

Spirituality among the Bikolanos: A Perspective in Contemporary Practices

Maria Sharon Arriola⁺

PhD Student Philippine Studies Tri-College Program
Asian Center, University of the Philippines – Diliman

Abstract. *Power. Reciprocity. Sympathy*¹. The traditional and contemporary spiritual practices among the Bikolanos² are believed to be attached to these three distinct emotional and highly personal gestures in relating to their Supreme Creator, their God, or to the spirits and saints. Their intense relationship with the spiritual and supernatural beings stretches a wide spectrum in the history of the region - from the pre-colonial societies to the colonial period under Spain and the United States of America, to the contemporary time. The people's profound attitude to the spirit world did not diminish significantly during the periods of encounters with the imperialists and with other cultures. It has remained a potent element in the construction of a regional identity and culture in Bicol.

The paper aims to trace the layers of signification that would provide meanings to this belief system that affects the contemporary life of the Bikolanos. Using an archival method in gathering data and employing a critical approach to explore the phenomenon, the study utilizes the framework of “*kaalamang bayan*” (Covar 1998) or knowledge of the local. Such approach facilitated the study in understanding local culture through their language and perception of the world – which serves as a take off point in problematizing the condition of locality and identity. As a result, a dynamic, cross-disciplinary articulation was surveyed bringing to the fore the varying degrees and nuances of spirituality in the region. Such layers of beliefs and practices are defined within the overlapping themes such as: (1) celebratory practices: rituals/festivals/devotions; (2) illnesses/natural calamities: healing practices and rituals; and (3) death: funeral practices. They are then explored within the notions of power, reciprocity and sympathy: a set of values believed to be inherent to the people in Bicol.

Keywords: Philippine studies, humanities, cultural studies, spirituality, folk Catholicism,

1. Introduction

The concept of “power” in relation to spirituality pertains to the intimate connections between the people and the venerated saints or spirits and how this framework of power relations is translated in the domestic and social levels. It encapsulates the people's attitude and beliefs toward sacrifices and penance, devotions to saints, submission to the tasks as healers - forging a constructive approach toward selflessness and service.

“Reciprocity” or a give-and-take relation is manifested in the humble acceptance of the healers as mediums personally hand-picked by spirits to heal people in exchange for any form of ‘help’ from the spirit in case any deplorable situations befall on the healer. This is also seen in their deep devotion to the Virgin Mary and saints through novena prayers, sacrifices, and other forms of “*panata*” (devotion). Devotees are motivated by the belief that if the devotion is intently and consistently practiced, personal petitions is expected to be granted.

Sympathy or “pity” is articulated in the practice of healing - for the spirits do not allow fixed payments to be made or given. Healing is said to be administered to those who could not afford the expensive treatments in hospitals and for purchasing conventional medicines. Furthermore, in the devotion to the *Santo*

⁺ Author's contact details: +632-990-0847 (home); sharonmapa@gmail.com (email)

¹ Cannell 1999

² Natives/inhabitants of Bicol, a southeastern region of Luzon Island, Philippines.

Entierro or the “dead Christ”, the emotional tension that fills the air during the funerals are imitated or repeated throughout the episode of crucifixion and death of Christ during Lenten Season.

The two distinct areas of engagements of faith – institutional and folk, are still being practiced ardently in the region despite the growing interest in electronic media as a form of communication and entertainment of the younger population. Consequently, the advent of electronic media in the region does not seem to pose a threat to the continuation of the tradition. Religious practices remained a common occurrence.

Taking off from the scholarly works of Fenella Cannell in Camarines Sur, Ramonfelipe Sarmiento’s manuscript on San Andres, Catanduanes, historical accounts of Danilo Gerona, and the wide range of electronic resource materials, the profound sense of syncretic Catholicism among the Bikolanos was explored and studied on the following concerns: How do the Bikolanos today practice their faith? How significant are the merging and blending of Catholic tradition and the indigenous, pre-colonial practices today? What roles do these religious icons play in their lives? How significant are these images to the people as they deal with the following: their relationships with the family, community, livelihood, trade, workplace, among others? What kind and condition of culture can be drawn out from their narratives?

2. Culture of spirituality in contemporary Bicol

The Bicol region, also referred to as Bicolandia lies at the southeastern end of Luzon together with the islands of Catanduanes and Masbate and several small outlying islands. The provinces of Albay, Camarines Norte, Camarines Sur, Catanduanes, Masbate and Sorsogon comprise the entire region; with 107 municipalities and 3,471 barangays. An estimate number of 5.1 million inhabitants were recorded on August 2007, about 8% of the country’s total population during that time. The Bikolanos are blessed with a diverse topography and terrain to inhabit - having slightly undulating to gently sloping mountains and volcanic landforms as they intersect with the wide valleys and plains, while rivers and lakes take part in the vast landscape that provide the people with rich natural resources. These resources however are still underdeveloped, a major factor perhaps in the region’s poor socio-economic condition despite the wealth of agricultural, mineral and forest resources that can be used for the people’s basic needs.

It is believed to have the highest number of Catholic followers than in any other regions in the Philippines. The impact of Catholicism in the region is worth noting for the Bikolanos still continue to adhere to the practices and tradition of Catholic faith even up to this date when technological advancements and globalization are being experienced in the region – for instance, satellite cable television system has become a common household item. Further, since there is a substantial number of Bikolano OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) mostly deployed in the Arab countries, UK and USA, their families communicate with them through computers linked to an internet using web cameras, electronic mails and cellular phones.

2.1. Celebratory religious practices: rituals, festivals, devotions

The devotion to the Lady of Sorrows or *Dolor* among the people in San Andres, Catanduanes started during the early 1920s when a young boy from Barangay Batong Paloway in San Andres found a small piece of stone that contained a clear image of the face of Virgin Mary embedded onto its surface. It was reported to have emitted a light within the surface of the stone. Others have witnessed the shedding of oil from the stone, changing of the facial expression of the Virgin and its slow increase of size (Sarmiento 2008). Deep devotions to the image strengthened and gained popularity for it is believed to possess a potent force to cure illnesses and can grant personal petitions.

In honor and devotion Our Lady of Peñafrancia, a week-long fiesta is celebrated in Naga, Camarines Sur. Devotees participate and take part in the *translacion* or procession of the Virgin from its shrine to the Metropolitan Cathedral of Naga. To describe the spectacle:

“Bicolanos from all walks of life will be in Naga City to meet their relatives and partidarios, share food, drinks, and prayers with them, and most of all, to pay homage and make thanksgiving to the Virgin of Peñafrancia, whom the Bicolanos fondly call Ina. Viva la Virgen, they will shout to high heavens. The feast day is headed by a novena, nine days of prayer, in honor of the Virgin. On the first day, the image of the Virgin, a copy of the Madonna in Peñafrancia, Spain, is brought from its shrine to the Naga Cathedral where

the novena is held. On the last day, the image is returned to her shrine following the Naga River route. The colorful evening procession is lit by thousands of candles from followers in boats escorting the image. When the flatboat reaches its destination, the devotees shout "Viva la Virgen" (Long live the Virgin!) and the image is carried back in a procession to the cathedral.

Devotees from all walks of life pay homage and prayer to this miraculous image for favour received and for future favours to be granted. Through rituals, commemoration of saints in fiestas and devotions to the patron saints are widely practiced among the contemporary Bikolanos.

The tradition of adopting a saint to the family goes beyond the physical essence of just being there in the house. They treat these icons as members of their family, performing tasks like bathing/cleaning and dressing them up during their feast day. These saints are inherited, a valuable possession of the family. Some families even believed that these saints are the owner/s of their land/property. Thus, their deep devotions to these saints take in the form of cultivating its land, farm and harvesting its produce. And when someone in the family is ill, they pronounce "promesas" or vows, and sometimes offer sacrifices to the saints and Christ for their supplications to be granted.

2.2. Illnesses/natural calamities: healing practices and ritual

Mystical contagions among the Bikolanos are believed to be caused by the aggrieved *tawo* ('people we cannot see'). According to Cannell (1999), even today, the people in Calabanga, Camarines Sur still believe in different kinds of *tawo*, divided into different classes with precise characteristics and locations (spirit of the air, land, water and earth). Illnesses which cannot be treated by conventional allopathic medicine are brought to a séance (*parabulong*) for healing through *santiguar* – the healers will be transformed into divination or possession in order to talk to the spirit or to calm down the aggrieved *tawo*. The healers try to persuade these *tawo* to pity the suffering person.

The *parabulong* (healer) is said to have chosen by the spirit/supernatural being as a medium to heal the people. Because of pity for those 'who have nothing' (Cannell 1999), the spirit instructs the *parabulong* not to ask for any payment. This kind of bond between the medium and the spirit is formed once the *parabulong* accepted the role bestowed upon him/her. In return, the sacrifices that the *parabulong* undergoes will be reciprocated through good health, happiness and peace of mind.

2.3. Death: funeral practices

A life-size miraculous wooden figure of Christ-taken-down-from-the-cross (Cannell 1995), the name signifies a literal translation in Bicol of 'the father who laid out in death' for the people in Barangay Calabanga, Camarines Sur, the *Ama* (Father) is figure of Jesus after he has been taken down from the cross. A realistic depiction of Jesus' suffering from persecution and crucifixion was rendered employing a *mestizo* or hybrid (native with Caucasian features). The image was believed to have been brought from Mexico during the late 19th century. The *Amang Hinulid* is considered by the people in Calabanga as part of their community, although an inanimate figure, they believe he is real and can grant their personal requests and heal their illnesses. He is regarded as a part of their family - highly personalized and humanized religious icon. People shift their views and treatment to the *Ama* according to the situation or condition of the family or person asking for a favour –the *Ama* can be a parent, sibling, cousin.

The people's personal attachment to the suffering of Christ is observed once more as they observe Lent, a Catholic tradition commemorating the passion and death of Christ. In *Kalbaryo* (way of the cross/journey to the Calvary), the *Pasion* rendered in the local language, is recited/sung and re-enacted throughout the night. And as they approach the part where Christ is about to die, their singing has turned into a lamentation. This religious tradition interweaves into their lives in a profound way as this is repeated in the funeral for their loved ones. The concept of suffering/dying, death and a promise of being with the spiritual beings after life are paralleled to the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.

2.4. Tracing the roots to pre-colonial belief systems

The ancient Bikolanos professed a belief in a supreme being called *Gugurang*, literally means very old. They regarded the *Gugurang* as the most powerful of all beings in the spiritual realm or the *kamurawayan*.

The people believed in a supreme God that takes care of the physical/material and the spiritual realms. They worshiped the Supreme Being through the intercession of the intermediaries or the lesser divinities, and sometimes their departed family members. Since pre-colonial societies are hierarchic and stratified according to social class, their belief about the potencies of the spiritual beings was hierarchic as well. As the people considered the *Gugurang* to be the most powerful of all, lesser deities were placed below the rank of the supreme one. Gerona (1988) enumerated these divinities, these are: (1) *Batala* – an emissary of the *Gugurang* entrusted with the duty of bringing happiness to the region; (2) *Katambay* – assigned to individuals to protect them from natural and supernatural enemies; (3) *Okot* – a forest spirit which resided in all trees that guided the natives to an abundant herd or game; (3) *Manguindara* – the underwater beings regarded as the guardian spirits of the fishermen; and (4) *Kalupnitan* – god of bats.

It was a common practice to give reverence to the ancient spirits or *anitos*. They believed that these *anitos* were in constant communication with their God and served as their mediators and intercessors. They manifested their veneration to these ancient spirits by creating sculptures – statuettes in wood, clay or stone of their *anitos* enthroned for rituals and other forms of prayer (Gerona 1988).

They had a priest called *asog*, a transvestite who is responsible for ritual offering to the *Gugurang*. Another leader for rituals in the community was the *balian* or *balyana* – a priestess who was responsible in curing the sick. Different kinds of rituals were performed by *balyana* for various purposes. These are: *atang* –for thanksgiving to the *Gugurang*; *hidhid* – performed when there is a calamities like locusts, epidemics and typhoons and believing the *Aswang* to have caused these miseries and hardships; *yokod* – to free the child from the possession of the *aswang*; *posoa* – to cure certain infirmity; *haplos* – done by a *hokluban*³, a very powerful witch that can create misery and illness and even death to an enemy without using any paraphernalia.

2.5. Evangelizing the Kabikolan region

Although the Augustinians initiated the beginning of evangelization in the Bicol region in 1576, it was the Franciscan order that became responsible to the conversion and spread of Catholicism to the natives. Adopting the system of “*Reduccion*” the Franciscans in the early 1600 evangelized and converted the natives - by compelling them to congregate in a strategic site and form a town. In the accounts of Gerona (2005), the success of Catholicism in Bicol during the period from 1600-1850 was due to a strategic approach used by the Franciscan friars – employing “gentle persuasion” plus the noble image of the Church projected to the natives which was well received for it led the people to preserve their “unwavering submission” to Catholicism despite their continuous observance to their indigenous practices, resulting in a syncretic and hybridized religious tradition.

Catholicism was introduced primarily to eradicate pagan practices of the natives. This project led to another introduction of a foreign concept – a new system of settlement and socialization. The new structure allowed the friars to take control of natives’ body, “...routinization of their activities from sun up to sun down, control their time - by attending masses for spiritual nourishment; natives were severely punished through public flogging if found guilty of disobedience to the orders of the church” (Gerona 2005). Despite such impositions of rules and decrees which curtail the natives to practice their indigenous beliefs, there had been no recorded revolt erupted in the region. This does not however spell out a total submission to the system. Native resistance found their way through retaining the pre-colonial practices such as ritual drinking and the continuous adherence to the indigenous beliefs – in a highly inconspicuous manner, concealed and kept secret from the Church. This episode resulted in a dynamic syncretisation of the indigenous and Catholic practices and faith.

2.6. Conclusion

The concept of asymmetrical “power” in relation to class/rank/type which can be culled from the sacred and secular practices among the Bikolanos reveals a contrasting perspective among the Bikolanos about their individual roles in society. The natives exhibited their resistance to the system and asserted their beliefs in

³ Juan de Plasencia, O.S.F quoted by Jocano (1975: 121)

personal and social affairs. However, when dealing with spirituality and religiosity, this asymmetrical power relation is viewed in a positive light even allowing it to be assimilated in their cultural practices. Their devotion to the lesser deities like the saints and *anitos* reflect a stratified social system inherent in their culture. The notion of “reciprocity” is manifested in the practice of healing and healers’ acceptance to the role given by the spirits provide a clear picture of a dynamic exchange of roles and functions of individuals within a society. Sympathy or “pity” signifies a potent element in understanding their deep sense of spirituality as they devote their lives in healing and serving those who are needy especially the poor.

In engaging with the spiritual beings, whether they are sanctioned by the Church or indigenous/folk-based, people view their roles and functions in a highly personal manner. Spiritual beings are real, not fictitious. They are treated like a close member in the family: a spouse, sibling, parent, or cousin. Healers are created because spirits interact and dwell in people’s body for the spirits took pity on people’s sufferings. The spirit/s initiates the offer to help. This favour shall be reciprocated if the person is willing to allow this spirit to use his/her body to heal others who are inflicted by illnesses. Similar condition is believed to be the platform for devotion to the saints. Food offerings, festive events, and other forms of spectacle are expected to please the patron saints - ensuring another blessed and fruitful life.

These popular spiritual practices remain potent in the lives and culture of the Bikolanos, whether they are residing in Bicol or elsewhere. By establishing and acknowledging the existence of this faith which resides within the person, it strengthens the belief that such spirit guide is responsible for the protection and blessings bestow upon an individual, regardless whether it is based on an institutional dogma or indigenous in origin and forms. This acknowledgment through celebration, fiesta, devotion and ritual re-affirms the intimate communal/family relations among the Bikolanos. These are celebrated in various forms – in a quiet and meditative mode in an intent prayer or having a conversation with the Supreme Being; or as a festive affair which commemorates a bounty harvest/productive industry or planting/start of a promising investment, birthing/fulfilling creative endeavours; and dying or going back to the realms of the spiritual world. In addition, it can also be a form of struggle in the guise of religious spectacle, to be themselves – to experience being human, to feel the sensations of the physical and spiritual realms through the music and movement of the body in the procession, or as the healers perform the rituals. Perhaps, it can also convey a venue for a convenient conversation with God. And lastly, it can be their way of negotiating with the Supreme Being.

3. References

- [1] Cannell, Fenella. *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press. 1999.
- [2] _____. *The Imitation of Christ in Bicol, Philippines*. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. June 1, 1995.
- [3] Covar, Prospero R. Larangan. *Seminal Essays on Philippine Culture*. Manila: National Commission on Culture and the Arts. 1998.
- [4] Gerona, Danilo. *The Hermeneutics of Power: Colonial Discourses in the Christian Conversion of Kabisulan (1600-1850)*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation University of the Philippines Diliman. 2005.
- [5] _____. *From Epic to History: Brief Introduction to Bicol History*. Ateneo de Naga, City of Naga, Camarines Sur. 1988.
- [6] Jocano, F. Landa. Edited. *The Philippines at the Spanish Contact Some Major Accounts of Early Filipino Society and Culture*. Manila: MCS Enterprises, Inc. 1975.
- [7] Sarmiento, Ramonfelipe. “The Dolor’s Translacion: Ritual as Embodiment of Conflict and Compromise in a Popular Religious Devotion in San Andres, Catanduanes, Philippines”. January 23-26, 2008.