

POPULAR INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PASSION OF CHRIST

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Philippine lenten rituals, specifically crucifixions and flagellations, do vary with official Catholic practice, and may be understood as symbols, that is, as iconic expressions that refer to a multiplicity of meanings. Observations of these rituals, and their folk interpretations, in Pampanga, Bulacan and Laguna suggest that these meanings are not exclusively religious. More important, these rituals serve to reenact and reinforce the key organizing principles of lowland Philippine society: debts of gratitude, concern for family welfare, loyalty to peer group, and the strengthening of bonds between kinsmen.

Stock Lenten figures in Pampango and Tagalog towns are the flagellant and a man, dressed like Christ, carrying a cross for a mock crucifixion. Occasionally, real nails are used. The number of people who participate in these rituals may be small compared to the rest of the population; but these rituals are regarded by many as legitimate, albeit uncommon, options. Moreover, they do elicit sympathy and even a tear from bystanders. Their extreme character therefore reveals some key aspects of the Filipino's religious consciousness.

Corporal punishment has been an important Catholic practice since the Early Middle Ages down to the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s. It was held that although a man's sin was forgiven through confession to the priest, penitential acts were needed to remove the effects of sin. Performed in the spirit of repentance, such acts kept a sinner from relapsing into sin, and they helped imbue him with the spirit of the Crucified Lord (Litzinger 1967:83-4). Penitential acts could be prayer and other acts of worship, pilgrimages, almsgiving, works of mercy, fasting, abstinence from tasty foods and corporal punishment (Martos 1981: 331; Litzinger 1967: 84). A favored form of corporal punishment was flagellation, either in public or in private, either self-administered or adminis-

tered by another, either during or outside Lent. Cardinals, bishops, monks, nuns, kings, queens, nobles, and commoners voluntarily received this bloody punishment (Scott 1941: 126-8, 139-40).

Although the *disciplina* began to wane in popularity after the 17th century, it became an integral part of the rules of the various religious orders (Courtney 1967: 955). Until recently they enjoined self-flagellation on fixed days of the week. The Jesuits and Franciscans brought the practice over to the Philippines in the 17th century (Ribadaneira 1970: 348-9; Chirino 1903: 249; Sanz 1971: 78, 81).

Not all flagellations have been sanctioned by the Church. Flagellant movements of 13th century Italy and 14th century Germany were persecuted by the Inquisition when their members began to absolve one another of sins, to cast out evil spirits, and to doubt the need for sacraments (Toke 1907: 91). Many flagellants went underground, forming secret societies that surfaced in various countries during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Scott 1941: 141-2). In the Philippines, what was official became folk when the people took the practice from under the priests' supervision into the countryside and gave it a different form and meaning. The *disciplina* became the *penitensiya*.

The history of voluntary crucifixions is difficult to reconstruct. I have not come across any evidence of it in Catholic Europe. Even if it was practiced there, most likely it never matched flagellation's popularity; nor would it have received any official approval. It has been practiced though in parts of Mexico and the U.S. Southwest during our century. In the Philippines, it is a recent folk ritual. Informants in Pampanga, where most such rituals have taken place, are certain that they began only after World War II.

During the Lenten seasons of 1980 and 1981, I observed folk interpretations of the Passion in Pampanga, Bulacan, and Laguna. Unlike crucifixions, flagellations take place not only on Good Friday but on any Lenten Friday. This made it easier to identify and befriend participants. All in all I gathered 34 cases of flagellation, crucifixion, and a practice called *tinggulong* — which seems to be found only in the Philippines. These cases were based either on direct interviews or on accounts by intimates of participants.

Since I am interested in defining the contours of the Filipino's religious consciousness, I decided, while writing this essay, to re-examine these events as *symbols*, that is, as iconic expressions that refer to a multiplicity of meanings (Turner 1975: 152). Some of these meanings are explicitly stated by the participants; others can be inferred by the outsider from the event's context. Moreover, in order to define the specific Filipino quality of these events, I then briefly compared them with officially approved Catholic penitential acts.

Flagellants, Rollers and Nailees

The *penitensiya* is widely practiced in some Pampanga, Bulacan, Rizal, and Bicol towns. In the most common version the participants wear hoods crowned with branches and leaves to signify the Crown of Thorns. Unique to Kalayaan, Laguna is the colorful *haplit*, where participants don skirts and bonnets made of palm leaves decorated with flowers. In both versions, the flagellants are stripped to the waist only.

To prepare himself, the flagellant either whips himself or has himself whipped by a companion (*berdugo*). Once his back muscles swell, a village mate who specializes in incisions works on his back with bits of broken glass embedded onto a paddle (as in Bulacan) or with a razor (as in Kalayaan, Laguna).

While walking, the flagellants whips his back bloody with an instrument consisting of bamboo sticks (*bulyos*) attached to a bunch of ropes. Should one stick fall off, he has to add a corresponding year to his vow.

In effect he embarks on a pilgrimage, for he visits places in his community regarded as holy. These are churches, chapels, or homes where the *pasyon* has been chanted. However, by custom, he never enters these places, he merely prays outside.

An assistant (*sunod*) may follow the flagellant, feeding him an egg, if necessary, or whipping him. The rite begins in the morning, ends by noon, and is followed by a rush to the nearest body of water where the flagellant washes himself. Many easily return to their usual schedule the next day, and yes, even to playing basketball every five in the afternoon.

Not as bloody but as painful is another ritual called the *tinggulong*. Here the devotee is garbed as in the *penitensiya*, but does not whip himself. Instead he walks, then rolls on the burning ground and, spreading his arms in the form of a cross, has his buttocks whipped for a prescribed number of times by an assistant (*sunod*). As in the *penitensiya*, the devotee makes a pilgrimage to different "holy" places in the area.

The passion play (*sinakulo*) has also inspired other forms of self-denial on Good Friday. The Passion and Death of Christ is acted out in some towns from eight in the morning of Good Friday till three in the afternoon. The Christ's tormentors, sometimes his own close relatives in costume, do not hold back their blows, nor does he want them to. He is tied, for a period of time, to cross under the afternoon sun.

Not content with this, some *Kristos* have even asked that their palms be nailed between the second and third finger bones. Nails used in

San Fernando, Pampanga are three inches long, are of stainless steel, and have been soaked in alcohol. But the crucifixion lasts for only a few minutes; no sooner is the nailed *Kristo* hoisted up than his cross is lowered and the searing metals pulled out immediately. To prevent tetanus, two nailees take antibiotics after the crucifixion and go to the doctor. From the 1950s, when these crucifixions began, down to 1981, only a few had had themselves nailed — no more than fifteen, according to informants in Pampanga and Bulacan, where most of these have taken place.

In all these three rituals, the participants claim having a light, happy feeling (*magaang ang pakiramdam*). The bloodier the scourging the better, they say, because this expels unwanted dirty blood. Nailed or not, the *Kristos* rave about the feeling of floating above the world. An uncle of Lucia says she faints (*nawalan ng malay tao*) while she's on the cross. Lucia denies this, however. Perhaps she enters into a trance which, to the outsider, looks like a fainting spell. It may be that what the devotees describe as a *magaang na pakiramdam* is actually a trance, or at least a trance-like state.

During these rituals, the devotees recite the full fifteen mysteries of the Rosary which recall not only the sorrows of Christ and his Mother, but also their joys and triumphs.

Participants are generally males, between adolescence and late middle age. This is inevitable, given the ritual's strenuousness and semi-nudity. Nonetheless, a small number of women do join; as a whole they are younger than the men. For modesty's sake, they wear halters.

Some women have had themselves nailed as well. They dress like the Quiapo Nazarene: a maroon robe with soft white ruffs and a long curly wig over the hair, but no beard. At Hagonoy, Bulacan, Lucia Reyes has done the men better by having each foot nailed just slightly so that the metal does not dig all the way to the wood.

Protagonists in these Lenten events come from the proletariat. They may be jeepney

drivers, factory hands, peddlers, or farmers with small plots. Their incomes are limited; so too is their schooling — a grade school for most and high school for a few. Rather slim is their knowledge of Catholicism's teachings. Most are not Sunday mass goers. Indeed two nailees are not even sure if humans, especially the wicked, survive death. But at Pulilan, Bulacan, a number of flagellants are successful doctors, lawyers and businessmen.

Meanings and Connotations

These rituals are vehicles that carry a variety of meanings, senses, and connotations for those that participate in them. The ritual is a signifier (*signans*) with signified meanings (*signata*) [Turner 1975: 150-2].

I gathered around 24 adult cases. Four of these concerned nailees, the rest flagellants. Sixty percent of the flagellants and all of the nailees did the ritual because of a vow (*panata*). The remaining forty percent of the flagellants did so for other reasons as will be seen. As for the adult practitioners of the *tinggulong*, I was not able to interview any of them.

Many problems stem from health. Either the devotee himself or a family member was once seriously ill. At one time, the wife of Mario Bagtas had breast cancer and two of their children developed gastroenteritis. Being but a bus peddler, he vowed to God to have himself nailed for a minute or so every Good Friday for a decade. His loved ones recovered. Flagellants tell similar stories. Rudy was a sickly boy. His father promised God that if his son got well, the latter would, as an adult, become a flagellant. Rudy claims he has never since been seriously ill.

Other problems are not health-related. A driver was imprisoned for having run over a pedestrian with a truck. Though his son was still in grade two, he asked the boy to promise that, as an adult, he would become a flagellant. The latter obeyed; after nine months, the driver was released. Years later the son fulfilled the promise.

Vows have also been made for more mundane reasons by the upwardly mobile: to pass

the bar and the medical board, or to put up a successful business company.

Of course, the idea of reciprocating God's extraordinary favor with a special gift of self is a standard one among Catholics all over the world. It may be that a hallmark of the Philippine version is its transferability *between kinsman*. Should a man die or migrate abroad without completing his vow, his son, brother or favorite nephew fills in for him. This parallels the prehispanic (Scott 1980: 156) and contemporary¹ Philippine practice of indenturing a child to a creditor, in case a debt cannot be repaid, for an agreed on period of time. By way of contrast, in 16th century France, flagellation was transferable even between non-kinsmen. Men willingly flogged themselves in atonement for the sins of anyone prepared to pay their fees (Scott 1941: 133).

Philippine flagellants explicitly state that they are fulfilling a vow.² They find this reason meaningful, for lowland Philippine culture emphasizes the importance of realizing one's moral debt of gratitude to another (*utang na loob*). However, other signata do cluster together in these rituals to differentiate them from milder forms of sacrifice such as walking on one's knees towards the altar or going on a pilgrimage. Some of the signified meanings are stated by the participants, others can be inferred by the outsider from the context.

Devotees claim that they embark on this task in order "to help Christ and share in his ordeal" (*upang matulungan at makidamay kay Kristo*). The Tagalog expression, *damay*, can mean many things. As a genuine, heartfelt sympathy for a friend during a crisis, it can take various forms: helping with the latter's chores, offering money, listening to him, or even just being with him. *Damay* can also mean getting so deeply involved in the affairs of another, that they become one's own. Though these devotees may not go to Church-sponsored rituals during the entire year, they feel that their participation in Christ's once-a-year torment has made them his bosom friends.

Two of the four nailees find another meaning to their ritual. In fact, they state this as another reason for having done the ritual.

During a long bout of illness, one such nailee, Lucia Reyes, saw Christ in a dream: as the Holy Child, then as the Black Nazarene. She was asked to heal the sick. At first she resisted, claiming unworthiness, but she eventually surrendered. As her condition improved she began to heal the sick for free. One day a voice urged her to imitate Christ's sacrifice. Since 1977, this shy and modest girl has had herself nailed on Good Friday in Bulacan. Because of this oblation, according to her, she is able to heal others.

I have not met a flagellant who associates his sacrifice with actively healing his fellow men; only these two nailees do so. For obvious reasons, voluntary crucifixion represents the ultimate test of friendship with Christ.

Among the twenty adult flagellant cases, eight submitted to the ordeal to *ward off* illness. Although the flagellants did not become healers, some underwent the ordeal to ensure that neither they nor a beloved would contract a serious illness. Flagellation can be anticipatory, for neither the devotee nor his close kinsmen need to have been seriously ill in the past. By becoming Christ's intimate, the flagellant believes that Christ will grant his request.

Unlike a sign, a symbol resembles what it signifies (Turner 1975:192-193). The association between bloodletting and the acquisition of strength is, of course, a universal one. Catholic preaching constantly alludes to the redemptive power of Christ's blood. The popular icons of Christ often show him bleeding and torn, yet powerful, as the rays on his head suggest. Moreover, there are indigenous precedents in the Philippines. Among both prehispanic and contemporary pagan Filipinos, when a person was ill, an animal was slaughtered, prayed over by the shaman and its blood smeared on him (Delbeke 1928:112-113; Garvan 1941:210). Indeed, when a high-ranking person was seriously ill, sometimes a slave was sacrificed (Delbeke 128:111). Today, in some Christian Filipino communities, a pig, or more commonly, a chicken is killed and its blood spashed on a new building's posts. During their rituals, the flagellant and the

nailee become sacrificial victims whose blood regenerates. While Lucia hangs on the cross, the faithful wipe her bloody feet with pieces of cloth and apply these to their sick. Some flagellants in Bulacan bury their bloody clothes on Holy Saturday to fertilize the fields (Bautista 1985: personal communication).

For other flagellants, another meaning is present, one which they will not explicitly state. For them the ordeal reinforces the bonds between them and their peer group by giving them an opportunity to prove their manliness. A fellow whose friends have either performed the ritual or are in the process of doing so will naturally feel compelled to join them. He can either use the illness of a member of the family as an occasion to make a vow, or he can perform the ritual to prevent illness.

Does atonement for wrongdoing figure in these rituals? Evangelista (1962: 11) answers in the negative. My findings were somewhat different. I was told of a man who did reparation for having committed a murder. But my informants agreed that this case was extremely rare. More numerous were cases of penitents who had acted insolently towards either their parents or kinmen, had been ostracized by them and, as a result, were now expressing their repentance publicly. All the ten cases I came across were of males, ages twelve to fifteen. None of the adult cases had this dimension. In some places, the ordeal and even the costume of young adolescents clearly differed from that of the adults. Kalayaan boys did not whip themselves; instead, wrapped in a protective sheath of dry banana stalks from head to toe, they did the *tinggulong*. They rolled from the outskirts of the town to the center but were not beaten. At San Miguel de Mayumo in Bulacan, young boys dressed as the Nazarene bore a cross of bamboo (Bautista 1985, personal communication; Tiongson 1986, personal communication). However, at Pulilan, Bulacan, and San Fernando, Pampanga, boys were garbed like adults and also whipped themselves. Public atonement seems to be equated almost exclusively with insolence towards immediate kinsmen. And it is the young who are made to perform this. The ritual thus

magnifies the importance of parental authority, rather than of God or even society as a whole. Other than the lone murder case, I did not come across cases of atonement for rape, adultery or theft which in Western Europe, compelled people to undergo voluntary flagellation. (Toke 1907: 90)

In both form and content, the *penitensiya* sharply differs from officially approved penitential works.

Family versus Church

Conspicuously absent from adult *penitensiya* is the sense of sin, of having violated a law of God to scourging by ecclesiastical officials — depending on the gravity of his offence (Scott 1941: 116, 132). A spirit of contrition was present. Penitential rites I either glimpsed, as a seminarian, or heard of in Manila during the 1960s, opened with the Confiteor, a confession of sins to the entire heavenly court, and the Miserere, a psalm that repeatedly invokes God's mercy on the sinner (cf. also Chirino 1903: 249).

In contrast, the *penitensiya* participant decides to take up the ritual because of the various meanings we saw above. Not even in preparation for this ritual, do the flagellants go to confession. Even the prayers used do not suggest a spirit of contrition. The Our Fathers and the Hail Marys of the Rosary that is recited do implore forgiveness for sins, but other non-penitential themes are present in those prayers. Moreover, the entire ritual takes place literally *outside* the Church, for, by custom, the flagellant must not enter any church building during the ordeal.

Rather than the power of the Church, the *penitensiya* upholds the power of the peer group and above all, the family. Young adolescents who have wronged their kinsmen are obliged to submit to the ritual; so too are adult males whose close kinsmen can no longer do so for one reason or the other. Regardless of the motivation, even if the prospective flagellant was inspired by a dream, he still consults with his "Parents, siblings, parents' siblings,

spouses, or friends." (Evangelista 1962: 11). This seems to be true as well of the nailees. One of them had been the black sheep among his siblings. Outraged by his behavior, his wife blurted out, "Why don't you have yourself nailed at San Fernando?" When illness finally struck the family, he took a vow.

Also absent from the *penitensiya* is the dichotomy between soul and body that Church-approved flagellations so vividly express. For centuries until the recent Vatican Council of the 1960s, the Church has emphasized the primacy of spirit over matter, soul over body, the eternal over the temporal (see, for instance, Thomas à Kempis, Part I: Chaps. 1 and 22). Acts that disciplined the body or even physically punished it were needed to keep the body submissive to the spirit; in turn, by mastering his carnal impulses, a man's spirit became increasingly sensitive to the promptings of the Divine Spirit. Though comfort, well-being, and health were regarded as good in themselves, a Christian could become so concerned with them, that he might lose sight of his primary objective in life: the salvation of his eternal soul. Through corporal punishment the soul defied the body, thus conquering it.

Folk flagellations and crucifixions in the Philippines ignore this symbolism. The ordeals thank God for health received and implore continued health. Flagellants claim that their bloodletting cleanses the body of impurities and, in fact, strengthens the body, *nagpapalakas ng katawan*. Nothing better illustrates this physical emphasis than the custom of having an assistant offer an egg to the flagellant during the ritual. Rather than the spirit, the body is renewed.

These folk interpretations of penitential rituals thus reverse the latter's very purpose: instead of denying the body, they affirm it. In a somewhat parallel vein, Church-approved flagellations that Medieval and Renaissance Europeans undertook to curb sensuality did the opposite, because naked buttocks were whipped, sometimes by the opposite sex. (Scott 1941: 117-8) Reversals of meaning, such as these, happen in the history of many rituals and invite further study.

Polarizing Meaning

According to Victor Turner, to understand a ritual's symbolism, it is not enough to examine its signata (1967:28). One should examine the context from which the ritual springs: the social and moral orders of a society, the principles underlying a society's organization, the kinds of corporate grouping available, and the norms and values inherent in structural relationships. "The norms and values that guide and control persons as members of social groups and categories" converge together in a ritual's "ideological pole" (Turner 1967: 28), like filings drawn toward a magnet. Thus *utang na loob* or a moral debt of gratitude, concern for the welfare of the immediate family, and loyalty to the peer group are key organizing principles of lowland Philippine society. These are reenacted and indeed reinforced by the Lenten rituals.

In this essay, I have not analyzed the ramifications of these Lenten rituals into their total moral and social context. My concern has been with contrasting them with official Catholic practice. I have described the structure of a bloom, but not how the bloom draws together various forces in the plant.

The feedback between ritual and social context could be examined more closely. On the one hand, relations with kinsmen influence the individual's decision to do the ritual. Not the church, not the state, not the law but the immediate family prods the Filipino to the *penitensiya*.

On the other hand, undergoing the ordeal may strengthen existing bonds between kinsmen. Part of the feeling of release described by the flagellants may issue from having resolved a kin conflict and from having fulfilled an *utang na loob* to them. In turn, the devotee's kinsmen may show him more warmth and consideration as a result of his ordeal. Could this be one reason why the flagellants seem to be increasing rather than decreasing in number even as the country "modernizes"?

Another area that ought to be examined is the moral universe of the Lenten devotees. There is little shadow of sin in the rituals. It

may be that the average Filipino's concept of sin differs from that of the hierarchy. Perhaps the Tagalog word, *kasalanan*, has, for the common man, a meaning different from what it has for the hierarchy and laymen educated in Catholic schools. What forms of behavior fall under *kasalanan* and what do not? Moreover, when does the commission of a *kasalanan*

require some form of reparation? In my conversations with the flagellants, they stated that murder and forcing a woman are sins, but lying, stealing, premarital and extramarital sex are not necessarily so.³ It all depends on the situation. Therefore, unless they have killed or raped, sin and repentance would not be a central reality in their lives.

Notes

¹Until the 1950s, Ilocano farmers asked their sons to render service to a fellow farmer for an agreed on period of time, in case they found it difficult to repay cash they had borrowed from the latter.

²According to one participant in these Lenten rituals, "I contracted a debt with Christ. He healed my loved ones. I have to pay back my debt." (*Umutang ako kay Kristo. Pinagaling niya ang aking minamahal. Kailangan kong bayaran ang aking utang.*)

³One informant says that a man should atone for his sins, if he has been insolent to his parents and close kinsmen, or if he has killed someone. However, if he has merely stolen a pig or a carabao, he should charge it to his conscience, (*Pero kung nagnakaw lang ng baboy o kalabaw, sa kaniyang konsiyensiya na lang.*)

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