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How imperialism erased Indigenous LGBTQ+ communities

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Babaylan, ang manggagamot. (Babaylan, the healer.) Detail of Mural "History of Philippine Medicine" by Carlos "Botong" Francisco. Image: XiaoChua.net

Since the resurgence of the Palestine solidarity movement following the heroic Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023, queer, trans, and gender non-conforming people of all ages have taken up the struggle for a free Palestine.

Face it: imperialism is the world's greatest threat to LGBTQ+ people.

Capitalism and imperialism, stretching back to its days of old-style colonialism, have

done more than any other force on earth to annihilate and suppress societies that see gender and sexuality outside a narrow binary.

Erasure of nonbinary people in pre-colonial Philippines

Take Spanish colonialism, for example. For those unfamiliar, one need only refer to the Spanish-American War in 1898, through which the United States made off with Spain's old colonies: Cuba, Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. At this point in history, the United States emerged as the leading imperialist power in the world, pushing aside the European powers.

Previous to this, Spain held these countries as colonies. In particular, Spain controlled the Philippines for over three centuries.

Before the Spanish arrived, societies across the Philippine archipelago, though not a monolith, viewed gender and sexuality in its many shades. In fact, people who we would now consider to be nonbinary, trans, or queer were considered spiritual and tribal leaders. One popular term for them, among many, is [babaylan](#).

What happened to the babaylans? Between the Spanish military, governors, and missionaries, they were vilified and executed. The Spanish colonists, by both sword and cross, enforced the nuclear family and the narrow gender roles that came with it.

The Catholic Church's "mission to civilize" was the ideological justification for the complete annihilation of an Indigenous social system, the babaylans being only one of many.

But the true motivator behind such a historical atrocity is not something subjective like "good" or "evil" — these are just assessments that different people and class forces make for different reasons.

The true motivator was primarily political and economic: it served the interests of European colonialism. There's an old saying about European colonialism: First came the Bible, then came the sword.

Like most Indigenous systems, the babaylans' significance and function stood in stark contradiction to the Spanish colonists' system of rule. Spain could not allow the precolonial Filipino peoples this degree of self-determination and autonomy, so it needed to be crushed.

Even hundreds of years later, the annihilation of the babaylans haunts the Philippines. Despite the Filipino people's struggle having expelled U.S. military bases from the archipelago, the Visiting Forces Agreement has allowed the U.S. military rent-free use of Philippine military infrastructure. And where the U.S. military goes, sexual violence follows.

One needs only refer to the [brutal murder of Jennifer Laude](#) and the non-indictment of U.S. soldier Scott Pemberton to bear this out.

Imperialism has wrought this kind of havoc throughout the world. It stands in the way of, and violently suppresses, any system that allows for the genuine self-determination and social development of a people, nation, or movement.

This is not to say that every Indigenous or cultural practice is positive or progressive or that they are all negative or reactionary. Social and cultural practices must be understood on their own terms and in their own contexts. They do not form in a vacuum but rather according to objective historical conditions.

But a society's practices simply cannot change and develop while the boot of imperialism weighs on its neck.

