

## Renegotiating the Filipino Bakla Culture: A Semiotic Analysis of Drag Performance in Eat Bulaga's Kalye Serye

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**Abstract :** This study explores the renegotiation of bakla culture in Philippine media in the context of Kalye Serye segment of the popular Filipino noontime variety show Eat Bulaga. Although the term "bakla" is usually translated to "gay" or "homosexual male" in English, they do not mean the same. The western notion of a gay refers to a male person attracted to another male person but still retains the masculine physical attributes. However, the bakla embodies loudness, femininity, and transvestitism. Hence, a bakla is a gay man aspiring to be a woman by assuming feminine actions and appearance, a definition much closer to a transgender. The Philippine media usually employs the bakla culture in comedy programs. The bakla nowadays is usually associated with the people of lower economic strata and carries a pathological connotation. The Filipino television program Eat Bulaga, which has been airing for more than 36 years, is fond of using bakla in comedy. However, the recently launched segment entitled Kalye Serye (literally "Street [Television] Series"), while still employing drag performance to incorporate bakla culture in comedy, renegotiates the bakla culture by deviating from the stereotypical notion of bakla. In this study, this researcher asks: (1) How does Kalye Serye renegotiate the Filipino concept of bakla in terms of economic aspirations and social norms? (2) How does Kalye Serye reappropriate the bakla culture to fit non-comedic performances? The study examines 15 purposively selected Kalye Serye episodes. Seven were selected from the Thursday episodes, seven from Saturday episodes, and the Lenten special episode. These were selected to cover as many characters and different character roles as possible. Data was constructed by identifying and coding the roles, physical appearance and gestures, and key dialogs of the characters. A total of six female characters played by three different male actors were examined. Semiotic analysis using semiotics of Roland Barthes was performed to produce a reading of the characters. Findings show that through physical appearance, the characters associate bakla with the economic affluence through the use of expensive-looking clothes, jewelries, cars, and elaborate gestures. This represents a new economic but old western aspiration of the bakla. In terms of social norms, the characters try to revive the traditional concepts of femininity, courtship, and respect, values which are touted to be lost in the current generation of Filipinos. This is quite ironic because while there is a seemingly tolerant attitude towards all forms of queerness, the bakla is considered immoral and yet, the bakla is used to teach about morality and values. Finally, the characters break the traditional association of the bakla with slapstick comedy and their roles are reappropriated to suit dramatic roles. By refraining from portraying the bakla in ridiculous manner (physically and in terms of roles), the bakla lends itself well in the performance of dramatic roles and their ridiculous and pathological associations removed. Future research may include other Filipino or Asian portrayals of queerness to get a better understanding of how queerness is incorporated in contemporary popular culture.

**Keywords :** bakla, drag performance, popular culture, queer representation

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