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**René B. Javellana's**

*Weaving Cultures: The Invention of Colonial Art and Culture in the Philippines, 1565–1850*

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## **Weaving Cultures: The Invention of Colonial Art and Culture in the Philippines, 1565–1850**

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017. 369 pages.

The dedication page of *Weaving Cultures: The Invention of Colonial Art and Culture in the Philippines, 1565–1850* adumbrates its content, as the author cites the varied provenance and affiliation of family members and friends, “Filipinos all.” They represent the flesh and blood of Philippine colonial history, engendering *mestizaje* (denoting miscegenation and cultural hybridity). René B. Javellana addresses the central question of Philippine cultural identity, tracing its development to a mesh of encounters that, with Spanish colonialism, thickened as well as expanded to the Americas and Europe, veritably constituting an early stage of globalization. Broadly, this monograph resonates with the core ideas of Nick Joaquin’s “process of Philippine becoming.” But Javellana’s inquiry mainly partakes of the insights from pioneering works on Latin American culture and art about the inescapable fact of mestizo culture.

Those conversant with Javellana’s work will agree with his remark that this monograph is “in a way a culmination of [his] many years of research in Philippine colonial art and culture” (xxi). It ties together the different strands of his scholarship: colonial art and architecture in the Philippines and Asia, cultural dissemination and heritage conservation, and art and communication theory. Undoubtedly cross-pollination has taken place among these areas of his oeuvre, given his long engagement with the arts as professor and former director of the Fine Arts Program at the Ateneo de Manila University, archivist of the Jesuit province in the Philippines, and chair of the Board of Trustees of Jesuit Communications.

The book explores the various aspects of cultural exchange and change resulting from the encounter that was colonialism. It begins with the network of exchange of information and knowledge established in the sixteenth century, in which the development of technology played a pivotal role. The next seven chapters discuss the colonial impact on the natural and built environments, on images and language, on clothing and performative traditions, and the native perception of these aspects of everyday life. By examining concrete objects, images, and practices as interrelated, mutually

shaping, and reinforcing parts of a whole, Javellana draws a vibrant picture of colonial life. The monograph concludes with an attempt to reconstruct the indigenous worldview based on the colonial world thus portrayed, from which questions arise to drive further research.

He applies a communications model from the field of information design, articulated by the likes of E. Tufte and N. Shedroff, to the encounter of cultures that resulted in the “invention” of colonial art and culture. Invention is to be understood as “creation and production” and in “the more archaic sense of finding as implied in its Latin root *invenire*, to find, to discover” (1). In the realm of communication, the emphasis lies in the two ends, sender and receiver, both of which can be interchangeably colonizer and colonized. Although the underlying idea of transculturation (and not just a one-directional acculturation) is not new in postcolonial studies, *Weaving Cultures* presents a rich tapestry of artefacts and practices that have undergone the process of colonial encounter. In the theory used, the extent to which communication — and therefore also miscommunication — occurs is articulated in the conversion of received data to information, and therefrom to the more orderly form of knowledge and even wisdom. Crucial to the initial part of the process is how data become meaningful to the receiver or consumer, which happens when the latter can relate to what is being transmitted; thus, a context of understanding should exist where the communicator “knows something about the world of the consumer in order to create a context of shared meanings” (9). The consumer then adapts, interprets and reframes, and modifies and integrates practices and objects introduced according to his or her own world of meaning. Oftentimes new meanings come about, which lie at the heart of cultural change. For example, the native belief in the inherent sacredness of nature was supplanted by nature’s association with Christian saints, who the natives accepted as patrons of natural phenomena affecting human existence. The introduction of vernacular values and terms in Gaspar Aquino de Belén’s Lenten literary piece *Mahal na Pasyon* brought it closer to the indigenous psyche and religious sensibility and needs.

Among the notable features of the book is the ample contextualization of the colonizer (Spanish, European) and the colonized (indigenous and Asian), which leads to an understanding of their respective worlds and perspectives, and thereby their cultural response to each other. Such contextualization also enables readers to effectively critique the sources produced by those worlds, such as colonial documents and anthropological studies. Javellana

conceptualizes a type of native elite (i.e., petty administrators, artists and craftsmen, educated individuals) who were cocreators of colonial culture, and he wonders whether those cultural mediators might have been the predecessors of nineteenth-century nationalists. He qualifies agency, whether individual or collective, Spanish or native, as “bridge-making”: “The sympathetic friar, the sensitive civil servant, and the insightful native” of whom he offers distinctive examples. He points out that for assimilation to take place, selective as it was, there had to be assent (304–5). And at the most basic level “transformation happened because living persons met” (295). This perspective provides a more rounded view than the commonplace of conflict and subjugation caused by colonialism and of the corresponding reaction of resistance.

Javellana effectively proposes an alternative narrative to that initiated by the Propaganda Movement and carried over in postcolonial studies. Instead of repudiating colonialism, his work invites us to face up to it by examining the processes of encounter from which a hybrid culture emerged. Using the communications framework allows us to view the colonizer and colonized, both colonials (as either sender or receiver), as agents in the cultural transmission process, albeit “not on equal terms” (4). Through this framework the author has sought to set right the anachronism of applying the category of nation-state to the colonial experience, rooted in the nineteenth-century view that remains prevalent. While acknowledging the contribution of the nationalist and indigenist viewpoint to the study of history and culture, Javellana cautions against the equally distorting effect of their lenses.

Some unevenness in proffering details reflects the author’s areas of expertise. For instance, the architectural examples in Manila in chapter 3 on the reconfiguration of space are treated exhaustively. The preponderance of Jesuit sources and examples is not surprising as the author, himself a Jesuit, would naturally have occasion and reason to study them. His familiarity with the monumental ethnographic work by the Jesuit Francisco Ignacio Alcina is advantageous, as Alcina remains to be among the most valuable written sources for prehispanic as well as early colonial Visayan society and culture.

The extent of the discussion of the different aspects of the colonial world reflects what available studies and evidence offer, which takes into account the regional variances as well as the homogenizing influence of Christianization. Thus, the chapters on biota (2), visual arts (4), and language (5) are discussed extensively, in large part owing to the existence of tangible

evidence in cuisine and surviving examples of linguistic usage and literature. On the opposite end is the chapter on clothing (6), a subject in which the extant written descriptions and visual materials leave many gaps, requiring the author to fill them by making inferences as far as methodological constraints allow.

It is most appropriate that a monograph on art and culture should physically represent the world it explores between its covers. The blown-up details from José Honorato Lozano's nineteenth-century *letras y figuras* (a genre of painting depicting letters the contours of which are shaped by human figures, animals, plants, and scenes), as well as other colonial printed materials that serve as section separators, are apt to introduce, encapsulate, or exemplify each section. Even the unjustified right margin gives visual support to the uneven, open-ended process of culture. It is unfortunate that the visual unity of the book is somewhat marred by occasional misspellings and typographical errors found on at least eighteen pages.

Javellana's work is highly readable. The nonspecialist can easily navigate through foreign and historical terms because these are succinctly defined or explained. To the Filipino reader who has been schooled in the ordinary stuff of Philippine history in which the Spanish colonial period is glossed over or made opaque by stereotypes, the book will present one discovery after another of the richness and pulsating character of the colonial world. The colonial becomes familiar and foreign at the same time. For instance, in the chapter on celebrations and rituals (ch. 7), footnotes are dedicated to commentaries on seventeenth-century traditions that have survived albeit in modified form.

Colonialism's progeny was mestizo culture, which "laid the basis of Philippine national culture. The Philippines is unified despite its differences—economic, social, ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic—because all were touched by the colonial experience, although not with the same depth, intensity or virulence, if you will" (314). *Weaving Cultures* has come a long way from earlier discussions on "hispanization." It shows that Philippine colonial culture was closer to globalization than we might have ever thought.

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