

Seminar Paper on
Eric Wolf's "The Virgin of Guadalupe"

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[Note: This paper was made in tandem with another teacher at the University of the Philippines for a class in Anthropology. The other teacher made the summary of Eric Wolf's thesis regarding the Virgin of Guadalupe, and so is supposed to be Roman numeral I in this seminar paper. However, since I have not obtained his permission, I am not including his part. The summary could very well be gotten by reading Eric Wolf's essay, which is relatively short anyway.]

II. Critique and Re-Appropriation
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Wolf's analysis of Guadalupe is enlightening, and could be used in determining the Filipino penchant for the Virgin Mary, but something seems to be missing in his analysis. Why, if the Mexicans needed a symbol, whether for the present, the era of Spanish colonialism, or pre-Spanish times, did they choose, and continue to choose, a woman as a representation of their dreams and aspirations?

We do not know Mexican society enough to answer that question, though we may answer that in many cases early societies did primarily worship goddesses rather than gods, and this is most likely for good reason. However, we can certainly use Philippine society as preliminary material on which to test our hypothesis.

In Philippine society, we cannot say that there is one single Virgin Mary that can be used as a single master symbol in whom lies a "collective representation" of our dreams and aspirations.

Rather, there are many Virgin Marys, and they are contained to the islands of Luzon and the Visayas.

This is because when the Spaniards came, we were not one single nation with a history of civilization like the Incas, Mayas or Aztecs, but a conglomeration of unattached and disattached barangays that worshipped not one single goddess or even goddesses, but nature and their ancestors. These separate barangays, while they have since grown and multiplied, still act like barangays (though networked now), and therefore worship their own Virgin Marys, each with her own specific characteristics and origin myth.

However, all of these Virgin Marys recall, not a goddess of old, but the babaylans, actual, living charismatic leaders in the barangays before the coming of the Spaniards. According to Dr. Zeus Salazar, Dr. Milagros Guerrero, and the ethnographic fieldwork of Ramon Obusan, most of the babaylans are women, and could be men only if they wore skirts. Dr. Salazar bluntly says that if they were not women they should be men of indefinite sex.

The babaylans were part of a triad of leadership in the barangays consisting of the datu, the panday and the babaylan. The datu took care of the political affairs of the barangay,

including the wars; the panday was in charge of smithing; and the babaylan undertook most everything else – from the education in the barangays' customs, traditions and myths to health to relationships to astrology to determining whether the barangay should go to war or it was propitious for the datu to get out of his house. The babaylan also took over whenever something happened to the datu. In other words, she was not only powerful; she was a nurturer in the most holistic sense of the word.

When the Spaniards came, their greatest enemies were the babaylans. So great were these enemies that the Spaniards had to hound them into the mountains, there to be gang-raped and tortured if they were caught. However, many of these babaylans survived – most in the mountains where they continued their roles with remaining followers, some within the absorbed societies, cloaked in other guises.

The people were cowed into submission only when they began to recognize that their babaylans had been replaced by two comparable figures: one, the priest who wore skirts; and two, the Virgin Mary who, though now a statue, was nevertheless a woman.

We submit that the figure of the Virgin Mary in its many appearances persists in the minds of a great many Filipinos, despite the now more than four hundred years of patriarchy artificially imposed on their society, because Philippine society is at bottom still matricentric, and the slightest prick can upset the patriarchal structure. Moreover, she exists beside the Sto. Nino, the man-child who never grows up, remaining a child forever. Together they represent the Filipino family and Filipino gender relations.

Such symbols do not, like the Guadalupe symbol, directly represent an overt political wish, for the simple reason that the Filipino in general has apparently been cowed into submission by the foreign colonizer. But they do still represent a subversion of the present order. For in the return to the primal state where holistic woman leads, the hope is that all will be well, and gentle, again. Rather than fight, therefore, the manifold symbol tricks the colonizer into thinking he has won, subverting his immediate agenda by surreptitiously positing a long-term goal: to put the babaylan back to where she has always belonged.