

# **philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints**

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**Romeo B. Galang Jr.**

*A Cultural History of Santo Domingo*

Review Author: Isabel Consuelo A. Nazareno

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Catholic discourse buttressed the 1965 celebration in Cebu to commemorate the beginning of Christianity in the Philippines. Bautista argues that it was in this celebration that “the Santo Niño had ‘figured’ as the unifying symbol of Filipino Christianity. It was an event that created the religious lingua franca in which the Santo Niño could be nationally articulated” (120).

Chapter 5 (“The Syncretic Santo Niño”) is an inquiry into “the processes by which the figure symbolizes a distinctive type of Filipino Catholicism that synthesizes the modern and the ancient, the official and the sensational, the pagan and the enlightened” (16). It discusses how syncretism or hybridity can be embedded in a discourse of “persistence” and “tolerance.” What remains in the discourse of persistence are the enduring prehispanic religious practices combined with Catholic rituals, while the annual fiestas become patent in the discourse of tolerance. The Sinulog sa Sugbo annual celebration, now emblematic of Cebu, is a collective expression of popular devotion to the Santo Niño, sanctioned by Catholic authorities. Bautista claims that this festival is proof of the Catholic Church’s tolerance of syncretism.

“The Rebellion and the Icon” (chapter 6) is a discussion on the use of religious icons, particularly the images of the Santo Niño and the Virgin Mary, in mass uprisings like the 1986 People Power Revolution. The presence of these images in these “holy revolutions” signifies divine intervention that legitimizes the people’s cause against their rulers. However, Bautista elucidates that divine power does not inhere in the icons themselves. Mass uprisings have a rightful claim on divine inspiration only after they have been convoked by the prescribed religious authority.

In chapter 7, “The Prodigious Child and *Bata Nga Allah*,” Bautista looks into how nationalist and regional discourses have provided other readings of the Santo Niño as a deity that originates from prehispanic times and is thus indigenous. These discourses are motivated by an agenda to find Filipino identities that are divorced from either the colonial or national discourse. The author ably demonstrates the Santo Niño as a “conceptually ‘floating’ signifier” that “oscillate[s] between competing accounts of local origins or moving across varied agendas of searching for a definitive, yet estranged sense of *Bisayan* (as opposed to a national) soul” (194–95). Bautista closes his work in chapter 8, stating that it “point[s] not only to what the Santo Niño is, but to the question of who Filipinos say the Santo Niño is” (207).

With adept use of the notions of symbol and materiality, coupled with discourse analysis, Bautista unpacks the layers of meaning attached to the

Santo Niño de Cebu. In presenting the process by which the Santo Niño became a popular religious symbol he shows the distinctive features of Filipino Catholicism. His critical stance on the discursive techniques that different parties use to privilege or dismiss the Holy Child’s image encourages readers to value the role of discourse in the construction of religious symbols. Bautista’s work is an invaluable reference for future works on other Filipino religious icons.

**Grace Liza Y. Concepcion**

Department of History, College of Arts and Sciences  
University of Asia and the Pacific  
<grace.concepcion@uap.asia>

ROMEO B. GALANG JR.

## **A Cultural History of Santo Domingo**

Manila: UST Publishing House, 2013. 178 pages.

To the twenty-first-century mind, it may be hard to reconcile the relic that Intramuros has become with what was once the bustling center and seat of Spanish power in the Philippine Islands. This challenge of enlivening the imagining of old Intramuros Romeo B. Galang Jr. takes up in *A Cultural History of Santo Domingo*. Galang obtained his MA Art History from the University of the Philippines Diliman and currently teaches courses on literature and the humanities at Far Eastern University. This book is based on his thesis, which benefited from a grant from the Spanish Program for Cultural Cooperation. Published by the UST Publishing House, the book looks at accounts that cover four centuries of the ecclesiastical complex, specifically that of Santo Domingo. It aims to show how such an institution was able to “bring forth a distinctive cultural life for the people of the city” (2). Its themes include colonial aesthetics; the role of geography and climate; power relations between church and state; issues of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class; and even “Asian customs and traditions” (9)—a daunting task for a book containing a little over 150 pages of text.

A common challenge in studying the history of the Catholic Church in the Philippines is the limited availability and accessibility of primary documents. Of those available, many reside in archives located in Spain. Fortunately copies of the manuscripts of the Archivo de la Provincia del Santísimo Rosario are available at the University of Santo Tomas Archives. It is from translated versions of these Spanish texts as well as other documents housed locally at the National Archives of the Philippines that Galang derives his main material.

The power that the Catholic Church and its agents have wielded in Philippine history is easy to recognize, their spiritual mission seemingly unaffected by mundane problems plaguing ordinary people. Details featured by Galang throughout the book's eleven chapters, however, provide glimpses of the very real and practical considerations faced by the Dominican Order in setting up shop in Manila. For instance, one may find some amusement in reading how the Santo Domingo's location, close to the Parian, was deemed an asset largely because the lot near the bank of the Pasig River was "the only site left in the city which could be bought" (13). Moreover the colonial government considered the enclosing walls required by the order's cloistered way of life an obstruction to security during times of conflict, necessitating a compromise between these two powerful entities.

By delving into the patrons' role in the building, renovations, and restorations of Santo Domingo, the book emphasizes the elaborate support system needed by the ecclesiastical complex in order to flourish and survive adversity. The descriptions of how spaces were appropriated, utilized, and transformed, coinciding with moments of celebration and disaster, offer a sense of dynamism to what would otherwise be inanimate wood, brick, and stone. Through these details, the book brings to the fore the existing power structures, along with the necessary negotiations and compromises among colonial institutions.

The ecclesiastical complex also reflected the inequity that characterized colonial society. Distinctions were seen in the roles performed by various racial groups. Aside from providing essential labor "in the building and maintenance of Manila" (103), black slaves were often put to work as musicians during religious celebrations. Galang stresses the treatment of slaves as property by citing accounts of their purchase, sale, and even donation to churches. In contrast, members of the native population were relatively privileged in the tasks assigned to them as cooks, choir singers,

and servants within the ecclesiastical complex. According to one account, native *majordomos* were put in charge of "[p]rovisions for the needs of slaves, including rations" (113).

While the multilayered approach utilized by the author gives a sense of how dense colonial society was, the reader can feel disoriented by the various trajectories of discussion and digressions dotting the chapters. The attempt to provide a broad view of cultural history based on limited and uneven data is admirable but tends to be problematic. Breadth substitutes for depth, precluding a genuine appreciation of the cultural life of the time.

For instance the transactional relationship between Santo Domingo and its benefactors is touched upon but not fully discussed. Somewhat frustrating is that, beyond a listing of names of presumably prominent individuals, little information regarding motivations for their support of Santo Domingo in contrast to other churches is available.

The negative attitude and harsh treatment that slaves were subjected to is ascribed tentatively to "differing cultural ways and a poor understanding of the slaves themselves" (113). What does this mean? Such reasoning begs further elaboration and validation.

In addition, the author suggests that some instances of segregation, such as the separate sermons for different racial groups (Spaniards, blacks, and native populations) stemmed from "attempts of friars to facilitate the native's understanding of Christian doctrine" (115). Accounts also describe efforts of confraternities to enhance the education of slaves, "buying a number of books . . . to help them learn the rudiments of reading" (113). Although some degree of benevolence and altruism may be ascribed to these acts, the question of who benefits most must also be raised. What values and attitudes were emphasized in the sermons? In the education of slaves? What did the content communicate? Were these actions motivated by a genuine concern for the slaves' wellbeing or were they meant to allow the masters to more easily manage them on a day-to-day basis?

Furthermore certain conclusions appear quite speculative due to gaps in information. The tendency to equate practices in the Santo Domingo complex and Intramuros with the rest of the colonial Philippines is something that historians must be wary of. Galang falls into this trap by his assertion that "fleeting accounts revealed not only the Dominican rules and customs but also the ways of life in the Philippines and how they infiltrated the convent" (93). As a case in point, he suggests that the Dominicans partaking

of chocolate within the convent showed that “chocolate had pervaded not only the Philippine way of life but also of the convent” (94). While it is quite easy to imagine friars enjoying some chocolate in the convent, to assume that chocolate was widely available or consumed by the rest of the islands’ population is stretching the point.

Given the absence of maps or visuals that may serve as references (only one map, labeled as pre-1941, is included), the book’s descriptions of location, layout, and orientation of the Dominican church and convent in relation to the rest of the city fail to make a strong impression on the reader. Should another edition be produced, consideration ought to be given to providing more cohesion between the narrative and the section on photos and illustrations found at the end of the book. As it currently stands, the relevance of this section is diminished by the lack of direct correspondence with the text, despite the visuals being numbered and accompanied by brief descriptions. It seems that the reader is left to discern the rationale for the selection and arrangement of images featured in this section.

A further round of editing would be beneficial as well. Among the simplest but most glaring oversights is the treatment of the topic “*Patio, Atrio, Cementerio*.” It is treated as chapter 3 when one goes through the book, but in the table of contents is listed as part of chapter 2, “The Foundation of the Convent.” Uneven use of language may be confusing for readers unfamiliar with the object of discussion. For instance: vacillation between the Spanish and English designations “*La Naval*” vs. “Our Lady of the Holy Rosary” vs. “*Nuestra Señora del Rosario*” (various pages); “Lady Chapel” vs. “chapel of Our Lady” (various pages); Dominican “convent” vs. “monastery” (the Dominicans were not monks); “Chapter” vs. “chapter” (47 and various pages); randomly referring to the Dominican Order as a “corporation” (18), which conjures modern meanings of a business enterprise that runs counter to the statement on the order’s dependence on alms, and so on. Providing brief explanations or perhaps a glossary of terms—*atacaranas* (32), *cabildo* (41), *caídas* (48), *quilason* (48), and so on—would also be helpful.

While the book renders a textured view of life in Spanish Manila, in the end it is precisely as the author describes it in the Introduction, that is, “a preliminary account of the historical evolution of the ecclesiastical complex” (9). What made life in Intramuros culturally distinct was not clearly articulated. It is apparent, however, that Santo Domingo was very much an active presence in the multifaceted society of the time. Through this work

Galang provides a springboard for further exploration and calls attention to the continued scholarship demanded to more fully illumine our colonial past.

**Isabel Consuelo A. Nazareno**  
Department of History, Ateneo de Manila University  
<inazareno@ateneo.edu>

LUKAS KAELIN

## **Strong Family, Weak State: Hegel’s Political Philosophy and the Filipino Family**

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2012. 236 pages.

In this novel usage of the “family” in Philippine politics and society, *Strong Family, Weak State: Hegel’s Political Philosophy and the Filipino Family* presents an interesting take on the complex yet often taken for granted interplay between and among the existing, and perhaps even the emerging, modern institutions in the Philippines today. The novelty of Lukas Kaelin’s work comes from his convincing application of Hegelian political theory on these modern institutions: family, civil society, and the state. Using Hegelian concepts, the book reflects on the conceptual openings and concrete opportunities for social change that can be considered in light of the centrality of Filipino “family” in modern Philippine society.

The author, Lukas Kaelin, is a critical theorist and political philosopher. He was assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy of the Ateneo de Manila University from 2006 to 2008. He has written papers and commentaries on the Philippines, which cover topics such as the ethics of organ donation and the migration of nurses, and the family and political dynasties in the public sphere. In 2009 Kaelin became a research fellow at the Institute for Ethics and Law in Medicine of the University of Vienna. He is currently a visiting scholar at Stanford University.

Kaelin begins his work by locating the “family” in today’s political theory of modern political order. With the apparent dominance of the Social Contract theory, he interrogates the common understanding of the Social Contract tradition of political order, which privileges individualism, freedom, and constitutionalism in the structure and practice of modern politics, by understanding the unique role of the “family” in the emergence,