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GENDER, RELIGION, AND POSTCOLONIALISM

The Birhen sa Balintawak and masculinities in the Philippines

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Introduction

This chapter outlines the connection between (post)colonialism, gender, and religion by focusing on masculinities in the Philippines, using the example of the ‘Mother of Balintawak’, the first indigenous Filipino representation of Mary and Jesus, as a test case. In this chapter, both the visual and the literary dimensions of this representation will be considered. I will show how relationships between (post)colonialism, gender, and religion are manifold and, although it is often assumed that religious constructions of gender favour a conservative attitude, the analysis of the Filipino case shows the subversive potential of religious traditions when it comes to constructing ‘alternative’ genders, in this case masculinities.

The connection between (post)colonialism and gender (for definitions, cf. later) is vividly illustrated by the cover of Edward Said’s Orientalism (Said 1978), which features a picture of a nude female snake charmer being observed by a lounging man in ‘oriental’ dress. The picture encapsulates at least two aspects of the relationship between colonialism and gender, which (post)colonial theory, in the sense of the critical study of the history of colonialism, neocolonialism, and their social impact, seeks to address and redress. The first is the feminization of the ‘oriental’ other in general (the lounging man may well be considered unmanly or decadent), and the second is the sexualization of the same (the snake charmer can easily be read as suggestively erotic). Considering this also indicates that situations of colonialism and its aftermath affect all gender constructions, male, female, and beyond (cf. Fanon 1977), although different kinds of marginality are at play as well (Fokken and Derksen 2015). This chapter introduces some salient aspects of the relationship between (post)colonialism and gender with a focus on masculinity in the Philippines. The analysis of a case study, the first indigenous representation of Mary with child, will show how the (post)colonial condition was also negotiated creatively and subversively at the intersection of religion and gender, to wit: masculinity. In particular, it will be argued that, although a relationship between religion, gender, and (post)colonial situations is also possible in which religious traditions reinforce colonial structures and constructions of gender, the reverse is also the case: an indigenous appropriation of traditional colonial religious repertoire—Mary with child—which can be described in terms of mimicry in a context of cultural hybridity, turns out to be an instance of the religious legitimization of both the indigenous culture.
and indigenous masculinity. In the course of the construction of the appertaining imagery, the colonial religion also becomes indigenized and the property of the colonized, rather than of the colonizers.

Postcolonialism and gender: intersections

Postcolonial studies, which includes (post)colonial theory, is a broad field, covering a range of phenomena that intersect in a number of ways with aspects of gender. This becomes visible when gender is understood as an intersectional phenomenon, that is, as something that emerges
at the intersection of various aspects of a person’s identity, such as ethnicity (or ‘race’), class, sex, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, and so on (cf. Shields 2008; Lutz, Herrera Vivar and Supik 2010).

The field of (post)colonial studies is, at large, concerned with both historical and contemporary power relations from the sphere of colonial enterprises and empires, both ancient and modern, and Western and non-Western. Four main concerns and foci can be identified in the field, when following Heinze’s survey (Heinze 2015; Hornscheidt 2012). First, there is the analysis of forms of ‘othering’, that is, representations of the self and the other in and through historical processes characterized by inequality (Amos and Parmar 1984; Mohanty 1997). Second, there is the analysis of power relations, hierarchies, and forms of exploitation that are undergirded and normalized by means of (colonial) cultural representation and political control (Bhabha 1994; hooks 1989; Spivak 1988, 1994). Third, (post)colonial studies, including (post)colonial theory, is concerned with the analysis of colonialization as a violent process of the creation of colonial subjects, created by means of pedagogic and performative strategies and practices (hooks 1994, 2003, 2010). Fourth, and finally, there is the transformation of colonial concepts of power(lessness), which construct the colonial subject as being without agency, into concepts of (self)empowerment (cf. e.g. Bhabha 1994; hooks 2003). Given the proximity of (post)colonial studies to political practices and its character of socially and politically committed scholarship, postcolonial criticism is never far away from contemporary political arena’s. This adds to the societal relevance of (post)colonial studies, but it is also a potential risk for the discipline, given the possibilities for its (uncritical) enlistment for political agendas (e.g. Emmer 2018). In terms of theoretical frameworks, Marxist, poststructuralist, and feminist, as well as increasingly queer approaches, are influential in the field of (post)colonial studies (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010), yet the field as such is strongly interdisciplinary and sometimes eclectic when it comes to combining theoretical and methodological perspectives, which may well be a necessity in order to deal with such a complex and ‘polyphonic’ reality (Ha 2011).

Gender studies, understood to be the discipline researching gendered identities and representations (‘gender’ is the result of the construction of such identities and representations), has interacted with (post)colonial studies variously. In order to survey this, first the interaction between (often feminist-inspired) gender studies in general and postcolonial approaches will be given attention; subsequently, masculinities studies and (post)colonialism are addressed. When it comes to the first topic, that is, the relationships between (post)colonialism and (feminist) gender studies at large, three things can be observed. First, the encounter between these two fields has substantially challenged feminist research, which makes up a substantial portion of the field of gender studies. Feminist voices that were embedded in colonial contexts and contexts that continue to be affected by a colonial past have highlighted the effect of the intersections of gender, class, race, economy, sexuality and ideology, thereby drawing attention to the complex nature of gender. In doing so, they also pointed to deficiencies in ‘Western’ gender studies and feminist theory (e.g. its ‘whiteness’ and its frequent bias vis-à-vis of religious traditions; for the issue of positionality as such, see Spivak 1994). Second, and to some extent as a development of the emphasis on identifying and problematizing the indebtedness of Western discourses (feminist and other) on gender to Western (post)modern culture, (post)colonial studies dealing with gender has also drawn attention to the epistemologies involved in gender studies, for example a tendency to think in universal rather than particular (and contextually grounded) categories (cf. with regard to Africa: Oyèwùmí 2016). This includes both implicit and explicit assumptions about relevant kinds of knowledge (e.g. preferring secular insights to religious ones and insights based on reason to those based on cultural tradition) and how to acquire them and the kinds of norms and normativities inscribed in Western critical approaches, which are connected to colonialism. Third, the connection between gender, sexuality and the colonial enterprise is of importance, given that this was often gendered (‘discovering and conquering virgin lands’ and the like) and
even sexualized (cf. Loomba 2005; Yeğenoğlu 1998; Hill Collins 1990—see also the aforementioned book cover of Said’s *Orientalism*). These three observations do not indicate, of course, that Western feminism or gender studies has become obsolete, but rather that the interaction with both (post)colonial studies and voices from non-Western settings can help to decolonize these disciplines and to contribute to a progress in critical thinking out of multiple cultural and socio-political contexts. To this, it should be added that this chapter can certainly not solve all of these problems, but it does, at least, note them and keep them in mind as it progresses.

**Masculinities in postcolonial perspective**

As indicated, this chapter will focus on masculinities (for the plural, see e.g. Hearn 2010), in order to highlight this often neglected aspect of gender studies and indicate that, also in (post)colonial studies, attention to masculinities can be fruitful. In line with the general understanding of gender and gender studies given earlier, with Kimmel and Bridges (2016) I suggest that masculinities studies can be defined as an ‘interdisciplinary field of study broadly concerned with the social construction of what it means to ‘be a man’ or ‘masculine’. Phrased differently by the same authors, ‘Masculinities scholars study the social role and meanings of masculinities.’ The field operates from a vantage point well summarized by Connell by arguing that masculinities can be understood as the patterns of practice that are identified as such by a society, or groups within a society; dominant patterns of masculinity are often referred to as ‘hegemonic masculinities’ (as discussed in Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, *passim*). Given the important role of masculinities in most societies, certainly in most colonial settings, understanding them is vital for understanding such locations; the frequent sacralization of particular kinds of masculinities to legitimize and promote them is an important reason for researching the intersection between masculinities and religion, also from a (post)colonial perspective. In doing so, masculinities are understood to be intersectionally constructed, that is, at the intersection of multiple dimensions of a ‘masculine person’ (e.g. sexuality, ethnicity, age, health, wealth, etc.).

Stanovsky’s entry in the *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities* provides a helpful starting point for accessing the discourse on masculinities in (post)colonial settings (Stanovsky 2007: 34; see also e.g. Morell and Swat 2005; Kabesh 2013). He observes, for instance,

[Questions of representation are central to the study of postcolonial masculinities. First World discourses about Third World masculinities often produce and maintain representations that serve to create, perpetuate, and reinforce First World norms of masculinity and heterosexuality by way of the boundaries and contrasts provided by these ‘other’ Third World masculinities and sexualities. For instance, Western representations of native men as dangerously hypersexual beasts who pose an imminent threat to the safety, security, and virtue of white women have been used as mechanisms to help mobilize and justify the use of force against both native populations in the Third World as well as immigrant populations in the West. At the same time, these representations of native men also work to create and bolster violently repressive martial masculinities in the First World. Perceived threats to native women from these same presumptively predatory native men can also serve as justifications for colonial and neocolonial violence. Practices shocking to Western sensibilities, such as polygyny, widow sacrifice, burqas, or infibulation, can function as pretexts for First World interventions. Spivak describes these as instances of ‘White men saving brown women from brown men’ (1988: 297). These myths of postcolonial masculinities can be construed as yet another form of subaltern consciousness that does not speak and represent itself]
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and so becomes represented through Western eyes and through Western discourse for Western purposes. Postcolonial masculinities thus run a similar risk of being essentialized and appropriated as the constitutive periphery of a central First World masculinity in much the way that Mohanty argues that ‘Third World Difference’ has served as an imaginary backdrop for First World feminism (1991: 54). This essentializing and homogenizing of postcolonial masculinity serves to obscure the actual diversity and plurality of lived postcolonial masculinities around the globe.

Thus, it is the ‘the interlocking and mutual articulation of race by sex and sex by race that works to create and produce the subject of (post)colonial masculinity’ (Stanovsky 2007: 35). This has similarities to other constructions of masculinities, of course, yet postcolonial settings have their own distinct dynamics, caused by the postcolonial condition. The complexities and the individual character of such masculinities has been and continues to be subject of range of studies, often making use of insights from other explorations of gendered identities (e.g. queer studies, research on economics and gender, etc., cf. e.g. Connell 2016; Treacher 2007).

The effects and complexities involved in such constructions of masculinities can be demonstrated with reference to ‘race’ (and/or ethnicity), which is key to the construction of (post)colonial masculinities. In contexts characterized by the heritage of colonialism (as well as elsewhere), one of the lines along which masculinities are ‘diversified’ is that of race and/or ethnicity. The influence of belonging (or being made to belong by being categorized as such by others) to a particular ‘race’ has implications for the extent to which a person is viewed as authentically masculine. This is the case in a mono-ethnic societal subgroup and in the context of a multi-ethnic society, in which different subcultures compete with each other, when it comes to setting standards for what amounts to being masculine and what sort of markers are indicative of such masculinity. One of these markers is ethnicity (or ‘race’). Being placed in one or the other category regarding ethnicity often has a considerable influence on the (self-)perception of those who embody masculinity (predominantly men and boys). Research has, for instance, addressed the ‘emasculation’ of black men in the USA in relation to hegemonic constructions of masculinity, in which whiteness (in terms of skin colour and cultural associations) was a key marker (Fanon 1977; Staples 1982). What can be said about such precarious black masculinities in the USA, however, can also be seen as one particular instance of the creation of colonial masculinities. Such masculinities are an expression of and building block for colonial power structures, with the standards for hegemonic masculinities being constructed in the image and likeness of those in colonial power (Segal 2007). This phenomenon may well occur across most, if not all, times and all places, ranging from the construction of ancient ‘barbarian’ masculinities, be they Greek, Roman, or Israeliite (Wetter 2015), to contemporary right-wing constructions of the masculinity of male Muslim Syrian refugees as testosterone-driven radicals, out of control sexually, religiously, and culturally (as Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders put it in a debate on 6 January 2016, using the term ‘testosterone bombs’ to describe these men). This latter example highlights the intersection between masculinity, race, and religion as well (Ganzevoort and Sremac 2015). At the same time, such ‘racialized’ masculinities can work out in three ways. The first is the development of subversive, subaltern masculinities, for example in groups that begin to develop their own standards and ‘pride’; a notable example of this can be found among ‘black’ American groups (Alexander 2006). This strategy may, however, simultaneously lead to an even deeper identification with (and limitation by) membership of a non-hegemonic group. That these strategies can be highly effective, in particular when religion is involved, can be illustrated with reference to the ‘The Black Christ’ painting of Ronald Harrison (1962), which depicts Jesus with the features (and skin colour) of Chief Albert Luthuli, the then president of the
ANC, thereby uplifting the dignity of the South African ‘blacks’ to that of (the suffering) Christ (Harrison 2006). The second effect that such hegemonic constructions of masculinity may have concerns groups that belong to the ‘right’ race, but somehow fail to perform accordingly—even to the extent that their masculinity ends up at the ‘bottom’ of the gender hierarchy by being trumped by others, for example ‘black’ men trumping ‘white trash’ men in terms of masculinity in a US American context. This has all sorts of dire consequences for the self-perception and self-esteem of the men involved, as well as the segments of society that they represent through their performance of masculinity (MacLeod 2009; Anderson 1999; Duneier 1992). Religion can play a role in the construction of appertaining forms of masculinities, for instance in the context of followers of former president Donald Trump (Kimmel 2017). Third and finally, the intersection between race and masculinities can lead to the exploration of spaces and practices in which hegemonic forms of masculinity can be performed despite being marginalized racially or perceiving oneself as being marginalized or under threat racially; this includes violent or martial masculinities in the domestic sphere and that of mercenaries (see e.g. Higate 2012), but also contemporary forms of Islamic terrorism and forms of domestic (‘white’) terrorism in the USA (Aslam 2012; Kimmel 2017) Thus, when it comes to the intersection between ‘race’ and masculinities, it can be observed that the two reciprocally influence each other, while religion can play a multifaceted role in the resulting constructions of gender and religion.

South-East Asia: gender and religion in a (post)colonial setting

In South-East Asia, the situation concerning gender and colonialism is similar to that in other (post)colonial settings, yet, with acknowledgement of the particularities caused by the specific colonial conditions in that part of the world (for a survey see Lyons and Ford 2011). From the early 1990s, substantial academic attention was given to the development of women’s studies (Karim 1993), which remains—and rightly so—an ongoing concern (Devasahayam 2019; Choi 2019). When it comes to the position of non-hegemonic genders, making visible the existence of such (i.e. non-hegemonically gendered) identities (whether women or otherwise) is a key challenge and is addressed in a range of endeavours. Yet for a long time, this meant, according to a 2007 survey, that it was mainly women doing research on women (Watson Andaya 2007; see for example a title like Women in Asia: Restoring Women to History [Ramusack and Sievers 1999; cf. Loomba 2003]). Only more recently have similar efforts emerged regarding (post) colonial masculinities and queer identities, both with an interest in historical developments and in the impact of the ‘global gender order’, that is, a spectrum of globally influential notions regarding gender that suppress local and more contextual convictions regarding gender, with its more suppressing and more liberating (queer) tendencies (Connell 2016). In all of these efforts, for (post)colonial gender studies the challenge remains of having to rethink the epistemologies, conceptualities, and norms that have been developed in such research, particularly Western, contexts. This is necessary in order to avoid replicating colonialism in the guise of postcolonially oriented research. Currently, gender is studied and discussed publicly with regard to a range of identities and social, cultural, economic, and political developments. A good illustration of this is the following quotation from an editorial of the East Asia Forum Quarterly in 2016:

The dynamism seen in contemporary Asia has a deep gender dimension. Rapid economic changes have fundamentally challenged the traditional division of labour of women working in the private, family domain and men in the public sphere of commerce and politics. Greater participation by women in politics has reshaped agendas for social change. The seemingly fixed images of masculinity and femininity are in flux,
accelerated by the commercialisation of popular culture across the region. Although the LGBT community is still struggling to gain wider acceptance, it has made strides that have challenged the hegemonic status of heteronormativity. In the area of body politics, where the state and religious groups still exert enormous influence, women have been resisting or sometimes appropriating the debate to put forward their own agenda. The search for employment or new life opportunities has driven thousands of women to migrate, legally or illegally, within Asia as brides, labourers, traders or sex workers. In the midst of these transformations, there has been encouraging evidence of legal changes that recognise the rights of women, exemplified in the abolition of various patriarchal laws, such as South Korea’s family head system, or by the enactment of equal opportunity laws or the lifting of bans on women in the military. Yet old discriminatory norms and practices persist and are further complicated by regional political and economic developments.

(Choi and Morris-Suzuki 2016)

Although the quotation does not address this explicitly, the (post)colonial condition is visible in virtually every sentence, including political, economic, cultural, and sexual entanglements. To these dimensions also belongs the dimension of religion, which is as much affected by the post-colonial condition, including the heritage of colonialism, as is, for instance, gender. This begins already with the category of religion as such and the interpretation of all kinds of ‘cosmologies’ as ‘religions’ (e.g. Dubois 2005) as a means of organizing and controlling the cultures that Western powers encountered in the course of the colonial project (something which cannot be overcome in this chapter). In relation to gender, the religiously substantiated colonial project also implied a certain kind of ‘body politics’, in which constructions of gender were imported and imposed on colonial subjects (e.g. Ong and Peletz 1995), often also with a modernizing or pedagogical aim in mind. Precolonial forms of religion could, by preserving earlier constructions of gender, from time to time function as places where ‘deviant’ forms of gender could be performed (i.e. deviant from the perspective of colonizing powers; cf. e.g. Peletz 2006, 2012), although a romanticizing of precolonial religion as a safe haven for queerness is, probably, also not justified, as these cosmologies could just as well support controlling and patriarchal structures (see e.g. Shih 2015).

Having outlined this general background, the focus of this chapter will now shift to the topic of masculinities in the Philippines (and the Christian tradition in that country) as a particular case. In discussing this case study, it will be stressed in particular how religion can also legitimate subversive masculinities from a (post)colonial perspective (a topic not always highlighted in literature on the interface between religion and gender in a South Asian context, in particular in the Philippines).

The case of the Philippines: masculinities and religion in a postcolonial setting

The study of gender in the Philippines is a growing area of research and includes studies on the precolonial and colonial past (Watson Andaya 2007). Most studies, however, focus on women and conservative religion, and many concern contemporary constructions of gender that have been influenced by colonialism and/or neoliberalism (MacKay and Lucero-Prisno III 2011; MacKay 2011, 2015; Johnson 2017; Yea 2015; McCoy 2000; Lauer 2005). While insight into such constructions of gender is important, it is the intention to move beyond contributions focusing only on ‘conservative’ or ‘fundamentalist’ Roman Catholicism and the role of women,
regardless of how important this is for the Filipino landscape in terms of understanding relationships between religion and gender (Aguiling-Pangalangan 2019; Jereza 2016). In this chapter, the focus will be more on the (recent) past than on the longer-term history of the Philippines, despite the significance of historical context (cf. e.g. Brewer 2001). Rather, the aim here will be to analyse constructions of masculinities in a (post)colonial setting that go beyond ‘traditional’ models, creatively carving out the space for new (and alternative) normativities. As an exhaustive overview of research is not possible here, representative examples will have to suffice. First considered is an example taken from the field of Filipino indigenous religion, and second is an example field of Christian tradition; given that these two are the most important religious traditions in the Philippines, attention for both is appropriate.

The first phenomenon that deserves attention is that of the ‘bakla’, which are, when using binary categories, men who understand themselves and often present themselves as women. In contemporary discussions, ‘bakla’ is often associated with discussions about homosexuality and its negotiation in the Philippines, also with regard to religion (Lee 2002; Jovero Rubio and Green 2009). Accordingly, the term is often translated as ‘gay’ (when focusing on the male-to-female sexuality that fits a bakla identity) or as ‘transgender’ (when concentrating on the female self-understanding of bakla men). However, both translations are contested, and it seems that Western categories concerning gender and sexuality only provide a very partial fit (Tan 1995; Winter 2006—different: Deleña and Masalunga 2019). Although many clichés exist concerning bakla men in contemporary Filipino society, the character of this identity and its broad acceptance can only be understood against the background of precolonial shamanism (babaylan shamanism), in which persons with a bakla identity played a key role. As Inton puts it:

The bakla has its historical roots in the practice of babaylan shamanism in pre-colonial societies in the Philippines. It was considered a primarily feminine occupation but not exclusive to female-sexed individuals. Male-bodied persons became babaylan when they donned feminine garb and adopted feminine manners and behaviour. This accounts for the modern bakla’s performance of effeminacy as an exaggerated mimicry of essentialised femininity. Another reason for the bakla’s effeminacy and feminine dress is the belief that the bakla possesses a ‘pusong babae’ (female heart), which also accounts for a sexual preference toward the masculine, heterosexual man or lalake.

(Inton 2015: 4; see Brewer 1999)

Regarded as part of Filipino culture and with its roots in pre-Spanish Filipino indigenous religious traditions, the bakla is a form of gender that transcends ‘modern’ and Western categories of male and female, or at least it questions them. The prior quotation demonstrates how precisely a religious tradition, in this case precolonial Filipino shamanism, can be a resource for both constructing and legitimizing gender constructions that may well be at odds with, and a form of resistance against, for instance, hegemonic colonial constructions of masculinities (as was and is certainly the case with bakla, cf. Inton 2015). As bakla is a very particular identity, revolving around—again in insufficiently precise binary categories—men who identify as women, it is, finally, also relevant to point to the fact that other forms of indigenous religious tradition in the Philippines contribute to the negotiation of marginal and therefore vulnerable masculinities in a (post)colonial setting. One may think of the work of Tremlett (2006) here, who gave attention to beliefs and practices that are to make male bodies invulnerable through the use of metal weapons (blades and bullets). Part of his analysis focuses on (religious) rituals that help lower-class men in the Philippines experience their bodies in new ways and to find strength in dire situations and negative perceptions of themselves as men. The
rituals concerning these weapons have a background in indigenous religious traditions (Tremlett 2006). Yet, also within the Christian tradition (in the broader sense of the word), a number of interesting phenomena can be observed. For instance, also highlighted in Tremlett’s work is the procession of the Black Nazarene (Quiapo church, Manila), a Christian tradition influencing gender constructions (Tremlett 2006). The Ciudad mística de Dios, in which the national hero José Rizal plays an important religious role and gender inversion has a significant place, is also influenced by Christianity (Lahiri 2004). The focus here, however, will be on another example: the Christ child of the Birhen Balintawak.

The ‘Virgin of Balintawak’ and her child

This section explores the gendered representation of Jesus in the oldest indigenous Philippine portrayal of ‘Mary with Child’, the ‘Birhen sa Balintawak’ (Balintawak was a village close to Manila; it is now part of the city itself and the location of a large bus station). She reportedly appeared to a revolutionary fighter in a dream in 1896, and this representation was presented to a broad audience by the ‘independent Catholic’ bishop and former revolutionary fighter Gregorio L. Aglipay (1860–1940), leader of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, an independent, anti-colonially oriented Catholic Church in the Philippines (cf. Smit 2011) in the mid-1920s. The history of transmission of the tradition between 1896 and the mid-1920s is, as of yet, unclear. The Birhen sa Balintawak exists in both literary and visual representations, and attention will be given to both in the subsequent analysis. In doing so, it will be shown how religion and gender, and in particular, masculinity, reciprocally influence each other and how the result can be read as a subversive restatement of colonial religious repertoires, or mimicry.

When discussing the Birhen sa Balintawak, a good starting point is one of the more striking and widely used publications (Gealogo 2010; see also Smit 2020a, 2020b) of Gregorio L. Aglipay: the Novenario de la Patria (1926a). A Novenario is a liturgical book containing the materials for a nine-day cycle of prayers in the Catholic tradition. It contains both a specific kind of Mariology and a statement in devotional form of Aglipay’s religious views. The origins of this kind of ‘Mary with Child’ are older, however, going back to an alleged dream that saved revolutionaries in the context of the Philippine-Spanish War of 1896–1898 (in the dream, Mary warned the revolutionaries not to travel to Manila from the village of Balintawak, as they would be in danger there; they remained where they were and, indeed, the place where they would have stayed in Manila was raided by the military at the moment at which they would have been there). The revolutionaries involved were so-called Katipuneros, belonging to the armed group of the Kataas-taasang, Kagalang-galangang Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan—‘Supreme and Venerable Association of the Children of the Nation’ (usually: Katipunan). These were lower-class fighters under the leadership of Andres Bonifacio (1863–1897; cf. Agoncillo 1996). As the reception of the Birhen sa Balintawak has been channelled, by and large, through Aglipay’s Novenario, this work will be the vantage point for researching the character of this type of ‘Mary with Child’. The focus in doing so will be on the ‘Child’. This goes beyond extant research, which, as will be discussed later when dealing with the Birhen sa Balintawak, gives the Birhen herself rather more attention than the ‘Child’, even though both are obviously of importance (cf. Smit 2020a).

In order to do this, first the Novenario de la Patria and the tradition that it is based on will be introduced and placed in the broader context of the work of Aglipay and the emerging tradition of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, while also surveying earlier scholarship on the work. Next, the place of Jesus in this work will be discussed, in order to finally draw conclusions as to the role of Jesus for this kind of representation of ‘Mary with Child’. Doing so will shed light on
the relationship between religion and masculinities from a (post)colonial perspective, given that the representation of the divine male child of Mary, that is, Jesus (he is not named as such in the representation considered here) highlights and legitimizes a particular form of masculinity religiously, giving it authority through sacralizing it.

The Novenario in its historical context

The historical setting of the Novenario de la Patria consists of two ‘layers’: the layer of the events of 1896 reported in the introductory materials of the work and the setting of publication of the work itself, both part of in the broader context of Marian devotion in the Philippines and—increasingly—‘global’ Catholicism. Here, the focus will be on the Novenario in the context of Marian devotion in the Philippines; what ‘really happened’ in 1896 is of secondary importance for analysing the Novenario.

The broader historical context of both the original dream and the development of the tradition concerning the ‘Mother of Balintawak’ out of which the Novenario emerged is, of course, provided by the Philippine Revolution (1896–1898) and the aftermath of the Treaty of Paris, in which Spain ceded the Philippines to the USA (1898). After the last Filipino forces had surrendered in the ensuing Philippine-American war, Filipinos, led by Isabela de los Reyes Sr. (cf. Demetrio 2012; see Mojares 2006), and acting in the context of a meeting of the labour union Unión Obrera Democrática (3 August 1902), proclaimed an independent Philippine church, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (Smit 2011; Hermann 2014). Gregorio Aglipay, a Filipino priest and highly regarded revolutionary, was a key figure in all of these developments and was named Obispo Maximo, ‘supreme bishop’, of the new church. In this role, he issued the Novenario 23 years later. In this publication, he appealed to a dream from 1896 and a newspaper report on the same from the 1910s, in order to substantiate the tradition of the ‘Mother of Balintawak’. The Novenario also accompanies the installation of a statue of this representation of Mary and her child in a church in Manila.

The publication history of the Novenario is somewhat complex, as it appears that the Tagalog translation was printed prior to the Spanish original (Aglipay 1926a; Tagalog is the language spoken in Luzon and neighbouring islands and forms the basis of the standardized national language of the Philippines, Filipino), which is often called, somewhat imprecisely, Tagalog as well). The Tagalog version notes that it is a translation from the Spanish by Juan Evangelista (Aglipay 1925). In addition, an English version appeared in 1926 (Aglipay 1926b) under the title Novenary of the Motherland. All editions were published by Isabelo de los Reyes Jr., as ‘parish bishop’ of the church of Maria Clara in Manila. Maria Clara is a main character in and as such a representation of the (colonized) Philippines in the revolutionary martyr José Rizal’s Noli me tangere (cf. Terrenal 1978; Peracullo 2017). This church building in Manila is also home to the oldest statue representing the Birhen sa Balintawak and must have been the centre of devotion to her in the 1920s and 1930s (e.g. Furusawa 2014: 92).

A rather different part of the Novenario’s context can be found in the broader field of Marian apparitions in the Philippines and beyond (cf. Zimdars-Swarts 1991; Di Stefano and Ramón Solans 2016). As noted, the Birhen is the first indigenous representation of Mary. The differences with other ‘Spanish colonial’ representations of Mary are obvious: rather than encouraging a piety focused on the beyond (‘heaven’, ‘afterlife’), the Birhen exhorts to a piety focused on agency and action in the world (Remensnyder 2014). Also, the Birhen is depicted with Jesus, rather than as an independent figure, as in some Spanish representations, and it is in imitation of the ‘Holy Child’ in particular that the devotee is exhorted to act, that is, as freedom fighters—at least, this is the interpretation in the text of the Novenario. With regard to this political aspect,
also among indigenous representations of Mary, the *Birhen sa Balintawak* remains the only representation which is directly linked to political events. As such, however, the ‘Mother of Balintawak’ fits well into the context of the (global) ‘age of Mary’ (ca. 1830–1950s), as it also affected Philippine Catholicism, in which a proliferation of Marian appearances (and the Roman Catholic dogmas of Mary’s immaculate conception and assumption of 1854 and 1950) all played a part in negotiating modernity, ‘within the processes of the construction of national and political identities’ (Di Stefano and Ramón Solans 2016:1). More specifically, territorial identities were created around Marian devotion. The *Birhen sa Balintawak* fits into such a pattern very well. As a ‘Filipina Mary’, she both highlights Philippine identity and its value and she claims the Catholic tradition for the Philippines (all the while interpreting it in a very modern[istic] and nationalistic manner). Yet, rather than being related, as is often the case with Marian apparitions (Di Stefano and Ramón Solans 2016; Krebs 2017), to reactionary or conservative politics, she is aligned with very modern and liberal convictions. The combination of being Filipina nationalist and European in terms of heritage and ‘ethnicity’, Catholic and liberal theologically (and ethically) ensures that the ‘Mother of Balintawak’ stands out among the various representations of Mary available in the Philippines and elsewhere, certainly in the era between 1896 (date of the narrated appearance) and 1926 (the publication of the *Novenario*). In fact, as will be argued, the whole representation of mother and child is a cultural hybrid, engaged in subversive mimicry. Also, the form and content of the *Novenario* fit this mould. On the one hand, the choice for the form of the novena/*Novenario* in order to popularize the views of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* (as they had been published before in works such as the *Biblia Filipina* and the *Oficio Divino*, cf. Gealogó 2010; Smit 2011: 245–246) is a very traditional one, given that it was one of the most widely circulated and influential kinds of religious literature of Catholic life in the Philippines. On the other hand, its contents are a complete transformation of what one might expect to find in such a work. Thus, gender, religion and the colonial situation of the Philippines all play a role when it comes to the ‘Mother of Balintawak’; this concerns femininity in relation to the female aspect of the imagery and masculinity when it concerns the representation of Jesus, which is the focus of what follows.

**The Katipunero Child in the Novenario**

When considering the *Novenario* and its *niño* (i.e. the child accompanying Mary), it should be stressed that the work and its use are located right in the centre of an era of popular devotion: Novenas and *Novenarios* abound. By connecting with this devotional life and transforming it and by introducing a new kind of mother and child and a new set of texts, a very appealing medium for the communication of Aglipayan theology is created. Although the *Novenario* contains multiple statements on Jesus and his teaching, here the focus will be on explicit references to the child in relation to the *Birhen sa Balintawak*, as Aglipay distinguishes between Jesus in general and this particular appearance of Jesus/child accompanying Mary (and dressed as a revolutionary fighter, cf. later) as well as in his discussion of both. The focus of this chapter remains on the *Novenario* itself, without tracing its reception history, as this would go beyond the boundaries of this contribution (cf. for exploratory research indicating the fruitfulness of such an investigation: Revollido 2010). Therefore, what is argued here concerning the construction of masculinity by religion and the legitimization of certain kinds of Filipino identity pertains only to what seems to be the rhetorical, ideological, and theological intentions of the *Novenario*, without being able to assess its impact.

A first description of the ‘mother and child’ occurs in the preface to the *Novenario*, which bears the signature of Aglipay. He starts by quoting the periodical *La Vanguardia*, in which the
journalist Aurelio Tolentino is introduced as a spokesperson for the story about a dream that occurred to an unidentified Katipunero (Aglipay 1926b: 1). The description of the dream is an aetiology of the *Birhen sa Balintawak* and therefore of key importance and worth quoting in full:

A beautiful Mother dressed in the style of the farmers of Balintawak leading a pretty child by the hand, dressed like a farmer with short red pants and holding a shiny bolo,

4 crying 'Liberty, liberty!' the beautiful woman approached the one dreaming and said to him 'Be careful.' When the dreamer woke, he told his comrades what he had dreamed, saying that the mother and child had the face of Europeans, though dressed like Filipinos.

(Aglipay 1926b: 1)

Subsequently, the Katipuneros changed their plans, remaining in Balintawak, thereby escaping a raid. The piece notes that it is because of the dream that the first Katipunan wore red trousers (as the *niño* in the dream wore the same). In a comment on the dream, Aglipay states:

The Mother of Balintawak . . . reminds you constantly of your sacred and inescapable duty to make every effort possible to obtain our longed-for Independence; and she is the sacred image of our Country. The voice of the people will constantly resound from our pulpits, reminding you of the great teachings of Rizal, Mabini, Bonifacio and other Filipinos, and these teachings of our greatest compatriots will form the special seal of our National Church.

(Aglipay 1926b: 1)

Later on in the *Novenario*, Aglipay writes:

[T]he Virgin of Balintawak is the symbol of our nation, and the Katipunan child that she bears is the Filipino nation, the rising generation, the youth that longed for independence, and the two figures are constant reminders to you of our inescapable duty to follow the sacrifices of those who suffered to obtain it.

(Aglipay 1926b: 42)

Following this account of the presentation of ‘mother and child’ in the *Novenario*, a few observations with regard to the child and masculinity can be made based on this text.

To begin with, neither mother nor child are identified explicitly, yet it is clear from the context, certainly of the *Novenario* as a whole, that they are versions of Mary and Jesus. Therefore, whatever kind of masculinity is involved in this male child, it is divinely sanctioned. The connection between masculinity and religion is, therefore, quite explicit. Next, when it comes to aspects of masculinity relating to one’s physical ‘make-up’, a few observations can be made. To begin with, Jesus certainly appears to be in good shape: as a healthy male child, he is even referred to as a ‘pretty child’ by Aglipay, which is of some significance for understanding what sort of masculinity is being presented here—the beauty of the child is, doubtlessly, also tied up with the value and beauty of the Filipino people. With regard to the child, questions of sexuality do not play an explicit role. Yet, age is of significance. On the one hand, the boy’s youthfulness reflects iconographic tradition that it is part of (although he is more an adolescent than a baby or toddler, which would be typical of earlier, colonial representations of Mary with her child). On the other hand, it is also commented upon explicitly by Aglipay in a manner that indicates that
the child’s age is more than just a remnant of traditional iconography. In fact, Aglipay identifies the child as a representative of the ‘rising generation’:

The mother of Balintawak symbolizes our Country, and the Katipunan child expresses the Filipino people, the rising generation [underlining in original, pb] which longs for independence, and both figures constantly remind us of the tremendous sacrifices of the liberators of our Country and of our sacred and inescapable duty to follow them, also making all possible sacrifices on our own part to achieve our independence. To this end, the immortal teachings of Rizal and other Filipinos on our duties to God and people will live and constantly resound in this temple. So, brethren, come and help us in this noble task of patriotic liberation and the liberation of conscience as well, instead of enlarging the ranks of the enemies of our Country and our liberty and adding to their already vast treasures.

(Aglipay 1926b: 1)

Thus, its age characterizes the child not so much as ‘not an adult yet’, but rather as someone who represents the future.

When it comes to ethnicity, it is immediately obvious that this is a key aspect of this representation of Jesus. Through an indigenous representation of Jesus (yet with a European face, at least in the account of the dream), religion and masculinity influence each other reciprocally. An indigenous male is elevated to the plane of the sacred, and such aspects of the sacred as the symbolic, the intellectual, and the ritual are shaped by their association precisely with the indigenous masculine. Spanish colonial ethnicity is no longer normative, neither in religion nor as far as gender is concerned. With regard to the latter, the shift in representation is even more significant than one might think, when considering the manner in which mother/child and motherland/people constellations functioned in Spanish colonial discourse. In brief, for a long period, the ‘mother’ of the Philippines was seen to be Spain, a country that was in turn associated with the figure of the Virgin (often represented as a Spanish queen). When the abusive ‘mother Spain’ is replaced by a representation of the Philippines qua Birhen, this represents an important shift (cf. Ileto 1997). Spain has simply been written out of the ‘genealogy’ of the Philippines, who are, as a country, no longer a child in need of and dependent on an abusive parent, but rather is an adult parent themselves, with a child who is part of the ‘rising generation’. With that, the parent–child relationship (with all loyalties that belong to it) has changed. Mary/Birhen appears to have brought forth the Filipino people, or at least is suggested to be supportive of their, her child’s/children’s, struggle. The Filipino people’s obligation is to the mother(land) in terms of the Philippines and no longer to Spain as ‘motherland’ of the Philippines and the Filipinos alike.

A further issue to consider is Jesus’ relationships to others. Both in the visual and in the textual representation of the Birhen sa Balintawak, three relations of the holy Filipino boy stand out in particular. These are his relationship (a) to the Birhen/the motherland; (b) to the Katipunero revolutionaries; and (c) to the colonial powers. Here, the first will be considered, as the other two will be considered when discussing social status and the use of power and violence respectively. For the identity of this ‘Holy Child’/Filipino people, the relationship with the Birhen/motherland is constitutive. Both mother and child play two roles simultaneously. This also shapes the masculine identity of the child: as the one born of the Birhen he depends on her, given that she leads him by the hand, yet as a child of the Philippines he is also committed to working (and fighting) for the motherland. Thus, not only ethnicity shapes the meaning of masculinity and religion, but also national identity. The three intersect here: to be a Filipino...
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man along the lines of this kind of representation of divine(ly sanctioned) masculinity, means to be a nationalistic man; while religion, ethnicity, and nationalist politics converge in such a manner that true religion for Filipino men appears to be nationalistic in content, and nationalism is religiously legitimized and associated with a particular kind of masculinity and ethnicity.

Next, when it comes to the use of violence, the child’s bolo, which features emphatically in both the visual and the textual representation of the Birhen sa Balintawak, is a clear indication that it is not a peaceful kind of masculinity that is involved here; rather, it is a revolutionary and militant kind. At the same time, the bolo is an improvised weapon, given that its main purpose is not so much fighting as it is cutting. It is a kind of machete—as such it is also indicative of incidental violence, in which improvised weapons are being used, and it is also typical lower-class weaponry. Either way, here religion legitimizes a violent kind of masculinity. This means a significant transformation of ‘Holy Child’ iconography as well as themes from traditional Christology, in which Jesus usually features as a non-violent figure. The violence is quite clearly directed against the colonial overlords of the Philippines (Spain in 1896; the USA in the 1920s), which also positions the masculine child further in terms of his relationships with others.

While questions of intelligence do not play a role in this case, issues of education, job, and social status do play a very important role. That is to say, the child is depicted as a lower-class figure. At least the following elements contribute to this. For instance, the child is dressed as a farmer, which occurs in both the visual and the textual representation of the Birhen. Furthermore, he has a bolo with him, which, as was noted, is a farmer’s tool turned into a weapon. More specifically, the farmer’s tool reinforces the impression that this is a lower-class ‘child’, one of the colonized, not one of the colonizers (as a ‘Spanish’ or ‘American’ Jesus would be, for instance, as a typical ‘Holy Child’). The kind of masculinity that this child embodies and that is religiously legitimized here is, accordingly, one that is lower class and marginal. At the same time, this positions religion socio-politically: if Jesus is this kind of man, then the force of religious support is with this kind of men, validating and empowering them. This, consequently, also shapes the ethical orientation of the Christian tradition, all the while making use of (transformed) aspects of the symbolic and ritual repertoire of this tradition itself. As the child is also quite emphatically associated with the Katipunan, lower-class freedom fighters under the leadership of Andres Bonifacio, this social positioning of the child is further strengthened. Jesus/the child is a little model Katipunan, which indicates precisely what sort of masculinity he stands for. Yet, this also draws the Katipunan into the sphere of religion (it was not an emphatically religious movement as such), while simultaneously indicating what the role of religion in the battle for freedom ought to be.

Physical location also plays a role in the case of the Birhen and her child. In fact, two locations matter: Balintawak and the hiding place of the Katipunerors there and the churches in which the statue of the Birhen with her child are located, in particular the Maria Clara Church in Manila, where the first statue was placed. The Novenario is also linked to this church. The first location is not religious at all, but rather politically connotated, which also contributes to the characterization of the ‘Mother of Balintawak’ and her child. The second is, of course, religious, yet also political, given that, as was already noted, ‘Maria Clara’ is the fictional (and tragic) heroine of national hero José Rizal’s famous Noli me tangere (1887). She is the polar opposite of the self-assured Birhen: a delicate and defenceless woman driven insane by the colonial condition. Both places the male child squarely in the political conditions of the Philippines, further characterizing his kind of masculinity, that is, a political, liberative one. This also aligns the religious with the political. This, to be sure, also speaks to the virtuousness of the child, which is not just given as such, but also focused in a particular manner, thereby also pushing religious morality in a very specific direction.
More generally, the combinations made in this particular ‘Holy Child’s representation lead to a number of noticeable ambiguities. To begin with, the role that Christianity plays in relation to the colonial struggles of the Philippines is important. Christianity is, on the one hand, a colonial import, yet, on the other hand, it also serves as a source of nationalist inspiration in an indigenized form. The child and his virgin mother are neither purely indigenous nor purely foreign, but indigenized. The hybridity inherent in something that has been indigenized also means that it cannot be reduced to other categories and remains somewhat ‘outside of the box’ (Bhabha 1994), which is certainly the case with this ‘Holy Child’ (with his European face and Filipino dress). The concept of mimicry might be used to describe what the Birhen and her Katipunan niño amount to. As mimicry involves the embrace of cultural patterns of the colonizer by the colonized in a manner that at the same time begins to subvert this pattern, it helps to see how the ‘Mother of Balintawak’ and her child both continue and subvert colonial patterns of Marian devotion. The dream and its ensuing reception, up until and including the devotional form of the novena, perpetuate such patterns, yet with a twist that steers the entire thing in a markedly anti-colonial direction. As the origins of it all are in a dream, the whole tradition may well be the expression par excellence of Bhabha’s stress on the unconscious nature of mimicry.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the following can be maintained. First, the manner in which gender and (post)colonialism are bound up with each other is a multifaceted one, in which colonial structures frequently lead to toxic or otherwise destructive gender constructions and in which the ‘translation’ of colonial realities into gendered realities plays a key role. Postcolonial theory seeks to address this on a broad scale, most recently in relation to masculinities. This leads, on the one hand, to a more encompassing insight into the (pervasive) and lasting influence of colonialism on gender constructions, yet also invites a certain ‘decolonization’ of the discipline of gender studies itself. This applies to both gender constructions without an explicit religious component and to such constructions that have an explicit religious component.

Whereas many constructions of gender with a religious component under (post)colonial conditions tend to be either complicit with colonial patterns or have a conservative shape for other reasons, the example discussed in the second half of this chapter showed a different picture. In the representation of Mary and Jesus as the Birhen sa Balintawak and her ‘Holy Child’, a kind of gendering in which religious tradition and gender stand in a reciprocal relationship to each other was found; each contributes to the construction of the other. The child, represented as a Filipino, lower-class boy, carrying a weapon and appearing in close relationship to his mother, who doubles as the country of the Philippines, while he doubles as the people of the Philippines, leads to the uplifting and legitimizing of a (violent) revolutionary indigenous masculinity—people embodying this are accorded the same status as Jesus. At the same time, this form of masculinity provides an interpretation of the meaning of ‘true Christian religion’: it is the sort of religious tradition that legitimizes such a kind of masculinity. Thus, the Birhen sa Balintawak and her ‘Holy Child’ also determine what Christianity can be, at least in the eyes of those adhering to the devotion to this type of ‘Virgin with Child’, such as the Katipuneros and the priest-turned-guerrillero-turned-nationalistic-bishop, Gregorio Aglipay. In analysing these aspects, the role of gender, especially masculinity, in (post)colonial Filipino religious identity has been highlighted, indicating that religion might also pave the way for more liberating constructions of gender, in this case masculinities.
Notes

1 Throughout (post)colonial is used to indicate that the colonial continues in a ‘postcolonial’ situation (e.g. following the independence of a former colony) and that, often, research with a ‘postcolonial’ agenda concerning the colonial period (i.e. the period during which a territory was formally a colony of a foreign entity) is at stake.

2 One of the sons of prominent Filipino journalist and politician Isabelo de los Reyes Sr., who would, from 1946 to 1970, become Obispo Maximo of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente.

3 In order to avoid having to produce a new English translation in the references made here, De los Reyes Jr.'s translation is used. If anything, De los Reyes Jr.'s translation also indicates how the text itself was understood in its historical context.

4 That is, a kind of machete, to be understood both as a farmer’s tool and as an improvised weapon of a lower-class fighter.

5 To this should be added that ‘indigenous’ means something like ‘mainstream Filipino’ here, that is, someone who is a descendant both of those inhabiting the Filipino lowlands prior to the islands’ colonisation and of the colonizers—Jesus is not, for instance, depicted as a member of one of the inland tribes, such as the Igorot or the Lumad.

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