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Idolatry and apostasy in the 1633 Jesuit annual letter

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The following selection is excerpted from the 1633 Jesuit annual letter, written by the provincial head and procurator Fr. Juan de Bueras (SJ), to the Superior General.¹ These annual letters would serve as a general report on the status and plans of the missionary province in question, and oftentimes consisted of transcriptions from letters written by other Jesuits throughout the province and addressed to the provincial head. Seen in the wider context of colonial history and Philippine culture, however, the letter also obliges us to question our basic assumptions about religious conversion and native resistance on the trans-Pacific frontier of the Spanish empire.

Fr. Bueras arrived in the archipelago in 1622, along with a number of Jesuits sent from Europe via the Mexico-Acapulco galleon for the purpose of expanding the Jesuit mission². The areas of Jesuit missionary activity included the island of Mindoro, just south of Luzon where the walled city Intramuros lay on the banks of the Manila Bay. Prior to the Jesuits' arrival in Nauhan, the settlement had been under the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of Manila for fifty years. The primary purpose of the Jesuit mission in Mindoro was to preach to the

¹ Special thanks goes to Mayra Cortes for her assistance in the transcription of the original materials from the microfilm copies. The translation is mine.

² See Horacio de la Costa (SJ), *Jesuits in the Philippines*, 224.

native highland group known as Mangyanes, with the ultimate goal of converting them to Christianity and persuading them to be resettled or “reduced” or “congregated” [*reducción / congregación*] around the coastal, presumably Christian settlements. These coastal settlements were predominantly occupied by native Tagalog peoples or *Indios*. As we see in the example above, however, Fr. Bueras soon discovers that the proposed Christian conversion of the Mangyanes would remain a futile quest if the Christian settlements on the coast were not first attended to. These consisted largely of Christian apostates observing practices that either originated in pre-Hispanic religious customs and beliefs or that developed alongside the uneven spread of Christianity throughout the first sixty odd years of the Spanish colonization.

This predicament of Fr. Bueras and the Jesuit mission turns out to be a relatively common one in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Bruce Cruikshank among others has recently argued, the great feats of mass pacification, conversion and baptism recounted by the religious chroniclers of the seventeenth century all mask or downplay the severe shortage of missionaries and priests to actually administer the Christian sacraments and services to the communities that presumably fell under the shadow of both the Church and the Crown.³ In many areas outside Manila, missionaries

³ See Bruce Cruikshank, "Disobedient but Faithful," 567-584; Greg Bankoff, "Devils, Familiars, and Spaniards," 37-55; and Brewer, *Shamanism, Catholicism and Gender Relations in Colonial Philippines, 1521-1685*, xxi.

would build a residence and church in the settlement, then leave in order to proselytize to the surrounding area, with promises to return periodically in order to administer the religious sacraments. The production of some real or potential native commodity (as in the case of beeswax in Mindoro), would serve as an additional incentive for the Crown, through its royal patronage [Patronato] of the Church overseas, to request the establishment of missions in various islands while attempting to turn over established Christian settlements to the secular priests under the Archbishopric of Manila. This strategy was often accompanied by the *encomienda*, or royal grant given by the Crown, to individuals tasked with the responsibility of administering to the needs of colonial subjects within a given area of land, which included the collection of tribute, the enforcement of civil laws among the natives including mandatory government service, and support for religious instruction.

Behind the theory that the parceling out of *encomiendas* and the spread of missionary residences throughout the archipelago signified the slow but continuous Christianization and Hispanization of the natives, however, lies a truth that John Phelan himself conceded when he adopted these terms as a lens for bringing colonial history into focus, in his well-known thesis on the “Hispanization” of the Philippines (Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines*, 153-161). That point, quite simply, is that the theory of Hispanization and

Christian conversion never actually *happened* in many places throughout the archipelago; which is why Phelan had to settle for describing the Philippines as “partially Hispanized,” and describing Christianity as having been “Philippinized” (72-92). During the time of Bueras’s predecessor Pedro Chirino (SJ), the phenomenon of apostasy was obviously still quite new: in Chirino’s account of relapsed Christianity in Taytay, a province some 31 km outside the walled city of Intramuros, the author ascribes the apostasy of natives from Christianity to the “fervor of the new ministers,” who, says Chirino, “think that one only has to arrive and baptize millions, and with it form model Christian communities, without any effort or difficulty” (Pedro Chirino [SJ], *History of the Philippine Province*, v. 2, 80). We find the same lapses taking place, however, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on an almost continuous basis (see Phelan, 101 and 141).

Returning to the 1633 Jesuit annual letter, the account of Jesuit Procurator General Juan de Bueras describes in great detail the social *anomie* that characterized many places outside the walled city of Intramuros until at least the late eighteenth century.⁴ From the time of the conquest, native *Indios* living in coastal and lowland regions throughout the archipelago were forced to reorient their society and economy around a new power, but one whose theoretical, legal,

⁴ For a comparative perspective to that of the Philippines, see James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

religious, and cultural pretensions never failed to fall short of what it was actually able to do. Neither completely bound nor completely free of this power, natives wandered in a cultural frontier which saw their gradual alienation from an understanding of their own traditions, even as they failed to secure a stable relationship with the imperial and Christian authority. But in this frontier situation of protracted colonialism, Fr. Bueras cannot wait for the arrival of spiritual and temporal reinforcements. He, too, is on the move, visiting one missionary station after another, exhorting his fellow priests to bring light to the presumed "dark" corners of the earth.