

Tolerated, if Discreet: 1960s Filipino Gays

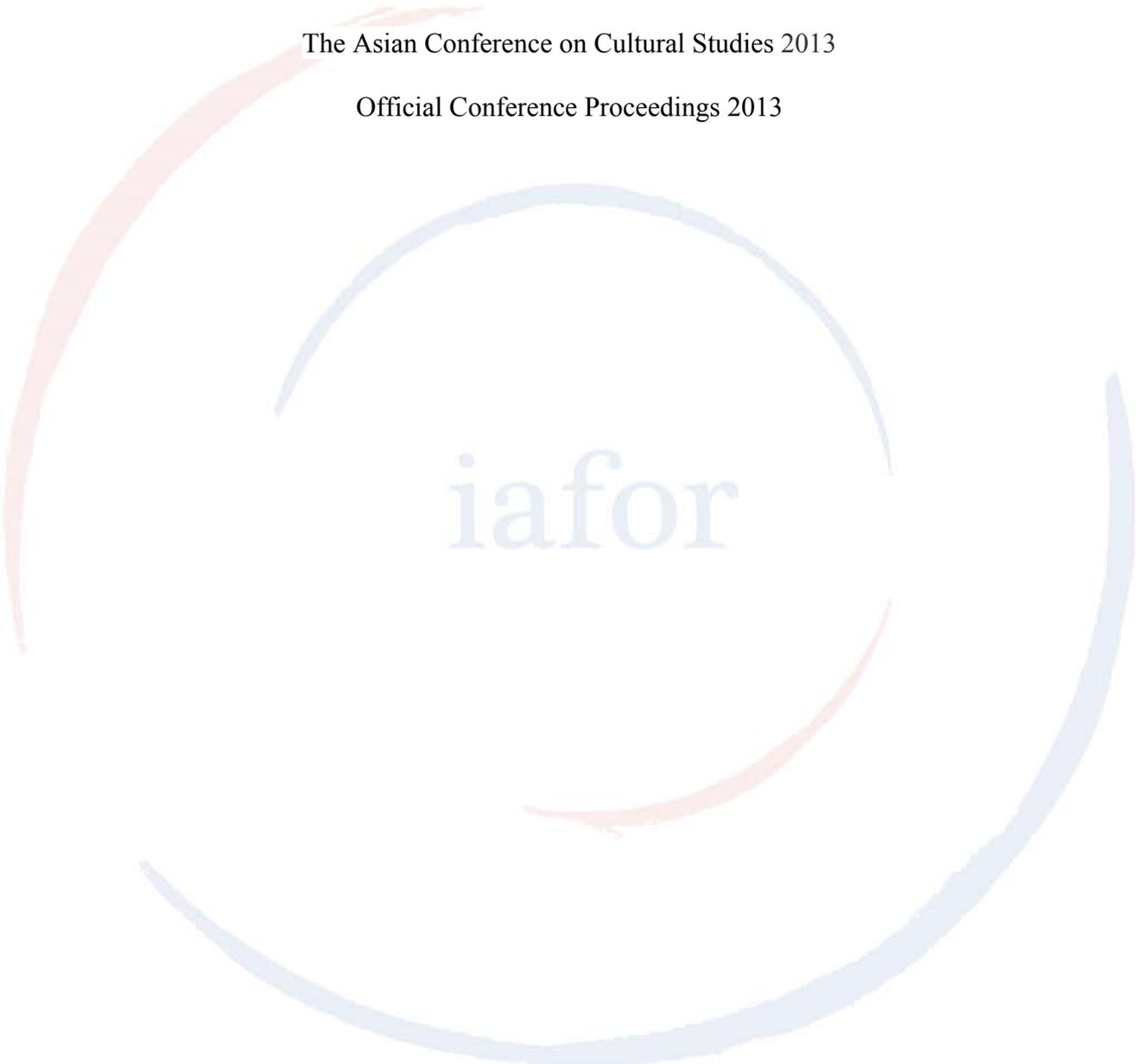
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Today, the international gay movement, coupled with AIDS prevention projects, has put male homosexuality into the public discourse in most South East Asian nations. This, along with the Internet, social networking and pornography sites, allow many Asian gays to see themselves as part of an international culture. Yet this was not the case in the 1960s Philippines. Homosexuality was rarely discussed. Despite an isolated environment, gays were rather open-mindedly dealt with.

There have been few articles indicating that the Philippines was tolerant of gays in the 1960s and 1970s, that is before Stonewall rebellion in New York in 1969 and the rise of the international gay movement. These include, Intel in 1989, Hart in 1968 and Lopez in 2007. The research of Lopez and Hart are the most pertinent, but only two isolated places were studied.

The evidence suggests that this relative tolerance of Philippine homosexuality did not come from either the Spanish or American colonizers. Spain was after all, home of the inquisition, and executed hundreds of males who practiced homosexuality in 1500s (Berco 2008). This was also the time that Magellan landed in the Philippines. After this period, the situation in Spain slowly improved for homosexuality, but intolerance remained.

America arrived in the Philippines in 1900. Strangely no law was passed prohibiting homosexuality (Carale, 1970); in spite of its prohibition in America. During their occupation of the Philippines, American gays were increasingly harassed, yet there seemed little impact overseas. In 1946, the Philippines declared independence, but the American influence remained strong.

The post-war brought the Cold War and McCarthy witch-hunts in America. Thousands of gays lost their jobs, and thousands more arrested. It was during this time that the sex researcher Alfred Kinsey claimed that the United States was the worst place in the world for homosexuals (Canaday 2009). Fortunately, these anti-homosexual campaigns did not reach Philippine shores.

Tolerance was Part of Philippine Culture

If this tolerance did not come from either of the colonizers, it must have been part of the Philippine culture itself. The answer might lie in pre-colonial Malay culture. The Philippines was the northern section of the Malay world. Barbara Andaya (1994, 2006) has made extensive research into gender issues, and has found women were well respected in this culture. Since women were accorded equal status, an effeminate male would suffer no loss in status for assuming the lifestyle of females.

Michal Peletz in his book *Gender Pluralism: Southeast Asia Since the Early Modern Times* (2009) identified a great amount of homosexual acceptance among the Malay. Neil Garcia (2008) examined Spanish accounts that showed early homosexuality was accepted, or at least tolerated in the Philippines. The native transgendered priests, called *babaylan*, were well respected, and engaged in sexual relations with men. These sources

also indicate that there was some sort of native acknowledgment for homosexual behaviour, and this may have persisted up through the modern era. However, from about 1625 homosexuality no records have been uncovered.

The 1950 gays in Tondo (a district of Manila composed primarily of urban poor) were described by Lopez. Like today, they had beauty pageants, although they were conducted discreetly. Some young men openly carried on relationships with gays. There were a few daring souls who cross-dressing in public, yet only had to endure light hearted teasing.

There is also a lengthy study done on Filipino homosexual life by an American anthropologist Donn Hart. He concentrated a town in the Visayas (central Philippines). Hart noted that some homosexuals openly crossed dressed at the fiesta dances and had relationships with young men. Both Hart and Lopez noted that in an era where women's virginity was imposed, some young men sought sexual release through neighbourhood homosexuals.

In a 1973 study, Sechrest and other researchers documented Filipino attitudes towards gays. These sociologists made a questionnaire with follow-up interviews of three groups of college students, one one American, the other Pakistani, and the other Filipino. The Filipinos were likely to view homosexuals as different but normal, while Americans viewed them as abnormal.

Struggling with terms

Even today, the status of the Filipino gay is ambiguous. Traditionally, a gay is called *bakla*. The term 'gay' is not usually used. The word as an adjective means confused, indecisive. As a noun may either refer to a sissy, a coward, an effeminate male, or a homosexual. The common Philippine homosexual sees himself as part female, and thus seeks a partner of the opposite sex; a heterosexual male.

Terms can cause confusion. For instance, masculine men who have sex with these *bakla* are not considered gay. Nor, is there a clear native term for a male acting homosexual who has regular sex with other males. A male-acting gay was unusual in the 1960s, yet now now there are many. This may be a recent Western cultural import (Jackson 2011; Altman 1997, and Manalansan 2006).

In this study, for the sake of simplicity, I will identify the Filipino 1960s participants as gay, or homosexual, although they did not use these terms at the time to describe themselves. For the purposes of this study, *bakla* means someone 'whose sexual choice is usually the same anatomical male gender, who usually to some degree, a transgendered identity.' Hart noted that the term did not carry the same stigma as either homosexual or gay, but nevertheless, it is often negative. *Gay* is a statement of pride, developed by homosexuals to identify themselves, and now is the preferred term.

The key term is *tolerance*. The first definition will be the commonly understood term. Defined from the American Heritage dictionary '1.The capacity for or practice of allowing or respecting the nature, beliefs, or behaviour of others' (Morris 1969). This is the definition probably participants of this study had. The more academic concept of *tolerance* is less accommodating. From The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Sociology: 'It is the not an expression of benevolence, but embodies a sense of disapproval. Tolerance is the deliberate choice not to interfere with the conduct, beliefs, lifestyles and behaviours of which one disapproves.

This study employed the social construction theory. Briefly, it is the idea that a society 'constructs' a belief system that is meaningful to it, and that these realities can change over time (Garcia, 2008, p.14). Concepts such as gender roles are not biologically fixed; instead a society constructs its own meanings to these roles (Vance 1987).

A culture's definitions that make up social construction can be varied and complex, and thus meanings are best derived unfiltered from the statements of the participants themselves (Creswell, 2009). Queer theory employs social constructionism. This states that sexual desire is a completely malleable social construct that changes over time, and means different things to different societies (Valocchi, 2005). Thus, differences in sexuality are not biologically based, but instead chosen (consciously or unconsciously) by the society and its members. People who believe in essentialism, the opposite of constructionism, argue that concepts such as sexuality and gender are universal categories. These divisions have always existed in human society because they are inborn.

Research Design

To measure and assess tolerance, I interviewed older Filipino homosexuals pertaining to tolerance they perceived in the 1960s. Example questions included: Were they fired for being gay? Did the police ever arrest them for cross dressing, homosexual acts, or propositioning another male for sex? Did they have to hide their sexuality from acquaintances and family? Did their classmates ever bully them?

The research was a qualitative study, employing induction, using phenomenological research design. This is a philosophy and as a method, is unbiased as much as possible. The data was organized, and analysis was only applied near the end of the study in an effort 'to see the things themselves' (Wertz 2005, p.168). The approach makes clear that the unreflective life that people live daily is a natural attitude.

The target group was homosexual men born prior to 1945. Thus, in 1960, they would have been at least 15 years old in 1960, perhaps the time of their first sexual experience with another male. By 1970 then, they would have been 25, and would be an accurate witness of how the 60s unfolded.

The eleven older gays chosen were mentally alert and healthy at the time of the interview. Groenwald (2004, p.11) noted that usually the participants numbered between one and

ten, and usually new participants were sought until the 'saturation point' was reached. This was when the data gathered became repetitive, and no new information could be extracted.

I strove to interview effeminate acting and male acting gay men, discreet and overt, from varied economic and social backgrounds. Although Metro Manila provided most of the participants, nearly all came from a province, since this city has had such a tremendous population growth from internal migration.

In order to choose the participants in the study, the study employed anonymous, purposive non-probability sampling. Instead of the actual names of the participants, gemstones were used to identification.

I contacted the participants, described the study, and asked that they sign an anonymous interview consent form approved by the University of Santo Tomas. After the interview was over, I made a summary from the notes and the recording, and later the recordings were transcribed.

The interviews were done in a mix of Filipino and English. I am fairly fluent in Filipino, and the transcriptionist was a native speaker. Another native speaker translated the dialog into English.

In terms of possible bias, the literature suggests the researcher give a short biography of himself. I am American, and was a gay activist in the 1970s in the United States. I am pro-gay, and I made sure the participants knew this.

It was difficult to check for data verification. Ethically, I could not go around and ask friends, family and neighbors if what the participants reported was accurate or not. Nor did I have enough time to go check the Philippine media reports for verification of events, because the press has never been catalogued. In a developed country a survey provides accurate and quick results. In the Philippines surveys are only seen in the academic world, and would be distrusted by older people.

The participants came from Luzon and two from the Eastern Visayas . Unfortunately missed was Mindanao. Because of this limitation, and because of the small number of participants, there can be no assumption that this what was said would hold true for the whole nation. Also, unfortunately poor gays were not well represented. There was only one beautician interviewed, although there it is a popular profession for Filipino gays.

I interviewed, along with their gemstone code names:

Five college professors - Agate, Bloodstone, Jade, Onyx, Ruby

Two celebrity talk show hosts - Crystal, Topaz

One movie set designer- Pearl

One retired pickpocket and prostitute- Diamond

One high school teaching assistant- Opal
One beautician- Garnet

On a positive note, the participants were positive, excited and proud to tell their stories. Only two, Jade and Topaz, were the exceptions. Jade had feelings of guilt because he is a born-again Christian. Topaz, a TV host, could give only a shrouded interview, citing the contract with his station. Also, two potential participants cancelled upon my arrival, perhaps due to embarrassment.

Below in underline are the tentative inferences derived from the research and interviews. It was hard to make generalizations, for there are exceptions to almost all statements.

All grammatical errors in the dialog have been retained. I used the pronoun 'he', although frankly, for a few of the gemstones, the feminine 'she' would have been more appropriate.

Being gay exhibits itself as an essential difference at a very early age. Only afterwards does social construction seem to play a role in developing in developing a gay adult.

Usually, the first sexual experience occurred with an older boy when the gemstone was under ten. The male would rub the gay's sex organ to get him aroused, and then prod him into performing sex. A typical story comes from Crystal, in Leyte who described himself as watching boys who were bathing in the river near his town:

Why was it that I cannot help watching them? And they kept on masturbating! They were big. And they even put my [hand], put it there, [they touched] my pants, then fondled. I could not prevail over them. I can't...No but I spank them. But of course, they knew I was gay!...I was about seven or eight ...I only pretended not ...to like it.

Bloodstone who described a somewhat long-term sexual affair with another high school student: 'We didn't talk about that. We just felt like we have to see each other. . .there wasn't any vocabulary'. Diamond in Samar also had no term to call himself, nor did he have any guilt when he had sex play with boys. He narrated:

Actually, I just realized and felt that even when I was young, I had a strange feeling, I felt differently. I was grade two then, that was before the war. There was a classmate whom I would often tease—Benji, my classmate. I would play seducing my friends. I would fondle Benji's penis like this. Then a classmate who saw us reported me to the teacher, 'Ma'am, look at Diamond, he is fondling our classmate.

Diamond was asked by the teacher what he was doing; he only replied that he was playing. He found nothing to be ashamed of, and continued with Benji in another room. Later that night, he reported the incident to his mother and father. His mother told him it

was bad, while his father declared that he was happy he had a gay son. When I asked who taught him about sex play, Diamond answered: 'Nobody really taught us.'

These stories dovetail with the theory of essentialism. This idea states that human sexuality (or gender) is an essential difference found in all human societies, past and present. In this sense, homosexuality bursts forth from the boy. It cannot be a choice. Homosexuality seems to exhibit itself as a sexual outlet for a minority of the population. Homosexuals then will always be different than the rest of society. Another Filipino term for homosexual, the 'third sex' seems an unconscious application of essentialism.

Social construction theory, on the other hand, states that sexuality, like racial and gender stereotypes, are constructed or invented by the society. Subcultures within society, and the group in power decide how their members will behave. Thus, Black Americans are encouraged to develop skills in basketball and in music, and women to become homemakers, and gays are pushed to take on some behaviors of the opposite sex. In another society, Blacks would be seen perhaps as excellent accountants, and women trusted pilots and drivers, and gays very masculine. All social roles are malleable, and can differ from one society to the next, and can evolve in society as well.

Social constructionists believe that there could be an ideal society where a variety of sexualities were practiced, and nothing was forbidden. Foucault believed in early Western society, there was no homosexual or heterosexual, these labels were a modern invention. Thus, in the distant past, some males chose women, others chose another male, and some chose both, and few seemed to notice.

Social construction has become the dominant theory in 'queer studies'. It has been found that there are very masculine males practicing homosexuality in New Guinea, unlike the rather effeminate gays of South East Asia. Thus, human culture does not have homosexuality, but homosexualities, and society constructs the role sexual minorities will take.

This study's implication might contradict this. Essentialism must be the way gays originate. The sexual urges arose in isolation, without media influence, in small towns across the Philippines. Not one the participants knew of another gay when they had their first stirrings of sexuality. They were still in elementary school, and did not even have terms for the feelings they had. They just knew they were different, and most accepted it reluctantly.

If instead this study investigated heterosexual boys, there would be no reluctance recorded, they would have easily accepted their sexuality as 'normal.' If it was not a choice for heterosexuals, then it could not have been a choice for homosexuals. Thus, like anatomical sexuality that divides males from females, I suggest that homosexuality originates as an essential difference between people. It cannot be like the difference between those with curly or straight hair, those of darker skin compared to lighter skin, but like anatomical gender, it is an essential difference between people. Homosexuality

seems inborn, occurring in a minority of boys. Once the boy acknowledges that he is gay, then he negotiates how his sexuality will be lived out, and this is social construction. This study seems to uphold this.

The Filipino idea that homosexuality is inborn, or God's choice, meant that the boy who became gay was not to blame. This led to a greater tolerance of gays.

Hart also noted this Filipino belief in Siaton (1968, p.242). Carballo in her article 'Second Thoughts of the Third Sex' (1969) inferred that most Filipinos thought that gays were born that way as well. Sechrest and Flores (1969) noted that the common opinion in the Philippines that homosexuality was inborn.

This belief has many implications. The boy who is born gay cannot be blamed for his sexual orientation. It might have been seen as unfortunate, but was not the boy's fault. Nor could the gay boy be pushed to become a true male. Nor, would there be many prohibitions on gay teachers, since they could not influence a boy's sexuality.

This is in marked contrast to Western science. As the Philippine college dean interviewed in Carballo's article pointed out, psychologists at the time blamed homosexuality on the parents, primarily the mother, for causing the affliction. It was thought that exposure to other gays could affect boys. Many gays in developed countries at the time received counselling (Katz 1976, p.131), and had much self-hate.

This research does not suggest that Filipino gays were immune to this feeling of shame. Only the two gemstones (the very effeminate ones) readily accepted their homosexuality. Jade and Topaz remained reluctantly gay. Probably also the two who backed out of the interview at the last minute were ashamed. Even the most politically aware, the most rebellious gemstones were not immune to this feeling. However, as someone who witnessed the time in America, I think the shame was much less felt in the Philippines.

The Catholic Church might be a reason for a greater tolerance of Filipino gays.

With the exception of Jade, the born-again Christian, religion had little place in the interviews. No one mentioned the official view of the Catholic Church. During the end of the interview with Jade, there was a discussion between him and Jade. The Catholic Bloodstone was stressing the overall message of love from Jesus, while the born-again Jade quoted Bible verses that condemned homosexuality.

For the researcher, this epitomized the feelings of many Filipino Catholics. The Church teachings are often ignored, and the message of God's love is paramount. Jade, like much of the Western world, is Protestant. The Bible has a number of rather clear condemnations of homosexuality, and the Protestants studied the holy book. Thus, they suffered more guilt and more ostracism.

Discrimination was internalized

Bias against gays manifested itself both not only in the overt form as shown in the stories above, but also in the self-hate perpetuated by the gay themselves. This was perhaps more damaging and insidious than the teasing they endured. For the victim, it is harder to cope with internalized discrimination. It is impossible for the victim to run away from the tyrant hiding inside himself.

All of the gemstones, except Diamond, acknowledged at least some reluctance in admitting to themselves they were indeed homosexual. This reluctance or shame was perhaps behind the two potential participants who refused to be interviewed even when the researcher had arrived for the pre-scheduled interview. There was also Topaz, who refused to admit, or let the researcher suggest that he was gay.

Jade, the born-again, rejected his gay side. Jade had felt victimized in his first sexual encounter. He admitted: 'Up to now, I could not accept that I'm one hundred percent gay because I'm a professional. That's why when you're a professional; you should be able to control your emotions, your behaviour. . . . We are Christian. So these things are taboo and the more that I have to be able to control myself.'

Onyx had a fear of disclosing himself to others. He said: 'There was some sort of internal, ahh internal, what do you call that? Non acceptance. . . there was some sort of fear in me.' He was fearful of approaching males he was attracted to in high school and college. He recalled: 'I never had the courage to approach or to propose to ahh, what do you call that, to. . . It wasn't a fear of rejection. I felt ashamed!' Upon graduating from high school, a neighbour boy kissed and caressed him, but Onyx ran away. He was embarrassed. Onyx did not have any sexual experience until the age of 28. He claimed it may have been a fear of rejection or possible violence by males he was courting.

Garnet, as mentioned earlier, was quite effeminate in appearance and movement. He was noticeably gay. He said: 'I tried to hide being gay in college, but even if I try to hide it, it's obvious.' Diamond, who was also quite effeminate, seemed open to accept himself as gay, unlike the others. He never gave a hint that he had any problems acknowledging that he was gay. As sixteen, he was servicing American soldiers for five dollars each, without any reluctance. Also, wartime made everyone desperate for cash. Upon moving to Manila, Diamond continued to support his family.

There was some tolerance for gays.

The participants did not report any police harassment or entrapment. There were no laws against cross-dressing as there were in America. This is also what Donn Hart found in the cities of Cebu and Davao in the 1960s. As Diamond would attest, he was regularly cross-dressing as a female prostitute targeting American sailors. Although there was occasional harassment of prostitutes, he was only affected once, and that was for a one-time 'clean-up' campaign by Manila Mayor Lacson.

Diamond mentioned no allies to help the gay prostitutes. The Church was not sympathetic; the communists thought that gays were part of capitalist decadence; the feminist movement and human rights groups had not yet started. Like American gays, here was a story of a struggle in isolation, without allies. Gays then, suffered in silence, remote from each other and from the larger society.

Opal and Crystal recalled bullies from high school. Crystal had it quite difficult in his high school in a neighbouring town in Leyte:

Some guys were teasing us (he and another gay boy named Antonio) because we are not really macho. They would say: ‘*Ooooy, bayot!* (Visayan for *bakla*).’ During breaks, we were supposed to go to the canteen but we would avoid going there because there are many guys there who would bully us or do whatever they want to do with us. I, I, I, fought, I fight with them. ‘Yeah, Antonio we have to quarrel to fight. No, no, you cannot afford to cry Antonio. No, no, no, you have to fight.’ But then it was so obvious; obvious as a clear sun and a clear moon that we were gay.

Crystal and Diamond claimed that back then ‘Warays (from the Eastern Visayas) are brave and masculine...they don’t back down in a conflict. And one thing they really don’t like is to have a gay son.’ Diamond said that the reason why he was tolerated at home because his father was from the Western Visayas, and people there accepted gays.

Ironically the more effeminate boys suffered less teasing than the male acting gay boys. Perhaps everyone already knew they were gay. Garnet, who seemed very lady-like, explained it like this: ‘If you are gay and you are too flirtatious, they will not respect you. They will call you names, insult you, they will tease you and everything. I’m the subdued type. It’s enough that they know I’m gay.’

In a general sense, a young gay male in the 1960s could be tolerated, if he carried himself with decorum, and acted decently. Pearl and Bloodstone used the adjectives ‘restricted’ and ‘discretion.’ In comparison to today, it was a constrained life, with no societal institutions to support and encourage the gay. The Church, the media, and society ignored or gossiped about him. If he became successful, it was in spite of the fact that he was gay.

Before there was a gay movement, individuals pushed for acceptance.

It does not take an organized movement to gain tolerance and dignity. Ruby was probably the most audacious among the gemstone-participants. In the late ‘60s, he formed an informal gay sorority in a large school in Manila. He recounted that ‘we have to go to Luneta (the central park of Manila). And walk like beautiful models! . . .Whenever it’s Wednesday or whenever it’s Friday, all of us would model!’ Ruby felt that ‘the young gays, especially the college gays, were more courageous in coming out.’ Around 1970, he organized a gay beauty pageant with about 75 contestants, all of who were college students.

Pearl, claimed that the sixties saw big changes for homosexuals. In part it was attributed to First Lady Imelda Marcos, who promoted the beauty and the arts and openly gay courtiers.

Although Garnet was a bit shy at first, he became a starlet. In a Manila high school, he was the partner of one of the notorious bad boys. In college, he was the unofficial muse of the basketball team, and a special member of a fraternity. Later, he did acclaimed female impersonation in presentations on basketball courts.

Pearl claimed there was very little teasing at gays at his college. The gays would not allow ridicule. They would confront the teasers. They made it a point to give a lesson to the ones who were teasing the gays. They challenged: 'Excuse me! We are more intelligent than you and we will earn more than you will ever earn!'

Although the researcher is not trained in psychology, it would seem that the gemstones compensated for being gay. This compensation was done in a positive manner. Crystal strove to become a great writer, Diamond the prostitute wanted to bring home much money for the family, Bloodstone a well loved teacher, Garnet, a successful OCW, Pearl, a great designer, and Opal, a respected counsellor and advisor to high school youth. Crystal claimed that gays were more intelligent, and Topaz believed that gays were workaholics. Possibly, the gay of the 1960s desired to be accepted in spite of his sexuality, and strove hard to make money and gain respect.

Today it is better for Filipino gays than in the past.

In a general sense, a young gay male in the 1960s could be tolerated, if he carried himself with decorum, and acted decently. In comparison to today, it was a constrained life, with no societal institutions to support and encourage the gay. Perhaps he knew that in comparison to the United States, the Philippines was tolerant of his identity and escapades. If he was successful, it was in spite of the fact that he was gay.

Today, gay teachers are bolder and less secretive than those of yesteryear. Crystal recalled a time when, 'We used to hide, like we were in a big prison. We were not allowed to be seen, we were not allowed to feel that we are gays. But now, in our town in Leyte, our city mayor is Mayor Noli Isidoro who is gay, gay, really gay . . .so very very gay!' Bloodstone recalled lecturing in class in a low voice, and only allowing his voice to go high when with friends. Otherwise, he tried to blend in. 'But now, gays are much more flamboyant, and wear bright colours.'

The Filipino gay today is still not fully accepted. Few openly admit that they are gay. There are many gay professionals, or those who hold regular jobs, but most have a reluctance to admit that they are gay. They remain concealed for fear of ridicule, or social ostracism. They do not talk about the issue with family members. In this sense, the situation today remains stuck in the 1960s.

On the other hand, there are a number of public figures that are now openly gay, and gays have a recognized role in many fields, such as the beauty and entertainment industries. This reflects a generalized tolerance for gays in the Philippines. Although few openly announce that they are gay, everyone knows or at least suspects, and seems to respect them. And there are many open-minded families. Noted Topaz: 'The parents are proud of their gay kid now. . .Gays are hardworking. Gays are workaholics. They can be welcomed in the family now.' Today, with the rise of the international gay rights movement, the Filipino gay is proud.

The lives of the glittering gemstones, and the lives of gays now departed, created a space of tolerance for the present generation of gays. To honour their lives, Filipino gays must continue to work for the full acceptance of the upcoming generations of gays.

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