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Review essay

Christina Lee, *Saints of Resistance: Devotions in the Philippines Under Early Spanish Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

John D. Blanco

What can we know about the spread of Christianity in the Philippines from its earliest documented evidence in the spread of devotional cults? Hundreds of these cults dedicate themselves to a patron saint, the Virgin Mary, or the Child Jesus, throughout the Philippines today: yet how closely do we study the conflicting stories of their origin and spread? What conclusions can we draw from what that evidence tells us? How do we measure conflicting claims of evidence against one another? Most importantly, how do the results of that analysis oblige us to question, qualify, or overturn our established certitudes about the role of religion in post-Conquest society? These questions, which would seem fundamental to the study of Philippine and global Christianity, have curiously never received the attention and study that would reveal the degree to which their answers matter today. For this reason alone, Christina Lee's recent monograph *Saints of Resistance*, which uncovers and explores the earliest devotional cults of the Holy Child [Santo Niño] and Virgin Mary in the colonial Philippines, deserves to be read and studied.

Lee's first and perhaps most lasting contribution may be the restoration of *controversy* to the origin and perpetuation of devotional cults like that of the Santo Niño in Cebu, or Virgin of Caysasay in Batangas. For it is only by restoring this original confusion to devotional cults that we can begin to reconstruct the ongoing negotiations, accommodations, and conflicts involving religious and political authorities during the Spanish colonial period as well as the emergence of popular aspirations and grievances under colonial rule. *Saints of Resistance*, in the author's words, begins with two points of departure: "first, that Spanish colonialism may well have proven as impactful in forming the *spiritual* landscape of the Philippines as it had been in Spanish America; and second, that the examination of popular Philippine beliefs endows a richer and more textured view of Spanish colonialism beyond the Americas" (3: italics added). The seeming modesty of these claims belies the underlying fact that, since at least the publication of John Leddy Phelan's classic study *The Hispanization of the Philippines*, most scholars have rather uncritically accepted and followed Phelan's argument that Spanish colonization was essentially non-comparable to that of the Americas: more (presumably) benevolent, less damaging to native lifeways and customs. Not coincidentally, such assumptions (which turned out to be largely false) dovetail with a positive view of the Church in the Philippines as the altruistic defender and promoter of native welfare and interests from its very inception.

Saints of Resistance draws upon the work of earlier Philippine colonial scholars like Vicente Rafael and Carolyn Brewer, who highlight native resistance to the Spanish conquest and colonization in the everyday practices of translation, interpretation, religious conversion (or apostasy), and resettlement. She also borrows from James Scott's notion of "hidden scripts" written between the lines of official transcripts regarding the state of colonial societies, to frame her own literary approach to the construction and critical assessment of historical narratives as well as more recent ethnographies of these early devotions. The result is a persuasive

demonstration of devotional cults as interfaces of the popular imagination, which in turn determined the course of political negotiation with or resistance to colonial rule.

The first chapter, which takes up the devotion of the Santo Niño of Cebu, exposes the palimpsest of hidden and official accounts of the conquest by pitting the narrative of the Spanish “discovery” of an image of the Holy Child (which the Spanish obtained by pillaging a coastal village on the island of Cebu) against native claims that the image had been “kidnapped” from them by foreign marauders. While various Cebuano Studies scholars have treated this discrepancy in the past, Lee’s contribution is to place the conflict of accounts within the larger context of conquest violence and impunity in order to show how the native account encodes a counter-narrative of dispossession, deracination, and degradation suffered by natives at the hands of Spanish conquistadors, royal grantees [*encomenderos*], and even the regular clergy. Quite a different dynamic of contesting narratives presents itself in Lee’s chapter on the Virgin of Caysasay near Taal, Batangas. The iconographic devotion to this small image introduces the significant presence of Chinese merchants and artisans throughout the settled populations of the Philippines by the early seventeenth century. Yet Lee’s research also brings to light a lesser-known aspect of the cult of Caysasay: that Chinese immigrants to the Philippines revered her as the Chinese protectress of the sea and seafarers, Ma-Cho or Ma-Tzu. Surveying the background of the periodic Chinese expulsions (read: massacres) in the Philippines as the key to interpreting the official documents reporting the Virgin’s apparition, Lee is then able to use her reading as a hermeneutic for (re)evaluating the centrality of “the Chinese problem” in both native as well as Spanish understandings of colonial hegemony. The politicization of Chinese immigration reappears, in any case, in Lee’s third example analyzing missionary accounts of the cult of the Virgin of Antipolo, in which Chinese rebels allegedly attempt to deface and disfigure the image of the Virgin.

Lee’s hermeneutic of reading official reports for their “hidden transcripts” reveals the political stakes behind religious devotions, which pivoted around the forced resettlement of natives under Spanish rule. At times admittedly the trace of such examples of native resistance to colonial rule seems more visible in certain devotions over others. The examples of the Santo Niño of Cebu and the Virgin of Caysasay, for example, yield counter-narratives of resistance and negotiation in a way that other cults treated in Lee’s study do not. Focusing too narrowly on the general frame of Lee’s individual readings, however, would overlook the larger significance of the author’s research and rigor in connecting various loose strands of investigation into the proliferation of devotional cults in the Philippines as both an instrument and counterpoint to the Spanish conquest. By placing these early cults within a comparative frame, Lee completes a task that has eluded the purview of both religious historians and anthropologists of Philippine Christianity. *Saints of Resistance* also challenges the tendency of area studies to prioritize the local variations of colonial phenomena at the expense of both the structural features of Spain’s “spiritual conquest” project in the Philippines. Both aspects of colonial rule introduce a transpacific dimension to the study of Philippine and global Christianity, which opens the door to a new generation of scholars tracing the outlines of a Spanish Pacific and Iberian globalization.