

Political Activism through Liturgical Performance: Teatro Ekyumenikal and the Ecumenical Counterpublic at the United People's SONA

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ABSTRACT

While Duterte delivered his fourth State of the Nation Address (SONA) on July 22, 2019, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) Teatro Ekyumenikal also staged a “call to worship” performance during the ecumenical worship gathering before joining the United People’s SONA protest. Through the lenses of performance, embodiment, and counterpublic theory, I ask the question: What does it mean to engage in political activism through liturgical performance? Using ethnographic methods, I examine how this performance integrates various embodied forms, such as Scripture reading, Christian liturgical practices, the aesthetic traditions of Philippine protest theater (or “proletarian theater”), and the performative repertoires of protests and mobilizations whereby marginalized sectors are portrayed as empowered subjects with a voice. The ecumenical liturgical performances in this event aimed to converge with the protest collective and diverge from it by highlighting their Christian identity and the theological dimension of their activism. This ecumenical counterpublic performance not only challenged Duterte’s rhetoric and the dominant conservative Christian stance but also diverged from the secular-political framework of the United People’s SONA, transforming ecumenical practices into politically efficacious acts of ritual through liturgical performance.

Keywords: Liturgical performance, SONA, counterpublic, Teatro Ekyumenikal, embodiment

In 2019, when I heeded our church’s call to participate in the United People’s SONA protest, I discovered that various Christian groups regularly held ecumenical worship services before mobilizations as a gesture of solidarity with the protest movement. This worship service featured a variety of performances—prayers, exhortations, short dramas, and movement pieces—aimed at contextualizing the Christian perspective on the social issues plaguing the state of the nation at that time. This liturgical program was publicly held along the streets of Commonwealth Avenue in front of Ever Gotesco Mall in Quezon City, and was a collaborative event spearheaded by ecumenical bodies.¹ The term “ecumenical” originates from the Greek word “oikumene,” which means “the whole inhabited earth.” Ecumenism represents a movement, theology, or mode of action aimed at fostering fellowship and unity among Christian churches (Britannica). Aside from various churches and religious organizations, representatives from marginalized sectors and human rights groups also participated in the program, each assigned a distinct role during the mass. A livestream of the ecumenical liturgical program was also published through the Facebook page of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP), the largest ecumenical network of Protestant and non-Roman Catholic churches in the country, extending its reach to online audiences.

This ecumenical worship gathering unfolded within a tense political climate, marked by violent responses toward those opposing Duterte's government and the demonization of dissent within conservative Christian circles. The threat of violence against government critics is evident in Duterte's repeated attacks on Catholic Church leaders, whom he once referred to as "sons of bitches," even urging street criminals to "rob and kill bishops" for their outspoken condemnation of the extrajudicial killings tied to his drug war (Aurelio and Corrales). Bishop Pablo David of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), whose Diocese of Caloocan saw some of the worst violence—including the extrajudicial killings of teenagers Kian Delos Santos and Carl Arnaiz—has been especially outspoken. Duterte's open call to "rob and kill bishops" paved the way for several other murders of priests and church people. According to a report by Al Jazeera, during Duterte's administration, Father Richmond Nilo was shot by unidentified gunmen while preparing for a church service in Nueva Ecija. Additionally, a 72-year-old priest was killed in the same province after facilitating a political prisoner's release, and a 37-year-old priest who advocated for ethnic minorities and opposed mining was killed in Cagayan. A fourth priest, serving as chaplain for the Philippine police, survived an assassination attempt near Manila (Regencia). Duterte's hostility toward dissenting clergy extends beyond Roman Catholic leaders. On August 2, 2019, just a few days after Duterte's fourth State of the Nation Address, Ernesto Javier "Tata" Estrella, a pastor of the Protestant church United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), was fatally shot by motorcycle-riding gunmen. Pastor Tata, who was only known for his involvement in anti-government protests in Kidapawan City, had no known enemies at all (Sarmiento).

While a minority of Christian groups and individuals face the threat of violence for engaging in political dissent against Duterte's policies, the majority of conservative Christian groups view participation in protests as unbiblical and believe it should be discouraged. Cornelio and Villanueva note that "pastors and ministers around the country have echoed this message: Christians are called to evangelize, not to meddle with politics."² Moreover, former President Duterte's popularity is attributed to conservative theological beliefs claiming that he is "appointed by God" to cleanse the country of social ills, reinforcing the view that God is a punisher of the sinful (Esmaguél). Christians are urged to remain silent, pray for the President, and support his administration, as he is seen as divinely appointed. Protesting against the government, therefore, is framed as an act of rebellion against God. Furthermore, some conservative Christian groups promote the image of the "mapagtiis na Kristo" (long-suffering Christ) as a model for political behavior, emphasizing patience, humility in the face of suffering, and submission to authority as virtues to embody. In this context, conservative religious circles confine Christianity to the private sphere, reducing religious expression to matters of personal salvation, individual struggles, and spiritual growth.

Interestingly, the privatization of Christianity is not only promoted in religious settings but also embedded in secular modernist discourses, particularly through the secularization thesis. According to this thesis, "as modernization and its constituent processes—global economic growth, industrialization, education, urbanization, advances in science and technology, etc.—ascend, religion declines" (Gharavi 15). As a result, societies eventually move away from relying on enchantments such as spirits, myths, magic, and grand narratives, and fully embrace scientific and accurate natural explanations, especially in public affairs. This perspective not only created a secular/sacred binary but also confined the secular to rationality and the sacred to the mythical. Essentially, religion is viewed as a private matter that must not enter the public sphere unless these religious discourses are translated into purely secular terms.

Given this context, I am interested in exploring how progressive theological belief—expressed through ecumenical Christians’ participation in social justice acts such as protests—is constituted through liturgical performance. To explore this, I will focus on the “Call To Worship” performance of NCCP Teatro Ekyumenikal during the ecumenical liturgical program held along Commonwealth Avenue, just before the official start of the United People’s SONA 2019. Broadly speaking, liturgy refers to the order and structure of a Christian worship service. The term “liturgy” is derived from the Greek words “laos,” meaning “people,” and “ergos,” meaning “work,” thus framing liturgy as the work of the people. This established, I ask the question: What does it mean to engage in political activism through liturgical performance?

The Teatro Ekyumenikal, recently renamed as the Ecumenical Arts Collective in 2022, is the theater and liturgical arts group of the NCCP, an ecumenical network of Protestant and non-Roman Catholic churches in the Philippines.³ Interestingly, in the 1960s, the NCCP initially followed American Protestant traditions focused on individual salvation and avoided involvement in social and political issues. However, postwar developments and Marcos’s martial rule led the NCCP to abandon this apathy and unite with other church groups in opposing the oppressive government. This marked a turning point, embedding a progressive stance in the church’s history, and prompting the NCCP to actively address justice, peace, human rights, and ecological concerns (Suarez).⁴ In 2008, NCCP Program Secretary for Ecumenical Education and Nurture Melinda Grace Aonanan emphasized that the NCCP’s ecumenical mission is holistic, involving the entire church and advocating for the oppressed in their pursuit of peace and liberation.⁵

NCCP’s Teatro Ekyumenikal was founded by Dr. Rommel Linatoc, a professor of Media and Development Studies, Theology, and Community Development at the University of the Philippines Manila, as well as a member of (UCCP). Dr. Linatoc has a long-standing background in community theater in Manila, is deeply passionate about creative worship and liturgies, and is also a committed advocate for migrant workers’ rights through his membership in Migrante International. While serving as the Program Secretary of the NCCP’s Christian Unity and Ecumenical Relations ministry, he established Teatro Ekyumenikal. Since then, the group has utilized theater to educate and engage audiences on social justice issues and broaden perspectives on prayer, worship, and spirituality (Ross et al.).⁶ Interestingly, in an article published in the lifestyle section of the Philippine Daily Inquirer in 2016, Teatro Ekyumenikal was referred to as an “activist theater fired up by the gospels” (Alviar).

This research attempts to fill in the knowledge gap on the State of the Nation Address (SONA) as a rhetorical performance. Studies reveal the power of the President’s SONA in justifying government policies and ideologies of power (Navera), but the artifacts examined in these studies remain to be the text-context of President’s speeches (Salvaleon; Miranda et al). In other words, there is plenty of documentation on the official historical narratives of the state of the nation through the perspective of the Chief Executive, but only few resources on United People’s SONA events, specifically of the religious actors present in it. On the one hand, while a few studies examine official pronouncements released by ecumenical institutions concerning their participation in public life and social issues in the Philippines, there is a gap in research on how these institutions employ embodied and creative practices in political events (Susmirano; Jison and Yonaha). On the other hand, news articles and research focusing on the performative presence of ecumenical groups in progressive social change tend to concentrate on the political and secular goals of their performances, often overlooking the spiritual and theological dimension as well as the performance of religiosity within these groups

(Franco; Banta). My research aims to expand the way performance scholars view political events such as the SONA by focusing on it as an embodied performance with multiple performers and addressed publics, and to highlight the importance of religion's performative presence in protests and progressive publics.

Theoretical Perspectives

Public Sphere and Religion

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas first conceptualized about the existence of a public in his theory of the public sphere. For him, the public sphere is “a deliberative space with agreed-upon rules for rational argumentation in which equal citizens meet to build communities, identities, and political opinions” (Chambers et al. 1). Habermas traces the emergence of this model from the late 17th and 18th-century Europe when bourgeois publics convened in salons and coffeehouses to discuss politics and the way they were governed by authorities. It was during this period when public opinion replaced religion as a legitimizing force of sovereign authority. In other words, the public sphere became “a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” (Fraser 2).

However, critics of Habermas's conceptions of a public sphere are skeptical of how it is constituted in its definition—that there is a singular public sphere in which all citizens negotiate decisions of collective concern (Pezzullo). This argument is based on the fact that this public sphere seems to include only the modern, eloquent, and bourgeois male in its constitution, and excludes the ways in which women, the working class, and peasants perform publics. Additionally, there is the notion that one has to bracket off one's identity and dismiss actual social inequalities when rationally deliberating with others, which actually works for the advantage of a society's dominant groups but at the expense of disadvantaged populations.

Michael Warner emphasizes that participation in a public cannot be reduced to rational communication that excludes identities because any public performance requires the embodiment of the private. Theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff echoes this argument by saying that it is impossible to ask religious people to set aside their religious traditions in favor of an impersonal stance when engaging in the public sphere, for “we live inside our traditions, not alongside” (Chambers et al. 10). Additionally, Nancy Fraser contends that “public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion; they are also arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities” (16). In other words, when religious individuals engage in public discourse, they are not merely participating for political purposes but also constituting their faith identity through their actions. Furthermore, Fuist et al. argue that political theorists' anxiety about the role of religious discourse in the public sphere may stem from conservative religious voices that promote policies contrary to liberal democratic values. Therefore, it is crucial to focus analytical attention on progressive religious voices and their participation in advancing liberal political agendas.

Indeed, religion insists on crossing the boundaries between sacred and secular, public and private, the ideological and theological. In this case, reducing religion to mere (irrational) belief denies us important explanations about its persistence in modern, public life. Religion must be seen not only as a set of theological arguments, “but a dynamic, lived, and fluidly embodied set of actions” (Chambers et al. 2). Most anthropological accounts of religion have traditionally focused on belief as the core of religious experience,

encompassing theology and people's orientation toward that content (Mitchell). Theology is often framed as “belief” and placed in cognitive, mental, or intellectual categories.

In this framework, the body is seen as a passive object, merely a medium for expressing theological ideas or beliefs. Clifford Geertz posited that religion is dependent on belief, encapsulated in the phrase “he who would know must first believe” (110). But where is the body in the process of constituting theological belief? Talal Asad critiqued Geertz' view, arguing that it reflects a post-Enlightenment, Western notion of religion as something distinct from, or prior to, the social (Mitchell). Instead, Asad proposed understanding religion through the discursive and authoritative practices that shape embodied religious subjects. Asad's critique points to the tendency in the anthropology of religion to focus either on the body as a vehicle for representing religious meanings or on how religious and cultural systems construct representations of the body. In Asad's work, religion is not merely a system of beliefs but also an embodied practice, shifting the body from being an object to becoming a subject. This entails using performance studies as a lens to theorize religion's performance in public, “because the public sphere is discursive as much as it creates space for discourse; it performs a public as much as it performs publicly” (Chambers et al. 14). In other words, both the public sphere and religion are fundamentally performative, challenging simplistic categorizations and highlighting the dynamic, embodied actions that shape their roles in modern life.

Counterpublics

The critiques of the normative Habermasian public sphere paved the way for the emergence of counterpublic theories. These theories seek communicative ways of performing social change that do not solely rely on rational debate and on the bracketing off of participants' differences. In fact, these theories “affirm and punctuate these differences” (Brouwer and Paulese 80). In this regard, counterpublics are characterized as “a response to the exclusions undertaken by the dominant forms of deliberation,” and function “both as spaces of withdrawal and as bases for antagonistic politics with wider publics” (Kampourakis).

Warner claims that “a public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than the discourse itself... it exists by virtue of being addressed” (50). Furthermore, counterpublics do not only contest the exclusionary ideas and political issues of the bourgeois public sphere, but also their “speech genres and modes of address” (Brouwer and Paulese 85). In this case, the role of communication practices within counterpublics must be seen as legitimate forms of public deliberation. These practices include language, symbols, storytelling, performance, and other forms of cultural expression. It is through these communication practices that marginalized groups articulate their experiences, values, identities, and concerns within their counterpublics.

Methodology

This study employs an interpretive research approach, focusing on analyzing the performative elements and rhetorical force of NCCP Teatro Ekyumenikal's performance during the ecumenical program of the United People's SONA, held on the same day as former President Duterte's fourth SONA. Ethnographic methods were utilized to emphasize the embodied nature of liturgical performance and theological belief, capturing “emotion, aesthetics, and sensoriality” (Mitchell 2)—elements that are often taken for granted as they are seen as byproducts of religion rather than integral to its essence

Data gathering involved participant observation during the liturgical program before United People's SONA and the protest itself, downloading video recordings of both the President's SONA and the liturgical program, conducting interviews with two members of the theater group, and gathering news articles, social media posts, and commentaries about the events of that day.

My positionality as a researcher in writing this article is shaped by my participation in the United People's SONA event as a member of the UCCP. I was conducting fieldwork for my master's thesis, which focused on my church's organizational rhetoric concerning justice, peace, and human rights during the Duterte administration. This was my first experience participating in both a protest and an ecumenical street worship, profoundly impacting me by fostering a socially engaged faith and a deep sense of solidarity with marginalized communities. This article aims to explore the affective and efficacious dimensions of liturgical performance based on that experience.

Analysis and Discussion

In a predominantly Christian country like the Philippines, political and social dramas frequently intertwine secular political debates with intense theological rhetoric. Here, religious arguments are commonly wielded both in support of and in opposition to public policies and political positions.

Interestingly, despite former President Duterte's political actions, which often appeared contrary to Christian moral imperatives—such as his calls for violence, use of profanity, and antagonism towards Roman Catholic teachings and leaders—he still garnered significant support from many Christian individuals and churches. However, while there are people who avidly supported Duterte using theological reasons, there are also Christian rhetorics that favored neutrality or silence during his administration. As a result, the theological belief that social ills can only be solved through conversion to Christianity and personal righteousness creates apolitical pulpits. For instance, Cornelio and Maranon report that in the midst of Duterte's drug war, megachurches concentrated on programs that focus on the moral renewal of police forces and interventions in rehabilitating drug users instead of engaging in political activism or releasing firm statements against injustice. While these civic engagement ministries have their own value, they contribute to the spiritualization of the war on drugs, overlooking the systemic and structural causes and consequences of substance abuse in the country.

The President's State of the Nation Address takes place annually as a way to demonstrate accountability to the Filipino people through a speech. The SONA's ceremonial elements, including the prominent Philippine flag and the presence of influential guests, highlight the authoritative nature of the Presidential pulpit in describing the state of the nation.⁷ In Duterte's 2019 SONA, he fixated on issues like illegal drugs and corruption, advocating for "killing" as a solution. He employed theological references, such as citing Ecclesiastes 3, to justify his stance on critical matters, including his lack of assertion of Philippine sovereignty over the West Philippine Sea.⁸ His overt criticisms of the Catholic Church, framing the institution as a political enemy, reflect a significant departure from the traditional reverence afforded to the Church in Filipino society.⁹

The "State of the Nation" from Church Pulpits to the Streets

The United People's SONA event is itself a declaration of the existence of a counterpublic—a "united people"—offering an antagonistic version of State discourses by

highlighting “the country’s struggle for sovereignty, democracy, and livelihood” Duterte’s rule (Berdos). This represents the reflexive nature of cultural performances by providing “moments to enact, comment on, critique, and evaluate the norms and values of a culture” (Bell 137). Since it is held in the streets, it aims to disturb everyday life and make a noise. While Duterte’s SONA features the President as the star of the show, the People’s SONA features multiple actors as performers—secular progressive groups, families of the victims of Duterte’s drug war killings, indigenous peoples, various faith communities, activist groups, and human rights defenders. There are also multiple issues being focused on: human rights, Philippine sovereignty, the drug war, opposition against the construction of Kaliwa dam, women’s rights, etc. Hence, the public’s multivocal and multifocal characteristic.

Representing narratives and bodies excluded from the halls of the Batasan, an estimate of around 5,350 protesters marched along Commonwealth Avenue to express their opposition towards Duterte’s policies. As a public and political event, the United People’s SONA embodies carnivalesque qualities, characterized by subversion and festive chaos. It aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnival as a space where normal rules are suspended, creating an environment for freedom, satire, and the critique of authority (Santino). In contrast to the expensive and formal designer clothes that graced the red carpet of Duterte’s SONA, protesters were wearing costumes and placards that creatively resemble the shape of sea creatures: fish, turtles, jellyfish, submarines, and boats to reference the main theme of the rally—the Philippines’ sovereignty over the West Philippine Sea. Duterte’s effigy was in the form of a *siyokoy* (sea monster), a metaphor for his inaction and his compliance with the monstrous grip of China. In the protest, placards stated: “Stop The Killings.” Duterte’s effigy showed: The President is a monster. The chants echoed: “Atin ang Pinas! China, Layas! (Ours is the Philippines! China, Leave Now!)” Interestingly, while the event was peaceful and there were no military water cannons attacking the protesters, the event was blessed with July rains, blending with the aquatic theme of the People’s SONA. Spirits were high, and it felt like everyone was enjoying wearing their creative take on the aquatic theme of the event.

Before joining the larger protest, Christian churches and religious groups gathered in front of Ever Gotesco Mall along Commonwealth Avenue for a liturgical ecumenical worship service. This program exemplified ritualesque qualities, emphasizing formal practices rooted in Christian rites aimed at invoking transformation among participants and symbolic action grounded in divine authority. Participants demonstrated solidarity with the protest by wearing aquatic-themed attire, including boat hats labeled “Duterte Bully” and jellyfish props. This event highlights how the carnivalesque and ritualesque can actually intermingle: while the carnivalesque disrupts the status quo with humor and festivity, the ritualesque derives its efficacy from its perceived connection to transcendent or communal authority, reinforcing the legitimacy of certain actions or beliefs (Santino).

The ecumenical gathering was titled “Defend our Seas, Land and People! One Faith. One Nation. One Voice” and was attended by pastors, church leaders, laypeople and nonreligious actors. The ecumenical liturgical program of the United People’s SONA took place in rain-soaked streets and on an unconventional, pulpit-free stage. In fact, during UCCP Bishop Joseph Agapaoa’s testimony, he asked people not to cover his head with an umbrella while he was speaking—he was the son of a farmer and is used to the rain. Also, anyone could come and witness the program. When examining the performative nature of liturgy, performance scholar Megan MacDonald poses the question: “What does it mean when this liturgical performance takes place at this time, in this place, with

this congregation?” (32). Conducted amid widespread red-tagging and state surveillance—where church activists often face violence or accusations of supporting communist insurgency—the public performance of the ecumenical liturgy on the streets served as a powerful and performative means to counter the state’s narrative. By making the liturgy visible and accessible to all, by laying bare faith-driven expressions of prayer, songs, exhortations, and creative performances, the ecumenical worship service performatively subverts the claims that those who oppose the government are merely driven by communist ideologies or controlled by the political Left. In this article, I consider liturgical performance as a legitimate form of public and political deliberation and I highlight liturgy’s “performative” nature as both a noun and an adjective, particularly within the context of the ecumenical worship service under examination. As an adjective, “performative” refers to the performance-like qualities of an action, while as a noun, it denotes an utterance that enacts or produces what it names (MacDonald 1).

The liturgical program was led by two liturgists who employed a call-and-response hosting of the event, filling dead air in between each part of the program with chants repeated by all protesters at the United People’s SONA.¹⁰ The liturgists and the congregants improvised and adjusted the order of the program whenever there were unavoidable delays and technical errors due to the rain.¹¹ Overall, the ecumenical liturgical program featured various performative modes of engagement: collective singing, solemn rituals of lighting candles, exhortative prayers, creative performances which involved a series of movement pieces and songs that mock Duterte, and testimonies. The ecumenical liturgical program exemplifies Warner’s argument regarding public sphere participation, demonstrating that it cannot be limited to purely secular communication in a sense that it must exclude the religious expressions or the embodiment of the private. In other words, the ecumenical liturgical program illustrates how participation in the public sphere extends beyond secular political deliberation, encompassing the embodiment of faith and theology in the world.

Performing Convergence: Bridging the Political and the Spiritual Through “Call To Worship”

The liturgical program of the United People’s SONA commences with NCCP Teatro Ekyumenikal’s Call To Worship/Scripture Reading performance, a segment of significant rhetorical force that sets the tone and purpose of the gathering for the worshipping community. Functioning as a “call to worship,” it marks a liminal period—a phase of being in between, betwixt, and of becoming. Traditionally, the call to worship signifies the congregation’s transition from the ordinary, secular world into a sacred and structured time in the divine presence of God. I contend in this section that Teatro Ekyumenikal’s Call To Worship performance does not seek to separate the secular from the sacred, the protest from the worship, the political from the divine. Instead, their performance signifies an alignment and fusion of both realms, a self-referential and executive act that constitutes the kind of spirituality embodied by the very congregation within the ecumenical event.

In the performance, six members of the Teatro Ekyumenikal recited the Biblical text Isaiah 65:17-25 (New Heaven and New Earth) in unison.¹² This passage refers to Yahweh’s utopian promise of a New Heaven and a New Earth, where sorrow and crying are absent, infants thrive, people live long and fulfilling lives, inhabit their own homes, enjoy the fruits of their labor, and savor the works of their hands. The piece starts with this verse: “Yahweh says, ‘I will make a new heaven and a new Earth.’” Through this



Figure 1

*Teatro Ekyumenikal performs a “call to worship” performance using Isaiah 65:17-25.
Photograph by the author, 22 July 2019.*

speech act in the form of a declaration, the essence of a new heaven and a new earth already brought into being.

While delivering parts of the Scripture describing Yahweh’s utopian promise, their movements were characterized by big and flowy gestures. They created a series of tableaux that visually represented the narrative unfolding in the scripture as the actors used their bodies to create a moving picture of the heavens, the earth, trees, and dwellings. Their choreography also involved movement that chartered through the big space of the makeshift stage, signalling Yahweh’s omnipotence and the vastness of this heaven. While describing Yahweh’s utopian promise, their facial expressions and vocal delivery showed joy, invoking a hopeful utopic sentiment in the performance (see Figure 1).

However, a few lines into the performance, the description of Yahweh’s utopian promise is interrupted by the passing of an urn, symbolizing the deviation from Yahweh’s promise and the harsh reality of death and grief in the country. As the performers passed the urn to one another, they transitioned into delivering one-liner dramatic interpretations, each representing the struggles of the Filipino people. These protagonists voiced their resistance against oppressive and unjust conditions, seemingly addressing an audience of antagonists—state forces, the police, or Duterte himself—declaring, “Enough!” and “This is already too much!”.

In contrast to the flowy movement and joyful expressions when reading Scriptural references of Yahweh’s utopian promise, the performers delivered these lines using rigid postures and intense emotions of frustration, anger, and fear. This suggests a sense of dissonance and sharp contrast between the current state of reality and Yahweh’s utopian promise. Following this initial set of dramatic lines, the performers briefly returned to the Scripture before being interrupted once again by a one-liner dramatic piece. This time, the performers formed a tableau of a boat, representing the fishermen who were slammed by the Chinese vessel at the West Philippine Sea. The performer at the center of the boat exclaimed:

Mga kasama, binangga tayo ng Tsina! Ang karagatan ng Pilipinas ay para sa mga Pilipino, hindi para sa kanino mang imperyo! (Fellows, China attacked us! The seas of the Philippines are for Filipinos, not for any empire!).



Figure 2

*Teatro Ekyumenikal raises protest placards in their “call to worship” performance.
Photograph by the author, 22 July 2019.*

By portraying characters from marginalized communities as protagonists—rhetors and mouthpieces of truth—Teatro Ekyumenikal embodied the core ethics of the liturgical program: recognizing marginalized sectors as empowered subjects with a voice, serving as rhetorical interlocutors of their faith. This dynamic was further reinforced in the liturgical program itself, where members of marginalized communities were present, actively participating and taking on multiple speaking roles throughout the event.

Following these one-liner dramatic monologues, the performers proceeded to the remaining verses of the Scripture and repeated the final line five times: “Ay wala nang pinsala o anumang masama.” (“They will neither harm nor destroy.”) Simultaneously, they raised protest placards bearing messages such as “PEACE,” “JUSTICE,” “END IMPUNITY,” and “NO TO MARTIAL LAW!” This aesthetic draws from the lineage of Philippine protest theater of the 1960s and 1970s, known as “proletarian theatre,” and its resurgence after Martial Law in the 1980s (See Figure 2). It is marked by small guerrilla performances by activist groups during rallies and demonstrations, where performers raise clenched fists and red flags, and decry imperialism, dictatorship, fascism, and bureaucratic capitalism (Llana). Teatro Ekyumenikal’s use of this aesthetic may be influenced by the directorial style of Dr. Linatoc, an activist with a long history in Manila’s community theatre, as well as by Teatro Ekyumenikal’s consistent participation in protests and mobilizations, which has helped cultivate an understanding of the aesthetics prevalent in Philippine protest movements which they reiterate and cite in the performances they devise.

The moment the placards were completely raised, the chorus of the song “Bayan Ko” (My Country) was sung by Dr. Linatoc, Teatro Ekyumenikal’s director, in the background. This was a popular protest song which was used during the 1986 People Power Revolution, and it served as the anthem for the toppling of the Marcos dictatorship at that time. Originally written for a sarsuwela, the popular version was penned by poet Jose Corazon De Jesus and was banned from being played during the Marcos regime as the song talks about a caged bird who longs to be free. Despite being banned, this anthem had the affective power to unite protest marchers at that time and strengthen their

resolve in the face of water cannons, tear gas, and truncheons used for violent dispersals (Rivera, 2021). Interestingly, there are two versions of this popular song. Freddie Aguilar's version is the more popular and tamer one, with the lyrics "Ibon mang may layang lumipad, kulungin mo at umiiyak". Rivera reports that in a book by Jose Capino, it was revealed that activists in the 1970s changed the lyrics from "kulungin mo at umiiyak" to "kulungin mo at pumipiglas" for a more militant stance. Rivera states, "the argument, it seemed, was that a caged bird could not free itself by merely crying; it must struggle and set itself free, hence the conversion of 'pumipiglas' from 'umiiyak' for at least one chorus." In Teatro Ekyumenikal's performance, Dr. Linatoc sang the more militant version of the chorus, "kulungin mo at pumipiglas." As "Bayan Ko" is sung in the background, the performers ceremoniously laid the protest placards on the ground in front of the altar table, one by one, symbolically offering these demands, the act of protest itself, and their activism as the fulfillment of the will of the Lord, of Yahweh's utopian promise. Following the placement of the protest placards, two performers then completed the altar's setup by placing a Cross and a Bible on the table at the center of the table. This powerful imagery culminated in a final scene featuring an altar adorned with a Cross, a Bible, and protest placards at its feet.

In this performance, the act of setting up the altar table during the Call to Worship involves placing liturgical elements such as a Cross and a Bible, which are integral to the Protestant liturgical tradition, as I have witnessed growing up within this tradition. Even with its Protestant Christian liturgical roots, the use of these elements is efficacious as a call to worship because these symbols are also fundamental and relatable to other Christian denominations, potentially indicating common ground with them. Teatro Ekyumenikal performs a social drama wherein Yahweh's utopian promise is breached because of the crises that Filipinos faced under Duterte's rule. The fulfillment of this utopian promise hinges on one crucial act of redress: performing political activism through solidarity with the marginalized. This solidarity is brought into being through the intertwining of various embodied forms: such as Scripture reading, Christian liturgical practices, the aesthetic traditions of Philippine protest theater (or "proletarian theater"), and the performative repertoires of protests and mobilizations wherein marginalized sectors are portrayed as empowered subjects with a voice.

Performing Divergence: The Ecumenical Counterpublic and the Embodiment of Yahweh's Utopian Promise

By holding an ecumenical liturgical worship program before joining the larger protest at the United People's SONA march, ecumenical groups emphasize their distinction from the other protesters. Their primary aim is to express their Christian identity through worship and experience the transformative power of liturgical performance in the pursuit of social justice. This is significant, as historically, progressive Christians in the Philippine revolution or the Philippine Left sought to assert their independence from the secular progressive movement. They often felt alienated by the political Left, which they perceived as dismissive of their faith for suggesting that maintaining their religiosity would weaken their revolutionary credentials (Harris).¹³

In this counterpublic within a counterpublic, the presence of God joins the congregation, a transcendental divine presence with a materiality and who performs—speaks, listens, and moves—with the public. In the social sciences, the study of the interrelation with God and other sacred figures has mostly been avoided because of metaphysical questions, but in fact, they are amenable for social scientific study since they are mediated by words, symbols, and actions (Mellor and Schilling). As part of the worshipping

congregation at time, the liturgical performances are inspired by the experience of a theologically-just God in our midst, a God that promises a new heaven and a new earth for his creation, a God that listens to the cries of the marginalized, a present God who wills for systemic change. God can be understood as an ideological figure who "calls" individuals, prompting them to see themselves as subjects, a concept rooted in Althusser's idea of interpellation. This process emphasizes how people are drawn into systems of belief or power through such a call, with subject formation being a performative act that is both embodied and enacted (Strhan; Llana). In this context, God is one whom we address because He first addresses us. He calls us as Christians responding to our prophetic duty, and we are "hailed" into recognizing our role in relation to Him. In fact, Teatro Ekyumenikal's performance rests on the speech acts of Isaiah 65: 17-25, wherein Yahweh declares a utopian promise of a new heaven and a new earth for his creation. By invoking this scriptural passage within the context of the struggles faced by the Filipino people through an embodied, dramatic staging, the performance enacts what it proclaims—a counterpublic which treats political activism and worship as a fulfillment of God's speech-act. This mirrors Warner's concept of a public: a relation among strangers, constituted through speech and discourse, formed through active uptake and attention, and sustained by the reflexive circulation of its messages. Through this collective performance, the ecumenical counterpublic is constituted not only through opposition to Duterte's unjust policies but also through theologies and practices that challenge those of conservative Christian circles. Additionally, it encompasses alternative modes of political expression from secular activists and groups at the United People's SONA, emphasizing the efficacy of Christian liturgical practices in strengthening ecumenical communities' activism and sustaining their ongoing pursuit of social change. In this context, the ritualesque nature of liturgical performance highlights not only its expressive qualities but also its instrumental role in social justice movement (Santino). Beyond drawing on a transcendent authority for change, participants believe they have actively contributed to change in the world through the ritual of liturgy.

Indeed, the performative nature of liturgy lies in its self-referential quality, where the act names itself at the moment of execution (MacDonald). In other words, as a performative act, liturgical performance reflects religious ideals and traditions and in turn creates those ideals and traditions (Polyakov). In a sense, the liturgical event is the ecumenical public addressing itself. Rev. Irma Balaba, Program Secretary of NCCP's Christian Unity and Ecumenical Relations ministry, emphasizes that before Marcos's dictatorship, ecumenical liturgical life was only focused on forging fellowship among Christian churches. However, when the church saw the need to be more socially-engaged as a response to the oppression and atrocities during the Marcos dictatorship, there have been changes not only in their articulated theologies but in the way in which these theologies were embodied through liturgical and ecclesial life. The church's stance against the Marcos dictatorship paved the way for transformative ecumenism to flourish, an ecumenism which asserts that a foretaste of heaven on earth can be realized through the pursuit of an abundant life for all, encompassing the entire inhabited world, or *oikumene*.¹⁴ In liturgical programs, ecumenical bodies sought to fulfill Yahweh's utopian promise through embodied actions performed with and for oppressed and marginalized communities. These actions—prayer, song, creative movement, chants, and prophetic testimonies—proactively addressed issues of injustice, poverty, and marginalization. As these practices are performed during the administration of yet another tyranny under Duterte's government, these liturgical performance practices are reiterated, cited, and performatively reconfigured, thriving in the material demands of the present.

When I asked Teatro Ekyumenikal member Mr. Ehlian Java if their liturgical performance has any political effect, he responded affirmatively: “Opo. Dahil upang makamit ang langit dito sa lupa ay dapat bigyang boses ang mga nahahirapan at iparating ito sa mga nakatataas.” (“Yes. In order to achieve heaven on earth, we should give voice to those who are suffering and convey this to those in power.”) Mr. Java further notes that the embodied actions aimed at realizing Yahweh’s utopian promise occur not only during performances but also throughout the devising and rehearsal stages. These processes involve listening, brainstorming, and engaging in dialogue, fostering an embodied connection with the narratives and experiences of marginalized communities. As part of their training in the theater group, Teatro Ekyumenikal members visit problem communities to gather narratives and data, incorporating these insights into Bible studies and rehearsals. Mr. Java notes that after collecting this material, the members break into smaller groups to create the plot and work on the staging, including script, blocking, and choreography. They then reconvene for consultation with Dr. Linatoc, their director, to finalize the performance. The group then previews their shows to observers and critics, including individuals from the marginalized sectors involved. By “moving out” of the confines of the church and allowing these communities, activists, and members of marginalized groups to “move” the church, Teatro Ekyumenikal members come to view these communities as rhetorical interlocutors in living out their faith.

Mr. Java also mentioned the concept of being “moved” as a desired effect they wish to produce from their performance. He mentioned that they wanted to “move” people into action: “Kung hindi ka kikilos, kailan? Kung hindi ka magsasalita, kailan? Kailangan namin ng action.” (“If you will not act now, then when? If you will not speak up now, then when? We need action.”) Mr. Java reports that after Teatro Ekyumenikal’s performance at the ecumenical liturgical program, audience members expressed how they were “moved” by their performance. For instance, the families of victims who perished in Duterte’s drug war were present during the event, and they approached Teatro Ekyumenikal performers to give them heartfelt words of gratitude and appreciation for such a “moving” performance. Rev. Balaba also notes that Teatro Ekyumenikal’s presence is highly sought after during political events and ecumenical gatherings. They bring life and energy to the liturgy, a sense of movement and vitality, creatively communicating to the congregation the essence of their prophetic mission. These encounters, where you witness that your actions have “moved” others, and that you are being “moved” by and with others, are crucial to the theological performance of ecumenism constituted in this counterpublic space. “Moving” leads to commitment, and this commitment is achieved through moving again and again and again. performance of ecumenism constituted in this counterpublic space. ¹⁵ “Moving” leads to commitment, and this commitment is achieved through moving again and again and again.

Concluding Reflections

Teatro Ekyumenikal’s Call to Worship performance staged a social drama in which Yahweh’s promise of a new heaven and earth is disrupted by the oppression under Duterte. This crisis prompts an act of redress: offering solidarity and political activism at God’s altar, fulfilling His utopian promise through embodied action. This solidarity emerges from the convergence of several embodied forms: Scripture reading, Christian liturgical practices, the aesthetic traditions of Philippine protest theater, and the performative repertoires of protests and mobilizations wherein marginalized sectors are portrayed as empowered subjects with a voice. In this counterpublic space, participants also distinguish themselves from the broader protesting collective. They are not

advocating for justice but also constituting ecumenical Christian identities, transforming their worship practices into politically efficacious ritualesque acts for social justice. Their performance diverges from Habermas' conception of the public sphere, which advocates for setting aside personal identities and privileging only secular and rational discourse as legitimate forms of political deliberation.

As I write this article five years after the ecumenical worship examined here, the Philippines has transitioned to a new presidential administration under Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., following Duterte's presidency. Despite this change in leadership, the nation continues to grapple with persistent challenges: the Anti-Terror Law perpetuates red-tagging which continues to affect church workers, and sovereignty over the West Philippine Sea remains unresolved, reflecting ongoing national crises. In the face of these realities, Filipinos continue to endure a profound state of national adversity.

As the ecumenical liturgical performances illustrate, the struggle for justice and social transformation remains vital within the Philippine context, highlighting the creativity and resilience of ecumenical faith communities in confronting systemic oppression. It is vital to support the flourishing of, and provide scholarly attention to, ecumenical arts-based collectives as they "move" others to worship and pursue progressive social change.

NOTES

¹ This includes the NCCP, the Ecumenical Bishops Forum, and the Promotion of Church People's Response and was attended by Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, Independent, and Roman Catholic parishioners.

² Christians often engage in politics, primarily advocating for conservative or fund mentalist views. Christian fundamentalism emphasizes strict adherence to doctrines like biblical inerrancy and opposes societal changes such as divorce, same-sex marriage, and abortion, viewing them as moral decline. This perspective upholds patriarchal values, often leading to discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, restrictions on women's rights, and tensions between religious freedom and civil rights. Additionally, fundamentalism prioritizes evangelism and personal morality over systemic reforms, weakening democratic institutions by opposing dialogue and pluralism.

³ The NCCP has the following member churches: The Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches, the Iglesia Evangelica Metodista en las Islas Filipinas (IEMELIF), the Unida Church, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, the Philippine Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, and has since expanded to include more member churches and associate members (Jison and Yonaha).

⁴ In the 1960s, the NCCP upheld an inherited American Protestant tradition focusing on personal salvation and avoiding political involvement. Its minority status and "theological parochialism" fostered apathy (Suarez). However, Marcos' martial rule (1972–1986) spurred Protestant groups and NC-CP-affiliated churches to unite against oppression, marking a shift toward progressive engagement. Since then, the NCCP has promoted Christian unity and responded to issues of justice, peace, human rights, and environmental integrity (National Council of Churches in the Philippines).

⁵ In her 2008 paper, NCCP Program Secretary for Ecumenical Education and Nurture Melinda Grace Aonan explained NCCP's definition of its ecumenical mission: The NCCP defines ecumenism as the whole task of the whole church to share the whole gospel to the whole world. It is a task that is holistic because it involves all human and ecological concerns, not just "religious" matters. It involves the whole church, everyone: children, youth, women, men. It shares of the whole gospel, the good news of total salvation that does not dichotomize between "spiritual" and "material," it is salvation from everything sinful, liberation from all that oppresses. It is good news for the whole world: not only to Christians, not only to people, but to all created order, the whole oikos. Ecumenism is all about

siding with the oppressed and accompanying them in their struggle for just peace and liberation. It is about advocating for them and being in solidarity with them. It is about exercising our preferential option for the poor (Aooan 2).

⁶ Teatro Ekyumenikal's mission is highlighted by its annual PASIDUHAY (Pagsasabay sa Sining Dulaan Para sa Kristong Buhay) theater camp during Holy Week, where members receive training in performance arts and ecumenical theology, culminating in performances like the NCCP's Easter Sunrise Service. Through theater workshops, participants memorize key Bible verses, such as Isaiah 65 and John 10:10, using these as foundations for church and street performances. Programs like Pagpag and Pasidug further contextualize these scriptures, integrating leadership and community organizing. By 2016, Teatro Ekyumenikal had produced plays addressing migrant workers' plights, healthcare privatization, and indigenous struggles, alongside creating short performances for protests, emphasizing faith-rooted advocacy (Alviar).

⁷ According to the Official Gazette of the Philippines, the State of the Nation Address (SONA) ceremonies begin with the President's arrival at Batasang Pambansa, where they are received by the Armed Forces Chief of Staff and Congress Sergeants-at-Arms. After passing the Honor Guard, the House Sergeant-at-Arms assumes escort duties, symbolizing legislative independence. The President proceeds to the Presidential Legislative Liaison Office (PLLO), where congressional leaders pay a courtesy call. A Welcoming Committee escorts the President into the Session Hall, announced by the Speaker. The Joint Session begins with the national anthem and invocation, followed by the President's address. The session concludes with formal adjournment by congressional leaders.

⁸ Direct quote from the SONA: "There's a time for everything. A time to negotiate and a time to quarrel. With your enemy, with your political opponents, with your wife. That is why some lives are... and a time to antagonize, and a time to make peace, and a time to go to war, and a time to live, and a time to die. That's Ecclesiastes 3" (Philstar.com).

⁹ Direct quote from the SONA: "Do not believe the others (Catholic church, opposition) because they are not my friends. They are my political enemies. They said I do not believe in God. Who says? I am a believer of a universal mind there. But [applause] I do not believe that a God so perfect would create hell for his creation. What kind of God is he? He is not my God" (Philstar.com).

¹⁰ Before the official start of the program, the liturgists rehearsed this chant with the congregation, and is repeated many times within the program.

Liturgists: Atin Ang Pinas!

Congregation: Defend our Seas!

Liturgists: Atin Ang Pinas!

Congregation: Defend our Land!

Liturgists: Atin Ang Pinas!

Congregation: Defend Our People!

While transitioning from the Call to Worship into the theatrical performance of Teatro Paghilom, another call and response was initiated by the liturgists.

Liturgists: Ang tao, ang bayan,

Congregation: Ngayon ay lumalaban!

Liturgists: Ngayon ay lumalaban,

Congregation: Ang tao, ang bayan, kasama ang simbahan!

¹¹ The flow of the liturgical program:

- Call to Worship/ Scripture Reading (Isaiah 65: 17-25): NCCP Teatro Ekyumenikal
- Response Through Song: "Salubungin ang Bagong Araw"
- Lighting of Candles and Prayers of Exhortation
- Theatrical Performance: Teatro Paghilom
- Testimonies: Defend Our Seas (For the Defend Our Seas portion of the liturgy, Bishop Iniguez of the Ecumenical Bishops Forum and Dr. Rommel Linatoc delivered testimonies. Bishop Iniguez used exhortatory speech while Dr. Linatoc sang "Kapalaran" before his speech.)

- Testimonies: Defend Our Land (For Defend our Land, the people who gave testimonies were former Chief Justice Ma. Lourdes Sereno (a political opponent of Duterte and a self-confessed evangelical Christian), Bishop Joseph Agapao of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, Sis. Edna Pineda of the Sisters Association in Mindanao, and Bro. Vic Gutierrez of Families for Truth, Justice, and Peace.)
- Testimonies: Defend Our People (For Defend Our People, those who delivered speech was Sis. Marisa Lazaro from Rise UP Mother, an organization dedicated for mothers who are relatives of the victims of Duterte's drug war)
- Panalanginan ng Sambayanan (Prayers of the Nation)
- Special Song: Union Theological Seminary
- Theatrical Performance: Aglipayan Central Theological Seminary (ACTS)
- Call To Action

¹² NCCP Teatro Ekyumenikal's version/script based on Isaiah 65:17-25

Kapahayagan mula sa aklat ni Isaiah Kabanata 65, Talata 17-25.

Bagong Langit at Lupa

Ang sabi ni Yahweh, ako ay lilika ng isang bagong lupa't isang bagong langit,

Mga pangyayaring pawang lumipas na ay hindi babalik,

Kaya naman, kayo'y dapat magalak sa aking nilalang.

Yamang nilikha ko etong Jerusalem, na ang aking pakay maging kagalakan ng mga hinirang

Ako mismo'y magagalak, dahil sa Jerusalem at sa kaniyang mamamayan

<Passes down an urn>

Ser, hindi po po ako pusher. Huwag niyo po ako patayin!

Ang mahal mahal na nga ng bigas pati ng tubig, i-dedemolish niyo pa kami!

Lumayas kayo dito, amin ang lupaing ito!

AHHHH! Tama na! Sobra na!

Ordinaryong tao kami, hindi kami terorista!

Bastos ka, parang hindi babae ang ina mo!

May karapatan kaming mag-unyon!

Doon ay walang kalupitan o kaguluhan,

Doon ay wala nang sanggol na papanaw,

Lahat ng titora roon ay mabubuhay ng matagal

Ituturing parin na kabataan pa ang edad na isang daan,

Ang hindi umabot sa gulang na ito ay pinarusahan,

Magtatayo sila ng mga tihanan na kanilang titorhan,

Magtatanim sila ng ubas na sila ang aani,

'Di tulad noong una, sa bahay na ginawa'y iba ang tumira,

Mga kasama, binangga tayo ng Tsina

Ang karagatan ng Pilipinas ay para sa mga Pilipino

Hindi para sa kanino mang imperyo!

Pagpapalain ko yaong lahi nila,

Maging ssusunod pa

Magpakailanma'y iingatan sila,

Ang dalangin nila kahit hindi pa tapos,

Ay aking diringgin,

Sa tanim na halaman iba ang nakinabang

Tulad ng punongkahoy hahaba ang buhay ng aking mga hinirang

Lubos nilang mapakikinabangan ang kanilang pinagpagalan,

Anumang gawaing pagpagalan nila'y tiyak magbubunga,

'Di magdaranas ng mga sakuna yaong anak nila,

Dito'y magsasalong parang magkakapatid

Ang lobo at tupa

Kakain ng damo pati ang leon tulad ng baka

At ang ahas nama'y pagkaing alabok
Kahit tapakan mo'y di ka mangangamba
Magiging panatag, wala nang masama
Sa banal na bundok
Sa bundok ng Zion
Ay wala nang pinsala o anumang masama (5x)

¹³ Historically, Christians have navigated political engagement to affirm their faith identity, especially during oppressive regimes. In the 1980s, Christians for National Liberation (CNL) collaborated with secular leftist groups like the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the National Democratic Front (NDF) to resist the dictatorship. However, they later distanced themselves due to persecution by the Church and State and marginalization within the revolutionary movement. The CPP's dismissal of their religiosity as undermining revolutionary credentials further alienated Christian activists (Harris 94). By the late 1980s, the CNL asserted independence, prioritizing a theological response to the struggle, transitioning this focus from optional to indispensable (95).

¹⁴ In Rev. Balaba's words, "Walang naisasantabi, tao, kalikasan, lahat ng nasa kapaligiran, walang usapin ng marginalization." ("No one is excluded—humans, nature, everything in the environment, there's no marginalization.") In other words, in transformative ecumenism, the abundant life promised by Yahweh is realized through advocating for "nakakabuhay na sahod, ligtas na pamumuhay" (a living wage, safe and secure living) for all sectors of society.

¹⁵ The streets serve as counterpublic spaces where transformative ecumenism flourishes, inviting participation from church members, secular individuals, and the general public. Teatro Ekyumenikal's performances aim to educate congregations on social issues and theological foundations for justice, peace, and human rights, but often face resistance from local churches due to their political themes, as noted by Rev. Balaba. These challenges are compounded by inconsistent funding and organizational instability, worsened by the pandemic, which led to the group's transition into the Ecumenical Arts Collective (Ecu ACo). Despite setbacks, ecumenical organizations and church leaders must support such theater ministries, and scholars should recognize their pivotal role in progressive movements.

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