

House Blessings and the Removal of Spiritual Dirt

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House blessings are religious rituals that are performed on a house prior to the moving in of the inhabitants to ensure protection from bad luck and evil spirits (House Blessings 2003). One may assume that house blessings in the Philippines are merely another Catholic ritual left over from the Spanish Colonization. However, I argue that this not the case, rather these rituals have a special spiritual and symbolic significance that intertwines the ritual cleansings of evil spirits, *multos* (ghosts) and the symbolic reordering of spiritual pollution (Douglas 1991). The focus of this article will be on Catholic house blessings that are performed in urban and rural areas of the Philippines, which will be interpreted using Mary Douglas' symbolic approach. My research was completed over the space of four years, during which I participated in four house blessings. As I am half Filipino, while I cannot be entirely objective and de-familiarise my account, this may add depth to it.

Thin Description*

Preparations for the house blessing begin many days or even weeks in advance. The family have to schedule the day for moving into their new home with the local Priest. After this has been completed, the hosts either book caterers to prepare a large meal for the party or ask family members to come a day in advance to start cooking the food. This grand celebration with food is a necessary practice, as the hosts must share their wealth with their community.

On the day of the house blessing, the Priest usually arrives in the morning with an assistant, usually a verger who helps with the preparations of the ceremony. To begin with, the Priest and the rest of the immediate family assemble outside the front door of the house. A ceremony that resembles a mass follows, with prayers and the reading of Bible passages. After this, the Priest blesses the outside of the house with holy water and the family follows him into the house. The Priest blesses each room of the house until the whole house has been in contact with him. After this, the social celebrations begin. The whole local community as well as close and distant relatives come to participate. Tables are borrowed from neighbours or hired from the catering company. After the large meal, the men and women separate to their own gender specified friendship groups. Men usually drink alcohol and play cards while women gossip about the local goings on. The party lasts until late afternoon to early evening when friends and family disperse.

The Significance of House Blessings in the Philippines

If I were to take a functionalist stance on this, I would argue that house blessings are a response to the hegemonic processes of Spanish Colonialism and Filipino folklore. When I asked members of my family about the significance of this ceremony, they replied it was merely tradition. However, one informant replied that it was to rid the house of what can be translated as 'black dwarves', evil spirits and *multos* (ghosts) (Cruz 2008). If an item in the house was lost my aunt would jokingly state that it had been stolen by a 'black dwarf' or a *duwende*. Cruz states that there are two types of *duwende*, a white one and a black one; the white brings good luck, while the black brings bad luck (ibid). While *duwende* are usually seen to be remnants of ancient folklore, *multos* or ghosts are taken quite seriously in the Philippines. This is because while *duwende* are merely dismissed as backward folklore stories, *multos* have still some resonance, due to their importance within

Catholicism, in the notion of the Holy Ghost. Cruz describes a *multo* as a "ghost or the soul of a person returning from the dead for some unfinished business here on earth" (ibid). Though many assume it is the spirits of their ancestors visiting live relatives, many are frightened at the signs of their presence, such as "a butterfly that flies in through a window, or a window or door banging shut at night," (ibid). Therefore, house blessings are a way to remove these spirits from the house so it can be a spiritually clean place to live. These rituals are a symbolic reordering of the environment.

On a symbolic level, one could argue that these *duwende* and *multos* represent bad luck and disorder that has to be purified and organised (Douglas 1966: 2). Essentially, the ritual purifies the spiritual dirt. Douglas states that "dirt is essentially disorder" (ibid). In eliminating it through purification rituals, one is making a "positive effort to organise the environment" so it can "conform to an idea" (ibid). Therefore house blessings are the spiritual re-ordering of energy within a house for the new inhabitants to remove the past occupants' spiritual pollution.

In conclusion, house blessings in the Philippines demonstrate Douglas' symbolic approach to purity and dirt in an ethnographic context. However, one must be aware of the pitfalls of such an analysis as the categories that Douglas uses of 'purity' and 'pollution' are absolute, there seems to be no middle ground as there is no explicit analysis of a liminal or transitory period. Furthermore, the use of this symbolic interpretation can suggest meaning where there is none. My Aunt said, "We just do this because it is our custom." That might just be the case.

* 'Thin Description' as taken from Geertz' description of the Balinese Cockfight (Geertz 1973)

References

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