

# Asian-American Marian Devotions as Ritual Practice

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Elements of Catherine Bell's ritual theory enable us to uncover the situational and strategic dimensions of Marian devotions from Asia as ritual practice, identifying how Asian-American Catholics redefine and nuance them to articulate new senses of empowerment and efficacy in the socio-cultural context of the United States.

Traditional Asian Marian devotions have taken root and demonstrated a remarkable growth in the United States. The dedication of the shrines to Our Lady of Antipolo (June 7, 1997), Our Lady of Velankanni (August 16, 1997), Our Lady of China (August 3, 2002), Our Lady of La Vang (October 21, 2006), as well as Our Lady of the Korean Martyrs and Our Lady of Korea at Cana (September 22, 2007) in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC, together with the annual pilgrimages by various Asian-American Catholic communities to these shrines bear testimony to the vibrancy Asian-American Catholic devotional piety. The annual Marian Days (*Ngày Thánh Mẫu*) in honor of Our Lady of La Vang in Carthage, Missouri, every August since 1978 draws more than 70,000 Vietnamese-American Catholics, making it not only an important Marian festival and pilgrimage, but also a public celebration of Vietnamese-American Catholic identity and pride.

After introducing the historical Asian roots of selected Asian-American Marian devotions, i.e., the Virgin of Antipolo (Philippines), Our Lady of La Vang (Vietnam),

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Our Lady of China, and Our Lady of Velankanni (India), I analyze the efficacy of Asian-American Marian devotions as ritual and discuss their impact on the devotees as ritual participants. At the most fundamental level, Asian-American Marian devotions have complex interplays of ritual that are best understood as modes of human “practice” or strategic ways of acting in the world (Bell, 81). Using Catherine Bell’s notion of ritual practice, this essay explores Asian-American Marian devotions as strategic ways of acting in the world. It will also consider the implications of Marian devotions as ritual practice for Asian-American Catholics, who continue to practice these devotions in the United States.

### ***Philippines: Ang Birhen ng Antipolo (The Virgin of Antipolo)***

The Filipino devotion to Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage (in Spanish, *Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buenviaje*; in Tagalog, *Ang Mahal na Birhen ng Kapayapaan at Mabuting Paglalayag*, or more popularly, *Ang Birhen ng Antipolo*, i.e., the Virgin of Antipolo) traces its origins to the wooden statue of Mary that the Spanish Governor-General Don Juan Niño de Tabora brought with him aboard the galleon *El Almirante* on its voyage from Acapulco to Manila in 1626. Don Tabora believed that this statue protected the galleon during its perilous voyage across the Pacific that was marked by storms and shipboard fire. This statue of Mary was subsequently carried as protection aboard other galleons traveling between Manila and Mexico, earning it the title *Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buenviaje* (Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage). Eventually, the statue was enshrined in Antipolo Cathedral, making it a well-known Marian pilgrimage center in the Philippines (Mercado).

### ***Vietnam: Đức Mẹ La Vang (Our Lady of La Vang)***

There are two versions of the tradition, one Catholic and the other Buddhist, explaining how the village of La Vang, located about sixty kilometers north of Huế in Quảng Trị province in central Vietnam, became the center of Marian devotion in Vietnam. The Catholic tradition recounts the edict of King Canh Thịnh (1792–1802) on August 17, 1798, ordering the execution of all Vietnamese Catholics in retaliation for the French Bishop Pigneau de Béhaine’s support of his rival Nguyễn Ánh for control of the land. As the persecution spread, a group of Vietnamese Catholics hid in the jungles of La Vang. One evening, as they gathered under a banyan tree to recite the rosary, they witnessed an apparition of a beautiful and radiant woman in white holding a baby and flanked on her sides by two boys with torches. Calling herself “Blessed Mother” (*Đức Mẹ*), she consoled them and

promised to intervene in response to their prayers. The Buddhist tradition begins with the apparition of a "Heavenly Lady" (*Thien Mu*) in La Vang under a banyan tree. During the anti-Catholic persecution initiated by Emperor Ming Mang (1820–1840), Buddhists occupied the spot and built a pagoda in honor of the Buddha. On the night of the dedication of the pagoda, the Buddhist leaders dreamed that the Buddha ordered them to remove his statue from the pagoda because a lady more powerful than he was occupying that spot. The next morning, upon discovering that the statue of Buddha had mysteriously been placed outside the pagoda, the Buddhist leaders proceeded to put the statue back in the pagoda. That night, they had the same dream. As a result, the Buddhists handed the pagoda to the Catholics, who converted it into a shrine for Our Lady of La Vang (Phan, 464–465).

### ***China: Zhonghua Shengmu (Our Lady of China)***

Located about 140 kilometers southwest of Beijing in the prefecture of Baoding, Donglu is one of the many Catholic villages that are scattered throughout Hebei province, which has one of the highest concentration of Catholics in China. During the Boxer Uprising (1898–1900), Donglu came under a terrible siege. At the height of the siege, the Donglu Catholics claimed that Mary appeared to them on several occasions over their beleaguered church and insisted that her apparitions were "instrumental in protecting them from a series of Boxer assaults between December 1899 and July 1900" (Cohen, 118). As the Donglu miracle became widely known, pilgrims came from near and far, making Donglu the principal center of Marian pilgrimage in China. In 1924, under the leadership of the apostolic delegate, Celso Constantini, the first Plenary Council of the Chinese Catholic Church consecrated China to Mary under the pan-national title of "Our Lady of China" (*Zhonghua Shengmu*). Constantini chose the image of Our Lady of Donglu as the new image of "Our Lady of China" and authorized its widespread dissemination through prints and holy cards. In 1928, Pope Pius officially approved the devotion to Our Lady of China, cementing its place in the devotional life of the Chinese Catholic Church (Clarke, 25–42).

### ***India: Velankanni Matha (Our Lady of Velankanni)***

Located on the shores of the Bay of Bengal about 350 kilometers south of Chennai (Madras) in central Tamil Nadu in India, Velankanni is the center of the highly popular devotion to *Arokia Matha* (Our Lady of Good Health) that transcends religious, ethnic, and caste boundaries. The feast begins on August 29 and culminates eleven days later on September 8, drawing massive crowds of 15 to 20 million pilgrims from the Catholic, Hindu, and Muslim communities across India

and the worldwide Indian Diaspora, ranking it third behind Lourdes and Fatima in prominence. Pope John Paul II boosted Velankanni's stature when he declared it the "Lourdes of the East" for the jubilee year 2000. This is more surprising when one considers that the Marian apparitions undergirding the devotion are preserved only in folklore, with no mention in the historical ecclesiastical and colonial administrative records (Meibohm; Mukherjee, 462–463).

Local tradition recounts three miracles, two in the sixteenth century and one in the seventeenth century. In the first miracle, a "divine" lady with a child in her arms appeared to a shepherd in Nagapattinam (near Chennai) asking for milk, which miraculously flowed from his pot without emptying it. In the second miracle, a "divine" lady appeared to a lame boy asking him for a cup of buttermilk. The lame boy miraculously regained the use of his leg and the local Catholics built a small wooden shrine in honor of *Arokia Matha* (Our Lady of Good Health). The third miracle concerned a Portuguese ship sailing from Macao to Colombo that was caught in a terrible storm. The sailors prayed to Mary and vowed to build a church in her name if she would lead the ship safely ashore. The weather calmed down and the sailors were able to come ashore near Velankanni on September 8, the Feast of the Nativity of Mary. In gratitude, the Portuguese sailors rebuilt the shrine as a magnificent stone chapel (Meibohm; Mukherjee, 462–463).

More significantly, Our Lady of Velankanni draws throngs of devotees from the Catholic, Hindu, and Muslim communities who have created a liminal space for their devotion that transcends socio-cultural and religious distinctions. Moreover, centuries of combined Hindu and Catholic devotion to Our Lady of Velankanni have resulted in a hybridization of ritual practices rooted in both Hindu and Catholic traditions, e.g., bathing in the sea, shaving one's head, walking on knees, and rolling in the shrine. These rituals continue to be practiced by devotees across the religious spectrum notwithstanding clerical disapproval. In addition, Hindu devotees of Our Lady of Velankanni often equate her efficacy as a healer of illness and victor over demonic forces as functional equivalents to similar attributes of the Hindu goddess Mariamman (Bayly, 367–368; Meibohm; Younger).

### *Defining Ritual Practice*

The emergence of ritual studies as an academic discipline in the mid-1970s is testimony to the recognition by researchers that one cannot study ritual merely by examining its myths, narratives, ceremonial rubrics, and other textual materials. As stylized human behavior, ritual is a complex synthesis of its participants' performance, enactment, and other gestural activities that interact with speech, song, rhythms, the spatial environment, and the participants themselves. The layers of meaning that are communicated by ritual have to be discerned from the complex interplay of action, performance, and the environment.

In her seminal work, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell explains that the key to understanding ritual as practice is to understand practice as a “nonsynthetic and irreducible term for human activity” (Bell, 81). Practice theory begins by addressing the issue of how a particular community *ritualizes* and why such ritualization is effective from the community’s perspective. According to Bell, the characteristics of practice are as follows: (1) situational, (2) strategic, (3) apt to misrecognize the relationship between its ends and its means in ways that promote its efficacy, and (4) it is motivated by “redemptive hegemony,” i.e., a nuanced ordering of power by relations of dominance and subjugation so as “to facilitate the envisioning of personal empowerment through activity in the perceived system” (Bell, 81; 84).

More important, Bell suggests that ritual practice involves *ritualization*, which she defines as a *strategic* way of acting which *differentiates* itself from other human actions, thereby establishing a “privileged contrast” (Bell, 90). The principal strategy of ritualization is that of *differentiation*. The goal of this strategic differentiation of ritual from ordinary human action is the creation of an environment within which ritual participants might discover “who they are and ‘how it is’ with the world” (Jennings, 113). Bell further argues that ritual, which is always *situational* and *strategic*, also deals with the practical needs of the community within specific contexts and circumstances. Members of that community take known relational schemes and rearrange them strategically, nuancing some elements, privileging others, thereby transforming the whole, and in the process displaying effective redemptive schemes that are embodied in the course of the ritual experience (Bell, 92).

Bell further suggests that the goal of ritualization is circular. On the one hand, the ritual participants engage in, nuance, and redefine the ritual environment where value-laden schemes and strategies are generated and differentiated over other schemes. On the other hand, such schemes are internalized by the ritual participants as a “sense of ritual,” thereby creating in the ritual participants a sense of empowerment and efficacy vis-à-vis the rest of the world. This acquired “sense of ritual” provides not so much an ability to see differently but to *act differently* (Jennings, 117). Ritual participants are empowered with a sense of *ritual mastery*, i.e., the acquisition of an instinctive knowledge of schemes and strategies that can be used to order their life experiences as to render them more or less coherent with the ritual. Ritual mastery is therefore the ability to deploy ritualized relational schemes and strategies in settings beyond the ritual event itself (Bell, 114–117).

### *Layers of Meaningfulness*

An important implication follows from the above discussion. The existence of a diversity of strategies of ritualization implies that there need not be one

normative meaning of the Marian devotions as such. If we take the devotion to Our Lady of Velankanni as an example, we discover that Indian Catholics, Hindus, and Muslims flock to the Velankanni shrine to participate in hybridized Hindu-Christian rituals, while at the same time retaining their respective faith beliefs. Because of such diversity and pluriformity, it is incongruous to speak of a normative meaning or pattern of the Marian devotional practices at Velankanni as such. Rather, the diversity and pluriformity of Marian devotional rituals at Velankanni arise from the varying perceptions and differing interpretive strategies of each group, i.e., Hindu, Christian, Muslim, which participate in the devotional rituals on their own terms. Moreover, this demonstrates that meanings are always inherently dynamic in nature—they are generated, maintained, and altered within social interaction (Blumer, 6–7); and they have spatial, temporal, personal, interpersonal, and social dimensions (Price, 29).

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Fred Clothey’s distinction between meaning and meaningfulness is helpful to explain the existence of multidimensional, multiple, and diverse meanings in any ritual event in general and the Marian devotions at Velankanni in particular. Clothey suggests that *meaning* is a “unit of intelligibility,” i.e., a single consideration within a whole universe of possibilities, while *meaningfulness* is the “mosaic of meanings ascribable to the phenomenon in its total cultural setting” (Clothey, 148). Clothey thinks that it is helpful to speak of “meaningfulness” as a “tapestry” which is “woven by the interpreter as a picture of the landscape of meanings which has been presented—an act of interpretation and mediation” (Clothey, 150). This fabric of meanings, woven by the interpreter, must always be faithful to the meanings present in the indigenous landscape and consistent with the various perspectives present in that landscape.

Clothey’s distinction raises two important issues in relation to the Marian devotions at Velankanni. First, Clothey suggests that ritual is commonly interpreted through a quest for its meanings, which are always diverse, pluriform and multi-dimensional (148). Such diversity in meanings may be seen in the coexistence of both “normative” meanings (as defined by church authorities and theologians) and “popular” or “folk” meanings of the common masses, which may differ significantly from the “normative” meanings (Clothey, 149–150). The devotion to Our Lady of Velankanni is a good illustration of how the “popular” or “folk” meanings of the common masses, i.e., the millions of Catholic, Hindu, and Muslim devotees

who flock to Velankanni diverge from the officially sanctioned or normative meanings ascribed by church authorities and theologians to the devotion. Second, Clothey points out that ritual has to be contextualized and interpreted within its appropriate contemporary spatial-temporal framework, because it does not exist in a timeless vacuum (151–152). As the expression of human beings in “specific times and places,” ritual is influenced by “individual and communal self-perception, by the nature of the work a people do, the ecology of their region, the significant role models and values of their subculture, and their attitudes toward political figures and family members” (Clothey, 153).

### *From Asian to Asian-American Marian Devotions*

In the context of contemporary Asian-American Marian devotions, it is pertinent to ask whether Asian-American Catholics perceive the Marian devotions in the same manner as their counterparts in their ancestral homelands in Asia. Bell’s practice theory enables us to uncover the *situational* and *strategic* dimensions of these Marian devotions as ritual practice, identifying how Asian-American Catholics redefine and nuance the “sense of ritual” to articulate new senses of empowerment and efficacy in a new socio-cultural context, i.e., the United States. Taking the traditional Vietnamese devotion to Our Lady of La Vang as an example, we find that in Vietnam, Our Lady of La Vang is perceived as a protector of the Catholic community in the midst of persecution through different historical periods. Despite repeated attempts by the communist authorities to suppress it, devotion to Our Lady of La Vang continues to thrive under communist rule. The same is also true of devotion to Our Lady of China among the Chinese in mainland China. In the case of the original devotion to Our Lady of Donglu, Jeremy Clarke highlights two significant implications that arise from the Donglu Catholics’ attestation of their miraculous deliverance from the Boxer militants to Mary. First, there is a strengthening of the faith narrative that Mary would intercede on behalf of those who pray to her in times of desperation. Second, this faith narrative in turn reinforced their sense of identity as Chinese Catholics vis-à-vis their persecutors. In other words, these two implications reinforce each other, such that “the bolstered identity encouraged greater practicing of the religious devotions, which in turn then led to a deepening of the original sense of identity” (Clarke, 25–26).

In contrast, Chinese-American and Vietnamese-American Catholics do not face persecution in the United States. Their continued practice of traditional Marian devotions suggests that new senses of ritual are being constructed vis-à-vis their new social location. Indeed Marian devotional rites provide a ritual environment that enables the Chinese-American and Vietnamese-American Catholic communities to define and shape their distinctive identities in multiracial and multicultural United States. Traditional relational schemes from the various ritual precedents

are reshaped or rearranged strategically, nuancing some elements, privileging others, and transforming the whole. The contemporary Chinese-American and Vietnamese-American Catholic communities are able to generate and embody effective schemes for affirming their racial-ethnic and Catholic identities within these ritual experiences, and to transfer these schemes to daily living in the contemporary United States society.

Moreover, we also see that Asian-American Marian devotions give rise to a diversity of ritual meaningfulness in the context of contemporary United States society. The various Asian-American Catholic pilgrimages to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and the Vietnamese-American Catholics' annual pilgrimage to Carthage, Missouri, illustrate Catherine Bell's point

about "redemptive hegemony" within ritualization. In other words, the ritual participants construe and order the reality within the privileged ritual experience in such a way as to empower them to embody flexible sets of cultural schemes. These schemes, taken as a whole, enable them to define their Asian-American Catholic identity in the multiracial and cross-cultural United States society, as well as to deploy such schemes beyond the immediate ritual experience into the arena of daily living in the contemporary United States society.

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Borrowing an insight from the sociologist Peggy Levitt, one could explain the close identification between faith, ethnicity, and culture by saying that the overlap between ethnicity, culture, and popular devotions among Asian-American Catholics is so entrenched that when Asian Americans

participate in Marian devotional rituals, they are asserting their religious, cultural, and transnational identities simultaneously. Levitt's original observations arose in the context of Catholicism and Latino/a and Irish immigrants. However, to paraphrase Levitt, one could say that Vietnamese-American and Filipino-American Catholics as well would be "hard-pressed to distinguish what is 'national' or 'ethnic' about themselves and what is 'religious.'" Therefore, when they "act out these identities, either privately and informally or collectively and institutionally, they express important parts of who they are and pass these formulations along to their children" (Levitt, 397).

Asian-American Catholics continue to maintain and participate in Marian devotional rituals in part because these devotions not only nurture their faith and spiritual life, but also enable to extend and maintain continuous transnational ties with their kinfolk or communities from their ancestral lands in an increasingly

globalized world. Hence, the continued practice of Marian devotions by Asian-American Catholics in present day United States, i.e., outside their historical context in Asia, points to the efficacy of such rites in important identity formation and maintenance roles. Asian Americans, as ritual participants, are able to experience, embody, and deploy various schemes for shaping and differentiating their daily lives vis-à-vis the other racial-ethnic communities in the United States in the face of external socio-political pressures of assimilation and accommodation in the multiracial and multicultural United States society. In the process of doing so, they are able to shape and nuance rich, vibrant, and dynamic Asian-American identities that are distinct from their counterparts in Asia.

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