

Indigenous Aspects of Worship in the Church of the Philippines

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Preliminary Note

The “Church of the Philippines” means in this essay the one with the largest membership in the Philippines today – the Catholic Church. “Indigenous” refers to those aspects and features of religious worship which are known to have been present in some form in the aboriginal Filipino culture, or have since been added by indigenous initiative onto the borrowed ones. And “worship” is, in the broadest sense, the acknowledgment and proclamation of God’s lordship especially in the form of ritual and prayer. In this general sense, it includes all authentic faith expressions.

In the development of our topic, the following scheme will be used:

- (1) general description of the indigenous Philippine worldview;
- (2) locating the place of God and man in that indigenous framework;
- (3) description of the features and elements of worship;
- (4) distinguish the indigenous from the non-indigenous elements; and
- (5) evaluate the contribution of the indigenous elements of worship to the quality of worship as faith-expression.

The Indigenous Philippine Worldview

The aboriginal Filipino sees the universe as consisting of a visible and an invisible world which are compenetrant. The invisible world is populated by *Bathalang Maykapal* (God the Maker), lesser invisibles called *diwata* and *anito*. Under the term *anito* belongs the souls of dead *ninuno* (ancestors). Because they each have their own popula-

tion, we refer to them as "worlds," but because they are also regarded as conditions of being, they may also be regarded as "states" of being. The visible and invisible worlds interact continually because the invisible world is not out there and distant from one's spatial location. The invisible is here and now. One must not say or do what the invisible beings disapprove of. They must be spoken to with respect, for they listen though unseen. To show reverence, their permission should be asked when one is about to do anything that might in any way be offensive to them: and when one is about to partake of the blessings of the land that used to belong to the dead ancestors, one must set apart a portion to be offered them as their share. This pleases them and is expected to bring to the offerer more blessings.

It is usual in traditional Filipino societies that customary rituals for obtaining favors and thanksgiving are performed. These rituals based on mythology are ordinarily believed ordained by divinities and cannot be discarded or violated with impunity which may involve not only the offenders but also the community in which the offenders live.

Humans are not always careful and may offend the invisibles wittingly or unwittingly. Moral responsibility is not a matter of willful violation of taboos. The fact of violation alone is sufficient to bring punishment upon oneself. Thus, when sickness or misfortune strikes which is believed to be caused by the invisibles, appeasement and atonement must be done by prayer and sacrificial ritual.

The compenetrant worlds are related assymmetrically. The invisible world is the more powerful. It is necessary, therefore, to keep in mind the hierarchical structure of dignities and values in both the visible and invisible worlds. It is this notion of dignity and value hierarchy that constitutes ethical and behavioral norms. And because of the hierarchy of dignities and values, good and bad are found on either state. There are good invisibles just as there are bad ones. The same thing in the visible world. But the general tenor of the manner of interaction between the two worlds is premised on the behavior of the human world. The invisibles may be gracious or wicked depending on how humans relate to them: they bless the pious and punish the impious.

Because of the vertical structure of the world and the unequalness of dignities, fear (*takot*) and shame (*hiya*) are features of Filipino psychology, and they are reflected in the native languages, and therefore in religious language.

Dead ancestors and loved ones are regarded as having passed the divide of the two worlds. Communication between both worlds remains possible (1) on the initiative of the living, (2) mediation of mediums, and (3) on the initiative of the invisibles.

To these have been added by Medieval Spanish Catholicism additional details such as the Triune God, the angels and saints, the devils, hell, purgatory, and paradise.

Prayer to and invocation of the invisible beings is living humans' initiating communication with the invisibles. When a community shaman or medium performs a ritual which is believed to invite the appropriate invisibles to manifest their wishes to humans through him/her, there is communication by mediation. The apparition of the dead to convey their wishes, or the occurrence of omens presaging events, good or bad, are on the initiative of the invisibles. Harmony and beneficial relations between the two worlds is grounded on the knowledge of and belief in the traditional worldview, and the keeping of the appropriate acts and rites indicated by tradition through the myths.

The Place of God and Humans in the Worldview

Living humans are on the visible state; God is in the invisible. The invisible is superior to the visible; and thus the invisibles are taken to be superior to the visible. God is the supreme invisible; and so great is his supremacy that he is remote, and he leaves the details of ordering and maintaining the universe to lesser, mostly invisible beings known as *diwata*.

In a way of looking, the *diwata* are not gods but inferior place or function spirits, although in some cultures such as the Subanon in Mindanao, *Diwata* is equivalent to the chief god. It is to the Intermediate beings that traditional Filipinos relate directly rather than to the remote *Bathalang Maykapal*.

The place of God in this worldview is on the upper end of the invisible world, and below him in the invisible world, and closer to humans, are the myriad *diwata* and *anito*. Humans, being inferior, must relate with reverence and piety toward the invisibles. It is from these they expect favors and blessings, and to them, too, they owe thanksgiving and appeasement in case of transgression. It is to them that sacrificial offerings and the implicit worship it involves are given.

The relation of humans to the spirits is not unlike their way of relating to super ordinates in the human world. It consists of explicit show of honor in the form of gifts, praise, and festification. Gift-giving is a general tradition that is often exaggerated. Praise is usually a proclamation of someone's achievements in poetry/song, or in epic chants which narrate the heroic deeds of the honoree. This was traditionally done upon a hero's triumph in war, or upon his death to glorify his memory. Today, there are still dozens of these ethno-epics, some of which, like the Maranaw *Darangen*, run into tens of thousands of verses.

Actual Features of Worship

The indigenous customs that are related to worship are of two interrelated general types: (1) those that are ritually defined and in which a specific officiator presides in the performance of the ritual; and (2) those subsidiary festive activities involving merrymaking and singing the praises of the honored heroes contained in epic literature.

An important pioneering work on indigenization in Philippine Catholic worship is Benedictine Fr. Anscar J. Chupungco's *Towards a Filipino Liturgy* (1976). This work begins with a backgrounder on the *Schema Constitutionis de Sacra Liturgia* indicating the direction towards liturgical pluralism and acceptable adaptation, then traces the history of liturgical adaptation from the Apostolic period to the ages of the Baroque and the "Chinese rites controversy." His thesis is that indigenization has been happening all along, either in the form of submission or assimilation; and when a major failure to adapt wisely happens, disaster follows.

The second half of the book is on "Principles of Liturgical Indigenization," and "Towards a Filipino Liturgy." The text in Filipino of a *Misa ng Bayan* is appended with an English translation. The entire work is very significant, but the center of the work is probably the one on "Principles of Liturgical Indigenization" which he indicates as (1) "Not an option but a theological imperative," (2) "The homage to culture," and (3) "Fidelity to the spirit of the Liturgy." Valuable to the topic at hand is Cupungco's observation that:

Filipino religious rituals are town celebrations held outside the church building, often without ecclesiastical ministry. They range from the simplest rituals to the most elaborate town processions, religious dances and theatrical religious presentations. The

people perform them with characteristic flair for drama and colorful festivity, abandon, and spontaneity. It is here they are able to let loose their pent-up zest for external celebrations, which the somberness of the official liturgy restrains.

It is the somberness of the official liturgy that kept the indigenous liturgies not only out of the church building but also out of the official liturgy making them folk rituals. Drawing from common knowledge in the Philippines, Fr. Chupungco mentions some of the better known folk liturgical practices: the *Flores de Mayo*, *Santacruzán*, *Ati-Atihan*, *Panunuluyan*, and the singing of the *Pasyon* in Lent. He goes some length describing what are probably the best attended lenten folk drama-rituals.

... the more dramatic folk "liturgies" are those celebrated during Holy Week. On Palm Sunday the *Hosana* is performed by children who sing the *Benedictus qui venit* and strew flower petals during the procession. At night the *Cenaculo* or Passion play is staged. It begins with the story of the fall and concludes with the Ascension. The play can run for several nights. But the drama reaches its climax on Good Friday morning, when the carrying of the cross is re-enacted along the main streets of the town by costumed performers. Jews and Roman soldiers recite (or extemporize on) verses of insult and condemnation, and whip the *Cristo* who is thrust down by the weight of the cross. Pious women come out to feed him and offer food and drink to the rest of the performers. In the evening a solemn procession with the images of the entombed Christ, the sorrowful Mother and a cortege of saints clad in mourning, accompanied by a band playing funeral marches, is held along the main streets. The final drama takes place at Easter dawn before the first Mass of the day. It is known as the *Salubong* or *Santo Encuentro*, the meeting of Christ and his Mother on Easter morning. Two separate processions, one with the image of the risen Christ, the other with the image of the Blessed Virgin veiled in black, meet at the town square. A little girl, dressed like an angel, is lowered from the roof of a platform and slowly lifts the black veil as she sings the *Regina Coeli*. Then the two images are made to bow to each other three times as a sign of greeting. White doves are released, and a young lady, holding an ornamented banner, performs a ritual dance expressing Easter joy.

The explanation he gives for the popularity of these liturgies is due to the fact that:

...they are fully incarnated in the religious culture of the people. They foster community life, because they are an endeavor that demands community involvement and nourishes interpersonal relationships.

It is not possible to deal with worship in detail here. Suffice it to present the main features of indigenous worship alongside Catholic liturgical worship. This will provide the present discussion a clearer presentation of the similarities and dissimilarities and see how far inculturation in worship has taken place, and in what form.

Because of the big number of traditional cultural communities in the Philippines, I will use here an Ifugao ritual. It is based on the myth of how a deity was offended by the first human rice planter because he failed to acknowledge the deity *Lichum* by means of a sacrificial offering. The high god *Kabunian*, learning of the offense sent a messenger deity to instruct the ancestral Ifugao, Wigan, to make a sacrificial offering. If he did this, his rice terraces would be protected from damage and his rice would be fruitful. Wigan, upon hearing this, obeyed and performed the first *caniao*, and it was so ordained henceforth, Ifugaos must offer to the gods a chicken which is burned so that its aroma would reach the gods. Accompanying the rites are appropriate prayers invoking the aid and blessing of the gods, as Lambrecht noted in 1963. These rituals are done by a community, and after the rites, the participants partake of a festive meal which *caniao* usually provides.

Catholic worship on the other hand, is centered on the Holy Mass, which is divided into three sections: (a) the "Service of the Word" which consists of readings from the Old and New Testaments the highlight of which is the reading of the Gospel followed by a homily, which is usually an explanation of the readings; (b) the sacrifice proper, which consists of the offering of bread and wine, the consecration of the same, and the offering of Christ to the Godhead that He may be worshipped and thanked, that sins may be atoned for, and prayers answered and mankind come to share in God's life; and finally, (c) as a sign of the response of God, the faithful are invited to partake of the sacrificial offering through the Eucharistic Communion.

In many instances when the Mass is celebrated in connection with any of the many popular religious festivals of Filipinos (some of which have already been noted by Fr. Chupungco), a grand community

festification takes place at which band musicians parade through the town, religious processions wind their way through the streets, merry carnival-like celebration involves everybody, and homes are teeming with food prepared in abundance to share with all corners. The connection of the community and domestic festification to the act of worship becomes clear when one is told that the generosity with which the feast-makers feed and entertain their guests is the measure of their offering to God. And hopefully, it would also be the measure of God's generosity to them.

While the offering of harvested crops in church has been done occasionally, it is in the community dimension of the celebration where local products are featured reminiscent of traditional indigenous harvest rites. This is especially obvious in *fiestas*, like those of *San Isidro Labrador* in Quezon Province in mid May. It is also in those festivals that indigenous songs, dances and theatricals are featured "in honor of the Patron," as the people say. What is sacramentalized in the Communion in the Mass is "realized" in the subsequent generous festification and sharing of food, drink and merriment in the community.

In traditional Philippines, as already noted above, merrymaking consists of music, dancing, dramatics, epic chanting, eating, and drinking, and elaborate festivities for triumph, and dramatics show grief when mourning were extensions of ritual worship or show of homage. These have been adopted and adapted to Catholic practice in the Philippines. Their presence in contemporary town fiestas in varied stages of modification, and the chanting of the Christian epic of the *Pasyon* (an epic poetry rendition of the passion and death of Jesus Christ) during Holy Week has contributed to indigenization. Dr. E. Arsenio Manuel has suggested that the presence of the *Pasyon* where there are no recorded ethnoepics, and vice-versa, indicates the probability of displacement of the traditional epic chants for tribal heroes by the epic of the Redeemer. Reminiscent of the funeral wake of heroes in the past where the heroic story of their lives were chanted to praise and honor them is the *pabasa*. A group of singers sit all day and all night singing or chanting the story of the Savior's passion and death, and frequently lying nearby is the statue of the dead Christ in a casket. The *Pasyon* is sung in different languages depending on where the singing takes place.

Whereas the Catholic Church has been very cautious and conservative with regard to inculturation in the formal liturgical practice,

some limited adaptation has taken place (See Lambrecht, 1963; Chupungco (1976). How much yet can be done remains to be seen, but the underlying structural similarities of Catholic worship and indigenous rites suggest that the indigenous people of the Philippines need not make too great a leap when they pass from traditional culture to Catholicism. But they may have a cognitive quantum leap. Historian Vicente Rafael in his book *Contracting Colonialism* (1989) says he believes that Filipinos probably have largely understood missionary preaching on their own terms and not on the missionaries'. Fr. Chupungco had said the same thing twelve years earlier.

Following is a schematic presentation of the structural similarities with regard to worship.

WORSHIP RITUAL

Indigenous Society	The Catholic Church
1. The Myth Narrative	Service of the Word (the Readings and Gospel)
2. Food Offering, usually with Drink, accompanied with invocations and prayer; sometimes with songs and dance	Offering of Bread and Wine and Consecration, accompanied by invocations and prayer; with songs
3. Eating of the rest of the Offering, or additional food and drink prepared for the festification	Communion, thanksgiving, and Blessing, and after Mass, festification and serving all comers
4. Officiating: Shaman	Officiating: Priest
5. Participant: Community	Participant: Community and Guests
6. Object of Worship: a deity or deities, diwata or anito	Object of Worship: The Most Holy Trinity
7. Language: Local Vernacular	Language: Local Vernacular

The Indigenous and Non-Indigenous

Evident in the foregoing table is the structural congruence of the indigenous and the non-indigenous. Today, the use of the local vernacular brings the liturgical texts closer to the indigenous –which was not so when Latin was the liturgical language. Yet equally evident are the divergencies the most outstanding of which is in No. 6: object of

worship. While it is true that the Catholic liturgy of worship frequently involves honoring Saints, these are never worshipped, their honor being merely a way of honoring Him alone from Whom they obtained the glaze of heroic love of God. At least that is the formal and explicit intention of the Church, but which is likely lost on many indigenous Catholics who most likely perceive Saints are something like *diwata* or good *anitu*.

It should be pointed out, too, at this point that although the paraphernalia of worship is not included in the chart, there is some parallel in indigenous traditional use of carved representations of divinities or *diwata* (known as *bulol* in the Cordillera) and the Catholic use of images representing the Deity or holy persons in connection with the rites of worship and other forms of faith-expression.

But the more substantive difference between indigenous worship and that of the Church may also be in the purpose or intention of the act of worship. In the indigenous, as Lambrecht (1963) had noted with respect to Ifugao rituals, in perhaps rather strong words,

...they are not conceived as acts of worship, but merely as bribes to keep the supernatural beings from molesting man, or to appease them so that they would not send the evils which they threaten...

Thus, it may be said that indigenous rituals may only be worship in a rather vague manner, that is, they imply in some way an acknowledgment of lordship or superiority of power on the part of the invisibles. The prayers uttered and invocations derive their power from the myths which teach that the gods had instructed so. In this, the indigenous differs greatly from Catholicism's Mass which is grounded on the value of the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross of which Lambrecht in the same article speaks:

The *Sacrifice of the Cross*, which abolished all the sacrifices of animals of the old dispensation pervades the entire Christian worship, and functions as its very center. No blessings are given without the sign of the cross over things and persons to be blessed: thus they recall to mind the sacrifice of Calvary. No prayers... public or private have imperative power, no Sacraments confer grace except through Christ's immolation. Christ," says St. Paul, "has annulled the first covenant in order to establish the second. It is in this will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the Body of Jesus Christ once for all."

The same author recognized that the problem of inculturation, indigenization, or adoption of material of worship and ritual from one system to another is the disparity of discourses, and therefore of worldview, between the interfacing cultures. He says.

Just as Ifugao culture is not a heap of lifeless items, but an integrated whole, just as the religious Ifugaos is not a compartment surrounded as it were by walls that separate it from other cultural traits, neither is Christian worship a heap of prayers and blessings, of sacramentals and sacraments, but an integrated whole. It is an integral whole because of its supreme act of worship, its sacrifice.

These were said before the conclusion of Vatican II, but Lambrecht, who spent decades as missionary among the indigenes of the Cordillera in the northern Luzon, knew too well the problems of adoption of Ifugao local customs in Christianity," which is the title of his article from which the above citations have been taken. It explains the relative absence of direct indigenous substantive borrowings in the central canon of Catholic worship, but at the outer parts of Catholic ritual, indigenous customs and practices which are not perceived as inconsistent with Catholic orthodoxy are accepted such as indigenous secular folksongs which have been imbued with a new and religious meaning (e.g. "*Dahil Sa Iyo*"), and *fiesta* banquetry as expression of *agape* or generous fraternal sharing sacramentalized in the Eucharist.

It is significant, however, that twenty years after Lambrecht wrote the above-cited ideas, Fr. Maynigo, Rector of the seminary that once housed the seminary of which Lambrecht was himself a Rector, published from the same university an article which says,

A Church incarnate implies that her presence among peoples takes on the visible cultural forms of the peoples or groups to whom she announces the gospel (AG 5, 21). Appearing to them in a recognizable form, speaking to them in their own language, and using their familiar symbols, the Church expresses and communicates the saving love of God for men through all the rich resources of their cultures. Thus *Ad Gentes* declares: "From the customs and traditions of the peoples, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these particular churches borrow all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, the revelation of the Savior's grace, or the proper arrangement of Christian life." (AG 22)

Fr. Maynigo says a word of caution, however, that while the Church can and must be made incarnate in cultures, it remains a transcendent reality."

Concluding Note

The indigenous aspects of formal worship in the Catholic Church in the Philippines is still limited, but they are developing, with the help of Post-Vatican II thinking. While the indigenous worldview is not structurally or even radically different from that of Catholicism, their substantive contents in the past have been viewed as divergent. The indigenous is loosely and ambiguously articulated while that of Catholicism dogmatically definite, at least the way Filipinos received it from Pre-Vatican catechesis. As a result, permission to adopt indigenous materials for religious use and worship have been cautious and conservative. Inculturative attempts have been largely limited to the outer fringes of religious expression and to language. One must say that the use of the native language is a most significant step towards indigenization, as Fr. Chupungco has noted very well in his book. Though largely occasioned by circumstances, the larger part played now by women in religious services may be seen as indigenization considering that aboriginal Philippine religions had *catalonan* (priestess).

It is perceived that the great reluctance toward indigenization may be due to a still strong attachment of leadership mentality to the culture-and ideology-specific frameworks derived from an older mindset. But today, there are conferences and discussions underway which talk about things like "non-biblical revelation" (Leonardo Mercado, SVD, 1991) whose concern is "Religious Experience and its Expression among Tribal Filipinos." The idea, I think, is not only to scavenge on the heap of indigenous culture hoping to discover stray items that happen not to be repulsive to the Gospel, but to discover the fact that God had been there among the native peoples ahead of missionaries, and that the task of evangelization has not been exactly as we have been trying to do till now. Culture is to be respected and viewed as genuine womb of the incarnation of the Church and the Word of God addressed to the human community. And as Fr. Maynigo says,

...the Church takes in culture in order to purify it, to heal and renew whatever is evil, and to promote, foster whatever is good, true and noble in it. This she does, not by remaining outside it,

but by being a part of culture itself. Thus from within the life of culture, the Church becomes a new principal of life... like a "leaven" in the world guiding it to its final goal which is God who has placed man in a given culture in order to bring him to his human fullness in Christ...

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