Beyond “Localization”: Some Thoughts on Filipino Universalisms
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When the historian Oliver Wolters introduced the term “localization” in his famous 1982 essay, “Towards Defining Southeast Asian History,” he gave concise and concrete form to a concept that had long been in the making among Southeast Asianists but as of yet lacked a punchy name. Denoting action and connoting an ongoing process, “localization” describes how foreign materials are made to fit into local religious, political, and social systems, transforms them, and in turn, are transformed. But this gloss hardly does justice to Wolters’ eloquence in justifying the term’s purchase and elaborating on exactly what it means:

The term 'localization' has the merit of calling our attention to something else outside the foreign materials. One way of conceptualizing this ‘something else’ is as a local statement, of cultural interest but not necessarily in written form, into which foreign elements have retreated” (Wolters 1982, 57).

This passage jumps out at me every time I read Wolters’ essay, summing up in my view the puzzling contradictions of Southeast Asian history. Here the “local” or “local statement” is not given a priori, but defined vis-à-vis the foreign as the ‘something else’. The foreign—which for Wolters was the Indian/Hindu but for many of us is the European colonial—does not enter the local, as one might expect, but rather retreats into it. Perhaps I’m overstating here what are little more than rhetorical idiosyncracies on his part (although he consistently chooses to use the curious phrase retreat into to describe what happens to the foreign when encountering the local). What is not an overstatement is the extent to which
“localization” has undergirded the work of many Southeast Asianists as a postulate that concedes the impact of foreign influences at the same time that it presumes these influences were domesticated or attenuated in some way, to some degree.

This is especially true when it comes to so-called “world religions.” Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity: most of us who work with these religious traditions in Southeast Asia have pursued their local articulations rather than their universal pretenses, whether we acknowledge a debt to Wolters or not. (give examples, Vince and translation, etc.). Yet “localization” cannot account for everything, I discovered, when confronted with Filipino religious movements that seemed to turn everything I learned from Wolters on its head, with Filipino proselytizers becoming the “foreign” to someone else’s “local.” A new kind of Christian ‘crusade’ (and I’m not speaking hyperbolically here, as some of these movements do use the term “crusade” in their name), some Filipino ministries are bringing their mission and their message out of Southeast Asia across the globe. Or, in the specific case I’ll examine below, from Manila to New York City.

How I learned about the event I’m about to describe alone gives a sense of vertiginous dislocation. The year was 1999, and I was in Manila doing preliminary dissertation research, when I read in the Philippine Daily Inquirer about an event that was to take place within a few weeks. This event would be called the World Marian Peace Regatta, and it was orchestrated by a Filipino organization dedicated to propagating devotion to the Virgin Mary. The event itself would not take place in the Philippines, where most of the press about the event was generated, however,
but in New York City, which happened to be where I was pursuing my doctorate, and my erstwhile home. Thus did these circumstances put me in the curious position of coming back to the U.S. to do fieldwork on Filipino Christian communities, and with this, the sense of “locality” itself became increasingly difficult to pin down.

Exacerbating this sense of dislocation was the obvious pretense of the event, as indicated by the name—the WORLD Marian Peace Regatta. Represent the world, it did. On September 11th, 1999, at the south tip of Manhattan in Battery Park a few hundred Catholics from around the world convened for what was, for the most part, a day-long prayer rally. The main feature of the celebration, that which gave the event its name, was a fluvial (of or pertaining to a river) parade of images of the Virgin Mary. These images had been brought from all over the world: you had Our Lady of Akita from Japan, Our Lady of Lourdes from France, Guadalupe from Mexico, La Naval from the Philippines, and several more. When the time came for the procession, each one was carefully loaded on a speedboat or leisure craft. Lined up in flotilla formation along on the Hudson River, these images proceeded around the tip of Manhattan to the United Nations. There, the icon of global citizenship was consecrated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

As unique as it was, the event would not have caught my attention had the entire celebration not been, as I already noted, organized and executed by a Filipino, Manila-based apostolate. In fact, from an observers’ standpoint, its global aspirations notwithstanding, the event was only fully legible as a cultural statement of Filipino religiosity. For one, the fluvial procession, to my knowledge, has no
correlate in other predominantly Catholic countries. As a convention it is rooted in the Spanish colonial period of the Philippines, but anthropologically speaking it reflects a particular valuation and delineation of water as ritual space. Secondly, the selection of New York—the “center of the world,” as the event’s lead organizer put it—as the location of the event was hardly arbitrary and unmotivated but reflects the long history of sojourn and migration of Filipinos to the United States, which itself owes to the legacy of U.S. imperialism in the archipelago. Thirdly, the primary people and organizations involved are all inheritors of what I like to think of as post-People Power conservative Catholic revivalism that has found its most assertive expression in renewed devotion to the Virgin Mary. Thus, despite the radical dislocation of the event’s staging, despite its taking place in New York, we might in fact say: so far, so local. Or at least so far, so Filipino.

But not so fast. Because there’s another important term embedded in the name of the event that continues to circulate among certain Filipino religious groups today, and this term is “Marian.” What exactly does this term mean and from what does it derive? Why is it important in this context?

It’s worth observing that the generic terms “Marian” and “Marianism” are relatively recent designations in the history of Christianity. The OED reveals the first instance of “Marian” to date back to the Counter-Reformation (c.f. 1635, A. Stafford: “Till they are good Marians, they shall never be good Christians”). “Marianism,” meanwhile, dates back only to the mid 19th century, and in its early usages often had a deprecatory meaning (c.f. 1845, G.B. Cheever: “Our Mother who art in heaven [says this great system of Marianism, instead of Christianity]”).
Perhaps we shall not be surprised by the circumstances that precipitated these lexical inventions and account for the tone of each. But together they signify the novel peeling off of categories from what had long been the figure of Mary, Mother of God. The term “Marianism” in particular betrays the same classificatory imperative that gave rise to the concept of “world religions” (see Masuzawa 2005).

In the history of the Philippines, like terms would have made their first appearance in Spanish as *Mariano* or *Mariana*, most prevalently in conjunction with the names of religious sodalities (*cofradías*), especially Jesuit sodalities, that flourished in the 18th century. While it is not clear exactly when the English term *Marian* enters Filipino Catholic discourse for the first time, it is safe to say that by the latter half of the 20th century it was widely in circulation among Filipino Catholics; in 1954, for example, Filipino Catholics participated in the global celebration of what was declared the “Marian Year”.

Etymology revealed, why is *Marian* an important term? What does it signal? Why do I draw attention to its usage among Filipino Catholic groups, such as this organization that had staged the World Marian Peace Regatta? Because from the introduction of the Virgin Mary in the Philippines in the late 16th century to the last decades of Spanish colonial rule and even to this day, Mary presides over communities in various and numerous incarnations and iconography, terrestrially rooted, each one possessing its own discrete title, powers, and legends. Many of these titles are in the vernaculars, taking on place names (*Our Lady of Namacpacan*), connoting local forms of livelihood (*Our Lady of Salambao*—where *salambao* is a fisherman’s net), or local flora and fauna (*Our Lady of Caysasay*, named after a
species of bird known as casay-casay), and so forth. The incredible diversity of devotional practices that may have flourished around each of these icons and the miracles attributed to them illustrate that sacredness is plural, and deeply tethered, at times even immanent, to the material representation itself (the image, or santo, in vernacularized Spanish), which in turn is attached to the land and geographically bound. These particular versions of Mary and their attendant practices exemplify, in other words, what Wolters would describe as “localization.”

By contrast, the term “Marian” suggests an almost inverse definition, that is, a transcendent figure of Mary, a Mary of single and singular identity. “Marian” prioritizes the universal and general over the local and heterogenous. It presupposes a different understanding of divinity, its locus and figuration. Furthermore, as an adjective that links a believer to this holy personage qua universal figure, as opposed to the highly place specific Mary to which one performs devotion, “Marian” has significant implications for religious subjectivity. Yet, while these are contrastive notions, they are not mutually exclusive. One can have a regular devotion to a particular Mary and still be described, as I often heard my interlocutors speak of themselves or one another, as “very Marian.” But to be “very Marian” means to recognize that the vast plethora of Marys that exist in the Philippines and elsewhere are but iterations of a single figure, but a series for which there exists a theological general equivalent. For example, the different images of Mary that came from all over the world to the celebration in Battery Park was still, in the end, my interlocutors would confirm, but representations of the one and only Mary, “Mother of Us All”. Against localization and heterogeneity, thus, it is an
opposite movement of “universalization” or “generalization” that makes something like “marian” devotion, a “marian” devotee, or “marianism” thinkable. And this universalization, my research shows, is something that been actively propagated by several Filipino lay devotional ministries over the last few decades.

There is another, perhaps simpler, way of putting this. And that is that some Filipinos—and not just members of the institution of the Catholic Church—are deeply invested in the production and policing of Catholic orthodoxy. This may not seem to be a radical claim to some of you, but given the continued robustness of the paradigm of religious syncretism or “folk Catholicism,” as it is known in Philippine Studies, this assertion is made far less frequently than one might think. In Filipino Marian movements today this investment in orthodoxy is nowhere more explicit than in the very active role some lay groups have taken in petitioning the Vatican to declare the fifth Marian Dogma.¹ (You don’t get more orthodox than dogma!)

But there is yet one more twist to this that I wish to introduce. For as much as there has been an increased trend among some Filipino Catholic ministries to conceptualize and advocate for Mary more as a universal figure of general equivalency and less in her specific and localized incarnations, even this general figure goes by a particular name in the Philippines that betrays anew unique valences, and this name is: “Mama Mary.” Whether or not this revealingly sentimental emphasis on the maternal dimension of Mary (as opposed to say, her perpetual virginity) simply represents an admissible instance of plurality still

¹ The four Marian Dogmas are: 1) of her divine motherhood; 2) of her perpetual virginity; 3) of the Immaculate Conception; 4) of Mary’s Assumption into heaven. The fifth would be: Mary as Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of all graces and Advocate.
ultimately subsumed by Christian universalism, or, by contrast, actually may serve to subvert the patriarchal claims of the universal Church is debatable. But the answer to this question may become more clear as Filipino Marian groups continue to carry out their global work of propagating devotion via events like the World Marian Peace Regatta, and we see how the foreignness of Filipinos’ idea of the universal motherhood of Mary retreats into local statements of Christianity elsewhere.

“Localization” has been an extraordinarily productive concept in thinking through continuity and change, differences and similarities across Southeast Asia. It has given rise to and forged affinities with some of the most important critical concepts of the late 20th century, such as translation. But its limits stem from one of its more obvious assumptions: the stability of place, or locale. With the rise of diaporic movements, including migration and sojourn, as well as the increasing deterritorialization of religious phenomena and communities, one cannot count so readily on bounded cultural contexts. In addition, as I have briefly tried to argue here, one limitation of “localization” in that it presumes that Filipinos, in this case, are only ever at the receiving end of Christianity, and thus that their agency, no matter how transformative its capacity, is only ever reactive. This may have been the case in the 16th and 17th centuries, but it is certainly not the case now. As 21st century crusaders, Filipino evangelizers need to be understood not solely within the history of European or American Christian hegemonies (which we ironically hazard re-inscribing if we invoke them too singularly), but rather as an important part of
the seismic shift of the center of gravity of Christian mission from Europe and North America to the Global South.