Religion and Spiritual Beliefs in the Philippines

Alisa Pierson

Most Americans are aware that the Philippines is comprised of Catholics, but Catholicism and spirituality in the Philippines extends beyond just being Catholic. In fact the way religion is practiced in the Philippines is very unique in comparison to the form Christianity takes in the west or other areas of the globe. Filipino Catholicism is practiced alongside and influenced by precolonial indigenous religions and indigenous Filipino concepts that are found in other areas of Southeast Asia. To understand how Christianity is practiced in the Philippines it is important to look at the unique ways Filipinos manifest their spirituality, how gender plays a role, and less common religious nuances that characterize Christianity in the Philippines. A discussion of religion in the Philippines would not be complete without paying attention to the unique place of Muslims in the Philippines. Through this discussion it will become clear that religion in the Philippines is indeed very influenced by western religions but still maintains a distinct Southeast Asian flavor in their spiritual beliefs and practices.

Catholicism

The form that Catholicism takes in the Philippines is in many ways unique to the region in which it is practiced. Across Christian areas of the Philippines indigenous religions or spiritual practices have entered into and influenced the practice of Catholicism. It is also possible to see the pre-colonial indigenous spirituality influenced by Catholic notions. Fenella Cannell did an extensive ethnography of Catholicism in a village in the region of Bicol Philippines. In her book Power and Intimacy she provides an in depth look at some of the ways women attend to the Christ Ama effigy. Across Southeast Asia, especially insular South East Asia on islands such as Sulawesi and Bali, people traditionally carved likenesses of their dead loved ones as a way to remember and worship their ancestors. They would keep the effigies, and/or bones of their ancestors in the family home or a house designated for that purpose so that people could visit the effigy. This indigenous Southeast Asian tradition has influenced the way Filipinos worship Jesus. The carved Ama (Jesus) of the village in Bicol, Cannell discusses, can be seen as a carry over of this South east Asian practice. Like other effigies that are carved
today in Indonesia, the Christ Ama is carved from wood, painted, and formed to resemble the person (in this case a westernized image of Jesus). The effigy is kept in a sacred place and is accessible to the public. In Bicol the Ama is kept in a designated home. One of the most interesting ways that Catholicism is amalgamated with the Ama effigy can be seen during the procession that celebrates the Passion. Each year the women of the village clean the body of the Ama very carefully as they do with a real dead body before burial. After this the Ama is carried through the streets in a funeral like procession while women mourn the passing on of the Ama. The Easter holiday is in fact a more important holiday for Filipinos than Christmas, which is not as "passionately" celebrated. In the Filipino celebration of Easter and the Passion it is possible to see how Filipino Catholicism diverges very much from Western forms of Catholicism. For the Filipinos different aspects and notions of Christianity are more important than for Westerners.

The way Filipinos view their relationship with Jesus is also infused by distinctly Filipino and Southeast Asian cultural notions. In the Philippines debt and dependency are the foundations of most social relationships. Any given person may be in a position of debt or dependency with any number of individuals with whom they associate, including (but not limited to) family, friends, politicians, etc. The relationship Filipinos have with Jesus is also characterized by the idea of debt and dependency. For Filipinos Jesus sacrificed his life for them to be saved, and so they are indebted to him. But Cannell suggests that it is somewhat more complex than that. Cannell notes that the Bicolanos of the Philippines view the holy father and Jesus as "a God who always credits his own debtors" by which God has made a promise of help to the Filipinos to bring them to Heaven (195). Therefore, because what God has done lies somewhere between help and creating an indebtedness for Filipinos, the indebtedness one might have in owing back a loan is not the same as the indebtedness they have to Jesus. Rather, the indebtedness to Jesus is similar to the kind one may have with a family member who "helps" their relative because of their relatedness and so the action is classified as assistance or help that doesn't necessarily need to to be paid back in full or equally.
Pre-colonial Spiritual Beliefs

Despite being Catholic, belief in spirits is pervasive (especially in rural areas) in the Filipino notions about the spiritual world. Many Filipinos in rural communities make use of healers to cure illnesses and these healers are bound up with the indigenous/pre-colonial spiritual beliefs of Filipinos. Filipino healers serve to fill an important place in the community. Healers are not medical practitioners in the Western sense but instead are more like shamans that one would find in a loosely organized society. The healers Cannell discusses in her book work to cure illnesses that are caused by invisible small spirit beings called *tawo*. These beings are the cause of a wide range of ailments and must be dealt with by a trained healer who is able to talk with the *tawo* to mediate and work on behalf of the sick to induce the being take pity on the sick and end its infliction upon the individual. For example, in Bicol séances are held at certain times when they are needed to heal a person. A séance calls one or more *tawo* into a room in order to communicate with them. The *tawo* may come into the room in its own invisible form or enter the body of the healer. The Filipinos have undoubtedly seen the world as being inhabited by these beings before Christianity came. So how did they deal with the idea of a world where there is both Jesus and *tawo*? The Filipinos Cannell studied suggested that these beings are aware of Jesus and do have a place in the Christian world (118). Some *tawo*, they argue, are in fact Christians. Yet ironically the spirits cannot enter into the church and be blessed while residing in a persons body lest the body forever be inhabited by the spirit. This, the Bicolanos say is because in the beginning of the world when god blessed all animals and humans the *tawo* hid among the trees and were not blessed which is why they are invisible (118). So if a *tawo* is blessed it will enter into the human world. Philippine Catholicism thus includes a unique spiritual world that does not exist in other areas of the world that practice Catholicism. In combination with saint worship and going to church, there are other forms of ritual and religious practice that has survived the efforts of colonialism to trample these practices.
It is important to acknowledge that many of the aforementioned notions about spirits were something Spanish priests tried to eradicate. The Spanish told the indigenous Filipinos that the *tawo* were demons and that healers were witches in order to persuade them to give up this religion the Spanish viewed as unacceptable (118). In the end, however, it was the Filipinos who decided what their religion would be like. Saint worship in the Philippines is also unique. Each family may hold a particular saint who resides on their land or with them. The saint is inherited and passed down in the family. A given saint will circulate within the sibling group, going from one grown up child to another throughout time. Cannell suggests that because of these circumstances and others the family's saint is like a patron and this can be seen in the devotion. (186) She states that "meals given as part of a devotion are remarkable for the way the saint seems to preside over the occasion. This is all the more visually striking when processions form part of the devotion" (186). In Cannell's discussion of saints it seems that the Bicaloanos have a distinctly Southeast Asian way of worshipping the saints that almost resembles the way for example Balinese worship a Hindu god/goddess. In Bali there are also processions and giving meals involved in worshipping a god/goddess. So despite the differences in religion and colonial history here is another example of the way the Philippines way of being Christian has been influence by their Southeast Asian heritage. In looking at Filipinos spirituality it is important to understand the unique place women have in healing and thus spirituality.

**Women and Religion**

Many of the spirit mediums or healers in the Philippines are women. Cannell looks at three spirit healers who are women. Women play a central role then in healing. This contrasts with Western healing and medicine which has traditionally had men as the primary healers. In fact when the Spanish came to the Philippines they referred to the healers as witches, signifying a negative Western view of women as healers. The fact that women are allowed to and supported in becoming healers may play a factor in why many Filipino immigrant women work in the health field. Playing a central role in healing illnesses is not a foreign or unique role for women in their culture. The Muslims of the Philippines also have a unique place in the Filipino culture that is also carried over to Filipino life in America.
Islam

Although many people assume the Philippines is comprised only of Catholics, it does have a Muslim minority. This Muslim minority mainly remains in the Southern Islands of the Philippines and Mindanao. The term designated to refer to this group is "Moro". Today Moros make up about 5% of the population of the Philippines and have a complex history. South East Asia itself has a history of Islamic influence and conversion. For example, much of Malaysia and Indonesia are Muslim. The Moro were also subject to the same Islamic influences that these countries were, although clearly only the Southern part of the Philippines was effected and influenced to the degree that they became Muslim and have maintained a distinctly Islamicized culture for centuries. Yeger suggests that Muslim influence from the Middle East came into the Philippines around the 10th century A.D. with the increase of trade (191). Islamic missionaries also played a part in bringing Islam to Mindanao. Inevitably locals began to convert and a sultanate was established. Over the centuries different ethnic groups converted and as a result the Islamic communities of the Southern Philippines saw themselves as distinct, autonomous Islamic groups that at times fought. Nevertheless the sultanate of the Moro community has had a great deal of power and authority in the Southern Philippines and is the leader of the Moro population. The fact that the Moros have a religious and national identity has naturally been a cause of conflict with the colonial, Spanish, and American powers that have tried to create a unified Philippines that includes the Moro community.

The Moro Community

Today the Moro community sees itself as a distinct and separate group that is different from the rest of the mainly Catholic Philippines. In recent years they have taken action to establish themselves as a separate nation and secede from the Philippines while still maintaining economic ties with the Philippines. This causes a conflicting desire to be somehow a part of the Philippines and not. One of the main ways that the Moro community has attempted to create more autonomy for themselves is through the establishment of the Moro National Liberation Front. The MNLF was established in 1972 for the purpose of working toward gaining national autonomy for the Moro society. One of the key factors that played a role in its establishment was the assistance from
other Muslim nations, especially Malaysia, who trained Moro men in military combat. Shortly after its establishment MNLF rebels came into conflict with the the Philippine government and for the next year and a half violence and Muslim control of certain areas in the South were a threat to the Philippines control of the Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan. During the dictatorial regime of Marcos this organization was one of the major opponents of the Marcos dictatorship. However, when Marcos offered to make special concessions for those who surrendered during the 1973 uprisings he did get a response, a number of Muslim leaders surrendered. From then on Marcos and the Philippine government attempted to maintain the Muslim areas of the Philippines in their control by offering benefits for staying in the Nation of the Philippines. For example, the Filipino government poured funds into the Muslim areas to build roads and establish more electric power throughout the area. There were also some reforms in the Filipino laws. There was a special section inserted into the national laws pertaining to Muslim religious practices that intermingle with state affairs such as marriage, and inheritance. However these actions never succeeded in subduing many rebels. In the years leading up to now there have been many more attempts to gain autonomy and establishments of more groups like the MNLF who may have more or less radical views about how to gain independence. Members of these movements have used a number of ways to get this done, including everything from diplomatic appeals to terrorist tactics. As of yet however the Muslims of the Philippines are indeed that; "Muslims of the Philippines". Unfortunately because these Muslims are still a minority and maintain a very separate lifestyle from the Catholic majority they do not tend to prosper as much as other Filipinos. It has now come to pass that the aid that was promised to them years ago was never completely given and as a result their economy is not as successful. Therefore, Muslims in the Philippines maintain a unique situation as a minority in a Catholic majority. It is also important to understand what the "civilian" Moros think about their situation and how they have played a part in the politics of separatism.

Those Moros who do not take an active role in fighting for separation form the Philippine state have a unique position and, as will be seen, an influence from an indigenous past. Just as the Christian Filipinos still hold views that are carried over from their indigenous spiritual beliefs, so too do the Moros. In McKenna's discussion of how Muslim Filipinos justify their fight as holy and see divine action, he describes the following statement from a woman of the Campo Muslims: "The Pagali are large
crocodiles...In times past people would place food on the riverbanks as offerings to petition them for favors. These stories are hundreds of years old but we have that these spirit crocodiles still exist because they assisted the fighters during the rebellion." (192) . The crocodile spirits (pagali) that the woman speaks of are reflective of the indigenous elements of indigenous Filipinos spirituality that is still present in their religious beliefs despite their being Muslim. This can be likened to the similar situation of the Christian Filipinos who hold similar notions of spirits. McKenna also mentions another popular kind of spirits that the local Muslim population calls tunngu a inged. Theses spirits are described as only being visible occasionally and often being invisible like the Bicolanos' tawo. These tunngu are said to have assisted the armed rebels as well, and are thus viewed as divine assistance. Yet again spirit who are not a part of the established Western religions (Islam or Christianity) interfere in the lives of humans. The Moros are decidedly Muslim, Islam is a major part of their identity and the politics of their lives, yet they still have another part of their identity that is connected with their being Filipino and Southeast Asian.

In looking at the religions of the Philippines it is clear that the west has played a major role. Both Islam and Christianity were brought to the indigenous people of the Philippines by westerners who helped convert the Filipinos. Yet, in taking a closer look at how Filipinos practice and understand their spiritual world it is clear that they have created a unique combination of both western religions and indigenous spiritual beliefs. It is important and valuable to understand that underneath the notion of the Philippines as being decidedly Catholic there rests unique local elements that shape Filipino religious life. Moreover it is also important to not overlook the fact that there is a small minority Muslim population in the Philippines who have struggled for separation from the state.

References


Ref.: http://chifilipino.tripod.com/religion.htm