

Pastor Ed Lapid founded Kaloob Philippine Music and Dance Ministry to research, teach, and promote the use of indigenous arts in Christian worship.

WHERE EVERY NATION HAS A CONTRIBUTION

Ed Lapid

Christianity came to the Philippines together with colonization. Catholicism came with the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century, and Protestantism came with American occupation

of the country in 1899. Successful evangelization was often measured by the destruction of indigenous culture. The God of the Bible was presented as a Western deity who could only



be pleased with Western cultural

expressions—in architecture, language, or music. Liturgy had to conform to Western aesthetics. Indigenous culture was judged as demonic in a way that was very colonialist and oppressive.

Many Christianized Filipinos have regarded their own heritage as something that has to be forgotten and destroyed. Our people have been led to believe that Western Christianity is the only “correct” brand of faith, while it has been culturally destructive to our identity and heritage. Kaloob Philippine Music and Dance Ministry began with a vision to what we call “cultural redemption.” For fifteen years we have been researching Philippine arts, especially those that could be used in Christian liturgy, such as music, dance, and ritual.

Mining the Cultural Heritage

Filipino society is about eighty percent Roman Catholic; the rest belong to Protestantism, Islam, and indigenous religions. Not much pre-colonial written history exists, as indigenous culture is told in lore, song, dance, and ritual. Therefore, we believe that the stories and the values and the spirit of our people are enshrined in the performing arts. Hence, the preservation and adaptive reuse of our cultural heritage is an important component of identity and nation-building.

Filipinos who have been evangelized have a choice: to be “good” Christians (which means Westernized) but “bad” Filipinos as they abandon their cultural heritage, or to do what we at Kaloob do and advocate—study elements of indigenous culture, filter them through Scripture, salvage everything that

does not directly contradict the spirit of Scripture, and then rededicate and reuse them in Christian liturgy. We have studied and collected hundreds of indigenous songs and dance, filtering anything offensive to biblical sensitivities. In our experience, ninety percent of indigenous artistic expression could be used in Christian worship without offending Christian theology.

Everything Kaloob does is founded on solid anthropological research that gives birth to two types of presentations. One we call a “prayformance,” indigenous music and dance in the context of Christian worship. These are no longer authentic original forms as they are refashioned for the needs of the liturgy. The other presentation is performance for the sake of artistic expression and cultural preservation. We perform Philippine dances as faithfully as possible in their original format. We are gratified that hard work has earned us a respectable niche among the country’s outstanding dance companies.

Chants and Dances

We would like the church to be the sanctuary, not the cemetery, of indigenous culture. And this can happen if the church not only stops rejecting indigenous culture, but actually uses indigenous expressions in contemporary Christian worship. On the other hand, we do not wish to bring the church back to the cave. That is why we contemporize to make songs and rituals work within the context of the church today. We are thus able to fashion a Philippine Christianity that is firmly rooted in our traditions, decidedly relevant to our context, and steadfastly biblical.

For fifteen years, our main church of nearly 6000 has used Philippine music and dance as part of Sunday worship. We have many satellite churches around the country and some around the world that, in various degrees, are also using similar cultural expressions. But this doesn’t mean we reject modern or Western culture. We also like to make harmonious fusions, rooted in our heritage but also citizens of the world and part of the global church.

We also envision contributing elements of Philippine arts to the global church, enriching of the body of Christ through rituals, songs, and dances that express faith and spirituality in the context of our culture. Of course, we’d like to see all the other nations of the world do this as well.

Pioneers and Diplomats

In the past, conservative elements of the church were suspicious and rejected us, believing our work was syncretism. Many were conditioned to think that anything indigenous could only be of the devil, and that sacred culture and arts could only come from the West.

Now, major churches in the Philippines have, in varying degrees, embraced our approach. Many Christian missions based in the Philippines bring visitors from abroad to our church so they can see how Philippine instruments and dances are used in worship. Some of the churches that used to be suspicious and unkind are actually now proud of us.

I cannot prescribe our technique or method to anyone; we have just been doing the best we could in our context

and within our limits. But here are few things we have learned that may help others avoid some unnecessary setbacks:

Don't be overzealous. You always need the support of the church leaders. Talk first to the pastors, not to the music and dance leaders, because there could be a wide chasm between their theologies, and if the pastor doesn't like it, nothing will go.

Don't try to make changes too fast, because many conservative believers think there is only one way to approach God. We have to respect them also. We must not carelessly alienate people.

Build on it. Don't fashion yourself as the enemy of the status quo.

Be diplomatic. Artists have to be diplomats, because you need lots of space and support.

A Global Church

Everything in the earth is the Lord's. So to reject the creative input of other cultures is to reject the God of creation who made the people of the world different. "Our God is not a God of sameness but a God of variety," as Monte Ohia of the World Christian Gathering of Indigenous Peoples loved to emphasize. We want to decolonize

Christianity and to welcome the Spirit of Christ to each culture, allowing all tribes and all nations and all languages to be able to worship God in variety.

The arts are very wonderful and powerful tools to set the oppressed peoples of the world free—free to be themselves, free from an inferiority complex. Jesus accepted those who fell through the cracks, those who were rejected by society. It's time for the church to embrace the cultures of the world, to uphold a global Christian church, where every nation has a contribution ●