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Holy Week centers on the death of Jesus as a demonstration of God’s sincere offer of peace and reconciliation. In the Philippines, *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) is the most significant religious celebration, and perhaps the communal reading of the *Pasyon Mahal* or most commonly known as *Pasyon*—an indigenous and vernacular rendering of the passion narrative—is the most powerful expression of Filipino folk religion.¹ *Pasyon* is a poetic composition that recounts the life and works of Jesus Christ. Used during the Lenten season as a commemoration of the Lord’s passion, death, and resurrection, this practice has been kept alive for centuries in the Philippines.²

This paper focuses on the faithful readers of the *Pasyon*,³ exploring the devotees’ appropriation of the cross in the context of the *Pasyon*, which centers on the message of God’s offer of peace and reconciliation through the sacrifice of Jesus. Does this message affect the lives of the devotees of the *Pasyon*? Do they experience a deeper sense of forgiveness and peace

¹ The most influential of all the Tagalog *Pasyon* texts is the *Casaysayan nang Pasiyong Mahal* (narrative of the passion) printed in 1814. Traditionally known as the work of Padre Pilapil, the *Casaysayan* remains the most popular text chanted in the *Pabasa* (a Lenten ritual involving the uninterrupted chanting of the *Pasyong Mahal*) every Holy Week.

² Rodel E. Aligan, *The Biblical and Folkloric Elements of the First Tagalog Pasyon* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2001), 3.

³ The respondents are devotees from towns of Bulakan , Plaridel and Santisima Trinida. Others are from a small barrio of Sumapa and Dakila. Their ages range between late-sixties and early eighties.They have been actively participating in the *Pabasa* for more than two decades.

before God? Does their devotion influence their understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation in their relationships with others?

This paper adopts an *interpretive content analysis*⁴ of the narrative of the devotees rather than a literary analysis of *Pasyon* as a text. This method requires greater interpretative judgment in coding and analysis. Unlike *basic content analysis*, interpretative content analysis does not assume that meaning is simply contained in the text, but instead allows the researcher to interpret the whole, or the gestalt of the communication.⁵ Researchers may use this method to describe the content and meaning of a text and even summarize and make inferences about thoughts, feelings, and intentions based on various forms of communication.⁶

In this research, personal in-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews, and observations of the participants were the primary means of gathering data . This process is based on the belief that the knowledge of a social world is constructed through informal conversation and personal interviews, since these forms of communication set the participant’s perspectives within the context of personal history and experience. Interviews were given during Holy Week as the respondents actively took part in reading the *Pasyon* during the *Pabasa*. The religious environment during Holy Week heightens the imagination of the devotees as they appropriate the suffering of Christ in their lives.

Pasyon as Pagninilay (Reflection) and Pakikibahagi (Identification)

⁴ James W. Drisko and Tina Maschi, *Content Analysis: Pocket Guide to Social Work Research Methods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). Generally, *content analysis* is defined as a “structured research approach using specified research design and methods to make replicable and valid inferences from texts and similar materials” (6). There are two types of content analysis. *Basic content analysis* assumes that meaningful content is fully contained in the text under study. It is objective, descriptive, and quantitative in its method and analysis. *Interpretative content analysis* is based on a constructivist epistemological foundation, which operates on the position that the researcher’s purpose and frame of reference may make an important difference in the understanding of words in context (67).

⁵ Drisko and Maschi, *Content Analysis*, 4.

⁶ Drisko and Maschi, *Content Analysis*, 65.

The reading of the *Pasyon* is meaningful for the devotees because it leads them to reflect on the suffering of Jesus in a way that is not purely rational. Since the reflection includes emotions and feelings, the devotees “connect” or “identify” with the suffering of Christ. Thus, the theme of *awa* (mercy, empathy) is very prominent in their narratives.

For the devotees, *Pasyon* serves as *pakikibahagi sa paghihirap ni Kristo* (sharing in the suffering of Christ). Since *Pasyon* centers on the suffering of Christ, it is done with respect and meditation. Devotees use various words to express the manner of reflection one should have in order to appreciate the powerful impact of *Pasyon*: *pagninilay* (reflection), *pagsasalooob* (internalization), *pagdibdib upang matimo sa isipan* (serious and deep reflection), *pagsasapuso* (take into heart), and *pagdama* (empathy). *Pasyon* should be performed with sobriety in order to internalize the message behind the song.

For Ka Dely and Ka Saring, reading the *Pasyon* is like reading the Bible. For more than fifty years, they have meditated on the sufferings of Jesus every Holy Week. The sufferings of Christ strike a sensitive emotional cord to Ka Dely, who is a mother, as she recites a verse in the *Pasyon* that depicts the scene where the lifeless body of Jesus is placed on Mary’s lap:

*Ito baga ang buhok mo
tuwi na’y sinusuklay ko
hinuhusay kong totoo?
bakit ngayo’y gulong-gulo
natitigmak ng dugo mo?*

(is this the hair you once owned?
one I used to touch
and care for so much?
Why now disheveled
and seemed filled with your own blood?)

Pasyon is a form of deep reflection on the sufferings of Christ (*pagninilay sa paghihirap ng Panginoong Jesus*) and also their means of sharing the suffering of Christ (*pakikidamay sa paghihirap ni Kristo*). Again, Ka Dely recites a verse from the text:

*Nasaan baga bunso ko
ang taong pinakain mo
mahigit na limang libo,
bakit ngayo 'y wala rito
at di dumamay sa iyo?*

(Where now my young child
are the people you fed?
there were more than five thousand
but now not even one here,
to weep with you, not even one was left)

This line invites all to share in Christ's suffering, since he died for our sins to redeem us. After reciting this line, Ka Dely reflects, "*Sinakop tayo ni Kristo, dapat pasakop din tayo, tularan natin sya . . .*" (Since Christ has subjected us, we ought also to be subjected to him; let us imitate him.) Ka Dely believes that we do not need to inflict pain in our body like flagellants:

"yong iba nga nagpipinitensya, nagpapadugo pa ng likod, kami ay hindi na ganoon . . . iniisip ko makasunod lang ako sa kalooban nya, higit pa sa pagpapadugo ng katawan ang nagawa ko."

(Others inflict pain on themselves, even to the point where their backs bleed; we are like that. I think that if I can follow his will, it will be regarded as superior to inflicting my body with pain.)

According to Rodel E. Ilagan, at first the *Pasyon* from the beginning was read for the purpose of consoling the sick and the dying and was originally known as *Magpa-Hesus*.⁷ But Aquino De Belen's *Pasyon* shifted the emphasis from the dying to those who are present on the

⁷ According to Rodel Aligan during the early years of evangelization, *Magpa-Hesus* was part of a pastoral solution to the problem of taking care of the sick and the dying. The prefix *Magpa* means someone who causes other persons to do something. Customarily, the *Magpa-Hesus* was used to pray the rosary over the sick and the dying. Also, the reading of the Gospel brought great consolation to those who were sick and dying. *Biblical and Folkloric Elements*, 10.

deathbed, who are chided for being materialistic and worldly. Rene B. Javellana notes that although the *Pasyon* genre is unquestionably Spanish in origin, the originality of Aquino de Belen's *Pasyon* lies in the lessons or *aral*.⁸

These lessons (*aral*) or moral sermonettes draw implications out of the different scenes in the passion of Christ, inviting readers to join in the spirit of penitence. Ka Marciana reflects that “*Parang may pangangaral siya (pasyon) . . . makikita mo ang buhay mo*” (*Pasyon is like an invitation for introspection*). After enumerating the many penetrating lessons about life from the *Pasyon*, many respondents say, “*nandoon po lahat sa Pasyon yon, mababasa nyo*” (You can read it all there in the *Pasyon*).

The lessons help devotees see their lives before God and how they relate with other people. For Ka Tessie (age 61), the *Pabasa* is an opportunity to come to God and ask for forgiveness and renewal. Meditation on the *Pasyon* gives her an opportunity to renew her heart before God (*pagbabalik-loob*). Ka Tessie admits that she seldom attends church and still struggles with sins in her life. She sheepishly reflects that in reading the *Pasyon*, “*nababawas-bawasan yong nagsisikip kong kalooban dahil sa kasalanan*” (It lessens my guilt and provides a sense of relief).

Pasyon and Themes Related to Peace and Reconciliation

In describing the experience of reading the *Pasyon*, devotees often identify two prominent themes: *Ginhawa* (comfort, relief) and *pakikipag-kapwa* (in solidarity with other being).

Ginhawa refers to the experience of forgiveness and *pakikipag-kapwa* flows out of this experience, which is the result of *pagninilay* (deep reflection).

⁸ Rene B. Javellana, “The Sources of Gaspar Aquino de Belen’s *Pasyon*,” *Philippine Studies* 32 (1984): 321.

Ginhawa

Ginhawa has the same wide range of meaning as *shalom* in the Hebrew Scriptures. *Shalom* is generally translated as “peace” (*kapayapaan*). All of the respondents share the same experience of “*ginhawa sa kalooban*” (inner relief) in their narratives. The devotees’ experience of *ginhawa* comes from their reflection on Jesus as a friend and co-journeyer (*katoto, kaibigan*), as he is depicted in the *Pasyon* without denying his divinity. Thus devotees find strength and inspiration in the suffering of Jesus.

Ginhawa is expressed in various ways. Respondents describe it as “*masarap po ang pakiramdam*” (I feel good), “*napakalakas po ng aking pakiramdam*” (I feel so strong), “*maligaya po ang pakiramdam*” (there is a feeling of joy), and “*nakakagaan po ng loob*” (it lightens my burdens). They speak of satisfaction and contentment, of having a sense of joy and fulfillment in doing their devotion: “*parang kulang po ang araw mo pag hindi ka nakabasa ng pasyon*” or “*parang hindi kumpleto ang Mahal na Araw mo pag hindi ako nakabasa*” (Holy Week is incomplete without being part of the reading of *Pasyon*). Their feeling of *awa* (sympathy/empathy) towards the sacrifices of Jesus in turn becomes their *pagpapasalamat* (thanksgiving, gratitude).

Moreover, the experience of healing contributes to some respondents’ concept of *ginhawa*. In addition to realizing the kind of love they receive from God through the suffering and death of Jesus, some narratives describe how their families experience God’s healing and protection. as a result of their devotion. They say, “*Hangga’t kami ay binigyan ng lakas ng Panginoon, patuloy kaming babasa*” (As long as the Lord gives us strength we will continue to read).

The only male among my respondents is Ka Vic Esteban . Diagnosed with an “unknown” health problem had found healing from God when he became a devotee and gave his vow (*panata*) to the *Pasyon*. He saw this healing power in the life of his father, who had a similar experience. Ka Vic reflects, “*Talagang sa Dios ay walang imposible*” (Truly, with God nothing is impossible).

“*Ginhawa sa kalooban*” includes God’s provision for the family of devotees. Given an offer to work as *kasambahay* (housemaid) and an opportunity to have small business, Ka Virgie keeps going back to her *panata* (vow). She says, “*Sa paglilingkod ko, hindi naman ako pinababayaang ng nasa itaas . . . pasalamat ako sa loob ng isang taon di ka man lang nagkakasakit*” (Never has God abandoned me as I serve him. I am thankful that I never got sick for a whole year).

A widow for more than twenty years, Ka Milagros’ son was able to graduate from college when she made the reading of *Pasyon* her *panata*. With tears in her eyes, she recalls the words of her son, “*Gusto ko po mag-college*” (I want to go to college). Even though she had no one to turn to for provision, God provided for her son’s educational needs.

For the devotees, *Ginhawa* does not mean having material possessions, financial security, or absence of pain and suffering. In fact, all of the respondents have their own stories of tragedies. But according to Ka Fely, *Pasyon* is the story of Jesus and human experience in this world. “*Ganito pala ang buhay ng tao na naghihirap, parang si Cristo . . . kung nanamnamin mo*” (So this is how it feels when humans suffer—it is being like Christ . . . if you really try to feel and experience it). A person who experiences *ginhawa* has *kapayapaan* (peace). Ka Trining speaks about her experience of life as taught to her by the *Pasyon*, “*masarap mabuhay kung kasama mo ang Dios . . . ang kasayahan ng buhay ay hindi yong tawa ka ng tawa . . . yong may*

kapayapaan ka . . .” (Life is meaningful if you are with God . . . having joy in life does not mean you laugh and laugh . . . but it is when you have peace).

The theme of *ginhawa* is dominant among the narratives of the respondents. *Ginhawa* is experienced first and foremost in their *kalooban* (inner being). The respondents receive *kapatawaran* (forgiveness), *kagalingan* (healing), and *pangangailangan* (provision) as part of their devotion. Thus the experience of *kapayapaan* (peace) is about having peace with God and experiencing inner peace.

Pakikipag-kapwa

The respondents’ devotion to the *Pasyon* helps them meditate on the suffering of Jesus and then appropriate its message in their lives. *Pagninilay* (meditation, reflection) is an invitation to imbibe the lessons and truth of the *Pasyon*, which is a spiritual exercise that carries significant moral and ethical implications.

The ethical implication of the *Pasyon* can be attributed to how Christ is represented in the text. Unlike the presentation of Christ in the Gospels, which is unadorned and spare, in the *Pasyon*, Christ is more rounded and multi-dimensional. Christ is shown to be interacting with others in situations that are not found in the Bible, portrayed as a man rather than a god.⁹ For this reason, devotees naturally see the relevance of the passion story to real life situations.

An important analysis of the first Tagalog *Pasyon* identifies two important contributions of the *Pasyon* text to the inculturation of Christianity in the Philippines. First, it had a catechetical function. Literature played an important role in the Christianization of the Philippines, and the folk idiom in the *Pasyon* ingrained the Christian faith into people’s

⁹ Elena Zarco Rivera, “Christ in the Tagalog Pasyon” (master’s thesis, University of the Philippines, 1976), abstract.

consciousness. Second, *Pasyon* served as a promoter of Christian and Filipino values. The Tagalog *Pasyon* helped to shape moral, religious, and social values that are integral to the Christian faith.¹⁰ The moral values find relevance in this research on *pakikipag-kapwa tao* (respect for the other person).

Another important theme that surfaced in the interviews reflects a slight different understanding of *pakikipag-kapwa* as being a good neighbor. The *Pasyon* is not just about an individual's relationship with God, but has social and ethical dimensions as well. According to the narratives of those interviewed, *pakikipag-kapwa* is expressed in various ways—through *pakikisama* (conformity, fellow feeling), *paggalang sa karapatan ng tao* (respecting the rights of others), and *pagmamahal at pagtulong sa kapwa* (helping other people).

The message of the *Pasyon* leads a person to engage with people. Aling Gay Villegas (age 72) says, “*Kung inuunawa mo ang mga binabasa mo magiging malapit ka sa mga tao . . . kasi nalalaman mo ang kanilang kalooban*” (If you would truly understand what you are reading, you would get more familiar and intimate with other people . . . because you discover who they really are). Ka Rosario and Ka Lourdes say that their devotion to the *Pasyon* has gained them many friends, which is not surprising given their joyful and resilient spirit during the interviews. Like other devotees, they have their own stories of pain and sufferings, but their reflections on the suffering of Jesus inspire them to be a *catoto* (friend) to others.

Pagpapatawad (to forgive) is part of *pakikipag-kapwa*. Since Jesus's death on the cross opens the way for God's forgiveness and reconciliation, we are also expected to forgive those who sin against us. Ka Aunor (age 63) says, “*Kasi ginawa sa atin ng panginoon pinatawad tayo, e di hindi tayo makapagpapatawad kung sakali man, kaya kailangan kung may kaaway ka, e*

¹⁰ Aligan, *Biblical and Folkloric Elements*, 61.

patawarin mo na.” (It is because God has forgiven us; if not, we won’t be able to forgive others. Thus, it is a must that, if you have an enemy, you must forgive.) When asked how the *Pasyon* influences her relationship with other people, Aling Lydia De Chavez answers “*pagtulong sa kapwa . . . yong bukal sa puso . . . at yong wag gagawa ng kasalanan sa iba*” (Helping others. . . help that is sincere . . . and not doing bad things to other people). *Pakikipag-kapwa* is priceless and has eternal value. One should not get tired of doing good to others. Ka Leonora (age 78), in referring to the truth that we will reap what we sow, states, “*para na ring nag-aalkansya ka, ipon ka ng ipon . . . pag dumating ang wakas ng buhay meron kang nagawa.*” (It is like having your own piggy bank. You keep saving . . . When the end comes, you will discover that you have done something good).

Some respondents mention lessons on family relationships. Couples who don’t get along with each other cannot receive the blessings of God, so they need to learn to love and forgive each other. Referring to children who defy the authority of their parents, Mang Vic says, “*Nakaka-isang salita ka pa lang, nakaka-isang libo na sila . . . nasa Pasyon po yon!*” (While a child has only spoken one word, parents have already uttered thousands. That is mentioned in the *Pasyon*!). On making friends, the *Pasyon* teaches Vic, “*pag may kwarta may kaibigan, pag wala, wala na . . . malalaman mo sino ang iyong kapanalig . . . sabi nga nila e KABIGAN hindi KAIBIGAN.*” (If you have money you have friends. But if you don’t have money, no one stays . . . you will really find out who your true friends are . . . and as they say, it is like being “user friendly,” but not a friend).

Conclusion

The reading of the *Pasyon* is a liturgical exercise where devotees contemplate the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ which serves as their *pakikibahagi sa paghihirap ni Kristo* (share in the suffering of Christ). In this sacred duty, those who offer a *panata* (vow of devotion) are affirmed of God's costly love. As they offer their service to God, their vow becomes a *panalangin* (prayer) for healing, protection, and provision, sufficient to survive a day or a week.

The *Pasyon* is not only a time for meditation, prayer, and worship but also a celebration of God's love, a time for fun and food. *Ginhawa* is not only about having peace with God and with oneself (*ginhawa sa kalooban*) but also about being reconciled with others (*pakikipag-kapwa*) in order for peace (*kapayapaan*) to reign over families as well as the whole community. For devotees, their devotion to the annual reading of the *Pasyon* invites them to experience a glimpse of *shalom*.