

# Carrying the legacy of Filipino indigenous knowledge

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## The Center for Babaylan Studies hosts the 1st International Babaylan Conference in April

MANY of us here in the United States may not have heard the term, babaylan, and even if we did, we wouldn't know what it means. The Center for Babaylan Studies (CFBS) was organized in order to work with others, dedicated to the path of the Babaylan. Headed by its Project Director Leny Strobel, who is an Associate Professor in American Multicultural Studies at Sonoma State University, the center was created after more than five years of research and discovery to continue the exploration and illumination of Babaylan indigenous wisdom and spirit toward the empowerment and healing of individuals and communities. Strobel also sees the center as a container for future collaborative projects, research and discussions that could bring the Babaylan tradition out of the rubble of the colonial lahar it is buried in. But what, and who is exactly a Babaylan?

According to artist and teacher Carlos Villa, "Babaylan is a Filipino word that refers specifically to an individual or a group of healers, mostly women, who were acknowledged by friends and family as possessing extraordinary gifts. These may be having a gift of vision, an ability to see through schemes or situations, the gift for healing—a specific touch or intuited or passed-on knowledge to specific processes of "fixing" and "putting" people and things together. The first priority of all Babaylan [is] her community."

In the Philippines, the Babaylan is identified by her community, recognizing her as someone who has the ability to mediate with the spirit world, has her own spirit guides and is given gifts of healing, foretelling and insight. She may also have knowledge of healing therapies such as hilot and/or arbularyo.

She is a ritualist, a chanter and/or diviner. They may be called by other names by the languages of indigenous communities—Mombaki, Dawac, Balyan or Balian, Catalonan, Ma-Aram. However, modern Filipinos may remember the arbularyos or hilots who may also have the gift of traveling to the spirit world or non-ordinary states of reality in order to mediate with the spirits.

### Decolonization of our beliefs

Sadly, these traditions and beliefs that existed amongst our ancestors were lost due to western colonization. Our colonizers came and made us think that our native ways were inferior to theirs. Under colonial rule and with Christianization, the Babaylan tradition was suppressed and silenced, derided and demonized. Babaylans were branded as witches, condemning their teachings as pagan and satanic. Because of this, most Filipinos began to look down on their indigenous culture, losing their identities as natives and strived more to be westernized like their colonizers.

Today, we carry fragments of these traditions in our cultural memory. The CFBS believes that we need to first believe that those memories are important and must not be trivialize or dismissed. In the United States, the organizers of CFBS believes that we can empower ourselves and

our communities by learning about the Babaylan traditions. Deepening our connection with our Filipino roots can help us make choices that someday can benefit us and our communities.

### Babaylan Conference/Gathering 2010

In 2008, Strobel and a number of Filipino-Americans went to the Philippines to attend the Kapwa 2 Conference in Iloilo. They were introduced to babaylans, chanters, ritualists and scholars, which made a lasting impact on them.

Pursuing the vision to reconnect with the spirit of the Babaylan traditions, the CFBS will host the 1st International Babaylan Conference in April 2010 at Sonoma State University. This gathering of healers, artists, scholars, activists, performers and other culture-bearers will share Babaylan-inspired work through ritual, ceremony, dance, poetry, film, academic panels, conversations and workshops.



With the theme, "Filipino Knowledge Indigenous Systems and Practices: Their Relevance in an Age of Globalization," the conference will present the work of artist/scholar Grace Nono, who spent the last fifteen years as an apprentice to primary babaylans who taught her sacred and oral chants and narratives; Katrin de Guia, founder of Heritage and Arts Academies of the Philippines and Virgil Apostol, a recognized healer in the Ilocano Ablon tradition.

Strobel believes that the Babaylan conference is timely and relevant. "There is a growing realization in mainstream society," Strobel explains, "that indigenous knowledge and practices carry the ancient wisdom that enabled people to survive the genocide and holocausts brought by modern civilizations." Stories of healing by an arbularyo, hilot, mombaki, bailan/beliyan/babaylan, catalonan, dawac or ma-aram run strong in the Filipino and Fil-Am families and communities. Many women passed down knowledge of healing herbs and massage techniques, while others were respected for their ability to speak with spirits. These women, and sometimes men, provided advice and healing for the community.

For more information about the Babaylan and conference, please log on to [www.babaylan.net](http://www.babaylan.net) or contact and [contact@babaylan.net](mailto:contact@babaylan.net).

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( [www.asianjournal.com](http://www.asianjournal.com) )

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