Unconventional Sisterhood
Claussen, Heather

Published by University of Michigan Press

Claussen, Heather.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/113378

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3629222
Prolegomenon

First, a Word

First, there was the Word—or so the Missionary Benedictine Sisters would say. And the primacy they give words is both revealing and disturbing. Words carry creative power; words, as my informants well knew, can be used both to reaffirm and to challenge the cultural worlds we inhabit. Thus, many of my primary interviewees played with their language, in good humor but often with high stakes. They were lucky, however. They were all proficient in both English and the new national language of the Philippines, Filipino, not to mention their native dialects and, frequently, other tongues, such as German or Spanish. Many Filipinos lack access to the training in English and Filipino alike provided by elite educational institutions in the Philippines, and many are thereby effectively kept from equal participation in Filipino politics and big business. In the Philippines, in short, it is difficult to gain a say in government or to make money without the right words in the right language.

So the use of words to make worlds represents a privilege and entails significant responsibility. Nor is this anywhere more obvious than in ethnography, which, by definition, entails the definition of others—often cultural others with unequal access to the words by which they are made—from an inevitably biased and interested distance. And given the desire to avoid repeating the mistakes of a neocolonialist history by misrepresenting the ethnographic field, this makes ethnography difficult to write. The thicker the words flow, the thicker the questions come—what right do I have to speak for my informants, what if my informants wouldn’t agree with my interpretations of their lives, is the shorthand of their biographies shortchanging them? What does one do when confronted by a host of unique individuals with pronounced personalities that can’t easily be abstracted into generalizations? What about the self-reflexive realization that one’s field interactions could
not have been typical and would not be duplicable, because situated within very particular historical, social, and relational contexts?

The subjective nature of ethnography renders it difficult to say anything with any certainty: the knowledge that every word, every claim, is inevitably skewed by an outsider’s point of view poses an obstacle to the assertion of anything positive whatsoever. The assertion of anything substantial concerning “the field” is always vulnerable to deconstruction and to critiques of the systems of privilege supporting ethnography in the first place. Yet I remain convinced—perhaps due my own interest in the matter—that the attempt to communicate something about alternative cultural possibilities is of value in its own right. It would be too easy to give up, lapsing into silence—but wouldn’t this ultimately represent a victory for ignorance and isolationism? I would rather try to tell the story of my fieldwork, notwithstanding all the risks involved, with words to problematize my very words.

And what is my tale about? It is about a select group of Filipina Missionary Benedictine Sisters—all of whose names have been changed to preserve confidentiality—who agreed to share something of themselves with me during the tenure of my research in Metropolitan Manila in the mid-1990s. It is about my informants’ attempts to challenge and renegotiate assumptions about what womanhood can and should mean within the modern-day Philippines. It is about the ways in which the nuns understand their faith as motivating and justifying radical action. It is about the social significance of visionaries like Sister Justine, perhaps best known as cofounder and former chair of the umbrella feminist organization GABRIELA. It is about individual agency in effecting cultural change not only through large-scale public action but also on a smaller, more local, more personal scale. It is about Filipina feminism—and feminism more generally—as a contested and complicated cultural category. Finally, it is about friendship and about treasured moments of communication across the divides of experience and perspective that separated my informants and me.

Nor is any of this insignificant. For one thing, although anthropological interest in the Philippine Islands has grown over the past twenty years—as evidenced by the laudable work of Cannell (1999), Dumont (1992), Ileto (1979), Johnson (1997), Mulder (1996), Ness (1992), Pertierra (1988, 1995), Rafael (1988, 1995), M. Rosaldo (1980a), and R. Rosaldo (1980), to name just a few examples—the Philippines itself has been long marginalized within anthropology (not to mention Southeast Asian Studies) due to trenchant international (and national) misconceptions concerning a purported lack of “culture” (including
material culture) in the multiply colonized, and thus superficially quite Hispanicized and Americanized, lowlands. While the Philippines’ unique colonial history may render it less immediately interesting to Western anthropologists seduced by the exoticism of other Southeast Asian nations with very different colonial histories and thus different national religiocultural histories, however, I would dispute the claim that the Philippines lacks its own cultural vitality, following the lead of both R. Rosaldo (1980), who problematizes the belief that “pristine” societies are better subjects for study than societies “contaminated” by other cultural influences, and Cannell (1999), who lucidly argues the significance of indigenous perspectives and practices despite both a veneer of “Westernization” and local assumptions of “culturelessness” in Bicol.

Moreover, insofar as the Philippines stands in contrast to much of the rest of Southeast Asia as the only (and significantly) predominantly Christian country in the region, I would maintain the particular value of ethnographic explorations of the ways in which Catholicism has not only heavily influenced Filipino “mainstream” culture (itself partly a matter of nationally internalized and promoted stereotypes often emphasizing the processes of “Westernization”), but has also done so in a markedly Filipino fashion, with a markedly Filipino flavor. Most of the (often exemplary) work done on Philippine Catholicism to date concerns popular religious practice, the church leadership, and male orders, however (see, e.g., Cannell 1999; de la Costa 1961; Ileto 1979; Pertierra 1988; Rafael 1988; Santiago 1995; Schumacher 1981, 1987; Shoesmith 1985; and Youngblood 1990). Filipina religious sisterhood has been largely ignored, perhaps partly due to the mistaken assumption that nuns are both boring and culturally insignificant, and partly precisely because women remain marginalized within the official Church hierarchy (from which congregations like that of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters retain some administrative distance but to which monastic orders still ultimately answer). Indeed, female monasticism elsewhere hasn’t received much more ethnographic attention: with the exception of Sanchez’s study of nuns in Puerto Rico (1983) and assorted sociological, journalistic, and biographical studies focused on women religious in the United States and Great Britain (e.g., Bernstein 1976; Campbell-Jones 1979; Ebaugh 1993; Norris 1996; Rogers 1996), anthropologists have paid little heed to Catholic women’s congregations. In the Philippine context, however, the Missionary Benedictines are significant social actors and warrant attention as such.
In fact, the Missionary Benedictines have formed an Institute of Women’s Studies in Metro Manila—managed by Sister Justine, who has publicly defined herself as a spokesperson for Philippine feminism, cofounded two well-known Philippine feminist organizations (including GABRIELA), and catalyzed the congregation’s growing concern with gender issues. On the other hand, many of the nuns also enact their politics in less obvious, more private ways during the course of their everyday lives: protesting sexist language, challenging students to reinvent their religion, and counseling women to take control over their own bodies and sexuality. Nor can their “feminism” be directly attributed to involvement with Philippine nationalist groups, notwithstanding an emphasis on the connections between Philippine nationalism and Philippine feminism in most of the extant literature on the subject. As will be further discussed in my final chapter, Aguilar (1988), Aquino (1985), and West (1992) have made notable contributions to the otherwise sparse literature on the topic, stressing the ways in which Filipina involvement in nationalist groups has engendered a concern with women’s issues within the specific context of neocolonialism. The sisters, however, primarily understand their own commitment to women’s rights issues as a religious impulse; in short, their faith dictates and is central to their politics.

The present study not only expands the scope of current scholarship on Philippine feminism, though; it also speaks to a lack of specifically ethnographic work focused on consciously “feminist” collectives worldwide. Rapidly globalizing urban environments like Metropolitan Manila merit further ethnographic exploration, too. Notwithstanding the city’s vast size and increasingly unstable, ethnically mixed, population, Metro Manila—often termed the “center” of the nation—is in fact of particular anthropological interest as the locus of dynamic political and ideological debates concerning both the negotiation of national identity amid intense diversity and “modernization” within a larger international context. And the Missionary Benedictines—simultaneously very much concerned with the affirmation and display of their Philippine identity and very much engaged in transnational ideological discourses (and practices) as members of a global congregation—afford significant insights into the ways in which culture is being simultaneously reclaimed and reshaped in the National Capital Region.

Of course, most of the Missionary Benedictines discussed neither themselves nor their projects with me in such abstract fashion. Instead, they told me stories and invited me into their daily lives. Not that doing participant observation with them was always easy. The nuns not
only were often extremely busy with their assignments but also represented a relatively inaccessible subject population. While female, unmarried, and even “good nun material” by my informants’ own reckoning, I still always remained only a lay visitor. And this prohibited my direct involvement in all aspects of the Missionary Benedictines’ lives. The sisters slept and ate their evening meals in cloister, and their cells and communal recreation sessions were off-limits even to the postulants and novices in formation; in short, they spent significant time in spaces I could only learn about secondhand.

On the other hand, I did participate in the nuns’ evening prayers, attend their searches in, visit their formation house, witness important religious rites, sit in on SSC classes, and occasionally accompany my informants on excursions outside of the convent. Moreover, we talked. Admittedly, these discussions primarily took the form of scheduled interviews during which I was treated to treasured pieces of the sisters’ life stories. As I got to know my interviewees better, however, our get-togethers became less formalized: we settled down to amiable chats in between prayer and work hours, not only providing mutually agreeable interactive opportunities but also affording me a chance to learn about issues of personal identity on a more intimate scale. Nor did our conversation, on such occasions, consist only of biographical details and theoretical questions. We also talked of more mundane if nevertheless relevant things: Sister Josephine’s headaches and teaching triumphs; Sister Virginia’s motion sickness and family relationships; Sister Micha’s student worries and swimming breaks. And, without doubt, the latter’s self-professed and loudly pronounced delight upon hearing me tagged her American kaibigan, or “friend,” remains one of the highlights of my field experience.

Indeed, I felt most fulfilled as an anthropologist in getting to know my informants as unique individuals, and I have endeavored to remain true to them in writing this book. While the interactions recounted here barely hint at the richly layered hours my interviewees and I spent together, I have made a sincere attempt both to reveal something of what it means to be Missionary Benedictine and to replicate something of the feel of the Philippines. Likewise, I have done my best to provide a window into the processes of ethnographic discovery that I myself went through by privileging the narrative itself, without the distraction and inevitable distancing of a conventional prefatorial outline.

Now, then, on to the congregation headquarters in Metro Manila.