Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines, Fenella Cannell

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/moussons/2781
ISSN: 2262-8363

Publisher
Presses Universitaires de Provence

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 July 2002
Number of pages: 137-139
ISSN: 1620-3224

Electronic reference

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divergent, yet internally articulated, in which every social group makes an important contribution, though not everywhere and all the time” (pp. 292-293).

This collection of essays certainly contributes to that quest for a better understanding of the 1896 revolution. A colorful patchwork picture, it offers, seen as a whole, a more complete saga of the times of the revolution, stressing that revolutions are not just fought in the battlefield but, rather, by every person whose live is affected by them.


**By Oona Thommes PAREDES**

As studies of lowland, “Christianized” Philippine culture go, this is easily one of the most insightful works to be published since Illeto’s *Pasyon and Revolution*. Both works deal to some extent with how people manage power inequalities. Like Illeto’s *Pasyon*, Cannell’s study shows how lowland Filipinos – this time in the Bicol region – have interpreted Christian symbols according to local concepts of power. However, Christian symbolism is only one aspect of Cannell’s work, and because of this, her book is meaningful on a much wider level. It is also an honest ethnography that will remain relevant for future generations of Philippinists and anthropologists.

The book is composed of four distinct and seemingly unrelated sections: marriage, spirit healing, saints and the dead, and beauty contests. Each section is strong enough to hold its own, and a hasty reading may yield the impression that the book is merely a compilation of disparate elements from the author’s fieldwork. The working theme is relational power – in this case, how power is negotiated in a relationship between unequal partners. The book deals with the most intimate types of relationships – between husband and wife, between a spirit and a healer, between the dead and their survivors, between a believer and her God, and between a person and his/her ideals of personhood. The theme recurs throughout the chapters, but does not truly coalesce to its full analytical impact until the concluding chapter.

In “Marriage,” Cannell explores how women manage their multiple roles as daughters and wives, and yet somehow retain some power in situations where they feel obligated to follow their parents’ decisions – in this case, in marriage decisions, even when these go against their own will. With parent-arranged marriages and the ideal of the obedient daughter, one could assume that Bicolano women have no real control over their own lives. But Cannell shows that women have multiple avenues for exercising control (e.g., rejecting their husbands in bed), and that both men and women see marriage as a process through which such difficulties should be eventually worked out. In fact, we learn that the marker of a successful marriage is that the wife and husband ultimately learn to cooperate, stay together, and eventually come to love each other. In the woman’s case, her assertion of power in this relationship is deciding when it is finally time to “pity” the man she was forced to marry, and actually start to care about his welfare and happiness. In addition, the woman’s demonstrated obedience to her parents compels them to defend her interests through parental interference. By gaining the confidence and obvious affection of these women, Cannell was able to explore with great insight how power is negotiated and a semblance of equality achieved through the institutionalization of female reluctance within this intimate dyad of husband and wife.

The section on “Healing and the Spirits” provides a glimpse of the fascinating interaction between people and the spirit world, a fact of life almost everywhere in the Philippines. The theme of relational power is explored here through the problematic relationship that (female) healer-mediums have with their spirit-companions (saro). The root of the problem is that, while the saro may grant some women the precious power to heal others, it is a gift that a healer is basically compelled to accept, and with this “gift” comes the near-total control by the saro and the spirit world over the healer’s life. The saro also has the potential to overpower the healer and literally drag her out of this world. Like the partnership between husband and wife, the partnership between the healer and her saro often involves reluctance,
negotiation, and eventually getting “used to each other.” All this takes place at the most intimate level of all – inside the healer’s consciousness. Beyond the characterization of this relationship, Cannell includes many interesting cultural details that point to the decidedly shamanic role of the healer, as one who does not profit materially from her gift, and for whom the “conversation” with the spirit world is not only the source of healing power, but also the goal of all her activity.

Moving on to Catholic symbols, the third section deals with devotional relationships with the dead and with Catholic saints. Elements from the previous section inevitably make their way into the discussion, as death is sometimes attributed to spirits or other supernatural creatures, such as the classic aswang, which remains at the forefront of every Filipino child’s pantheon of fear. The first chapter focuses on relations with dead relatives and friends who may return to visit or molest the living – much as parents sometimes interfere with their children’s marriages. One recurring issue is the unfinished business or unresolved “debt” (whether emotional, social, or financial) that may remain between the deceased and the living. When the dead “cling” to the living for “companionship,” it is considered destructive in that it generates illness and sometimes death among relations and close friends.

The idea of relational power is not well-developed in this first chapter, because there appears to be no real negotiation or reciprocity taking place in relationships with the dead. Though Cannell begins to deal with grief and mourning, she does not connect the persistence of dead relatives or friends with the psychological process of grieving. Clearly, people in a diverse range of cultures, even Western ones, can become physically affected, even to the point of death, by the passing of someone with whom they had close emotional ties. Though Bicolanos use a different terminology, is this not basically a physical manifestation of the severe emotional impact of an unexpected death, and the relative inability of some individuals to deal with the burden of grief? Why relations with the familiar dead should run contrary to the negotiation and reciprocity prevalent in all other Bicolano relations (marriage, neighbors, spirits, saints, etc.) is puzzling, especially as we know that ancestors tend to remain useful to the living in other Southeast Asian cultures, and even in other Philippine groups.

The second and third chapters of this section deal with Catholic saints and the Amang Hinulid, or image of the dead Christ. This is more familiar territory to those who have read Ileto’s Pasyon and Rafael’s Contracting Colonialism. Cannell emphasizes the difference between the proper relationship with the familiar dead, and the proper relationship with the dead who have become Catholic icons. With the former, a definitive separation is required in order to proceed successfully with daily life, whereas the less powerful living must rely on the Ama’s and the saints’ pity and innate generosity, for which they negotiate compensatory acknowledgment in various ways. Negotiating supernatural assistance is another highly intimate form of dealing with power, though it is distinct from the healer-saro relationship in being benevolent and merciful. Neither the saints nor the Ama make unreasonable demands on those who ask for their help. A relationship with the dead Christ and the saints also forms another nexus of social organization, albeit loose, through which a religious kinship creates ties between individuals, based on their devotion. What is novel here is the connection that Cannell makes between imitation and self-transformation in the recitation and performance of the Pasyon, and imitation and self-transformation in beauty contests, the subject of the final section.

“Beauty Contests” is unfortunately brief, for it is to me the most fascinating section of all. It is about overcoming “shame” (which is more akin to self-conscious inhibition in the Philippines), and the transformative nature of local performance opportunities, such as beauty contests for women and bakla (transgendered “gay” men). Such contests take place throughout the lowland Philippines in even the smallest barrios. By transcending shame and self-consciousness, the performer achieves a form of “beauty.” The moderator of these events, the ubiquitous “emcee” or master of ceremonies, functions as a trickster, with license to disregard normal social restraints against direct criticism, often infusing his role with comedy to avoid causing offense.

Talent and beauty contests might seem a kitschy but weak imitation of American low or “pop”
culture, but there is considerable social status associated with winning the title of beauty queen. A title is significant social capital because "[b]ecoming beautiful in the Philippines has historically been seen as a protective process, emphasising a person’s humanity and right to respect..." (p. 225). In this way, the quest for beauty and refinement by women and bakla and the quest for perfection by individuals in talent contests have much deeper aesthetic connotations than the usual derogatory assumptions about imitation in lowland Philippine culture would allow. For talent and bakla-beauty contestants, imitating a popular singer or dressing up like a movie star is not a way of showing off, but of getting closer to the elusive, timeless beauty and social power of their objects of admiration. It is a path to self-transformation, just as participating in the Pasyon brings one closer to the spiritual beauty and supernatural power of the suffering Christ.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Power and Intimacy to Philippine studies, and to Southeast Asian studies in general, is that it challenges us to take another look at the substance of “modern” lowland Philippine culture. The concluding chapter begins with an insightful synthesis of the divergent themes around which the book was built, reiterating the theme of relational power, already recognized as a complex, widespread concept in Southeast Asian cultures. This core concept underlies a wide range of social and political phenomena in the region, including Filipino utang na loob (“internal debt” of gratitude), political mandalas, and the perceived supernatural potency of some individuals. But it is often misunderstood in functionalist terms as the “patron-client relationship.” Cannell transcends this problem with a rich and historically informed discussion of relational power and the ways in which this concept of power turns class stratification (as understood through Western economic models) on its head – at least on a social-relational, or intimate, interpersonal level.

In the middle of the concluding chapter, Cannell recounts the historical development of the idea that Philippine lowland culture is not only far too “Christianized” and “Hispanized” to be considered “authentic,” but also that anything distinctive, such as native use of Christian symbolism, or other unique lowland practices, is nothing but an anomalous adaptation of Western culture. Cannell shows with great clarity that this highly negative concept of lowland culture, which most unfortunately dominates lowland Filipinos’ ideas about their own culture (or better yet, the lack of it), was developed mainly during the American colonial period. The Americans brought with them not only different (more egalitarian and Protestant) ideas about Christianity, but also the then-radical notion of the separation of church and state. On top of this, several centuries of experience with Native American cultures bred in these colonizers a romantic bias towards the more picturesque and visibly exotic upland cultural groups. Donning Western dress and practicing that all too familiar old-time religion, and some even speaking a European language with considerable fluency, the “overclad” lowlanders never had a chance against this “colonial mentality.” The fact that many of the lowlanders fought a guerilla war against the Americans until 1907 – and the uplanders by and large did not – only fed romantic notions about the pristine (read: authentic) culture of “noble” savages and the negative definition of the hostile lowlanders as having no real culture of their own. Fortunately this mentality is slowly changing in Philippine studies, despite its prominence in conventional wisdom.

Because it is so multifaceted, Power and Intimacy naturally cannot match the cultural and analytical detail of, say, Pasyon and Revolution. But its breadth, combined with the clarity of Cannell’s style of writing and presentation, makes it accessible to college students not specifically interested either in Philippine studies, in anthropology, or in inter-related fields like religious or gender studies. Yet this study is complex enough to hold the interest of specialists in all those fields. This combination of qualities makes it ideal for use in those respective curricula, while contributing to a broader public exposure of Philippine cultural studies.

Notes

2 Contracting Colonialism, by Vicente Rafael, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1988.