

The Mandaya Woman: Her Role as Balyan (Priestess) and Magdadawot (Bard)

Authors : Genevieve Jorolan-Quintero

Abstract : After the devastation caused by typhoon Haiyan in the southeastern part of the Philippines in 2012, there was this intense need among the indigenous communities to 'reconcile' with nature. The belief that the deluge, which claimed thousands of lives, was caused by the destruction of the environment because of humanities' greed and carelessness was widespread and strong. The rift had to be mended. Nature had to be appeased. For this, the balyan (priestess) was called in to perform a ritual. Only she can communicate with the spirits. The communities depend on her spiritual intervention as she alone has the power to invoke the spirits of nature. Among the indigenous people, the balyan is most often also a magdadawot (bard) who possesses the knowledge especially about the folk epics and the skill to chant them. The balyan is the communities' repository of knowledge. When one passes away, a whole library of tribal knowledge and wisdom is lost. The oral traditions embody the life values, ideals, customs, and even the history of the First Nations People. These include the myths, epics, legends, riddles, and songs. The indigenous system is patriarchal, but is actually indirectly matriarchal reflecting the authority of the woman. Disputes within the community are heard and tried by the Council of Elders. However, the balyan is often consulted for her opinion. Her advice is deemed significant and most often necessary. These are three instances that highlight the significant role of the balyan among the indigenous communities in the Philippines, especially among the Mandaya tribe who live in the southern region of the country. This paper highlights the unique kind of leadership of the Mandaya woman - as priestess and bard - and her impact on the lives of her people.

Keywords : balyan, bard, magdadawot, mandaya

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