

The Folk in Filipino Catholic Christianity

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Folk Christianity is associated with pagan behavior of Filipino Catholics, such as in wiping a sacred image with bare hands or with a handkerchief and rubbing it on the body part that is afflicted with illness or disease. We equate Folk Catholicism with religious festivals where throngs of devotees exhibit such fervent devotion to the point of madness, like in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Carnival as Counter-Culture* or Victor Turner's *Liminality*, when devotees at a particular moment turn from the faithful to the fanatic. Fr. Jaime Bulatao (1966) identified this as Split-Level Christianity: the normative behavior of Christians inside a church and the unexpected behavior which he describes as an "occasional breakthrough of one's spontaneous self" (as cited in Drona, 2008, par. 2). Anthropologist F. Landa Jocano (1967/2019) distinguished two kinds of Catholicism: Rural Catholicism vs Urban Catholicism. Consequently, Fr. Leonardo Mercado (1994) pursued the study on the "Filipino Mind" to understand the Filipino psyche and behavior based on concepts and terms in the vernacular. Unwittingly, Bulatao, Jocano, and Mercado's studies resulted to a kind of dualism: a bifurcation between the *folk* (pagan) and the *western* (Christian). This paper problematizes the *Folk* in Filipino Folk Catholicism. Why are they viewed as pagans, heathens, and masses? This work intends to recuperate the definition of folk from a simplistic binary opposition or dualism using Cultural Exegesis framed by Syncretism and Inculturation. It shall also draw from the author's own reflective and reflexive practice as a Filipino Catholic faithful.

Keywords: *Split-Level Christianity, cultural exegesis, syncretism, inculturation, binary opposition*



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During the onset of the Lenten Season in the year 2021, my attention was caught by a repost of a Lenten message on facebook by Catholics@Work from Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan Archdiocese who is a former President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). Archbishop Villegas called for “abstinence” from inappropriate clapping at Mass and said that, “The breaking of the Bread is a commemoration of the violent death that the Lord went through. Who claps while others are in pain?” He reminded the priests that applause should not be used to sustain their parishioners’ attention throughout the mass. The Archbishop urges everyone to “abstain from applause in Church. May this abstinence from clapping flow over into the other days of the year.” He instructed the faithful that, “The giving of appreciation such as clapping, must be done outside the Mass” (CBCP News, 2020).

But what interested me the most were the comments from netizens (internet citizens), particularly, a comment from an African Catholic. The netizen shared how African Catholics can clap, sing, and dance even during the liturgy of the mass for praise and adoration.

I wondered why can't Filipino Catholics, like the African Catholics, use songs and dances while clapping as forms of worship and praise? How is it that clapping in Church is inappropriate as stated by Archbishop Villegas? Does this “in Church” refer to the structure—the holy place of worship? Yet, he also stated that clapping must be done outside the mass. Is Archbishop Villegas permitting clapping after the mass “in Church” or outside the Church?

The question of how the faithful behave inside the Church and outside of it has been documented in previous studies, such as in the Master's thesis of Fr. Stephen Redillas (1999) when he observed the conflicting behavior of the devotees of Our Lady of Peñafrancia in Bicol. During the mass, the devotees were behaved and obedient to Church authorities but when the religious image of Our Lady was brought outside the Church for procession, the faithful became an uncontrolled crowd. The mood was transformed from a somber, solemn, holy mass to an exuberant and uninhibited display of devotion. This is exactly what happens during religious feasts when icons and holy images are brought outside the Church for procession. Other studies have documented the same observation during religious feasts: the Santo Niño de Cebu (Bautista, 2010); the Nuestra Señora de Manaoag in Pangasinan (Nelmidia-Flores, 2004); and, the ongoing study of the *Traslacion* (Transfer) of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo by Michael Charleston Chua.

This collision that also becomes a negotiation between the sacred and the secular is best exemplified in religious feasts or *fiesta/pista*. Sir Anril Tiatco (2016) calls the “performativity of pista” as an “entangled phenomenon” when “orthodox Catholicism is negotiated with everyday Catholicism” (p. 132).

During the Spanish era, religious feasts were commemorations of patron saints’ martyrdom. Like precolonial rituals, fiestas gathered the community together. But unlike precolonial rituals, the *fiesta* under colonial Spain was used through the policy of *reduccion* as an instrument to gather the Christianized *indios* to isolate the outlaws (*tulisanes* and *remontados*).

Indios in the Philippines referred to the general population of inhabitants who did not belong to the mestizo class (Spanish and Chinese). It is recorded for instance that the population of Chinese mestizos increased in 1810, with 121,621 in an indio population of 2,395,676 (Tan, 1994).

The policy of *reduccion* was adopted from Latin American colonies and applied in the Philippines. Because lowland settlement pattern was composed of dispersed small villages and there were limited number of priests, the policy was to establish a settlement which serves as the central village with a church and a convent. These settlements were called *cabeceras* or the central church village. Later on, this will evolve into a *población*. The policy of *reduccion* through the *cabecera* was effective in mass conversion, controlling the population against recalcitrant natives and as a source of labor (Doeppers, 1972).

Since the 20th century, fiestas have become pageants and spectacles to boost local tourism. Structured and institutionalized through negotiations between the Church and State, the more ostentatious and exotic the tapestry of the *pista*, the more the electrifying effect on the community. Some religious feasts and observances even border on the uncanny and bizarre.

This unorthodox performance of Catholic Christian rituals and ceremonies is always associated with the folk. There seems to be a divide between the folk and the traditional/conservative Catholic Christian in the way they manifest their devotion and piety. Conveniently, any aberrant behavior of a Catholic faithful is understood as part of Folk Christianity.

In this paper, my interest is to problematize the *folk* in Folk Catholicism. Who are the folk in Filipino Folk Catholicism? Why is there a pejorative reference to them as pagans and heathens?

The word “pagan” in the Bible refers to those who worshipped idols and practiced polytheism and animism. They were the exact opposite of the Chosen People of God, from Abraham to the Israelites who only worshipped one God. In Exodus 20:3, Yahweh commanded the descendants of Abraham not to worship any other gods. In Genesis 32:22-32, Jacob was called Israel. His descendants, the Israelites, were committed to keep the covenant and observe the law which is to worship one God. Pagans were considered outsiders and heathens by the Israelites. Today, pagans and heathens are those who do not belong to a widely held religion such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

How come religious rituals and practices which appear absurd and ridiculous are disparagingly referred to as folk? There are two main objectives of this paper: to understand the folk using cultural exegesis framed by syncretism and inculturation; and, to recuperate the definition of folk from a simplistic binary opposition where the folk is defined as native/pagan vs western/orthodox Christian.

Cultural Exegesis

The dismissive attitude towards the folk in Folk Christianity associated with an aberrant and irrational behavior is an indication of a lack of understanding of the cultural texts that ordinary Filipinos or the *common tao* produce to make meaning of the world around them. Cultural exegesis is a helpful methodology in understanding the reception and appropriation by the folk of Catholic dogma, beliefs, and traditions.

Cultural exegesis provides a framework in understanding “The art and science of interpreting culture: the sets of rules, guidelines, or principles for interpreting cultural texts and trends” (Vanhooser et al., 2007, as cited in Conner, 2019, p. 93). Filipino Professor of Theology Jose M. De Mesa (1987) is one of the pioneer educators who grounded his methodology in cultural exegesis. For him, cultural exegesis “intends to make explicit the meaning a culture holds” (as cited in Ramos,

2015, p. 698). As a hermeneutical act, cultural exegesis is informed by the past—ancient religious traditions and practices of a people before the advent of Christianity.

To denigrate the folk in their manifestation of their reception of Judeo-Christian religion as irrational, absurd, and insane betrays the lack of understanding and ignorance of our ancient belief system, traditions, and customs. Cultural exegesis as a methodology should however be framed by Syncretism and Inculturation.

Syncretism

From the Greek word *synkretismos* meaning “to combine,” syncretism was first made evident under the rule of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE. With his empire reaching Mesopotamia and Persia, the Greek language and culture spread: the Hellenistic culture. In Jesus’ time, Greek was the *lingua franca*. It is believed that Jesus spoke not only Aramaic and Hebrew but even Greek since it was the *lingua franca*.

Saul, who would become St. Paul, spoke Greek, Aramaic and perhaps, even Latin since he was highly educated as a Pharisee. St. Paul’s facility in Greek brought the new faith successfully to the Greek-speaking regions of Ephesus, Corinth, Philippi, Athens, etc.

Synkretismos, however, will not only refer to the mixture of languages but of people and their culture given the movements and migrations of people along the Mediterranean Sea. St. Paul would be known for his evangelization to the Gentiles against the consternation of some Jews who were disciples of Jesus, including St. Peter. The Gentiles converted into the new faith had different cultures and practices from the Jews that initially was the cause of antagonisms between them. It was in Antioch where “Christians” was first used to name the new followers of Christ. From the outset, Christianity was borne out of the different local cultures of Gentiles, particularly where St. Paul’s footsteps had trod.

Religious syncretism is a highly contested academic terrain. For some theologians, the content of Christian message has been compromised due to

religious syncretism. They believe that while Christianity would have not survived without syncretism, the incorporation of new belief systems and customs has diluted the meaning of the Sacred Scriptures. It is pointed out that “Christian religious practice showed an enormous appetite for absorbing materials from other religious traditions, and this indicated success in penetrating the wider society. It however posed a threat of uncritical syncretism” (Sanneh, 1989, pp. 42-43, as cited in Nyuyki & Niekerk, 2016, p. 385).

Nyuyki and Niekerk (2016) critiqued inculturation which leads to uncritical syncretism. The authors define syncretism as an “indiscriminate and uncritical incorporation of religious and/or cultural practices into Christianity in order to make it relevant to the receiving cultural context” (p. 399). The terms “indiscriminate” and “uncritical” here already suggest that the authors are suspicious of local cultures’ incorporation into Christianity as something that will pollute and corrupt the religion.

To understand the folk in Folk Christianity, the study of religious syncretism is inevitable. The encounter between two religious belief systems and cultures will never result to homogenization or the creation of a new whole. The encounter is a process which cannot be simplified as mere borrowings or influences which deny the inherent power of religious cultures. Other related studies on syncretism focus on reception and appropriation of foreign religion by native cultures. In this case, it is the folks’ reception and appropriation of the Judeo-Christian religion. Reception and appropriation presuppose that the receiving culture has already an understanding and acceptance of the foreign religious belief system and culture. This understanding and acceptance are coursed through inculturation.

Inculturation

The Roman Catholic Church has convened two Vatican Councils. The First Vatican Council convoked by Pope Pius IX from 1869-70 addressed the contemporary issues and influences during that period such as rationalism, liberalism and materialism, and the decision to declare the infallibility of the Pope (Vatican, 2018). It has been described as the Council of the Counter-Reformation. The Second Vatican Council was convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962. When he passed away in 1963, Pope Paul VI succeeded him and saw its completion in

1965 (Carbone, 1997). The Council called for the modernization of the Church, encapsulated in the Italian theme of *aggiornamento* (bringing up to date), because of world events such as World Wars I and II, communism, and totalitarianism. The Second Vatican Council is also known as the *Aggiornamento* Council.

The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium Et Spes* (Joy and Hope) and the Decree *Ad Gentes* (To the Nations) of the Second Vatican Council recognized diverse cultures and conditions of human life and committed to the continuous promotion of culture (*de culturae progressu rite promovendo*) in their missionary work.

Inculturation has been a primary concern from Synods since 1979. It was defined as “the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity in the various human cultures” (Final Report voted by the Fathers, 1985, as cited in International Theological Commission, 1989). In the history of salvation, inculturation has expanded and extended the covenant between God and Israel to the Gentiles and to all of creation. The ultimate mission of the Church is *Lumen Gentium* or to bring the “Light to the Nations,” the Word made Flesh—Jesus Christ—to all cultures.

Filipino scholars who did studies on inculturation related it to the process of indigenization which is considered the most effective way of bringing Jesus Christ and expressing the Gospel in their own language and culture. It is stated that expressing Christianity in indigenous ways is “Folk Christianity” (Ramos, 2015). Thus, inculturation in Folk Christianity can be simply understood in terms of indigenization, vernacularization, and localization of Sacred Scriptures, the Liturgy, and Christian teachings.

Folk Catholicism and Popular Religion

Folk Catholicism is under Folk Christianity and is associated with popular religion. For Belgian priest and theologian Antoine Vergote (1982), “The term ‘folk Catholicism’ is thus broader than the French term ‘religion populaire’ which has a more sociological signification... it is the Catholicism that is tightly bound to the cultural traditions of the people and that is adhered to by the majority of the people, thus giving it the distinguishing character of so-called popular religion” (p. 6).

Vergote (1982) explains that the word “folk” is sociological because it signifies “a group of people that is used in contrast to the cultural and/or economically dominant group” (pp. 5-6). Folk Catholicism has been derided by other faith communities under the Catholic Church, particularly those who belong to the middle and upper educated classes, since it is constituted by masses who are superstitious and unlearned. This “rational disdain,” according to Vergote, comes usually from charismatic groups and Basic Christian Communities (BCCs). Interestingly, the latter is critical to both folk religion and charismatic groups and “distrust folk Catholicism.” Moreover, BCCs “are inclined to consider folk religion as an ‘opium *of* the people’ in the Marxist sense of the expression, and the charismatic movement as ‘opium *for* the people’ which is a neo-Marxist judgment” (Vergote, 1982, p. 8).

Folk Catholicism clashes with other faith communities under the Catholic Church because it is viewed not only as a “popular religion” but also as “habit religion” where customs and traditions of the past are mindlessly performed perfunctorily, thus corrupting Catholicism as a universal religion. Another term associated with habit religion is “natural religiosity.” It is assumed that humans are naturally religious from the beginning of human life when they could not understand and control the world around them so they look for gods to protect them. Natural religiosity in Folk Catholicism is commonly understood as the persistence of pagan practices evident in Judeo-Christianity.

From an anthropological perspective, habit religion and natural religiosity in Folk Catholicism reveal the importance of rituals. Religious rituals are more than a mechanical, perfunctory, or superficial routine of performative acts. Victor Turner’s *The Ritual Process* (1969) is a germinal work in anthropology on rituals. Turner saw the interrelation of religion, rituals, and symbols. For him, rituals possess meaningful symbols that are informative of a community’s social and religious values. Rituals can be authoritative and even transformative. Turner’s *liminality* (which he derived from Arnold van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage*, 1909) while it may sound ambiguous to many up to now, is better understood with his *communitas*. Turner’s field study of the Ndembu of Zambia gave him the opportunity to develop his conceptualizations of liminality and *communitas*. Turner (1969) observed that in a “liminal period,” society becomes “unstructured or rudimentarily structured” (i.e. *communitas*) where “the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be

low.... The passage from lower to higher status is through a limbo of statuslessness ... In liminality, the underling comes uppermost ... the supreme political authority is portrayed as a slave” (pp. 96-97, 102).

This state of limbo in liminality, like a world upended in a given moment which radiates power to the common ordinary folk, is akin to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Carnavalesque* (1968). While Turner studied the Ndembu of Zambia, Bakhtin had the satirist Francois Rabelais’ novels as his field of study. Like Turner’s liminal period, Bakhtin’s carnivalesque is also a moment of chaos, of disruption and disorder. Bakhtin’s concept of carnival laughter is interpreted as “a subversive attack on the perverted concept of folk culture.” The laughter by renaissance folk culture in the carnival is a “spectacular feast of inversion and parody of high culture”; a subversion of order, authority and hierarchy. It is a “... world in which syncretism and a myriad of differing perspectives are permitted” (Lachmann, et al., 1988, p. 118).

From Turner’s ritualesque to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, this moment of disruption and disorder is precisely the power sui generis of the folk. Folk Catholicism’s carnivals and spectacles, such as in religious feasts (the pista) which may appear irrational and insane to the “educated” and “initiated” Catholic Christian, are the locus of the folks’ subversion and defiance against order and hierarchy in an institutionalized religion. But contestations are also negotiated so that Folk Catholicism continues to animate the manifestation of faith and increase the number of the faithful under the Catholic fold.

Folk Catholicism in the Philippines

Considered as the country with the biggest Catholic population in Asia, the Philippines has many religious feasts, rituals, and ceremonies that amaze and shock foreign tourists and observers. Religious festive celebrations and dolorous commemorations are usually spectacular and attract local and international audiences. But preceding these spectacles is a solemn holy mass officiated inside a Church where parishioners and the faithful remain decorous and restrained. The radical shift of behavior of the faithful from the holy mass inside the church (decorous and restrained) to the procession outside of the church (uninhibited and wild) is rather baffling.

Split-Level Christianity

One of the first, if not the first, to observe that Filipino Catholics exhibit conflicted behavior once in the church and outside of it is Fr. Jaime Bulatao who wrote about Split-Level Christianity in 1966. Bulatao started his essay with a funny story about a Mother Superior who was gifted a parrot which could recite a prayer automatically when its legs are pulled. When the Mother Superior pulls its right leg, the parrot recites the “Our Father.” When its left leg is pulled, the parrot immediately prays the “Hail Mary.” One of the young nuns was curious what the parrot would recite when both of its legs are pulled which was what she did. The angry parrot cried an expletive, “Putres, madadapa ako!” (“Damn, you’ll make me fall!”) (Bulatao, 1966, as cited in Drona, 2008, par. 1).

This funny parrot story was used by Bulatao (1966) as an analogy to how Filipino Catholics actually behave. His observation is that Filipino Catholics recite prayers and manifest their “special behavior in the presence of society, authority figures” like a learned reflex or automatism (as cited in Drona, 2008, par. 2). But this learned and conditioned behavior which Bulatao attributes to formal schooling and influences cracks when confronted with an unexpected turn of events. He calls this an “occasional breakthrough of one’s spontaneous self” (as cited in Drona, 2008, par. 2).

Bulatao (1966) describes Split-Level Christianity as the “coexistence within the same person of two or more thought-and-behavior systems which are inconsistent with each other” (as cited in Drona, 2008, par. 5). He explains that at one level, the Filipino Catholic “professes allegiance to ideas and ways of behaving which are mainly borrowed from the Christian West” and at another level, “his ‘own’ ways of living and believing which were handed down from his ancestors” (as cited in Drona, 2008, par. 6). From this description, Bulatao infers that the normative behavior of Catholic Christians is influenced by Western Christianity while the “spontaneous,” irreverent behavior is primitive and primordial.

Bulatao (1966) mentions many other stories about devout Filipino Catholics who in their unguarded moments show unbecoming behavior. He narrated how a group of alumni from a Catholic high school celebrated their reunion in the company of two priests but after the pleasant, wholesome event, ended up in a nightclub in the company of prostitutes. There was also this young lady who

conforms to the strict dress code enforced by a local church but reads pornographic literature at bedtime. Another typical story shared by Bulatao was a Manila policeman who regularly went to mass but who also regularly collects *tong* or protection money from the small stores.

This Split-Level Christianity during the 1960s which reveals a “hidden” or “unconscious” behavior of Filipino Catholics contrary to Catholic values was readily identified as Folk Christianity. Interest in this “split personality” of Filipinos grew, from studies on what creates this “split” to studies on how Filipinos behave and think.

Urban Catholicism vs Rural Catholicism

A year after Bulatao (1966) released his essay “The Split-Level Christianity,” anthropologist F. Landa Jocano published his academic paper entitled “Filipino Catholicism: A Case Study in Religious Change” (1967/2019). The intention was to look into religious practices and behavior of Filipinos from the urban and the rural areas, respectively. The findings seem to answer the question why there is a “split personality” among Filipino Catholics. Jocano proffered two kinds of Catholicism—an urban Catholicism and a rural Catholicism.

He presented his description and analysis of “folk religion” focusing mainly on Roman Catholicism. He made clear that his study on folk religion is grounded on anthropological research rather than from a religious point of view. Using historical sources, Jocano pointed to the *cabecera-visita* settlements as the reason for the two kinds of Catholicism. The church was located in the cabecera which would later become the *pueblo*. Since subsistence farmers hesitated to leave their fields to go to the distant cabecera to attend mass, the Spanish missionaries were the ones who visited the small settlements or the *barrio*. They built a chapel or *ermita* to bring the word of God to them. This colonial arrangement bred two variant forms of Catholicism—the cabecera (pueblo/urban) and the visita (barrio/rural) (Jocano, 1967/2019).

In his study, doctrines and rites of the Judeo-Christian religion would be interpreted and practiced differently in the cabecera and in the visita. Infrequent visits of Spanish missionaries to the visita gave the rural farmers more freedom to express and articulate Catholic concepts in the context of their everyday life

compared to the urban population. According to Jocano (1967/2019), urban dwellers are more into the “content” of the new religion while the farmers are more into the “form of worship” through their rituals and lore.

Interestingly, in the entire paper, Jocano (1967/2019) refers to Filipinos living in the *visitas*/barrios as rural Filipinos or rural *folks*. His reference to Filipinos in the *cabecera*/población is urban Filipinos or urban Catholics but not *urban folks*. The folk in Jocano’s Filipino Catholicism directs us to the old *visita* population—the rural farmer Filipinos who are less educated, less indoctrinated, and less privileged vis-à-vis the urban educated Catholic Filipino.

The Filipino Mind

In 1974, Fr. Leonardo Mercado wrote his first book—*Elements of Filipino Philosophy*. The basic concepts in this book were used in his next book, *Applied Filipino Philosophy*, in 1977. Twenty years after his first publication, Mercado authored a monumental work on Filipino philosophy based on the study of culture—*The Filipino Mind* (1994). This book sought to understand the Filipino psyche and *weltanschauung* (worldview) given the multiethnic, multilingual Philippine society.

To deeply understand the Filipino psyche and identity, Mercado (1994) used concepts and terms in the vernacular. Curiously, his introductory statements about urban and rural Filipinos seem to enrich what have had been proffered by Jocano (1967/2019) in his “Filipino Catholicism.” Mercado (1994) writes, “If there is a continuum in the social context of the **urban and rural Filipino**, there is also a continuum in their world view. This continuum may range from the thoroughly **western to the precolonial ...**” (p.13; emphasis mine).

The book emphasized the need to examine ourselves in our own terms. The concepts of *loob*, *kalag*, *kagandahan*, *lusot*, and the social values of *pakikipag-kapwa*, *pakikisama*, *utang na loob* in Tagalog, as well as *ginhawa* (Cebuano) over *hininga* (Tagalog) and *nakem* (Ilokano) over *damdamin* (Tagalog), best express and articulate Filipino-ness or the ethnocultural identity of Filipinos. Mercado (1994) also included Eastern philosophical models in his analysis of the Filipino’s concept of the soul and spirit to point out that the double-soul belief (a person has two souls) among certain ethnic groups in the Philippines is more Eastern or Asian rather than Western (a person has only one soul).

The “Filipino Mind” for Mercado (1994) is “not the philosophy of any individual philosopher as in Western tradition” (p. 155) in a pluralist Philippine society. It is that of the people, which he relates to *diwa* or *volksgeist* or the folk’s worldview. He intertextualizes his use of *volksgeist* to Emerita Quito’s (1984) “Filipino Volksgeist in Vernacular Literature.”

Volksgeist is attributed to three German thinkers: Herder (1744-1803), Hegel (1770-1831), and Savigny (1779-1861). Herder’s *volksgeist* points to a people with distinct ethnicity, language, culture, and context which is his direct criticism against Voltaire’s French universalism (Finkielkraut & Friedlander, 1996). Hegel, following Herder, reveals that an individual has a “spirit” as well as that of a certain group of “people.” Taking all the separate “spirits” or essences of diverse nations, a uniform “world-spirit” arises through a dialectical process (Avineri, 1962). Savigny’s *volksgeist* views laws not as a deliberate legislation but an expression of the “spirit of the people,” a common will that is predicated upon the people’s history and traditions (Rai, 2011).

In Deutsch, *volk* means the people (or an ethnic group), where the English word “folk” is derived. But the German *volk* and the English *folk* are not similar because of their different historical contexts, especially of the emergent German nationalism after 1800 (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

Volk in 1800’s Germany would acquire the meaning of nation and in Hitler’s time, *volk* is the German people—the superior race, and that the mission of the state is to serve the *volk*. In the United States, *folk* refers simply to the common people who belong to the working class or the *hoi polloi* (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). This usage of *folk* was brought to the Philippines through American colonialism and it persisted in the minds of the learned and educated Filipinos. But instead of referring to the working class or the *hoi polloi*, it referred to what Jocano (1967/2019) had been pinpointing all along—i.e. the rural folk who are uneducated and unsophisticated.

Thus, Mercado’s (1994) use of *volksgeist* or the folk’s worldview which encapsulates all his explications about the philosophical concepts in the vernacular language actually ascribes these to the common people—the rural, the uneducated, the masses.

Problem of Dualism and Dichotomies

It may not be the intention of Bulatao (1966), Landa Jocano (1967/2019), and Mercado (1994), but their studies resulted to a kind of dualism: a bifurcation between the folk and western.

Bulatao's (1966) Split-Level Christianity has unwittingly defined the behavior as bipolar, a kind of disorder that seemed to undermine the folk; their behavior which he describes as an "occasional breakthrough of one's spontaneous self" (as cited in Drona, 2008, par. 2).

Today, this Split-Level Christianity appears as a simplistic view of people's behavior given the *cultural paradigm* that has framed many studies on society, religion, and philosophy which gave birth to new perspectives such as hermeneutics, cultural exegesis, syncretism, inculturation, symbols, and meaning-making, etc.

But Bulatao's (1966) observation is one of the first articulations of an awareness that there is a conflicted behavior among Filipino Catholics. This challenged many theologians and researchers to direct their studies toward the understanding of Filipino Catholicism and the Filipino mind.

Jocano (1967/2019), treading the same path, made the split more apparent when he dichotomized Filipino Catholicism between Urban Catholicism and Rural Catholicism. He assigned the word folk to Rural Catholics but maintained the designation of Urban Catholics. This juxtaposition of rural vs urban becomes ambiguous when Jocano distinguishes the two in terms of rituals and Catholic belief.

As he simply put, rural folks are more into rituals while the urban Catholics are into content. This observation however cannot substantiate the numerous urban festivals and rituals that reverberate with prehispanic practices scorned as paganistic and profane such as the Sto. Niño Festivals, the Obando Fertility Dance, the Marian Festivals, and the *Traslacion* of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo, which are not in his list of "pan-regional religious observance" (Jocano, 1967/2019, p. 97).

Mercado (1994), interested in the Filipino psyche than behavior, laid down another dichotomy between western-educated Filipinos and indigenous Filipinos

who have their own *volksgeist*. Mercado calls for the study of indigenous categories of thought against Western philosophical thought taught in schools. Deciphering concepts in the vernacular, he found out that several ethnic groups in the country share the same *weltenschaung* which he relates more to Eastern philosophical models rather than Western models. Dichotomizing indigenous/Eastern vs Western thought purports to a people divided in terms of their education and socioeconomic class, not very much unlike Jocano's (1967/2019) rural folk vs urban Catholics.

With the foregoing discussion, educated urban Filipinos are viewed as those who are more initiated into Western thought while the uneducated rural folk are those who retain their indigenous worldview or *volksgeist*. This results to a dichotomy between the educated urban Filipinos vis-à-vis uneducated rural folks. As mentioned earlier, it may not be the intention of Bulatao (1966), Jocano (1967/2019), and Mercado (1994) to create dichotomies but their studies directed them to a configuration of folk identity defined in terms of binary opposites.

The problem with dualism and dichotomies is that meanings are restricted wherein one is defined in relation to the other. In the study of hermeneutics, dichotomies hinder the interpretation of texts and only allows an understanding predetermined by the relationship between opposing thoughts. Dualisms and dichotomies spring from the theory of binary opposition in Structuralism propounded by literary critic Jonathan Culler; rendering meaning as immutable or fixed. Subscribing to binary opposition, the tendency is to essentialize, homogenize, and hegemonize meanings.

The folk in Filipino Catholic Christianity has been bedeviled by its location in binary opposition through sets of dichotomies. How is the folk defined, described, and referred to in these sets of dichotomies?

Sets of Dichotomies

The folk is referenced in a binary opposition as follows:

- pagan/heathen/gentile vs Christian/believer/disciple
- indigenous/native/primeval vs western/mainstream/modern
- rural/uneducated/masses vs urban/educated/elite

- naïve/uninitiated/ignorant vs experienced/cultivated/learned
- fanatical/peculiar/exotic vs orthodox/common/normal

These sets of dichotomies conjure images that are unfavorable to the folk from the point of view of civilization, rationalism, and urbanity.

Images

More powerful than words are images representing the folk in Filipino Catholic Christianity. Here are two images of the folk in popular religious observances in the Philippines.

From the point of view of the urban and educated elite, these images reify the folk as pagan, heathen masses who are uneducated and uninitiated into the authentic Catholic doctrines and Sacred Scriptures. They are anachronistic—being indigenous, native, and primeval; a group of people who are naïve, ignorant, and uncouth. Their behavior is irrational, peculiar, unorthodox. Their ritual performances are intense, insane, and profane. They are easily dismissed as fanatical and even lunatic.

Cultural Exegesis, Syncretism, & Inculturation in Filipino Folk Christianity

A careful and impartial perspective grounded on exegesis will shed light on who are the folk in Filipino Catholic Christianity. This brings us to the existence of a prehispanic belief system which was not entirely obliterated by Spanish and American colonization. This ancient belief system is rooted in our Austronesian past which is called by anthropologist Prospero Covar and historian Zeus Salazar as *Anitismo* (not Animism as some scholars wrote). From the term *anito* or spirit, our ancestors believed in the spirit world. According to Covar (1998), the anitos dwell in nature: mountains, hills, forests, caves, etc. These anitos or spirits are nature's caretakers. Intermediaries between the spirit-world and mortals are the *babaylan* (Visayan), *catalonan* (Tagalog), *mandadawak* (Kalinga), *maaram* (Kinaray-a), and *manag-anito* (Pangasinan). According to Salazar (1999), the *babaylan* were experts in religion, literature, psychology, medicine, and even science. In spite of the conscious efforts of the Spanish missionaries to demonize



FIG. 1. *Traslacion of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo. Traslacion is a yearly reenactment of the “transferral” of the image from its original shrine in Intramuros to Quiapo Church. (Estrella, 2020)*



FIG. 2. *Mandarames in Pampanga (The Penitents during Lenten Season). (Mhegs McV, 2010)*

Anitismo, its belief and practices persist to this day. This explains why even among city dwellers who need the help of a babaylan, they can always find one in every barangay—diviner, herbalist, *manghibilot* or bone-setter, native midwife, *albularyo*, etc.

Modern-day babaylan are known in their English terms as folkhealers or faithhealers. Most prominent among them were Alex Orbito and Antonio Agpaoa whose patients/clientele were mostly foreigners. Alex Orbito, the builder of the Pyramid of Asia near Manaoag Shrine, was the spiritual adviser of then President Fidel V. Ramos. His claim to fame was his prediction that Ramos would become the next President. As Ramos' spiritual adviser and with his "faithhealing" operations abroad, Orbito also served as the President's ambassador of goodwill by reciting speeches before an assembly of captive audiences in every country he visited (Licauco, 1999).

Anitismo is still evident in contemporary Catholic religious practices both in the rural/barrio and in urban/pueblo. The belief in the spirit-world and the rituals and practices to appease the spirits when natural calamities struck or ravaged the crops or when illnesses afflicted the village folk have been integrated into the Catholic rituals and ceremonies. The process of religious syncretism in the Philippines cannot be overstated. Catholic religious feasts, rituals, and ceremonies are the most evident forms where anitismo surfaces and where the folk are viewed as fanatic instead of as faithful.

Bautista (2010), in his study of "The Syncretic Santo Niño" of Cebu, has put it aptly, "the processes by which symbolizes a distinctive type of Filipino Catholicism that synthesizes the modern and the ancient, the official and the sensational, the pagan and the enlightened" (as cited in Concepcion, 2014, p. 578).

Even Jocano (1967/2019), who dichotomized the rural and urban, noted that Filipinos wherever they are, invoke the saints for protection, healing, rain, work, etc., because in precolonial times, the ancient religion also had deities that interceded for the natives. It is said that humans recognize a Supreme Being and his lowliness in the greater cosmic scheme of things. Studies have shown that the success of Catholic proselytization is based on the native religion's belief system and rituals which are not dissimilar from Catholicism. The belief in *Kabunian* or *Bathala* does not run counter to the worship of a Supreme Being in Judeo-



FIG. 3. *Manag-anito in Pangasinan.*

Christianity. Deities (*diwata* and *anito*) have found their counterpart in saints and martyrs. The *agimat* or the *anting-anting* are just replaced by religious scapulars and medals. The *poon* is transformed into a Catholic religious icon such as the *Santo Bangkay*. The natives' prehispanic river rituals find resurgence in fluvial processions, especially of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Syncretism allowed the ancient, native religion to not only to be integrated into Catholic Christianity but to animate it as well. However, the success of religious conversion in the Philippines could not be solely attributed to syncretism. Social actors such as the *ladino* poets (meaning "latinized" or the first natives who learned Latin) were instrumental in the facilitation of Latin prayers to the native tongue. Inculturation, even before the Second Vatican Council, had already taken root during the Spanish colonial era.

The *ladino* poets were the first translators of the Bible and the Ten Commandments. They were taught Latin so they could fulfill their duty as translators. They served as the first *sacristan* or church servants who were confined inside the *convento* to concentrate on their work.

Christ's passion on the cross is recounted through the *pasyon*, an epic narrative in verse. There are three notable *pasyon* texts: *pasyong De Belen*, *pasyong Pilapil* and *pasyong De la Merced*. Of the three, it is *Pasyong Pilapil* which was the most popular. Allegedly written by a secular priest Padre Pilapil, the *pasyon* had captured the imagination of the folk because it incorporated prehispanic mythical characters and superstitious beliefs. As a reaction to this "nativistic" text, *pasyong Candaba* was written to expunge the nativistic, pagan elements in the *pasyong Pilapil*. The result was an antiseptic and uninspiring *pasyon* that was hardly read nor chanted. The folk reception of the *pasyong Pilapil* attests to the power of the native population as a receiving culture, to accept what is closest to their worldview and to reject what does not intersect in their lived reality. In fact, the *pasyon* provided revolutionary power to the natives as was powerfully theorized in the pioneering work of Reynaldo Ileto (1979)—*Pasyon and Revolution*.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65), through its *Ad Gentes* decree, reiterated the mission of the church to form strong Christian communities all over the world through inculturation. Synods from 1979 continue to emphasize the theme of inculturation of faith in the light of the Scripture. Today, Eucharistic masses are celebrated in the vernacular. The bible, novenas, hagiographies, prayers, and religious instructions are translated into different Philippine languages.

Inculturation has been synonymous to indigenization and vernacularization. But the identity of the folk as the ignorant native remains in these problematic categories. Indigenization and vernacularization are also caught up in dichotomies—indigenization for the indigenous and vernacularization for those uneducated masses who cannot relate to the English language. The lingering question is still left unanswered: Are the masses the only ones constitutive of the folk in Filipino Catholic Christianity?

Folks as Elites

As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, the ladino poets instrumentalized inculturation through translation of biblical texts and prayers. They were the first native elites of the *Islas Filipinas* under Spain for they were taught how to read and write in Latin.

The *hermano* (brother) and *hermana* (sister) who were lay leaders since Spanish times were privileged church servants. Today, they are chosen by church officials

to spearhead certain activities of the church, including the exoticized and outrageous religious festivals and processions.

The religious images which are displayed during fiestas and processions are owned by elite families. In De La Paz's (2012) study of the statue of the *Mahal na Senyor ng Lucban, Quezon*, she interviewed the elite Rañola clan who are the caretakers of the *poon* (sacred image). The *poon* was originally owned by a Chinese mestizo, Don Juan, who bequeathed it to his nine children along with an endowment of two hectares of land to oversee the icon's maintenance and Holy Week rituals. The Rañola clan is a blood relative of Don Juan.

There are politicians, celebrities, and personalities who join religious feasts and processions that are directly associated with the folk and fanaticism. Former Vice-President Noli De Castro is a well-known devotee of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo. Many say that his attendance in the maddening yearly Traslacion may have given him the votes from the masses. Incumbent Vice-President Leni Robredo is always visible during the popular feast of the Our Lady of Peñafrancia in Bicol, her home province. Famous broadcaster and EDSA personality in the 1980s, June Keithley was a known Marian devotee whose documentaries chronicled miraculous stories and life of visionaries. Popular TV actor Coco Martin, among other stars such as Christopher de Leon, Angeline Quinto, and Melai Cantiveros are spotted during Traslacion.

How can these educated politicians, broadcaster, urban and cosmopolitan TV stars be considered part of the folk defined and described in pejorative terms—paganistic, fanatic, lunatic, and heathen? Thus, this brings me to my own folk experience.

Folk and Faith

In 1995, my first baby was born very premature at 28 weeks of development (normal is 37-42). Her weight was just 1.1 kg and she was smaller than a 1 liter bottle of Coke. Inside the ICU incubator, she developed hydrocephalus with an accompanying porencephalic cyst. She contracted meningitis and the deadlier ventriculitis, not once but twice. She underwent 16 brain surgeries.

The doctors had conflicting approaches that even led to an almost fisticuff in our presence, the parents. Desperate, I explored all kinds of healing—from the folk



FIG. 4. *ex-VP De Castro in Traslacion 2015.* (Umbao, 2015)

manag-anito (healer), pranic healing, to healing priests and “prayovers.” My most memorable experience was when a *manag-anito* from my home province of Pangasinan came to Manila the first time and instructed me to go to 14 churches and pray the 14 Stations of the Cross. Since she was illiterate, she just drew the churches where I should go. Her scribbles were more symbolic than actual drawing.

Unbelievably, the symbols were clear enough to point to particular churches such as the “hanging Christ” in the UP Parish of the Holy Sacrifice and the Marian Icon in the Lourdes Church in old La Loma, not to mention the others. She was not privy to the history of my husband nor mine, yet she was able to direct us to the important landmarks of our lives separately and jointly: as parishioners of the UP Parish and my husband’s high school Alma Mater, Lourdes School beside the Lourdes Church.

I finished my spiritual journey ending in the Our Lady of Manaoag Shrine. When I returned to Manila, my baby survived her most difficult surgery and we

returned home. But it was not the end of my spiritual journey for I would be afflicted with breast cancer in 2018. The manag-anito, *Manang* Mary, passed away many years ago. There may be no more manag-anito during my ordeal but the faith of a folk who believes in the miracles performed by Jesus, his apostles and saints, is the one that sustained and restored me—body and spirit; a folk who knows her lowliness and sinfulness before a merciful God. It is not erudition nor knowledge that made me choose Catholic Christian values over the earthly and mundane. Paradoxically, my education challenges my faith and leads me to doubt and ambivalence. Choosing good over evil or knowing right from wrong is not a gift from books but a gift of discernment for those who have the desire to live a life in the way a good God wants us to.

Folk and faith are not mutually exclusive. There is an inherent goodness in humans whose lowliness in the greater cosmic scheme of things makes him realize his precarious existence and thus look up to the heavens. The folk cannot be defined in terms of class, ethnicity, nor education but by his own faith.

Conclusion

Recuperating the definition of *folk* from a simplistic binary opposition or dualism, the meaning of folk transcends class, socioeconomic, geographic, and ethnic categories. Raymond Williams, in his “Culture is Ordinary” (1958), demolishes the idea of “masses” as ignorant contrasted to the Leavisite “high culture tradition.” Williams’ grandfather was a farm laborer and his father worked as a railway porter. He argues against the generalized view by the bourgeoisie that masses were ignorant and incapable of culture and sophisticated thinking. He wrote, “working people are excluded from English culture is nonsense” (Williams, 1958, as cited in Highmore, 2002, p. 95). Williams asserts that there are no masses but only ways of “seeing” people as “masses” (Highmore, 2002, pp. 94-96). There is really a great danger when we look at the folk in Filipino Catholicism as masses who are ignorant, fanatical, and profane. This “seeing” is essentialist, homogenizing, and hegemonizing.

St. Paul, though very educated as a Pharisee, preached the Gospel to the Gentiles. He was in fact ridiculed as a folk believer in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a preacher to the Gentiles. Saint Peter and the Apostles were uneducated masses

yet they became Evangelists imbued with Wisdom and *Parisea* (boldness and courage) through the Holy Spirit.

I have lived in an urban area all my life. My mother was a devout Catholic and my father was a Catholic convert from Protestantism. I grew up joining community prayers and processions. I have witnessed inexplicable and supernatural phenomena where the manag-anito was always summoned to intervene. I am awed at stories of healing and other miracles from people I know and even those from documentaries. I have been reciting the Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help since I was in Grade 5. I recite novenas to different saints with a special devotion to the Holy Spirit. Every time I visit pilgrim churches and mingle with people from all walks of life, I find comfort and solace that my faith is celebrated with the faithful regardless of class, ethnicity, or social standing. In the midst of all of them, I am folk. There are Filipino intellectual elites in the academe who may have participated in a religious feast or have become a devotee of a popular devotion, one way or another. Anyone can be folk and be faithful.

Saint John Paul II, in the context of a new era, exhorted the Church to commit itself into a New Evangelization given the challenges of communism, dissolution of family, and moral decadence. Nyuyki & Niekerk (2016) question uncritical syncretism and offer critical contextualization as a methodology instead. But can we really distill pagan practices from folk Christianity or weed out the ancient and exotic from the authentic and official?

Perhaps, whatever religiocultural formation that arises from syncretism and inculturation (which is certainly of academic interest), the most important concern is if the essence of Christianity has been implanted to grow in the lives of the faithful. The mission remains univocal and clear which is the main point of evangelization: **to spread the Truth in the Gospel of Christ = his life, death, and resurrection.**

In a post-truth world, where truth can be non-existent or can have multiple meanings, it is in the **faith of the folk** such as Mary Magdalene, the first witness, that the truth of Jesus Christ's crucifixion and resurrection is preserved and preached.

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