Tita Aida and Emerging Communities of Gay Men: Two Case Studies from Metro Manila, the Philippines

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SUMMARY. This article describes and analyzes the development of two gay men's organizations in Metro Manila, the Philippines. The members, who are predominantly salaried professionals, represent an emerging subculture among "men who have sex with men," self-identifying as gay. The HIV/AIDS epidemic, while eliciting different responses from the two organizations, is described as pivotal in challenging the groups' ethos about sexual identity, behavioral change, and community organizing. The potentials, as well as limitations, for further development of these groups are discussed. [Article copies available from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678.]

In the 1980s, the large number of reported HIV/AIDS cases involving male homosexuals in western countries led to speculation that there would be further stigmatization of homosexuality which

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would inhibit the "coming out" process and stifle efforts to organize gay communities. Yet toward the end of the 1980s it became clear that gay organizations were more active and assertive, not in spite, but because of HIV/AIDS. Altman (1989) attributes this in part to the fact that "gays had carved out some degree of political legitimacy" in the 1970s, but acknowledges that there has also been "legitimation by disaster."

This "legitimation by disaster" may be more dominant in many developing countries where there has been no history of gay community organizing prior to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and certainly none of the political legitimacy that comes from organized activities.

In this article, I describe such developments in the Philippines and analyze problems and prospects for these incipient communities of gay men. I use a case study format, describing the development of two Metro Manila-based non-governmental organizations (or NGOs)--The Library Foundation (TLF) and Katlo--and their responses to Tita Aida (Aunt Aida, gay jargon for AIDS).

Most members of these two organizations self-identify as "gay" and are conscious about efforts toward building a "gay community." Similar populations have been described in Indonesia (Oetomo, 1991) and Brazil (Parker, 1986), generally representing a minority within the broader population of men who have sex with men but who may prove to be crucial as they lead organized responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

I propose that the petty-bourgeois class background of the two Filipino organizations is an important factor that relates to the development of their involvement in social services and the broader arena of gender politics. I will not, however, attempt an in-depth analysis in the tradition of political economy, which would require a much longer treatise on class and social change. A number of studies have already been published on social change and the political role of the Filipino petty bourgeoisie or, to use the preferred vagueness of American terminology, the "middle class" (see Constantino, 1975; Doeppeers, 1984; Doronilla, 1992).

Rather than taking "petty bourgeois" simply as an economic construct, I emphasize the processes of culture formation and change, with an emphasis on group ethos and worldviews. I will quote from interviews with members of TLF and Katlo, as well as
from organizational publications. This type of analysis is necessary if we are to understand the directions taken by emerging social formations such as feminist groups (Patajo-Hidalgo, 1992) and gay organizations.

I write as a "native anthropologist," aware of the advantages, as well as limitations, of being an insider. My approach is to narrate events and then to present an analysis gleaned from discussions with members of both organizations. I have participated in these discussions, less as a detached listener than as an active participant in what has been frequently intensive engaged discourse. The observations are necessarily candid and are intended to contribute insights into policy formulation and implementation in the complex area of HIV prevention.

**SOCIOHISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The Philippines went through two successive periods of colonial occupation. The first extended over 300 years under Spain. It was a period described as the domination of the Cross and the Sword, with Roman Catholicism introduced as a major form of social control. Spanish Roman Catholicism introduced a powerful sexual ideology of *machismo* that has formed the foundation for misogyny and homophobia.

In 1898, Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States, which retained formal control over the archipelago until 1946. The U.S. colonial period introduced secularism, but rather than diluting religious homophobia, the Americans' biomedical models (mainly drawing from Freudian psychiatry) merely tagged homosexuality with a new label—that of "sickness"—to the old one of "sin."

Nearly half a century after regaining independence, Filipinos carry ambivalent attitudes toward homosexuality (and sexuality in general). Many Filipinos, as well as foreigners, argue that there is "tolerance" of homosexuals, pointing to the many *bakla*, identified mainly as cross-dressing effeminate males from lower-income groups.² The *bakla*, however, is tolerated only as long as he remains confined within certain professions: hairdressers, couturiers, and to some extent, the entertainment industry. The "tolerance" of *bakla* is, at best, patronizing, and appreciated only for camp value. It is
not surprising then, that informal associations of *bakla* have existed for many years, activated mainly for annual *fiestas* where the *bakla* provide entertainment through drag beauty pageants.

“Gay” men from middle- and high-income groups have traditionally remained discreet, but a few began coming out around the 1970s when gay discos sprouted in Manila and it became a status symbol to be seen in such places. One Filipino writer (Fernandez, 1981) suggests that “the gay disco will probably go down in history as one of the most liberating factors for the tradition-bound, image-ridden Filipino.” This observation was probably premature, considering that gay discos were primarily identified with the efforts of the former First Lady, Imelda Romualdez Marcos, to transform Manila into a haven for the international jet-set. This close association of “gay socialites” with the dictatorship was not beneficial. As the Marcoses plundered the Philippines, social unrest grew. It was difficult to dismiss the irony in Manila’s elite spending thousands of pesos a night in gay discos with names like the Velvet Slum, while half of Manila’s residents lived in the squalor of Manila’s 600 slum colonies. Many gay men active in the anti-Marcos movement remember how they had to remain in the closets as colleagues referred contemptuously to homosexuality as a product of “bourgeois decadence.” Class struggle remained primary; gender politics, including women’s issues, had to remain in the closet.

Thus, while the Marcos dictatorship saw a proliferation of sectoral “cause-oriented” organizations (mostly directed against Marcos), there were no gay groups with a political agenda except for the short-lived Kakasarian (Of the Same Gender), organized as a small rap group by young professionals in the late 1970s. Even after the overthrow of the Marcoses in 1986 and the emergence of democratic space, gay organizing remained non-existent.

At the end of the 1980s, the only visible segment of the homosexual population remained the low-income *bakla*. It would be presumptuous to suggest that there was an emerging “gay” population even as the term began to be used widely. “Gay discos” catered to a small elite and were still “safe” because of their mixed clientele. Besides these discos there were few alternatives for gay men to congregate: a few “gay bars” that were mostly fronts for male prostitution, “massage parlors” and *casas* or brothels.
No doubt, there were chances for socialization and sexual encounters outside this highly commercialized scene. These included parks, shopping malls, and theaters. In a 1989 survey on sexual attitudes and practices conducted in Metro Manila, 17 percent of a random sample of 200 adult males aged 17 to 24 reported they had had sexual experience with another male (Tan, 1990). On the whole, however, opportunities for socializing as an open community remained limited to small networks, largely isolated from each other and divided by age, class, ethnicity, and even rural and urban origins. It would be safe to say that the situation was one of “men who have sex with men,” most of whom did not self-identify as “gay,” bakla, homosexual, or bisexual.

**HIV/AIDS IN THE PHILIPPINES**

The first case of HIV in the Philippines was reported in 1984, and involved a male Filipino who had acquired the infection abroad and who had already developed AIDS. In 1985, the U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit (NAMRU) and the Philippines government’s Department of Health initiated HIV testing in the country. Most reported HIV positives in the next three years involved women sex workers from the cities of Angeles and Olongapo, traditional rest and recreation areas for servicemen assigned to nearby U.S. military bases.

The demographic pattern of reported HIV-positive cases resulted in the public’s perceiving HIV/AIDS as having been introduced into the country by U.S. military personnel and mainly affecting women sex workers servicing the Kano (Americans). When the Department of Health launched a television advertisement in 1990 urging the public not to associate AIDS with the bakla, several prominent gay fashion designers called health officials to complain that the ad was giving Filipinos the idea that AIDS was a gay disease, where the idea had not previously existed. The Health Department eventually withdrew the ad (Severino, 1990).

In reality, the number of reported HIV cases involving Filipino “men who have sex with men” was rising. By mid-1993, 18 percent of reported cumulative HIV cases (and 46 percent of cumulative AIDS cases) involved self-identified “homo- or bisexual men”
(Department of Health, 1993). The statistics represent only part of the picture but they do indicate that HIV/AIDS has become a serious problem for "men who have sex with men" in the Philippines.

**CASE STUDY I: THE LIBRARY FOUNDATION (TLF)**

The Library Foundation (TLF) was formally organized in October 1990. In an organizational brochure, the original group is described as "a socio-civic organization" that launched "small-scale outreach projects for the street children of Malate, the victims of natural calamities, in addition to the usual fellowship and activities for its members." The founders are described as "young professionals," regular patrons of The Library Pub, a sing-along bar "frequented by Filipino men who have sex with men."

In 1991, some of TLF’s officers were alerted to a call from the Health Department for proposals to implement HIV/AIDS prevention projects. There was internal debate about reorienting TLF’s work toward HIV/AIDS prevention, with those in favor of the redirection prevailing. A proposal was submitted, and was among those approved for funding. The TLF proposal was for a series of workshops called HIV (Healthy Interaction of Values) to be conducted over a year.

Planning for the HIV workshops was occasionally turbulent, especially around the issue of using the word "gay." The original conveners opposed proposals to bring in "gay" issues because this would alienate those who did not self-identify as "gay" and because "gay activism" was seen as inappropriate for the Philippines. Eventually, an agreement was reached to stick to the more neutral "men who have sex with men," a term that had been introduced by the Department of Health in its call for proposals. As recently as 1992, a nine-page information pack on TLF mentioned the word "homosexuality" only twice (once in quotation marks) and "gay" only once, in quotation marks.

Between 1991 and 1992, TLF conducted twelve weekend HIV workshops with 328 participants. It was a major breakthrough as TLF was able to go beyond the small group of regular clients from The Library Pub. The workshops attained the objective of raising consciousness about HIV/AIDS but there was no way to skirt dis-
cussions of gender identity and empowerment. Sessions were often emotional as participants shared their frustrations and fears. A session called "Other Issues," where participants could bring up the most pressing questions they had about sex and sexuality, showed amazing consistency throughout the twelve workshops, with questions centering on the issues of coming out: religion and homosexuality, career choices, and relationships. The workshops had evolved into forums for voicing long-repressed questions about what it meant to be "gay" in the Philippines and what a "community" could do. The workshops, held in a place two hours away from Manila, eventually became large gatherings as previous "graduates," often outnumbering the workshop participants, would participate in Saturday night socials.

TLF members recognized that there were new needs as the community emerged. A sportsfest was organized and a newsletter was launched. In April 1992, TLF set up a community drop-in center. Initial response was favorable as HIV workshop participants dropped in for various social activities: rap sessions, film shows, poetry readings, joint birthday celebrations, aerobics, and choral practice. The center also had a reading room with a small collection of books on gay-related issues. A male-to-male helpline was introduced in November 1992.

It was during this period that TLF linked up with Margarita Gosingco-Holmes, a clinical psychologist who writes a daily newspaper column offering advice mainly on matters related to sexuality. On homosexuality and homosexuals, Holmes (who is heterosexual) had taken a stand of unconditional acceptance of homosexuals and homosexuality. It was natural for TLF to link up with Holmes, helping her with responses to the many "men who have sex with men" who would write in for advice. (Holmes estimates that half of the letters she receives are from homosexuals, bisexuals and lesbians.) TLF's contributions to Holmes' columns evolved into a more active position of advocacy, and eventually expanded into a media watch activity that included letters to the newspaper editors whenever homophobic articles would appear.3

Smaller activities were organized by "batches" (co-participants in a workshop). Activities were mostly social reunions but included, interestingly, group testing for HIV. Ties within each of the batches
were closely knit, almost parochial, and supported previous studies suggesting that Filipinos tend toward what has been called “small-group belongingness” (Bulatao, 1963).

While such intensive small-group bonding was impressive, it did not seem to be able to evolve into a sense of belonging to a larger group. Participation in TLF activities became more confined to a small core group. The HIV workshop participants remained in touch but were willing to be mobilized only for more HIV workshops, which could not be initiated because the external grant had been used up.4 That TLF continued to sponsor activities using its own resources was in itself an achievement but there were severe limitations to this attempt at self-reliance. Several project proposals were submitted to donor agencies, but all faced long delays in processing.

In April 1993, TLF closed down its community drop-in center and suspended its telephone helpline service. Funding for additional workshops was approved in July 1993 and workshops were resumed in September. While the workshops have revived participation in TLF activities, members agree that the time lag has set back community organizing efforts.

**CASE STUDY 2: KATLO**

Like TLF, Katlo started out as a small group of friends with one difference: Katlo’s organizers tended to be more politicized and included several who were active in the anti-Marcos movement. Curiously, Katlo’s membership is also now “bar-based,” in the sense that most members meet regularly for socials in a gay bar about ten kilometers away from The Library Pub, in another part of Metro Manila.

Limiting ourselves to a textual analysis of one Katlo document (Katlo, 1992) explaining its organizational history and goals, we can identify clear differences between Katlo and TLF. Note how Katlo explains its origins:

On January 25, 1991, ten gays turned a gathering in Quezon City from a party to a freewheeling discussion and informal visioning for a gay support group. Subsequent series of activi-
ties led to the formalization of KATLO as an organization which would promote gender sensitivity in general.

Katlo describes itself as "a community for a gender-sensitive society." Katlo's literature uses Filipino more often than English. There is free use of terms like gay and bakla. Among its objectives is "correcting misconceptions that prevent human development of the bakla." Membership is, in principle, open to people "who are not gay and who wish to represent any other gender sector."

Katlo means "third" and was itself the product of extensive debates, including arguments against the name because it tended to suggest acquiescence to popular perceptions of homosexuals as a "third sex." Proponents of the name argued, however, that Katlo was intended as an organization that would challenge dichotomies:

The world is not divided into black and white. The world does not just have two genders. (Brute) strength and coyness are not the only foundations of sexuality. There are many colors. Many genders. Many foundations for sexuality. Many other perspectives.

A proposed organizational song for Katlo (Remoto, 1992) reflects its militant position, the last stanza reading (in translation):

We will no longer be quiet
Head raised high, voices full
We sing our only song:
We are Katlo and now
We are here.

Katlo's names for committees reflect a playful, sex-positive orientation: Awareness-Raising Initiatives for Empowerment (ARISE); Information Sharing and Exchange (ISEX); Socials and Creative Work (SCREW); Health and Wellness (HEAL WELL). Katlo's strength has been in organizing public forums called "Male and Gay," each lasting three to four hours, with themes like "Gay Sexual Lifestyles: How Do You Do?" Smaller workshops, intended for members, have also been conducted for purposes of bonding.

In December 1991, Katlo co-sponsored a play called Kung
Paano Ko Pinatay si Diana Ross (How I Killed Diana Ross). While this was not the first Filipino play tackling homosexuality, it was significant in that the themes were drawn out of several group discussions involving Katlo members. Both the scriptwriter and the director were Katlo members. The play deals with a young Filipino gay male, portrayed as “butch” and struggling with his alter ego, and a drag queen named Diana Ross.

On the issue of HIV/AIDS, Katlo has moved slowly. Part of the reason has been Katlo’s unwillingness to tap external assistance for its projects, and its prioritization of internal community-building activities. While members articulated an interest in HIV/AIDS education from its inception, it was not until February 1993 that Katlo organized an AIDS awareness workshop for low-income bakla, drawing resource persons from other organizations including The Library Foundation. In an evaluation that followed the workshop, Katlo realized that AIDS awareness among their own members remained low, and that there was a need to start in their own backyard. Currently, Katlo’s activities continue to emphasize community building with plans to have their members participate in TLF’s HIV workshops.

DISCUSSION

The Political Economy of Coming Out

TLF and Katlo were established only a few months apart, out of separate networks that were initially unaware of each other’s existence. The two organizations have marked differences in their orientation toward gender politics, with TLF representing a more conservative perspective. Despite these differences and the ways TLF and Katlo have organized themselves, both groups’ members share one important characteristic: their members are predominantly petty-bourgeois or more specifically, salaried professionals. As I explained in the introduction, I will not attempt an in-depth analysis of the political economy of this gay social movement. However, it is important to recognize how particular developments in the economic sphere, such as the rise of market economies and the emergence of a
"middle class," can relate to the formation of gay communities (Greenberg, 1988, pp. 347-396; Weeks, 1981, 1986).

To some extent, we can identify such developments in the Philippines and perhaps other developing countries, where a "middle class" becomes more self-conscious about sexual identities and has the time and some degree of economic stability to pursue its interests. This has been clear in the Philippines, where both TLF and Katlo depend almost totally on volunteers.

It is not accidental that both TLF and Katlo are "bar-based" organizations. This could never have happened with lower-income groups since going to a "gay bar" would be unaffordable. Even the idea of holding weekend workshops, so central to community-building efforts, has not been transferable to another TLF project involving low-income bakla, who explain that they cannot afford to take that much time off work.

TLF and Katlo members sometimes describe themselves as "yuppie gays." This description is not quite accurate since the income and living standards of the Filipino petty-bourgeoisie fall far below that of counterparts in the United States or, closer to home, in Malaysia (where another "yuppie gay" group, Pink Triangle, has been active). The economic constraints, while not severe, do pose obstacles to participating in a "gay" scene. For example, many TLF and Katlo members continue to live with their parents, which narrows opportunities for independent socializing and the building of gay social and sexual relationships.

TLF and Katlo members, while not materially deprived, do perceive themselves as being economically vulnerable. This forces many of them into a situation of "controlled disclosure." While out to themselves and a small circle of friends, many TLF and Katlo members remain "in the closet" at home (for fear of losing family inheritance) and at work (for fear of losing their jobs). TLF's letters to the media are signed organizationally and not by individuals. In 1992, four TLF members—a businessman, a bank official, a physician, and an economist—agreed to appear on a television talk show on the condition that it was pre-taped and that the studio lights would be positioned so that their faces would not be seen. The taping session in the shadows was a powerful metaphor. Clearly,
perceptions of intolerance can be major constraints for petty-bourgeois organizations such as TLF and Katlo.

Economic vulnerability extends beyond the level of the individual. I have referred to the problem of dependency on external funds for HIV work. To understand why there is this dependency, it is important to recognize the dynamics between the petty bourgeois and other classes. The phenomenon of “pink capitalists”—wealthy gay men supporting gay organizations in the U.S.—has not happened in the Philippines. There has been little support for TLF or Katlo from Filipino high-income gay men. Although much less constrained by fears of job security, and carrying some immunity from discrimination, high-income Filipino gay men have consistently refused to involve themselves in “politics,” whether gender-related or not.

This situation is all the more ironic considering that it has been upper-class gay men who have felt the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic because many of them have lived overseas, mainly in the United States and Europe, and have lost friends to the epidemic. Few middle-class gay Filipinos know, or know of, anyone with HIV/AIDS. This partly explains the debates within TLF and Katlo on the appropriateness of involvement in HIV/AIDS prevention. With an apolitical upper class, and the low-income groups preoccupied with hand-to-mouth survival, we face a situation where TLF, Katlo and other petty-bourgeois gay groups, despite constraints such as “controlled disclosure,” will almost by default, continue to play the lead role in the organizing of Filipino gay communities.

The Challenge of AIDS

The HIV/AIDS epidemic elicited different responses from the two organizations. TLF’s early decision to become involved in HIV/AIDS projects resulted in HIV workshops that became catalysts for debates over gender identities, mainly “homosexual” and “bisexual.” I have explained that initially TLF’s members agreed to use the term, “men who have sex with men” partly as a conservative reaction to the idea of “gay activism.” When the aversion to “gay activism” subsided, the use of the term “men who have sex with men” became ritualized, and rationalized, as a reflection of openness to accepting a spectrum of sexualities. This openness was oriented toward the goal of creating a sense of community that has
crystallized only in the form of small social groups (i.e., the workshop “batches”). TLF’s work was necessarily extensive. Starting with HIV/AIDS outreach work, TLF recruited as many workshop participants as it could, with the result that it could not sustain other needs of this large “family.”

In contrast, Katlo’s work was intensive. While subscribing to multiple gender formations, Katlo started out with, and developed, an appropriated bakla identity as a referent, in the context of a community that has been kept small and close-knit. Interest in HIV/AIDS work developed as the sense of community led to a concern for the health and welfare of its members.

We see how HIV/AIDS plays a different role in the development of two gay organizations. Ultimately, however, we need to consider how the petty-bourgeois nature of groups such as TLF and Katlo will affect their responses to HIV/AIDS and by extension, the other psychosocial needs of the “gay” population. To illustrate, during negotiations between TLF and Katlo to hold a joint HIV/AIDS awareness workshop, a major obstacle to a final agreement was Katlo’s insistence on having a person with AIDS at the workshop, on the argument that Filipinos need to be motivated by fear.

Such views are certainly not limited to Katlo. There were similar proposals, such as using photographs of PWAs, during the first two workshops organized by TLF. TLF later agreed that fear tactics had no place in its workshops and the sessions have been dominated by an orientation toward “values clarification and change.” This orientation reproduces mainstream discourse about the need for “moral recovery” to solve the country’s problems, from graft and corruption to “sexual promiscuity.”

Despite recognition of the wider context of social discrimination against homosexuals, both TLF and Katlo still tend to be inward-looking, focusing on personal behavioral change, with expectations of almost instant “conversion” to safer sex practices (which relates to the point of using fear tactics to “hasten” the process).

TLF’s initial formation as a “social-civic organization,” was inevitable. It was a typical response to be expected from the petty bourgeoisie: a concern for the “poor” and for “victims of natural disasters” within a politically safe and elitist framework of noblesse oblige.
Responding to HIV/AIDS has been more difficult, given the many difficult social issues that challenge the existing petty bourgeois ethos.

To further focus on this Filipino petty-bourgeois, gay worldview, I cite the work of Tony Perez, a Filipino gay playwright. In 1992, Perez published a book in Filipino called Cubao 1980, subtitled Unang Sigaw ng Gay Liberation Movement sa Pilipinas (First Cry of the Gay Liberation Movement in the Philippines). Perez's book is a personal treatise, consisting of short plays, poetry, essays and letters. Perez attacks social prejudice and discrimination against homosexuals throughout the book, and comes out, in one of his letters, with what he feels should be four objectives for "gay liberation" in the Philippines. I present translated excerpts here (Perez, 1992, pp. 151-153):

1. Raise awareness to all (bakla) that they were created men and not "women imprisoned in the bodies of men." Any bakla who denies his physical maleness is truly abnormal.
2. Raise awareness to all (bakla) that the object of bakla love should be other bakla and not ordinary males.
3. Fight for equal employment opportunities.
4. Close down all brothels catering to bakla. This way, all will be given direction toward friendship and love, rather than passing (sexual) relief and earthly pleasure.

Perez also has a poem, Mani pesto (Manifesto), which provides material that runs parallel to his agenda for gay liberation. I present two segments in translation (Perez, 1992, pp. 151-153):

Down with the mind of the dressmaker
Down with the mind of the manicurist
Down with Mrs. Purity
doesn’t want to work, lazy
never-never-, ROTC
Army, Air Force, Navy, Philippine Constabulary
contrived daintiness
the gait
a pinched scrotum.

Down with pimping.
Down with multiple sex.
Down with A.I.D.S.
Down with Aling Bebang of Barbosa (a brothel owner)
Short-time take-home pay the brothel mama
what a body, big dick macho for the bed
buy-one-take-one
including the soul.

Perez’s book elicited uneasy reactions from both TLF and Katlo, and one Katlo member (also a playwright) drew up a furious written critique, which was privately circulated. My reading is that while many TLF and Katlo members saw problems with Perez’s “demands,” there was reluctance to dispute his points because Perez had, in essence, articulated sentiments among TLF and Katlo members, together with its myriad contradictions. After all, who could quarrel with a demand like “equal employment opportunities,” an issue that is all too real for many TLF and Katlo members who do not come out at work for fear of losing their jobs.

The other three demands in Perez’s agenda for “gay liberation” are more complex, reflecting a conflation of class and gender ideologies. The cross-dressing bakla (read lower-class bakla) is “abnormal” and “lazy,” and evades military service. The rhetoric of what is “normal” and “abnormal,” “natural” and “unnatural,” is extended into sexuality with a definition of the appropriate “object” of bakla love as “other bakla,” an absolutist construction that hangs in a social vacuum considering that many, if not most, Filipino men who have sex with men do not self-identify as bakla.

Tita Aida enters the picture, providing the rationale for prescriptive moralism, bolstered by the imagery of sexual pleasure as being dangerous when it is “mundane,” without “friendship” or “love.” It is not surprising that Perez uses the English “multiple sex” in his poem, followed immediately by a reference to A.I.D.S. (sic). Perez’s solution is to close down the brothels, which Manila’s conservative mayor, Alfredo Lim, has, in fact, done in the past year. Lim has proposed, as an alternative to the bars and brothels, ice cream parlors and handicraft stores where presumably friendship and love can blossom and the AIDS problem will come under control.
SYNTHESIS

There is something globally prophetic in a warning that came as early as 1987 from an American gay activist and health educator:

The initial questioning of the political arrangements that lead to gay oppression and the search for new social forms has been transformed into a reaffirmation of the values linking monogamy, domesticity, and sex. It is now clear, however, that unless we seize the offensive in reexamining the meaning of sex and intimacy in gay life, this conversation will be controlled by those who are not interested in our survival. (Silin, 1987, p. 36)

I discuss Perez’ work to illustrate potential problems that come when a particular ethos is projected into HIV/AIDS programs. Given the specific social milieu in which TLF and Katlo developed, the tendency to fall into the trap of erotophobic moralizing and idealist prescriptions for behavioral change is clearly present.

TLF and Katlo represent different strands within a slowly evolving network of communities. Tita Aida, or HIV/AIDS, will continue to provide counterpoint in the discourse within and among the communities. It is interesting how, among TLF members drawn into HIV/AIDS advocacy work, there has been marked “radicalization” of viewpoints, including a gradual disappearance of the taboo against use of the word “gay.” There have also been discussions on the need for members to eventually come out in public to become more effective in HIV/AIDS advocacy.

It is important to recognize that TLF and Katlo have gone beyond the limited biomedical response to HIV/AIDS, i.e., the use of AIDS 101 sessions and the social marketing of condoms. Both organizations have developed integrated programs to address issues of sexuality and empowerment. The two organizations have also developed a critical reflexivity in handling their programs, conscious of “excess cultural baggage” that members carry because of class and social status. TLF and Katlo have set the pace for gay organizing in the Philippines but will continue to go through the difficult process of choosing among options in the search for legitimacy. One option is co-optation into the mainstream, either with conservative moral entrepreneurs who emphasize personal conversion to heterosexual-
ity, or into the "value-free" biomedically-oriented groups that limit HIV prevention to condom distribution and AIDS lectures. Another option is to pursue the present trajectory of integrating HIV prevention into a wider program that questions dominant ideologies as they relate to class, gender, and society. Co-optation, while the easier route, would further privatize gay identity (or identities) and negate the development of broader-based bakla/gay communities of social agents that can assert what it means to be bakla in this time of HIV/AIDS.

NOTES

1. While Filipino lesbian communities are also emerging and are significant in their own right, I will concentrate on gay men since developments in the lesbian "movement" are more closely related to the rise of feminism than to HIV/AIDS.

2. Note that the available literature on homosexuality in the Philippines has concentrated on the cross-dressing bay-ot in the southern Philippines (Hart, 1968; Pontenila, 1975; Whitam and Mathy, 1986). Bay-ot is a gloss for the Tagalog bakla, a term that is now widely used, since Tagalog forms the basis for the national language, Filipino. Whitam and Mathy (1986:77) make a rather sweeping suggestion that "transvestic homosexuals in the Philippines probably enjoy more personal freedom and prestige than in any other major contemporary society."

3. A compilation of Holmes' columns on homosexuality, including contributions from The Library Foundation, has been published (Holmes, 1993).

4. TLF had managed to conduct twelve workshops instead of eight as described in the original proposal.

5. On the average, a glass of beer in a gay bar would be equivalent to half a day's wages for the low-income bakla. Some gay bars have an admission charge equivalent to more than a day's wages.

6. In a questionnaire administered at the start of each workshop, about 25 percent of those who attended TLF workshops self-identified as bisexual while 70 percent self-identified as homosexual.

REFERENCES


