

Book Review

Counter-Hispanization in the colonial Philippines: Literature, law, religion, and native custom

By JOHN D BLANCO

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023. Pp. 355. Map, Plates, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463424000341

Counter-Hispanization in the colonial Philippines builds on John Blanco's previous book *Frontier constitutions*, which examines cultural transformations in the Philippines in the nineteenth century. This volume takes an earlier starting point than that of the depiction of Spanish colonisation as a 'spiritual conquest'. It argues that far from bringing about the peaceful conversion of native peoples to Christianity and their incorporation into the Spanish state, the interaction of the religious orders with native elites led to counter-Hispanisation processes and social anomie. The study is largely based on a literary analysis of the writings of the religious orders and selected Tagalog texts and practices.

Chapters 1 and 2 outline the background to Spanish colonisation of the Philippines, showing how the term *pacificación* rather than *conquista* was chosen to justify Spain's possession of the islands in the face of legal challenges and criticisms of its depredations in the Americas. Along with other recent scholars, Blanco demonstrates how even though the colonisation of the Philippines was largely in the hands of the religious orders, its occupation was not peaceful but rather was accompanied by bloodshed, resistance, flight, and marronage that continued through to the nineteenth century. The author then examines the legal basis of Spanish patronage over the church, showing how the regular clergy were governed by the rules of their orders and the authority of the Pope in Rome. This gave them immunity from canon and civil law, leading to struggles for jurisdiction with secular officials and between the religious orders themselves over its interpretation. These conflicts generated accounts that exposed abuses, showing how indigenous beliefs and rituals were suppressed, but left native societies ignorant of Christianity and the laws and values it embodied.

Chapter 3 compares the aims of 'spiritual conquest', involving conversion and resettlement, against the realities as revealed in the prose of religious chroniclers, notably the Philippine Jesuit Pedro Chirino and the Dominican Diego Aduarte, but also in the context of more general writings by the Jesuit, José de Acosta. Accounts describe the practical difficulties missionaries faced in the establishment of mission settlements, notably the geography of the islands, their dispersed populations, and the shortage of priests to maintain a permanent presence. Absent though is

any recognition of the destabilising effects of Moro raids, which were a significant scourge particularly in the Visayas. The chapter goes on to discuss how the Christian conception of a struggle against evil and the Devil led to a focus on the suppression of idolatry and shamans and how accounts of native practices and beliefs reveal the confidence of the religious orders in the inevitability of Christian conversion.

Blanco observes that the religious orders not only condemned native practices but also aimed to demonstrate the benefits to adopting Christianity in the face of the anomie induced by conquest. These benefits included caring for the sick, and protection from disease or from the devil or outsiders. Blanco shows how this was done in part through promoting cults, such as the Holy Cross, and accounts of miracles, which he exemplifies in comparing different accounts of the origin of the Virgin of Caysasay. He shows how, although the religious orders initially encouraged cults and were tolerant of the way they were adopted, they later became concerned about their divergence from Christianity.

Chapter 6 turns to an analysis of two early eighteenth-century Tagalog texts, namely Antonio de Borja's *Barlaan at Josaphat* and Gaspar Aquino de Belen's *Mahal na Pasion*. Written against the background of the increased commercialisation and penetration of state control into the provinces held by the religious orders, Blanco shows how native elites criticised the colonial authorities for their failure to bring the freedom that spiritual conquest had promised. Addressed to native leaders in Tagalog, these writings foreshadow the rebellions that would break out later in the century. Excerpts from the original Tagalog texts are presented along with English translations.

Based on both religious and Tagalog texts, Chapters 7 and 8 demonstrate how, in the eighteenth century, native cultures were transformed or reinvented as a practical defence against increased commercial and bureaucratic penetration into interior regions. New forms emerged that were acceptable and might even be promoted by the religious orders who were facing diminished authority and frustration with native conversion.

This book is set within a wider historical context, but it is written by a literary scholar rather than historian, so it is based largely on the analysis of Spanish and Tagalog texts. The prose and concepts used will perhaps be challenging to those less familiar with the literary field, but it reveals what textual analysis can contribute to understanding wider cultural historical processes. While some of the background to colonisation, the role of the religious orders, and native resistance is well known, the topics and sources are approached from a different perspective. Blanco hints at the applicability of his analysis to frontier regions in other parts of the Americas. A significant issue is that the Philippines were in many ways exceptional, not least in the very prominent role afforded to the religious orders, but also the prevalence of native slavery or servitude and Muslim raids from the south. Might there not even have been differences between Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao with their different native cultures, which are not really discussed, or between the approaches of different religious orders who were responsible for distinct regions of the islands? Like all good research, the book poses as many questions as it answers.

Counter-Hispanization is a significant contribution to understanding the colonial experience in the Philippines and of the culture and politics of the islands today.

It reveals the complexity of the Christianisation process and how it reflected struggles between the state and church for control over native peoples. This was a central feature of Spanish colonisation throughout the Americas, so by inserting the lesser-known Philippines into this broader context, Blanco not only adds to knowledge of the islands but brings it to scholars with interests beyond the Southeast Asia region.

LINDA A. NEWSON

School of Advanced Study, University of London