

Pangasinan Lenten Cultural Practices: A Dying Ritual?

By

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Introduction

ALMOST every town in the Philippines holds unique Holy Week rites, centered on the reenactment of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. Many will observe Good Friday, the most holy day of Holy Week, when Jesus was nailed to the Cross and died on the Golgotha in Mount Calvary in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. The "Moriones", "Penitencia", "Cenaculo", "Visita Iglesia" and the "Pabasa" are Holy Week activities that are held nationwide, although the Moriones Festival is held exclusively in the island province of Marinduque. Embodying the beliefs, traditions and ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Filipinos, they are vital components of our history and culture - especially the history of Catholicism in our country.

The month of April marks the celebration of Christ's death and resurrection, what the pious call in the Philippines "Holy Week" or Semana Santa or Cuaresma.. In contrast to other Christian countries, Filipino Catholics give emphasis on the suffering of Christ, rather than on His resurrection, on the belief that salvation comes at the end.

Religious piety is passionately displayed in different parts of the Philippines, particularly in the provinces where communities go on pilgrimage to as many churches and devotees re-enacting Christ's ordeal through real-life crucifixion under the scorching heat of the sun.

They also celebrate Maundy Thursday, attending church services and watching Passion Plays. In one practice called *visita iglesia*, Catholics try to visit as many churches as they can. On Good Friday, among believers in certain areas, such as Manila, San Fernando in Pampanga Province, and Antipolo in Rizal Province, They also celebrate Maundy Thursday, attending church services and watching Passion Plays. In one practice called *visita iglesia*, also re-enact the sufferings and death of Christ in the Cross. Although Good Friday is a sober time, Easter Sunday is a joyful occasion that starts with *salubong*, where the statues representing the Risen Christ and the Grieving Mother Mary are carried to meet at an appointed place. also re-enact the sufferings and death of Christ in the Cross. Although Good Friday is a sober time, Easter Sunday is a joyful occasion that starts with *salubong*, where the statues representing the Risen Christ and the Grieving Mother Mary are carried to meet at an appointed place.

Similarly, Pangasinan is one of the country's rich in the cultural lenten practices observed during Holy Week, which is locally called *Cuaresma* or *Pananggilin*. Pangasinenses start the observance of Cuaresma during Palm Sunday. Among the cultural lenten practices, the following activities are observed in the different towns of Pangasinan. These are the Palaspas (Pistay bolong) Penitensiya, Senakulo, Pasyon or Pabasa, Procession (Libot), Salubong (Abet-abet), Fasting (Ayono), Whipping (Bakbak), etc. In Lingayen (the capital town of Pangasinan) alone, these Lenten activities were observed in almost all of its barangays. Pangasinenses cooperate in commemorating the life and sacrifices of our Savior, Jesus Christ. . But these rituals in Pangasinan are not well documented so there are few related literature / articles written about Pangasinan lenten culture for references

for the younger Pangasinenses and for other Filipinos who might be interested of cultivating the Pangasinan lenten culture.

Before, when the presenter is still a grader, she grew up in Barangay Libsong, one of the barangays in Pangasinan which is very rich in preserving and observing the Pangasinan lenten cultural practices. All the practices are done in the Pangasinan language for young children to ponder and understand the real essence of the passion of Christ. The presenter believes that those Lenten cultural practices had touched her life and she lives a Christ- directed living. Moreover, most of the generation of her age, also felt the same behavior. And it so lamenting, that today's generation, few observe and participate to these Lenten cultural practices.

Probably, this is the reason that motivates the presenter to research on this topic and prepares a call paper on Pangasinan Lenten Cultural Practices: A Dying Ritual?

The presenter asked 100 students of PSU-Lingayen Campus and 30 employees from Pangasinan on the following questions:

a. Do you observe Lenten season in your locality?

*If yes, what are the rituals/ practices observed in your locality? Pls. check if there is/ are being observed.

a. sinakulo

b. penitensya

c. fasting (ayono)

d. pasyon (pabasa)

e. palaspas (pistay bolong)

f. ash Wednesday (pistay oring)

g. procession (libot)

h. others, _____

*If No, why?

a. It is an ordinary day

b. I do not believe on these practices/rituals

c. It is against my faith (religion)

b. What are the activities observed by the family during these holidays?

a. staying at home and watching TV. (Movies on Lenten)

b. going to beaches and other places

c. malling/ shopping spree

d. reading bible and attending religious activities

e. fasting

f. others, _____

c. Among the rituals/practices observed in your locality, which do you think touch and influence your life? Rate them using the scale below

1- no deal 2- slightly influences me 3-moderately influences me

4- Influences me 5- greatly influence me

a. sinakulo –

b. penitensya-

c. pabasa-

d. palaspas-

e. fasting-

f. others, ----

d. Suggestions, if any.....

Related Literature and Studies

The whole nation is observing the Lenten celebration (Cuaresma and in the vernacular it is called Panangilin or Ngilin)). In Pangasinan, the said celebration starts on Palm Sunday and ends in “Salubong or abet-abet. All the Lenten activities (rituals) are performed in the dialect (Pangasinan).

The following cultural practices are observed in Pangasinan. These are:

Ash Wednesday. This is a practice of the Catholics to having ash marks on their forehead, which tells that the 40-day countdown to Easter begins.

Palaspas. This tradition of every Christian Filipino is still rich in Pangasinan. The Pangasinenses attend mass on Palm Sunday bringing with them different kinds of leaves. In the dialect, it is the so-called “Pistay bolong”, wherein the family brings any kind of leaves especially herbal leaves to church to be blessed. These blessed leaves are believed to cure illnesses and could fight against evil spirits.

Fasting. Fasting (ayono) is also observed in almost all homes, wherein children are not allowed to play or to make unnecessary sounds. However, to some adults fasting is really observed in its real sense like away from luxuries, worries, vices, good food and the like but instead they indulge themselves in reading the bible or going to church. Though there are few Christians, whom I believed are non-believers to the solemnity of this celebration that they drink a lot with their friends and visitor. Others engage themselves with cockfighting. Still others belong to the “Walang pakialam “ group.

The Salubong or abet-abet. The "Salubong" at Easter Dawn commemorates the encounter between Christ and His Mother, Blessed Virgin Mary. This is done by separating the people into two groups. The first group is consists of men and boys who will follow the image of Jesus Christ, while the other group is consists of women and girls who follow the image of Mary. At the end of the procession, the two groups will meet in the church, where a number of little girls who participate during the dawn ritual as angels. At one time, there were more than 50 little girls, harnessed and suspended, who kept the image of the Virgin Mary Company through Easter dawn. They were lowered for the traditional lifting of the veil of mourning of the Blessed Mother.

The Penitensya . In the streets, flagellants reenact the torture and death of Jesus Christ. A pagan interpretation, the tradition is their way of asking forgiveness for sins committed, for fulfilling religious vows or for expressing religious gratitude as when a favor has been granted.

The Whipping. Similar to penitensiya, this is practice in some barangays of Lingayen and other neighboring towns. The whipping or "bakbak" is practiced as a re-enactment of the torture and death of Christ. However, in this practice the half-dressed flagellants, wearing only trousers, have their faces covered with black cloth and with their heads crowned with thorny vines. They traverse barefoot under the scorching heat of the sun and are whipped on their backs till they bleed. The actual whipping is done in two ways: the penitents do the whipping themselves or someone is asked to lash the penitents' back. At the end of the procession, the flagellants jump into the salty sea. As claimed by the flagellants, all bruises heal after the dunking. The healing power of salt?

The Cleansing or washing of the feet. This ritual is observed in the Catholics where the priest washes the feet of the people before or after the mass. This ritual was believed that performing it will help clean the spirit and the soul of every individual performing this practice. Hence, the individual is redeemed from his sins.

The Visita Iglesia, a Spanish term translated as “Church Visitation” takes Catholic Filipinos to visit and pray, at least, in seven different churches on the night of Maundy Thursday. This practice is termed as pilgrimage to the different religious institutions/ sacred places or churches. There is a belief that joining this church visitation will help cure the illnesses and brings joys and enlightenment.

The Sinakulo. The traditional sinakulo is a Lenten play, usually in verse, which narrates a long sequence of episodes from the Old and the New Testaments, with special emphasis on the life, sufferings and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Certain conventions of marching, chanting and magic are usually followed. Sinakulo scenes are presented on a proscenium-type stage of bamboo-and-wood or cement-and-steel; under light bulbs that cast an unyielding light instead of creating a mood and against painted cloth or paper backdrops, called telon. It takes at least eight nights - from Palm Sunday to Easter - to present the play. Because of the imperatives of urban life, most modern sinakulos run for only one or two hours. They can also be presented in all kinds of venues: on the traditional stage, on the streets, in a chapel, in a large room, or even in an open-air strike area.

If the traditional sinakulo drew Life from the feudal, agricultural order, the modern passion play responds to a very definite need - the need to inform students, professionals, workers about the problems created by unresolved contradictions in Philippine society. The word *sinakulo* (also spelled *senakulo*) comes from the Latin

cenaculum – in English, "cenacle". In the Roman Catholic faith it refers to the room in which the Last Supper of Jesus Christ was held. In Spanish *cena* means supper and *cenáculo* is a gathering.

In the Philippines *sinakulo* is staged during Holy Week, sometimes for eight consecutive nights, as an epic play dramatising the passion and death of Christ. It is very popular particularly amongst Tagalog Christians. It is not an indigenous ceremonial ritual. When Spain colonised the Philippine islands the 16th century, cultural tools such as passion plays were used as instruments of occupation and religious conversion. It had also been used as a cultural tool against the censorship.

The *sinakulo* in Pangasinan is “Pangasinalized” or translated in the vernacular, and it is shown four consecutive nights from Tuesday to Friday, wherein people from all walks of life watched the play to commemorate the passion of Christ. Though others go and watch the play to escape their home activities without internalizing the real essence of the stage play. Still others just use the time to see and chat with their friends, boyfriends and the like.

The Pasyon. The *pasyon* (or the *pabasa*) refers to the verse narrative on the life and sufferings of Jesus Christ. The *pasyon* text may be written in Tagalog or in other major Philippine languages, like Pampango, Ilocano, Pangasinan, Bicol, Ilongo, Cebuano, and Waray. There are also *pasyon* narrative among the Ibanag and Itawes of Cagayan, the Gaddang of Nueva Vizcaya, and the Cuyunon of Palawan.

Among the Tagalog, the most commonly used text is entitled *Casaysayan ng pasiong mahal ni Jesucristong Panginoon natin na sucat ipag-alab ng puso ng sinumang babasa* (An account of the sacred passion of our Lord Jesus Christ which

should inflame the heart of anyone who reads it), which is one of the many later editions of a work by an unknown writer first published in 1814.

Continuous singing of this length is not practiced in the Spanish and Mexican lenten traditions. It relates to the Philippine cultural practice connected with epic singing during important celebrations of the community. The pasyon may also be chanted, though rarely now, during wakes and death anniversaries, as well as during the reenactment of Christ's Last Supper on Holy Thursday evening. There are various melodies and musical styles in the rendering of the pasyon.

Because the text is in 5-line stanzas while melodic phrases tend to be symmetrical, various techniques are employed to reconcile the difference. In a widely used, old Tagalog punto, the first musical phrase encompasses lines 1 and 2, while the second musical phrase covers lines 3, 4, and 5. In adapting folk song melodies or similar tunes, a four-phrase melody is first sung for lines 1 to 4, which is repeated to render lines 2 to 5. Another formula makes a four-phrase melody coincide with lines 1 to 4 and appends a stock melody or standard melodic ending for line five. Generally, pasyon singing is a capella.

Many innovations in pasyon singing have been introduced, like the use of the guitar or rondalla for accompaniment and the use of the accordion by a travelling group of pasyon singers. Singing of the pasyon is performed in two basic group formations. In the first, two people or groups of people sing alternately. In the second formation, each of the singers takes their turns in singing a stanza of text. The pasyon chanting tradition is seen by many of its practitioners as a vow or panata made by an individual or family, which in many cases has been passed on from one to two generations back.

The Pasyon and the Filipino Experience. Among the most popular forms of literature, music and drama, during the Spanish times, were the various renditions and versions of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ, or the Pasyon Ni Kristo.

The first Tagalog pasyon or poetic rendition of Christ's life appeared in 1704. So popular was it that it had a fifth edition in 1760. Its author, Gaspar Aquino de Belen, was an indio layman who worked in the Jesuit press in Manila. Though he used a 17th century Spanish passion as a model, de Belen's work is fully grounded in local traditions.

Anonymous versions of the pasyon began appearing in 1804. Spanish friars decried the presence of a few "heresies" in the pasyon as well its "profane" use in indio festivals and social gatherings, death and courtship rituals included. This shows that by the end of the 18th century, the pasyon had become a true social epic of the Tagalogs and probably other lowland Christian groups as well. In the 19th century, a native priest named Mariano Pilapil made "corrections" to various illicit versions and produced the most popular version of the text called Pasyon Pilapil or Pasyon Heneis.

There are two directions in which the pasyon may have altered popular consciousness. It has been persuasively argued that the pasyon simply affirms prevailing social structure and its values. After all the pasyon drama was usually performed in the local churchyard, with the Spanish friar's blessing, and often with the financial support of the local gentry. In the pasyon there is much weeping among the characters. The virtue of meekness and resignation to suffering, rather than the confrontation of oppression, seems to have been encouraged. This is particularly true of the portions titled aral or lesson, which preach the fulfillment of conventional

Christian duties and the acceptance of things as they are, because reward is forthcoming in heaven.

But the aral portions have little or nothing to do with the inexorable flow of the story; in fact, they stand out as obvious commentaries by friar censors anxious to draw to their advantage the enormous popularity of the pasyon. Problems are caused by looking at images of meekness, suffering, and lamentation of every Filipino society from an upper class, "Westernized" perspective. Taken metaphorically, these images may, in fact, represent inner power and mutual empathy among members of an association. Note that the pasyon continually reminds the audience that social status based on wealth and education has no real value. What do these do to the loob, the "inner being", which is widely regarded as the focus of a person's true worth?

The pasyon may be a dying ritual today, but its imprint in the popular consciousness remains. Given the kind of popular culture that has developed and persisted over the last few centuries, it is hardly surprising that masses of people from all walks of life almost instinctively offered damay - even momentarily - for this new pasyon figure.

Passion plays that flourish today in the urban and rural areas project this conflict. The still dominant, traditional *sinakulo* pictures Christ as a model of meekness and masochism, a lamb accepting death in obedience to authority. In contrast, the new *sinakulo* spotlights a Christ of reason and resolve, a lion who leads the downtrodden against all oppressors. of artistic material that challenged the Marcos dictatorship. The *sinakulo* can take on a variety of formats, as community theatre in a small hall or incorporated in a street procession and fiesta. In some localities it has even evolved into displays of penitents engaged in self-flagellation and actual crucifixion while throngs of bystanders ogle and buy souvenirs.

The Pabasa written in Pangasinan language was practiced by people young and old every Maundy Thursday night till Friday at two o'clock in the afternoon at Barangay Libsong in the municipality of Lingayen. This ritual was done continuously, wherein the readers are scheduled to read the pasyon. The readings in the form of chant were enjoyed by many people including the children. After every reader performed his "pagbasa" he/she was offered food as a sign of thanksgiving.

Results and Discussions

Truly, all these Lenten cultures were also practiced in Pangasinan

Majority of my respondents answered that penitensya is still performed in almost all barangays in Lingayen and some neighbouring towns. Most of the penitents perform their sacrifices through whipping themselves or ask others to torture them because of the beliefs that doing such rituals will redeem them in their sins. Though some are performing their sacrifices in other forms such as walking from home to Manaoag every Thursday night as a vow or panata so that sins be forgiven..

Sixty percent of my respondents answered cenakulo touched their life because they could recollect the sacrifices done by Christ and that they could avoid committing sins. Though only, 33 % answered cenakulo was observed in their locality.

All of my respondents answered that fasting was observed in their homes like fasting from worries, noise and food.

Nobody among the students knows what "pabasa" is all about but 100 % of the employees appreciate the essence of "pabasa", which they claimed has touched their lives.

Everybody observed the Palm Sunday, they attend but only few is performing that ritual of bringing leaves to be blessed in the church.

Most of my respondents preferred to stay at home during Lenten holidays and they preferred to watch Lenten movies and read the bible.

Most of them answered that these Lenten activities touched and influenced their life however; they preferred to see these activities in television rather than going out at night to watch cenakulo. Though 13 % of my respondents answered they were not affected by these activities because everyday of their life they are already aware of the sacrifices of Jesus Christ, that's why according to them they have accepted him as their Saviour.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on my findings, I therefore conclude that Pangasinan is still rich in Lenten cultural practices. Many Pangasinenses are still observing these Lenten holidays and are practicing some of the Lenten rituals in the Pangasinan language. Few articles are written on these Lenten cultural practices of Pangasinan, which serves as reference materials for future in the Philippine literature.

May I call on Pangasinan writers to document and make articles on these Pangasinan cultural Lenten practices that will enlighten the young generation and to preserve this cultural heritage of the Pangasinenses. Moreover, may the curriculum planners in the CHED integrate these Lenten cultural practices as part of the study of the Philippine Literature so that the young generation could preserve this cultural heritage. Furthermore, may I appeal to our political leaders to take the lead in preserving and strengthening these Lenten cultural practices of Pangasinan especially the “pabasa” or film showing on the Christ’s passion for us to commemorate His death to save us from our sins.