

Un-holy Union between Church and State

The Question of Divorce in the Colonial Philippines

No
Reservation
required

27 November 2025 Thu

15:00-16:30 (Japan Time)

Seminar Room (No.213)

Inamori Foundation Memorial Building, CSEAS, Kyoto University



ACCESS

ABSTRACT

Issues of marriage and divorce remain contentious in the Philippines, but the history of marriage remains unexplored. It is widely believed that the Philippines, along with Vatican City, remain as the only nation-states where absolute divorce is illegal. However, the laws and practices concerning marriage and divorce are more complex and have undergone dramatic shifts and changes throughout Philippine history. Marriage laws were introduced under Spanish colonialism, transforming indigenous practices of divorce and polygamy; and for over 300 years the inhabitants of the Philippines were subject to Iberian laws, sharing cultural practices with Spain's American colonies. During the 19th century, hundreds of *demandas* (lawsuits) were filed, mostly by women, in the civil and ecclesiastical courts of Manila, which frequently heard suits concerning "Adulteries," "Divorces," and "Concubinage." These fascinating cases provide a unique glimpse into the complexity of marital relationships in the Spanish Philippines, and the way women in particular used the courts to secure relief from unhappy marriages. These cases also reveal how the two institutions of the Catholic Church and the Spanish colonial state, which functioned as one under the Patronato Real (Union of Church and State), attempted to use reforms in marriage law to fashion a new sense of public morality among its subjects. My talk explores the contested nature of marriage and domestic relations in colonial society by both the Spanish Church and State, revealing some disunity in these two institutions as well as sacramental, legal and popular attitudes towards marriage in the colonial Philippines. It will also reflect on how marriage laws, which were direct impositions of the Spanish colonizing process, continue to shape the debates about divorce in contemporary Philippines.

PRESENTER

Vina A. Lanzona

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Born and raised in Manila, Philippines, Vina Lanzona has been living and working in the U.S. for more than 30 years. She was educated at the Ateneo de Manila University, at the New School for Social Research for her MA and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for her Ph.D. in Southeast Asian History. She is currently teaching in the History Department at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where she also served as Director of the Center for Philippine Studies. Her first book entitled *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion: Gender, Sex and Revolution* (published in both the US and in the Philippines) as well as subsequent works were inspired by her twin passions for studying revolution and the role of women in political change in the modern Philippines. For her current projects, she's moving back in time to the Spanish colonial period and the enduring relationship between the Philippines and Spain. She is currently working on the social history of marriage and divorce in the colonial Philippines and the role of Filipinos and Filipino-Americans in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

Chair: TSUCHIYA, Kisho (CSEAS)

CSEAS colloquium 2025