Vernacular Religiosity and "Grace" in Bicol Christian Devotion

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Faith in God is *pagsa-Dios* to the Bicolanos and expressions of this faith have persisted and endured in cultural practices of communities of believers, a testimony to how Christianity as colonial inheritance has been claimed and appropriated. The observance of the quincentenary of Christianity in the Philippines is a good time to once again ask how this has happened, to revisit some of the explanations by major Philippine scholars and rethink them in dialogue with other ideas, and perhaps find out how going back can help us go forward, especially in light of the current difficult times. Writing mainly on the *dotoc* of Bicol, a devotion to the Holy Cross, I discuss the Christian conversion vis-à-vis the emergence of vernacular religiosity as an experience of and response to "grace"—Christian grace (*grasya nin Dios*)—but also as a kind of "laicized grace" similar to Alain Badiou's Pauline story in the book *Saint Paul* (2003), one that is kept with fidelity across/despite time and its many vicissitudes.

Keywords: *Christian conversion, performance of devotion, performance of pilgrimage, laicized grace, dotoc*

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The Bicol *Dotoc*

The *dotoc* is *pagsa-Dios*. This is the answer one gets to the question about what the dotoc is or why people observe the tradition. Pagsa-Dios can be variously translated as: for God (Dios); an act of faith or belief in God; a religious practice. Elsewhere, I have written about the dotoc as "religious longing" that enables the devotee to commune directly with the *Ama* or *Dios* (Llana, 2011, p. 94). As devotional practice, it is a homage to the Holy Cross. Communities of devotees in the Bicol region perform the dotoc for nine days every year, in April and May. It is performed by women cantors called *paradotoc* who sing a text while playing the role of pilgrims journeying to the Holy Land to visit the Holy Cross.

In the *Vocabulario de la Lengua Bicol*, dotoc is a verb: "nagdotoc" is defined as "*llegar, o acercarse a alguna parte*" (Lisboa, 1865 [1628], p. 128). The Bicol-English dictionary by Mintz and Britanico (1985) provides a translation: dotoc, spelled "dutok," is "advent, coming" and "magdutok" means "to come for something or for a specific purpose" (p. 279). I have inferred from these sources that the term "dotoc" is an archaic Bikol word for pilgrimage, which is "the narrative contained in the dotoc as cultural performance" (Llana, 2009, 2016, 2020).

The dotoc is performed in several places in Bicol, but my research covered principally the dotoc in Baao, Nabua, and Canaman in Camarines Sur and in Bigaa, Legazpi City. In Baao, its current form is called the *corocobacho* or *cobacho* dotoc, the text of which can be traced to an 1895 print, authored by an unidentified priest (the University of the Philippines Library has a copy of this early publication). The cobacho dotoc is called such because of the use of a "cobacho," a shelter for travelers, where the pilgrims of the dotoc meet another group and between them tell the tale of the theft of the Holy Cross by the Persians and its recovery and return to the Holy Land by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius. The same text is used in Nabua and in Bigaa. The use of the cobacho dotoc began sometime in the 1930s. The paradotoc in Baao speak of texts older than the cobacho dotoc, but these texts are not used anymore. In Canaman, the dotoc still has many texts, one for each day of the novena. In all these texts is a common narrative thread also present in the cobacho dotoc: pilgrims go on a journey to the Holy Land to look for or visit the Cross and they find it, sing songs of praise, worship and adoration, and submit petitions for salvation from "hunger, war, and pestilence" in this life (*hambre, gierra, y peste* in the cobacho dotoc: line 4, quatrain II of the Pasion part) and from

eternal damnation in the hereafter (*Dotoc sa Mahal na Santa Cruz*, 1895). In this essay, I will elaborate only on the cobacho dotoc narrative.

In the cobacho dotoc, the protagonists are the pilgrims who are ordinary people from Spain (*hale sa España*), while the story of the great Heraclius is only told, not enacted. The pilgrims (*peregrinos*) set out for the journey in May, when flowers are in bloom, and travel on foot at night to escape the scorching heat of day. They come upon a cobacho by the roadside and wonder if the people there were also Christians and decide to stop by and ask them. The people in the cobacho say they were Christians also and ask the pilgrims where they were headed. The pilgrims answer that they were traveling to the Holy Land to visit the Holy Cross and pay homage, but the cobacho people heard that the Cross had been stolen. The pilgrims reply that the Cross was indeed stolen but had already been returned. The people in the cobacho say they want to hear what happened and invite the pilgrims to be seated. By turns, as they are organized in four rows, the pilgrims sit down on benches facing the cobacho. They then proceed to tell the story of how the Cross was stolen by the Persian king *Cosrohas* (Chosroes), how the emperor *Herakyo/Heraclio* (Heraclius) waged war and defeated the Persians, how *Serwis* (Syrois) the son of Coshoras surrendered all to Heraclio including the Holy Cross, and how Heraclio returned the Cross to the Holy Land. After this, the people in the cobacho thank the pilgrims and decide to join them on the journey to visit the Cross, to the great delight of the pilgrims. They get flowers and prepare *media luna* (tiny paper half-moon flags) as offerings to the Cross. They travel together and eventually reach the place where the Cross is located—in the scenography this is the chapel, which represents "the Holy Land." There they sing the *Vexilla Regis Prodeunt*, a 6th century hymn in praise of the Cross, the *Pasion de Dotoc* which are composed of petitions to the Cross, and a final *Adios* or farewell.

The dotoc is sung throughout, with choruses and parts sung by four rows of singers—*uno, dos, tres, quatro*—in succession, one quatrain after another, accompanied by guitars. In the Baao practice, it is sometimes accompanied, although less frequent, by an electric organ, a saxophone, a clarinet, a cornet, or a bass, or all these together. The music was composed by a local musician—Marcial Briones—in the 1940s, but improved or improvised (*pigparapakaray*) and ornamented over time by generations of paradotoc. The language is "Standard" Bicol, commonly referred to as "Naga Bicol," which is the language of the Bicol Catholic church.

In Nabua, however, I saw another form of the dotoc in barangay Baras, which enacts the story of the search and finding of the Cross by Helena and Constantine, the better known story in many parts of the Philippines that is the basis of many Santacruzan traditions. The form is *komedya*, with actors playing the parts of the characters, but the practice is called dotoc and also sung. In Bigaa, the same Helena narrative is performed as komedya (and called komedya), with a cobacho dotoc preceding it. The cobacho dotoc is thus common in the Baao and Bigaa practices, while the search and finding of the Cross by Helena, performed as komedya, is common in Bigaa and Baras. The performances differ in many aspects like the number of performers, the music and melodies, the scenography or "sets" used, and the costumes and hand properties, which are all marked by active local improvisations.

In my work on the dotoc and on the category of "popular devotion" within which it can be seen as a form or expression, I use the methodology of radical ethnography in performance research, first elucidated by Dwight Conquergood (2002). It is a methodology of co-performance where I, the researcher, can only account for what I encountered in the research process and do not seek to represent what only the devotees and practitioners can fully speak about. I can only hope and strive for the ethnography, the writing-up of this experience, to be faithful to this encounter. In this essay, I strive for the account to be faithful to the dotoc event, to what was said by those who practice it, which, at the same time, is a shaping or construction of the event for themselves and for others. I say this as someone who sang the dotoc myself, in Santa Cruz, Baao, where I grew up, and so I had an organic relation to the practice. I was and continue to call myself a paradotoc, like my grandmother and mother before me. The dotoc was something we did as part of our life in the community but did not need to explain to ourselves, until it became, for me, a subject of research. I had to negotiate the insider-outsider identity when I started looking at it as a researcher, thinking that I needed to be "objective" and that objectivity can only be achieved with distance from the researched. With radical ethnography, however, this negotiation is rendered unnecessary and even ill-conceived, because this methodology interrogates the very idea of an "objective" research. Its ambition is for the research as embodied performative practice to enable insider voices, otherwise muted, to sound loud and prominent in the ethnography. This is a radical departure from the view of research as a practice of experts who consider culture as a text to be interpreted, the "world-as-text model of ethnography" propounded by Clifford Geertz that Conquergood debunks

(Conquergood, 2002, p. 149). The methodological challenge for radical ethnography in fact, as I have used it for my own work based on Conquergood, is not how to be distanced and objective but how to co-perform and be one with the other. This is the challenge of *anduyog*, the Bicolano practice of what in Tagalog is called *bayanihan*, which I have adopted as my own ethic of practice. Anduyog calls for being one with the other, the *kapwa*. And as I have conceived it, an important part of this methodology is how to be proper (or "polite") such that I pay attention to the way the dotoc appears, to how it is shown, and what people say they are doing. It is also a practice of performative historiography that constitutes the past in "a critically, creatively and politically affective afterwardness that enables some form of moving forwards" (Kear, 2013, p. 217) in the "politics of the present" (p. 8). For this essay, I am thinking especially of the pandemic currently gripping the country in 2021, in the here and now of the Philippines under the regime of Rodrigo Duterte, and what the commemoration of the 500 years of Christianity means for us within this weave of time and circumstance. This methodology commits to the act of historicizing as recognition of the incessant march of time, but strives to intervene, to stop time, or bend it towards a different direction.

The discussion that follows is in many ways an illustration of this methodology, as I attempt to articulate how "popular devotion," in the specific instance of the dotoc, is a practice of "pagsa-Dios" and how Christianity as colonial inheritance has been claimed and appropriated in a thoroughly vernacular way, in what I call an experience of "grace," drawing from Alain Badiou's notion of "laicized" grace.

Christian Bicolanos

Scholars who have written on the Christian conversion say that the people resisted the colonial imposition—among them are Reynaldo Ileto (1979), Vicente Rafael (1993), and Filomeno Aguilar (1998), who take subaltern perspectives and interpret conversion as a process of native appropriation and translation that served emancipatory purposes. But the dotoc and other Christian devotions are a testament that the belief was embraced, prospered, and endured. Something must have happened that made the people keep their fidelity.

Can Rafael's account be taken as a possible explanation for the Bicol conversion? For Rafael (1993), the conversion was a translation, with the natives

using their own notions of exchange when they "contracted" the new faith and thereby transformed it, "[resulting] in the ineluctable separation between the original message of Christianity … and its rhetorical formulation in the vernacular" (p. 21). For confirmation, Rafael used linguistic analysis of colonial texts such as catechisms and *confessionarios* (confession manuals). But translation in Rafael's conception is not only linguistic translation, it is a process that he calls a domestication of the foreign in the vernacular, which can be understood not as passive assimilation but as an act of active containment (see Rafael, 2006).

However, the British scholar Fenella Cannell says that there is something else that needs attention, especially when we start asking about not just the conversion as such but what came after that: the lived religion of the Bicolanos and its continuity to the present. Her book, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (1999), came out of field work in Calabanga, Camarines Sur and has had a lasting influence in my thinking of the dotoc devotional practice.

Cannell shows that belief in and transactions with the world of the *tawong lipod* (the Bicol term for spiritual companion, the Visayan *dungan* that Aguilar [1998] speaks of) still exist side by side with Catholicism and that contemporary Bicolanos are still "superstitious" and taken by magic or belief in spells, charms, or the *anting-anting*. Why this is so is explored in her ethnography of indigenous healing and spirit possession and the devotion to the *Amang Hinulid* in Calabanga, Camarines Sur. The ethnography reveals much about contemporary vernacular religiosity in Bicol and the way that relations with the sacred are informed by and interlinked with power relations evident in everyday sociality, such as the transactions between husband and wife in forced marriages or the place of the *bakla* (transvestite men) in society. Cannell (1999) shares most of Rafael's assumptions, such as the existence of a stratified social system—W.H. Scott's division of precolonial society into *datus* (aristocrats), freemen, and commoners (Scott, 1985a, 1985b) in which rank and status are "mutable" depending on how one fares in the economy of social exchange —that is, the datu may lose his leadership status or the slave may become free or even ascend to datuship. The mutability is due to the relational/reciprocal character of power whereby the parties in a relationship, in the exchange, mutually affect each other: the datu's power is as much dependent on the loyalty of followers as the followers' welfare is dependent on the care of the datu. Moreover, and this is basic to Rafael's analysis that Cannell also takes for her own, it is one's obligation to enter the relations of exchange—it is only by entering into relations of exchange that one cultivates the *loob* or inner self.

However, Cannell points out in another work, the essay "Reading as Gift and Writing as Theft," that the question of conversion is even more complicated than what Rafael takes up: it was not just translation from one language (Spanish) to another (Tagalog), because there were many more: Bicol, for instance, and its many variants in the region, not to mention Bisaya, Iloko, Ilonggo, and so on in other regions (2006, p. 139). Texts were translated not only into Tagalog, but also into these other languages, or the Tagalog text was further translated into Bicol. An example that is particularly relevant is the Bicol (Lenten) *Pasion* thought to have been translated from the Tagalog *Casaysayan* by Tranquilino Hernandez at the instigation of Archbishop Francisco Gainza (Javellana, 1988). The translator states that the Bicol translation "clarifies" for Bicolanos what was otherwise not clear to them when they only had the Tagalog *Casaysayan*, suggesting that Tagalog as a totally different language was in fact poorly or not fully understood by the Bicols: "one can imagine a phase in which [the *Casaysayan*] constituted yet another layer of the polylingual, half-understood, half-recognized religious texts with which Bicolanos were surrounded" (Javellana, 1988, p. 143). This Bicol version of the *Casaysayan*, the Lenten Pasion, eventually migrated into many other texts such as the texts of the dotoc.

Performance of Devotion

As it happened, when our ancestors embraced Christianity, they did so with full devotion in the way they knew how and developed and passed on to later generations a fidelity to the religion that can be seen in the *panata/panuga* (promise or vow) and in the many forms of faith expressions associated with calendrical rituals and devotional practices. It is a fidelity that can only be described as tenacious, even fierce.

The dotoc is a lighter example, because it is quiet, muted, even melodious and lilting, but also uneventful in the sense of being almost ordinary or quotidian, whereas other devotions are more spectacular, more visceral in their impact—like the Nazareno of Quiapo or the Peñafrancia of Naga. In the dotoc, one does not experience the intensity and thickness of the atmosphere present in the Peñafrancia and Nazareno processions. But the dotoc is as much a practice of pilgrimage as is the Peñafrancia devotion and one in which, as in the Peñafrancia, there is something else at work—beneath the ritual or the trappings of tradition, there is

a genuine truth event that effects the subjectivation of the devotee. This is why I have moved beyond the more well-known explanations of the conversion and popular devotion, even as I continue to draw from and be inspired by the ideas of Ileto, Rafael, Aguilar, and Cannell. I continue to explore deeper ground in the effort to stay faithful to what I encountered: the dotoc on my pulses. Of course, as the performance researcher Geraldine Harris (2008) suggests, "deeper" may actually be all on the level of appearance.

Let me elaborate on this point which I feel is an important aspect of the methodology of radical ethnography in performance research. Writing on a production by Quarantine and Company Fierce, Harris (2008) says that "*[it] seemed rude, as in impolite*, to Susan and Darren (the performers whose names are used in the title of the show)" for her to analyze the performance using her "usual" categories of race, sexuality, gender, age, and class, or in relation to the politics of identity (p. 4, emphasis added). Instead, she ends up writing about her self-reflexive experience of the performance and included a running counterpoint of "corrections" by Quarantine about her observations on the details of the performance. Writing about "the appearance of authenticity," she concludes that the show's apparent authenticity comes "paradoxically" from its "focus on surface, 'show' or appearances (the spectacle itself [!]) rather than what is 'behind' them …" (p. 14).

It may well be that I have nothing else to go by but the appearances of the dotoc as I encountered them, and the challenge is how to stay faithful to those encounters. Only by such faithfulness can such appearances reveal something else: the truth that flashes rare and quick amidst and through appearance, challenging us to seize and hold it—as Saint Paul did when he saw the truth of Christ's resurrection on the journey to Damascus—and, I would argue, as the dotoc practitioners have done all these years (why I refer to Paul will be seen in the later pages).

The dotoc is a performance in the sense of being ritual and also in the sense of being repeated, "restored behavior" as Schechner (1988) would say, both involving the elements of play and display. It is a nine-day prayer (*novenario*) which means it is performed every night for nine days and repeated in April and May every year. It is a pilgrimage to the Holy Cross but not a "real" one; it is a performance of pilgrimage. The pilgrims of the dotoc only imagine the pilgrimage, "act out" the journey, the performance turning intention into reality—*as if* they do become

pilgrims *hale sa España* (from Spain), as the text says, looking for the Cross and finding it in the Holy Land (see Llana, 2011, p. 93).

This performance of pilgrimage is a creative act, an imaginative transaction by agentic subjects. As Michael Taussig (1987) puts it, the centrality of the devotees in this creative act marks their embodied fidelity as a community of persons who imagines the sacred and in so doing, keeps the sacred alive. The divine being sought in the pilgrimage is made present by the act of seeking, and the act of seeking becomes an act of giving, so that as givers they may in turn receive in the dynamic play of reciprocity with the divine. In the terms of Marcel Mauss (2005 [1954]), such giving obliges the receiver to give back and places the giver on an even ground. The devotee is neither victim nor helpless supplicant in relations with the divine, even as individual subjective positions may be one of deep humility and desperate need. This giving is akin to Cixous' (1994) idea of feminine giving, because it is a giving that does not or cannot command a return. Though a return is prayed for, one can only believe in and hope for the love and goodness of the divine—and this comes as grace. One may say that pilgrimage and its performance in the Bicol experience thus become a seizing and sharing of grace. And this giving, this sharing, is done not from excess but from lack. Many devotees are poor and they save and scrape in order to participate in the devotions, although many attest that they "miraculously" have an excess (say, of fish-catch) that allows them to have a feast on the table and to buy the dresses or accessories for the performances.

The people were "struck by grace." It can be the Christian concept of grace, inferring from how the dotoc practitioners talk about pagsa-Dios, how they profess their Christian faith. However, it can also be Badiou's (2001) idea of "laicized grace" that does not depend on any "divine transcendence," but one that involves only human individuals grasping at a "chance of truth" (p. 123)—persisting in a truth whose predications or outer appearances have changed because of the experience of colonialism, but remaining what it is, a potent force in their lives. This is the unsaid, perhaps unsayable, explanation manifested only in the performance of devotion.

Vernacular Religiosity

Why is there a continuing discrepancy between popular faith observances and prescriptions of the official church? The plausible explanation is that what the native Bicolanos held on to with a fierce faith upon "conversion" was not really Christianity in its European or Spanish form, but one that was shaped according to the native understanding, that is, a thoroughly "vernacular religion," and this is how we can understand the concept of appropriation.

I use the term as it is defined by Leonard Primiano (1995) who says, "Vernacular religion is … religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it" (p. 44). In my view, this is religion considered as speech, behavior, performance, specific situated practice. Primiano suggests that all religion is vernacular religion because it is interpretive; it is also ultimately "personal" and "private." Working in the field of folklore and folklife studies and their intersections with religion, Primiano posits the concept of vernacular religion both as theory and method, offering it as an alternative to approaches that presuppose a split between "official" religion and "folk" religion. Primiano rejects such approaches saying they only perpetuate the relegation of the folk to the margins and reifies religion as an institution, making it stand for the "community of believers" whose individual belief and practice are inevitably found wanting. The concept of "folk religion" has had great currency among scholars of religion, notably in the work of Don Yoder (1974, reprinted 1990) in the Western academy, as well as among Philippine scholars: Lynch (2004); Gerona (2005); MacDonald (2004); Gorospe (1986, 1994); Reyes (1985); and Mulder (1992a, 1992b). Mulder terms it as localization or the Filipinization of Christianity.

I find Primiano's concept useful in thinking out the problematic of Bicol religiosity as expressed in the dotoc (and other devotions) without resorting to predicative claims of identity—the reason I hesitate to use terms like "the Filipinization" of Christianity. The view that every religious practice is vernacular suggests that it is a multiple singular and thus contains a potential universal address.

Wendy James and Douglas Johnson (1988) see the Christian religion as a way to apprehend truths and that this way is in fact multiple: "for outside the authorizing institutions of the Churches and the texts of theological debate there is no Christianity except in the life of vernacular society and culture" and that

"without such a 'native' appropriation, there cannot be a living religion" (p. 3). Saint Paul, they say, "legitimized 'vernacular Christianity' [through both the style and message of his preaching]—[even as] he also embodied the tensions between the universal and the local which together have helped to spread the Christian way" (p. 3). But can the vernacular in fact have a universal address? James and Johnson (1988) rightly raise what seems like opposing positions between the universal and vernacular Christianity. "There is a point at which the proclamation of universal faith and its necessary practical demonstration must take precedence over and alter local cultural idioms" (p. 4). They go on to enumerate some of the ways that they think this happened, for instance, the way that the Jewish heritage (and laws from the Old Testament) was adopted by the Graeco-Roman world and imposed on and would have "profound social implications" for those outside the Jewish world. Moreover, "the early Christian apologists were aggressive in their claims to exclusive truth" (p. 4) and the later Christians (Europeans) brought the religion by conquest to other populations in "the rest of the world and the rest of the world must choose to submit or resist" (p. 5). In the Philippine experience this has meant the erasure of the precolonial religion in its outer appearances. All these we understand to be true. However, going back to Paul, it was not him who decided the adoption of the Jewish laws. It can be said that Paul, in fact, asserted the vernacular: the universality of the faith could be true only if it was vernacular—if the uncircumcised would be recognized as Christian as much as the circumcised. While the fidelity to the faith may be considered Pauline, the acts of colonizing populations as we know them in history cannot rightly be called so and can be thought precisely as opposite and inimical to the Pauline idea. I therefore see no contradiction between asserting the vernacular and professing the universal, for as Badiou (2006) says, the universal is always local or can only be known as or appear in a local site. This is not to say it is particular, because the particular is known by means of its predicates, but that it is singular, subtracted from all predications (p. 146). It seems to me that this is perfectly in agreement with the assertion by James and Johnson that "there never was a Church" but always churches in the plural, even during the early days of Christianity in Asia Minor, where it flourished before it reached Europe. Of course, it is possible that James and Johnson are in fact talking about predications, particularities, "particular social situations" (p. 2), but this may be just a matter of semantics or perspective, because any particular situation is itself a singularity and a multiple—that is, each of the churches is a multiple singular being as Christian and as Greek, Armenian, Assyrian, and so on. The same may be said of the Philippine church, or the Bicol church. Predicates define a world, but

it is important to see that a singular truth must be "subtracted from identitarian predicates … although obviously it proceeds via those predicates" (Badiou, 2006, p. 147).

The Work of Grace

For Alain Badiou (2003), Saint Paul preached the "Christian discourse" that the Christian message is for all, whether Jew or Greek, circumcised or uncircumcised, and it was this and similar actions that questioned and rejected the Law (upheld by the "Jewish discourse") that marks him as the great militant of grace that he was. As Badiou (2003) elaborates, "what Paul calls grace … occurs without being couched in any predicate … is translegal, and happens to everyone without an assignable reason" (pp. 76-77). But it can only be thought or apprehended within the situation of its occurrence, that is, vernacularly. For the Bicolanos, when this universal Christian message was addressed to them, they responded in the only way they knew how, that is, vernacularly.

Badiou (2001) likens how truths come to be apprehended to the Christian idea of grace and admits to the possibility of something that exceeds human understanding, such as the divine: "If every grace is a divine gift, we cannot absolutely avoid the idea of an ultimate, divine calculation, even if that calculation exceeds our understanding" (p. 122). However, Badiou's (2001) grace is "laicized grace," and therefore different from the religious conception of the term.

> Fundamentally, what I call laicized grace describes the fact that, in so far as we are given a chance of truth, a chance of being a little bit more than living individuals, pursuing our ordinary interests, this chance is always given to us through an event. This evental giving, based absolutely on chance, and beyond any principle of the management or calculation of existence—why not call it grace? Simply, it is a grace that requires no all powerful, no divine transcendence. (p. 123)

It is instructive for my reflections on the dotoc that Badiou uses Saint Paul as an illustration, a classic case of the experience of Christian grace. In Saint Paul one sees Badiou's (2003) notion of "a fidelity to a fidelity" (p. 47)—the truth-process being itself a fidelity. The "becoming of a truth" and indeed the process of

subjectivation exceeds one's understanding, and that a truth always only becomes after the fact of one's having been struck by it through "a pure event"—that in the case of Paul was Christ's resurrection. It is not planned or pre-conceived. Once seized by such a truth, one is capable of remaining faithful to it, of being a "militant" of the cause one believes in.

In *Saint Paul*, Badiou (2003) presents Paul as a militant par excellence. He is Badiou's illustration of all that he says in his philosophical writings: of being, of truth, and the subject. It is in reading *Saint Paul* that I understood why Badiou insists that truth is for all, that as universal singularity it is addressed to all and can be accessed by anyone, be he/she Greek or Jew, Christian or Gentile, slave or citizen, and that predication limits and excludes and thus shatters or negates universality. Paul thus provides me with a model to think of the dotoc as fidelity and ground my political take on it in the situations within which I encountered it. The connections are uncannily strong: Paul was always outside the "law" or authority—he was never part of the anointed group, the twelve apostles and their immediate circle of friends who formed the core of the early Christian church; the dotoc has also largely been a secular undertaking, outside the church's initiative or program, and it is of the folk. Paul was focused on only one thing: the event of Christ's resurrection and he believed in its singular truth outside of what can be considered its history—Jesus' life and works. As Badiou (2003) puts it, Paul's was "a discourse without proof, without miracles, without convincing signs" (p. 53). The dotoc is pagsa-Dios, an act of faith—everything else is mere detail subordinated to this one truth professed by the Christian Bicolanos. Beyond these immediate striking links between Paul and the dotoc, other ideas in Badiou's (2003) writing on Saint Paul resonate powerfully or present further challenges to thinking about the dotoc and the Bicolanos' lived experience and practice of Catholicism: Paul's texts as "interventions" (p. 31); Paul's "militant discourse of weakness" (p. 53); the "antidialectic of death and resurrection" where death is not negated by resurrection but is its affirmative ground (p. 73); the opposition of law and grace and grace as *kharisma* or gift (pp. 75-85); the linking of love and faith and love as "universal power" (pp. 86-92); and hope as the "subjectivity of a victorious fidelity" (p. 95).

Performance and the "Elsewhere" of Faith

Cannell also diverges from Rafael on a key idea in suggesting that the attraction of conversion to the Bicolanos lay somewhere else, not in the promise of Paradise. A point that she repeats several times in the ethnography and in subsequent papers is "the complex and ambivalent tone of Bicol culture" (1999, p. 138), that the Bicolanos are "uninterested" in constructing a clear picture of who they are or what their culture is or what they believe in, which of course makes it difficult for people like her (and me) to write about them (us). Nevertheless, a striking observation that Cannell seems certain about is that the Bicolanos (at least those with whom she lived) are also "relatively uninterested in the classic Christian 'economy of salvation'" that figures greatly in Rafael's theory. "The relationship of exchange into which they insert [the words in the Pasion and other religious texts] is not the one intended by the church" (Cannell, 2006, p. 144). While some of the details she enumerates to support this view may be uniquely true to the Calabanga folk and may be true only to a limited degree or not at all for other groups of Bicolanos, I find that they can also be said of the ordinary folk in the dotoc sites covered by my own research—notably, that "ordinary Bicolanos are not especially priest-centred, nor are they deeply invested in a morality within the economy of salvation, which is centred on sin, repentance, and justice in the next life" (Cannell, 2006, p. 145). The novenario and dotoc performances run smoothly and largely without the involvement of priests, although they say mass on the day of the fiesta that marks the end of the nine-day cycles and ordinary folk are quite pleased to be at the receiving end of the priest's attention if and when it is given. Yearning for salvation is said in the prayers and found in the dotoc verses, but that is just what it is: text. The interiority of the desire is something else that is never discussed by or among the dotoc singers or their *kabarangay* (fellows). Instead, practitioners are preoccupied about present worries and frequently talk about them—like how the devotion to the Holy Cross saves them from the danger of volcanic eruptions or typhoons and flooding and puts food on their tables. For the paradotoc, therefore, conversion and fidelity would not be about a (sinful) past that must be ransomed or about a future (the afterlife) that must be ensured, but about the here and now that needs to be faced with faith and fortitude.

What was/is going on then? What is the "elsewhere" that Cannell points towards as a possible, truer, account of the enduring Christian faith of the Bicolanos, long after the colonizers have gone? "What, then, does it mean for

present-day Bicolanos to insist that what they are doing, during Lenten vigils, is 'reading' the Pasion?" (Cannell, 2006, p. 143). This essay proposes that a close look at the performance of devotion will provide an answer.

Cannell's (2006) supposition aligns with the notion of a laicized grace in saying that contemporary vernacular religiosity in Bicol and relations with the sacred are informed by and interlinked with power relations evident in everyday sociality, undergirded by the mutability of rank and status, depending on how one fares in the economy of social exchange. And how else to say this but in terms of performance?

> Bicolano Pasion singers are perfectly capable of explaining many of the episodes given in the text they "read," as well as of rhetorically quoting a number of passages from it, and they themselves emphasize their skill in producing the words clearly, a statement that would no doubt have gladdened the heart of the local priest. Yet at the same time, they stress the "matching," "harmony," and "pairing" of their two voices, concepts that refer to ideas of balance, testing, and blending in Bicol rhetorical techniques in quite different contexts (such as formal riddling contests and courtship ritual). The extent to which Bicolano people literally "read" in our sense when they perform the Pasion is, therefore, debatable. Actual performances often depart to some extent from what is printed on the page, and my observation over many readings is that singers rely on memory as much as on the text, despite the length of the piece. Semi-memorized, the reproduction of the Pasion occupies a space between the exclusively oral and the exclusively literate. (pp. 143-144)

Cannell's (2006) answer takes the form of a description of the way that the Pasion is "read"—essentially how it is performed, since the reading is a chanting in two voices.

> The technology of performance … goes far beyond what we mean by *reading*. In singing pairs, one person always leads, while the second harmonizes and ornaments the line. The way in which this is organized musically actually cuts across the structure of what is printed on the page. Thus while the *Pasion* is arranged in stanzas of five

> lines throughout, the musical ornamentation occurs principally at the ends of the first, second, and fifth lines and runs together the others in rhythms determined by the chant more than by the meter of the printed line. To know where to ornament, as well as to learn the wide repertoire of possible musical variations appropriate for particular points in the text, requires complex knowledge and experience, none of which can be read from the book itself. The performance of the *Pasion* by singing pairs in some respects actually seems to replicate a common pattern in the Bicol religious performances generally. (p. 144, emphasis in original)

She goes on to describe the way that the dotoc in Canaman, for instance, is performed, with the *maestra* (the director, who Cannell identifies as a "prompter") reading the lines "slightly ahead of the moment when the group of performers need to sing it … [or] start reading while the singers are still completing the line before, producing a slightly syncopated effect in the performance." She ends this description with the insight that "Bicolano reading has this quality of interruption, of something extra being interjected. The line is not produced on a direct path from eye to mouth" (2006, p. 144). She may well be describing the dotoc performance, though the dotoc is sang rather than chanted. The difference between singing and chanting can be seen in the melodic quality of the piece, evident even to untrained ears—the difference, for instance, between the dotoc singing of the Pasion specifically in its current form of the cobacho dotoc and the chanting of the Lenten Pasion. I am not sufficiently equipped to describe this in specialist terms, but it suffices to say that the melodic structure of the cobacho dotoc is already predominantly Western, while that of the Lenten Pasion is not. I have said elsewhere that the Pasion chanting may be traceable to the *soraque* intoned by the female shaman called *balyana* in the *atang* rituals that the ancient Bicols offered to the god Gugurang in thanksgiving for a good harvest (Castaño, 1895).

It may very well be that, with the Christian conversion, the Bicolanos had found another material with which they can hone their rhetorical and performance skills, another way to show or present themselves (my point about play and display) and thus push their standing a further notch up the scale of exchange and balance of power—even as they enjoy their performances, with their costumes, movement, stylized delivery, or the highly "ornamented" singing, out of which their fidelity of faith surges.

> The inexistent appears, the invisible becomes visible: the "native," who cannot be conformed to the law imposed by the colonizer: of modesty, of piety, that is supposed to be demonstrated in behavior and appearance; and the vernacular that is the product of situated transactions governed by the idioms of reciprocal exchange. The subjugated and converted are revealed as active subjects who act on/in a situation and transform it and themselves to be the militants of the truth that they are capable of being. Through the dotoc and other devotions, God appears and the devotee appears, and they commune *without mediation*: without priests, shamans or other intermediaries. (Llana, 2011, p. 94, emphasis in original)

The Philippine church has long incorporated in its evangelization program what is called "inculturation," identified as "the effort to express and live the faith in terms and ways more attuned to the symbols and traditions of a people" (Claver, 2006, p. 3), which became official policy after the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines held in Manila in 1991. In the words of a 2000 pastoral letter of the CBCP, "True inculturation … is really the building up of an authentically local Church for its own time" (Quevedo, 2000). However, while there is a move to inculturate Christianity, there are notions of "authentic" and "inauthentic" inculturation, which means the church continues to be bound by an idea of a "pure" faith versus vernacular expressions that need to be "purified." This is perhaps only to be expected since we are talking about an institutional program, what Badiou might typify as law. But faith works well beyond any law, and this is how I propose we understand what devotion is and how it works—like grace. As Badiou (2003) puts it, the Christian is not so much a transgressor of law as he/she is bound by a different law: that of love.

This might be Christian love, but then again it might be something else for which we have forgotten the words, after 500 years of Christianity. What matters is that the faithful devotees have persisted not as objects of conversion but as subjects and agents who chose to be Christian and have fashioned their own expressions of that decision. How significant is this for us as a nation and people in 2021, looking back to the arrival of Christianity even as we face the worst of disasters in our contemporary history: living in a pandemic period and under a tyrannical regime? The question compels a critical and decisive action: to persist in that agency, to muster our creative energies to not just survive but live, and, in

radical love—Christian or not, perhaps, more rightly, "Filipino"—to choose to resist subjugation and end tyranny.

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