

Santo Niño in Canada: Religion, Migration, and the Filipino Underside

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Abstract : “Santo Niño in Canada - Religion, Migration, and the Filipino Underside” seeks to explore the intersection of religion, migration and the Filipino underside through research participant narratives, archival research, and fieldwork on the cult of Santo Niño in Canada. Santo Niño is the single most revered saint in Filipino religiosity. According to popular lore, the original statue of Santo Niño was brought to the Philippines by Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan in 1521, who claimed the islands on behalf of Spain. While Santo Niño is meant to be a manifestation of Jesus as a child, in Filipino thought and culture he very much resembles pre-Hispanic spirits, as well as patron saints introduced by the Spanish. Santo Niño shrines appear in churches, restaurants, businesses, and homes throughout the diaspora suggesting that he was much more than a Catholic image. He represents a deity who often shares a business or home shrine with non-Christian statues such as lucky cats, the Buddha, Guanyin, and Guangong, and sometimes the Chinese God of the Earth. He represents how Christian culture has been refashioned through indigenous, Chinese, Malay, and Indonesian influences. He embodies the religious superstructure that defines Christian piety and habits. On the one hand, he stands for Jesus, a pious son of God, and yet, on the other hand, he can be a simple vindictive child who punishes those who ignore him. Santo Niño is a complex character linked to the past before Christianity. As Filipinos engage with Santo Niño in Canada, they connect to him as Jesus, the son of God. They are also connecting to a childlike figure who sometimes uses his spiritual power to punish. A hybrid figure who comes came into being at the beginning of the Spanish colonial moment, he is maintained throughout the American one and continues to be a powerful reminder of Filipino identity and resilience when people leave the Philippines for migrant work. As this paper argues, Santo Niño beliefs, practices, and stories unite people in the diaspora regardless of language, gender, or nation. Santo Niño enables one to think about and understand what it means to be Filipino and living migrant lives in the diaspora today. In this way, the cult of Santo Niño expresses both Catholic orthodoxy and the heterodox Filipino underside that includes the use of magical amulets, healing, visions, and spirit mediumship.

Keywords : ethnography, migration, Philippines, religion

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