



***Repositioning the Missionary:
Rewriting the Histories of Colonialism,
Native Catholicism, and Indigeneity in Guam***

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Repositioning the Missionary: Rewriting the Histories of Colonialism, Native Catholicism, and Indigeneity in Guam by Vicente M. Diaz. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010. 280pp. \$60.00.

It is evident and generally well known that Spain controlled the vast number of savage nations more by the preaching of her missionaries and the sacrifices of her martyrs than by the might of her soldiers. (xxvi)

– Luís de Ibáñez y Garca,
Governor of the Mariana Islands, 1871-1873

The death of Father Diego Luis de San Vitores marks the most widely narrativized loss of a Spaniard at the hands of a Chamorro native during the time of Spanish colonialism in Guam. Vicente M. Diaz uniquely analyzes the historical documents and sites that surround his death in *Repositioning the Missionary: Rewriting the Histories of Colonialism, Native Catholicism, and Indigeneity in Guam*. On a beachside in Tumon, Guam, adjacent to the Guam Reef Hotel and tourists in bikinis, a statue commemorating the martyrdom of San Vitores presents a snapshot of the events leading up to his death and is captured in photography in Figures 6-9 of Diaz’s text. The implications of this enormous structure help deepen the study of Chamorro indigeneity, an enterprise taken up by the author through a myriad of ways. In the “Editor’s Note,” David Hanlon writes that “Diaz’s interdisciplinary approach uses history, anthropology, and literary criticism to promote the rediscovery and inclusion of indigenous forms of discursive analysis” (vii). Diaz is currently an associate professor of American Indian Studies and Anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (having previously taught at the University of Michigan) and received his Ph.D. from the History of Consciousness program at University of California in Santa Cruz. His dissertation titled *Repositioning the Missionary: The Beatification of Blessed Diego Luis de Sanvitores and Chamorro Cultural and Political History on Guam* is the precursor to this current study. At the “Beatification Shrine” in Tumon, the statue of San Vitores not only reflects the key players in the martyrdom narrative but also propagates a specific mainstream view that Diaz seeks to rewrite. I remember my own feelings of fear of Matá’pang and Hirao, looming Chamorro masculine Others, when looking up at the monument for the first time after it was unveiled in 1985 in Tumon. My own young life had been impressed upon by my maternal family’s devotion to the Catholic faith, which took root in their active participation with the Santa Barbara Church in the nearby village of Dededo.

The book is a dense investigation into the multiple components that make up the story of San Vitores as seen from many varying tongue-in-cheek perspectives that stem from sexual overtones of the “missionary position.” In three sections of *Repositioning the Missionary*, Diaz looks at the San Vitores canonization through the Church (from above), the Chamorros (from below), and his own analysis (from behind).

From official Vatican and other authoritative perspectives, or “From Above: Working the Native”—the title of the book’s first of three sections, Diaz chooses the *Positio*, a term that shortens the much longer official title of *Cause of Beatification of Ven. Diego Luis de San Vitores*, as his point of departure from which to write about the ways in which native culture and Catholicism have created a complex Chamorro indigeneity. As the primary text for the San Vitores canonization that he analyzes in the first chapter, “The Mission *Positio*,” the document outlines the specific circumstances of San Vitores’ death through missionary perspectives, yet remains problematic in its “circularity, or self-referencing,” in proving its veracity (35). Diaz notes this contradiction in “the way God’s truth can be verified through documentation whose authenticity relies on faith in God’s omnipotence and omnipresence through his agents and the evidence of the work they do, as mediated by the Church” (38). Although not originally made in Guam, the Tumon beachside statue settles firmly onto the land just as tales of San Vitores’ death first written by fellow Jesuit priests settle firmly within the Chamorro people’s consciousness in Guam.

In the second chapter, “The Oral Cavity,” Diaz states, “The modern concern with factuality, and with credible source documents, was secondary to the belief that if God was working through the individual in question, that truth (and its practical value for nurturing faith) was what really mattered” (56). The authoritative *Positio* strives to wrap the death of San Vitores into the conventions of the Catholic martyrdom narrative, and yet in so many publications on the history and culture of Guam, the tale of his death is also found within the realm of local myths and legends. “The Legend of Father San Vitores” in *Legends of Guam* (produced by the Chamorro Language and Culture Program of Guam’s Department of Education) and “Story of San Vitores” (as told by Simon Sanchez, Sr. and published in *Hemplon Nãna Siha: A Collection of Chamorro Legends and Stories* by Department of Chamorro Affairs) are just two examples of the story’s presence in Chamorro literature of Guam. The authorship in the San Vitores’ story is explicit, told by *sanhiyong*¹ and partially dependent on the accounts of native witnesses. This death narrative of San Vitores is an epic story of mythic proportions.

In the Tumon beachside statue, an innocent and vulnerable priest performing the by-now familiar rite of baptism is depicted on his knees alongside the child’s praying mother as the menacing Hiraõ and Mata’pang approach to kill him. The *Positio*’s strategy of creating two-dimensional figures out of both San Vitores and Mata’pang is conducive to fitting in alongside other archetypal characters in the myths and legends of Guam. Diaz notes that “[i]t did not matter so much that the stories about a certain hero or heroine were a bit over the top, much less whether the person in question even actually existed, if the legends and stories helped build faith in God” (55-56). The polarization of San Vitores and Mata’pang is set up to justify San Vitores’ martyrdom, even as other dichotomies fulfill other agendas. Just as San Vitores cannot be canonized into sainthood without the embodiment of Mata’pang as a Satan-figure, a contemporary study of the martyrdom narrative cannot be complete without examining what effects the Spanish Catholic conversion has had on the Chamorro people.

¹ The term *sanhiyong* is used throughout the text and is the abbreviated form of *taotao sanhiyong*, a Chamorro term that refers to “outsider.”

In the second section, “From Below: Working the Saint,” Diaz shifts his focus to the rites and cultural activities of the people in Guam as they relate to San Vitores and Catholic practice. Contemporary Chamorro indigeneity is oftentimes an in-between space where memories of a native legacy on one side and multiple colonialisms on the other create overlapping values, customs and belief systems that become melded into Chamorro language, kinship structure and spiritual practice via Catholicism. In Chapter 3, “The Sweet Spot,” Diaz charts the history of the beachside shrine/statue that was built on the official site that marks San Vitores’ death and the Blessed Luis de San Vitores Church, formerly named “St. William of Vercelli Church” until San Vitores was beatified, further down the road in Tumon. The experiences of lay Catholic parishioners, leaders and clergy and their devotion through prayers, songs and *nubenas*² on or near the exact location of San Vitores’ death give alternate meanings from those emphasized by the Vatican. Diaz reveals his own religious background where “Catholic schools, lives of saints, and ringing in my ears—the maxim that ‘a family that prays together, stays together’” (25) resides. Chapter 4, “Traffic on the Mount,” continues to center the analysis in Tumon and shows how the growing veneration of San Vitores emerged in a time of rapid modernization in an ever-increasingly Americanized society. His beatification by the Vatican affirmed a Chamorro sense of difference and cultural distinction against modern colonial and neocolonial forces. The excavation of ancient burial sites found through the construction of hotels; anti-canonization letters to the editor in the *Pacific Daily News*; and early colonial writers such as Jacques Arago, Otto Von Kotzebue, and Captain James Burney (who criticize the Spanish Catholic missionary activities in Guam) are some of the components that create this traffic. The chapter continues to travel outward to Diaz’s former home in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a place where the book frequently returns to chart the progressions and shifts in Diaz’s intellectual work, as well as to the Vatican itself where the Chamorro hymns of a small humble delegation of faithful Chamorro people from a far away island play boldly in Saint Peter’s Cathedral.

A third way out of the polarities of martyr/assassin, above/below, and metropole/margin is the book’s final section, “From Behind: Transgressive Histories,” which directly illustrates Diaz’s alternative views of the legend’s two main characters. Matá’pang, in Guam’s history, represents Chamorro resistance in a time of critical uprisings to Spanish colonization, and many generations later, the promotion of San Vitores into sainthood reflects the integration of a Spanish-Catholic identity in relation to Guam’s present-day colonial status with the United States. In Chapter 5, “Disrobing the Man,” Diaz examines San Vitores’ physical appearance and self-understanding as he “went native” in undressing himself and fashioning clothing made of palm leaves to blend in with his Chamorro environment. San Vitores’ clothing, personality, mannerisms, smell, and lack of teeth are evaluated by Diaz as “other narratives, which I believe can also serve as vessels, can bear witness, to yet other cultural, political, and historical truths, even for Catholic Natives in the new millennium” (173). At the Tumon beachside statue, San Vitores wears not the humble robes of the missionary priest nor the leaves of palm referred to by Diaz but instead what looks more like the uniform of the Spanish soldier. Alternative representations of San Vitores’ appearance like those highlighted in Diaz’s work more accurately contextualize the Jesuit priest’s experiences of interacting with Chamorro people. As the co-founder of Guam Traditional Seafarers Society and writer/director of the documentary film, *Sacred Vessels: Navigating Culture and Identity in Micronesia*, Diaz’s reclaiming and reviving with indigenous Pacific Island navigation informs much of his scholarship and theoretical

² A nubena is a Chamorro Catholic religious ritual that is encompassed by nine days of prayer and devotion.

framing. Chapter 6, “Kinship with Matå’pang,” extends the concept of vessel to Matå’pang himself:

Sensing in Matå’pang something of a political and spiritual kindred soul, I have grown increasingly dissatisfied with the role that he is relegated to play as nothing but a negative witness to San Vitores’s martyrdom, his valorization as defiant anticolonial hero in some circles notwithstanding... I am still bothered by the inescapable and profound fact that the only mention we have of Matå’pang as a real-life Native person is in documentation produced by *taotao sanhiyong* [outsider] in the context of canonizing San Vitores, and the only information we have of him is in the scripted role in which he kills the priest in a show of direct anger toward God. (185)

Diaz seeks a more nuanced connection with Matå’pang through a linguistic study of his name where *mátapang* in Tagalog, a sibling language of Chamorro, means “bold” or “courageous,” and yet Diaz always remains conscious of his own ethnic position. Possessing a Filipino and Pohnpeian heritage and born and raised in Guam, Diaz “can personally attest to the moments of Chamorro unease on matters Filipino on Guam, and the innumerable historical and cultural reasons that might trigger such sentiments” that shy away from the Tagalog language “in light of the long and often vexed historical and political relationship between Chamorros and Filipinos” (200).

Understanding colonial resistance in Guam begins with a rewriting of the San Vitores-Matå’pang tale that prioritizes a dissection of Catholic authority and displaying current anthropological understandings of ancient and contemporary Chamorro society, which are done extremely well in *Repositioning the Missionary*. Diaz’s analysis of the sites of San Vitores’ life, death, and canonization alongside anthropological, literary, and political understandings of Chamorro culture reveal new and much-needed understandings of the Chamorro people in relationship to indigeneity.

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