

00:10

I was an eight-year-old kid in the mid-1990s. I grew up in southern Philippines. At that age, you're young enough to be oblivious about what society expects from each of us but old enough to be aware of what's going on around you. We lived in a one-bedroom house, all five of us. Our house was amongst clusters of houses made mostly of wood and corrugated metal sheets. These houses were built very close to each other along unpaved roads. There was little to no expectation of privacy. Whenever an argument broke out next door, you heard it all. Or, if there was a little ... something something going on --

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(Laughter)

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you would probably hear that, too.

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(Laughter)

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Like any other kid, I learned what a family looked like. It was a man, a woman, plus a child or children.

01:04

But I also learned it wasn't always that way. There were other combinations that worked just as well. There was this family of three who lived down the street. The lady of the house was called Lenie. Lenie had long black hair, often in a ponytail, and manicured nails. She always went out with a little makeup on and her signature red lipstick. Lenie's other half, I don't remember much about him except that he had a thing for white sleeveless shirts and gold chains around his neck. Their daughter was a couple years younger than me. Now, everybody in the village knew Lenie. She owned and ran what was the most popular beauty salon in our side of town. Every time their family would walk down the roads, they would always be greeted with smiles and occasionally stopped for a little chitchat.

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Now, the interesting thing about Lenie is that she also happened to be a transgender woman. She exemplified one of the Philippines' long-standing stories about gender diversity. Lenie was proof that oftentimes we think of something as strange only because we're not familiar with it, or we haven't taken enough time to try and understand.

02:21

In most cultures around the world, gender is this man-woman dichotomy. It's this immovable, nonnegotiable, distinct classes of individuals. We assign characteristics and expectations the moment a person's biological sex is determined. But not all cultures are like that. Not all cultures are as rigid. Many cultures don't look at genitalia primarily as basis for gender construction, and some communities in North America, Africa, the Indian subcontinent and the Pacific Islands, including the Philippines, have a long history of cultural permissiveness and accommodation of gender variances.

03:05

As you may know, the people of the Philippines were under Spanish rule for over 300 years. That's from 1565 to 1898. This explains why everyday Filipino conversations are peppered with Spanish words and why so many of our last names, including mine, sound very Spanish. This also explains the firmly entrenched influence of Catholicism. But precolonial Philippine societies, they were mostly animists. They believed all things had a distinct spiritual essence: plants, animals, rocks, rivers, places. Power resided in the spirit. Whoever was able to harness that spiritual power was highly revered.

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Now, scholars who have studied the Spanish colonial archives also tell us that these early societies were largely egalitarian. Men did not necessarily have an advantage over women. Wives were treated as companions, not slaves. And family contracts were not done without their presence and approval. In some ways, women had the upper hand. A woman could divorce her husband and own property under her own name, which she kept even after marriage. She had the prerogative to have a baby or not and then decide the baby's name.

04:34

But the real key to the power of the precolonial Filipino woman was in her role as "babaylan," a collective term for shamans of various ethnic groups. They were the community healers, specialists in herbal and divine lore. They delivered babies and communicated with the spirit

world. They performed exorcisms and occasionally, and in defense of their community, they kicked some ass.

05:07

(Laughter)

05:09

And while the babaylan was a female role, there were also, in fact, male practitioners in the spiritual realm. Reports from early Spanish chroniclers contain several references to male shamans who did not conform to normative Western masculine standards. They cross-dressed and appeared effeminate or sexually ambiguous. A Jesuit missionary named Francisco Alcina said that one man he believed to be a shaman was "so effeminate that in every way he was more a woman than a man. All the things the women did he performed, such as weaving blankets, sewing clothes and making pots. He danced also like they did, never like a man, whose dance is different. In all, he appeared more a woman than a man."

06:07

Well, any other juicy details in the colonial archives? Thought you'd never ask.

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(Laughter)

06:17

As you may have deduced by now, the manner in which these precolonial societies conducted themselves didn't go over so well. All the free-loving, gender-variant-permitting, gender equality wokeness clashed viciously with the European sensibilities at the time, so much so that the Spanish missionaries spent the next 300 years trying to enforce their two-sex, two-gender model. Many Spanish friars also thought that the cross-dressing babaylan were either celibates like themselves or had deficient or malformed genitals. But this was pure speculation. Documents compiled between 1679 and 1685, called "The Bolinao Manuscript," mentions male shamans marrying women. The Boxer Codex, circa 1590, provide clues on the nature of the male babaylan sexuality. It says, "Ordinarily they dress as women, act like prudes and are so effeminate that one who does not know them would believe they are women. Almost all are impotent for the reproductive act, and thus they marry other males and sleep with them as man and wife and have carnal knowledge." Carnal knowledge, of course, meaning sex.

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Now, there's an ongoing debate in contemporary society about what constitutes gender and how it should be defined. My country is no exception. Some countries like Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Nepal and Canada have begun introducing nonbinary options in their legal documents, such as their passports and their permanent resident cards.

08:05

In all these discussions about gender, I think it's important to keep in mind that the prevailing notions of man and woman as static genders anchored strictly on biological sex are social constructs. In my people's case, this social construct is an imposition. It was hammered into their heads over hundreds of years until they were convinced that their way of thinking was erroneous. But the good thing about social constructs is they can be reconstructed to fit a time and age. They can be reconstructed to respond to communities that are becoming more diverse. And they can be reconstructed for a world that's starting to realize we have so much to gain from learning and working through our differences.

09:01

When I think about this subject, I think about the Filipino people and an almost forgotten but important legacy of gender equality and inclusivity. I think about lovers who were some of the gentlest souls I had known but could not be fully open. I think about people who have made an impact in my life, who showed me that integrity, kindness and strength of character are far better measures of judgment, far better than things that are beyond a person's control such as their skin color, their age or their gender.

09:42

As I stand here today, on the shoulders of people like Lenie, I feel incredibly grateful for all who have come before me, the ones courageous enough to put themselves out there, who lived a life that was theirs and in the process, made it a little easier for us to live our lives now. Because being yourself is revolutionary. And to anyone reeling from forces trying to knock you down and cram you into these neat little boxes people have decided for you: don't break. I see you. My ancestors see you. Their blood runs through me as they run through so many of us. You are valid, and you deserve rights and recognition just like everyone else.

10:41

Thank you.

10:42

(Applause)