). Ildefonso further suggests their absence in Filipinx LGBTQIA+ history has ‘contributed to the current society’s system of thoughts toward Filipina lesbian people’ (2022, p. 228) and, as such, makes researching lesbian history a challenge, particularly as such research is actively discouraged within some social and scholarly fields (Marin, 1996).

From the middle of the 20th century, anecdotal accounts of lesbian relationships began to emerge, but these remained *kwento* stories. There were stories of long-term, live-in *titas* (aunties), exclusive dance parties and secret engagements (Villar, 2000). Compared with their gay male counterparts, Filipina lesbians during this time were incredibly secretive and kept their relationships private. Any notions of ‘coming out as lesbian’ were futile, particularly in a deeply Catholic society where any type of exposure could result in being cast out from one’s known community. Lesbian Filipinas’ sexual orientation was only ever assumed and confirmed through gossip (Ildefonso, 2022).

Lesbian visibility in public activist movements was also almost non-existent until the late 20th century (Tan, 2001; Villar, 2000). Even during the 1970s, when there were strong calls for equality, these were either centred on heterosexual women’s needs (feminist movements) or gay men’s rights, but this was in line with lesbian Filipinas’ desires to keep a low profile (Tan, 2001). Lesbian activism in the Philippines coincided with an understanding that coming out meant they could

organise themselves and advocate for change. This happened in the 1990s, including the existence of the first lesbian contingent in the International Women's Day march in 1993, the establishment of the First National Lesbian Rights Conference in 1996 and the formation of lesbian groups such as Galang Philippines (Ildefonso, 2022). Of course, in the diaspora, Filipina lesbians were very much part of the civil rights movements. Rose Bamberger, an American Filipina is noted as being one of the founders of the influential lesbian association, 'Daughters of Bilitis' (Myers, 2013), formed in San Francisco in 1955.

In the third story above, I recounted the way I was situated by postcolonial expatriate Filipino culture to walk a journey structured by expectations of heteropatriarchal success. In this journey, there was little to no conception of anything but compulsory heterosexuality. There was nothing at all in my environment that would suggest anything else but a heteronormative life. As queerness has been socialised out of the fabric of the Philippines, there were no obvious examples while I was growing up in the Filipino diaspora in New Zealand. In fact, the urgency to conserve a semblance of Filipino values, traditions and expectations might have even been stronger here. In retrospect, I do remember several aunties and uncles who were long-term, live-in companions and now I wonder whether their relationships amounted to more than companionship. No one ever assumed they were gay, and, even if I were to bring it up with my mum, she would say, 'Don't be silly. They are just good friends who keep each other company.' This kind of silencing and erasure of LGBTQIA+ happens just in this way. It's made invisible in the most ordinary of ways.

Ikaapat Kwento: The Fourth Story

The first time I was with a woman, I felt like I had come home. Her body was so familiar. Everything made sense when it was just her and me together. There was a synchronicity to how we related that I had never experienced with any man. I felt robbed of all the years I could have been with a woman, but I'd never considered it because it was so out of the realm of possibility. Yet, here I was, in my 40s, in love with a woman and feeling more like a woman myself than I had ever felt in my life. Suffice it to say, I am unequivocally queer.

It was one thing to experience this beautiful relationship in private but to expose ourselves to the gaze and judgement of others was a space of vulnerability. I read something on Instagram that we shouldn't think about 'coming out' but rather 'letting in' – who are we letting into our world? I was protective of my lesbian relationship and was self-conscious about who we would let in. Apart from some of my evangelical Christian friends, whose stance I knew very clearly (hate the sin, not the sinner), I was not sure who would be supportive and whose homophobia would surface. I started by telling my close friends, and most of them were supportive, but I still received well-meaning advice about not labelling myself as

gay, or that this might be 'only a phase,' or don't use the word 'queer' – it's got bad connotations. These comments weren't outwardly hurtful, but they belittled the identity of being lesbian, gay or queer. One friend seemed fixated on the act of lesbian sex and would continually make nervous jokes about it, as if a woman's orientation towards loving another woman was only about stereotypical lesbian sex acts and not an orientation towards the world and one's relationship with it.

I was most nervous about letting my parents know. I am my mother and father's only child. They separated when I was 30 years old, and both remarried. That was a divorce that rocked the Filipino community. I remained closer to my mother because of their separation and felt somewhat estranged from my dad as his remarriage resulted in me having two new half-brothers who were similar in age to my children. There was no bayanihan spirit towards my father. Considered the guilty party, he was instantly cut off from the Filipino community, while my mother found increased strength, solidarity and respect from it. By way of a close connection to my mother, so did I.

The Filipinos I know have a paradoxical relationship to queerness. They love bakla on TV and are happy to be entertained by gay humour. They love the camp (in Filipino: bading) personalities and will welcome gay men into their friendship circles because they bring joy, laughter and frivolity into their lives. I've known quite a few gay Filipino men. Queer eye for the straight guy is the vibe. I know of one lesbian Filipina woman in my community, but she moved to Australia one day, and no one talks about her.

When I told my mum that I was seeing a woman, she said she knew it. She could tell. She said I needed to keep the relationship a secret and not bring it out into the public. She said people don't need to know what I do in the privacy of the bedroom and to keep it that way. If my relationship with my partner was kept behind closed doors, it was fine. If I kept my lesbian identity behind closed doors, it was fine. They won't ask, and you won't tell. So, stay in the closet, anak (daughter). This worked for a few months, in the earlier months, and we all seemed to get along okay. But I couldn't sustain it. Who can? Who can sustain living in a closet? Once I had started opening the closet door and was working through my shame, my internalised homophobia, when I started stepping into my pride, then it got too hard for my mother. According to her, since other people knew, others in the Filipino community, she had been devastated. She said she didn't want to socialise anymore. People had stopped asking after me (usually, Filipino parents connect by bragging about their children's achievements, and it's one of the first things they ask about). She said that people had stopped engaging with her Facebook posts about me, so she's stopped posting where I'm concerned. It hurt her so much that her (non-Filipino) husband put his foot down. If I was living this lifestyle, I would not be welcome at their house with my partner. What happened to bayanihan?

What happened to unity, togetherness, and shared one-ness? What happened to kapwa? Is this what kapwa really is – we are one, but only if you fit in this particular box? If not, there is no ‘we.’

Hindi sa Aking Bahay: Not in my House

[F]rom the past to the present, a person who is guided by the overt-conservative interpretation of Catholicism, powerful institutions demonstrating overwhelming machismo, and a society robbed of their original beliefs and replaced by outsiders’ philosophies had become the unbecoming characteristics of homophobia and sex and gender discrimination in the Philippines. (Ildefonso, 2022, p. 235)

The journey of coming out is not straightforward for anyone, but for queer Filipinx *tao*, they must also contend with the centuries of anti-LGBTQIA+ colonial history alongside deeply held collectivist values that have syncretised with Roman Catholic morality. In this section, I explore research related to the experiences of LGBTQIA+ Filipinx in coming out (or not) to their families.

Religion as a Barrier

With 90% of the Philippines’ population professing a Christian belief system, the expectation to follow the church’s teachings of the Bible is paramount (Ildefonso, 2022). But, for many LGBTQIA+ Filipinx *tao*, this religious adherence is a major hindrance to coming out. Participants in Nadal and Corpus’ (2013) study shared that their families believed homosexuality was a sin, and, thus, any such expression of a non-heteronormative identity was deemed abhorrent. Linked to homosexuality as a sin was the feeling of guilt and shame in being non-heteronormative. Focus group discussions highlight how these religious beliefs have made it difficult for gay Filipinx to have healthy sexuality development or a positive self-concept as a gay person. For many in this study, ‘being Filipino, gay, and Catholic were competing identities that could not be reconciled’ (Nadal & Corpus, 2013, p. 169).

Heteropatriarchal Family

Central to a Filipino collectivist identity is family, which is the most basic, essential and influential unit in Philippine society. Due to the strong Spanish-Catholic influence, this family unit is expected to conform to heteropatriarchal norms (Ildefonso, 2022; Kumashiro, 2001; Velasco, 2022). To be Filipino, one must belong within a family unit, and one must practice heterosexuality.

Implicit in this family belonging are values of *hiya*, *pakikisama* and *utang ng loob*. One must not bring shame to the family. One must protect the harmonious relations within the family by making choices that align with the family’s desires over individual desires. One must understand and hold a sense of gratitude for what the family has offered and act in kind. Within a Spanish-Catholic heteropatriarchy, this means any choices, identities or practices that fall outside of its structure will

bring shame to the family and must be avoided to keep the peace. In doing so, this shows a person's sense of gratitude for what the family has provided (Nadal & Corpus, 2013). According to Marin, 'anything that is deemed unpleasant, challenging, or threatening to the existing fabric of family relations is not viewed favourably' (Marin, 1996, p. 39) and risks disconnection from the family.

Various studies and *kwento* of LGBTQIA+ Filipinx *tao* have highlighted the challenges of revealing their non-heteronormative identities to their families, with most experiencing denial from their parents and the family's difficulty in accepting these identities (Chan, 1989; Consolacion, 2001; Kumashiro, 2001; Nadal & Corpus, 2013). In many families, there is already a lack of open sharing about social-emotional topics, let alone any constructive discussion about gender identity or sexual orientation (Nadal & Corpus, 2013). Such topics are deemed too intimate, and, in the case of LGBTQIA+ identification, the potential for conflict is high. A culture of silence to avoid conflict is not uncommon in Filipino families. This is even more the case for many LGBTQIA+ Filipinx *tao*, who must endure a wall of silence from their parents and/or a lack of acknowledgement of their identities. LGBTQIA+ *tao* may engage in silencing strategies for themselves, including not speaking up or hiding their identities from their families (Chan, 1989; Nadal, 2011; Nadal & Corpus, 2013).

The self-imposition of disciplinary practices to mask one's identity is another strategy for LGBTQIA+ *tao* to please their parents and to protect the family from shame. This may include toning down their gender expression, continuing to perform heteronormative identities and, in some cases, completely denying their own orientation (Ildefonso, 2022). Some lesbian Filipinas have even been victims of corporal punishment by their parents, and other LGBTQIA+ *tao* have experienced outward animosity from their families (Ildefonso, 2022). The consequences of such homophobic responses to these identities include the development of deep personal-emotional problems, feeling abnormal, holding shame and guilt in isolation, experiencing dysphoria and wrestling with their own internalised homophobia (Ildefonso, 2022; Marin, 1996, p. 39).

Philippine Nationalism and the Queer Filipinx

Philippines' nationalism is predominantly centred around heteronormative and classist ideals (Diaz, 2015). Filipinos on home soil find successful immigrant Filipinos a source of great nationalistic pride, particularly those Filipinas who embody the quintessential features of normative Filipina femininity whilst managing to perform a successful US-assimilated subjectivity.

Prior to his transition to Jake Zyrus, Charice Pempengco was one such example of a successful 'Americanised and assimilated female performer' (Diaz, 2015, p. 737). As Pempengco, Zyrus made history on many levels. As a vocalist, he became both the Philippines' *and* the United States' darling, able to belt out American ballads and gracing the stages and studios of many famous artists and celebrities, including a story arc on the hit show *Glee*. His fame back home called forth a form

of nationalism centred on the approval of the West, a form of colonial mentality, and the narrative of upward mobility (Diaz, 2015).

Zyrus also made history by being the first person to come out as a *tomboy* on Philippines' national television. Note that the term *tomboy* in the Philippines does not only imply a gender expression that appears more masculine but is also synonymous with being a lesbian (Diaz, 2015; Ildefonso, 2022) and is closely associated with the working class. He then transitioned to a trans-man and took the new name Jake Zyrus. There are several subversions at play here, all of which have come at a cost for Zyrus. In the television interview in which he revealed he was a *tomboy*, he discussed his estrangement from his family, and his first statement was to apologise for the emotional harm he had caused them, as well as for disappointing his adoring public (Diaz, 2015).

But his bravery in revealing his identity destabilised the logic inherent in Filipino nationalism and offered exposure for an invisible queer identity (the lesbian and then the transman) within the Filipino social imaginary. Originating from the lower-working class and openly using *tomboy* as a self-descriptor, Zyrus also calls forth the marginalised working-class status into nationalist discourse (Diaz, 2015). Through Zyrus's public act of coming out, not only does he shun the 'exemplary Filipino' identity, but he also implies that Filipino stardom is not only for cisgendered, assimilated, upper-class folk. Most importantly, he validates and brings to the fore other gendered and sexual subjectivities that have otherwise remained erased, marginalised and silenced.

Filipino nationalism is strong in the diaspora. In immigrant Filipino communities, to be seen as the exemplary Filipina, heteropatriarchal success is critical to full belonging. By leaving my husband and coming out as a lesbian, I shattered these expectations completely. By choosing my own happiness/identity, I was seen as turning my back on everything that mattered to Filipinos. I turned my back on the expected way these cherished values are meant to be expressed, a transaction young people make for belonging. I brought shame to my mother, who accused me of being selfish and not considering how this would impact on her and the wider family. I was held accountable for all that my mother had sacrificed for me, for not considering her feelings in this personal life choice. Worst of all, I was going against the laws of Catholic morality. My soul might end up in purgatory or even hell. I imagine my mother and my aunties would have to light candles and try to pray it out.

For myself, I had to fight against my own self-policing. My intuitive inclination was to keep my identity and relationship secret, not share anything about my private life or my partner with my Filipino family and community. The desire to keep this part of my life secret and hidden is still strong. Now, at a time of my life when I want to explore and share my cultural heritage with my own children, I have experienced a distancing from the local Filipino community and feel the exclusion keenly, aware that there is the likelihood that I am very possibly the topic of gossip.

Ikalimang Kuwento: The Fifth Story

At the age of 44, I lost my mother to homophobia. If my mum, whom I thought could show her love for me unconditionally, could erase me once I started walking in my truth, what about my dad? We already had a more distant relationship. We hadn't seen each other for three years, but we had shared a text exchange here and there on important dates. We finally had a catch up and I told him I was seeing a woman. Like my mum, he said, 'I know. I'm your dad. I know.' But unlike my mum, he said, 'Look, I'll be honest, this is hard for me to come to terms with. When I was growing up, we would chase down the gay boys in the village and beat them up. It was just not something you did back then. But I know that's not your generation. Just give me time. It's not that I won't ever get there. I just need time to process it. Just give me time.'

Although it's not a resounding welcome, acknowledging what it was like for him growing up, his generation and their beliefs, there was an openness to the way he was approaching the idea that his only daughter had just come out gay to him. The next time we caught up, he talked about what he had been learning about regarding gender identity and pronouns. He was still uncomfortable at the idea of me being with a woman, but he was trying to learn about what it might mean to be queer.

Rather than further distancing or silencing a core part of me, through my dad's honesty and willingness to learn, we began to reconcile a past that had become estranged due to his own fall from Filipino grace. There was an authenticity in our relationship that wasn't there before. We talked about hard things with honesty. What could have driven us apart had he decided to remain in a place of denial or rejection of queerness, instead became a place of restoration because of his openness. Is this kapwa re-imagined?

Reimagining Kapwa

I had thought my only connection to Filipino community and culture was through my mother. When I came out, and my mother cut me off, I felt such grief. Not only was I losing her, but I was also losing my identity as a Filipina, which seemed to come through her acknowledgement of me. I really felt the loss of *kapwa*. I felt it cut as if it was a real tangible thing. But through my reflection on Filipino values, I am learning to articulate an Indigenised reinterpretation of Filipino values like *kapwa* that enables me to bypass the rigidity of colonising Roman Catholic values in Filipino culture and to re-engage with a definition of *kapwa* that offers connection and belonging, regardless of gender or sexuality.

My father's open response to my coming out offered me the only olive branch from the Filipino community I received. It came from someone who, while not gay, had had a similar experience of being rejected by the community. This was a

recalibration for me because, instead of a narrative of being excommunicated or exiled from Filipino culture, this openness offered me the possibility of another way of articulating Filipino identity. I wondered in that meeting whether what my father offered me was another or perhaps an older way of understanding *kapwa*.

Coming out and experiencing alienation from the Filipino community does not have to mean that I am no longer a ‘true’ Filipino. While painful, it offers me an opportunity to rethink values core to Filipino identity like *kapwa*. It also offers me an opportunity to do the work of decolonisation and embrace a Filipino identity that doesn’t mean the rejection of my personhood, gender, sexuality and my loved ones. *Kapwa* and the other values I have engaged with here do not need to function as limits by which to exclude others. It offers me the opportunity to revisit the colonial history of the Philippines and re-envision *kapwa* with inspiration drawn from a time when multiple genders and sexualities co-existed in Filipino social life prior to the Spanish conquest.

A decolonised understanding of *kapwa* offers a place of pride for the Filipino LGBTQIA+ community. It goes beyond just the family but reaches out to the past, our ancestors prior to colonisation and offers a future where queer Filipinos can experience full inclusion in society, dignity and freedom. *Kapwa* could be a restorative idea that offers the Philippines and the Filipino diaspora a way to evolve and connect more deeply with each other. To decolonise *kapwa* means to remember what we have had taken away from us through colonisation and to identify parts of our community that are still suffering.

Decolonisation means to remember the history and shame of dispossession (Strobel, 2023). The Philippines lost a great deal through its colonial period. Filipino value systems, traditions and communities changed markedly in response. The lesson here is that cultures can change. The concept of *kapwa* invites Filipinos to conceive of themselves as one but diverse, as both unified and interconnected. With colonisation, this conception became redefined through the laws of Christian morality. The impact on the queer community continues to this day. *Kapwa* has become transactional and othering: you are one with us, but only if you express certain cultural expectations. If you don’t, you are not one of us.

In my father’s openness, I envision a kind of decolonised *kapwa* that is not a closed and closeted system of expectations. It is an Indigenous and spiritual conception of ‘us’ that offers community without loss of personhood. It is a creative space (Strobel, 2023) that energises and offers restoration to Filipino society and its queer members.



Eunice Gaerlan, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0065-2466>

Author’s contribution

The author confirms being the sole contributor to this work and having approved it for publication. They take full responsibility for the accuracy and the integrity of the data analysis.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

References

- Agoncillo, T. A. (1974). *Introduction to Philippine history*. Garotech.
- Alegre, B. R. (2022). From *asog* to *bakla* to *transpinay*. *Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies*, 2(1), 51-64. <https://doi.org/10.5070/LN42156404>
- Chan, C. (1989). Issues of identity development among Asian-American lesbians and gay men. *Journal of Counselling & Development*, 68, 16-20. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1989.tb02485.x>
- Consolacion, T. (2001). Where I am today. In K. K. Kumashiro (Ed.), *Troubling intersections of race and sexuality: Queer students of colour and anti-oppressive education* (pp. 83-86). Rowman and Littlefield.
- David, E. J. R. (2013). *Brown skin, white minds: Filipino-American postcolonial psychology*. Information Age.
- de Guia, K. (2005). *Kapwa: The self in the other: Worldviews and lifestyles of Filipino culture-bearers*. Anvil.
- Diaz, R. (2015). The limits of *bakla* and *gay*: Feminist readings of *My Husband's Lover*, *Vice Ganda* and *Charice Pempengco*. *Signs*, 40(3), 721-745. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679526>
- Enriquez, V. G. (1994). *From colonial to liberation psychology: The Philippine experience*. De La Salle University Press.
- Foe, J. (2014). The 1960s gay life in the Philippines: Discretion with tolerance. *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, 17. <http://www.ejhs.org/volume17/gaylife.html>
- Garcia, J. N. (2004). Male homosexuality in the Philippines: A short history. *IIAS Newsletter*, 35, 13. https://www.iias.asia/sites/default/files/2020-11/IIAS_NL35_13.pdf
- Hopkins, A. G. (2021). The Philippines in imperial history. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 49(4), 805-825. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2021.1957502>
- Ildelfonso, T. M. (2022). From *asog* to *bakla*: Genealogical analysis of the Philippine history to diagnose the roots of homophobia. *Humanities Bulletin*, 5(2), 213-238. <https://journals.lapub.co.uk/index.php/HB/article/view/2472>
- Kumashiro, K. K. (2001). Queer students of colour and antiracist, antiheterosexist education: Paradoxes of identity and activism. In K. K. Kumashiro (Ed.), *Troubling intersections of race and sexuality: Queer students of colour and anti-oppressive education* (pp. 1-26). Rowman and Littlefield.
- Marin, M. (1996). Stolen strands: The in and out lives of lesbians in the Philippines. In M. Reinfelder (Ed.), *From Amazon to Zami: Towards a global lesbian feminism* (pp. 30-155). Cassell.
- Myers, J. (2013). *Daughters of Bilitis*. Historical dictionary of the lesbian and gay liberation movements. <https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9va0FydGJbGU6NDQ1MjgxOQ==>
- Nadal, K. L. (2011). *Filipino American psychology: A handbook of theory, research, and clinical practice*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Nadal, K. L., & Corpus, M. J. H. (2013). 'Tomboys' and 'baklas': Experiences of lesbian

- and gay Filipino Americans. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, 4(3), 166-175. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0030168>
- Strobel, L. (2023, January 4). *In conversation with Dr Leny Strobel: Decolonisation as remembering, kapwa psychology and wells of liminality*. <https://advaya.co/read/2023/01/04/in-conversation-with-leny-strobel-kinship-2023>
- Tan, M. (2001). Survival through pluralism: Emerging gay communities in the Philippines. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 40(3-4), 117-142. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v40n03_07
- Triandis, H. C. (2001). Individualism-collectivism and personality. *Journal of Personality*, 69, 907-924. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6494.696169>
- Velasco, G. K. V. (2022). Queering the global Filipina body. *Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies*, 2(2), 105-110.
- Villar, G. (2000). Philippines. In B. Zimmerman (Ed.), *Lesbian histories and cultures: An encyclopaedia* (pp. 584-585). Garland.