

Exotifying Bodies: Self-Flagellation, Abjection, and Social Memory

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Abstract

During the Lenten ritual known in the Philippines as *penitensya*, hooded penitents whip themselves publicly as they walk. While some Church and government officials have repeatedly expressed disapproval of the practice, self-flagellation has persisted with characteristic obduracy to this day. Through mass media and social media, it has caught the attention of other parts of the world. A cursory search on the internet, for example, would yield not a few visual and textual materials on *penitensya*. Some of these materials are analyzed in this paper, using critical frameworks based on Kristeva's concept of abjection and Jameson's delineation of third-world literature as national allegories. One would encounter such abjection in the decontextualized foregrounding of the grisliness, violence, and horror associated with this form of corporal mortification. As a practice rooted in colonial history, *penitensya* evokes colonial traumas, but contemporized, it also serves as an allegorical embodiment of collective hopes and possibilities.

Keywords: *penitensya*; self-flagellation; abjection; Lent in the Philippines; national allegories; Roman Catholicism in the Philippines

Catholicism's Conflicted History: Spirituality, Colonialism, Politics

Roman Catholicism may be cited as the most enduring legacy of Spanish colonialism. Introduced by the European *conquistadores* immediately upon their arrival, Catholicism became a vital instrument for colonialism, employing both subtle and non-too-subtle strategies to establish and maintain Spanish hegemony in the islands (LeRoy, 1903). The colonial clerics kept links with government authorities and even controlled knowledge production, owning religious institutions of higher learning such as the University of Santo Tomas (established in 1611) and the Ateneo de Manila University (established in 1864). Also, there are historical records on uprisings that stemmed from the refusal of Church authorities to recognize the right of the *indios* (a racist term for a native of the Philippines) to be inducted into the clergy (Constantino, 1975/2008). National heroes like the martyr Jose Rizal and the journalist Marcelo H. del Pilar wrote incendiary stories and poems critical of the abuses allegedly committed by the friars. But strong anti-clerical sentiments, the cession of the Philippines to the United States at the turn of the 20th century, and the four decades of direct American rule did little to curb the influence of the Church on the Filipinos.

In more contemporary times, the Catholic Church in the Philippines has continued to enjoy immense influence, and as in the past, still occasionally interposes itself in what may be considered as largely secular affairs. During election periods, it is not surprising to hear about politicians

trying to woo the endorsement of influential clerics if only to improve their chances of winning. Conversely, Church hierarchs would also express their disapproval of some politicians so as to discourage people from voting them, especially politicians that are thought to be against the Church's position on certain issues. In 2013, for example, the Church, ever the staunchest critic of reproductive healthcare, launched a campaign against candidates who had enabled the passage of the then newly-signed Reproductive Health Law allowing artificial means of family planning and responsible parenthood (Mallari, 2013).

That a foreign religion was reinterpreted by the natives into something that captured their own experiences can only point to the complexity of colonialism. In many respects, Catholicism in the Philippines is of a syncretic or hybridized sort, a reconfiguration of the faith introduced by the Europeans from the time they first came to the islands in the 16th century. While the intrusion replaced pre-colonial deities and spirits with a pantheon of imported saints, the vestiges of ancient spirituality did not disappear but seeped through the cracks of the new religion. It is, therefore, interesting to note that despite the natives' deep-seated contempt for the friars, the natives have clung to the Catholic religion, reinterpreting its doctrines and practices in more ways than one. Even at present, for instance, there exist several chiliastic groups in the country, which live according to their own reinterpretation of Christian teachings fused with elements of Philippine precolonial and colonial history (Ileto, 1979).

It can be clearly observed that popular religiosity in the Philippines is remarkably complex and, as illustrated later in the discussion, even contrarian. There is no other occasion when Filipino Catholic religiosity is most manifest than during Holy Week, the last week of the Catholic Lenten Season. It is a period when almost all activities grind to a halt -- Catholics (and some other Christian denominations) commemorate and reenact the death and resurrection of Christ through fasting, daily masses, prayers, and processions. One would see relatively few vehicles on otherwise busy and traffic-laden thoroughfares. Business establishments and offices are mostly closed. In lieu of their regular programs, even media stations give way to masses and movies with religious themes. Apart from traditional prayers, some devotees also conduct what is called "visita iglesia" (literally, church visit) which involves visiting at least seven different churches in memory of Christ's seven last words as he lay dying on the cross.

Holy Week rituals and beliefs persist, including those not officially sanctioned by the Church, because, as the late anthropologist F. Landa Jocano (1967) explained, they make up "a psychological construct which underlie the emotional behavior of the people" (p. 64). In other words, Filipinos find in these rituals elements that resonate with their collectivistic *Weltanschauung* or worldview.

Punishment and Penitence: Flogging in History

It is common knowledge that maintaining the authority of the Catholic Church was done with the employment of force. While preaching Catholic doctrines, the colonial clergy likewise used coercion and intimidation to cow the natives into submission and perpetuate colonial hegemony. Writing in 1918, Charles Cunningham cited the 1621 report of Governor-General Fajardo in which the Spanish viceroy expressed concern over the friars' penchant for corporal punishment. The clergy used "floggings and other cruel punishments for minor offenses" (Cunningham 1918, p. 169). In any case, government authorities also picked up the practice against natives who were perceived to be reneging on their civic "obligations" such as the payment of tribute. The whipping would sometimes be so brutal and violent that it resulted in the death of the native. The punishment,

together with unjust wages, also compounded labor conditions during the Spanish colonial era (Diamonon, 1919).

Considered a penalty lighter than enslavement, flogging had been a form of punishment even in precolonial times (Mintzs, 2006). The colonizers, however, gave it new meaning by associating it with purifying the body and purging it (as well as the soul) of sin. Among the sins that merited hard whipping was failure to attend mass, as described in the following 17th century report:

Regarding the Chinese who are whipped for not attending mass, I say that the Curate as a father can give them a more moderate punishment without causing injury. For this reason, one can give without any scruples a couple of lashes to the *indio timaua* (free Filipino) because among the latter, no insult is inflicted nor is pain excessive. (Arcilla, 1972, p. 403)

Flogging would also be acquired by the natives who, with the initial approval of the friars, used it as a form of self-mortification. The practice reified a basic Christian teaching—the dichotomy between the body and the soul, the corporal and the spiritual, in which the latter takes precedence. The natives believed that by punishing the body, indeed by ritualistically disembodimenting oneself, their sins would be absolved and their soul would be more potent. But before long, the inhabitants got so used to the practice that the natives would do it with undue frequency as if oblivious to its physical effects (Arcilla 1972).

Because of the popularity of flogging as a religious practice, it is not surprising that the natives appropriated it in a way critical of the colonial order. According to Filomeno Aguilar (1998), “Flogging served as the most potent act to release what had been withheld, as indeed the colonial state extracted what it wanted by having its functionaries perform the very same act on errant natives” (p. 163). Aguilar specifically cited the flogging of Christian crosses in Negros Occidental supposedly to bring forth good fortune and vitality.

More recently, the Catholic Church, cognizant of the widespread popularity of the ritual, has decided to loosen up its position on the matter. The clergy has refrained from denouncing the ritual and instead called for caution, exhorting the faithful to also reflect on Christ’s own passion, supposedly the real purpose of the Lenten Season. Still, the Church believes that “empathic pain” (that is, empathy for the suffering Christ) is a better option than “actual self-mortification” (Bautista 2015, p. 101).

Why has the practice persisted despite no less than the Catholic Church’s subtle condemnation of the ritual as something that borders on religious fanaticism? Would mere reflection on Christ’s ultimate sacrifice on the cross be a satisfactory alternative to self-flagellation? The following insights are most instructive:

For many self-mortifiers... a vicarious mental identification endorsed by priests cannot sufficiently constitute an empathic identification with Christ. To flagellate is to express embodied empathy according to culturally and religiously determined modes of suffering in order to communicate an empathic identification with another predicament... (Bautista 2015, p. 104)

For the humble penitent, mortifying oneself in public is a corporal manifestation not just of faith, but also of empathy for fellow human beings who have, to use a popular expression in the Philippines, their own crosses to bear. Flagellating oneself in public constitutes a blurring of the barrier between the personal and the public—that is, while the pain inflicted is ostensibly individual and solitary, it is also communal.

The Materials

This study looked at self-flagellation as a cultural practice. In particular, it problematized self-flagellation in a complex field of representations consisting of online videos, blog entries, and photographs. I read the representation of self-flagellation in the said materials in conjunction with certain elements of the historico-social imaginary, such as colonial traumas and anti-colonial resistances, and in more recent times, quotidian struggles such as poverty and even heavy traffic in the Philippines. In this regard, I made qualified use of Kristeva's (1982) notion of abjection, defined as the state associated with the horror evoked by the loss of distinction between the self and the other, thus ambiguating the limitations of selfhood. I adapted abjection into something that hews more closely to a cultural, ergo collective, memory. This is because abjection is also invoked to limn and situate the postcolonial positionality of the Philippines vis-à-vis western (neo)colonial discourse that has subjected Filipinos to an Orientalizing gaze (Tolentino, 2008).

Moreover, I was guided by Jameson's (1986) delineation of third-world literature as national allegories in his controversial essay, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." While Jameson's theoretical formulation concentrates on literature, I deemed it imperative to expand his framework to include other cultural practices, among them religious rituals. I sought to explain how the allegorical character of the *penitensya* has sustained its popularity notwithstanding its disapproval by traditional power-wielders like the Catholic Church and the government.

Analysis and Discussion

In what follows, I discuss the selected materials in which self-flagellation figures prominently. Guided by the frameworks laid down earlier, I analyze how the practice is represented and how the narrative of *penitensya* and self-mortification has influenced the Filipinos' collective psyche. To reiterate, the discussion is aided by my reading of the cultural concepts of abjection and national allegory, relating them in particular to the country's colonial and postcolonial memories and imaginaries.

A video entitled "Crucified in the Philippines" (Un Mundo en mis Ojos, 2016), whose narrator speaks with an ostensibly Spanish accent (thus making a rather uncanny connection to the country's first colonial experience), does not focus on the ritual right away. Instead, for reasons not stated or implied in the video, it begins with seemingly voyeuristic scenes of nightclubs and bar girls in the red light district of Angeles, a city not far from the capital, Manila, and a popular site of the rituals. As the *pasyon* (a narrative about Jesus Christ that is popularly chanted during Lent) plays in the background, images related to *penitensya* are shown, including the flagellants themselves and a long line of spectators. The narration, however, is punctuated by the narrator's question, "Why would they do it?" suggesting incredulity and shock. He—and vicariously, his non-native viewer—lies in a conflicted space between wonder and disbelief on the one hand, and the facticity of the act on the other hand. Repeating the question is a poignant attempt on the part of the narrator as outsider and first-time witness to come to grips with the surreally violent character of the spectacle—a seeming breakdown of meaning which, according to Kristeva, characterizes abjection. And yet, he refuses to give voice to the penitents, or at least the other locals participating in the ritual, and simply expresses his horror and disbelief over something that to him seems perverse—a kind of mystification outsiders usually commit when confronting an indigenous

act or scene that discombobulates them. In other words, it symptomatizes sense of indifference to the “distinctive tonalities of (the natives’) existence” (Doja, 2015, p. 45).

Two other videos are characterized by the natives’ proverbial silence. Entitled “Shocking! Bloody Easter in the Philippines” (2012) and “Crucifixion in the Philippines” (2017), the videos were taken by a foreign tourist under the name “ronniemacaloni” during his first Holy Week foray into San Fernando, Pampanga, a suburb near Angeles City. Neither of the videos gives the context of the ritual, unduly accentuating instead the bodies bloodied by the whippings. While engrossed with the images, the tourist shows no significant interaction with the locals. Nowhere in the two clips do we hear the tourist speak meaningfully with the natives, and yet in the caption of the video, the tourist unabashedly expresses his view of the event: “I was shocked. Some of them got even hit by sticks and the boys doing this had no mercy”. That he conveys the observation without any explanation of the context, which the natives could have easily provided, is disconcerting to say the least, and illustrates a flagrant objectification of the natives, relegating them to a position of abjection and insufferable indeterminacy.

That the practice has been continuing for centuries despite the pronouncements of Church authorities reflects the necessarily complex nature of Catholicism in this part of the world, exemplifying Homi Bhabha’s notions of hybridity and third space. This means that given the impossibility of undoing the consequences of colonialism, including its depredations of colonized territories and destruction of local cultures, the dialectics of colonialism have paradoxically created emancipatory, or at least contrarian, spaces where “the oppressed make plans for liberation and where the oppressed and oppressor come together and collectively voice dissent and come to understand their new identity” (Boumlik, 2016, p. 323).

Bible-thumping censures of the practice can also be found in a series of videos uploaded in 2012 and produced by Trojan Horse International, a non-Catholic religious group based in Europe and with a website managed by David Clarke, also the narrator in the videos. Clarke’s initial remarks in the videos can only suggest scornful rejection tempered by a desire to “enlighten” his subjects: “What you are about to see may be quite shocking... The need to teach the Gospel in the Philippines is very clear.” Clarke, a foreigner witnessing self-flagellations for the first time, echoes his western predecessors’ civilizing mission as he reveals that his aim is to “bring to light the Gospel of Christ... We acknowledge that these people are very sincere, but sincerely wrong (emphasis mine) in the understanding of the Gospel” (Clarke, 2012).

The videos also include interviews with foreigners who were also in the same area and witnessing firsthand the flagellation and crucifixion of the penitents. A common thread that runs through the interviews is the expression of shock and discomfort at the sight of self-infliction. An American interviewee, for example, even describes the ritual as “kinda (sic) fanatical” even if she mildly praises the penitents for their sincerity and boldness for participating in the ritual. Another interviewee serving as a foreign missionary in the Philippines is even blunter in his observation: “We consider it blasphemy. We have to understand the darkness of the Philippine (inaudible) and we’re in sympathy with these people. They are in darkness... Yet, while we would condemn it, we have a deep feeling for the people”.

These representations, including the interview clips and Mr. Clark’s narration, are problematic to say the least, primarily because they come from non-Catholic foreigners witnessing and valuating a local, Catholic event. To state the obvious, their doctrinal repertoire and lack of native positionality colored their judgment. Unfortunately, their observations hark back to the “civilizing” discourse of colonialism premised on the supposed inferiority of the colonized peoples

as uncivilized, backward, and violent—blinded by their ancient faith and superstition. One cannot but be reminded of Edward Said's (2003) polemic against western stereotypical representations of the orient:

And of course many writers of travel books or guidebooks compose them in order to say that a country is like this, or better, that it is colorful, expensive, interesting, and so forth. The idea in either case is that people, places, and experiences can always be described by a book, so much so that the book (or text) acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes. (p. 93)

In the olden days, it was the travel book; now it is films produced by foreign tourists which reinforce the predetermined, essentialist image of the non-west.

The people of the Philippines, of course, are no stranger to the experience of otherness and subalternity. This need to “proselytize” the natives painfully recalls the west’s long history of remorseless conquest, supposedly aimed at civilizing the benighted heathens of the east. In one of his trenchant critiques of cultural imperialism, Said (1993) referenced the religious impositions on “Others who have incurred the wrath of a stern White man, a kind of Puritan superego whose errand into the wilderness knows few boundaries and who will go to any lengths to make his points” (p. 295).

An episode of the now-defunct documentary program *The World's Most Dangerous Places* does not have self-flagellation in the Philippines as its main focus (DPx Gear, Inc., 2016). Instead, the ritual serves as a backdrop for the theme of the episode, that is, the protracted conflict between the national government and Islamic secessionists in the southern part of the country. The narration—by seasoned North American journalist Robert Pelton who came to the Philippines to interview an Islamic secessionist group—is replete with references to the proliferation of conflict and violence in the country. As he alleges at the beginning of the documentary, the Philippines is “a nation with a turbulent history steeped in violence,” without providing any clear historical context for such a sweeping description. Pelton likewise commits faulty analogy as he compares Holy Week rituals (crucifixion, self-flagellation) with the country’s peace and order conundrum. In one scene, for example, he says, “I didn’t have to visit a war zone to experience bloodshed.... all I had to do is drive just outside Manila,” while showing penitents flogging themselves. His description of Holy Week is off-putting--“this most violent of Philippine holidays.” In other words, his observations, rambling at times, trivialize an otherwise profoundly spiritual event. Panning the camera to a small group of people buying refreshments, the narrator says, “Swept up in the hysteria, the crowd has an appetite for bloodshed and ice cream,” as if self-mortification in public is nothing but a burlesque *tour de force*.

The above-cited filmic representations evidence how the absence of a thorough understanding of the practice and, concomitantly, of sufficient contextualization can affect the depiction of an unfamiliar cultural feature in another part of the world. Palpably recorded for western audiences, the gory images on which the recordings concentrate hardly provide any clear or coherent, much less empathic, representation of self-mortification among Filipinos.

Indeed, the twin ideas of punishment and sufferance have become so deeply ingrained in Philippine culture that their correlative terms – especially penitensya – have found a rightful place in the Filipinos’ idiom. The spirit of penitensya is invoked when describing social concerns from the most bewildering to the most banal. Vehicular traffic, for instance, has been repeatedly described as a penitensya, that is, a perennial burden that Filipinos, especially those who live in the capital, have to endure on an almost daily basis. Given the seriousness of the problem, traffic has

been conflated with the Holy Week practice, with the ordinary Filipino, commuter or non-commuter regularly putting up with the country's notorious gridlocks. The caption of a recent news story from a local network illustrates the point: "*Mabigat na daloy ng traffic sa Apalit, penitensya para sa mga motorista, ang mala-EDSAng traffic na araw-araw nilang nararanasan*" (The heavy EDSA-like traffic along Apalit is a daily penitensya for the motorists – translation mine) (CLTV36, 2018).

The idiom of penitensya has also been appropriated by cause-oriented groups in furthering their agendas. In 2014, Sining Kalilayan, a group of politically-committed artists mostly based in the province of Quezon, held a performance called *Penitensya ng Mamamayan* (literally, "The People's Penitensya"). According to a blog, the program aimed to dramatize how ordinary Filipinos reel and suffer from "difficulties caused by (state) exploitation and oppression." The gallery of pictures found on the same website shows some of the familiar penitensya scenes such as masked penitents either flogging themselves or bearing crosses. But what makes them different is the politically charged message as can be viewed, for example, in the political messages on the crosses borne by the penitents. The words written on the crosses reference some of the country's enduring socio-economic concerns—illegal mining, high power rates, public-private partnerships (PPP's), etc. Here, a centuries-old tradition is creatively reinvented to highlight contemporary issues and express resistance. It exemplifies what has come to be known in creative cultural resistance as *detournement* or, literally, "a 'turning around,' especially the act of pulling an image out of its original context to create a new meaning" (Darts, 2004, p. 321). The artists involved in *Penitensya ng Mamamayan* obviously infused with overt political messages a popular practice, dovetailing the narrative of Christ with the Filipino's own narrative of sufferance.

Thus, the idiom of penitensya does not only point to a curious manifestation of faith, but to the Filipinos' historico-cultural memory—an observation that resonates with Fredric Jameson's theorization of third-world national allegories. Acknowledging the basic Marxist precept concerning the history-politics-culture nexus, Jameson declared all third-world literature as national allegories which, unlike first-world literature, blur the boundary between the personal and the political. Taking Jameson's critical theorizing even further and applying it to my extended reading of self-flagellation, the penitensya may be construed as a national allegory embodying collective pains but also collective hopes. The by-product of Spanish colonialism, the penitensya is a taunting, allegorical evocation of colonial memories, particularly those that have to do with the excesses of colonial power. But in more contemporary times, the penitensya has come to represent the ordinary Filipinos' attempt to deal with the real horrors of contemporary society. Every whipping cries out for an injustice of some sort—financial handicap, lack of employment, the inability to afford medication, hunger, job precarity, traffic, etc. Again, to borrow the words of Jameson (1986, 71):

What is reconstructed... is a grisly and terrifying objective real world beneath the appearances of our own world: our unveiling or concealment of the nightmarish reality of things, a stripping away of our conventional illusions or rationalizations about daily life and existence.

Conclusion

Self-mortification, in particular self-flagellation, has had a long, convoluted history in the Philippines. In the analysis above, I problematized certain representations of self-flagellation using Kristeva's concept of abjection. One would encounter the abjection, for example, in the

foregrounding of the grisliness, violence, and horror associated with this form of corporal mortification, instead of, say, contextualizing the penitents' participation in the ritual. The abjection, as explained above, carries traces of colonial constructions of othering/otherness in which the native Filipino as barbaric, superstitious, irrational, ignorant, fanatical, etc. was subjected to the outsider's objectifying gaze. And while self-flagellation is said to be absolving one's self—that is, one's body and soul—of sin, penitensya is not a completely self-involved or intrapersonal act because it is an inherently social ritual. It is social because of the relational values that are inexorably embedded in self-flagellation. Given this formulation, it is not far-fetched to read this popular Filipino ritual as a sort of allegory for the nation. Rooted in colonial history, self-mortification allegorizes the indignities of a troubled past while flagging up the injustices of the present and announcing insurrectionary possibilities. Sans the required contextualization, attempts at representing a native practice especially by an outsider would ineluctably amount to incomplete, exotified, or romanticized portrayals of something deeply spiritual to the Filipino devotee.

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