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* This review expresses the scholarly perspectives of the reviewer only. This review does not represent the perspectives or position of the Thai Government.

Performing Catholicism: Faith and Theater in a Philippine Province

SIR ANRIL PINEDA TIATCO

Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2016.

Exploring the intimate intertwining between the sacrosanct realm of Catholicism and the almost sacrilegious cultural practices-cum-performance spaces, Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco pushes readers to an uncomfortable corner where they get a full view of the active tension transpiring between faith and spectacle, between orthodox and unorthodox in the Philippines. He probes into the fantastic world of captivating, dramatic, and sensational Catholic devotional rituals, which include carrying of the cross, self-flagellation, and dancing and offers a way to look at the Catholic faith as a “spectacular and performed” religion (p. 5). As Tiatco explains in *Performing Catholicism: Faith and Theater in a Philippine Province*, some of these cultural practices, usually done during the Holy Week, have been discouraged, even opposed, by Catholic Church leaders time and again, and yet countless devotees continue to observe them (and representatives of the Catholic Church take

part in them as well), hence contributing to their perpetuation as well as popularity. Throughout the book, Tiatco teases out the paradoxes and nebulosity of certain Catholic practices performed regularly by zealous observants under the auspices of the Catholic Church. The result is a compelling and lucid critical reading of Catholicism and its manifestations beyond the official dogmas and into the public-cultural sphere.

Focusing on three Catholic cultural spectacles in Pampanga—the *libad* (water ritual and festival), *pamamaku king krus* (nailing on the cross ritual), and *kuraldal* (dance ritual)—the author contends that there is no “homogenous and monolithic enactment” (p. 20) of the performances. Rather, the devotees engage in an unremitting process of negotiation and performance that renders their own imagination, contestation, and interpretation of the Catholic faith apparent albeit (especially as it is) deviating from orthodox Catholic doctrine. Drawing on theories from performative studies scholars such as Richard Schechner, Jon McKenzie, and Victor Turner, Tiatco scrutinizes these cultural practices against the analytical references of performativity, liminality, and efficacy. Citing Harvey Whitehouse, Tiatco maintains that despite the fact that Pampanga (like the rest of the Philippines) is majority Catholic, the actual process of Catholicization is not “simply the imposition of Western culture onto local tradition but, rather, highly variable processes of local interpretation and contestation” (p. 23). According to Tiatco, these Catholic cultural performances are both interpretations of and embodied resistance against the Catholic doctrine. On the one hand, the devotees themselves justify their devotion to the “very Catholic origins of the spectacles” (p. 113). In other words, they express their commitment to a divine being as well as their respect and obedience to the teachings of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, through these performances they are also “performing transgressions and resistances to the very doctrine where their cultural spectacles are rooted” (p. 113). That is to say, they also form their own narratives around the practices that defy official narratives.

The book is divided into four short chapters. In the first chapter the author lays down the rationale, theoretical foundations, and organization of the book. He makes it clear at the outset his positioning as an ethnographer who is also personally familiar with the Kapampangan Catholic cultural performances as he was born and raised there. Indeed, the book is as much an investigation of cultural practices in Pampanga as it is a personal account of the author’s reflections and examination of his own fascination with these cultural practices. Chapter 2 deconstructs a religious water ritual and festival in Apalit, Pampanga, called Apung Iru Libad as a site of continuous negotiation and contestation between the folk and the Catholic Church. The author surmises that these negotiations—marked by intermittent power struggles between the Catholic Church and the folk—are imperative not only for the continuance of the rituals but also for the performance of intimacy, which in turn fosters collective consciousness.

The third chapter extends the argument on the negotiating dynamics, elaborating on the ironies and ambivalences of the *pamamaku king krus* in Cutud, San Francisco. The author asserts

that the “actors, the audience, the spaces of performance, and the texts” (p. 59) are all embodiments of the Catholic doctrines. He further suggests that these ambivalences allude to the myriad of interpretations of the Catholic tradition constructed by the people themselves. In the process, the Catholic doctrines in Pampanga remain ambiguous and, at some level, subversive even to the Vatican’s official narratives. The last chapter takes the reader to the interesting case of the Kuraldal festival in Sasmuan, Pampanga, where thousands of (usually) childless couples participate as an act of “*panata*” or devotion hoping for their prayers to be answered (particularly on conceiving). According to Tiatco, local Catholic communities are continuously constructing narratives about Apung Lucia, the patroness of the parish, based on several narratives: their own interpretation and negotiation between the orthodox dogma coming from the Catholic Church as well as the unorthodox narratives and stories from devotees themselves. In this process, the ritual undergoes a complex process of continuous traditionalization without causing the destruction of the communities’ local cultures that preceded the advent of Catholicism in the Philippines.

The book is a compelling read as it offers a nuanced understanding, which deviates from traditional and orthodox Catholic scripts, of the convoluted landscape of religious and cultural processes in the Philippines. In a skillful interweaving of his ethnographic observations, personal insights, and theoretical musings, Tiatco successfully unravels the agency of the people and their role in meaning-making and the production of context for Catholic rituals that simultaneously engage and interrogate the official narrative and message of the Catholic Church. Without a doubt, this book is a significant contribution to the fields of performative studies, Philippine studies, and religious-ethnography studies. It encourages us to look deeper and closer into the inner workings of cultural translations and performances that are occurring at the ground level and therefore attempt to better understand the ideological, cultural, and social underpinnings of certain cultural performances that are otherwise discounted (sometimes) as heretic, problematic, or crude interpretations of orthodox Catholic doctrines. The book persuades us to consider the myriad of interpretations that are being produced by those who participate in religious practices as performances (and, by extension, the audience—those who bear witness to the spectacles). It forces us to view religious practices (not just Catholic) not as stagnant or static phenomena resistant to change but as continually being reinvented by powerful authors who, in fact, reside outside the main authority of the institution of the Catholic Church and are oftentimes regarded as passive (or blind) followers or receptors of the Catholic faith.

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