

BEYOND THE MYTHS:
THE SOPHISTICATED
SOCIETIES OF
PRE-COLONIAL PHILIPPINES

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WELCOME

To begin healing the inner child as a Filipino is to ask: Who told us who we are — and who told us to forget? For so many of us, our earliest wounds were not just personal, but historical. We grew up absorbing shame — of our brown skin, our accents, our silences, our family struggles — without being told how these were shaped by centuries of colonization, erasure, and survival. The inner child inside us carries not only unmet needs, but also inherited grief — of ancestors who were forced to abandon their language, land, and even their softness.





WELCOME

Learning our precolonial history is not nostalgia. It is memory work. It is a radical act of remembering that before we were told we were broken, we belonged. Kapwa was our way of knowing the self in relation. Loob was our depth. Our communities knew how to live in rhythm with the land, with each other, and with the sacred. To decolonize is to return to that knowing – to tell the child within us: you were never too much, never too strange, never beyond belonging. You come from people who survived. You come from people who knew how to love beyond empire. And you are still becoming whole.



A Quick Note -

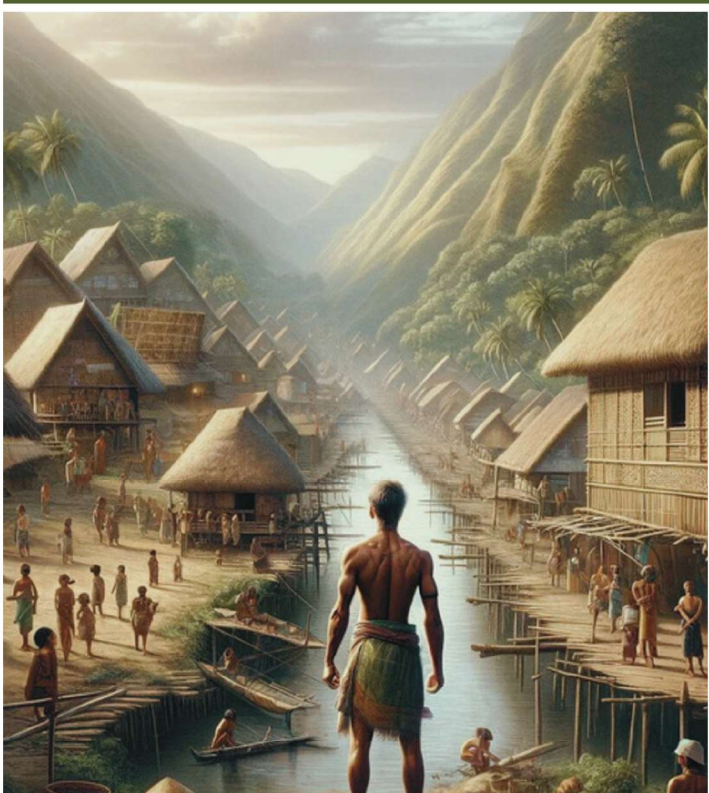


i It's important to recognize that this is just a brief overview of the rich history of pre-colonial Philippines. This narrative by no means captures the full depth and complexity of our ancestors' lives and societies. Our history is as vast and diverse as the thousands of islands of our archipelago.



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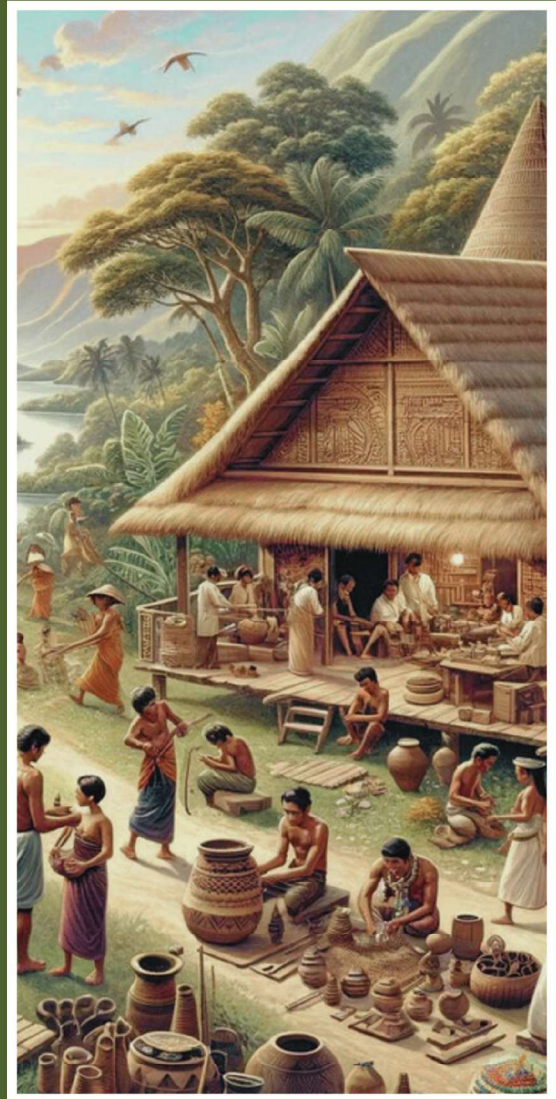
SOPHISTICATED SOCIETIES AND GOVERNANCE

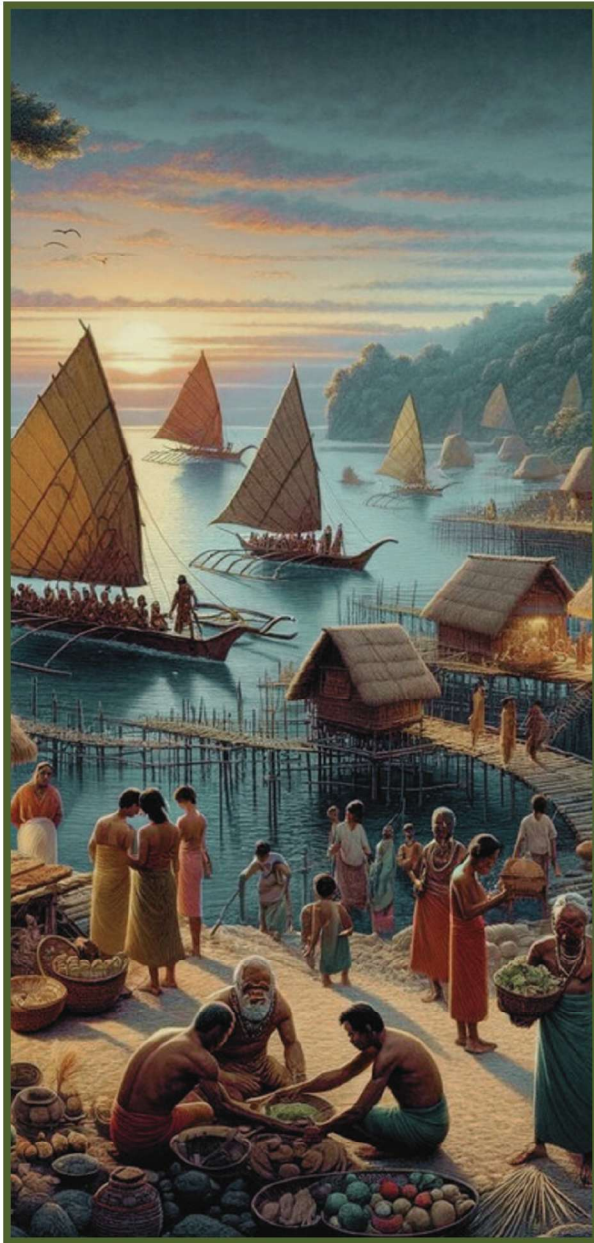


Before the arrival of the Spaniards in 1521, the Philippine archipelago was a mosaic of independent barangays, each led by a datu, rajah, or sultan. These leaders were not despots but rather benevolent chiefs who ruled with the consent of the governed, often consulting with a council of elders known as the maginoo or the sandigang bayan. These councils ensured that governance was not a matter of absolute power but a collective decision-making process, embodying a proto-democratic system that valued consensus and communal welfare.



The barangays were self-sufficient, with complex social, political, and economic systems. Although subject to historical scrutiny, the Code of Kalantiaw and the Maragtas Code symbolize the presence of codified laws that governed various aspects of life, from property rights to family relations and from trade regulations to criminal justice. These legal frameworks highlight an advanced sense of justice and order that predated Western influences.





Trade and commerce flourished in these early communities, with the Philippines being a significant player in regional trade networks that extended to China, India, and the Malay Archipelago. The Laguna Copperplate Inscription, dated to 900 AD, is a testament to the sophisticated written language and system of debt forgiveness and trade practices that existed long before European contact. The discovery of ancient trading ports, such as those in Butuan and Tondo, further underscores trade's extensive and organized nature, where local products like gold, pearls, and spices were exchanged for silk, porcelain, and other luxury goods from neighboring civilizations.





Maritime prowess was another hallmark of pre-colonial Filipino societies. The balangay, a large wooden boat, exemplified the advanced shipbuilding techniques of early Filipinos. These boats were not only used for trade but also for exploration and settlement across the archipelago and beyond, indicating a highly developed knowledge of navigation and maritime culture.



CULTURAL RICHNESS



The cultural life of pre-colonial Filipinos was vibrant and diverse, characterized by a rich & diverse traditions, languages, and artistic expressions. Oral traditions were the cornerstone of cultural transmission, with epic poems like the "Hinilawod" of the Visayans and the "Biag ni Lam-ang" of the Ilocanos being recited by community bards or babaylan.

These epic tales passed down through generations, capture the people's values, history, and cosmology, serving both as entertainment and as a means of preserving collective memory.

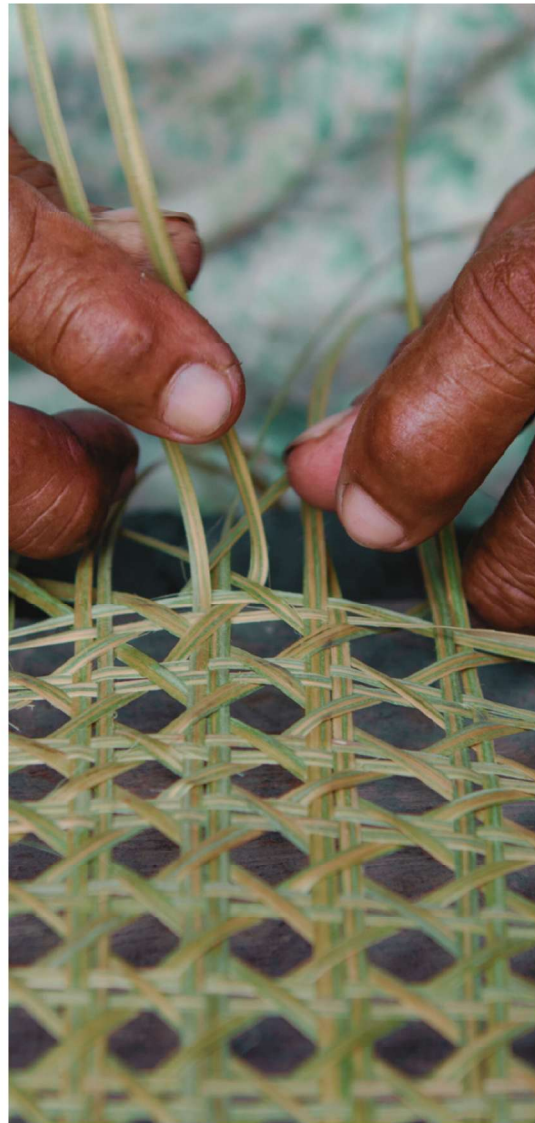




Indigenous scripts such as the Baybayin were used to write various languages, proving that literacy and scholarly pursuits were widespread. This script was used for personal communication and for recording significant events, laws, and genealogies. The existence of other scripts like the Tagbanwa and the Hanunoo further highlights the linguistic diversity and intellectual achievements of early Filipinos.



Art and craftsmanship were highly developed, with intricate designs in pottery, weaving, and goldsmithing. The discovery of the 10th-century Butuan Boat attests to early Filipinos' advanced boat-making skills and seafaring capabilities, which made them capable of long voyages and substantial maritime trade. Gold jewelry and artifacts, such as the golden Tara of Agusan and the exquisite goldwork from the Butuan and Surigao regions, reveal a high level of artistry and a deep appreciation for beauty and craftsmanship.





Music and dance were integral to community life, with each region having unique forms and styles. Instruments such as the kulintang, a set of gongs used in Mindanao, and the kudyapi, a type of lute, were central to musical performances that accompanied rituals, celebrations, and daily activities. Dance forms, from the courtly Singkil to the martial Sakuting, showcased the people's agility, grace, and cultural narratives.





Religious practices were deeply intertwined with daily life, with animism and ancestor worship forming the core of pre-colonial belief systems. The babaylan, often referred to as baylan in some regions, were the spiritual lifeblood of pre-colonial Filipino communities. Imagine them as the original Renaissance figures, seamlessly blending the roles of healer, priest, and cultural custodian. In the heart of lush villages, the babaylan stood as a bridge between the earthly and the divine, called upon to heal the sick, guide rituals, and maintain harmony with the natural world.





Their wisdom passed down through generations, is a rich tradition woven from countless experiences and deep spiritual insight.





Babaylans were skilled herbalists, using the land's bounty to create remedies that cured ailments and soothed souls. They recognized the intricate dance between physical health and spiritual well-being and embodied a holistic approach to healing. In ceremonies filled with chants, dances, and offerings, they performed rituals that maintained the community's balance, preserving cultural heritage through stories, songs, and dances. These practices were acts of resistance against colonial erasure.





In a time when women's roles were often confined to the domestic sphere, the babaylan stood out as powerful figures of authority and reverence, embodying a society that valued balance and inclusivity. Rediscovering the legacy of the babaylan means reconnecting with an identity that celebrates wisdom, courage, and deep spiritual connection.





The babaylan is not merely historical but deeply relevant to contemporary issues of identity, spirituality, and cultural heritage. The wisdom of the babaylan offers valuable lessons for today's society, particularly in embracing holistic healing and acknowledging the importance of spiritual well-being. Moreover, the babaylan's acceptance of gender fluidity and their integral role in community life provide powerful examples for contemporary movements advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights and gender equality.



Dr. Grace Nono, an ethnomusicologist, music-performing artist, cultural advocate, and author of the book *Babaylan Sing Back*, emphasized the active agency of the babaylan, “To view the babaylan as relics is to misunderstand their role and significance. They are active agents of cultural and spiritual continuity, adapting and evolving while maintaining a deep connection to their roots.” This perspective highlights the babaylan's proactive involvement in their communities. Rather than being passive keepers of tradition, they are dynamic practitioners who continuously adapt their practices to stay relevant and effective in the modern world.



COLONIAL AND WARTIME ATROCITIES: THE HIDDEN HISTORIES OF GENOCIDE IN THE PHILIPPINES



With Ferdinand Magellan's arrival in 1521 and the subsequent Spanish colonization, a concerted effort was made to rewrite and distort Philippine history. The Spaniards portrayed the pre-colonial Filipinos as uncivilized and in need of salvation, thereby justifying their conquest and colonization. This narrative was further propagated through the education system, ensuring that future generations of Filipinos were indoctrinated with a distorted view of their own history.





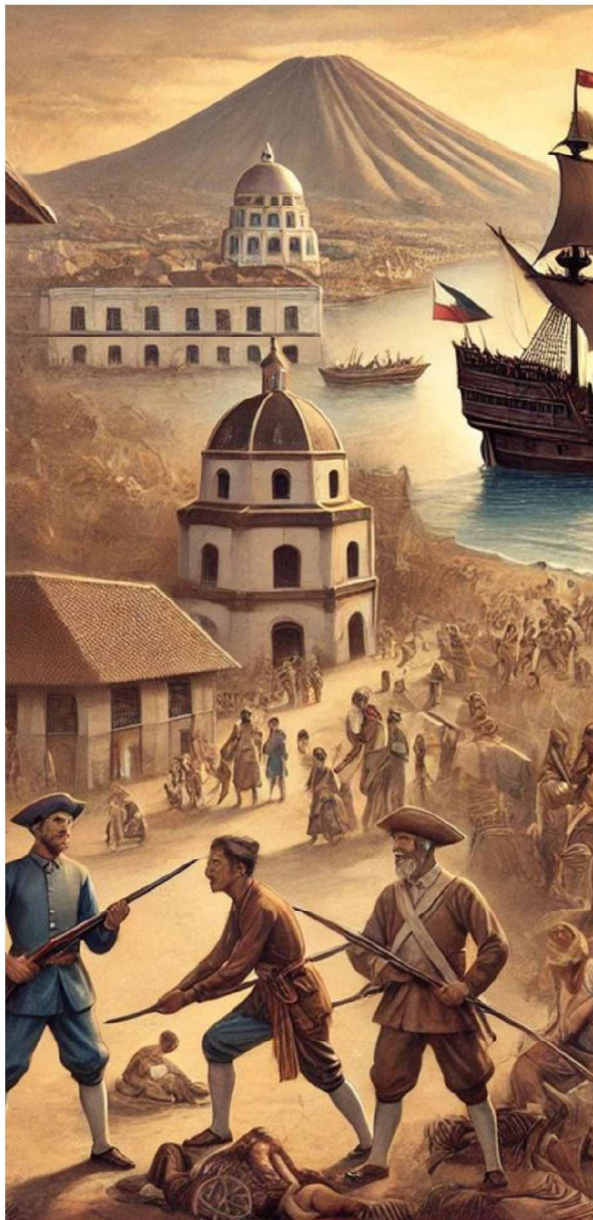
The atrocities committed by the Spaniards were numerous, including forced labor, conversion to Christianity, and the systematic destruction of indigenous culture and governance. The colonizers imposed their language, religion, and customs, erasing much of the rich heritage of the pre-colonial period.





The American colonization, which began in 1898 after the Spanish-American War, brought another wave of cultural erasure and genocide. The Filipino-American War (1899-1902) saw brutal tactics employed by American forces, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Filipinos. The Americans, like the Spaniards before them, sought to reshape Filipino society in their own image, introducing a new education system that glorified American culture and undermined indigenous traditions.





It's important to recognize that the tragic history of genocide is not confined to the actions of Americans alone. The Spanish colonization of the Philippines from 1565 to 1898 was marked by brutal suppression, forced labor, and systemic exploitation, leading to countless deaths among the indigenous population. The introduction of new diseases, harsh working conditions under the *encomienda* system, and violent repression of uprisings further decimated Filipino communities. Similarly, the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II from 1941 to 1945 was characterized by widespread atrocities, including massacres, forced labor, and severe human rights abuses. These historical periods reflect a pattern of colonial and imperial powers inflicting widespread suffering and loss of life of Filipinos.



CONCLUSION



Despite the oppressive nature of Spanish, American, & Japanese colonization (among others), the strength and defiance of the Filipino spirit endured. The struggle for independence continued through various forms of armed and peaceful resistance that exemplified the unyielding desire of the Filipino people to reclaim their sovereignty. This resistance was not just a fight for political freedom but a profound assertion of cultural identity and self-worth. By reclaiming this history and celebrating the true legacy of our ancestors, we can take pride in our roots and challenge the distorted narratives that have long overshadowed our past.



THE CHALLENGE



There's a kind of remembering that doesn't just happen in the mind – it stirs in the bones. As we uncover the truth of our precolonial ancestors – the way they governed with loob, moved through life with rhythm, traded across oceans without losing themselves – something quiet inside us starts to rise. Like steam from lugaw on a cold morning, it reminds us: you come from people who knew how to live fully, and love without apology. But here's the hard part – knowing this history is not enough. The deeper challenge is letting this knowing reach the younger parts of us that still think they need to earn their worth. The ones that were shaped by silence, shaped by fear, shaped by stories never meant for them.



Your Remembering is Sacred – and It Doesn't End Here



As you return to the memory of who we were before empire, may you also return to the child within you – the one who never forgot the feel of belonging, the wisdom of the land, the language of softness. If this remembering stirred something in you – grief, pride, ache, longing – we invite you to continue your healing journey with us at The Hilom Collective, a sacred space for Filipino inner child healing.



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For those yet to come.*





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Final Words from your Divine Inner Child:

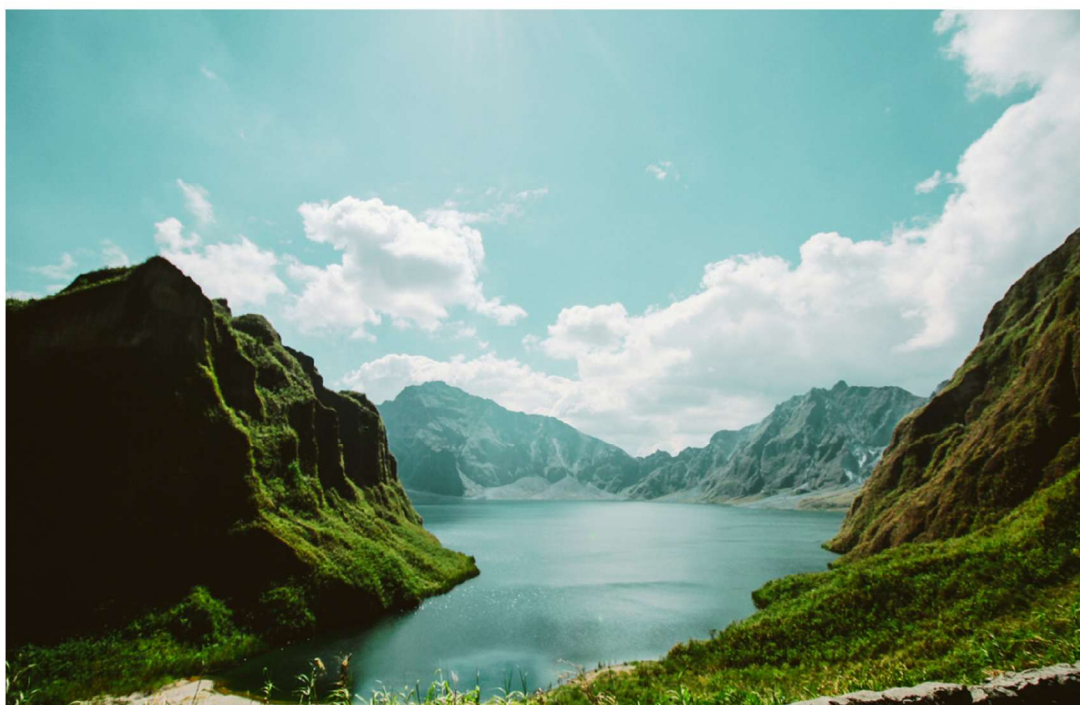
We are never too much.

We were never broken.

We just needed to be seen.



MABUHAY KA AT MALIGAYANG PAGLALAKBAY!



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