

Good Friday crucifixions in the Philippines

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Today, Good Friday, at least 17 people are scheduled to be crucified in the barrio of Cutud, San Fernando, Pampanga, in the rice farming region of central Luzon in the Philippines. Similar crucifixions will take place in other areas of the country. It is an annual celebration of gore and obscurantism, an international media circus, and a tourist bonanza.

Holy week, the celebration of Christ's suffering and death—Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Black Saturday, and Easter Sunday—is an inescapable phenomenon in the predominantly Catholic Philippines. Businesses and government offices shut down. All who can afford to, leave Metro Manila and return to their provinces of origin.

Pabasa spring up everywhere. The makeshift shelters house an altar, rows of monobloc plastic chairs, and a microphone and amplifier. People gather—particularly the aged, particularly women—and warble and caterwaul their way through the *pasyon*, the sung version of the passion and death of Christ. Worn, newsprint Tagalog librettos are passed from singer to singer, illustrated with images of the passive, docile Jesus suffering at the hands of the Romans and of the Jews, who are identifiable by their medieval caps.

The amplified singing continues 24 hours a day for the duration of the week, culminating in the crucifixion of Christ on Friday at three in the afternoon. At which point it is said that God is dead and silence reigns until Sunday.

A host of rituals are also widely performed, each more macabre than the last. Flagellants walk the streets on Friday. The majority are poor young men. Many have their faces covered in masks or wrapped in cloth to hide their identity. Crowns of thorns top the heads of some; all are shirtless and drenched in their own blood. Prior to their performance, they have assistants make a series of vertical incisions in their backs with a razor. They rhythmically strike themselves with bamboo flails, bloodying the prepared slits in their backs. Onlookers and passers-by occasionally strike the flagellants with bamboo poles or with the flails.

And, in certain barrios, most famously in Cutud, Pampanga, people are publicly crucified. A procession occurs recreating the arrest, trial, torture and execution of Christ. Participants are elaborately costumed. Scores of centurions, looking as if they had stepped out of a low budget sword-and-sandal epic, escort the *kristos*, the Christs, who are scheduled for crucifixion. The *kristos* are nailed through their hands and feet to crosses which

have been prepared for the occasion. Each cross has a footrest upon which they can stand. They are elevated, crucified, for a few minutes or up to an hour, then taken down and removed from their crosses.

Local and international media capture this event annually. Their cameras zoom in, recording in loving detail the agony on the face of a *kristo* or the impact of a flail upon a bloodied back. The morbid fascination of the media with gore and suffering is palmed off as reportage on the exotic and bizarre, yet devout and sincere, deeply religious behavior of ordinary Filipinos. The flagellants and crucified are described as doing penance, a behavior we are told which Filipinos have engaged in since their conversion to Catholicism during the period of Spanish colonization.

An examination of history reveals that the crucifixions are not performed as penance, nor are they an ancient practice. They are a modern phenomenon born of the rupture produced in rural life by the influx of international capital in the postcolonial period, and fostered, nurtured and funded by the Philippine government, local business, and the international media.

The Spanish conquered the Philippines in 1565. With the exception of the colonial government bureaucracy in Manila, which monitored the galleon trade between Acapulco and China, Spanish rule relied on the clergy. They were responsible for the administration of taxation, farmed out to the native ruling elite; the religious orders owned most of the land; and they sought to inculcate into the populace the values of passivity and submissiveness.

There are very few sources that give an insight into the behavior of the clerics in the Philippines during the first few centuries of their rule. The clergy did not instruct the population in Spanish and each priest needed to learn a local language. The religious orders produced Spanish-Tagalog dictionaries which are unintentionally revealing. Priests learned to conjugate verbs with the sentence, “Hahampasin co si Juan. Hinahampas co siya. Hinampas co siya/ I will strike Juan. I am striking him. I struck him.” Another page reads, “Gotomin mo siya” which is rendered “Castigale con hambre/ Punish him with hunger.”

The clergy also instructed the population to hit themselves. The medieval European practice of flagellation, formerly regarded as heretical, but now adopted by the church, was transplanted onto Philippine soil. When such practices became

frowned upon again in Europe, they were banned by the Synod of Calasiao in the Philippines in 1771. No one was to engage in “bloody penance.”

The practice had largely died out a century later, when the Americans purchased the Philippines from Spain for \$20 million and then subjugated the population in a bloody and protracted colonial war. But the 1950s saw the startling rise in practice of religious self-mortification that was bound up with profound economic and social changes in the immediate post-independence period.

A massive influx of US capital in the aftermath of World War II transformed the region. Capitalist exploitation was dramatically extended throughout the countryside. Traditional patron client ties between landlord and peasant ended and were supplanted by the cold cash nexus of wage labor. As class relations were overturned so too was the viability of the traditional peasant response of millenarianism and revolt. Old class solidarities, the product of working a parcel of land for a common landlord, were vanishing. The new class solidarity of the agricultural proletariat was forming, but much of rural labor force was atomized.

The appalling living and working conditions of the rural populations necessarily bred disease and malnutrition. Part of the quid pro quo of earlier patron client ties was the expectation that the landlord would assist with a share of medical costs. This too had disappeared. Left to fend for themselves, the rural population turned to ritual self-mortification. This was not an act of penance, of contrition for some imagined sin. It was *panata*, a vow that if God would heal, would intervene on their behalf, they would whip themselves bloody.

In 1961, a man in Pampanga, Arsenio Añoza, made a vow that if God would intervene on his behalf he would crucify himself, put nails through his hands and feet, every Good Friday for fifteen years. The event gained local media attention and quickly spread. Others imitated Añoza. This was an act of sheer desperation, an appeal to the silent heavens for rescue from conditions of exploitation that were daily experienced but not understood.

The news spread rapidly. Within one year, 200 American tourists arrived in Pampanga to watch the gruesome festivities. Travel agencies began promoting the event, offering other attractions to draw crowds. The Philippine Department of Tourism was founded in 1973 and quickly began selling what they called the “awesome and barbaric” event.

The numbers of visitors quickly grew. By the 1970s, twenty to thirty thousand people were attending the annual blood fest. Local businessmen saw the opportunity for profit. They began investing in the event. The crosses were no longer made of stray timber; they were smooth, carved affairs with foot rests and a nicely painted INRI, the label traditionally inscribed at the top of the cross meaning Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. Coke and Pepsi sponsored the events, setting up banners and stands to sell their products. Hawkers sold sunglasses, hats,

religious artifacts.

By the late 1980s, the Department of Tourism was directly investing in the event. They financially sponsored its operations, set up a director to insure that it was performed well, promoted the event through print and broadcast media, and created package promos for local and overseas tourists.

The *kristos* began to receive sponsorship as well. Affluent religious persons or local business consortiums began giving money to the crucified, sometimes as much as 50,000 pesos. The practice was lucrative and spread from Pampanga to other regions of the Philippines, notably Cebu.

The international media has played a critical role in the promotion of this gruesome circus. CNN, BBC, Fox News, ABC, and the like, all will have representatives present for the spectacle. Long-standing *kristos* gain five minutes of international notoriety.

An estimated fifty to seventy thousand people now show up for these events. McDonalds sets up a temporary store to sell burgers, fries and ice cream to those exhausted by the tropical heat. The Philippine Department of Health has representatives on hand to give tetanus shots to each *kristo* before they are nailed down for tourists’ enjoyment, government revenue and corporate profit. Last year the crucified included a 15-year-old boy and an 18-year-old girl.

There is a putrid whiff of sanctimoniousness when the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines officially disavows the events. The local priest blesses the nails and the flails. And at mass every Sunday, the devout are told that God loves them and loves justice before they are dismissed to return to their shantytowns. The church has for centuries promoted a barbaric doctrine of bloody, redemptive suffering. It cannot wash its hands so easily of the gore of Good Friday.

The Good Friday crucifixions in the Philippines are a particularly grotesque example of the way in which capitalism and all of its institutions can transform the suffering and backwardness of the most impoverished layers of the population into a source of profit.



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