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=3629227
Notwithstanding the routine of the sisters’ everyday, of course, their lives are also punctuated by new and sometimes unexpectedly illuminating opportunities and experiences afforded them precisely as Missionary Benedictines. Indeed, not only the fact of the sisters’ religious flexibility but also some of the ways in which their understandings of spirituality support an activist politics were exemplified by what proved a very instructive pilgrimage I made with Sister Micha to Mount Banahaw, a sacred mountain in the Philippines. Notably, the journey not only entailed geographical movement across space to the mountain but also engaged us in movement across cultures, and, symbolically, in movement across time, both backward through Philippine history and forward to a projected millennium. Moreover, as a pilgrimage across such multiple boundaries, the trip helped to cue me in to a larger, always religious, and often appropriative Missionary Benedictine search for both national and feminist relevance.

Not, of course, that I understood the excursion in such highly theorized fashion at the time. Rather, I was simply excited at the prospect of an overnighter with Sister Micha that warm January Saturday. Officially, the sister volunteered to make the trip as chaperone to the Love Bank, a club composed of St. Scholasticans and medical-school students interested in mission work. The medical students would offer the residents of Mount Banahaw free checkups and minor medical services, while the collegians would distribute free medicine, obtained by soliciting pharmaceutical companies. And as dean of student affairs, the sister was happy to help; after all, she wanted to encourage the students to get involved with underprivileged populations in the Philippines. Nor would their contributions be unappreciated. Banahaw residents have limited access to Manileño supplies and services in the normal course of affairs. Traveling the distance between the mountain and the
metropolis by public transportation normally entails making several stops and taking a chance on often irregular and unreliable jeepneys; we ourselves were lucky to have the private bus commissioned by St. Scholastica’s, not to mention the sleeping quarters afforded by our college connections.

If Sister Micha was formally accompanying the Love Bank as an SSC official, however, she had her own reasons for making the trip, too. The outing represented a rare opportunity not only to see the fabled mountain but also to visit the Siyudad Mistika, a nationalist religious cult headquartered at Banahaw. Nor is the Siyudad alone. There are many millennial and nationalist sects based in the area—some eighty in all, including splinter groups (although Quibuyen’s [1991] estimate of thirty is more conservative) according to Carmen—then celebrating her twentieth year as a teacher of both religion and women’s studies at SSC. The various groups coexist peacefully, even observing one another’s celebration days and often joining together for communal purposes.

The Siyudad Mistika is the largest of this multitude; moreover, it is of particular interest in this case because headed by Suprema, a sort of symbolic model of Philippine female religious empowerment for many of the nuns. Not all the sisters personally know the high priestess: many simply know of her from congregation stories of both the priestess and her following, not to mention the traditional pilgrimage cycle made by devotees. Nevertheless, all of the nuns with whom I talked about the sect expressed fascination with Suprema and the Siyudad Mistika alike—this they told me, was a religion run by women, testifying to indigenous Filipina spiritual expertise. And that, in turn, is why “exposures” to Mount Banahaw have been incorporated into the Trainor’s Training (sic) offered both lay and religious Filipina activists by the IWS as a sort of introduction to gender issues.

The expert of the moment was neither Sister Micha nor any of the other nuns, however, but Carmen. Although not Missionary Benedictine herself, she was heavily involved with both the sisters and the IWS; in fact, she regularly participated in women’s ritual sessions with the nuns, was instrumental in the development and implementation of the women’s studies program at SSC, was highly knowledgeable about Philippine feminism in general, and was altogether as much an activist as an academic. What’s more, she clearly got along very well with Sister Micha, which was doubtless partly why she decided to accompany us to Mount Banahaw as a very welcome guide and trail veteran.

Nor was Carmen the only one to join what, in the end, proved a
rather eclectic band of travelers. When I arrived at the college with my backpack in hand, I was both surprised and pleased to be introduced to two more aspiring pilgrims—a German student named Gretta and a Korean feminist theologian named Mei. I had actually already heard of Gretta when one of my more casual informants confused us upon my initial arrival in the Philippines. While such confusion was certainly understandable given the fact that we both had white skin, blue eyes, and fair hair, however, Gretta was in the country for somewhat different reasons than I. As we waited for the decidedly tardy medical students to board the bus hired for the excursion, she told me she was completing a research practicum with children in the urban squatter communities of Metro Manila for a German social work program—an enjoyable venture but also a difficult one, she admitted, because, ignorant of Tagalog, she had to rely on sign language and play.

**Appropriate and Inappropriate Appropriation**

Mei, on the other hand, although also foreign, and certainly also ignorant of Tagalog, configured her much more short-term presence in the Philippines not in terms of difference but rather in terms of a common “Asianness.” If both Gretta and the Indian and Chinese women I met on the convent grounds talked to me of various difficulties in managing the Philippines as outsiders, Mei was not prepared to admit to any such problems. Instead, she was rather appropriative of Asian cultural diversity. After identifying herself as a Korean theologian here for five days to work on a book with Carmen, she rather casually informed us that she would make her next stop in India. And, “Oh,” she went on, she “loved India;” she “must have been Indian in a previous incarnation.” Her stomach, she thought, was Buddhist, her heart was Christian, half her brain was Taoist, and the other half of her brain was Confucian.

“Confusion—yes, that’s right!” concluded Sister Micha at the end of the monologue—unable to resist a joke, this time prompted by and pointed at Mei’s seeming appropriative pretensions. While I thought I detected irritation at Mei’s claims to be a corporeal representation of everything Asian here, though, Mei herself was not entirely different from Sister Micha in identifying across the diversity of Asian traditions. In many ways, the Missionary Benedictines are themselves appropriative of cultural alternatives, including those represented by the Siyudad Mistika. Moreover, the Philippine congregation prides itself in being a
“new Asian missionary center” as part of the “only Christian nation in Asia.” Such congregational claims are hardly any more legitimate than Mei’s talk of being Buddhist-Christian-Taoist-Confucian: just as Mei was emphasizing her Asianness over her Koreanness in order to forward her collaboration with the Filipinas hosting her, the Missionary Benedictines are emphasizing their Asianness over their Philippineness in order to forward the establishment of new houses in India and China.

All of this bears on the sisters’ understandings of their Philippineness, too. Nationality and internationalism were of simultaneous and inseparable concern to my interviewees, who, again, existed within an arguably privileged yet troublesomely ambiguous liminal space between and across more traditional lines of self-definition. Just as gender was of issue to the sisters precisely because of the ways in which they were transgressing cultural gender expectations, being (and proving themselves) Filipina was of issue to them precisely because of their vulnerability to accusations of insufficient patriotism—of having capitulated to Western hegemonies because identified with an originally German congregation or, more critically, because feminist. Although, for the sisters themselves, being Missionary Benedictine and being feminist afforded opportunities to transcend the very bounds of citizenship and geography, such crossings-over were apt to engender different but equally uncomfortable sorts of suspicions in the Philippine left and the Philippine mainstream alike.

At the moment, then, the fact that we were on our way to a Philippine nationalist stronghold mattered. Being Philippine would and did make a difference here for some of the reasons suggested above; this, I think, was why Sister Micha—who had ironically proven herself impatient with the Chinese candidates’ failure to fit in—appeared so perturbed at Mei’s claims to familiarity, and even identity, across all of Asia. It wasn’t so much that Mei was a foreigner, like Gretta and me, but that she appeared ready to appropriate the Siyudad in support of her own self-definition, something Sister Micha clearly felt she had more right to do herself as a Filipina.

More Monkey Business

Of course, the fact that the Siyudad Mistika was serious business for Sister Micha didn’t stop her from joking—as should be evident by now,
she often joked about serious things. In part, admittedly, this was quite simply because she was Filipino, and Filipinos stereotypically place a high value on performance and entertainment. Indeed, the 1994–95 Primer on the Philippines put out by the Philippine Convention and Visitors Corporation advertises “Sixty-million smiling Filipinos [who] account for the sense of fun and openness in the archipelago.” More generally, Filipinos often present themselves as ever ready to laugh, sing, dance, and party, even in the midst of poverty and disaster, all of which points to the widespread cultural value placed on the appearance of being carefree and lighthearted.Appearances (and national self-stereotypes) can be deceiving, however. In contexts where openly expressing hostility is extremely impolite, humor can quite intentionally be employed to express controversial opinions or even downright disagreement without explicitly offending anyone, as Sister Micha herself well knew.

Consider some of the sister’s jokes, for instance. Having already manipulated the homophones Confucian and confusion to both get a laugh and forward a subtle critique of Mei’s appropriative tendencies, the sister went on with what was essentially a form of wordplay—not to mention a commentary on the possibilities of miscommunication. While watching Gretta unwrap a chicken sandwich packed by the house help at Subiaco, Sister Micha took it upon herself to describe a comic strip she liked. The first character, she told us, says, “My tummy doesn’t feel too good.” The second responds, “It feels fine to me” while putting his hand on the first character’s stomach. So the first lifts his club over the other’s head, shouting, “Your head won’t feel too good soon.”

Notably, such joking—dependent on double meanings and terminological twists—was typical of the sister. Recall her talk of the nuns’ ung-goy formation, for instance, or of going from “X to zzzzz” in prayer. During one of our lunch dates at Chow King, a Chinese-Filipino fast-food restaurant, too, she entertained me with a set of stories already familiar to me from my childhood in the United States: a customer finds a fly in her soup and asks what it’s doing there: “Looks like the backstroke,” says the waiter, or, “Did you want a mosquito instead?” In all of these cases, the sister’s humor turns on specifically linguistic ambiguities—what does it mean to say a tummy doesn’t feel good or to announce a fly in one’s soup? If the jokes are funny, they are funny because the mistakes or confusion involved are both in some sense obvious and simultaneously perfectly reasonable errors of communication. Indeed, listening to and “getting” such jokes depends on, and in fact serves as proof or
reassurance of, knowledge of the way language works—knowledge, in short, both of what was really meant and of why the mistakes made might be made, whether with the suggestion of intention or due to simple misinterpretation. In many ways, then, as joker, Sister Micha herself was displaying and practicing linguistic facility.

Moreover, the above examples all involve the English language. And this, I would argue is significant not only given the history of the Philippines and the internationalization of the congregation but also the fact that I, the ethnographer and Sister Micha’s interviewer, was myself a native American English speaker. In short, I suspect the sister’s reliance on English in joking with me (and, in the case of the tummy joke, with a larger international audience) bears significance over and above her desire to entertain. Admittedly, in part, her choice may have been practical; after all, the alternative, Filipino, was no more her own first language than was English. Indeed, although the proponents of Filipino intend it to be and promote it as a pan-Philippine language, it is actually highly contested in the Philippines because largely based on Tagalog, and Sister Micha not only came from Iloilo, in the Visayas, but also admitted to me that many Tagalog-speaking Manileños thought her accent funny. Her English, on the other hand, was well practiced, if Filipinized—English not only having been taught her in elementary school, but also serving as the generic scholastic, bureaucratic, and global, language of the congregation.

Speaking to me in English was not just pragmatic or even hospitable, however. As mentioned previously, English is a high-status language in the Philippines, largely because it signifies high-status Americanness (in turn historically associated with power and privilege in the republic) and indexes the ability to participate on at least equal linguistic terms in international exchange. Thus, Filipino tourist pamphlets proudly trumpet the notion that the Philippines is an “English-speaking country.” More generally, many Filipinos, including those in government, see their knowledge of English as capital in the global market. The apparent success of Filipino overseas workers (OCWs) is often at least partly attributed to their knowledge of English—Filipinas are said to have an edge on other Third World nannies, for instance, because better able to communicate with their employers and charges alike. In addition, the Philippine government and local big business are attempting to attract foreign development by, in part, advertising the linguistic facility of Filipino laborers. Although many of the people employed in the EPZs are not in fact well educated in English due to a
lack of school resources and proficient teachers in many rural and impoverished parts of the archipelago, this only supports the point that English speaking ability has something to do with economics here; it is the elite of the Philippines who can afford an English education in the country’s elite schools, thereby further extending the possibilities of exchange with and access to the West. Sister Micha’s linguistic choices, then, may represent attempts to demonstrate both her personal merit and the internationalism of her congregation, thereby proving her quality as an informant, however much I myself was desirous of practicing my Filipino with the nuns.

The sister’s wordplay may have provided a means of asserting equality with me, too. After all, she had a stake in getting me to take her seriously. And, ironically, demonstrating her English facility may have represented a way to persuade me that she knew what she was talking about. What’s more, joking this way may have rendered the interviews less anxiety provoking—we could have fun, we could be friends, and she could take control of our sessions enough to make me laugh. Such humor doubtless also served as a test of sorts. Several months into my fieldwork, Sister Micha confessed that she “liked people who laughed at her jokes.” Trying her jokes out on me, therefore, may have afforded her a way of ascertaining whether I was someone she might like and someone who would not only “get” the jokes but also “get,” and thus more accurately represent, her.

Indeed, the fact that many of her jokes had to do with ways in which language can be misinterpreted and misused might be taken as an expression of some concern over my interpretative authority as an ethnographer. The sister’s wordplay hinged on the highly inexact, and therefore highly manipulable, nature of language in general and, in particular, the English language within the Philippines. As indicated previously, language has long been used as a colonial tool in the archipelago; consider not only the early Spanish confessional and Latin masses, but also the ways in which the Americans schooled and ruled the country in English. Notably, such forms of linguistic imperialism have significantly disadvantaged Filipinos during highly charged political negotiations dependent, in part, on linguistic facility. On the other hand, Filipinos have also long employed wordplay to make political points; Ileto (1979), for instance, discusses the use of wika-wika (wordplay) within the context of Philippine nationalist efforts in the late nineteenth century. Although the tummy joke does not explicitly involve characters of any specific nationality, then, the sort of misinter-
pretation indexed by the second’s response to the first’s talk of “not feeling good” might be understood as pointedly metaphorical of the ways in which Filipinos have either been intentionally or simply carelessly misunderstood by foreign powers.

Others of the sister’s jokes even more directly indexed concern over the negotiation of foreign matter in the Philippine context, however. For instance, during our very first interview, Sister Micha asked if I had heard of the car Pajero? The Filipinos, she said, had decided to build one just like it; they had called it “Pareho”—or “the same.” How about the Mercedes Benz? Here, in the Philippines, a virtually identical model was called “Mercedes Din,” din meaning “also.” The subtext here, of course, is the point that Filipinos are (or at least popularly conceive of themselves as) good imitators; if they see something they like and can’t get it or afford it themselves, they simply copy it. Nor are such claims to imitative prowess insignificant with respect to the ambiguous position of the Philippines vis-à-vis the international market. Again, Western businesses both operating factories in and selling “high-status” goods in the Philippines have drawn the republic into the global marketplace, with the production of a broad reaching and socially important desire for things western. Yet, here was the suggestion of the possibility of subverting such desire through the appropriation of those very objects desired. If Filipinos have been induced to want Pajeros, well, they will make their own—pareho—thereby manipulating and rewriting the complicated and unequal relationship existing between the Philippines and the rest of the world. The West may have reorganized the world economy to the detriment of Filipinos, but Filipinos can themselves exploit both foreign language and foreign cultural materials in defiance of capitalistic Western interests.

Notably, both the heavy reliance of the Philippines on things foreign and, ultimately, the importance of Filipino agency were also implicated in yet another of the sister’s stories—this time concerning a theological argument between a Japanese man and a Filipino man. “Buddha is the greatest,” says the former, while the latter insists God is much superior. “No, Buddha!” “No, God.” And so forth, until at last they decide to put the matter to a test atop a high mountain cliffside, with the agreement that whoever has the fewest broken bones after jumping over the edge will be proven correct. The Japanese man leaps off first, chanting “Buddha, Buddha, Buddha” all the way down—until, right before crashing into the ground, he miraculously begins levitating all the way back up. So, the Filipino jumps, reciting “God, God, God” while falling. “God,
God, God,” Sister Micha continued—and, right at the point where the Japanese began levitating—“God, God . . . Buddha!” Which means, of course, that he is saved.

While the joke again pokes fun at Filipino deference to the value of foreign traditions, of course, it additionally forwards an implicit claim to the right and ability of Filipinos to make use of such alien cultural forms. And why not? While copying carries negative connotations in America, the ability to imitate and appropriate and to change strategies given situational demands has been of significant survival value in the Philippines, not only given the nation’s long colonialisubjugation to a wide variety of different, foreign cultural pressures but also given modern globalization, rendering the capacity to adjust relatively easily or to conform to divergent social demands very useful. Indeed, the ease with which the Missionary Benedictines accommodate (and make their own use of) foreignness has doubtless not only contributed to their own self-proclaimed missionary success across the globe but also signifies, to both self and other, their Philippineness. Likewise, the nuns’ simultaneous self-presentation as both Westernized and Asian, both Catholic and pagan, and both global and Filipino is quite simply good strategy, amplifying their options in diverse situational contexts and significantly underscoring a fluidity of faith backgrounding their very interest in the Siyudad Mistika.

A Radical Nationalism

The Siyudad itself represents not just a religious sect of sorts, however, but also a highly nationalistic political collective. Cult members identify with past Filipino resistance efforts against the Spanish, the Japanese, and the Americans. Moreover, although founded by Maria Bernarda Balitaan as recently as the late 1950s, the Siyudad can be understood as a part of a long tradition of local reformative and nationalistic religious movements, “a tradition of resistance to the prevailing power structure in Philippine society and an alternative vision of the moral order” (Quibuyen 1992, 20–21; also see Cullamar 1986; Ileto 1979; Marasigan 1985; and Schumacher 1979, 1981). During the early 1800s, Apolinar de la Cruz established a rebel millenarian fraternity titled the Cofradía de San Jose, the members of which not only made regular pilgrimages to Banahaw, but also hid out in the tunnels honeycombing the mountain in an attempt to evade Spanish attempts to violently suppress their revolutionary efforts (Ileto 1979; Quibuyen
Cult activity flourished in the area in the late 1800s, too. “By the time the revolution against Spain began in 1896, the cult was an established center for the Lenten pilgrimage, attracting not only Tagalogs but people from all over the archipelago” (Ileto 1979, 68). In fact, Sebastian Caneo, a pastor heavily involved with the Philippine independence movement, claimed to have heard *santong boces* (holy voices) in Banahaw’s caves directing the rebels to march on the Spanish with magical rope. Likewise, in 1935, Agapito Illustrisimo heard supernatural voices on the mountain, this time calling for the formation of the Tres Personas Solo Dios—another local religio-nationalist sect still in existence today (Marasigan 1985; Quibuyen 1991).

Nor is the Siyudad any less nationalistic; in fact the group’s patriotism is inscribed on its church. For one thing, the main window to the far end of the chapel was fashioned out of three panels of different hues, one red, one white (or transparent, to be exact), and one blue. These, Mr. Santos—our Siyudad host—explained, represented the Filipino flag, consisting of a white triangle containing a yellow sun, bordered by a blue tail on top and a red one below. The flag had been banned during part of the American “occupation,” he continued, but who was to say its colors couldn’t be painted on glass?

The otherwise spartan interior of the church was also decorated with several brightly illustrated posters glorifying José Rizal—again, widely considered the most important national hero of the Philippines and credited for having roused the masses and angered the Spanish through his novels. An oversized portrait of the revolutionary with his incendiary *Noli Me Tangere* and its sequel, *El Filibusterismo*, adorned one wall of the church, next to a bold depiction of Rizal lifted half off the ground by the force of the bullet that took his life—much to the apparent amusement of two Spaniards rendered here in striking and, I suspect, bitter detail. If Rizal’s martyrdom was meant to be metaphorical of the larger experience of colonization, however, it was likewise intended to recall Christ’s own public martyrdom, and the scene was bordered by representations of twelve other Filipino national heroes—Rizal’s disciples, by Siyudad logic. After all, for the cultists, Rizal is a superhuman son of God just like Jesus, and his biography has been mapped onto Christ’s in an ironic appropriation of the terms of the Catholic conquerors.

Of course, unlike Jesus, Rizal has national relevance to the sect. Worshipping the Philippine hero represents another inversion of the terms of Catholicism; the use of Biblical models here signifies not the internalization of Christian pacifism, but, rather, the recognition of a revolu-
tionary politics in Christianity justifying struggles against imperialism. After all, while Christianity may be interpreted as a passive creed, it can also clearly be understood as an exhortation to adhere to personal convictions despite persecution (Ileto 1979). It isn’t so much Jesus’s exhortations to universal love, patience, and forgiveness that interest the Siyudad, then, but his trials and tribulations, his rebellious defiance of Roman authority, and his sympathy for the underprivileged. What’s more, from the Siyudad perspective, herein lies both a scriptural mandate to nationalist action and a rationale for Rizal’s promotion to superhuman status. No matter that Rizal himself was critical of religion, and no matter that Christ himself was arguably more an internationalist than a patriot; the cult’s simultaneous and selective reverence for both support and legitimate the continuing belief that it is necessary, as a mission of faith, to struggle against the “two forces [that] have enslaved [the Philippines]: sin and other countries” (Quibuyen 1991, 16).

Reconfiguring Mainstream Philippine Values

Indeed, while much of its mythology is premised on both the legendary and historical past, the Siyudad remains suspicious of foreign interference in the modern day Philippines, too. More specifically, cultists maintain interconnected concerns with both the reclamation of a Filipino morality believed adulterated by the West and the rectification of social inequalities attributed, at least in part, to the colonial and neocolonial history of the nation. From the Siyudad perspective, America’s political interest in the Philippines, the exploitative use of local labor in foreign-owned EPZs, and the purported perversion of Filipino youth through the production of excessive material desire and the promotion of sexual laxity all exemplify objectionable forms of relationship between the republic and the West. Siyudad members further blame westernization for the corruption of the Philippine elite who, as a general class, are benefiting from and making use of foreign goods, educational opportunities, and connections—in oblivion to, or sometimes even at the expense of, the Philippine poor. In contrast, local responsibility, frugality, and economic cooperation are emphasized within the Siyudad:

Money symbolizes the ungodly qualities of greed and selfishness. Though the priestesses provide the collective labor in a commu-
nal economic enterprise involving the raising of orchids and other ornamental plants which are sold in the city and also the manufacture of children’s clothes for export, there is no capital accumulation. Profit is used for the sustenance of the whole CMD community. (Quibuyen 1991, 15)

In short, the community appears more socialist than capitalist in its organization and operation, with the religious as involved as anyone else in insuring the town’s sustainability. And, in these respects, the Siyudad represents a counterhegemonic response to both the global orientation and entrenched class inequalities typical of Manileño and more mainstream Filipino society.

Nor should the Siyudad’s counterhegemonic stance be surprising, although initially seemingly at odds with scholarly convention concerning the analysis of traditional Philippine social structure. Most students of lowland Philippine culture have focused on the patron-client relationship as the primary organizing principle in Philippine society. Such relationships historically existed between lowland Filipino peasants, farmers, and workers and their local elite benefactors, landlords, and employers—premised, in part, on *utang na loob*, translating into political loyalty and labor exchanged for economic assistance from the wealthy. Patron-client loyalties still can and do often cut across class interests in modern-day Manila; indeed, familial patron-client loyalties continue to play a significant role in Philippine elections and help to explain why even much-maligned figures like Imelda Marcos have returned to national power. Yet the patron-client model does not seem particularly helpful in explaining the periodic resurgence of peasant solidarity in religious rebellion throughout Philippine history. Rather, Ileto (1979) suggests that popular movements of this sort have tended to disrupt prevailing systems of class organization. And while Ileto’s work is not specifically concerned with the Siyudad Mistika, this reading seems appropriate with respect to the cult, with allowances for the participation of select elite and for the ways in which Suprema herself may figure as a patron of sorts for some cult members.

We might understand the activities of the Siyudad Mistika, then, as an attempt to creatively formulate alternatives to mainstream Philippine society given an extensive critique of that society. Indeed, herein doubtless lies the cult’s attraction for many of its members. Like many of its forerunners, the Siyudad has specific appeal to, and is largely comprised of, the disenfranchised; it is primarily a movement of the poor and underprivileged, a movement rendered sensible precisely
because of experienced suffering and inequity begging correction and resolution. Most members come to the faith in refuge from rural or urban poverty; moreover, most are dependent on the local elite and foreign markets alike for survival. We passed residents laying out coffee beans of several different shades to dry in preparation for export; many locals also work as day laborers in coconut plantations maintained by an upper class of Philippine landowners (Quibuyen 1991).

Thus, Siyudad objections to the unequal division of wealth in the Philippines and abroad reflect the cultists’ own experiences of exploitation. If the townspeople rely on the land for their living, this doesn’t mean they are self-sufficient. In fact, the Siyudad’s resistance to capitalism and globalization has clearly been developed and is clearly maintained in a somewhat uneasy relationship with the community’s doubtless much resented but obvious reliance on larger national and international economies. No grateful clients here, the locals instead subscribe to a faith significantly challenging the terms of their own institutionalized poverty.

After all, the Siyudad downplays such problematic worldly dependency by defining itself first and foremost as a New Jerusalem, its spirituality and geography signifying self-determination. Members can rest assured that the very global economy on which they currently rely will eventually collapse: the rest of the world will thereupon become dependent on them and their hospitality, their guardianship itself guaranteed partly by the material simplicity they, like the sisters, have reconfigured as a sign of moral purity. If scarcity has been imposed on the Siyudad’s members, they have turned their need into virtue—much the way the Missionary Benedictines applaud poverty, if more by choice than by necessity.

Sisterly Interest in the Siyudad

Siyudad values clearly parallel those of the nuns in other respects, too: the sisters not only devalue the accumulation of goods but also share resources and expressly oppose Western domination. In addition, like the Siyudad, the Missionary Benedictines—themselves internally hierarchical but democratically rather than absolutely so—represent a primary community premised on ideology, in opposition to traditional patron-client relations, not to mention the pursuit of conventional Philippine signs of status and power. Moreover, like cult members, the nuns prioritize hospitality and are engaged in utopian reform efforts.
And both communities are not only in some sense oriented toward the Bible as inspiration but also exist in a world in which economic and political inequalities abound and in which developing and maintaining a Philippine identity and Philippine independence is of increasing importance given the ambiguous ground of national solidarity and widespread cultural interest in acquiring and imitating foreign goods and signifiers. Both groups also evidence dissatisfaction with the ways in which women and men are differently conceptualized and valued within the country, and, as will presently be discussed in greater depth, both perceive connections between such problematic gender norms and the colonial/neocolonial history of the archipelago while imagining a more egalitarian future wherein the Philippine populace and Filipinas in particular are simultaneously liberated and empowered.

Nor, for that matter, are the two groups’ forms of worship entirely different. In fact, the Siyudad church services we witnessed had an oddly familiar flavor. As we stood in front of the shrine the morning after our arrival, several members of the community entered the church and quietly seated themselves on mats set out before the shrine, reminiscent of the Missionary Benedictines awaiting lauds or compline. Worship here was as strictly scheduled as in the convent, too, although on a different basis: every hour, twelve men and twelve women would come here to pray, the women to the left and the men to the right, all lay members of the Siyudad assigned an entire day’s devotion at monthly intervals. Moreover, the believers presented a rather uniform picture not altogether unlike that of the nuns at vespers. The women kneeling before the altar all wore white cloths over their heads and sported white blouses or T-shirts over white or blue skirts, while the men were all dressed in white tops and blue pants. And when one of them began chanting aloud from the Bible in Tagalog, so fast that not even Carmen and Sister Micha could understand the words, I couldn’t help but think of the sisters’ prayer sessions, wherein the act of ritualized speech itself often seemed of greater importance than the exact words. Despite important differences in detail, the similarities were striking: the formalized dress and positioning of persons, the ceremonial kneeling and rising, and the distinctive way in which biblical selections were given voice (marking their extraordinary character because verbalized in extraordinary fashion).

On the other hand, if the Missionary Benedictines and the Siyudad are both engaged in a counterdiscourse of sorts vis-à-vis the prevailing moral order, their social standings differ. Most obviously, perhaps, the sisters, however self-identified and involved as radical activists, enjoy...
both the general social respect accorded the habit and the privileges of their congregation. Siyudad members, in contrast, not only have fewer actual resources to draw upon, but are also widely marginalized; notwithstanding Sister Micha’s attempts to persuade them otherwise, even the well-intentioned Love Bankers and medical students we accompanied to Mount Banahaw proclaimed the cultists “loopy.”

Yet while Suprema’s participation in the development of a close relationship with the Missionary Benedictines may represent a strategic move on her part to gain greater public legitimacy, not to mention access to services of the sort provided by the Love Bank, the Missionary Benedictines in turn clearly have their own interest in maintaining a close connection with the cult. In part, the sisters obviously view Banahaw as a prime educational opportunity for both their own number and others—going on pilgrimage to the mountain provides a chance both to learn about (reconstructed) Philippine revolutionary history in an experiential rather than purely academic fashion and to witness female spiritual expertise.

Perhaps more significantly, however, the Siyudad offers the nuns validation of the sort they need—not with respect to the mainstream Philippine populace but with respect to the Philippine Left. After all, while the cult boasts historical connections to well-known Philippine revolutionaries, the Missionary Benedictines are in a rather more ambiguous position. As members of an international faith and an international congregation historically linked to the religious colonization of the country, albeit one more specifically established on Philippine soil within the neocolonial context of the American regime, the sisters stand vulnerable to accusations of national betrayal. Does their primary allegiance belong to the Philippines or to Germany or Rome? How can they term themselves “nationalist” if so global in orientation and experience?

Given such concerns, the nuns’ interest in the Siyudad and participation in the pilgrimage cycles may well index a bid to prove their Philippineness. Although the cult might in fact be better understood as an example of post-Christian syncretism than as a modern-day revival of pre-Hispanic babaylanism, Siyudad members claim continuity with such pre-Hispanic practices. The Missionary Benedictines’ connections with Suprema, then, effectively bolster their own claims to legitimacy as both indigenous religious practitioners and Philippine nationalists. Indeed, the nuns’ association with the Siyudad is particularly important given the general value placed on origin stories within the modern Philippines—wherein assertions concerning Filipino identity often
involve reference to the pre-Hispanic (and thus presumably unadulterated or pure) Philippine past. While the congregation’s German and Catholic origins may be suspect, the nuns’ appropriation of the Siyudad’s *babaylan* history provides a means of validation in such contexts (a point I will presently explore further with specific reference to the gendering of faith).

**Faith in the Future**

For now, however, we might return to a consideration of the Siyudad’s millennialism. In fact, the cult exemplifies something of a classic revitalization effort to reconcile modern pressures (in this case, political and economic exploitation by both foreign nations and a Westernized Philippine elite) with indigenous values (local leadership, an ideal of communal self-sufficiency, and an animistic relationship with the local natural geography) (Wallace 1956; see also Cullamar 1986). Given Siyudad belief that God is not only good but also omniscient and omnipotent, it seems a forgone conclusion that, eventually, the unjustly (and, by Siyudad reckoning, highly virtuous) disempowered will gain back what is rightfully theirs, subject to final judgments based on moral right rather than social or worldly success (which, from the Siyudad perspective, signifies sinfulness in the first place). The millennialism of adherents, then, derives from their faith in not only the desirability but also the inevitability of some sort of ultimate resolution to present injustices—an ultimate resolution on earth in real time rather than merely in some faraway eternity. Local misfortune will be vindicated with the onset of a new age in the biography of humanity. Following the destruction of the world in its present form (already foreshadowed, in Siyudad eyes, by an increase in both natural and human-caused disasters worldwide), Mount Banahaw will attain its rightful place as something of a chosen land—a New Jerusalem—where the Siyudad, as a chosen people, will offer survivors both salvation and refuge from God’s wrath. Indeed, devotees are constructing a big brick building in anticipation of the influx—a generous gesture, despite its probable future insufficiency given the numbers forecast by their millennial prophesying.

In fact, I couldn’t quite see how the Siyudad intended to host an international overflow of saved sinners. After all, if Mr. Santos, our evidently well-off Manileño host, had room for guests, he was an anomaly here. While his sometime mountain residence was quite large and
comfortable, the rest of the town of Dolores amounted to little more than a scattering of small nipa huts and bare concrete constructions, hardly suitable for sustaining a surplus. On the other hand, the locals themselves didn’t appear particularly bothered by the prospect of a huge population crunch, perhaps partly given their faith that God would take care of any practical problems, and perhaps partly because, as is, it was quite simply difficult to envision Mount Banahaw as anything other than refreshingly uncluttered. In the present premillennial day, the area remained of little interest to anyone other than hikers and mountain climbers: although the Missionary Benedictines came for the Siyudad, they were a rarity, Carmen assured me. Carmen was not eager to see an increase in outsider visits to the area, either; notwithstanding Siyudad interpretations of such visits as a sign of their growing significance, Carmen expressed concern that the mountain might become a mere tourist destination for Filipinos and foreigners with little real respect for the local faith. Indeed, even our own presence was suspect—didn’t our very interest in the Siyudad turn in part on the ways in which we were imagining it as exotic and other?

Yet perhaps Suprema had her own reasons for so warmly welcoming us. Notwithstanding our foreignness, not to mention the fact that our interest fell short of conversion, our voyeurism was encouraged. Doubtless, this was in part due to genuine Siyudad goodwill and religious magnanimity and in part because maintaining connections with SSC made for good press and important services. On the other hand, our very interest doubtless also represented a sort of national victory within the arena of hospitality. From the Siyudad perspective, we were sinful, ignorant, and in need of salvation. What’s more, in enlightening us our hosts could both gain symbolic currency in a society explicitly valuing hostessing as a mark of the good Filipino and incur utang na loob, thereby exerting subtle forms of influence over us. True, we might not in fact repay our hosts in any way beyond the offer of a hundred pesos per person for room and board, but we would remain in some sense symbolically indebted to them—or at least we should remain so, by their cultural standards.9

Of course, our visible—and alien—presence also offered Suprema the opportunity to reaffirm her position as high priestess. It was hardly surprising, then, to find ourselves invited to the cult leader’s simultaneously residential and governmental quarters, housed in one of the larger buildings in town. Nor did we have to wait long for the Siyudad matriarch, although I would hardly have recognized her as such but for the respect obviously accorded her by her comrades. She was clothed
only in a simple blue-and-white batik housedress, and wore her gray hair pulled tightly back in a bun, rendering her angular features and beaked nose a bit severe. Despite her rather plain, if unforgiving, appearance, however, the smile she flashed Carmen in recognition was surprisingly and auspiciously generous. She greeted the rest of us with friendly pleasantries, too, as Carmen introduced the remainder of our party, taking care to underline our Missionary Benedictine connections. Sister Micha belonged to the same order as Sister Justine, while Gretta, Mei, and I were affiliates and friends of St. Scholastica’s, the justification for our all too obviously foreign presence in a world in which affiliations and nationality meant everything.

And what, then, of Suprema herself? In response to our questions, she told us a bit more about both the Siyudad and herself, with Sister Micha and Carmen translating what was apparently a deeper Tagalog than that commonly used on the streets of Manila. The faith owed much of its existence, Suprema informed us, to seekers who came to Mount Banahaw upon hearing voices. Each time the voices manifested, a big bird appeared to guide the faithful through yet another part of the pilgrimage cycle until, eventually, all seven of the Siyudad sacred sites were revealed, in a reclamation of both indigenous religious expertise and the sanctity of the Philippine landscape itself.

The early seekers hardly had a monopoly on communion with the divine, however; Suprema herself also claimed to have heard voices, mandating not only her vocation but also the details of cult activity, including the aforementioned construction of new buildings for the millennium. Not, she admitted, that she had always held such visionary power. In fact, she hadn’t even been born on Mt. Banahaw, but had instead been introduced to the cult by her father. Her father’s status as a seeker pledged to regularly visit the mountain had not guaranteed her Siyudad membership, either: children, she explained, were only allowed into the church once old enough to make the decision for themselves. Still, given her prior contact with the cult and her family’s eventual permanent relocation to the area, it was hardly surprising that she was eventually chosen by God herself—in this case not only as a priestess but also as the next community leader. It wasn’t something she had planned on doing or had even particularly wanted to do, she assured us. It was just a matter of her calling, not unlike the calling of which many of my Missionary Benedictine informants spoke.

Suprema’s powers weren’t limited to the Siyudad context, either. She ultimately proved (or at least professed herself) something of a prophetess on a larger, if also more intimate, scale. Some of the priest—
esses in training interrupted Suprema’s narrative to offer us a sumptuous lunch of soup, rice, and various fish, vegetable, chicken, and beef dishes. As we settled down to the feast before us, Mr. Santos observed to Sister Micha that, unlike Catholic nuns, Siyudad priestesses take no formal vows. The sister, in turn, quite reasonably asked why not. “Well,” Mr. Santos explained, because vows “never go beyond the moment” and are thus “useless.” “Useless?!” If Sister Micha was not easily shocked, this certainly took her aback, provoking the somewhat indignant response that her own vows were periodically renewed and that she found them helpful in keeping her “on track.”

Indeed, while I could understand our host’s desire to defend his own beliefs against the perceived threat of a Catholic nun affiliated with a more popular and higher-status form of Filipino religiosity—however accepting of difference herself—I found it curious that he would suggest her vows indexed a lack of sufficient inner spiritual strength. His critique involved a failure to recognize the ways in which he himself participated in spiritual exercises such as the pilgrimage in order to remind himself of and renew his faith. Moreover, notwithstanding his claim, Siyudad members do in fact make vows—just vows of a different sort, undertaken not in order to gain or retain cult membership but as situationally specific forms of worship. Recall, for instance Suprema’s references to her own father’s pledge. Cultists also engage in practices like bathing in the sacred mountain waters as “a form of panata, a ritual practice to thank God for prayers answered or to ask for special favors, not for oneself but on behalf of others—like a relative’s recovery from a dreaded terminal disease or a friend’s success in an examination” (Quibuyen 1991, 13–14).

Of course, perhaps this was precisely the point of contention. The term panata not only means “vow” or “promise to perform a certain religious devotion” but is also widely used to designate nuns’ holy vows in the Philippines. On the other hand, Suprema had referenced the term herself earlier in the day. Outsiders, she observed, often viewed the cult with suspicion, sometimes even trying to convince her that she was wrong. For example, a Catholic guest had attempted to persuade her of the existence of hell. She had responded that she was indeed very interested in hell: could he take her there? He couldn’t, of course—because, she asserted, perhaps as a warning to us, hell couldn’t be proven. It was all a matter of faith, just like her own religion. But many people couldn’t get past their blinders. Many, she admitted, still persisted in calling the Siyudad fanatics, or panatika-ko. These doubters didn’t realize, however, that the term panatika was derived from the Filipino panata.
So, Siyudad members had begun referring to themselves as *panatik*, indexing not the fanaticism outsiders perceive but their pilgrimage practices. In short, they had reclaimed the word as an expression of faith, turning it into an advantage, a positive thing. But the very fact that such a twist was necessary pointed to the motives doubtless prompting Mr. Santos’s defensiveness. Both Suprema and Mr. Santos had clearly experienced prior ideological attacks on their faith: it was understandable, then, that both felt it imperative to demonstrate their legitimacy to us in order to avert any expression of skepticism on our part. More than that, though—if they were now identifying as *panatik*, it was necessary to defend the nature of their *panata* as something different from but, in Siyudad eyes, even more valid than the sort of *panata* Sister Micha had made (and the sort of *panata* with which most of their guests are probably more familiar). In other words, the rather surprising challenge our host posed to the sister might be seen as part and parcel of a larger preemptive claim to rights over the terms and practices by which the cult defined itself.

Not that any of us—least of all Sister Micha—wanted to dispute the Siyudad’s legitimacy. Rather, although Suprema in some sense represented an unconventional figure for those of us sitting around the table, we all very much respected her initiative and inspirational capacities. And we were more interested in learning from her than in challenging her. Over lunch, Mei actively solicited Siyudad advice with respect to her own obviously quite current concerns. She needed help, she explained. She had previously confided to the rest of us that she was having a problem locating a good father for the baby she wanted to have. Immaculate conception didn’t seem to be working very well, and she couldn’t find the right man; gentle men, she averred, were somehow too wimpy, but other men were too macho.

In actuality, her problem appeared more a matter of the ways in which her understandings of ideal masculinity were culture bound than anything else—as Mr. Santos himself observed, taking umbrage at the suggestion that gentle men were wimpy. After all, although a product of Philippine gender socialization, Mr. Santos now subscribed to a religion explicitly valuing so-called feminine emotional sensitivity and clearly now defined himself as and took pride in being a gentle (but not, he assured us, wimpy) man, moving toward Siyudad ideals of androgyny. On the other hand, however much our host objected to Mei’s terms and however adamant his exhortations to focus only on our inner selves, he was ready to play a chivalrous role when given the opportunity. Having chided Mei for her choosiness, he suggested that she come to the Siyu-
dad should she find a prospective father who was unavailable or uninterested, and the cult would “send forces to bear on him” to make him available and interested. What’s more, he added, Suprema could determine whether or not the match would be a good one.

Nor did this possibility fail to capture Mei’s imagination. Once apprised of Suprema’s prophetic capacities, she revealed that she already had two men in mind. One, she admitted, was insufficiently spiritual; the other, she said, was insufficiently political. Yet she wanted a husband and a baby enough to accept either man were he only to tell her, “I am meant to be your husband and the father of your baby.” Was that all she needed? Mr. Santos laughed—no problem; he could find someone to say that to her! Seriously, though, why not inquire of Suprema which of the two was most suitable, if she really thought one of them might be worth it? All she had to do was write her name and those of the men on separate sheets of paper, which Mr. Santos handed to a rather stocky woman who added the number of letters in each, prior to commencing more obscure numerological calculations. Reviewing the results, Suprema then warned Mei that the first of her prospective spouses would be a good business partner but not a good marriage partner: were they to wed, she would be rich but unhappy. She would get along very well with the other in marriage, in contrast, but would find herself either impoverished or widowed within a couple of years were they to tie the knot. It was best, in short, to find someone else entirely, a verdict with which Mr. Santos fully agreed, adding that Suprema could have said all this before looking at the numbers if she hadn’t been so polite. He himself had immediately known neither relationship was right because Mei had prefaced the interview with an expression of dissatisfaction.

If Mei was distressed by all of this, however, she didn’t argue with Suprema’s conclusions, and neither such negative results nor her own skepticism deterred Gretta, in turn, from asking Suprema to assess her own prospects with a boyfriend back home. Mr. Santos was next, too—indicating immediate agreement when the high priestess told him that his marriage was workable yet sometimes argumentative and that he should be careful because he was gullible and vulnerable to people desirous of taking advantage of him. “That’s true, that’s true,” he exclaimed, issuing only the mild objection that he still preferred to be trusting than cynical. Then Sister Micha spoke up—would Suprema mind answering a question about her parents? She was worried about their health and felt torn between her convent life and their desire for her to come home to stay with them in their old age. Both cultural
obligations to parental obedience and the specter of parental disapproval were weighing heavily on her.

Whatever the strength of the sister’s concerns, though, it is notable that she was asking Suprema, rather than one of her convent superiors, for advice. In other words, the possibility of the priestess’s divinatory capacity was intriguing enough to evoke a significant response from our party. With the encouragement and backing of Mr. Santos, Suprema effectively and intensely engaged our interest on not only an intellectual, but also an emotional level. And this, in turn, provided the priestess a means of advancing her larger claims to prophetic power and religious validity. By inviting and responding to questions of great affective importance through an apparently innocuous and benevolent desire to help us with her psychic insight, Suprema both successfully insured our attention and reaffirmed her own declarations of special knowledge.

Indeed, however disappointed at the specifics of Suprema’s predictions, Mei, in particular, was hooked—the first step to conversion. She talked about the priestess’s predictions throughout the remainder of the afternoon, her faith in the woman’s prophetic capacity on such a personal scale rendering Suprema’s claims to foresee world catastrophe and salvation on a grander scale appear all the more plausible. In some sense, then, Suprema’s divinatory antics can be understood as the strategic display of a visionary capacity to which we would at least momentarily defer and by way of which we might be persuaded of her larger historical declarations. Moreover, Suprema’s demonstrations index the importance belief in prophesy to the cult itself. Prophesy could be employed to dictate action, renegotiate subjugated positions, defy structures of dominance in the Philippines, and, significantly, win new devotees.

### A Philippine Promised Land

As mentioned earlier, the Siyudad’s prophetic tradition began with the revelation of seven sacred sites on Mount Banahaw. And, while the sun was already setting by the time we reached Dolores, Mr. Santos and his comrades took us partway along the pilgrimage cycle the day we arrived. After showing us our rooms, our host introduced Tito, a self-proclaimed faith healer who would serve as our guide to the first three sacred stations of the Siyudad sequence. It did not matter that none of us were believers: cult membership was no more required here than
was Catholicism in the SSC chapel, where I was welcomed to vespers despite my admitted agnosticism. But we would be expected to respectfully observe silence at the shrines, and we had to be open to experiencing the mountain, even, Tito warned us, when that meant getting wet.

Not that getting wet counted as much of a tribulation by local reckoning. Our caterpillar line soon came upon a small sari sari store advertising not only a wide assortment of amulets for sale—hibiscus seeds for protection and a full purse, black triangles featuring the Eye of the Goddess, engraved wooden shapes for health and luck, and seed beads of the sort our guide himself sported around his neck—but also plastic bottles for the collection of holy water. And our first stop entailed a trek down a 267-step rock stairway to the river below, where at length we came to a few rather thin rivulets of water streaming down from the foliage covering the chasm walls above. If the scene was less than spectacular, it nevertheless marked an important part of the pilgrim’s journey: this, Tito announced, was Santa Lucia Falls, the very name testifying to the degree to which the Siyudad, however anticolonialist, has appropriated the signs and terms of popular Filipino Christianity. While the falls were little more than a shower spray at this time of year, bathing in the water would be healing and cleansing, not to mention good for menstrual problems.

We would have to bathe separately, though—women first. Notwithstanding its ultimate androgynous ideals, the sect still maintained strict gender distinctions doubtless of particular importance under the wash of falls not only associated with nonreproductive female physiological functions but also meant to purify us in preparation for the rest of our pilgrim’s progress. Or was it instead some Siyudad form of chivalry that required male patience while, one by one, the Scholasticans and our international party waded in, climbing over rocks and braving the fast ‚ow of the river with concerted efforts to keep our ‚sinelas (sandals) on? Whatever the logic of the bathing order, however, the act itself was calming, the efficacy of the rite a matter not of reasoned persuasion or preaching but of the sounds and feel of the river’s rhythms. Nor are such forms of worship surprising, as devotees believe the natural landscape the sign of something over and above the visible. For the Siyudad, in fact, the “whole mountain is a sacred symbol for ‘God the Mother’ who became incarnate in Maria Bernarda Balitaan” (Quibuyen 1991, 13); indeed, on our way down to the falls, Tito had paused to point out a huge boulder he identified as the Teadro Mental, a “magnificent cathedral in the other dimension.”
Not that Tito wanted us soaking too long, though—notwithstanding the blissful sighs emanating from a watery pool to which Sister Micha, apparently unconcerned about missing vespers, had abandoned herself. Once the men completed their ablutions, he hurried us on our way further up the mountain, heedless of the sister’s good-humored grumbling that the hike was making her feel all of her thirty-seven years. After all, the light was fading, and, deep inside an underground cave with minimal dry space, Jacob’s Well could only accommodate ten of us at a time. If Santa Lucia Falls hadn’t been sufficiently persuasive of the mountain’s sanctity, however, the descent into Jacob’s Well certainly contributed to the effect. Even barefoot, I found it a difficult climb down. Bereft of vision, I had to cast myself around to gain a foothold—twisting my body to fit between the cracks until, in some consternation, I found myself dangling in empty space with no choice but to trust Tito’s instructions to lie on my back and drop. Of course, ultimately, that was precisely the point. Once we were all safe within the heart of the cavern, Tito told us the descent itself was a test of sorts. Getting to the well in the first place signified, for the Siyudad, the ability to let go of guilt—else one would get stuck. Likewise, faith was important here: faith in our guide, faith in ourselves, and faith in the very ground below us.

Admittedly, negotiating the cave was only half the ritual. After explaining the importance of the station, Tito directed our attention to a ladder extending down a crevice in the cave floor. The chasm was filled with water, shining an opaque shade of pale blue under the glow of several small candles carefully melted into the surrounding nooks and crannies. A strong sulfur stench pervaded the air above, enough to wrinkle our noses and inspire Sister Micha’s protests that this was “not her fault.” No, it was the water that smelled, Tito assured us with a smile; it was not river water, but rather came from some underground source. The stink shouldn’t deter us, however—the idea was to climb down the ladder and submerge oneself three times. “See?” he said, indicating his own wet jeans and shirtless state in what was doubtless intended to be an encouraging gesture. And, for the matter, the water was indeed both pleasantly warm and surprisingly buoyant. Ducking under took the edge off the night’s chill, and I could almost swear I felt the underground vibrations Tito claimed testimony to the power of the place.

Our next stop, in contrast, made for a more sedate experience. The Twin Caves of Peter and Paul had less to do with the proof of faith than with “presentation,” Tito explained. Now that we were cleansed of person and conscience, we could offer our respects to the ancient deities.
of the mountain, those “even older than God.” Never mind the apparent incongruity of the simultaneous reference here to biblical figures and pre-Christian tradition; the Siyudad freely combines elements of Roman Catholicism and indigenous animism. God is in actuality only one of many divinities believers worship, including, again, the mountain itself.¹²

Thus, we once more descended into the very body of Banahaw to pay it homage, climbing down a long ladder to the comparatively accessible and spacious cavern floor, where Tito somberly handed each of us lighted candles to concretize our devotion at the double altars below. Both were already well illuminated by the offerings of previous suppliants, and this time we were not only allowed but even encouraged to linger in the caves. This was our final stop that night, and, while it was dark and late for dinner, the caves were supposed to be a place of quiet prayer and introspection, such “presentation” affording both a fitting culmination to the evening’s explorations and fitting preparation for our meeting with Suprema on the morrow.

### Making Magic

Indeed, the effects of the pilgrimage are meant to endure beyond the term of the journey itself, and, observing Mei making for the comfort room back at the rest house, Mr. Santos warned us not to rinse ourselves off or wash our hair. Not that we couldn’t wipe our feet of the mud we were in danger of tracking in, or wash our hands in preparation for a sumptuous dinner of vegetables, beef, chicken, rice, soup and tea—it was more that it was nonsensical, in Siyudad eyes, to talk of further cleaning ourselves of what was supposed to have been cleansing itself in a fashion far transcendent of the ordinary tabo system. After all, this wasn’t just a matter of bodily purification—the pilgrimage also, and more importantly, engendered spiritual purification. For the Siyudad, it was a healing journey of the soul as well as the corporeal person, and, Mr. Santos informed us, visiting even just the first three stations of the cycle should have induced a meditative state of mind.

In fact, with a certain degree of faith in our capacity for such spiritual experience, our host suggested that we attempt a “mystical exercise” of sorts after dinner. Once the table was cleared, he rather proudly brought out several recently acquired U.S.-made Magic Eye books featuring pictures hidden behind multicolored patterns perceptible only
when stared at long enough with slightly unfocused vision. And, while Carmen, Gretta, and I were already familiar with such visual illusions, Mei and Sister Micha were both suitably impressed. At Mr. Santos’s prompting, both quickly became caught up in the attempt to find the hidden images. Indeed, the sister in particular pored over one of the books with a remarkable intensity of purpose, exclaiming at every success. What’s more, Mr. Santos took her keen interest as confirmation of Mount Banahaw’s spiritual efficacy. Significantly, for him, discerning the Magic Eye pictures was not merely a game but an index of mystical capacity. In fact, I suspect the discovery of new signs beneath the obvious even in images manufactured for sale was, for our host, analogous to perceiving the other dimension of which Tito had spoken.

Nor, for that matter, did Carmen or Sister Micha dispute our host’s claims that our collective capacity for identifying the Magic Eye pictures might have something to do with our having just returned from our pilgrimage. Carmen herself commented that one had to be able to go into a trance to see the hidden drawings—although she explained this not so much in Siyudad terms as in what, for her, were more scientific terms. Like the rest of our group, she was conversant with the distinctions made by much of Western science between right and left brain functions—the former having to do with artistry, emotion, and visual skill, the latter a matter more of logical reasoning and verbal skill. In this case, she said, it seemed as if one had to let the right brain take over in order to correctly see the images—an endeavor involving imagination more than rationality. “Yes!” added Sister Micha, very much in agreement and excited by the possibilities all this suggested. This could be wonderful training for new entrants, she gleefully observed. She would advocate the use of such books during the postulancy: entrants unable to find the pictures behind the patterns wouldn’t be allowed to advance.

Not, of course, that the sister was serious—no matter how adamant her self-defense when Mr. Santos and Carmen responded with appreciative and amused queries concerning her apparent desire to weed out all left-brained initiates. On the other hand, like most of Sister Micha’s jokes, the suggestion was telling. Many of my informants spoke of visions or other sorts of extraordinary religious experiences in explaining why they had joined the convent, remember. And, if, from the Missionary Benedictine perspective, neither the Magic Eye pictures nor Tito’s talk of another dimension was quite equivalent to seeing God, the idea that something sacred might be discerned beyond the
immediately visible was certainly compatible with, if not central to, the nuns’ faith. If Mr. Santos could recognize the possibilities of a spiritual practice in the books, then, it made sense to me that Sister Micha might see the same, albeit from a somewhat different religious standpoint. While the Magic Eye pictures were not themselves miraculous, the appeal in both cases was clear. Identifying the secrets behind or within the pictures involved altering perception and remaining open to the possibility of seeing something invisible to ordinary sight. Likewise, whether a matter of locating cathedrals in boulders or God’s hand in every occurrence, spirituality for both the Siyudad and the sisters was at least in part a matter of seeing the real picture behind the face of the mundane world.

Moreover, if there was some irony in the use of books published in the United States and marketed as entertainment in order to exercise “mystical” perception, such usage again testifies to Filipino creativity in appropriating foreign (and secular) artifacts for new purposes. While the Magic Eye books signify participation in a global market to which the Siyudad and the Missionary Benedictines alike are opposed on principle, our nipa hut experimentation altered the meanings of such Americana, transforming capitalist artifacts into meditative tools in an arguably counterhegemonic move.

**Orientalism?**

The Magic Eye books weren’t all, however. As we prepared to turn in, Sister Micha suggested the use of yet another originally alien tradition as spiritual exercise. *Shibashi*, a Chinese form of physical and meditative practice characterized by a series of highly controlled and poetically defined movements, is both regularly practiced by the sisters and taught to students at the Institute of Women’s Studies. And Sister Micha volunteered to teach us the movements, too. Even if we couldn’t really learn all eighteen steps in just one night, she thought we’d find it fun to at least try them out. We might appreciate the fact, too, that the sequences were modeled on the natural world. Indeed, *shibashi* carries arguably environmentalist ideological messages of particular relevance to both the Siyudad and the Missionary Benedictines. The tradition as a whole is premised on a belief system celebrating the harmony and beauty of nature (itself always a cultural construct) as well as an ideal of integration and unity, both within the self and in the world. The basic
idea is that both spiritual and physical accord can be attained by imitating, and thereby in some sense absorbing the essence of, the stork, for example, or the rainbow.

On the other hand, while the appeal of shibashi—a meditative system specifically grounded in the perceived sanctity of natural phenomena—to the nuns is clear, Sister Micha herself readily acknowledged that such spiritual use of the natural differentiates shibashi from traditional Catholic forms of ascetic practice. Slowly bringing her hands together in demonstration of the first of the eighteen steps, she informed us that the movement was intended as a representation of the meeting of matter and soul, the possibility of which, she observed, ran counter to Christian dualism. After all, she added, moving on to the next sequence—and then the next—while Western spirituality divides the physical world and the spirit, “Oriental” spirituality integrates the two.

Of course, significantly, such observations beg the question of where the sister locates her own faith. As noted earlier, she was proud of being Christian in a country itself proud to be “the only Christian country in Asia.” Moreover, she took pride in her ability to speak English and her relative cosmopolitan sophistication. Yet she also frequently defined herself as “Oriental” in response to my curiosity about and sometime befuddlement at aspects of her world she took for granted. In such instances, Sister Micha would often suggest that my bewilderment or amazement resulted from the fact that I was Western, and it—whatever it was—was “an Oriental thing,” thereby selectively, if temporarily, invoking her Asianness and downplaying her own affiliation with an originally Western religious order. Likewise, in claiming both knowledge of and expertise at shibashi, the sister seemed to be prioritizing her Asianness over her allegiance to a Catholic congregation, even critiquing Catholic dualism. In other words, recalling Mei’s talk of being a Buddhist-Taoist-Confucian-Christian, Sister Micha was quick to manipulate her position and identity in order to appropriate a wide range of different (and sometimes apparently opposed) traditions, depending on circumstances. In the end, then, Sister Micha simply didn’t permanently align herself with either Western or “Oriental” practice. Rather, she appeared perfectly happy to play with the artificial distinctions marking modern geography, the ease with which she shifted her allegiances both evidence a fluid sense of identity in notable contraposition to the assumption that the self is (or should be) a unified construct and reflecting the value placed on appropriation and adaptation as historically conditioned means of engaging with otherness in the Philippines.
Multiple Modes of Identification

Sister Micha was not the only one of the nuns to elide such easy attempts at anthropological definition, either. As discussed previously, many of the Missionary Benedictines demonstrated an eclectic and ecumenical approach to faith. Indeed, their very interest in the Siyudad goes hand in hand with a larger interest in the incorporation and appropriation of alternative religious (and even secular) traditions across the globe. Of course, in part, such creative religious flexibility might be put down to technological advances affording new opportunities for religious exchange, through print and video, not to mention the international conferences and travel in which many of my informants engaged. Likewise, such engagement with the Siyudad may reflect the comparative self-determinative freedom afforded religious congregations following Vatican II, in addition to the Catholic Church’s growing interest in ecumenical endeavors since the 1960s. Yet the existence of new technologies and looser Church policies does not explain the positive drive necessary for the sort of radicalization and globalization at issue here. Rather, I would suggest that the sorts of examples cited in this book reflect the specific position of my informants as spiritually oriented Filipinas.

As suggested earlier, the Missionary Benedictines are making a strong claim to Philippineness through maintaining connections with Suprema. This not only provides the sisters legitimation as Filipinas, however, but also—and therefore—enables a concomitant commitment to the exploration of other, non-Filipino faiths. In short, the nuns’ very engagement in both interpretive and investigative practices securing their national identity effectively allows the additional use of foreign resources without fear of either internal or external accusations of national betrayal. It is no coincidence, then, to find the sisters simultaneously spending time with the Siyudad (a nationalist practice) and referencing foreign cultural traditions (an internationalist practice). The former renders the latter possible; the latter, by the same token, probably renders the former all the more imperative. And either way or both ways, the nuns appear to be adopting ever more fluid understandings of faith in transcending the boundaries between this and that, here and there.

Nor should such shifts in self-identification and presentation be understood as contradicting the claim that personal and moral integrity are of value to the Missionary Benedictines. Rather, the very fact that the nuns subscribe to a well-developed doctrine of the soul
arguably not only reflects the instability of their experience across different times and places, but is also productive of a certain flexibility in response to external circumstances. According to my informants, all that is really important is the commitment to serving God wherever and whenever possible. In fact, Sister Virginia explicitly assured me that she cared less about the specifics of religious identification than about one’s ability to love. Thus, it didn’t matter to her that I was agnostic, much less that one of her sisters was *Iglesia ni Kristo* and two of her siblings had converted to Islam, as long as we were all good people. Ideological affiliations and shifting situational requirements remain secondary to “being (and doing) good.”

The fact that the nuns attribute more significance to personal responsibility than external detail not only engenders a certain degree of religious tolerance, however, but also, as intimated earlier, affords a surprising degree of behavioral freedom. Thus, Sister Micha could freely don civilian clothes, skip her scheduled prayers, and participate in a pagan pilgrimage apt to be condemned by the Vatican, professing all of this fully in accord with her core Missionary Benedictine values. It is worth noting Sister Josephine’s self-confessed dabbling in both ancient Chinese and New Age cures for insomnia, too, including not only a hypnosis tape and assorted relaxation exercises but also snake blood and a special Chinese oil that altered her body temperature. The sister additionally put great faith in a Chinese-Filipino doctor she knew, not to mention popular American New Age guru Louise Hay, both of whom advocate self-forgiveness. Now, she told me, she looked in the mirror every day to tell herself she loved herself. And, if she hit her finger or something, she now simply said “Sorry” to it instead of castigating herself for her stupidity. In other words, like Sister Micha, she was quite willing to entertain (and even adopt) religious alternatives to traditional Filipino understandings of Catholicism without in any way perceiving herself to be contradicting the central tenets of her Missionary Benedictine faith.

**Mga Madreng Babaylan**

Similarly, the Mga Madreng Babaylan, a ritual group to which Carmen invited me, freely borrowed from outside sources. In fact, I got my first taste of the remarkably accommodating and diversified nature of my informants’ spirituality while in the company of the Mga Madreng Babaylan, who regularly met at Nursia (the IWS headquarters) as part...
of a larger effort to create a forum within which Filipinas can develop new forms of religious practice of particular relevance to them as both women and Philippine citizens.

To begin with, the very name of the ritual group was significant. *Madre*, a Spanish-derived term, means “nun” in Tagalog, while, as previously indicated, *babaylan* means “priestess,” referencing the usually female religious authorities of the indigenous Filipino past. And the conjunction of the two words is interesting. Like the relationship newly formed between the Missionary Benedictines and Suprema, the phrase *Madreng Babaylan* symbolically draws together two historically disparate and often conflictual traditions—traditions integrated in the name of and simultaneously reaffirming the efficacy of Filipina religious expertise. Admittedly, most of those in attendance were in fact nuns, and nuns are granted at least some public recognition as spiritual adepts within the modern-day Philippine context. On the other hand, the power sisters hold within the official Church hierarchy remains limited—and this is where the second half of the equation comes in. No matter that the Vatican fails to recognize female priests, these *babaylanes* could identify themselves as modern-day, and indisputably Filipina, priestesses by invoking a cultural heritage dating back to the pre-Hispanic era—a heritage, significantly, also invoked within Siyudad practice. Participation in the ritual group, in other words, held the promise of the same sort of national and nationalist reaffirmation afforded by participation in the Siyudad pilgrimage.

Indeed, Sister Flora, or “Nona,” made the importance of being *babaylan* explicit in her introduction to the ritual. The Filipina *babaylanes* of the past, she said, had been part of a precolonial women’s ministry, a healing ministry, dating back to a time when, according to her understanding of the situation, women were “more equal” to men. But, she continued, the *babaylanes* had been persecuted by the Spaniards and had been forced to go into hiding and adopt other tactics of resistance. In other words, this was a history of the repression and suppression of indigenous female religious authority by patriarchal and often violent colonial powers. And, while this wasn’t a unique history—there were witch-hunts in Europe, too—it was important for modern-day Filipinas to know, identify with, and take pride in their own heritage.

Of course, this morning’s session was more specifically intended as a “Sharing Workshop on Women and Spirituality.” Nona herself had chosen the title and topic and had come prepared with an eclectic assortment of materials for our use: green, red, purple, yellow, and beige woven mats and equally colorful pillows to soften our seats; a black-
board pulled up to one side; and two ceramic pots containing glass jars. What's more, she commenced with the assertion that we could and should share our gifts as women with the world. She had planned a ritual to this end rather than a lecture because spirituality, in her opinion, was as much a matter of experience as something “in the head.” Unfortunately, however, female participation in spiritual practice has often gone unrecognized. We might consider, for instance, the biblical story of the coming of the spirits. In the story, Nona observed, all the people gathered in the upper room, including the apostles, are named. Or are they? Mary is the only woman mentioned but did this really mean she was the only woman present? Maybe other women, who weren’t acknowledged, were there, too. The latter seemed more probable to Nona: after all, the Bible often ignores women or refers to them simply as “the prostitutes” or “the good women.”

We had it in our power to change that, though—beginning now. At Nona’s direction, we went around the room in circular fashion, exchanging introductions. Sister Lucia began by observing that her religious name meant “light” and that, true to her name, she liked getting up early and getting things done during the light of day. Next, Josimar, a former novice working at the IWS, identified herself, followed by the elderly Sister Lola, Sister Patricia, Sister Bella, and a lay candle maker named Mimi. Our number also included another local lay Filipina, a sister in Manila on break from her work in the provinces, one of the women undertaking Trainor’s Training at the IWS, an Australian visitor, Sister Felicity, three RGS novices, Carmen, Nona, and, of course, me, the anthropologist with the unpronounceable name and bizarre research interest in nuns.

Nor was the exercise inconsequential. It not only somewhat predictably broke the ice but also, as Nona suggested, provided a means of symbolically reclaiming the right to spiritual expertise and apostleship long denied women by the Catholic Church. Self-determination is of particular importance in the Philippines, too, given the nation’s long colonial history. While we might think of names as a given, as almost an inalienable right, the Spanish early on imposed their own appellatory system on the indigenous tribes of the archipelago in order to better track local populations for both military and tax purposes (relocating villages to the lowlands for the same reasons). Thus, a great many Filipino names are in fact Hispanic in character and origin, often as not ironically dependent on distinctions between p and f or v and b, otherwise allophones in Filipino. Although the use of Spanish-sounding names is now very Filipino indeed, such usage testifies to and recalls
the influence of the conquistadors—extending even into the most private domains of self-identification and speech.

Insofar as naming can be imposed on a people in such a literal sense for disciplinary purposes, then, reclaiming the right to self-identification has special relevance. Naming oneself affords a certain degree of psychological freedom from, and a potential point of resistance to, hegemonic and biased categories and labels employed by more powerful groups. For Filipinos, this at least potentially means claiming independence from definition by European others—as the savage pagans “saved” by the Spanish missionaries, the “little brown brothers” of a patronizing America, or even, in the modern day, as a friendly but carefree people more concerned with fiestas than with self-betterment.

Consider again, too, the ways in which Filipinas, in particular, are advertised not only as beautiful and sexy, but also as obedient and passive, both within the mail-order bride business, and in a good many tourist guides to the country. Needless to say, such stereotypes do not bode well for Philippine women’s efforts to develop an independent voice. Resisting such assumptions about Filipina femininity is important to feminist efforts within the country, and both private and public self-identification may represent a critical step toward such resistance.

Indeed, Nona’s insistence on the exchange of introductions is consistent with a more general IWS philosophy of women’s empowerment. The institute’s programs and courses often begin with autobiography; the Trainor’s Training students, for example, all routinely create altars of personal significance to discuss with one another—sufficing not only to facilitate group familiarity, but also effectively validating their lives. Here, as among the Madreng Babaylan, women’s words and stories of self are quite intentionally given special emphasis, largely in response to (and in an attempt to challenge) the tendency of primarily male governmental, political, and legal agents to ignore the narrative female voice.

**Sister Water**

If simply making oneself heard could be revolutionary, though, Nona suggested that it was important not only to speak out ourselves but also to attend to the voices of the world around us. She concluded our round-robin with the observation that her indigenous family name meant “lake” or “body of water.” And water, she noted, both makes up 75 percent of the human body and plays a significant role in nature. In
fact, she continued, showing us a picture of a Mexican woman rising out of a pool, we were all here with “Sister Water.” Sister Water wanted us to take the time to listen to her, too—in this case, in the form of a music tape meant to evoke the sense of a bubbling brook. This, Nona said, should help us to meditate, to go to our depths, like reaching into a well in order to achieve a state of *pagtining ng tubig ng buhay* (“being still at and from the depths” or “the coming together of the water of life from the very depths of stillness”).

So we sat in silence for a while, with the cassette playing in the background. Then Nona quietly directed each of us to rise at our leisure and pour a small quantity of water from a thermos set up on a nearby table into one of several pink plastic cups she had brought with her. The process was meant to inspire contemplation: we could drink from our cups if we wished or simply think about the water inside. We might think, for example, of mountain springs and waterfalls full of *masarap* (“sweet”) and *malamig* (“cold”) water. Could we taste this, could we savor it in our minds? If that was good, though, it was also important to think about how Sister Water is dying, how the earth is drying up. Many people have to struggle to get water now, Nona observed—one only had to consider the large numbers of modern-day Filipinas forced to stand in line for hours in order to obtain cooking and drinking water.

Indeed, water is of great concern in the Philippines. Running water, especially hot water, is still something of a luxury within even Manileño households. In many *barangays*, residents still pump their water from wells. Nor is water guaranteed to those households outfitted with plumbing: in my own apartment complex, the water pumps stopped working every time the electricity went out. But water could also be dangerously present. Stagnant pools are prime mosquito breeding grounds, and during the rainy season, the streets of Manila sometimes become flooded to such an extent that traffic stops entirely and schools and businesses are forced to close. More seriously yet, the news often carries stories of entire coastal villages destroyed by tidal flooding. In short, in the Philippine context, Sister Water represents both an important resource and potentially menacing force, both life and death, both something special and something everyday—all in all, an evocative metaphor for spiritual sensitivity.

What’s more, the idea that spirituality, like water, is inherent and everyday rather than derived from and located in a heavenly sphere distinguished from the physical world and expressed or demonstrated through Church ritual, effectively returns spiritual power and self-determination to the individual, again subverting the terms of ortho-

---

dox Philippine Catholicism. As noted earlier, much of traditional Catholic theology opposes woman, nature, and the secular to man, soul, and the sacred. Indeed, such oppositions have been used to justify an exclusively male priesthood. Redefining spirituality in terms of a mundane yet simultaneously miraculously life-giving (and death-dealing) substance such as water, however, may afford women a means of reappropriating Catholic dichotomies in order to place spirituality within their own province. By asking us to imagine women drawing water from wells, then, Nona was in effect suggesting an alternative way of conceptualizing faith, granting us, as women, the power of our own “natural” religious expertise, located in the “wells” of personal experience rather than in the annals of a patriarchal Church history or classical biblical tradition.

Nona was not the only one to make such religious use of water, either. As already demonstrated, water is also important to the Siyudad Mistika pilgrimage cycle as both a natural and a nationalist source of spiritual cleansing and augmentation. For the Siyudad, bathing in the water of Santa Lucia Falls or of Jacob’s Well is healing partly precisely because a means of participation in the bounty of the native soil itself, something configured as sacred and a source of blessings in its own right. The suggestion here, in other words, is that the waters of Mount Banahaw—and of the Philippines itself—could both wash away the dirt of material (capitalist and foreign) temptation and cure ailments understood by the Siyudad in some way to be rooted in psychological and physical alienation from the nation.

**A Fluid Faith**

It is worth noting that water lacks definite edges or boundaries of its own, too. In fact, bodies of water lose their congruency when mixed with other bodies of water, and in some sense, all the water on earth is part of a single, global cycle. Water, in short, flows across local and national lines, and thus might be taken as symbolic of both general psychological flexibility and appropriative ability. In other words, Nona’s suggestion that we think of our spirituality in terms of water might be understood as an implicit call for the development of ever more fluid understandings of faith, extending to the limits of our own personal capacity for incorporation and tolerance. After all, a self-professed Zen practitioner as well as a Catholic nun, Nona herself clearly did not feel her own faith could (or should) be contained by definitional lines.
drawn between different bodies of doctrine; nor did she appear to think her spirituality could (or should) be confined only to particular spaces and times. And her example underlines the more general importance of such fluidity within my informants’ lives.

Admittedly, symbols such as water should not necessarily be taken as literal indications of social or psychological phenomena. Nevertheless, the ways in which people employ symbols can significantly illuminate the ways in which they experience and conceive of reality, and Nona’s use of water imagery reflects a fluid, global, and appropriative understanding of faith in many different respects. For one thing, it is significant that she incorporated alternative religious materials into the Madreng Babaylan ritual at issue. Notwithstanding important parallels between Mexican and Philippine colonial (and missionary) history, Sister Water was originally Mexican, not Filipina. And Nona also made use of her Zen Buddhist training during that morning’s session. As each of us held our pink plastic cups, meditating on the water inside, Nona began slowly, repeatedly, striking a small gong she used in her Zen practice.

She directed us to “dive into” ourselves in order to tap the spontaneous images “born of our own depths” while listening to the beat, too—again suggesting the possibility of a spirituality not only flowing over national boundaries but also springing from an inner source. When she thought about her faith, she told us, she often found herself remembering her childhood: for example, she had vivid memories of standing at her parents’ windows watching the sun when a mere toddler. In her eyes, religion, she explained, was not only or by any means primarily a philosophical practice but rather was rooted in experience, and particularly in our earliest, least well socialized, and least analytical experiences—recalling Sister Micha’s frozen moments and Sister Placid’s recollections of Mount Mayon.

And we might further consider alternative forms of spiritual expression, such as drawing, for example, rather than the mere verbalization more typical of Catholic prayer sessions. After allowing us several minutes of contemplation to the sound of the gong, then, Nona asked each of us to try sketching out some sort of representation of our memories, with colored crayons themselves reminiscent of childhood. Insofar as this was a sharing ritual, too, she suggested that we ultimately share the results with one another, offering up our creations at a makeshift altar in the middle of the room. Thus, we all poured some of our water into the afore mentioned jars—our communal Nursia well—in symbolic testimony to the mutual respect nurturing our individual intentions. Lastly, we formed a circle, our arms around one another’s waists, while
Nona recounted the biblical story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman who gave him a drink despite his potentially threatening alien nationality. While the point in part was that Christ ultimately gave her a drink of the water of life by way of thanks, it was also worth noting that the episode highlights a woman’s generosity across the boundaries of the known. This, Nona concluded, was her kind of spirituality. Notwithstanding the ways in which Christianity has been institutionalized, Jesus himself, she felt represents a spirituality marked by tolerance, acceptance, and flexibility rather than one defined by the rigid lines of religious dogma.

_Babae-Lalaki_

And this, of course, brings us back to the Siyudad, as a tradition also concerned with the creative construction of specifically Filipina religious expertise in defiance of Catholic norms. Consider, once again, the Siyudad chapel. While the portraits of Rizal caught my attention first, there were other posters decorating the church walls further up from the entrance, too, depicting the mythological origins and future of the cult. One featured an apparent androgyne captioned Babae-Lalaki, or “woman-man.” Was this a fantasy of the ideal freedom fighter, clothed here in military uniform as an indication of Siyudad’s concern with independence?

In actuality, Mr. Santos informed me, the hermaphrodite was none other than Maria Bernarda Balitaan, the aforementioned founder of the cult. If now deceased, however, she nevertheless represents the nation’s final hope. In fact, the portrait of the _babae-lalaki_ depicts an imagined future wherein Maria Bernarda will rise again as a doubly gendered (and thus fully balanced) savior of sorts, heralding humanity’s reunion with God. According to the cult’s logic, the millennial history of the Philippines (and the world) will culminate in her rebirth as a superhuman combining what the Siyudad believe to be the separate skills and virtues of women and men. Indeed, cultists believe that Maria Bernarda’s reincarnation will signal the end of life as we know it, as marked by two distinct, consecutive, stages: _ang panahon ng lalake_, the “time of man,” and _ang panahon ng babae_, “the time of woman.” The historical misfortune of Filipinos is rendered comprehensible and even acceptable when understood in terms of this general trajectory, wherein male (and colonial/neocolonial) dominance has been foreordained as part of the fall of humanity, despite the efforts of men such as

Christ and Rizal (deemed essentially of the same supernatural character, distinguishable only by historical and geographical situation). While Christ and Rizal themselves are recognized to have set key processes in motion, Mr. Santos explained, neither is believed to have succeeded in reconciling the “way of men” and the “way of women.” Now, in the *panahon ng babae*, it was up to Suprema and her priestesses to redress the imbalance in the world.

The justification for the Siyudad’s female leadership, then, lies both in the model provided by Maria Bernarda Balitaan and in the belief that women hold the promise of salvation in the modern day. Nor does this mean the mere substitution of a matriarchy for a patriarchy: the future resides in Maria’s rebirth as *babae-lalaki*. And, in many ways, the idea of the woman-man is coincident with my informants’ talk of coming to terms with alternative forms of womanhood. Sister Micha, for example, played at being a boy as well as a girl both prior to and during formation. As earlier noted, finally accepting herself as a woman meant learning to accept the possibility of retaining femininity while acting in apparently (albeit only stereotypically) masculine ways. In the sister’s experience, then, the integration of both culturally defined male and female behavioral patterns in her own person represented a necessary step toward more complete selfhood.

Of course, admittedly, while Sister Micha’s understanding of womanhood involves the insight that both women and men can (or should be able to) exhibit the sorts of characteristics usually separately attributed to males and females, the Siyudad still very much promotes the belief that femininity and masculinity are distinct and attached to biological sex—the reconciliation of the two possible only with the actual biological reconciliation of both within the *babae-lalaki*. In many ways, in fact, Siyudad understandings of gender mirror those promulgated by Philippine Catholicism. In both cases, femininity implies being more connected to the world of emotions, as distinguished from a more masculine world of logical thinking. The twist here is more a matter of a different understanding of what is and isn’t most desirable in spiritual practice than a matter of radically revised gender norms, then: the Siyudad places greater importance on feeling, whereas, despite its mystical origins, Catholicism grants greater comparative authority to rationality. In some sense, in other words, Siyudad ideology involves not so much a recategorization of stereotypical Catholic classifications as a reassessment of them. Essentialist gender differentiation is still involved here, but, significantly, more spiritual value is granted female emotional sensitivity than male philosophy.
Reclaiming the Philippine Past as Feminist Practice

Notwithstanding such differences in the ways in which womanhood is defined, however, the Missionary Benedictines remain invested in maintaining connections with the Siyudad precisely because the cult nevertheless affords positive examples of female priestesshood, in marked contrast to the ways in which Catholicism circumscribes female religiosity. What’s more, the sisters’ interest in the Siyudad and the accord granted women within the Siyudad are both partly a function of the ways in which the Siyudad claims continuity with the pre-Hispanic past. As previously intimated, the Siyudad imagines itself to be preserving an original Filipina priestess tradition. Indeed, cultists reference such indigenous traditions to support their bids for legitimacy (and their nationalist ardor) as marginalized groups in the modern Philippines.

Of course, in reality, despite the dynamics of a nationalistic historical longing and despite the continued use of deep Tagalog, Suprema and her followers are not truly equivalent to or the direct heritors of babaylanes past. Nor should Siyudad claims to continuity with the past be taken at face value: as already noted, the cult makes heavy use of not only pre-Hispanic but also Catholic religious material. In other words, although the Siyudad Mistika can indeed be identified as an indigenous religious form insofar as its genesis and development can be definitively located in Philippine time and space, the cult does not really represent the mere revival of prior Philippine practices. Despite current renderings of the Philippine past in terms of a generalized Philippine experience, the sort of history and Philippineness indexed by Suprema and the Siyudad Mistika are partial with respect to the history of the entire nation.

On the other hand, for the Siyudad, the birth of the country itself is conflated with the birth of the Philippine resistance movement. One of the cult’s hymns attributes the emergence of the republic to the symbolic union of Maria Bernarda, conceived as a sort of pseudo-Marian virgin mother, and the already much mythologized Rizal:

The Virgin Maria Bernarda, a Filipina mother
Dr. José Rizal, a Filipino father
Once in a mystery, they came together
And so emerged this country, the Philippines.

(Quibuyen 1991, 10)
Notably, such re-writing of Philippine history is revolutionary in foregrounding anticolonialist resistance efforts and an indigenous perspective, effectively equating the existence of the nation itself—already an artificial construct—with the growth of Filipino self-consciousness.

In actuality, however, as earlier observed, the Philippines is by no means a culturally unified entity—and was not in fact a nation at all prior to colonization. While its many islands are now subject to the rule of one government, and its many traditions are claimed as Filipino (although not equally so in all contexts), the republic ironically owes its unification to the very colonialist presence that so disrupted the integrity of its various member communities. The islands currently forming what both the larger world and their inhabitants themselves now think of as the Philippines represent, in some sense, a rather arbitrary collection—bound together not by virtue of preexistent cultural or linguistic similarities, but rather by the geographically empirical whim of the Spanish. Nor were all the peoples of what was defined in European terms as “the Philippines” equally affected by, or rebellious against, Spanish rule. Indeed, the lowland Tagalogs were amongst those most thoroughly engaged with the foreigners; after all, the Spanish established their governmental base in what eventually became known as Manila—while the mountain tribes and the Muslim communities of Mindanao had much less contact with the invaders, and undoubtedly experienced the exploitative excesses of the Spanish quite differently.

In other words, while this is not the place to attempt a more detailed account of the many probable divergences of Philippine history as experienced by Filipinos themselves, it is important to note that the history of the revolutionaries and devotees hiding out in Mt. Banahaw is by no means pan-Philippine. It is, rather, a very localized, and in many respects Tagalog-based, history. While the widely known and widely taught story of José Rizal has now very much been appropriated by both the Philippine government and Philippine nationalists as a key chapter in Philippine history (indeed, Rizal is configured by both parties as a national hero—nor is he unfit for the position, although some Philippine nationalists feel the recognition granted him has eclipsed widespread recognition of less intellectual, less pacifist, less elite and potentially more dangerous rebel leaders like Bonifacio and Aguinaldo), the fact remains that many Filipinos of Rizal’s era were not necessarily as concerned with theoretical questions of freedom, rights, and nationalism as were Rizal and his ilustrado friends.

So, the history indexed by the Siyudad can not in any strictly
genealogical sense be conflated with the histories of its individual members, nor, for that matter, with the histories of the individual Missionary Benedictines. Certainly, this ancestral history was not that of the urban Mr. Santos, nor of the Visayan Sister Micha, and the very attempts made by the Siyudad and the sisters alike to appropriate such rather essentialized understandings of the past necessarily entail strategic elisions—inexact and ambiguous equations across both time and space obscuring the diverse actualities of their multiple and varied ancestries and everyday experiences. On the other hand, if Suprema and her followers do not really exemplify the unadulterated Philippineanness that they appear to claim for themselves, and that many of my informants locate in them, the Siyudad still holds clear symbolic value, its historical pretensions reflecting an understandable projective desire to legitimate present practices through identification with a national past. After all, history—always anyway open to strategic manipulation and subject to competing interpretations, particularly in cases such as that of the poorly documented and highly speculative pre-Hispanic Philippines—holds ideological currency in the modern day republic, as a country struggling to develop a coherent national identity in an increasingly transnational world. What is important here, then, is not actual continuity with the pre-Hispanic past, but, rather, the cult’s very desire to revive or carry on (and the sisters’ desire to believe in) something retrospectively constructed as natively Philippine.

And, again, the emphasis placed on specifically female religious expertise within the Siyudad is of particular significance. Notably, feminism is viewed with widespread suspicion in the Philippines. As will presently be discussed at greater length, the general Philippine populace presumes it threatening to “family values.” Moreover, notwithstanding sometime efforts to forward women’s rights within the larger nationalist movement, the Philippine left in general dismisses it as a product of objectionable western influences, and as necessarily secondary to concerns of nationality and class. Nor is this surprising; in light of what might now be termed relatively popular Philippine leftist academic critiques of the ways in which American influences on Philippine ideology have neglected and obscured the Philippine experience, the anticolonialist and postcolonial desire of Filipino radicals to disassociate themselves from feminism, and to situate their radicalism within Philippine history, is quite comprehensible.

Need being feminist in the Philippines really imply capitulation to the hegemony of Western feminist concerns, though? Both Siyudad and sisterly talk of pre-Hispanic babaylanes suggests the possibility of
looking to the Philippine past for models of an indigenous feminism of sorts. In fact, many Filipina feminists take pride in the apparent (but difficult to document) egalitarianism of the pre-Hispanic era: “[w]omen in pre-contact times served as ruling queens, priestesses, warriors, and patrons of art. Women in the non-ruling classes worked in the fields, sold their produces in the markets, and engaged in various forms of trading activity” (Aquino 1985, 322–23). Women could also own land and property and hold political leadership positions in the Philippines, and bilateral kinship systems are characteristic of the region—this often being taken as indicative of women’s power. And all of this in turn suggests the possibility of claiming even modern-day forms of Philippine feminism to be derivative from or grounded in Filipino experience, rather than Western experience—a matter of significance to nationalist feminists like the Missionary Benedictines, in particular. In many respects, then, the sisters’ efforts to maintain strong connections with indigenous examples of female Philippine religiosity such as those afforded by the Siyudad reflect a desire to reaffirm their legitimacy within the Philippines itself. In identifying their own religious expertise with that of experts such as Suprema in turn identified (if only partially) with the Philippine past (notably, a revolutionary, anti-colonialist, and even anti-Catholic past), the sisters are arguably symbolically relocating themselves within their country of origin not only as babaylanes in their own right, but also as feminists.