

POPULAR RELIGIOSITY OF THE ITAWES ON THEIR CONCEPT OF SALVATION

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Abstract— One of the means in which man and woman can achieve full humanity is through culture. It is for this reason that popular religiosity, as an expression of culture, is taken into study to find out its significant contribution to full human development, particularly of the Itawes of Atulayan Sur, Tuguegarao City. This study dwells into establishing the salvific elements or life-giving elements of the popular religious practices of patunak, balangun, and makitollu, as contributory towards their Christian Catholic concept of salvation. The primary source of information was attained through interview and observation method. To substantiate the information gathered, library work was done. The hermeneutics of appreciation was especially employed in the interpretation of the data gathered, in respect of the culture of the subjects. The descriptive and expository methods were also used in presenting the data gathered. Specific Christian Catholic doctrines and traditions were utilized to enrich the reflections made from the popular religious practices.

This study reveals that patunak is a mirror of the hope of the poor people for survival from their impoverished situation. There is an evidence of transfer of life from one form to another. The Kingdom of God reigns in a structure which underwent patunak. Balangun, is necessary for the salvation of a sick child. While, Makitollu is concern about harmonious relationship of family members. The practices are means of achieving salvation and they are essential in teaching important Christian Catholic values. Furthermore, the practices are not only concern about human relationships but extend to other beings.

Keywords— *popular religiosity, soteriology, patunak, balangun, makitollu, Itawes, salvation*

INTRODUCTION

“The human person can achieve true and full humanity only by means of culture”, (Gaudium Et Spes, 53). This claim of the Second Vatican Council on the role of culture for every man and woman is noteworthy. Culture as beautifully defined by Kroeber and Kluckhohn(1994), consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas specially their attached values. The ideas, values, and behaviors of an individual are parts of his/her culture. This very important role of culture to every man and

woman makes the process of inculturation becomes imperative for any theologian who wishes to evangelize a group of people.

The Council in her stand about inculturation, is affirming that the best starting point in evangelizing is the cultural experiences of the people. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) does not only emphasize the importance of the process of inculturation to the development of the person and the process of evangelization but points out the importance of inculturation. According to PCP II:

“Inculturation is necessary for the sake of the Church itself. It enriches the Church. Unless the Church participates in this process of inculturation, it will not be able to respectfully draw the good elements within a culture, renew them from within and assimilate them to form part of its Catholic unity. The Catholicity of the Church is more fully realized when it is able to assimilate and use the riches of a people’s culture for the glory of God” (PCP II, 208).

Culture, with its positive elements, can contribute to the unity and the catholicity of the Church. By the process of faithfully rediscovering the richness in the culture and bringing its beauty to the awareness of the people, this element of culture will not be despised but can be taken as part of Christian faith. “Popular religiosity is part of the culture of people and obviously carries with it an almost endless variety of manifestations and features.” (Vitaliano, 1999) With the same effect as that of culture, manifestations and features of Filipino popular religiosity could also contribute to the unity of Christian faith and catholicity of the Church. The richness of these popular religious practices of the Filipinos could bring out the potentials of the Filipinos to become truly Filipinos, through the process of inculturation. But, as observed by Wostyn (2004), little attention has been given to Filipino culture and cultures. Filipinos lost contact with their cultural roots and little attention was given to the religiosity of the people.” Most often than not, the problem with some of us with regard popular religious practices is that we name them outrightly as superstitious and therefore discard them as nonsense practices. This negative attitude against popular religious practices might have been caused by globalization,

religious arrogance and lack of respect of the culture of the people. In the Itawes community to which the writer belongs, there are 1,364 Itawes speaking people out of the 2,894 total population. Popular religious practices are observed in this community. People in the community who are ignorant of and uninitiated to the culture would simply discard them as *angngurug yo babakat nga mari makkalsong* (belief of an old woman who does not wear panty). By convention, people would do the practice to avoid conflict or arguments with the usually old practitioners while saying *awan ma mawawan nikaw nu kuwam mu* (you will lose nothing anyway if you will do it). The superstitious members of the community would do it to avoid the bad consequences which could be brought by the absolute. More often than not, young adults also refuse to do the practices because the practices are already pre-judged by them as superstitious and they would not like to be branded as superstitious by doing the pre-judged practices. The potential salvific messages which can be drawn from the popular religious practices therefore are not seen any more by those who close their eyes and are not known by those who close their minds.

What this research has to do is to present that these popular religious practices could be taken as potent contribution to the Christian understanding of faith, especially on the concept of salvation. It is mainly for this purpose that the researcher aims to bring out the life-giving elements and challenge the death-dealing elements in the popular religious practices of the Itawes. However, there is an obvious display of non-appreciation of the popular religious practices by some members of the community themselves. For this reason, the writer employed the hermeneutics of appreciation in dealing with the popular religious practices of the Itawes. The methodology was employed with the aim of bringing out the potentials of the popular religious practices of the Itawes, to become tools in proclaiming the message of salvation, primarily to the Itawes people themselves. The writer recognizes the emphasis of Vatican II that God reveals Himself to His people and speaks to them according to culture proper to their ages (GS 58). Using this methodology is needed to arrive at a sincere and respectful dialogue with the popular religious practices of the Itawes in order to discover the salvific elements in the culture and consequently experiencing salvation from it. Eventually, such process was utilized by the researcher to find out whether the popular religious practices of the Itawes could really be consistent with the Catholic Christian practices.

Pertinent to the study are three of the popular religious practices of the Itawes - *patunak*, *balangun* and *makitollu*. These practices were observed by the writer as part of the culture of the Itawes. They are part of the ordinary life of the Itawes. They are the focus in this study, in the aim of the writer to find out the role of the popular religious practices of the Itawes in their concept of salvation.

METHODS

Interview and observation method were used in gathering the primary source of information from the Itawes community due to lack of related literature about the popular religious practices of the Itawes. An unstandardized interview which is flexible and open was utilized. A semi-quantified questionnaire was used as guide for the interview. After conducting individual interview, a focused-group, which is 5% of the Itawes, the hermeneutics of appreciation "calls strongly for the retrieval (rediscovery and recovery) of the strength and riches of the cultural wisdom and genius of a people". This form of hermeneutics "utilizes combined cultural and social analyses which emphasize on the positive, life-giving elements of the culture. To ensure that the appreciative stance will be foremost in the dynamics and process of theological reflection, the methodology of mutually respectful and critical interaction between the Judaeo-Christian Tradition and contemporary experience, is required by this form of hermeneutics." Although this type of interpretation does not deny the undesirable elements in the culture, it focuses more on the positive elements; and the descriptive and expository methods were used in presenting the data gathered. The same methods were used in presenting the outcome of the discernment of the researcher on the role of the popular religious practices of the Itawes people on their concept of salvation.

The respondents were identified from the 309 sample population of Itawes speaking people of the community. The facts about the Itawes' understanding of salvation, particularly coming from the popular religious practices, which were gathered from the interview process were interpreted in the light of the *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Pope Paul VI, PCP II, 175 and some theologians' understanding of salvation through culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religious Practices of Itawes.

Patunak is literally the erecting of the first post of the house or any structure to be built. The practice is done by an elder by first identifying the first hole to be dug where the first post is to be erected. The elder will follow it up by sprinkling wine on the hole. Coins, kunig, salt and rice, would follow in the hole. The ritual is accompanied by saying the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary. The act of placing the rice and salt on the hole could be suspended until the structure could already house its dwellers. Filling-up a pot, the mentioned elements could be hanged on the first erected post when the dwellers shall already stay in the house.

If the house is to be made out of cement, chicken's blood should be sprinkled on the corrugated rod before putting it up. Otherwise, wine, rice and coins are the only things required to be placed on the first hole. It is important to carefully choose the first post to be erected because the ritual cannot be

repeated. The ritual should not also be done on the month of February because the month does not have the complete days as compared to the other months of the year. The members of the community may be invited for that day of *patunak* to join in the celebration of the family.

Balangun is literally passing on of a name to sick child or inheriting a name by a sick child. While passing on of a name is willed by the spirit of the dead relative, the inheriting of the name of a dead relative is willed by the child. It is a response to the declaration of a folk doctor that a spirit wanted a child to carry his/her name or that the child does not want the name given to him/her. As an effect, the child keeps on crying or gets sick with no known cause. Thus, it is the responsibility of the elders of the family to name the child with the name of a dead relative. The child will stop crying or will get well if he/she likes the name that is assigned to him/her. The ritual is done only once with those who are not yet capable of talking or reasoning out because of age.

Makitollu is literally allowing the self to be bathed with elements prepared by an elder. The practice is done because of the *suru* (a crooked line from the navel up or from the navel down), which causes the sickness of the child or the trouble in the family. Burned pieces of rice stalks, two pieces of coins, and a new thread shall be placed in a half size coconut shell with its natural hole at its bottom where the water to be poured could possibly pass through. Water then, shall be poured on all members of the family, passing through the coconut shell with the other prepared elements. The taken off wet clothes and everything that were used during the bathing shall be sprinkled with wine and to be thrown in the flowing river. Table-fellowship with rice cake shall be prepared and everything should be consumed. White chicken with yellow feet shall be sacrificed but is to be eaten by the *nattolu* (the elder who administers the ritual to the family). If the child with *suru* is a boy, a hen should be prepared. Otherwise, rooster should be prepared. If the *suru* is found from the navel up and the navel down, two chickens should be sacrificed. One chicken must still be white with yellow feet and the other could be any color. The white chicken should be consumed by the *nattollu* and the other should be all consumed by the family. The sacrificial chicken is believed to absorb the misfortune that is supposed to be suffered by the child. The practice could not be repeated for the same child. But the whole family could repeatedly join in the ritual every time there is a new natural member of the family who is *suru*.

The Meaning Behind Itawes Religious Practices

Patunak is done for the house to become strong, for the members of the family to remain healthy, and for the family to live harmoniously. Identifying the position of first post to be erected, is a reminder for everyone that everything has its proper place. The sprinkling of wine on the first post is done to drive away the unwanted spirit and invite the desirable spirit.

Putting of rice and salt in the hole symbolizes the basic need that a family should work for to survive a day. Filling up a pot with the elements means that the family should not run out of the basic needs. Shedding of the chicken's blood in the corrugated rod is observed to keep the house strong. This is teaching that sacrifice is an element of strength.

Balangun is done to salvage the sick child from sickness. Changing the name as willed by the child. It is done when the child keeps on crying and is an act of listening to the unspoken need of the weak. Changing the name is willed by the spirit of a dead relative. This element in the practice is creating a link between the past and the the present. Relationships, which are established on earth goes on beyond earthly limitations. The child could already choose a name from the two names given to him/her when the child grows. The practice promotes the sense of responsibility on the grown up child.

Makitollu is done to salvage the family from quarrels and the child from sickness. The burning of rice stalks symbolize the cleansing of the family from the old life so that they could start a new life. The element of the practices that all members of the family should join in the bathing ritual explains that the problem of a single family member is faced and given solution by all members of the family. The thread symbolizes the knitting of the family together, while the rice cake symbolizes sticking together of the family in facing the new life that they are hoping for. Both elements are speaking of the togetherness of the family in the circumstance of a member of the family. The chicken is used as a sacrifice to absorb all the misfortunes of the family. The required gender of chicken by the elder also symbolizes the complementarity of male and female. The throwing of the clothes and other objects used in bathing symbolizes an act of totally throwing the negative of the past. The *suru* of a child is symbolizing the wrong path being taken. With the help of the family members, the child who is described as *suru* will take the right path. Repeating the practice every time that there is a new member of the family who is *suru* explains that whenever a member of the family faces a problem, the family would untiringly be together in finding or giving a solution to the problem.

Life-giving elements of Itawes religious practices

Patunak promotes the observance of the proper position of things – seen and unseen. It makes the person conscious of the presence of the unseen beings, which is an initial step for a wider worldview and the belief in the life after this earthly life. It recognizes and respects the presence of the unseen beings. The act of putting rice and salt in the hole promotes work for the satisfaction of needs. This is a show of independence from a spirit of luck. It teaches the idea of work not to amass wealth but simply to satisfy needs. It encourages the person to find ways or use his abilities to be able to satisfy basic needs. The main purpose of the practice is to keep the

structure strong. Having in mind that the house you are staying is safe, it gives the family the confidence that nothing wrong will happen to them under the structure. Consequently, living in the place also becomes comfortable and productive.

Balangun promotes concern for good physical disposition. It is a response to the will of the child for a change of name is recognition of the right of every individual. The practice encourages people to listen to the unspoken needs especially those of the weak. The practice connects people to the future. The practice promotes the good of an individual in all aspects of his/her personality.

Makitollu is acknowledging the need for purification as the need arises. Since the practice sees a personal circumstance as having communal effect, the community should also be together in addressing the said communal effect. This very behavior is getting rid of individualism. The use of the sacrificial chicken in the practice recognizes the effectivity of men and women when working together. The work of a female is given significance by a male and vice-versa. The complementarity of male and female in promoting harmony is indispensable.

Death-Dealing Elements Of The Itawes Popular Religious Practices

Patunak discriminates the month of February as not a good month. It is described by the Itawes elder as *narakarakat* (very bad). It conditions the believers that anything that happens on the month would also be very bad. Even those who are born on February are very bad. Anything evil that happens is blamed on the month. Therefore, it excuses the doer of any responsibility and submits to it as fate, because he could not do anything with the month. This element which centers on luck is against the Christian teaching on God's grace and mercy. Christians do not depend on luck but on the grace of God.

Balangun is giving two names to a child – the Christian and the *nabalangun* (inherited) name. If the named does not learn to love his/her inherited name amidst social pressures, he/she may find the inherited name as ridiculous. Consequently, if he/she called by the unliked name, it will affect his self-image negatively. The imposed name does not recognize the freedom of a person. The practice has also an element of clinging on to the past temporarily. The element is hampering the person to move on swiftly or do something good.

Makitollu is identifying the circumstance of a person as the cause of quarrel or sickness in the family is quite judgmental. It closes the mind to the possibility that the cause could be some other factors and not the absolutely pinpointed phenomena. Such behavior is a show of escaping from moral responsibility.

The Itawes Popular Religious Practices in Comparison to the Catholic Christian Doctrine and Tradition

On Patunak. The practice of shedding the blood of a sacrifice is not only a practice seen among the Itawes but it is also observed in the Jewish Passover from Egyptian slavery and the Christians' liberation from different forms of oppression through following Jesus' teachings even to the point of death. Like Christ's dying on the cross, the death of the chicken in the practice is a reminder for the members of the family or community, to die from their old selves for the sake of a greater good. Further, the shedding of blood of Jesus as a result of his strong conviction, inspired his followers to become strong as a community. Likewise, the practice of shedding of blood is also teaching the family or community to become strong. In the Christian tradition, holy water or incense are used to drive away evil spirits to keep a place sacred. While in the Itawes *patunak*, wine is sprinkled to drive away the evil spirit and keeping the place sacred. Moreover, the practice is also done in recognition of the influence of the spirit and saints in human life. Ultimately, the spirit of God should reign so that human institution can be kept strong.

Observing the proper position of the first post to be erected is a mirror of the observance of the proper places of the sacred objects.

On Balangun. *Wostyn* teaches that salvation is experienced when one is in good relationship with nature and with the self. A child, who is the focus in the practice of *balangun*, is an example of one who is in touch with the self because unlike an adult, he/she cannot deny what he/she feels in his/her body. Responding to the unspoken need of the crying child is likened to the Catholic virtue of listening to the unspoken needs of the weak, most probably by putting ourselves into their shoes. Giving a Christian name to a child in the Catholic tradition means developing the child to carry out the threefold mission of Christ – priestly, prophetic and kingly. This means that names have meaning indeed. For the Itawes, given names could either heal the sick child or connect the child to his/her ancestors. In the Old and New Testaments, Jewish names are changed as an indication of conversion and mission. In the Itawes tradition, a change in name is an indication of the need for healing. It is performing a specific mission of salvation.

On Makitollu. The practice of *makitollu* emphasizes the communal aspect of an activity. That is, the practice does not become effective if not all family members are present for the ritual. As taught by the Church, persons are open and related by nature. The Jews were bathed by John the Baptist in the Jordan River as a sign of repentance. Repentance is tantamount to spiritual straightening of spiritual crookedness. The practice of *makitollu* is also straightening of crookedness to experience a harmonious relationship with the family members. Although most of the societal problems are rooted in the family, the society is adhered to solve the problem not individually but as

a community. This is a Catholic admonition which is also a behavior behind the practice.

The Itawes Popular Religious Practices of the Itawes as Indicators towards Catholic Soteriology

On Patunak. being saved from evil and sickness, being at peace with the unseen, having a harmonious relationship in the family, have a secured house to stay, enough supply of basic needs for survival, interrelatedness of creatures, dying from old selves for a greater good, living a good life, having a strong family

On Balangun. being at peace with the unseen, salvation from sickness, salvation from early/childhood death, the past as a reminder for the present and the future, a person is made of the past, of the present and of the future, respect for the name of a person

On Makitollu. salvation from sickness and quarreling, salvation is communal and not individual, newness of life, complementarity of male and female forces, being concern about the welfare of each member of the family, being purified whenever necessary

CONCLUSION

It is inescapable a fact that people's experiences are far more important than any theoretical or ideological theology that any unconscientized theologian tend to introduce to a culture-rich society. Nevertheless, such kind of theologizing is important especially in posing a challenge or a question to the experiences of the people to come up with a good theological reflection.

Patunak is a mirror of the hope of the poor people for survival from their impoverished situation. This is symbolized by the rice and salt which are taken, enough to survive a day. Despite the reality that life would not be easy for them, they hold on to the hope that nothing evil will happen to the members of the family.

In the practice, life is transferred from one form to another. There is an observance of the continuity of life, even if it would mean someone or something has to sacrifice for the sake of life.

The practice of patunak, which is mainly done to ensure a strong structure, is necessary to teach the following Catholic Christian values:

1. observing the proper position or places of things;
2. do not depend on luck for survival. Instead, work for it and depend on God's grace;
3. we should maintain a good relationship with the unseen beings;

4. we should drive away evil spirit and attract the spirit of goodness in the family;
5. we should live the present life for the future;
6. we should be willing to die from our wickedness to be of service of love to others; and
7. enjoy a safe house and safeguard a comfortable home.

When all these values are observed, it could be said that the Kingdom of God reigns in a structure which underwent patunak.

Balangun, which is literally inheriting a name, is done for the purpose of healing an unknown sickness especially of a child. As a practice, it teaches the following Catholic Christian values;

1. every human being has a past, present and future;
2. the community should be concern for the welfare of the child;
3. names have an effect of various sort to a person;
4. physical death is not the end of the relationship of relatives; and
5. through the act of recycling of a name, the relatives could still be with one another, even beyond physical death.

The practice of makitollu, is concern about the harmonious relationship of family members. Specifically, the practice is important in teaching the following Catholic Christian values:

1. the family should be together in solving the circumstances of a family member;
2. the family should be willing to accept that something is wrong and consequently be willing to correct it as a family; and
3. after every circumstance, there is a joyful acceptance of a new life.

Each of the practices mentioned here are solving the human problems of the ordinary human being, which is a means of achieving salvation. Furthermore, the practices are connecting the participants to the unseen being, to the past, and to nature. This is telling us that the practices are not only concern about human relationships but extends to other beings.

The practices as part of the culture of the Itawes, could not simply be ignored nor discarded, for they are means by which they can experience salvation from God. By the very reason that the practices are part of the lifestyle of the Itawes, they are undeniably grounds for the presence of the Holy God who is the source of salvation aimed by every believer. Furthermore, the Itawes are becoming who they are now and becoming who they can be, by the fact that they do not assume activities which are not theirs. They confidently say and do their activities because of their full possession of the activities. They are their culture!

RECOMMENDATIONS

The culture of the Itawes is a rich culture. To recognize and promote the richness of this culture, the following are recommended.

1. Elders should ask their believers to submit themselves to authorities after the effect of the popular religious practice on them to prove the real effect of the practice. Just like when Jesus asked the healed to go to a doctor for examination if he is really healed from sickness. At the same time, this is also to confirm the authority of the elders in the community in administering the healing effects of the practice.
2. Educate the Itawes believers about their understanding of the popular religious practices. That the practices are not just done because it is a tradition but because they have salvific effects.
3. In every practice of patunak, the parish priest as a religious authority, should be present, to teach about the importance of establishing a home, especially to combat every form of social malaise. His immersion to the culture could avoid distance from the religious leaders while promoting lay empowerment. In the absence of the parish priest however, catechists, pastoral workers, or even local theologians must do the work.
4. Adults should carefully study the meaning of names given to a child before finally giving it as a permanent name.
5. The minattolu (the elder who administers the practice of makitollu) should educate the family of their responsibility in maintaining a good family relationship so that the practice will not be thought of as having a magical effect.
6. Catechists should be provided to the recipients or participants of the practices of patunak, balangun, and makitollu, to let them understand the long term effect of their practices through their conscious effort and the grace of God.
7. The Catholic Church should use these practices of the ordinary people in her work of evangelization, especially emphasizing on the participation of the people in bringing forth the Kingdom of God.
8. A booklet about the practices of patunak, balangun, and makitollu, should be produced to serve as a guide and source of information about the richness of the culture.

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