Flagellation and Crucifixion: The Yearly Lenten Vow in San Pedro Cutud, San Fernando, Pampanga, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses "Flagellation & Crucifixion: The Yearly Lenten Vow in San Pedro Cutud, San Fernando, Pampanga, Philippines. It uses qualitative methodology utilizing triangulation techniques. Findings are their petitionary- vow fulfillment, i.e., a vow of sacrifice and penitence and at the same time a petition of prayer for the following reasons: For good health / long life, for prosperity, their vow of sacrifice or penitence as a family, forgiveness of sins. In conclusion, the yearly Lenten vow in San Pedro Cutud is deeply rooted in their history as a community whose tradition of penitence is a serious vow faithfully fulfilled every Lenten week. The challenge now is the sustainability of their beliefs and the spirit of the Lenten practices.

Keywords: Crucifixion, Flagellation, Lenten vow, San Pedro Cutud

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Introduction

The practice of petition — a vow of sacrifice traditionally done by most Roman Catholics, especially in observance of the Lenten Season's Holy Week celebration — is a phenomenon that has gained so much media attention locally and globally. This time-honored religious practice ubiquitous throughout the Philippine Archipelago, particularly in places with rampant practitioners like Pampanga, Laguna, and Bulacan, involves rituals such as crucifixion, self-flagellation, carrying of the cross, singing certain verses from the Bible (pabasa), prostration in submission or laying down(horizontally) with front body facing the floor (salibatbat or dapa) to name a few.

But more than any other place, the most popular – which draws both local and international tourists as well as the media – is the one held by religious devotees of Cutud, San Fernando, Pampanga. This could be attributed to the fact that, aside from the present-day pageantry and breathtaking spectacle in the celebration of Christ's Passion and Death, Cutud is also the original place where the actual first lay crucifixion happened in 1962.

It was Arsenio Anoza who pioneered this practice when, in 1961, he was nailed to the cross in what was officially considered the very first lay crucifixion in the Philippines, in a barrio near San Pedro Cutud, also in Pampanga.

From then on, it became a highly-anticipated annual religious practice, where an actual crucifixion would highlight the stage play Via Crucis[1], which is being staged during Good Friday and the weeklong Holy Lenten festivities in San Pedro Cutud.

The indigenous practice of crucifixion in Pampanga and other places in the Philippines is a relatively novel practice – being only forty-seven years young – and is being practiced only in the Philippines. Nonetheless, it has become increasingly popular with the local male and female practitioners and even non-Filipinos of both sexes. For instance, in San Pedro Cutud in 1994, a Belgian woman was crucified in 1994. Two years later, a Japanese male movie actor, Shinichiro Kaneko, was so fascinated with the practice that he also had himself nailed to the cross.

1 Via Cricis is the Latin for Stations of the Cross (or Way of the Cross). Also called the Via Dolorosa or Way of sorrows, Via Crucis pertains to the depiction of the final hours (or Passion) of Jesus, and the devotion commemorating the Passion. The tradition as devotion started with St. Francis of Assisi and extended throughout the Roman Catholic Church in the medieval period, up to the present

Methodology

This study utilized the qualitative method of triangulation. This approach involves the simultaneous use of three different but complementary methods, namely: (1) Key Informant Interview (KII), with practitioners themselves as the source of raw and basic information as well as residents of Cutud, specifically the eldest members or senior citizens of Cutud; (2) Observation, where the researcher conducts actual on-site examination and experience of the phenomenon; and (3) Secondary Data, which involved the use of archival / library research, both print and electronic (Internet and online databases).

Socio-Historical Origin and Development of the Practice

It could be surmised that the religious ritual of self-flagellation seems to have attained its rebirth in 1946 after the Philippine Independence. The dramatic resurgence or reawakening of the corporeal self-mortification performed annually by adult males during Holy Week was never really buried in oblivion.

This practice originated from Italian hermits and monastic reformers, most notably with St. Peter Damian (1007-1072), between the 11th century and early 13th century, which spread rapidly as a normal feature of monastic life throughout the Latin Church. This was a result of the rise of mendicant orders, particularly Franciscans and Dominicans, as well as the lay Third Order of Penance and flagellant confraternities or sects that emerged during late medieval Europe.

By the later part of the 17th century, the practice of self-flagellation was in decline throughout Europe. However, this was not true in the Philippines, Asia's only predominantly Christian nation. In the 20th century, this practice

was virtually extinct on the global front except in some monastic orders and groups, i.e., Opus Dei and convents, isolated brotherhoods on communities in Northern Spain, Southern Italy, Mexico, and parts of Latin America, namely Columbia.

At present, self-flagellation is commonly practiced in Luzon, especially in Bulacan Laguna and Pampanga. This ritual was introduced by the Hispanic Missionaries in the Philippine Archipelago in the late 16th century as a shedding of blood in imitation of Christ and for the remission of sins (and a ritual of Disciplina to the Indios, Filipinos).

Diego de Leon, who arrived in the Philippines on June 20, 1590, was the first to introduce self-flagellation in the Philippines. Filipinos from all walks of life – people of high rank, of every condition, and professions – took the new religious practice with extraordinary enthusiasm.

Before colonization, it seems that no recorded practice of self-flagellation in the Philippines has been found to date. The Indios were so fervent and eager that they castigate themselves violently to the point of death in some instances every Lent. This practice was soon extended to all Fridays of the year and became unabated, especially in Central Luzon, which would become the epicenter of the practice of self-mortification activities (disciplina or penitencia).

Two centuries after being introduced in the Philippines, the practice of self-flagellation survived the test of time as a religious custom and was performed with increasing discretion, especially in small villages of the interior and of the outlaying barrios (villages) of the larger towns – more or less secretly away from the site of white men or church hierarchy members who discourage or prohibits the practice by issuing decrees or imposing bans on flogging publicly or doing penance that entails bodily mutilation and other bloody penitence.

Flagellation became less widespread and more clandestine during the first half of the 20th century when the Americans and the Japanese occupied the Philippines. However, it was soon revived in 1946 after the Philippine independence, and it gained further momentum in the 1950s. Tens of thousands of Filipino men scourged themselves again openly during Holy Week without inhibition or reprimand from the Church.

As mentioned earlier, it was in the 1960s, especially in Good Friday of 1961, that advent of a new religious self-mortification ritual was introduced by Arsenio Añoza - a faith healer known in Bulacan who died in 1993 – crucifixion by actual nailing of oneself to the cross, and he was the very first person to be nailed on the cross in that far-flung barrio in Pampanga using real two inches-long nails.

The following is the verbatim account by a Flagellation website:

"*The first crucifixion in the Philippines took place on Good Friday 1961. The man nailed to a cross in Pampanga province, at the climax of a street sinakulo (passion play), was Arsenio Añoza, a faith healer who died in 1993. Añoza performed crucifixion annually on Good Friday between 1961 and 1976 when he "closed" his vow. His decision to undergo crucifixion, taken during a Lenten pilgrimage to Mt. Banahaw, was triggered partly by the revival of flagellation. Before Holy Week 1961, Añoza was a flagellant—as historically are many Kristos (literally Christ-figures, or people who volunteer for crucifixion).*

Añoza saw crucifixion as a means to get closer to Christ in his passion; closer than flagellation permitted. Proximity to the dead or dying Christ…is a crucial means of acquiring sacred power, the bedrock of esoteric healing. Crucifixion is seen as the most difficult mortification vow to fulfill and therefore the most likely to achieve a desired result (Mandelbaum, 1985, 183). After Añoza's retirement, other faith healers followed in his footsteps, and crucifixion steadily increased in popularity, notably from the late 1970s, and 1980s onwards. At this point, not coincidentally, the non-participatory revival of interest in self-mortification as viable cultural heritage began to wane. Unlike flagellation, crucifixion by nailing was regarded by the educated elite as unacceptably fanatical, although ironically it was a new, post-colonial, Filipino ritual performance.

Meanwhile, crucifixion continued to attract volunteers. On Good Friday 1997, in San Pedro Kutud, San Fernando, Pampanga, the historical epicenter of religious self-mortification in the Philippines, and the village where I do fieldwork, fourteen Filipinos were crucified, while hundreds of adult men flagellated themselves."

Thus, every year on Good Friday, around a dozen — mostly men but sometimes with a woman or two — are taken to a rice field in the barrio of San Pedro Cutud, three kilometers away from the city proper of San Fernando, Pampanga and nailed

to a cross using two-inch stainless-steel nails, that have been soaked in alcohol to disinfect them. The penitents are taken down when they feel cleansed of their sins. Other penitents flagellate themselves using bamboo sticks — often with nails or steel spikes — tied to a rope.

Aside from San Pedro Cutud, Central Luzon, crucifixion reenactments were also held yearly in Angeles City, Sto. Tomas, Pampanga, and in Bulacan. (Lacanlale, 2008; Roxas, 2004)

Meaning and Significance of the Lenten Practices to the People of San Pedro Catud and Significance of the Ritual to the People of San Pedro Cutud

First and foremost, the practice of self-flagellation, crucifixion, salibatbat/dapa (prostration with whipping or spanking), carrying of the cross, pabasa (singing of certain verses from the Bible) – is their petitionary- vow fulfillment, i.e., a vow of sacrifice and penitence and at the same time a petition of prayer for the following reasons:

A. For good health / long life

Their penitence is considered a prayer to petition for the healing of the sick members of their family, i.e., sons, daughters, wife, mother, fathers, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, and sometimes friends.

Likewise, it is a prayer of thanksgiving for the healed members of the family to which they usually attributed the healing due to the vow of the promise of sacrifice or penitence that they performed previously, namely a prayer of petition to avoid meeting fatal accidents and for the safety of all members of the family.

B. For prosperity

A petition prayer for the successes of their family and relatives in their business ventures, in finding a good job locally or abroad, in passing board exams, to name a few.

A thanksgiving prayer for the success of their relatives in their jobs or business dealings, for having good financial standing, for having good harvest in their farms, or simply living a good serene life and surviving all their financial crises and difficulties and problems with the help and guidance of God.

C. Their vow of sacrifice or penitence as a Family

It is also considered a form of family tradition that is handed down as a type of "inheritance" from generation to generation. It started from the practices of their forefathers who initiated the vow of penitence or sacrifice for petition or thanksgiving purposes and was passed on to their male sons or brothers or any male relatives.

If the father "closes" his vow, a son or any male relative has to take his place to continue the vow, or sometimes a son or a relative would also take his vow even before his father "retires" from his vow, which usually lasts for a decade or more.

D. Forgiveness of sins

Though less mentioned by the practitioners, their vow is a prayer of petition for the forgiveness of their sins and their relatives. It serves as a prayer of repentance for the forgiveness of their sins..

The Mode of Practice

The celebration of Lenten week starts on Holy Monday with the Pabasa or the singing of verses from the Bible, which is held in the chapel of San Pedro Cutud. Volunteer elders and youngsters alike would group themselves and take turns singing the verses from the Bible from morning until dawn of the next day, which would continue 24 hours daily until Good Friday.

Each volunteer family would take turns in serving snacks or food for the singers of Pabasa so that they would not get hungry during their "duty." Usually, during the night time of Holy Monday, there will be a few practitioners who would carry the cross or perform salibatbat (prostration accompanied by whipping or spanking, usually by their relatives who carry with them some type of wood or stick which they use in whipping the practitioners of prostration).

There will be few self-flagellants that would start on Holy Monday or Holy Tuesday but during

Holy Wednesday up to Good Friday, the practitioners of flagellation would increase in numbers with participants as many as over 200 people during Friday morning when the staging of Via Crucis starts and will end in the real crucifixion of members of Kristos ranging from 10 or more (an average of 10-15 Kristos per year are being crucified).

In between Monday to Friday, a different vow of sacrifices/penitence will be fulfilled by practitioners ranging from pabasa, salibatbat/ dapa, carrying of the cross, and self-flagellation. These rituals and practices will culminate on Good Friday, when spectators would mill around the man-made Mount of Calvary in San Pedro Catud as early as ten o'clock in the morning as they witness the practitioners ending their "journey" at the top of that hill to kneel, to prostrate or lay flat facing the ground in adoration and submission to God while praying, signaling the fulfillment of their vow of sacrifice and prayer for that year. The Lenten week will be capped later in the afternoon on that same day by the staging of Via Crucis when the actual crucifixion is held at the top of "Mount Calvary" which was heavily fenced with barb-wire to avoid the spectators from getting closer to the Kristos being crucified as local and international media take photos and videos of them from two stages that were strategically located in front of the hill.

Practitioners would do it again the following year or, in case they decide to "close" or end their vow that year, they would be replaced by their kin, sons, or other relatives who are willing to continue their vow as a form of inheritance (mana) and tradition.

Analysis

Perhaps this Lenten practice is the most important socio-cultural contribution of the people of San Pedro Cutud to the Philippines. The practice of bloody petitions, particularly the one in Pampanga that started in the early 1960s, seems to have transformed if not provided an additional practice and ritual among fanatics, religious, and devotees.

A considerable number of writers have discussed in numerous works the relatively severe Holy Week activities of penitent Filipinos, even during the Spanish times. The historian Gregorio Zaide (1978) observed: "The Lenten season, beginning with Ash Wednesday and ending on Easter Sunday, was a somnolent period of the year. During this period, all joyous festivities were suspended. People chanted the passion or attended the cenakulo."

According to Durkheim, religion has four major functions: disciplinary, cohesive, vitalizing, and euphoric social forces. Considering the data above, it is clear that the pabasa, prostration, carrying of the cross, self-flagellation, and crucifixion are religious rituals that Durheim says help prepare men for social life by imposing self-discipline and a certain measure of asceticism.

This is confirmed by the participants of the Holy Week tradition in Cutud because, according to them, discipline is a must as long as they are under the vow of being Kristo for the Holy Week. They have to live what is demanded from their vow – at least living a good and disciplined life, which means having good relations with their families and the community. They should reread a particular verse in the Holy Bible and say it during the street play. Despite the outspoken discouragement of the Roman Catholic Church, the people, especially the penitentiaries, delay gratification of their bodily needs at least during Holy Week to purify their souls by self-mutilation, fasting, and sacrifice as they reflect on their previous sins and misgivings against their God while fulfilling their vows and promising to be better individuals. During the spectacle, it is expected, especially by the elderly, the organizers, and the practitioners, that everyone will pay attention to the entire message and sanctity of the occasion, imposing disciplinary measures not only to the body but also to the mind. However, the seriousness and sanctity of the event are threatened as the occasion increasingly becomes commercialized through the sustained efforts of the local government to promote tourism and provide temporary business opportunities to locals. On the other hand, tourists tend to trivialize and exoticize the traditions and beliefs of the people.

Another function of religion fulfilled in these Lenten practices is bringing people together, their common bonds, and reinforcing their social solidarity. Indeed, the observance of Holy Week is

celebrated as a family reunion and a barrio fiesta for the entire barrio of San Pedro Cutud. There, people, both locals and tourists, have a spectacle to watch. Their attention is focused on the communal event. Their common experience as both spectators and participants in the communal ritual provides them with a certain moral energy of being together, or what Durkheim termed "collective effervescence," that, concerning the shared socio-economic sensibilities of Filipinos about everyday sacrifice for better living conditions, made relevant yet coated by Catholic sensibilities about the passion of the Christ, enables them to collectively identify with the penitentiaries as they strive to finish their vows in the Calvary.

Social solidarity is manifested by the locals who have transferred residence by returning to San Pedro Cutud during Holy Week, which is a precious occasion for them. It can be safe to say that they can miss going there on Christmas but not during Lent. Religious observance maintains and revitalizes the social heritage of the group and helps transmit its enduring values to future generations, as children are being exposed to Lenten traditions and beliefs while listening, watching, and, at other times, participating in the activities of their parents, elder siblings and playmates, kin and kapitbahays (neighborhood).

Furthermore, religion has a euphoric function that counteracts feelings and loss of faith and certitude. The believers' sense of well-being, a sense of the essential rightness of the moral world, is re-established. On the most general plane, religion as a social institution provides meaning to man's existential predicaments by tying the individual to that supra-individual sphere of transcendent values, which is ultimately rooted in his society.

Finally, it is noteworthy that two famous Popes have shared the spiritual significance of self-flagellation and other practices that focus on physical mortification. For one, in his encyclical letter, Miserentissimus Redemptor, on reparations, Pope Pius XI called Acts of Reparation to Jesus Christ a duty for Catholics and referred to them as "some sort of compensation to be rendered for the injury" with respect to the sufferings of Jesus. Likewise, Pope John Paul II referred to Acts of Reparation as the "unceasing effort to stand beside the endless crosses on which the Son of God continues to be crucified".

Conclusion

From the above discussion and analysis, we can conclude that the people of San Pedro Cutud's extreme practice of self-mortification is deeply rooted in their history as a community of people whose tradition of penitence is a serious vow that they faithfully fulfill every Lenten week of the year.

It is a form of folk religiosity that expresses their religious beliefs and practices and is their means of sharing in the passion and death of Jesus Christ.

It is also a petitionary vow fulfillment and an expression of thanksgiving.

The people of San Pedro Cutud's practice of yearly penitence (which is the primary priority during Lenten Week) through self-mortification strengthen familial ties, particularly in times of crisis, acute illness, and conflict between relatives as this becomes an occasion of a family together or reunion of sort (which is the secondary priority to the fulfillment of vow), so that crisis and conflict of long standing can be settled amicably by forgiving each other finally and be united again in fulfilling their vow of penitence and sacrifice. Other members of the family shoulder the food expenses during paisa and other Lenten activities.

Lastly, self-flagellation and other forms of penitence are rich family traditions and customs that people have inherited from their forefathers who pioneered in fulfilling their vows of penitence and were handed down from generation to generation to the present and which will be handed down to the future generations as well to continue the colorful legacy and rich heritage of the age-long family tradition.

NOTE: This research was done in 2013 and was never published in any journal. The author decided to share this research output which she finds relevant up to the present

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