

THE AESTHETICS OF KAPWA

TEXT

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Kapwa is a Filipino word that refers to a shared identity. When someone likes the same thing I do, such as coffee, I might refer to them as *Kapwa kong mahilig sa kape* (fellow coffee-lover). Someone who eats as much as I do is *Kapwa-matakaw* (fellow glutton). A fellow Filipino is *Kapwa-Pilipino*. At this point, one might mistake *Kapwa* as simply a translation of the word “fellow”, but it doesn’t just refer to a mere companion separate from oneself. *Kapwa* is our relationship with the people around us; it connects us. Interacting with others is acting on this *Kapwa* relationship: *pakikipagkapwa*. We are, all of us, *Kapwa*—strangers, lovers, friends, and family members who share the same basic humanity. They are our *Kapwa-tao* (fellow humans).

At its core, *Kapwa* is all about authenticity. In Filipino psychology, each of us has an interiority (*Loob*) that is expressed outwardly, which defines who we are. Good actions imply a beautiful inner self (*kagandahang-loob*), especially if they are done willingly (*kusang-loob*) with an open heart (*bukas-loob*). The ubiquity of the word *Loob* in our language speaks volumes about folk philosophy (in Bisaya, we see a parallel in the word *buot*). The poet-philosopher Albert Alejo said that when we

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ILLUSTRATION RIGHT

“The piece features a distorted T’nalak dreamweave pattern. This pattern, traditionally sacred, is now fragmented and superimposed onto digital screenshots of Manila’s landscape and the Angono Petroglyphs. This artwork reflects the current disposition of The Filipino’s relationship to spirituality and the pervasive influence of westernization.

This work somehow is a personal commentary on how we Filipinos portray spirituality in the most vague, detached way.”



look into our *Loob*, we don't discover more of ourselves; rather, we find other people – and in this sense, personal reflection can become a form of solidarity. Within the self, there is *Kapwa*. So, when *Loob* is aligned with the world beyond the self, especially with our *Kapwa* relationships, that is when we are our most authentic. With the world beyond the self, especially with our *kapwa* relationships, that is when we are most authentic.

As we know, we present ourselves in particular ways, not all of which are aligned with our most authentic selves. We are all wearing *something*—clothes, bodily modifications, even attitudes. The evolutionary importance of clothing has mainly been in helping us adapt to our environment. We wear jackets because it's cold. We take layers off because it's hot. Metaphorically, we also notice that a person might loosen their collar when they "feel the heat" of a difficult question. But to say that something is "being worn" implies that the act of "wearing" is both a conscious action *and* a reaction to one's environment. In fact, our clothing choices sometimes go beyond the practical when we wear something *regardless* of climate, especially when we intend to express a personal preference or a sense of group belongingness. For example, a person wearing a thick, expensive jacket in the blazing noon-time of a tropical sun who wants so desperately to be perceived as "cool". This kind of suffering for the sake of aesthetics is called *tiis-ganda*.

The philosopher Leonardo Mercado pointed out that the Filipino word for beauty, *ganda*, is synonymous with goodness (in Bisaya, we also see this with the word *ayo*). A beautiful person is *maganda*; when we greet someone good morning, we say "*Magandang Umaga*." Something that is *maganda* is suitable: it can sustain life, and we would want it to continue existing.

The opposite of *Ganda* is *Pangit*, which means "ugly," but also "insufficient" and "morally corrupt." Any person can have an ugly face (*pangit ang mukha*), an ugly attitude (*pangit na ugali*), or an ugly lifestyle (*pangit na pamumuhay*).

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anxiety one experiences when one does not want to disrupt existing social dynamics. *Hiya*, more often than not, is experienced when one *cares* about a certain relationship—such as with one's elders, current friends,

potential acquaintances, certain respectable authority figures, etc. That is, with one's *Kapwa*. *Hiya*, then, is one's intuition about the implicit code of conduct within a particular social context. One can experience *hiya* when placed in the position of having to display something *pangit*—implying, then, that ugliness (in either appearance or action) is *rude*. It also implies that acceptable aesthetics (what is considered *maganda*) are shaped by societal expectations.

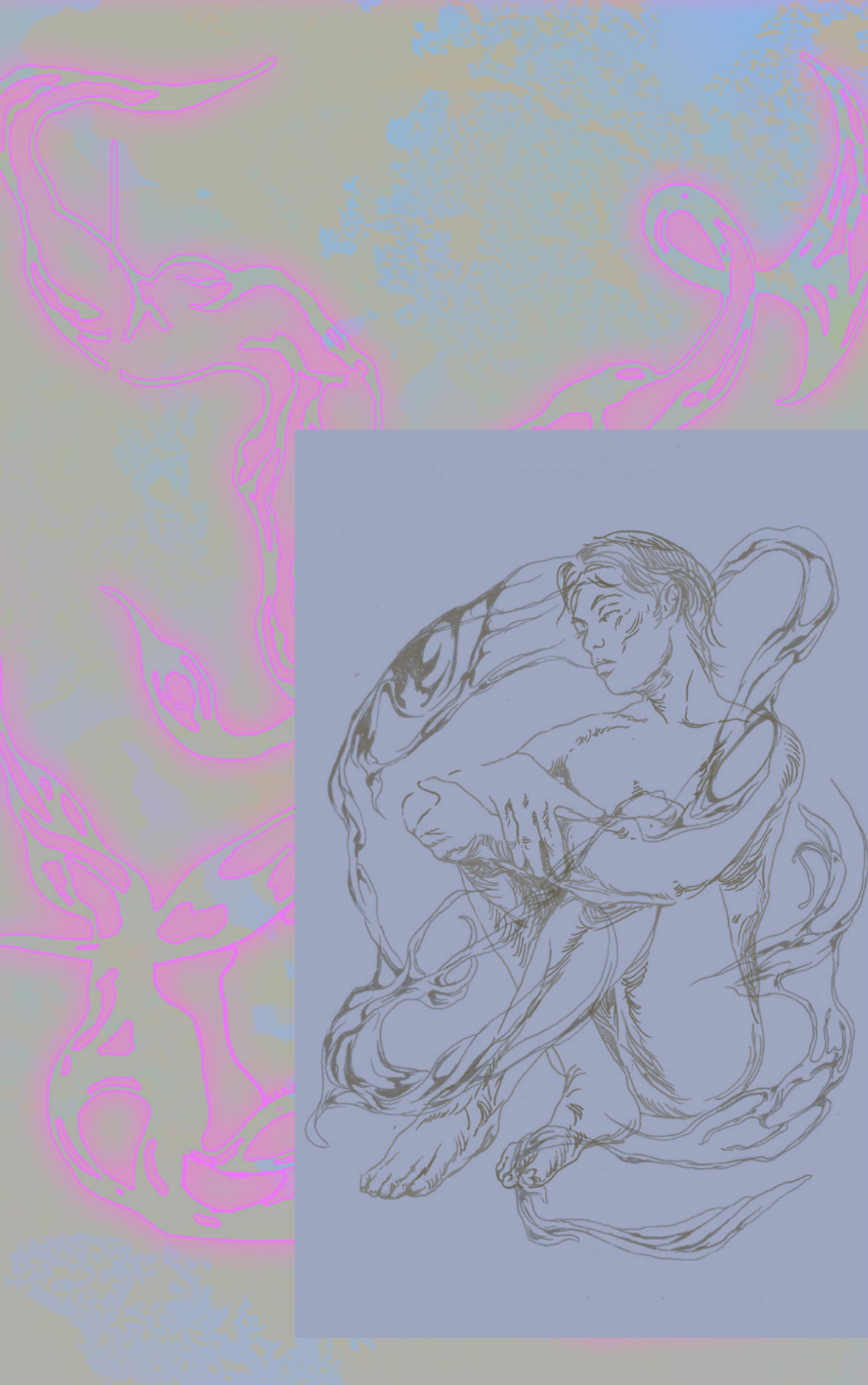
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not only by evolutionary and environmental needs but also by psychosocial and cultural expectations. They can be markers of status, and we know that status itself is a societal structure we agree upon. Whatever we associate with it, then, is shaped by historical influences. The *Barong Tagalog*, an intricately embroidered long-sleeved shirt, is a breezy formal outfit traditionally woven from *piña* (pineapple) or *abaca* (Manila hemp). Despite its colonial history, it is considered to be the national outfit of the Philippines. In *The History of the Burgis* (GCF Books, 1987), Mariel Nepomuceno Francisco and Fe Maria C. Arriola pointed out that the way the *Barong Tagalog* was worn may have been a sign of inferior status since the *indio* could not conceal weapons.

It is, after all, see-through and untucked. Whether or not this is true matters less than the fact that a sophisticated design of cool, gossamer fabric makes sense to both our cultural taste and to our climate—more so than layers of suits and ties, which no doubt work best in cold weather. We must remember, however, that practicality and societal expectations don't always match, especially when these expectations have been imposed by outsiders and absorbed into our collective consciousness. We may observe both the *Barong* and the suit worn for special occasions like weddings and baptisms, but in our everyday life, they may take on different associations. For example, we might still prefer to wear the suit because we associate it with power and international appeal.

When what we wear doesn't match with who we are, it's only a costume, like those worn by children on Halloween. The *Loob* longs to be seen, yet is covered up by something artificial. More often than not, our bodies naturally reject what doesn't make sense to them: clothes become itchy, hot, and uncomfortable. Decolonizing fashion and beauty standards doesn't mean invalidating Anglocentric aesthetics and attire; it means contributing our own perspective. Our indigenized contribution to the global standards of fashion and beauty can make it both inclusive and relevant. This is what scholars in Indigenous Psychology call "cross-indigenous." Rather than using one culture as a source of judgment and understanding for all others (which is the general practice in "cross-cultural" work), we ask each culture

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to contribute their own standards—each culture becomes a source of wisdom, rather than a target of influence. This doesn't just mean that we only ought to wear what seem to be “indigenous” aesthetics (such as ethnic patterns and dresses)—that would only be another costume, especially if we wear them *for the sake of* looking “indigenous.” We must inquire inward and collaborate with each other. In doing so, we can better embody these patterns: they become an authentic expression of our *Loob* and an alignment with *Kapwa*. Just as there are multiple designs across various ethnolinguistic groups, *Kapwa* doesn't mean that we should all conform to one thing, one singular “indigenous” aesthetic. *Kapwa* is not one thing only; it is the ecology of people, who recognize their common heritage as unique members of the human race. It is the vibrance and inclusivity of natural variety, like a garden with many flowers. (It's like that old nursery rhyme of the tiny nipa hut surrounded by an assortment of plants. *Bahay kubo, kahit munti, ang halaman doon, ay sari-sari...*)

In the end, the indigenized appreciation of aesthetics does not have to be a reactive and artificial imposition of anti-Anglocentric aesthetics (that is, selecting looks specifically because they are not Anglocentric). Rather, it can be the authentic recognition of what is, to us, truly *maganda*—beautiful, but also, good. When we allow what is inside us to emerge outwardly, displayed in aesthetics that make sense to us, it returns us to *Kapwa*.

ILLUSTRATION LEFT – “This illustration features a Pinoy figure seated in a pose reminiscent of the Manunggul Jar, reflecting on the state of *kapwa* in today's cultural landscape. An organic, higher being with a large, watchful eye embraces the Pinoy body, symbolizing the mutual gaze and connection at the heart of pakikipag-kapwa. The higher-being, becoming a lost connection to Filipino animistic beliefs, overshadowed by the influence of mainly Catholicism. This artwork questions how these spiritual and cultural threads interlink in the modern Filipino identity.

An ethereal depiction of pakikipagkapwa, where a “higher being” and a Pinoy figure exchange gazes, where *Kapwa* becomes imbued to our interconnectedness to one another. The being, representing the divine essence that watches over and interacts with humanity.

This illustration captures the delicateness between seeing and being seen, feeling and being felt, embodying the Filipino value of shared identity and the connection within the concept of *kapwa*.”