

Christmas in the Philippines: Beyond Popular Religious Tradition

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Abstract –This paper explores the unique Filipino way of celebrating Christmas. It investigates the syncretism of Filipino culture and religious tradition. In this contemporary world, such traditions and practices have been continuously commemorated traditionally. However, with modernism and consumerism, such practices became more complex. To examine the Christmas phenomenon in the Philippines, this study presents descriptive research of Catholic Filipinos which indicates Christmas has a deeper meaning. It supersedes religious expressions of gratitude. Rather, it is a time sought after by every Filipino far and near to gather-once families to re-connect and deepen family relations. This implies that the yearly Filipino Christmas celebration is more than a religious practice but is part of the culture and tradition that each and every Filipino household and communities live with.

Keywords –Culture, Misa de Gallo/Simbang Gabi, Tradition, Inculturation, Popular Religiosity

INTRODUCTION

Religiosity plays a very important role in the life of a Catholic Filipino. Its reasons can be varied as simply a practice passed on by their parents or could have been influenced by other people significant in their lives, or developed out of a certain need and circumstances especially in these contemporary times. Elesterio [1] asserts that devotional practices such as novenas, pilgrimages, processions and fiestas, employed in ceremonies and rites manifest a unique Filipino religiosity done as a community or individually a reflection of deep faith as a Church. This religiosity and culture become part of the whole cultural system and have been carried upon to whatever they do or to wherever they go.

Popular as they are practiced religiously by the community and has even passed the tests of time and trends. Lovett [2] defining “popular religiosity” to indicate the faith-expressed in common religious customs that are historically concrete, social and cultural, whose categories of understanding and expressions are heavily shaped by its institutional reality. Of the few colonizers, the Spaniards thrust to Christianize the natives at first met disapproval. But the friars adopted what the native’s belief system has

and in the process use the functional substitution technique. Arbuckle [3] describes this process of substitution into which gradually the symbols adopted a new meaning, which in effect the natives accepted this new understanding together with the new rite; this change took time for the locals to fully accept and adopt. Gradually Christianity is seen incorporating itself and becomes part of the indigenous culture of the natives as it creates an inseparable relationship. As a consequence becoming a Christian implied an uprooting and integration to and from the indigenous way of life.

Popular religiosity such as customs, traditions, and rituals in Filipino culture is inconceivable without it. Its religious practices relate much to a variety of religious spirituality radiating in the process of its Filipino spirituality. This fusion of religious traditions and culture is what characterizes the unique Filipino Christmas celebration. *Pasko sa Pilipinas* or Christmas in the Philippines is a gospel-based religious and culturally rooted expression of the Filipinos sense of respect and gratitude to the Child Jesus who is not consigned to the past. To this child, John Paul II asserts as the whole human history stands about illuminating time and future by his presence [4].

This important event that Filipinos value today will be constructed and reconstructed in a dialectic way where the gospel and culture are shared, passed on, created and recreated.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper explores the Christmas popular religious practices of Catholic Filipinos in the Philippines. To examine the phenomenon of the merging of folk religious beliefs and practices of the locals and that of the Roman Catholic Church devotion to the Birth of the Child Jesus in the gospel. To understand how it makes sense and its integration to their cultural-religious ways and belief system making Christianity become part of its Filipino indigenous reality and the challenge it poses in this contemporary context.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses Fr. Louis Savary's [6] four mind levels operating in the integration of values as guidelines for evaluating Filipino culture, religious tradition, and practices. It is believed that the emergence of these in the community have influenced the people that have made them enrich their communal values through such practices.

Fr. Savary highlights these raw materials of human life such as experience, understanding, judgment, and decision that is understood by giving meaning, label, and interpretation to it [6]. Which after, understanding such experience, its dimensions of truth is explored that must eventually be translated into action (judgment). The decision comes in which involves a choice between opposites, an option among several alternatives, or it indicates a return to earlier mind levels. Indigenous traditions are sustain but with a new interpretation and understanding and a fusion of the Christian tradition revealed in the sacred Scriptures and Church teaching.

Historical Development

The Philippines, as a predominantly Christian country, is known for its long and extravagant celebrations. Its gatherings and activities: public and religious holidays including weddings, baptisms, and funeral and town fiestas are reasons for thanksgiving and cannot be without a touch of culture and folk religiosity. More locally, every town has its own unique and distinguishable stamp of traditions and practices that have been passed on from one generation to another with an upgrade and tone of

influence from various contexts as see fit into the contemporary lifestyle of the locality. The religious and cultural aspects are without question uncontested, for without which the practice becomes foreign and less of a Filipino tradition.

Roman Catholicism comprises the majority of the population. Though other minorities do not agree with its seemingly pagan ritual of procession and pageantry employed in its festivities, other religious denominations would be driven about to its long, lavish and animated activities. Culture and religiosity are a strong basis for a tradition to sustain, Tisdell [7] assert, common cultural history weaves together one's early religious exercise both spiritually and culturally with its ethnicity that has become one's formation to what one has become [7].

With the coming of the Spaniards, one tradition that has greatly influenced various Filipino indigenous practices and beliefs is that of Christianity [8]. Natives in different parts of the country have been Christianized, and somehow those other different minority groups have gradually adapted and integrated the Christian beliefs and practices into their indigenous culture. Nevertheless, the natives' cultural practices are believed to have existed for hundreds of years even before the earlier colonizers came. Fabella [10] even asserts that common folks have kept these indigenous beliefs and practices even after centuries of evangelization, valued the gospel and their culture while professing their Christian faith. This is shown in their native practices that have a pagan background that has somehow been interpreted with a Christianized tone [9, 10].

The Roman Catholic liturgies have developed and with Vatican II's adaptation of inculturation, the Filipino unique religious expressions were slowly incorporated in its rituals and devotions. This blending process of two different religious values and beliefs are conceived out of this integration. The Pontifical Council of Culture [11] recalls that from the beginning it can be seen as the way Filipino Catholics express their faith and its relationship to God through their indigenous way. Significant to note, of a small monument that exists that believed to be the site that marks the first Christmas mass held in the Philippines two hundred years ago before Magellan wandered in the archipelago. Morrow [12] wrote of a Franciscan priest named Odoric Mattiussi of Pordenone who was believed to be the one who celebrated the first "*Misa de Gallo*" in the shore of Bolinao, Pangasinan. Though the event has not been proven historically yet

the marking opens possibilities for further exploration. Nevertheless, the *Simbang Gabior Misa de Gallo* was a practical compromise in the early Spanish colonial period for Filipino farmers who began working before sunrise to avoid the scorching noonday heat in the fields. A nine-day novena masses in honor of the “*Inang Maria*” or Mother Mary highlighting her contribution in the salvation history and emphasizes important Marian virtues and characters. Earlier in Catholic history, the referred ritual of ‘*panata*’ or vow is a re-enactment of the crucifixion which in the process has been accommodated to making sacrifices for a certain need: such as good harvest, the well-being of members of families, protection, unity, and blessing. Alejo [13] shares that such attitude characterizes Filipino popular religiosity that devotees are oriented to have novenas; a continuous nine weeks or nine days of devotion as a form of sacrifice to achieve a spiritual goal. Ultimately, this cherished custom became a distinct cultural feature and a symbol of spiritual devotion all year round.

Christmas in the Contemporary Context

Christmas in the Philippines is known in the world as the longest time celebrated. The anticipation begins during September and to last after the Feast of the Santo Nino. But liturgically, Christmas is ushered in by the Sundays of Advent, observed as a period of hopeful waiting and preparation both for the birth of Jesus at Christmas and His return. Practices associated with it include the Advent Wreath as candles are lighted each Sunday symbolizing the faithful waiting for Christ’s coming, through repentance and joy of heart. The nine-day dawn masses are a novena in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The highlight of the celebration is on the eve of Christmas where the Nativity scene or the “*belen*” is completed with the Child Jesus at birth. Liturgically, the official observance by the Roman Catholic Church is from the beginning of the nine-day “*misa de gallo*” or “*simbang gabi*” on December 16 towards the Feast of the Epiphany, the first Sunday of the year.

During the “*Noche buena*” meal-gathering after the “*pahalik sa batang Hesus*,” children express their respect to older members of the family with a “*mano po*” to which the latter offers to them their “*aguinaldo*” or “*pamasko*” in the form of monetary, toys or goodies, a delight to children who anticipate every year during Christmas this tradition of gift-giving. This is the biggest gathering where families

share the bounteous blessings at meal-time, a re-enactment of Jesus’ agape-meal with his apostles and disciples. It is a family meal-celebration as an extended cell of the Church where the Eucharist community-meal calls for every member to share at the table the blessings of God. And it would not be complete without the “*Lechon*” roasted pork that family would themselves raise for a year as intended for Christmas. Other delicacies made from the rice flour, such as native sweets are influenced by the trading Chinese are believed to bind the family together and the relationships intact and solid.

With the rise of commercialism, the celebration of Christmas became even more festive and exaggerated. The native Filipino tradition became widely combined with western and other influences. It now becomes largely a secular holiday with the element of noise and consumerism. Of overly commercialized spending of Christmas-related purchases, extravagant gift-giving spree, relentless and excessive eating and drinking far exceedingly different from what Christmas should be, of simplicity and silence. Nevertheless, these yearly celebration epitomizes how Christmastime has become Filipinized. Christmas highlight a year-round celebration where family and school batch reunion is held, connection and long-time acquaintances are recalled and established, grandparents anticipate and long after for them to see grandchildren and other relatives meet and greet. This experiences Tisdell [7] asserts is given new meaning after a pause and is restructured in some way through the power of imagination, thereby creating a new wholeness or a map of a new reality. This new wholeness is often manifested symbolically in many ways, such as in dreams, images, or created new insights [7]. It may be ritualized or experienced in the context of a religious tradition that is embedded both in its Christian liturgy and practice through ritual celebration employed in its folk religiosity. Where symbols have been used as an effective expression of the locals’ beliefs and values and these have been translated into rituals and so become an effective means of communicating and relating between and among communities, extended into the larger society and with God. Ritual behavior in this sense serves as its identity. John Paul II [4] addressing the Filipino people on February 17, 1981, builds up by motivating the people to carry out the task of enriching and valuing its heritage as he spoke:

There is a clear national identity that is unmistakably and truly Christian and created

an obligation and confers upon the nation a specific mission... not only to preserve its Christian heritage but to bear witness to the values of Christian culture before the whole world. The Filipino people will always draw the strength and inspiration they need to carry out this task from their noble heritage – a heritage not only of the Christian faith but also of the rich human and cultural values that are their own[14].

Ritual practices help people carry their common identity and values. Such practices are commonly identified by symbols used to express and communicate meaning, beliefs, and values. In her *Theories of Performance*, Elizabeth Bell [15] highlighted the components of culture: such as what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce. And what summarizes its properties. By symbolically transmitting cross-generationally through sharing, learning, adapting to the physical world, and integrating it [15]. The ongoing acceptance and practice of the contemporary trends and influences as a way of reinterpretation attached to such religious tradition and practice would inform us of the life the celebration has in the life of the Filipinos. The life that comes from the true light that carries newness and life-source. The life that is symbolic of the light of Christ that Francis [16] speaks of in the opening of his encyclical *Lumen Fidei* [16]:

The light of faith: this is how the Church's tradition speaks of the great gift brought by Jesus. In John's Gospel, Christ says of himself: "I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness" (John 12:46).

Saint Paul uses the same image:

"God who said 'let the light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research identifies and describes the unique Filipino Christmas tradition and practices of the indigenous Filipinos and those that are adapted from various influences especially that of the colonizers. The Filipinos have integrated their cultural practices with the adaptation of some of the Christian traditions through their awareness, understanding, appreciation, acceptance and constant practice of their faith. Van Kaam [18] writes:

We may say that personality, viewed within the framework of values, is someone open to values, enjoys and affirms them in himself and others, and realizes them in his existence according to the hierarchy which is inherent in the values themselves. Moreover, he radiates these values to others, by their very fulfillment in his own life[18].

A tradition, Postma [19] asserts, cannot continue unless "it has a positive value". This seems to true with the Filipino Christmas tradition. Experience is the initial criterion in Louis Savary's four mind levels in the integration of values [6]. By faithfully performing the rituals, festivals, and celebrations both in the traditional way and with a modern twist combined which manifests that religious and cultural practices are made to fit into a given perspective that has great impact and connection. The integration of this customs and practices in the Filipino way of life has been understood and interpreted and translated into action (judgment) as expressions of faith as "*panata*," also family gathers at table-meal through a "*salo-salo*" that for a time have been observed, anticipated and have become an obligation of all [6]. The significance played by these sets of beliefs and practices becomes valid and accepted fully when the community decides these practices and is set as an expression of one's beliefs, passed on as tradition to members of families and communities and the next generation coming.

A group of people will not maintain their practices nor promote them unless it suits or is useful to them. The understanding and integration of these positive values from the indigenous and religious practices bring to birth an inculturated custom and tradition [6]. However, this integration requires a time of consistent practice. These new sets of learned values are shared and transmitted utilizing language and symbols and are made realized and applied and valued in real-life situations. Such, as a child learns by following and adapting what the parents and elders say and do, one follows what is offered by one's environment or surroundings. Magannon [21] asserts that "a ritual is justified for human activity if it gives meaning, value and order to human existence and life". A ritual is sustained and validated as a concrete response to the unique situation or context and it stands as "something real" to people and community. In this way, the new values adapted could easily be understood, accepted and practiced by the people

themselves.

Many Filipinos give more importance to the cultural practices where they find their true group identity and their communal values. The values derived from their practices which are translations of their knowledge and belief about Christmas is associated with festivities and spirituality are believed to have been directly or indirectly influenced by the beliefs and practices brought by the tradition they later acquired. These Christian traditions are adapted in life based on judgment and decision [21]. The practices of the community help people affirm their communal identity and thereby enrich more their family values.

Through the process of socialization and acculturation, these beliefs and practices are transmitted effectively by families who build up the basic unit of society. It is within these settings that life in the community begins, where sets of beliefs, behavior, attitudes, and values are introduced, developed and shaped and so become an accepted way of life. These strong family ties that are present in Filipino families and every aspect of community life are shared and have become common especially that of beliefs, practices, and values. Religious Filipino tradition of Christmas has been and will be a substantive fusion of culture and the Christian traditions.

CONCLUSION

Filipinos are extraordinarily religious as devotions are identifiable in its various expressions of popular practices of faith and culture. Family share in common some of these and are passed on to new adaptable practices to its new breeds of millennial. Faith is manifested in every aspect of life, at every stage of it, a fusion of religion and culture. The assurance of sustaining one's traditions and practices can be done through the lens of faith. As Pope Francis [17] speaks of this in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelium Gaudium*:

Christ is the "eternal Gospel" (Revelation 14:6); he "is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrew 13:8), yet his riches and beauty are inexhaustible. He is forever young and a constant source of newness [17].

Christmas is only one aspect of the many Christian traditions celebrated the whole year-round. To it alone, one affirms an on-going development and

renewal in its practice through inculturation. Moreover, these sets of practices become adaptable when lived and tested in time. Understanding one's experience proved necessary thus, becomes a decided practice or way of life. This faith-community that John Paul II [4] affirms continues to accept, to rejoice and be animated by interpreting its faith into its own with the Gospel and in communion with the universal Church [4]. Christmas in the Philippines is rooted in the humble family of Bethlehem of which the first Christmas delivers the Good News of joy and gladness and hope. Amid poverty, yearly typhoons and calamities, the Filipinos strength to sustain is undeniably based on its faith in the providential generosity and guidance of the Divine. The Catechism of the Catholic Church spoke of the religious piety as it asserts:

Essentially, the piety of the people is a storehouse of values that offers answers of Christian wisdom to the great questions of life. It creatively combines the divine and the human, Christ and Mary, spirit and body, communion and institution, person and community, faith and homeland, intelligence and emotion. For the people, this wisdom is also a principle of discernment and an evangelical instinct through which they spontaneously sense when the Gospel is served in the Church and when it is emptied of its content and stifled by other interests[16].

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