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Myths and Symbols Philippines

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Book Reviews

MYTHS AND SYMBOLS PHILIPPINES. By Francisco R. Demetrio, S.J. Manila. Published by National Book Store, Inc., for Xavier University, 1978. 295 pages.

This book is a restatement in the Philippine context of some outstanding themes of Mircea Eliade in his famous studies on mythology and comparative religion, which stress: (1) that there is a truth in myth which is much deeper than mere historical truth – the truth of symbols (p. 179), and (2) that myth is in itself a truly religious phenomenon (p. 181). Therefore, Fr. Demetrio adds, “wherever you have a people who are truly religious and who believe in the presence of God and his power in the world, . . . there are many mythic elements, if not whole myths, in their thought and behavior” (pp. 4-6). Filipinos ancient and modern have shown deep religious consciousness and have preserved symbolic expressions of that consciousness in their mythology and folklore. To understand “myths and symbols Philippines” is to understand and appreciate the Filipino soul.

Philippine myths and the rituals that accompanied them have been poorly preserved because of a failure in the past to understand mythology as essentially a symbolic system of a people’s expression of a deep awareness that “the Word has always been in the world which He made,” and “that missionaries coming to a new field are not really bringing God and Christ there for the first time” (p. 105). Fr. Demetrio gently alludes to the iconoclastic zeal of early Christian missionaries in the Philippines. The religion of the early Filipinos was “inadequate,” he admits but “one cannot fully agree with early Christian chroniclers who claimed that the religion of the early Filipinos was altogether diabolical. What had served the needs of the people for long centuries before the advent of Christianity cannot in fairness and truth be called the work of the devil pure and simple” (Ibid). This valid insight is, unfortunately, centuries late in coming, and Fr. Demetrio grieves over what he believes is the modern secular lowland Filipino’s lack of chance to experience “the moving effects of myth and ritual,” all because “our myths are fragments and the rituals are all but gone” (p. 13). There is a point in singling out “modern secular lowland Filipinos” as alienated from myth and ritual, for it

is the lowland Filipino who has received the primary impact of both the Spanish missionary effort to make him give up his primitive religion for Christianity, and of modern Western scientific and technological culture whose effect has been an ever accelerating trend toward removing "the mystery of things" by explaining away all phenomena by means of matter and mechanics. Many of the highland peoples of the Philippines have since been the subject of folkloric studies, and from these have come a considerable body of ethnographic material among which are myths and other forms of oral literature. But even these highland Filipinos have not been free from the relentless advance of scientific and secular modernization. Some of their lore is probably beyond retrieval for reasons familiar to Fr. Demetrio and all his colleagues today in the field of Philippine folklore research. Many of the valuable carriers of the mythological traditions are dead, dying, or inaccessible. There are comparatively few field researchers, not to mention the common deficient methodology. Moreover this area of study has not always been given enough high priority among funding institutions. As a result, what is known today of myth and ritual of Filipinos ancient and modern, is merely a fraction of a surviving fraction. Nevertheless, Fr. Demetrio says that what today is known of Philippine mythology, though fragmentary, is still sufficient for the reconstruction of its vital features.

To prove his point, the author devotes ten of the fifteen "essays and articles" (see "Preface" — he does not call them chapters) to the presentation of mythological and folkloric data and his analysis of these data. The arrangement of these ten describes a broad historical pattern. He begins with "Early Filipino View of the Universe — the Sky World" (p. 24), and concludes with "On Orasyones or Magical Prayers and Living Christianity" (p. 220). Between these are "Creation Myths among Early Filipinos"; "Death: Its Origin and Related Beliefs among the Early Filipinos"; "Engkanto Belief: An Essay in Interpretation"; "Toward a Classification of Bisayan Folk Beliefs and Customs"; "Checklist of Beliefs"; "Religious Dimensions of Some Philippine Folktales"; "Themes in Philippine Folktales"; and "Filipino Folk Memory and the Pasyon." The message comes through clearly: the mythology has survived, though it is presumed that much has been lost. Christianity has not succeeded in rooting it out, or in transforming it, but instead has contributed something of its own mythological and ritual literature as symbolized by the "orasyones," and other related beliefs.

What stands out from all these data, seen again from Eliade's point of view as Fr. Demetrio presents it, are the beliefs: (1) in a beginning, symbolized by the motif of the Center; (2) in the human agents who are closely associated with the Center, the shamans, who make possible the ritual renewal of "the beginning"; and (3) in "the land of the dead and the trials to which the dead are subject on their way thither" (p. 14). That is as close as a mythologist can come to suggesting that the Christian notions of God, Creation, Church,

Priesthood, Salvation History, and the Life to Come are present, though rudimentarily, in mythology. This is probably what Eliade and Fr. Demetrio are saying when they affirm that "mythology . . . is a truly religious phenomenon."

This book is one more rich addition of Fr. Demetrio to his already substantial contribution to Philippine studies, particularly in the area of comparative religion and folklore (see his list of publications, pp. 283-5). Students of Philippine culture in general, and of folklore and folk religion in particular, will find this an important new piece of literature in their field. In spite of heavy reference in some parts to related literature not ordinarily within the normal range of laymen's reading (e.g. works of Louis F. Hartmann, Geraldus van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade, S. H. Hooke, S. G. F. Brandon, Clyde Klukhohn, R. Pettazoni, etc.) the book is readable and can be enriching reading for the layman. One group who may find this book especially interesting and helpful is the growing number of Christian theologians and liturgists concerned with religious inculturation and related interests.

While it is true that studies of truly national scope are in great demand today — Fr. Demetrio's book has tried to meet that demand by using the word "Philippines" in his title — the present work reflects a certain disproportion in the representation of parts of the country. The bulk of data is biased in favor of the Visayas and Southern Philippines.

Myths and Symbols Philippines promises a scope broader than that which a book of this size and method of composition allows. (Twelve of the fifteen "essays and articles" appeared earlier in magazines and periodicals.) The last four essays are certainly insightful and enriching reading, but they do not help the deficient balance regarding the geographic coverage of the book. The colorful and attractive *malong*-inspired cover is eye-catching, but adds to the regional bias.

The use of sources such as the so-called *Povedano Manuscript of 1572* and the *Pavon Manuscript of 1838-1839* may raise some questions. Fr. Demetrio "believes that these writings and their content could be studied from the folkloristic point of view even before the question of genuineness and historicity has been settled, in fact, *regardless* of whether they are genuine and historical or not!" (p. 65, underscoring supplied). Does "regardless" include disregard for the genuine folkloricity (understood as authentic reflection or bearer of the consciousness of the folk)? The question is larger than the Povedano-Pavon problem. Moreover it seems strange that in connection with the said questionable sources, William Henry Scott's work, "Prehispanic Source Materials for the Study of Philippine History," published in *Unitas* 41 (1968): 227-440, is not mentioned. The author does not seem to be aware of this article which may explain the statement that "to date, not much investigation has been made on the content of these writings" (p. 65). Scott did study these manuscripts painstakingly, and his conclusions are difficult to disregard,

even by folklorists. A "W.H. Scott" appears in the Index of Authors, followed by a number 194, but on page 194 there is no reference to Scott. His name appears four pages later on page 198 as translator of the work of a Fray Ruperto Alarcon, but with no reference to his work on these controversial manuscripts.

In fact, the index to authors is confusing. For example, E.A. Manuel is supposedly cited on pages 190 and 253, but his name actually appears on pages 194 and 257. Another random choice: "E. Hassel, p. 253," whereas actual citation is on page 257. The pattern is obvious: page entries in the index of authors are four pages behind the actual pages they supposedly refer to. The same seems to be the case with the index of subjects: e.g. "*zarzuelas*, 225-26," with actual location, pages 229-30. The wrong page indications of the indexes seem to start somewhere around page 59 where important names like Laura Watson Benedict, H.O. Beyer, F.C. Cole, Mircea Eliade, and John M. Garvan appear but are not correspondingly so indicated in the index. Benedict and Garvan among others are left out altogether in the index listing. After this page (p. 59), index references to pages are generally off the mark.

While Fr. Demetrio must answer the questions on folkloricity of forged materials, his editors/proofreaders could have done him better service, for the errors in page indications in the indexes, as well as the many typographical slips, could have been easily avoided.

Florentino H. Hornedo

LORENZO RUIZ, THE PROTOMARTYR OF THE PHILIPPINES, AND HIS COMPANIONS. By Fidel Villaroel, O.P. Pasay City: Saint Paul Publications, 1979. 160 pages.

The reason for the choice of Lorenzo Ruiz as the title-name for this book is intriguing. Ruiz is the lone Filipino among a group of seventeen martyrs killed in Nagasaki, Japan, in the years 1633, 1634, and 1637, ten of whom were Japanese, four Spaniards, one Filipino, one Frenchman, and one Italian. By vocation, nine were Dominican priests, two Dominican lay brothers, two Dominican sisters, and four laymen. In an earlier introduction of the Cause for beatification of these martyrs, Fr. Domingo Ibañez de Erquicia, O.P. headed the list (p. 147). The top-billing of Lorenzo Ruiz would have been unlikely in the seventeenth century. But this is post-Vatican II, in a Philippines steaming with nationalist fire and which, in spite of being known as the "only Catholic nation in Asia," has no beatified (much less canonized) native to its credit, while Japan, Vietnam, and China count a sizable number of blessed and saints. In fact, in Japan alone, over 4,000 martyrs could be perfectly identified by the year 1636, and of these 205 have been beatified (p. 39). In this light one may ask whether there has not been some hagio-