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# Understanding Folk Religiosity in the Philippines

Juan Rafael G. Macaranas 

Theology-Philosophy Area, School of Multidisciplinary Studies, De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde,  
2544 Taft Avenue, Manila 1004, Metro Manila, Philippines; juanrafael.macaranas@benilde.edu.ph

**Abstract:** This paper argues for the appreciation of Filipino folk religiosity as part of cultivating authentic faith expressions among Filipinos. It presents historical, anthropological, sociocultural, and theological views on significant folk religious groups, traditions, and practices in the Philippines, including but not limited to the millenarian movements and popular Catholic feasts. Despite the varied influences and variegated Philippine culture, folk religiosity among Filipinos can be generalized as a syncretic blending of pre-colonial beliefs with the Catholic faith. As an academic and practicing Catholic, the researcher explores the folk religious elements present in the development of the millenarian movements, the unique faith expressions and influences behind folk Catholic feasts and celebrations, and probes deeper into the meaning of ordinary faith expressions. Coming from his own experiences and insights, he refers to previous scholarly works in discussing how spirituality or reverence to the sacred is inherently embedded in the folk religious ways, how the cultural Filipino traits manifest in the religious practices and vice versa, and how folk spirituality enables the expression of deep cultural and personal Christian faith experience. In conclusion, he maintains that millenarian movements are valid faith expressions that also celebrate independence and Filipino identity; traditional festivals and religious rites are the locals' unique way of authentically expressing their faith, and; preserving folk religions and folk religiosity among Catholics is beneficial for engendering the growth of the faithful and the development of religion. A clear sense of folk religiosity is elemental in reappropriating religious dogmas and doctrines as the church and the faithful continuously study, dialogue, and fully experience life in the pursuit of approaching authenticity in faith, beliefs, and religions.

**Keywords:** folk religiosity; folk Catholicism; authentic faith expression; culture and spirituality; phenomenology



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## 1. Introduction

Folk religiosity is embedded in the Filipino culture and permeates the Filipino Catholic way of expressing their faith. However, when it comes to teaching religion in the academic setting, folk religious practices are often left in the byways, far from being appreciated and included as a course topic. We sometimes, without much thought, refer to them as the religion of the masses, the practices of the elders, and seldom given fair academic attention even if practically everyone observes or practices some if not most of it. The traditional focus of religious teachings, despite the availability of studies on the subject, remains to be the doctrines and dogmas, and self-reflections in the application of these teachings. I share the interest of [Cornelio \(2014\)](#), and probably all the Filipino scholars whose previous works I will be using here, to seek and cultivate authenticity in everyday religious expressions. To borrow [Cornelio's \(2014, p. 481\)](#) words, "The turn to everyday authenticity stands in contrast to early scholarship of a clearly normative character, . . . drawn from a prescribed understanding of Scripture, liturgy, and catechism." I will argue for the appreciation of Filipino folk religiosity as part of cultivating authentic faith expressions among Filipinos.

On the occasion of celebrating 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines, we are impelled to take a critical but compassionate view of the life of ordinary Christians. As a practicing Catholic and an academic teaching Philosophy and Religion, perennial questions

from students create in me an urgent need to put together my experiences, observations, thoughts, and collection of notes from attending fiestas, Holy Week rites, and reading reflections of varied scholars on folk religiosity in the Philippines. I use phenomenology in describing and reflecting on the subject. It is a qualitative study, strongly informed and influenced by my spontaneous observations and lived experiences since I became aware of folk religiosity, catching my attention as a young college seminarian. My focus is on gaining insights from all available information. It is motivated by the search for answers to faith questions like why do many Catholics still flock to Baclaran on Wednesdays, and Quiapo on Fridays? Additionally, why do couples dance in Obando? What makes them persist amid the pandemic?

I purposively chose a critical but appreciative stance, with the hope of gaining a richer and wiser understanding of folk religiosity in the Philippines. A shorter and earlier version of my attempt to understand this subject was presented in the online 2021 Union of Societies and Associations of Philosophy in the Philippines (USAPP) summit with the theme Emerging Philosophies of Religion in Southeast Asia.

Folk religiosity, as used in this paper, adopts Yoder's view on folk religion that it is "the reinterpretation or expression of the official religion in the folk level . . ." This definition includes "elements related to official ecclesiastical forms on the one hand and the other those which have a partially independent existence outside the boundary of orthodoxy" (Yoder 1974, p. 15). I also understand the term to refer to any ethnic or cultural-religious practice considered to deviate from the doctrine of organized or institutionalized religion. Other authors, such as Alejo (2004), also refer to it as a popular religion. Long's definition of popular religion, as cited by Dawson (2001) and Palmer (2019), also approximate the diverse forms of folk religiosity that I will be discussing, specifically definitions 3, 4, 5, 6:

(3) the pervasive beliefs, rituals, and values of a society, a kind of civil religion of the public; (4) an amalgam of esoteric beliefs and practices differing from the common or civil religion but usually located in the lower strata of society; it includes esoteric forms of healing, predictions, phrenology, palm reading, astrology, newspaper and magazines astrological forecasts; (5) the religion of a subclass or minority group in a culture; (6) the religion of the masses in opposition to the religion of sophisticated, discriminatory, and learned within a society.

The Philippines is predominantly Catholic. According to the latest Philippine census, at least 81% of Filipinos categorize themselves as Catholics. The rest are protestants (about 11%), Muslims (6%), and others. Consequently, several in-depth studies on the subject, written by both local and foreign authors, interchangeably use Filipino folk Catholicism and folk religion. I will also refer to Folk Catholicism and Pre-Spanish Religions in the Philippines written by the French anthropologist Charles J-H Macdonald (2004) and Folk Catholicism: Its Significance, Value and Ambiguities by Belgian Catholic priest, also a psychologist and psychoanalyst, Antoine Vergote (1982). I will not dwell so much on differentiating terminologies unless found necessary. Following common practice, I will discuss folk religion in reference to Catholicism. Following Alejo's train of thought, I will also pay more attention to the meaning of the beliefs and practices of folk religion among ordinary people, myself included, "meaning in the sense of truths that help people to go on with life" (Alejo 2004, p. 11). Due to temporal limitations, this piece will not yet include how they relate to specific Church doctrines and dogmas.

## 2. Major Religious Influences in Philippine Folk Religion

Since culture is a complex whole of the behavioral traits and ways of thinking, which the individual inherits from his culture, it also colors his approach to God. Today, what can be considered Filipino is an integration of both the native pre-colonial traits and practices, the colonial influences, such as Spanish and American, and more.

After 300 years with the Spaniards and Catholicism came Americans who brought in Protestantism. Indeed, Christianity came to the Philippines in a sustained series of Western influences, effectively permeating the culture. When the Spanish colonizers came, they

brought Catholicism by sending missionaries with Spanish conquerors. The Augustinians, the first missionaries, arrived in 1565 in Cebu in the central Philippines and established their missionary house. The Franciscans were the second missionaries to arrive on the island in 1578 to evangelize the natives. The Spanish Jesuits, the third missionaries to arrive on the islands, came in 1581.

Animism was practiced by most of the natives. The *anitos*, gods, and the goddesses or *diwata* can be found in nature, in mountains, hills, trees, anthills, bodies of water, caves, and even in communities and houses (Covar 1998). Other belief systems, such as Hindu and Buddhist influences, also came in around the 9th to 10th century, brought in spontaneously and non-systematically by traders and migrants from China, India and nearby countries. The Muslim's influence was estimated to take ground in the 13th century. Historical accounts would show that they were governing some islands and areas like Mindanao and Manila.

The seeming immediacy that characterized the peoples' conversion to Catholicism is remarkable. Judging from literary and historical accounts, I would attribute this phenomenon to sweeping and ruthless imposition, if not by the missionaries, by the administrative system that did not distinguish between church and colonial matters. Regardless of the ultimate cause, Filipino scholars and writers would acknowledge that native communities widely accepted the Catholic religion. Philippine historical texts would suggest that except for the persistent uprisings by some Muslim communities in Mindanao in the southern Philippines, Catholicism was embraced without so much resistance in most areas.

Some scholars identified inherent elements in the new belief that made it acceptable to the native Filipinos. Elesterio (1989) gathered that Catholicism adapted well to the culture of the natives, and thus, the early communities did not suffer any apparent great psychological difficulty in embracing Catholic doctrines and practices. What probably made Catholicism adaptable is the fact that the new religion bears a striking semblance to what their forefathers have practiced in the past. At the very least, people may not have fully believed what they were taught to practice but observed them anyway, as they did not find anything wrong with it. Macdonald (2004), in describing his thoughts and findings after spending some time with some tribal communities in Palawan and other places was able to demonstrate that the ease of acceptance, interpretation, and assimilation would have varied from tribe to tribe due to the differences in the receiving belief systems, its match to the message of the new religion, the carriers particularly the missionaries, and the context of the natives who had to appropriate the new ideas. In specific areas, he identified similarities in the structure of Christian beliefs and indigenous concepts, among them are the existence of a supreme being and the belief in a variety of supernatural beings.

Mercado (1994) did not downplay the imposition and instead pointed to the resiliency, flexibility, and creativity of the natives in explaining how Philippine folk religiosity came about. In his reckoning, existing religious manifestations were indeed suppressed in the name of universalizing Christianity, so they simply reappeared in another clothing or, we can say, in a camouflaged form.

In a nutshell, perhaps owing to the great length of Spanish colonization, the Philippines became a predominantly Catholic country. By the time they left in 1898, the Catholic Church was well entrenched in Filipino society (Go 1979). Christian doctrines and teachings had been integrated into the local pre-colonial culture and tradition. In another perspective, animism, which is understood to be the basic form of religion practiced by the Philippine natives in pre-colonial times, subsequently got integrated into the practice of Catholicism (Covar 1998). Religious syncretism or the overlapping of two or more faiths is the nearest accurate characterization of folk religiosity in the Philippines. Considering the 110 UNDP-recognized ethnolinguistic groups (UNDP Philippines 2013) spread over the 7641 islands (as of the latest official count), it is not surprising that Philippine folk religiosity is variegated, or "a melange of animistic elements of the natives and the sacramental and liturgical elements of Spanish Catholicism" (Belita 2006, p. 109).

### 3. Folk Religiosity in the Millenarian Movements

The millenarian movements, as described in this paper, include all the folk religious groups that chose to establish an identity apart from the institutionalized religions. They may not prescribe an original sacred text or theological doctrines, differentiate themselves from any established religions, may still be influenced by the doctrines of organized religions, but elected to stay independent, usually proclaiming a unique call or mission. Fuller accounts and discussions about these movements could be found in the works of Go (1979); Iletto (1979); Covar (1998); Salazar (1999); and Pesigan (2000) among others.

When Catholicism was introduced, imposed, and spread throughout the archipelago, some local priests or shamans, called *babaylan*, *catalonan*, began to go underground. Although some of them joined the mainstream, some could not simply accept the new religion (Salazar 1999). Their activities included the formation of groups that will later become religious fraternities. The *babaylan/catalonan*-led movements became avenues for Filipinos to continue with their old religious practices.

Iletto (1979) gathered that new religious groups formed during the Spanish period were the outcomes of conflicts between social groups or a reaction to the frustrations of colonial life. Such movements grew in the Southern Tagalog province in Luzon. Apolinario de la Cruz (also known as Hermano Pule) founded a confraternity that later was outlawed by Spanish authorities on suspicion of heretical acts. He attributed the persistence of these religious movements cum revolutionary movements to the *pasyon*. The *pasyon* is an “epic” that tells of Christ’s passion and death recited (sometimes sung or chanted) in the local language during the celebration of the Holy Week. It was a literary piece that helped shape the consciousness of the members of the groups. Beltran (1987), in his examination of popular religiosity, which he termed “folk Christology” or “Christology of the inarticulate,” sought to find out empirically what common people think about Jesus: “the task of theology is to mediate the systematic and critical inquiry of Christology with the understanding of Jesus of the ordinary believer in the Philippines” (p. 8).

Iletto would further explain that the *pasyon* was a reference point for norms of behavior and social relations. All of man’s experiences are to be attained through a pattern of birth, death, and rebirth. This is what was common in Hermano Pule’s Cofradia de San Jose (ca. 1841) and to the more recent Santa Iglesia of Felipe Salvador, 1849–1910. Outwardly, the groups centered on religious activities, centering on the *pasyon*, while inwardly holding on to their magic amulets and vests believed to be impregnable by bullets. The religious movement essentially evolved activities that filled the spiritual yearnings of the masses, in effect providing an avenue to express their deeper sentiments against the colonial powers.

Covar (1998) affirms that Hermano Pule’s role in Philippine folk Christianity is very vital as Pule is regarded as the one who began the belief in the *pamumuwesto* (transfer), the practice of which may have begun as early as 1849. *Pamumuwesto* tells the story that God is looking for a new Holy Land after Old Palestine was desecrated by the never-ending war in the Middle East (Covar 1998). The new place supposedly selected by God is Mount Banahaw in Quezon province. This belief coincided with the efforts of Isabelo de los Reyes and Fr. Gregorio Aglipay in the northern Philippines to break away from the colonial religion. After 300 years of Spanish rule, they founded the Iglesia Filipino Independiente. Similar to Catholics, they used the mass for community worship but did away with confessions.

Jose Rizal, the Filipino national hero who fought against the Spanish regime and was executed by the Spanish authorities, played a central part in the millenarian movements. His execution in 1896, his unjust death, and martyrdom by the Spanish officials, made him a hero. The believers in Rizal had wanted to canonize him; they held on to a core belief that Dr. Jose Rizal is the Christ of the Tagalog Region. The lives of Jesus and Jose were triangulated with Jove. These are the *tres Jotas* (Js) that, for them, symbolizes the three persons. Believers claim that the name Jose Rizal has a Latin version, Jove Rex Al. *Jove*, as the secret name of God, *Rex* meaning King and *Al* for All. Thus, Jose Rizal means God King of All or God King over All (Covar 1998). Until that time, Covar identified several Rizalistas or followers

of Rizal, among them are *Iglesia Watawat ng Lahi*, *Bathalismo*, *Sagrada Familia*, *Sagrada ng Lahi*, *Tatlong Persona Solo Dios*, *Ciudad Mystica de Dios*, *Kainainahan at Kaamaamahan*, *Lapiang Malaya*, *Kapatirang Ang Likas ng Katalinuhan*, and Philippine Benevolent Association.

The Rizalistas made Mt. Banahaw their headquarters. According to Iletto (1979), this would not come as a surprise as many folk beliefs suggest Mt. Banahaw, Mt. Makiling (in Laguna), and Mt. Arayat (of Pampanga in Central Luzon) to be holy mountains that are connected by a tunnel. All three mountains are found in Luzon Island and are often regarded as the *Tatlong Maria* (Three Mary's). In their belief, according to Covar's research, it is from these mountains where the new Jerusalem will rise, and it is also here where all men will be judged after Armageddon (Covar 1998).

Aside from the observation that early millenarian folk religions were mostly concentrated in Banahaw, healing sessions were held with a new element, that of Jose Rizal as a god-like character comparable to Jesus Christ. The 1920s and the 1930s were equally important years in the growth of these religious movements. They evolved into movements with less revolutionary ideals, as the "colonial enemies" are now gone. Chiropractic, a healing method using *hilot* or massage centered on the spinal column, was revived. After a successful effort by the Philippine Medical Association to cause the practice into hiding, it re-emerged as a healing practice of the *ispiritista* (medium/clairvoyants). Covar (1998) further described the healing sessions to be a mixture of Bible interpretation, seances, cultism, and healing which were often done in the *centro*. The *talaytayan* was the "blessed" person in such healing, claiming that Jesus Christ sends the healing powers that are being used in the sessions.

Women also played prominent roles in millenarian movements, as highlighted in Pesigan's 2000 study of folk religious leaders. In *Ciudad Mistica de Dios in Mount Banahaw*, the group's leader was Isabel Suarez. She and her predecessors often made predictions of coming cataclysms and unwanted changes. This ability to foresee the future bolsters their mystical charisma among the members. One prophecy involved water shortage, which somehow materialized with the onslaught of El Niño. Pesigan referred to such dynamics as material culture becoming a symbolic action and discourse for sect cohesion. The notion of *Ciudad Mistica* as the world leader in the establishment of *Gobierno Ispiritual* (Spirit-inspired Government) makes its members feel special and different, eliciting loyalty among the believers and enhancing the charisma of *Suprema* Isabel Suarez.

The *Sto. Niño Cofradia* in San Pablo, Laguna, some 15 km away from Mt. Banahaw, is a group led by Aling Vecing. Pesigan (2000) describes her as a trancing shaman that utilizes rituals to make predictions, mostly of the material-ecological-disasters type. After the destructive eruption of Mt. Pinatubo (in Central Luzon) in 1991, the members were warned that the seven lakes of San Pablo would drown the people. This is based on a basic conviction among the members that seven lakes are connected to all the lakes in the Tagalog Region (the area includes Manila and all surrounding provinces). Members were adamant about this position, as a scientific explanation is possible. The Philippines lying along the volcanic ring of fire makes subterranean connections real, and there are intra-connections by both fire and water.

The *Ikatlong Tipan sa Bagong Mundo* (Third Covenant in the New World) is in Orion, Bataan. Erlinda Mateo, the group's leader, like Aling Vecing, foretells ecological disasters. The headquarters of the group is a house surrounded by ten posters, each poster containing a summary of their belief system. The writings are trancing documents believed to be part of a Third Testament. More documents allegedly fortify the belief that the leader assumes divine affinity with either the Holy Trinity or with the Trinitarian addition of God the Mother. Beyond these, members are taken to treasure-hunting expeditions in search of the fabled Yamashita treasure. Yamashita was a Japanese general who allegedly buried stolen wealth during the Japanese Occupation somewhere in Bataan. Pesigan (2000) surmised that perhaps the group is bound by something beyond the spiritual, specifically the material.

They may be few, but the millenarian movements in the Philippines coexisted with the Catholic religion. Although most Filipinos accepted Catholicism as the institutionalized

faith expression, some found a way to reinterpret or reappropriate parts of it into their native or pre-colonial practices. Somehow, the millenarian movements resulted from varied ways of going around the introduced religion to appease their colonial lords, but still refused the unacceptable parts to keep their core indigenous practices and beliefs. They blended the two religions and came up with their new brand of religious system. The product was to be a mixture of mysticism and biblical teachings.

The *pasyon* becoming the centerpiece of the Philippine millenarian movements was understandable. The translation of Christ's passion into the native language, when most of the rites and taught prayers are in foreign form, made it their own. Christ's life was seen as a life worth emulating. Even colonial life must have brought a deeper and meaningful meaning. Life is expected to be a struggle that includes sacrifices, pain, and suffering. In the end, renewal is attainable. In due time, the movements only had to extend the meaning of this story to the struggle for liberty from the colonial masters. The struggle is not only for personal spiritual renewal but also for social and political liberty. In a sense, they came up with their version of Liberation Theology through the *pasyon*. Thus, some Filipinos held on to the millenarian groups because they served two purposes: spiritual fulfillment and libertarian causes.

After the Spaniards left, the millenarian's calls shifted to more contemporary issues like social inequality and ecological calamities. Although some may find these groups strange to make prophecies regarding deluges, water shortage, and other natural disasters, observers found their claims to have sound bases by closer scrutiny. The presence of women leaders could be an expression of the believers' adherence to the pre-colonial system that was more egalitarian.

Jose Rizal as the model of extreme sacrifice, a prophet or a new Christ is comprehensible. He is a more effective and real mediator because he is a Filipino. His teachings were very much the same as that of Jesus, equality of all in the eyes of God and the laws of man. His sacrifices were very much the same as well; he was persecuted for unjustifiable reasons. It was very easy to understand that Rizal is not of this world, a man who has a meta-human composition. After the hardships under colonizers, it must have been comforting to realize how people are blessed to be given such privilege to have walked the grounds where Rizal walked. They are therefore bound to venerate him as they venerate Jesus and the saints. It would be a disservice to dismiss him as an ordinary person who does not deserve respect and religious affectations.

Truly, as observed by Belita (2006, p. 131), "people invest in the practices of popular religion as instruments of human survival as they seek order, meaning, and power in what religion offers to them."

#### 4. Folk Religiosity in Fiestas and Holy Week Celebrations

Catholic festivals are also bearers of folk religious practices. Philippine *Fiestas* (holy feasts) and *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) celebrations showcase the variety and unique blends of Filipino pre-colonial practices and beliefs, the Catholic liturgical practices, and rituals introduced by the missionaries. Upon closer scrutiny, some folk religious elements also came from the missionaries who brought with them their share of folk practices. I will merely describe some of them for illustration purposes.

One popular Catholic celebration is the *Sinulog* in Cebu City in the Visayas, in the central Philippines. The festivities center on the image of the *Sto. Niño* (Child Jesus), more popularly called by the locals as *El Señor*. The religious image of the *Sto. Niño* is widely venerated as miraculous by Filipino Catholics. The image was given as a baptismal gift to the wife of the local chief, Rajah Humabon, by Spanish explorers led by Portuguese-born Ferdinand Magellan. When Magellan landed in Cebu, he was welcomed by Rajah Humabon. The celebration is held with festive dancing in the streets with drum beatings as people put soot on themselves. Putting on the soot would remind observers that the first inhabitants of Cebu Island were *Aetas* (Filipino aborigines). The festivities can be traced to the early ways of the *Aetas*. It can be noted that even early Filipinos had their faith fixated

on the image. Apparently, in their acceptance of Christianity, the early Cebuanos tried to mix it with their native religion. There are accounts of the effort to turn the western icon into a local god, by clothing the Sto. Niño image with indigenous materials.

*Tais-Dupol*, the traditional observance of the Holy Week in the minds of locals in Palo, Northern Leyte, also in the central Philippines, is a slightly controversial one (Marticio 2019). Male penitents wear robes and hoods. The hoods have slits for the eyes, mouth, and nose. The hoods are either pointed (*tais*) or blunt (*dupol*), thus the name. They go around the town or city in a procession bare-footed, bearing the *Sto. Entierro*, the Dead Christ. To some observers and critics, the penitents rather look like members of the Ku Klux Klan. It is general knowledge that these rites were introduced to the locals by Spanish missionaries. Indeed, the practice mirrors the Holy Week observance of Andalusia in Spain, and some of the penitents' cloaks were even sourced from Spain to truly mirror the shared tradition. This is a good illustration of Macdonald's (2004) assertion that some missionaries must have also brought their folk beliefs. As they found a good match or more common grounds with some native beliefs, assimilation of the new religion became easy.

The feast of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo, Manila is another very popular festivity. The image of the Black Nazarene, or *Poong Nazareno*, which depicts Jesus carrying the cross to his crucifixion, was carved by an unknown Mexican from dark wood in the 16th century in Mexico and then brought to the Philippines in 1606. The feast and its celebration are one of the most anticipated Catholic feasts in the City of Manila. Every January 9, the Black Nazarene is brought out of the Quiapo Church for a procession. Here, hundreds of thousands (and recently before the pandemic it has reached up to a million) devotees come in droves from nearby cities and provinces to join the procession bare-footed. Believers, mostly men, try to come near the image, which is placed on a *carroza* (float) to have their hankies wiped on the image. Such wiping is presumed to give healing power to the hanky, that when wiped on a sick person, will bring wellness or cure.

The penitents of Cutud, City of San Fernando (a city northeast of Manila), have their remarkable expression of the Catholic faith. Penitents from this place, mostly males, would have their backs wounded using shaving blades for slight bleeding and would walk the streets bare-footed in the middle of the day. They flagellate themselves with small wooden sticks tied to strings to hit their back wounds. Others carry crosses twice their body size from one chapel to the next. However, what makes the Cutud famous are the penitents who have themselves nailed on the cross, imitating Christ's suffering before his passionate death.

As previously discussed, aside from Catholic doctrines and liturgy, other foreign folk elements were integrated into the religious culture of Filipinos. These elements of the foreign culture blended well in the local culture, especially in the basic, fundamental religious system and practices (Covar 1998).

The observance of feasts and the Holy Week is a common manifestation of Filipino folk devotion. I had my share of personal and family experiences of praying for children among others. When we encountered two consecutive miscarriages, we prayed the novena to our Lady of Guadalupe in the church dedicated as her shrine. Our prayers were granted and we had two daughters. When we prayed for a special request that the next child will be a son, we prayed to Sto. Niño in a church built in his name. That prayer was also granted. Now we have two daughters and a son. Earlier on in my mind, even as we were praying in the shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe, I also entertained the thought of going to Obando to join the Fertility Dance. The Obando Fertility Dance is a famous part of the feast celebration of Obando town in Bulacan. The Dance is performed during the town festival. Couples who hope to be blessed with children join the street dance in a long procession. It is celebrated in honor of the town's patron saints: *Santa Clara* (Saint Claire of Assisi), *San Pascual de Baylon* (Saint Paschal of Baylon), and *Nuestra Senora de Salambao* (Our Lady of Salambao). Since our petitions were already granted, that plan was no longer pursued.

Alejo (2004) observed that "people of popular spirituality are a people with mixed motivation, with the struggle to find the way to go on with life, given the situation, given

the powers, given the hierarchy. So, it is a way of negotiating with the Divine, a way of celebrating who they are" (p. 11).

### 5. Folk Religiosity in the Filipino's Ordinary Life

In this section, I will attempt to highlight the not-so-visible elements of folk religiosity in the Philippines. To better understand Filipino folk religiosity, several scholars, some of them anthropologists, sociologists, theologians, philosophy, and religion teachers like me, observe the spirituality and psyche of the Filipinos. Some of us join and experience their festivities. Some live among the people.

Alejo (2004, p. 11) finds it important to pay serious attention to the way people are finding God:

If we are serious about Jesus, we should be serious about the people he loves—the poor, the ordinary people. If we are serious about the ordinary people, especially the poor, then we should also take their way of praying seriously. We should take their way of connecting to the Divine as seriously as we take our own way of connecting to the Divine.

Mercado (1976) earlier described Filipino religiosity as inculturation or the symbiosis between culture and faith. Spirituality being a conduit of culture, it is expected that Filipino spirituality reflects Filipino culture. The Filipinos can live and practice religion as they do because they think God is not something "out there," but He is someone "right here," a factor in his daily life. The inculturation theory leads us to the further claim that Filipinos believe that indeed "God lives with us." The primitive practice or belief in religion by the Filipinos has already manifested that the supreme deity is somewhere around (he may be the heaven that covers us or the sun that makes our crops grow or the lightning that had just struck a tree).

The belief in the supreme deity who is always with the people was strengthened by the indoctrination or evangelization of the Spanish missionaries through the Bible or Holy Scriptures. In the Holy Scriptures, Christ is Emmanuel, God is with us ([The New American Bible 2002](#), Mt. 1:23), the word was made flesh and dwelt among us (Jn. 1:14), the risen Christ has gone to the Father, Christ is still with us until the end of time (Mt. 28:20), and He is present where two or three meet in His name (Mt. 18:20). Catholicism reinforced this deep spirituality, but at the same time, it also transformed such spirituality. In so doing, Catholicism also underwent some modification to accommodate the folk or native spirituality of the Filipinos.

The Filipinos, like their Asian neighbors, have a holistic worldview. The Filipino mind is not keen on making categorizations or compartmentalization of reality. The world is seen as a whole, where everything, the physical, spiritual, and divine, is an integral part of reality. Even the self is regarded not as a separate entity but as an integral part of the world or reality ([Aguas 2016](#), p. 18). The Filipino has a strong sense of connectedness with the physical world and most especially with the sacred or divine, be it the *anito*, *Diwata*, or the Christian God. Such a deep sense of connectedness is manifested in his religious practices and beliefs and is the very basis of his spirituality. Thus, if the early Filipinos accepted and integrated the Christian doctrines into their spirituality and religious beliefs, it is because they also see its connectedness to God.

This deep connectedness with the sacred explains many Filipino traits and even behavior regarding their expression of their faith. Mercado (1976) noted that when Filipinos pray, they tend to gaze at images while doing the sacred duty of paying homage to the Divine. The *Ibanags*, the ethnolinguistic minority who inhabit the provinces of Cagayan, Isabela, and Nueva Vizcaya in northern Luzon has a practice of gazing while praying, to sit and make one's presence felt in the church. The early *Tagalogs*, the most dominant cultural-linguistic group that inhabit Manila and the surrounding provinces in Luzon, practice praying called *paghingalay*, a contraction of the words *pahinga* or *hininga*—breath and *himlay*—to rest. This "gaze praying" was also believed to be practiced by the *Aetas* when they stare at Mount Pinatubo. This manner of praying is an expression of the Filipino's deep



spirituality anchored on his deep connection with the divine or sacred. The gesture shows that praying for Filipinos is a direct communication to the Supreme Being. Such manner of praying is very much different from how the early Spanish friars introduced the practice of Catholicism, especially praying, to the Filipinos. They are supposed to bow their heads because they are not worthy and do not have the right to stare at sacred images because of their impurity or unclean spirits. In contrast, praying for the Filipinos is a personal act, and their relationship with God is not and should not be hindered by their faults. The “gaze” while praying is but a manifestation of an honest intention to communicate, very much like the same when one simply gazes at a friend, a family member, or a loved one to convey a message.

This applies not just to the sacred but to a broader category. As explained by Fe Susan Go (1979, p. 192):

... at the base of Filipino folk religion is the prevailing belief in, and the deep fear of, supernatural creatures that live and alongside humans. Placating or avoiding various forms of spirits and witches is a major preoccupation of most Filipinos, whether in the rural areas, in the towns proper or in the cities. All types of misfortune, tragedy, disaster, accidents, illness and death are believed to be caused by supernatural beings.

Inter-personalism or sociality is another Filipino trait that shapes his spirituality or religiosity. The Filipino emphasizes not only the inner core of the person and his value but also his outer dimension; he also recognizes the relationality or relatedness of the person with other persons (Aguas 2016, p. 22). This relationality expressed in *pakikipagkapwa* (fellowship) and *pakikisama* (belongingness) is the foundation of his sense of community which can be observed in how he expresses his spirituality or religiosity. Religious practices are commonly done in groups or communities. The millenarians, the flagellants of Cutud, the Black Nazarene procession of Quiapo, and the penitents in Palo, Northern Leyte are all exercises of spiritual oneness with a group, telling of the Filipinos’ strong sense of community (*pagkakabuklod-buklod*), or the affirmation of solidarity. Some penitents would join such religious activities because they feel that it is their obligation to their religious social group. This emanates from Filipinos’ *pakikisama* (belongingness), that one’s worth to the group can be seen in his participation in their activities.

The Filipino sense of *pakikipagkapwa* is also observed in his sense of *utang na loob* (feeling of indebtedness). An individual feels that a favor bonds him/her to the giver and that whatever is requested by the grantee should be given. Most Black Nazarene devotees ask for both material and spiritual favors. The granting of such favors obliges one to make a devotional pledge (*panata*). It can be presumed that many of the devotees had their prayers answered. The intense and sustained participation in the feast could mean they are paying back their *utang na loob* to the Black Nazarene. Even for others who do not ask for any favor, the mere suffering and death of Christ to save us all make one feel indebted to Him. This deep sense of indebtedness also explains why devotees fill up churches every Sunday and other devotional days, like in the Baclaran Church every Wednesday, where the Mother of Perpetual Help is venerated. People also pray to saints and/or images in places of worship renowned for granting miracles and favors, like St. Jude (for hopeless cases), the patron saints of Obando Bulacan (for couples longing for children), and many others.

*Kababaang loob* (feeling of lowliness) also animates Filipino spirituality and religiosity. As an expression of lowliness, a devotee feels the need to be physically present during the celebration of the feast of a saint. It would be preposterous for a subordinate (the faithful) to be absent in the procession of the saint’s image (the superordinate). Such absence could be interpreted as being too proud to snub the saint’s procession. The feeling of shame or *hiya* also plays an important part here. Shame is related to decency, and thus a Filipino must be properly dressed when he or she attends religious practices or activities. Shame or *hiya* also requires one to follow or give in to a request because it would be shameful to decline such a request. *Hiya* is also related to the feeling of *utang na loob*. If someone

got a special favor from the saint, one is to feel *hiya* or shame if one will not celebrate the saint's feast.

For Filipinos, Jesus Christ is seen as a savior, provider, helper in spiritual and material needs, and a father. The role of Christ as a father makes Him a big part of Filipino life. As the Filipino society is predominantly patriarchal, much respect is usually accorded to the father. Philippine Christmas season (Christ's birthday) is regarded as the longest Christmas celebration in the world, starting on December 16 and ends on January 6. As Filipinos are joyous over the father's natal day, there is also great mourning for His "annual death anniversary" during the Lenten season. The deep respect accorded to Rizal could also be seen this way.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, corruption in government, and widespread poverty, Filipinos remain religious. Alejo's observation still makes sense: "The power to will is more on moral and self-affirmation. This what ordinary people are ultimately trying to keep alive in the struggle against hopelessness" (Alejo 2004, p. 11).

## 6. The Function of Filipino Folk Religiosity

Bulatao (1956) who was one of the earliest theologians and scholars who gave attention to Philippine folk religiosity cautioned the faithful community as it connotes split-level Christianity or the coexistence within the same person of two or more belief systems that may be inconsistent with each other. However, his later writings became less cautionary, referring to this phenomenon as "a prayer life bordering on the mystical" (Bulatao 1992, p. 62). He also expressly recognized popular expressions of faith such as the devotion to *Santo Nino* (Infant Jesus) and the *Nazareno* as a "valid experience" of a personal God (p. 72).

Mercado's further comments on the popular Filipino expression of devotion called *punas-punas* or the wiping or touching of a sacred image with a piece of cloth (usually a handkerchief printed with Catholic "formula prayers") is insightful. The devotees' belief that a handkerchief that touches the sacred image obtains a *bisa* or efficacy to cure sicknesses and ward off evil spirits is among the numerous religious practices and symbols attributed to the "integratedness" of religion in everyday life of a Filipino (Mercado 2000).

In searching for conditions that would encourage everyday authenticity of religiosity, like Cornelio (2014), I applaud recent scholarship on Philippine Catholicism welcoming new dimensions in the self-expression of religiosity and growing responsiveness to the suffering of the community. In as much as everyday authenticity gives importance to the local contexts and experiences of being Catholic, individuals must be "able to express themselves in ways that do not necessarily align with institutional prescriptions of religiosity or orthodoxy" (Cornelio 2014, p. 481). Authenticity must be expected to embody the existing beliefs, practices, and contexts of Filipino Catholics.

Not every religious practice in daily life is part of folk religiosity. However, it is the folk religious elements and expressions that need involved and engaged examination to be appreciated. Alejo (2004) considers it to be essential (and I say valuable) as it is a source of cultural energy, which he describes as "a power not meant to dominate nor to resist but creatively for a people to become themselves. I suggest there is something spiritual here as well" (Alejo 2004, p. 10).

Alejo's works on this subject and his idea of looking at popular religiosity or popular spirituality as a form of cultural energy whose value could only be enhanced by highlighting them in an appreciative conversation are very progressive. It helps to shift our focus from doctrine or dogma, even just for a moment, and pay closer attention to meaning, in the sense of the truths that help people authentically live their lives.

Vergote's explanation on the interrelatedness of folk religion and identity is enlightening and hard for me to paraphrase, so I quote (Vergote 1982, p. 10):

Folk religion consists thus of religious behavior that, through historical inheritance, belongs to the cultural identity of a folk community. Its importance is that it creates a unity between folk culture and the Christian faith, as can be clearly seen in former mission territories.

He further elaborates on its value on a personal level, in page 11 he elaborates:

This illustrates the meaning of habits or customs: that they are symbolic forms through which one expresses oneself with one's own cultural language. Customs—religious customs included—are a second nature, a cultural nature. They form a second spontaneity in emotion, expression and devotion.

[Chupungco \(2004, p. 19\)](#) considers popular religiosity as a form of worship that is “varied, undefined and changeable,” in contrast with the other form that is organized. However, he appreciates these folk religious practices for giving form to the discarded religious expressions of the past. The acceptance of the Catholic religion of folk religiosity gave them a form of the sacred that connected with what is indigenous and native to the ethnic or cultural group, like folk healing. Folk religious groups or movements somehow quenched the thirst of Filipinos for a profound understanding of their lives. Folk religiosity provided answers to many of life's questions then. Folk religion and the accompanying practices fill the lull in the people, embodying the sacred, which is incomprehensible based on simple and basic language, rituals, and practices. Folk religion simplifies the practice of religion for the Filipino.

[De Mesa \(2015\)](#) is also encouraging. For him, the God–human relationship must be articulated in terms that are intelligible, meaningful, and challenging to the culture. To this end, issues, presuppositions, cultural thought patterns, and theological language must be carefully considered. From the side of inculturation, folk Catholicism can be viewed positively since “it also helped in preventing the destruction of our indigenous culture during the time of Spanish, even, American colonization” ([De Mesa 1994, p. 221](#)).

The Catholic Church, for its part, while remaining stable and unchanged in its doctrines, has shown openness to how people express their faith or religiosity and spirituality through reformation and dialogue ([Vatican II 1962–1965](#)). It has updated the liturgy, gave a larger role to laypeople, introduced the concept of religious freedom, and started dialogues with other religions. There is somehow a paradigm shift in its work of evangelization, even calling its faithful to seek and allow ecumenism, dialogue, and religious freedom. Vatican II documents on Ecumenism ([Vatican II 1964, Unitatis Redintegratio, no. 5](#)), Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, ([Vatican II 1965a, Nostra Aetate, no. 10](#)), and on Religious Freedom ([Vatican II 1965b, Dignitatis Humanae, no. 13](#)) are some of the bearers of the church message that it is working on embracing the truths and beliefs of the people. This openness attests to the reality that no culture is static; human institutions are bound to change. As [Mercado \(1998\)](#) remarked, the future will always have something of the old and the new. However, De Mesa cautions that:

Although the official Church today concurs with this fundamental harmony between folk Catholicism and the cultural values, it also thinks that the proper attitude towards such practices is one of critical respect, encouragement, and renewal. There is a need to foster these popular religious practices in such a way that they do not become distortions of religion or remain at the level of superficial forms of worship but become rather true expressions of faith. To this end, we must have the courage to correct what leads to fanaticism or maintains people's infantile in their faith ([De Mesa 2007, pp. 60–61](#)).

## 7. Conclusions

I have established that there is more to lose than to gain in neglecting folk religious traditions and practices. We learn much about ourselves as persons and as a people when we recognize and appreciate the beginnings of our folk religious practices.

Millenarian movements are not only valid local faith expressions, but they also embody and celebrate Filipino identity and religious freedom. Keeping a dialogical stance between and among religions is consistent with recognizing and appreciating the common cultural context that binds the millenarian movements with Catholics and other religious groups.

There is a need to re-learn and appreciate the context and nuances that make folk religiosity vibrant and alive among cultures and ordinary people. Preserving traditional

festivals and religious rites means respecting the locals' unique way of expressing their faith. The spontaneity of celebrations, the people's voluntary giving of time to honor the sacred, and the hope that sustains the people, among others, are enough reasons to keep these as part of the corpus of authentic and unique expressions of faith. As Vergote (1982, p. 12) pointed out, if we remove folk symbolic signs and usages, the faith content (the core teachings) does not fully penetrate the heart and mentality of the people. Therefore, even in catechizing and evangelizing, appropriately recognizing folk religiosity is elemental.

Cultivating authenticity of religious expressions at all levels will always require including informative, reflective, and critical discussions of religious habits and traditions. For instance, folk Catholic traditions will grow and become fuller faith expressions if the believers are guided still by the doctrines and dogmas, discussions are kept open to challenges, and real practice in ordinary daily lives of the professed Catholics are examined with respect. In the same manner, the theologian must be ready to be enriched by the depth and uniqueness of expressions and intentionality of certain folk practices and habits. In this way, the habit of dialoguing inside the Church will bear fruit to benefit everyone. This would pave the way to the balance of stability and quiet but spontaneous and sustained church renewal. A continuing real-time study of practices vis à vis Church dogmas will foster the habit of re-examination of faith by way of affirming or shedding off elements that are contrary to the essence of the belief.

Recognizing the folk religious elements in Filipino Catholicism is essential in cultivating a truly authentic Catholicism among Filipinos. In teaching religion, the importance of speaking a lot less and listening more becomes more important than ever. This affirms continuous learning and broadened methods of education as a good pedagogical discipline (Macaranas 2021a), particularly in challenging and transforming Filipino folk religiosity towards greater authenticity.

To be fully human is to be more compassionate and considerate of one another. Folk religion is a good point of discussion for a philosophical community of inquiry. Because it involves both the subjective and social perspectives, it is a fertile ground to train and habituate minds to be open while remaining critical, without imposing views on others. The call of scholars to promote critical public and social engagements, whether face-to-face or online, are good venues for developing creative and critical perspectives (Macaranas 2021b) and can therefore contribute to promoting appreciation as well as enriching the practice of folk religion.

Indeed, justice to humanity is upheld when different faith expressions are allowed to flourish with respect. The people of popular spirituality are people with valid and varied narratives, with the struggle to find their way in life, given their context and situation. To avoid the pitfall of encouraging excessive relativism, missionaries and schools must persist in educating the faithful on the Church teachings. In dialogue, we can achieve social transformation where folk religiosity is harnessed and acknowledged to positively contribute to society. More than proselytizing, engendering philosophical habits, such as reflecting, participating in open engagements, dialoguing, and liberating the mind, it will enable faith communities to discover, critically evaluate, and appreciate their most deeply held beliefs and attitudes; in particular, those which are often held uncritically.

As seekers of truth and wisdom, we participate in probing the ways of the people by going to the roots of expressions, words, and beliefs. Let us continue to harness the role of forms, expressions, and hermeneutics in communication and thought development. We must persistently seek to clarify as well as to expose persistent problems and confusions in our culture and traditions. Understanding folk religiosity is, at best, doing philosophy in our everyday life and everyday discourse. A clear sense of folk religiosity can help in reappropriating religious dogmas and doctrines as the church and the faithful continuously study, dialogue, and fully experience life in the pursuit of approaching authenticity in faith, beliefs, and religions.

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