

Panata, Pagtitipon, Pagdiriwang: A Preliminary Contextualization of Cultural Performances in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Cultural performance first appeared in the language of the academic community when Milton Singer published his book *When Great Tradition Modernizes* (1972), in which he proposed cultural performance as a unit of observation in anthropological inquiry. Since then, cultural performance has become a useful tool to provide a frame for the understanding of the self, the society and culture. This essay reflects on the concept of cultural performance in a preliminary attempt to historicize and to contextualize it using Philippine culture as a starting point. The first part is a descriptive illustration on how the term evolved from being a social scientific concept to an important subject in the humanities, particularly in the fields of theatre and performance studies. Included in this section is a proposal based on reflections by anthropologists, folklorists and performance scholars for a model illustrating some identifiable markers that signify an activity as a cultural performance. The second part is a paradigmatic schematization on the specifics of how cultural performance may be understood in the context of the Philippines. Using the phenomena of *panata*, *pagtitipon* and *pagdiriwang*, this paper argues that Philippine cultural performances are artistic communications in small groups performed publicly as a community gathering, even if the intentions of many performers are personal. The preliminary arguments found in this essay are based mostly on sporadic field notes in various locales in the archipelago.

Keywords: Cultural performance, Performance Studies, Philippine festivals, ritual, spectacle, ritual and festival studies

My first encounter of the term cultural performance was about 20 years ago when I was still a student in a minor seminary. Minor seminaries (High School seminaries) in Luzon annually meet for a sports festival called *Sangkan*.¹ All high school seminarians from the Cagayan Valley to the Bicol Region meet up for two to three days to compete in ball games and individual sports. While student-athletes prepare immensely for these sports events, another group also prepares for what *Sangkan* organizers call the cultural performance competition, usually held on the first night of the sports meeting and popularly labeled as the *Sangkan* Cultural Evening.

Back then, the term “cultural performance” was used as if it was something commonsensical: encompassing anything belonging to the performing arts, or another term for festive dancing. Indeed, cultural performance then and now has been used fleetingly and synonymously with festive competitions. For instance, many local government units publicize cultural competitions as community traditions, such as the *sinulog* in Cebu, the *ati-atihan* in Aklan, the *masskara* in Bacolod and the *dinagyang* in Iloilo.² This is one reason why, for many, cultural performance is equivalent to these extravagant and spectacular competitions and festive street dancing.

I came across cultural performance again 10 years after my initial encounter with it in high school as I was reading related literature for my graduate thesis. I realized the context was not in sync with its commonsensical deployment in my local experience as festive competition. I remember some examples provided by the text: prayer rallies, public demonstrations, rituals and even beauty pageants. Since then, I began to rethink the meaning of cultural performance as a complex phenomenon, and reflected on how it might impact on a group of people beyond the usual fun and festivity.

Cultural performance first appeared in the language of the academic community when Milton Singer published his book *When Great Tradition Modernizes* in 1972. Singer was then investigating what anthropologists were identifying as “little tradition” and “great tradition” in the Southern Indian village of Madras. He was conflicted on how to define the units of observation because, as he observed, Madras was a rich center of activities ranging from story-telling to rituals and prayers, to name but a few. In the end, he proposes the concept of cultural performance as a unit of observation in anthropological inquiry:

I shall call these things “cultural performances” because they include what we in the West usually call by that name – for example, plays, concerts and lectures. But they also include prayers, ritual readings and

recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals, and all those things we usually classify under religion and ritual rather than with the cultural and artistic. (71)

Generally, Singer was writing against Western models of ethnographic epistemology and methodology, which tended to generalize about a culture on the basis of how it compared with Western ideas. Instead, Singer advocated looking at culture in its own terms.

Later scholars found this new mode of inquiry, especially the notion of cultural performance, as useful tool to provide a frame for the understanding of the self, the society and culture. In *Verbal Art as Performance* (1977), for example, Richard Bauman invites a critical reflection on communicative processes as bounded events in the interactions of daily life through the notion of cultural performance. In *Anthropology of Performance* (1987), anthropologist Victor Turner shifts anthropological focus on cultural performance by transcribing structure into process and competence into performance. Deborah Kapchan (1995) explores performances as “repetitive aesthetic practices” (479) and “multisemiotic modes of cultural expressions” (480), viewing the individual in terms of his or her consensual membership in a group. Moreover, she posits that performance processes contribute variable senses of agencies, making the structural ideas of culture difficult to pinpoint.

Following Singer, folklorists, particularly those whose area of interest was verbal art, saw the potential of cultural performance as an alternative lens for the understanding of folklore and tradition vis-à-vis culture. Kapchan explains how this group of scholars began transforming their ethnographic works from the investigation of static texts to more dynamic utterances and enunciations, taking into account the contexts of interpretation and their potencies in cultural enactments and events. Dell Hymes sees performance as an artful accomplishment instead of a flawed representation of the ideal structure of culture. Richard Bauman extends this work to assert that performance displays communicative competence. Today, cultural performance is argued as a paradigm in the discipline of performance studies. In *Perform or Else* (2001), Jon Mckenzie asserts how cultural performance produces efficacious encounters of transgressions and subversions, such that personal concerns transcend into community/collective concerns.

This essay is, generally, a preliminary reflection on the concept of cultural performance and, specifically, an attempt to historicize and to contextualize cultural performance using Philippine culture as a starting point. Historicizing and contextualizing cultural performances are significant primarily because the

Philippines is home to a number of cultural performances that, like Singer's observation in Madras, are not attached to the theatrical and artistic framings of the concept. In other words, these cultural performances are also observable units that may lead to an understanding of a community – a Filipino community – through performance.

The essay is divided into two parts. The first part is a descriptive illustration of how the term evolved from being a social scientific concept to an important subject in the humanities, particularly in the fields of theatre and performance studies. Included in this section is a proposal based on reflections provided by anthropologists, folklorists and performance scholars for determining identifiable markers that point out an activity as a cultural performance. The second part is a proposal on the specifics of how cultural performance may be understood in the context of the Philippines. The preliminary arguments found in this essay, particularly in the attempt to construct a model of Philippine cultural performance, are based on sporadic field notes in various locales in the archipelago, which I started visiting in 2014 for a project involving the documentation of different cultural performances found in the archipelago: Chavayan in Batanes, Angeles City in Pampanga, Marawi City in Lanao del Sur, Pundaquit in Zambales, Lucena City in Quezon Province and San Luis in Batangas.

CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN/AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES

The emergence of the discipline of performance studies is a significant epoch in the formation of cultural performance as an important subject and an observable unit in the study of culture and society. The birth of cultural performance as an idiom, beginning in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology and folklore studies, and developing now in the humanities, especially in theatre and performance studies, paved the way for a dictum that throws off earlier habits of using culture as a noun and to come to terms with the complexity of recasting it as a verb.

Performance scholar Jon Mckenzie notes a comprehensive picture of what cultural performance is vis-à-vis the development of performance studies. He writes:

These include traditional and experimental theater; rituals and ceremonies; popular entertainments, such as parades and festivals; popular, classical, and experimental dance; avant-garde performance art; oral interpretations of literature, such as public speeches and readings; traditions of folklore and storytelling; aesthetic practices

found in everyday life, such as play and social interactions; political demonstrations and social movements. (29)

In relation, McKenzie adds that performance studies scholars have constructed cultural performance as an engagement of social norms, as an ensemble of activities with the potential to uphold societal arrangements or, alternatively, to change people and societies. In short, cultural performance produces efficacy. In simple terms, efficacy is a performance's commanding authority to produce an effect: to transgress, as in the case of religious cultural performances, and to subvert, as in the case of public demonstrations and political protests. In *Performing Catholicism* (2016), I argue this direction of efficacy as a "site for discourse on deterritorialization, reterritorialization, displacement, power struggles, identity politics, politics of difference, to name a few of the most crucial junctures in performance studies nowadays" (15).

Following Milton Singer's earlier proposal of cultural performance as an observable unit, John J. MacAloon provides another critical annotation on how cultural performance is understood in the anthropological circuit. In his 1984 anthology *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance* (1984), the concept of cultural performance is reconfigured from an object of ethnographic data into a potential theoretical frame. In the introduction of the volume, MacAloon cites its renewed definition, as provided by Barbara Babcock, Barbara Myerhoff and Victor Turner during a symposium they organized on the paradigmatic proposal of an anthropology of performance through the study of rites and festivals: cultural performances are "occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others" (1).

Generally, scholars have been attributing cultural performance as a cultural fact and a cultural lens for the understanding of personal identity and communal belonging, through what McKenzie calls "the dramatization or embodiment of symbolic forms." Moreover, as it is viewed as "imperative of social efficacy, theorists have largely concentrated on performance's transformational potential" (2001, 31).

But what account a *cultural performance*? The safest direction is to think of its components. Singer writes, "[T]he performance became for me the elementary constituents of the culture and the ultimate units of observation. Each one had a definitely limited time span, or at least a beginning and an end, an organized program

of activity, a set of performers, an audience and a place and occasion of performance” (1972, 70). These components, remarkably, are the same vocabularies traditionally used in the theatre. McKenzie explains,

theatre thus provides the human sciences with metaphors and tropes which are developed into conceptual tools for analyzing other activities, and those tools may then pass back to humanities scholars and become applied anew. From theatre to metaphor to analytical concept and back to theatre and other performances. (2001, 35)

Nevertheless, if these are the markers constituting a cultural performance, then how different are these performances from the staged and live performances of the theatre?

Combining perspectives from anthropologists, folklorists, performance scholars, and even remarks from informants encountered in the field, some probable identifiable markers of a cultural performance can be gleaned. The relationship of cultural performance and folklore has special significance in this attempt toward a definition. Folklorists were the first to embrace cultural performance as an important idiom for the understanding of culture and society. In this regard, a cultural performance has folkloric value in the sense that it is also “an artistic communication in small groups” (Ben-Amos 1972, 14). Kapchan also equates folklore to cultural performance because both are repetitive aesthetic practices whose repetition “situates actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities” (1995, 479).

The water ritual and festival such as the devotion of the Apaliteños to St. Peter in the province of Pampanga is an example of a cultural performance that reinforces such aesthetic practice and artful accomplishment that structure a sense of the collective. Apaliteños continuously construct narratives reinforcing their personal and communal devotions to St. Peter, as I note in *Performing Catholicism*:

These personal narratives woven together consensually validate the Apaliteños’ claims for factuality. By weaving these narratives together, the community formalizes the backbone of their sociocultural life. A personal narrative leads to a communal undertaking... In weaving these narratives together, the Apaliteños have consensually come up with a particular belief: If great faith in Apung Iru is maintained, their intentions and petitions will be granted. (2016, 34-35)

This creation of a narrative is an artful accomplishment that, in a sense, is communicated consensually to community members.

But while there is consensus, this does not mean there are no tensions or conflicts among community members. This is especially since narrative-making is a complex scenario because stories from stakeholders are always arbitrary. In *Anthropology of Christianity*, Fenella Cannell explains that in the construction of narrative and meaning in many Christian-Catholic communities, participants creating the stories can be best described as being in tension with one another because “Christianity’s meaning is always undetermined by any single historical, social, or ideological context in which it is deployed; [...] it is deployed by power holders for the purposes of domination, and even if most of the potential interpretations of Christian doctrine inevitably remain unrealized in social action at any time” (43). In this sense, the consensual community narrative is a product of never-ending negotiations among stakeholders. Conflicts and tensions can never be avoided because a community is a conglomeration of different subjectivities.

The narrative becomes the base, the source of activities turned into cultural performance, which, according to Kapchan’s discursive provision, is performed publicly even if the efficacy is often intended for a personal advocacy or purpose. In *Power and Intimacy* (1999), anthropologist Fenella Cannell notes that the public performance of a ritual is necessary because it adds to the efficacy of the personal: activating a sense of assurance that the Divine will reciprocate the performer’s intention via allowing the devotion to be witnessed by the public. The same manifestation of the private-public is performed by the *magdarame* (self-flagellants) in the province of Pampanga: as informants have explained, it is only through the pain experienced in the public performance that these devotees feel the assurance that the Divine is listening and in return reciprocates the personal devotion that motivated the performer-devotees to do the performance to begin with.³

In Berga, in the state of Catalonia in Spain, Catholic devotees perform the *Patum*, a ritual whose origin is believed to predate Catholicism and is a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity inscribed by the United Nations for Educational and Scientific Organization (UNESCO). This ritual brings together a multitude of people, including visitors, to carouse in live music from the moment the pieces of *tabal* (large ceremonial drums) appear in the streets after the parade of what locals call *balls* – effigies such as dragons and other mythical figures dressed with symbolic meaning. Folklorist and anthropologist Dorothy Noyes (1995) observes how the festive performance brings the personal into a communal action. She notes that the ritual-festival is “calling performance a communal action, creating a shared reality, and over time a fund of common experience; it makes mutual understanding at the same level possible” (138).

Cultural performance is also an intervening space between the past and the present, the self and the community, the state and religion, ornament and function, fact and fiction, celebration and solemnity, the sacred and the secular, and other related entanglements. In short, it blurs boundaries of the everyday life and special occasions, making cultural performance a liminal entity. Borrowing from *The Ritual Process* (1969), Victor Turner's seminal anthropological inquiry on ritual performance, a cultural performance may be perceived as entities that

[a]re neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by a law, custom, convention and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (95)

A useful concept identifiable with liminal entity is entanglement, mixing and matching different elements together to a point that these elements are no longer recognizable. The performance of *palo-palo* in the Batanes Islands in the Northern Philippines is a good example (see Figure 1). For many, the *palo-palo* is an Ivatan



Figure 1. Students of Sabtang National School of Fisheries depicting a war between colonizers and the natives. The colonizers are wearing European inspired costumes while the natives are wearing costumes made of coconut leaves and other local materials. Photo courtesy of Mary Rose Charito Calma.

tradition performed by students during school gatherings such as foundation days. For others, it is one of the presentations performed during an organized program for fiesta celebrations of barangays and municipalities of the Batanes group of islands. In the provincial capital of Basco, the *palo-palo* is also performed as a gesture of hospitality when important personalities or figures visit the province.

Many Ivatans associate the *palo-palo* as an entanglement of local tradition, Spanish culture and strong Catholic faith. According to an informant, the performance is a depiction of the community's resistance and struggle against the colonizers. However, ironically, high-school teachers in barangay Chavayan point out how the Ivatans, in a way, are thankful for the Spaniards for providing them such a performance tradition. In Vincente Rafael's *The Promise of the Foreign* (2005), he warns his readers that this promise is not simply an infatuation or over-excitement with the foreign (i.e. the promise of grandiosity and greatness of our former colonizers). Rafael asserts that the introduction of the theatre form *komedya* "broached the possibility of intermittently imagined communities founded on the recognition of the foreign lodged in the familiar" (2005, 177).⁴ Following the same line of argumentation, the *palo-palo* has an important role in shaping community consciousness (perhaps, an Ivatan consciousness) through this creation of assemblage based on blurred boundaries of the foreign and the local, the religious and the secular, entertainment and efficacy, to name a few.

Another example of boundaries blurring is the performance of the *ati-atihan* during the town's fiesta in Kalibo in the province of Aklan. *Ati-atihan* is a street-dance performance honoring the black-skinned ancestors of the islanders called the *ati* and a performance-devotion to the Santo Niño (Holy Child). In *Places for Happiness* (2016), William Peterson describes the performance as the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane in such a way that performer-devotees of the Santo Niño mingle in the streets with drunken merrymakers and spectacularly attired dancers day and night for a week. Organized by both the local Roman Catholic Church and the municipal government of Kalibo, this festivity has interesting spaces where representations of the Divine (in the figure of the Holy Child) are performed in colorful varieties. More particularly, the representations become more complex when locals begin to strip off the Divine attributes of the image such as configuring Him as a "mischievous boy, who surreptitiously leaves his altar night after night," while others think of Him as a "naughty boy, who secretly steps down at night to gallivant around Kalibo's deserted streets to tease and play harmless tricks on the residents" (Alcedo 2007, 110-11). In this regard, the performance becomes a liminal entity in the way that the boundaries of the sacred and the secular are blurred by

mixing and matching Roman Catholic dogma (the attribution of the Santo Niño as a Divine) and the narratives of everyday Catholicism.

Finally, cultural performance is implicated as an important community narrative. Philip Zarilli (1992) notes, “[P]erformance as a mode of cultural action is not a simple reflection of some essentialized, fixed attributes of a static, monolithic culture but an arena for the constant process of renegotiating experiences and meaning that constitute culture” (108). In addition to previously mentioned examples of St. Peter personified as Apu in Apalit, the engagement of the foreign and the local in palo-palo, and the mixing and matching of the Divine and everyday life in *ati-atihan*, the *pintados* in Leyte is another fascinating example of a cultural performance in which a community narrative is implicated. The *pintados* features performances of songs, dances and body art and is performed annually every 29th of June in Tacloban City. All municipalities of the province gather together and perform their own renditions of the *pintados* based on a storyline reflecting their respective municipalities. Often, the narratives they perform in the festival are based on the community’s collection of *kuwentong bayan* (folk stories) such as the romantic encounter of the *engkantada* (loosely translated as fairies) and an ordinary person (most of the time, a fisherman), or the folk story regarding how the creation of the universe due to the constant fighting of the god of the waters and the god of the air. The festival was founded to commemorate the pre-Hispanic locals of the island who, as Hispanic annotators noted, wore elaborate and colorful body tattoos.

THE PHILIPPINE ARCHIPELAGO OR THE PERFORMING NATION

In *Places for Happiness*, William Peterson interrogates how happiness, performances and community may be simultaneously experienced when one visits the Philippines. In my view, the inclusion of happiness in the title of the book is a conceptual strategy to locate the place of the Philippines in the scholarly world of Southeast Asian theatre and performance, where scholars are often engaged in a constant search for the indigenous. As Peterson implies, there is “unhibited fun through performance” (2016, 2) in the archipelago, following a comment made by a fellow passenger in the Philippine Airlines about two Filipino children happily playing en route Manila, the nation’s capital. He later notes what may be inferred as a prelude to his larger claims on Philippine performance: “Fun was its own reason for being, and from that we took pleasure that contributed to our individual and collective happiness” (2016, 2).

Following this line of argumentation, the very idea of “performing culture” is not new to the Filipino people. The Philippines is a nation of cultural performances, with all its regional festivities, religious and sacred rituals, beauty pageants, excessive political rhetoric in the house of congress and senate, beauty pageants, boxing matches and basketball games. These performance activities are embodiments of artistic communications in small groups, public events, continuums between past and present, based on contested and collective narratives. Often, these are in the forms of ritualistic songs and dances performed during community festivities. In this regard, it is relevant to hark back on an essay I co-authored with Guevara and Gatchalian (2014) where we explained that the tourism strategy during the time of President Corazon C. Aquino: Advertising or marketing the Philippines as a Fiesta Archipelago or Fiesta Island, a promotional tactic which continued even after Aquino’s term. This is because every region – more so, every province – mounts its own cultural performance through its celebration of fiestas, whether state-civic or religious in nature. Many cultural performances implicate personal or private affairs in public performance and embody a sense of collective narrative-making through a unique and artistic means of communication among members of the group. While the Philippine *pista* (fiesta) is generally Catholic, it should be noted that the Philippines is not entirely a Catholic nation. In this regard, we can also look at the idea of “performing archipelago” vis-à-vis performing culture through the different colorful, secular and civic festivals that community members or local government units commonly organize.

I look at three examples of local cultural performances in Luzon to reflect on a possible model for the contextual understanding of cultural performance in the Philippines: the funeral of a dead Christ in Angeles City, boat-blessing in Zambales, and the *santacruzán* performed in different Catholic communities in the archipelago.

Devotion, Prayer, and Catholicism

In Angeles City in Pampanga, every Good Friday, the congregation of the Shrine of the Holy Sepulcher, locally known as *Apung Mamacalulu* or the dead Christ, in Barangay Lourdes Sur mourns the death of Christ right after the Catholic Church-endorsed ritual of the Veneration of the Cross. At 3 p.m., the Veneration of the Cross commences, headed by the Shrine rector. In the veneration ritual, the presider (the priest) leads the congregation in approaching a cross and then offers a gesture of respect to all that the cross represents. This gesture includes kneeling and bowing before the cross and then kissing it.

Normally, a *limbon* is held right after the Catholic Church veneration ritual. It is a depiction or reenactment of Jesus's passion and death through tableaux or life-size figures. While the *limbon* is common in many Catholic churches in Angeles City or elsewhere in the Philippines, at the Shrine of the Holy Sepulcher, the congregation participates in a mourning ritual as the image of Apung Mamacalului brought down from its altar and is paraded around the vicinity of the church or the shrine. The image is also accompanied by a life-sized image of Mater Dolorosa (The Sorrowful Mother) privately owned by a community member.

For about 30 minutes, the in-house *limbon* is led by the Shrine's ministry of liturgy head. Behind the image of the Apung Mamacalulu are black-veiled women volunteers carrying vigil candles (see Figure 2). They mourn histrionically as if mourning a family member. Right after the women are the Shrine's active organizations like the Knights of the Blessed Sacrament and Apu Youth Ministry, followed by the image of the Mater Dolorosa standing in a beautifully decorated *karo* (procession wagon). Behind the image are laymembers (some volunteers and some invited by the rector) dressed as apostles. The rest of the congregation follow last.



Figure 2. The black-veiled women who mourn during the procession of the image of *Apung Mamacalulu* of the dead Christ inside the Shrine of the Holy Sepulcher. Photo courtesy of Loyd Jayril Tiatco.

After the procession, Apung Mamacalulu is brought in front of the altar. The crying veiled women continue their histrionic mourning and cry for about 20 minutes while delivering a prayer in Kapampangan. The delivery is almost chant-like, similar to the Kapampangan *pasyon*. Right after the mourning, the women offer their vigil

candles around the image. The women afterwards leave the church to give way for the rest of the congregation to pay respect to Apung Mamacalulu. The image of the Mater Dolorosa is also brought out of the church. Church ushers and usherettes lead the devotees to the image.

The devotion, or the kissing of Apung Mamacalulu, normally ends at midnight, but at the time of fieldwork, the organizer ended the devotion at 10 p.m. One of the apostles (assuming the role of Peter) faces the devotees and announces that Apung Mamacalulu is about to be buried.

The apostles then bring the image out of the church and transfer it to the Dayrit ancestral house, which is adjacent to the shrine. The transfer is a symbolic gesture of burying the dead Christ. The ancestral house is a strategic site of transfer because it is the same site where the image of Apung Mamacalulu was kept prior to the transfer of the shrine to the Archdiocese of Pampanga in the early 2000s.

The apostles lay the image in one of the ancestral house rooms. There, Apung Mamacalulu is symbolically undressed while lying in bed. The head apostle enters and brings with him a new set of clothes. Apung Mamacalulu is then dressed with this new set of clothes. Afterwards, the image is delicately covered by a white blanket. Everyone in the room delivers a prayer before the image, after which Apung Mamacalulu is left inside the room prior to its return to the shrine on Easter Sunday.

Gathering Together: Sub-Community within a Community

Some 120 km drive west of Angeles City is Barangay Pundaquit in the province of Zambales. One way of understanding the socio-cultural life in this barangay is to understand the people's relationship with the sea. Barangay Pundaquit is a fishing village. Compared to its neighboring towns, the beaches in this village are more serene and, as the townsfolk claim, calmer. The town is also known for its cove barrios and islands covered with white sand such as Capones and Camara. Pundaquit thus depends on the water for economic sustenance, with the people's primary livelihood being fishing and tourism.

Fisherfolk commonly leave the shore to catch fish at the West Philippine Sea at two in the afternoon. They return to shore between six and eight in the evening. If they catch a huge school of fish, they go straight to the market and sell their catch to fish vendors. On a good day, the fisherfolk may earn up to a thousand pesos each.

On bad days, they go straight to the beaches and sell their catch directly to tourists. A well-known type of fish that tourists commonly buy from them is the *pompano*.

While many are fisherfolk, some residents earn a living by transporting tourists from the shore of Barangay Sitio Tres to the different islands and coves of Pundaquit where the beaches are located. People of Pundaquit are proud to claim that their small town is known for its comparatively calm and clean beaches. Other than Capones and Camara, the town is also known for its tourist coves such as Anawangin, Nagsasa and Sinlanguin.

Since water is an important element of the people's socio-economic life in Pundaquit, the boat also represents a significant part in the people's everyday life. Normally, a household contracts a boat maker from purok 3 (zone 3) to make one for the family. Once the boat is made, family members are not allowed to use it until it undergoes the ritual of *bendisyon* (blessing ritual). In this predominantly Catholic community, households often contact the priest from a nearby town where the closest parish church, San Raphael Parish, is located. On the day of the *bendisyon*, the boat is placed off-shore and decorated, typically with colorful sweets or candies wrapped in plastic containers. Other households include packed meals in the decorations.

During the *bendisyon*, the priest recites prayers from a book of prayers. Afterwards, the priest begins to sprinkle holy water on members of the household first and on the boat next. While the boat is sprinkled with holy water, the priest invites everyone to say the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary and Glory Be, three well-known prayers in the Catholic tradition. Afterwards, the owner recites his or her own prayer before everyone. A resident of Sitio Nagsasa recalls her own prayer when she had her boat blessed: "*Bendisyunan niyo po ang sasakay at ihahatid ng bangkang ito. Ilayo niyo po sila sa kapahamakan*" (Please bless whoever rides this boat. Keep him away from any danger).

After the benediction, the boat owner usually throws some coins which signals the start of *agawan* (seizing). First, the children compete for the coins thrown by the owner. Afterwards, the young participants start to retrieve the plastic containers hooked to the boat. If food is hooked to the boat, older visitors also join in the *agawan*.

As soon as the boat is blessed and all the materials are consumed by the participants from the *agawan*, the boat owner and a boatman push the boat to the shore. While onshore, two men, or sometimes women, ride the boat and begin the first journey. The participants then applaud the first sojourn and wish them good luck.

Pageantry, Festivity, and Narrative

The *santacruzán* is another popular cultural performance in the Philippines performed in different Catholic communities of the archipelago during the month of May. The month of May in the Philippines is a transitory period from the heat of the dry season to the start of the wet season (or the monsoon) locally known as the *tag-ulan*. In *Sagala* (2006), Abe Florendo and Zardo A. Austria describe the month as a period in the archipelago when “the blazing tropical sun turns the fields of grain into golden brown and coaxes the flowers to bloom and the fruits to ripen on the boughs, suffusing the air with a fresh fragrance – in farms and homes, at elegant banquet tables and modest vendors’ stalls – and tempting everyone with a luscious fleshiness” (1), signifying the festive environment that the season brings to the community. May is also popularly known as the month of flowers in the archipelago.

The Catholic Church also marks May as the month of the Virgin Mary in the predominantly Catholic country. Beginning in the 13th century, the Christians (and Catholics) have been dedicating the month of May to the Virgin, proclaiming her as the Queen of the Heaven and Earth. In modern times, Pope Paul VI continued envisioning May as the month dedicated to the Virgin. He wrote in his 1965 encyclical message that the devotion must be used as a means of obtaining prayers for peace.

In the Philippines, the combination of this devotion to Mary and the festive mood brought by colorful flowers results in a month-long secular festivity called *santacruzán* or *flores de mayo* (flowers of May). In many Tagalog communities it is called *sagala* (see Figure 3). In other regions of the country, *santacruzán* is known in several names: *dotoc* in the Bicol region, *katapusan* or *pag-aalay* in the Southern Tagalog region of Batangas and Laguna, *sabatan* in Pampanga.



Figure 3. The *sagala* ritual-pageant in Lucena City during its celebration of the Pasayahan 2016 or the city-wide Fiesta in May. Photo courtesy of Kevin Brandon Saure.

According to Florendo and Austria, the performance is believed to have originated from Malolos, Bulacan where the community in olden times performed an annual *komedya* titled “Tibag” by an unknown author. The play narrates the legend of Queen Helena and her court as they search for the holy cross or the wooden figure where Jesus Christ was crucified. Today, the santacruzán is no longer a reenactment based on a staged *komedya* but a parade of muses representing the play’s important characters, particularly Reyna Elena and his son Constantino.

Traditionally, the santacruzán is a parade or a ritual pageant where young women don costumes of elaborate gowns, representing mythical characters, historical and cultural figures, and different names attributed to the Virgin Mary. Accompanied by the townsfolk singing devotional songs for the Virgin Mary (often the popular Latin prayer “Dios te Salve” and “Ave Maria”) and by young men (commonly family members) holding *sulô* (torches) to illuminate the night, each woman is accompanied by two men carrying an *arko*, a decorated bamboo arch covered with colorful flowers and papier mâché. On top of each arch is the character title the muse represents. At the end of the pageant is the court of Reyna Elena and her son Constantino guarded by a group of 12 men, commonly called *dose pares*.

Following the muses is a group of young girls commonly clad in angel costumes or sometimes also in gowns. They hold placards spelling out Ave Maria, pertaining to the different titles associated with the Virgin Mary. In many traditional santacruzán, a total of 15 titles are paraded: from Divina Pastora to Reyna Candelaria and other names known in the Catholic world. After the Marian titles is the Reyna de Flores or the Queen of Flowers, typically assigned to a young lady who is also considered to play the role of Queen Helena. In some areas, a beauty pageant is held prior to the santacruzán in which the winner is assigned to be Reyna Helena and her runner-up, Reyna de Flores.

Reyna de Flores is then followed by the court of Helena commencing with a lad riding a horse. In some areas, he is named Heneral Roldan, believed to be the general of the court. He is followed by the *dose pares*, or members of the army, whom he leads. After this group of young men, Reyna Elena is accompanied by a young boy named Constantino. The grandiosity of Reyna Elena and Constantino are marked by their appearance under a grand *arko* with four handles and sometimes held by four boys.

In Angeles City, to hark back on santacruzán’s history as a street play reenacting the search for the holy cross where Christ was crucified, a Moorish prince named Goido prevents the court from proceeding and accuses the Reyna Elena and her company

as trespassers. In the end, Goido allows the pilgrims to proceed as he falls in love with the queen.

In San Luis, Batangas, the pageant starts at the village's *kapilya* (small church). The delegation begins with *musicos* (brass band) playing popular tunes. The band is followed by a group of hired teenage youths performing the *ati-atihan* and a group of young majorettes. The actual pageant then follows, beginning with small children dressed in colorful gowns. With them are flowers to be offered to the Virgin Mary at the end of the pilgrimage inside the *kapilya*. The *hermano* and his family members are next in line (see Figure 4). On the *hermano's* hand is the *emmie*, a symbolic object passed on to the *hermano* by the fiesta committee to signify his primary role of financing and sponsoring the year's pageant-ritual. Next in line are the *sagalas* or muses. To distinguish their roles, they wear sashes the *hermano* has provided with the inscription of the roles assigned to them. As in the traditional *santacruzán*, the cultural, historical and mythical figures walk before the Marian titles. In addition to the common Marian titles, the San Luis *santacruzán* includes other Marian titles such as the Lady of Caysasay, Lourdes and Fatima. Unlike the traditional *santacruzán*, the young girls costumed as angels are lined up only after these Marian titles, carrying their placards spelling Ave Maria. Immediately after the angels are Reyna Elena and Constantino, played by the *hermano's* daughter and son.



Figure 4. The *hermano* and his wife during the *santacruzán* performance in San Luis, Batangas in 2016. Photo courtesy of Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco.

Since the introduction of Catholicism in the Philippines, this tradition and cultural performance has lived on for more than 100 years. Today, the pageant ritual has evolved in several typologies. In Marikina and in Malabon, the annual santacruzán is performed by the *bakla* (homosexuals) and transvestites. In Pasay City, at the Mall of Asia, the Fashion Designers Association of the Philippines host an annual santacruzán where members of the association compete among themselves as they interpret the different characters of the santacruzán through elaborately designed gowns and costumes.

PHILIPPINE CULTURAL PERFORMANCES: PANATA, PAGTITIPON, PAGDIRIWANG

When asked why people engage in these cultural performances, three reasons consistently emerge: *panata* (sacrificial vow), *pagtitipon* (gathering of a small group), and *pagdiriwang* (community festivity). In this section of the paper, I look into the specifics of these phenomena and propose that Philippine cultural performances are contextualized by the tripartite framework of panata, pagtitipon and pagdiriwang.

The mourning ritual at the Shrine of the Holy Sepulcher in Angeles City is centered on panata but is also a performed pagtitipon and a pagdiriwang. As an informant remarked, the performance is a commemoration of Christ's sacrifice; therefore, it is also a pagdiriwang, a celebration of how Jesus, the Christ in the Catholic-Christian world, saved mankind from sins. Since the performance also involves a small group, the Church congregation, it is also appropriate to think of it as a pagtitipon, similar to the communal gathering that churchgoers perform during the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist.

In Pundaquit in the province of Zambales, the informants suggest that the boat-blessing ritual-performance is a prayer-petition invoking the Almighty to guide whoever rides in it. At the same time, it is an act of petition to ask the Divine for good yield from the waters of Zambales. Obviously, it is a pagtitipon as it gathers together the host or hostess' family members, relatives and friends. Finally, it is an implicit celebration of success, or pagdiriwang, indicating prestige achieved by the host or the hostess. Despite it being a necessity, a boat in this small village in Zambales costs thousands of pesos. Not everyone in the village can afford a boat that can accommodate tourists or a large volume of fish. For this reason, boat-blessing is highly anticipated in the village, and people look forward to celebrating these milestones with fellow villagers.

Finally, the santacruzán as a cultural performance is centered on pagdiriwang. In recent years, it has evolved into a spectacle featuring the most beautiful women in a village. Each village has its own rendition of the performance, making it a pagtitipon. However, panata is also highly engaged since it is still a very religious ritual-performance. For instance, beauty queen Yvethé Santiago (Binibining Pilipinas Supranational 2014) has been participating in the santacruzán since her younger years (see Figure 5). In May 2016, the Designers Association of Quezon invited her to be the province's Reyna Elena, which she promptly accepted. Over the years, she developed a career in modeling. This paved the way for many more invitations for her to participate in different santacruzán and sagala, which she accommodated as long as her schedule permitted because for her, taking part in the santacruzán and in the sagala are acts of panata stemming from generations of devotion to the Virgin Mary. Analogous to the barefoot procession she participated in when she was young in her home province of Albay, she thought of walking long distances in 5- to 6-inch heels and wearing heavy gowns (including, during her participation in Lucena, a 20-kg gown) as forms of sacrifices, especially if these combined with enduring the heat of the sun or the downpour of rain.



Figure 5. Binibining Pilipinas Supranational 2014 Yvethé Santiago as the Reyna Elena in the sagala ritual-pageant of Lucena City in 2016. Photo courtesy of Kevin Brandon Saure.

Broadly, panata is a religious vow whereby a devotee promises to do sacrifice for his faith in the hope of being rewarded by divine response to his prayers. In *Figuring Catholicism* (2010) and *Performing Catholicism* (2016a), Julius Bautista and I respectively explain that this religious act is oftentimes associated with the Catholic

doctrine. Commonly, it is explored as a colorful performative cultural activity linking *pagdamay*, or sympathy, with what Jesus, the Christ in the Christian and Catholic frameworks, experienced when he was sentenced to die on the cross. This is also the reason why most panata acts are performed during Holy Week in the Catholic calendar. Since these acts are linked to a shared pain with Jesus, most performances involve visceral and physical acts involving pain. Such acts are not incidental, as anthropologist Bautista (2011) notes:

Pain is central to the founding narrative of Christianity. It is a religion founded upon the belief that Jesus Christ, a divine being, underwent the excruciating torment of state sanctioned (sic) torture, thereby enduring the limits and vulnerability of the human body. It is founded, also, on Christ's transcendence of pain and the mortality of the body itself. (152)

Panata may also be understood as a pathway, or the devotees' link, to their Almighty. It refers to devotees' petitions and intentions as well as their acts of thanksgiving. For many folks in the locales visited for this study, panata is simply translated as *dasal*, as in the case of Chavayan in Batanes, Lucena City in Quezon, and San Luis in Batangas. Despite various meanings attached to the idea of panata, one thing is clear: it is a personal act performed before a community. Panata is an experience of sacrifice, done individually yet performed for the good of others as well. Thus, the community is invoked as the end-all of this social phenomenon (Tiatco 2016a, 17).

On the other hand, pagtitipon is literally translated as gathering. These are commonly performances during special affairs or events that implicate a much smaller group. In many instances, these are cultural performances performed by a group within a group. These are traditions and practices of families transferred from one generation to another but nonetheless are based on cultural norms such as weddings, baptisms, and funerals. These are cultural performances coming from personal habits transformed into ritualized activities and performed before specific publics. But apart from these kinds of familial or domestic pagtitipon, the term is also used to signify meetings of congregations such as those performed in various Church activities.

During the launch of the Performance Studies International Conference in August 2013 at the De La Salle University in Manila, the convening team used the concept of pagtitipon as the main billing of the academic gathering. In the call for participation to the event, the Philippine Literature Portal writes pagtitipon as "a gathering [that] connotes a communion of multiples, the coming together of things,

objects, persons, ideas, practices already there, and being here, becoming one thing, something, now, without erasing previous autonomous, plural, existences. Perhaps it is a different, not necessarily new, way of being together..." The phrases "becoming one thing" and "way of being together" indicate these events as mimicking some aspects of rituals: the creation of *communitas* (collective), and the production of liminal encounters following Turner's arguments on rituals in *The Ritual Process* and *The Anthropology of Performance*. It is also for this reason that many of these performances integrate feasting, sometimes music-playing, often dancing, and in many instances even gift-giving, not unlike the Pundaquit performance of the boat-blessing.

J. Lowell Lewis explains that

when an event is created to be extremely important and vitally necessary, then it makes sense for it to become progressively more and more elaborated. One way that this happens with special events is for the framework to become redundantly marked, with multiple beginnings and multiple endings. (2013, 61)

These cultural performances are understood by participants as matters of concern but nevertheless are not really fundamental. For performers of the boat-blessing ritual in Pundaquit, their participation is a way of identifying with the sub-group to which they belong. It is a performance of consensus within a smaller group in a community, or artistic communications in smaller group within a small group. However, they are also aware that the performance is not a necessity in the sense that the larger social sphere where they belong will continue to exist and move forward even if the performance were not performed.

The *kasipa* performed by mostly male individuals in Marawi City in Lanao del Sur is another example (see Figure 6). This performance is a traditional game commonly performed during the enthronement of a *datu* or a *sultan*. In this cultural performance, a leader-performer kicks a rattan ball up in the air. All performers should maintain the ball in the air. If the ball falls down to the ground within the area of a performer, the performer is eliminated from the game. In one of the visits to Marawi City, I observed that this cultural performance is performed in the town plaza almost every day at six in the morning. When asked why men perform the ritual-like event, one member claims that the performance is a display of skills. Another explains that it is a peer event where they rehearse their skills in case a new *datu* or a new *sultan* is enthroned. It is their constant rehearsal because they want to perform

their best before a sultan or a datu as he celebrates his enthronement. At the end of the performance, the best group performing the kasipa receives a prize from the datu. In other cases, the datu or the sultan may request a last-man-standing performance; in this case, the last “performer standing” is proclaimed the winner. He is then awarded a gift, commonly in the form of cash.



Figure 6. Kasipa morning ritual at the town’s plaza of Marawi City performed by men. Photo courtesy of Asnanie Cabili Marohom.

Finally, the concept of pagdiriwang is also highly implicated in Philippine cultural performances. Literally, pagdiriwang means celebration. In the context of cultural performance, pagdiriwang is synonymous with festival. William Sauter equates a festival to a theatrical event, a model developed via four basic concepts of (1) playing culture, or the communication of the culture’s value system; (2) cultural context, or the socio-political and socio-historical environments in which the festival is taking place; (3) contextual theatricality, or the conditions under which the festival-event takes place; and (4) theatrical playing, or the encounter between the

performer and the spectator. Sauter notes these elements are working together during a festival because the community members are also working hand in hand to activate their shared values, identities and history.

While Sauter's analysis of the festival is useful for the understanding of pagdiriwang, a more useful concept is the *pista* (Philippine fiesta). In another essay, I explain that *pista* may literally mean "celebration" or "party" and that these festive gatherings are entangled phenomena, entangling representations, shared histories, relationships and genres. As a performance of entangled representations, "the *pista* is interrogated as a complex phenomenon, thought of as solemn yet at the same time secular; a festivity where neither the state nor the Church is in the ultimate position of authority; a parade of holiness; and a procession of spectacle" (2016b, 156). The *pista* is also a celebration of shared histories, discussed as the performance of "colonial histories, which are often dismissed as trivial and deceitful because of the destructive forces many colonial masters exhibited during colonialism" (134). Furthermore, "the *pista* is also an occasion where various opposing political parties literally sit side-by-side. This is especially true when the ruling elites attend the Holy Eucharist. Even if the gestures are artificial, it is notable to see these people exchanging peace-be-with-you's in one of the important parts of the sacrament" (138). Finally, it may be inferred that *pista* celebrations are filled with excesses. Often, these excesses are derived from the different performance activities, such as the procession, beauty pageants, parades, concerts, sports festivals. In short, "festive dancing, singing and other performances are combined together in a *pista*—making the religious occasion extravagantly spectacular" (138).

In understanding cultural performance as a pagdiriwang, it is seen as a theatrical event that mixes and matches representations, shared histories, relationships and genres. Performers consciously exhibit their artistic skills in order to create symbolic figures addressing common values, identities and histories. As a pagdiriwang, these cultural performances are literally colorful because they mix and match elaborate and symbolical costumes while ritualistically performing songs and dances. Cultural performances create a meaningful spectacle that reveal meta-narratives that the community members share and celebrate. Examples are yearly festivals performed in the different regions of the country. The *ati-atihan* in Kalibo, Aklan, for instance, is a commemoration of the community's pre-colonial past despite its current Catholic character. While the *ati-atihan* today is believed to be a *panata* (*panaad* in Kalibo) and devotion to the Santo Niño (Holy Child), Patrick Alcedo explains how the black make-up and elaborate costumes worn during the festival pay homage to the original settlers of the island of Panay.

On a final note, panata, pagtitipon and pagdiriwang share a disposition of concern for and a celebration of the “other.” Panata commonly refers to a deep devotion leading to a sacrificial performance, commonly for the sake of another person. The other is also implicated in both pagtitipon and pagdiriwang, as in a fiesta celebration which “begins with templates of sameness, intimacy, and hospitality or a sense of opening up of the self to ‘others.’ The pista calls for a recognition of shared intimacy among community members and between the hosting community members and guests” (Guevarra, Gatchalian and Tiatco 2014, 2). Through this tripartite model, cultural performances in the Philippines may be conceived as celebratory performances of openness, care and respect.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Since Milton Singer’s introduction of the term to the academic domain, cultural performance has evolved into an important observable unit in the study of the individual, society and culture. From anthropology and folklore studies, to communication and media studies, to theatre and performance studies, cultural performance is a significant lens which has led to the throwing off of earlier habits of using culture as a noun and the coming to terms with the complexity of recasting it as a verb. In short, the idea of culture has transformed from static object into performance.

The simplest way to think of a cultural performance is to think of its components: time span, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance. If we combine perspectives from various disciplines that utilize cultural performance as an observable unit or as a phenomenon for the understanding of culture and society, the following may be used as its identifiable markers: first, it is an artistic communication in a small group; second, it is performed before a public even if the efficacy is often intended for a personal advocacy or intention; third, it produces an intervening space between the past and the present, the self and the community, the state and religion, ornament and function, fact and fiction, celebration and solemnity, the sacred and the secular, and other related entanglements. Finally, it is implicated as an important community narrative.

Generally, the emergence of cultural performance as a social idiom in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology and folklore studies, and now in the humanities, especially in theatre and performance studies, paved the way for a dictum to

transform culture into action. In the Philippine context, it is important to note that the concept of culture as performance is not new to the Filipino people, as cultural performances are very prevalent in the cultural and political life of Filipinos.

By looking at some cultural performances from particular locales, I have proposed that to understand the context of Philippine cultural performance, one must look at these performances as processes of *panata*, *pagtitipon* and *pagdiriwang*. Moreover, it is also important to note that these performances are not only treasured because of their spectacular attributions but also because these performances activate the shared values, identities and histories of communities. As a final note, I propose looking at Philippine cultural performances as personal creative expressions of every community member that, despite intentions, goals and aims, become public as they are transformed from personal performances into ceremonial gatherings, sacrificial vows, and festive celebrations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This essay is part of a larger project entitled *Philippine Performance Archive*, funded by the University of the Philippines System, through the Emerging Interdisciplinary Research of the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs. In this regard, my sincerest gratitude is extended to the aforementioned institution.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Sangkan*, short for *Isang Angkan kay Kristo* or the National Association of Minor Seminaries in Luzon is a sports competition for minor seminaries in Luzon held four times annually. The competition would commence in July with high school seniors competing. The juniors would then meet in September, followed by the sophomores in October. The freshmen would close the year in February. Participating teams include minor seminaries from the archdioceses of Manila, Tuguegarao, Lipa, San Fernando (Pampanga), and the dioceses of Laoag, La Union, Vigan, Bangued, Cabanatuan, Bulacan, Antipolo, Sorsogon, Lucena and Borongan.
- ² The *sinulog* in Cebu, *ati-atihan* in Aklan and *dinagyang* in Iloilo are cultural performances venerating the Santo Niño. While these feature festive dancing in honor of a Catholic figure, these festivities, save the *sinulog*, are also commemorations of the coming of the first settlers to their respective locales, particularly the *atis* or the dark-skinned settlers. The *sinulog*, on the other hand, is also a commemoration of the pre-Hispanic religion in Cebu. The three festivals are performed yearly in January beginning with the *ati-atihan*, followed by the *sinulog* and then the *dinagyang* in the last week of the month. The *masskara* in Bacolod is a recent tradition that commenced in the 1980s to salute the

hardships of Bacolod's local heroes against oppressive and exploitative landlords. The festival is also a commemoration of different tragic events that the city in the late 1970s, particularly the sinking of a ship that killed many locals.

³ My observations of the *pamagdarame* and nailing rituals in Pampanga include the accounts of devotees who believe that the cross is the source of redemption: "carrying the cross is a mark of atonement and guarantees the bearer that his petition will be granted. More so, they believe that to be nailed on the cross is a complete surrender to the redemptive power of the cross. Some devotees narrate that before they actually decided to participate in the ritual, they dreamed of the cross" (Tiatco 2016a78).

⁴ In *Palabas* (1996), Doreen Fernandez describe the *komedya* as a traditional theatre form introduced by the Spaniards during colonization. It is a colorful theatrical tradition whose plots revolve around the social, political and religious conflicts between the Christians (generally, the Catholics) and the Muslims. This traditional theatre form was and still is commonly performed during fiesta celebrations of many Catholic communities.

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