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Understanding the Moryones of the Moriones Lenten Rites: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract. Popular religiosity is one of the intriguing phenomena in the Roman Catholic religious tradition and practice. Using descriptive phenomenology, this study aimed to provide an emic description of popular religiosity from the perspectives and collective experiences of 15 devotees of the Moriones Lenten Rites in Marinduque. Cool and warm analyses conducted on the qualitative data, semi-structured interviews yielded three significant themes that describe the shapes and dynamism of the Moryones phenomenon, namely, remembering the past, giving thanks for the present, and embracing one's fellow others. Through the years, popular expressions of religiosity such as the Moriones Lenten Rites were able to secure a foothold in the private lives of ordinary Filipino Catholics and has continued to flourish despite secularizing and modernizing influences in Philippine society.

Keywords. Moriones Lenten Rite, Moryon, phenomenology, popular religiosity

1.0 Introduction

Popular religiosity is one of the more intriguing and even at times controversial phenomenon in the Roman Catholic religious tradition and practice. Popular religiosity suggests an aspect of being religious that is distinguished from formal religious belief systems, and institutions, but still represents a vital part of being religious.¹ It is a differentiation between the religion of ordinary people and the religion of theologians, priests, and other religious professionals.² Nevertheless, there is a continual assessment of these practices that should lead to a deeper understanding of their meaning and purpose for the ordinary believers.³ Studies about popular religions such as the Black Nazarene of Quiapo,⁴ the Santo Nino of Cebu,⁵ the Virgin of Manaoag in Pangasinan,⁶ and the Lady of Penafrancia in Bicol,⁷ show how they have

¹ Lippy, C. H. (1994). *Being religious, American style: A history of popular religiosity in the United States* (No. 37). Greenwood Publishing Group.

² Lippy, Being religious, 2.

³ Cornelio, J. S. (2014). Popular Religion and the Turn to Everyday Authenticity Reflections on the Contemporary Study of Philippine Catholicism. *Philippine Studies Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 471-500, p. 481.

harnessed the devotees collective religiosity across time. In this regard, the annual procession of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo, a life-sized statue of a suffering Jesus, for example, attracts hundreds of thousands of barefooted devotees as a *panata* or vow of sacrifice and thanksgiving.

Along the same vein, since the 1870s, the island province of Marinduque annually observes the Moriones Lenten Rite Festival as part of the Holy Week observance of the Roman Catholic religious tradition. It also attracts devotees from all walks of life to participate in a week-long festival within the context of the history of salvation centered on the narrative of Jesus of Nazareth. Dressed as Roman soldiers, the participants go around the streets from Holy Monday to Easter Sunday to reenact the story of Longinus, the half-blind Roman soldier who was said to be present during Jesus' crucifixion. Although it has spawned the creation of similar rites in other parts of the country, none can probably compare with the pomp and splendor of the festivities held in Marinduque and which has also evolved across time into one of the island province's tourist attractions. Thousands of local and foreign tourists are drawn to the festival each year to watch caped and elaborately costumed men inflict suffering upon themselves by whipping their backs, carrying a wooden cross and sometimes even crucifixion.

Like many other expressions of popular religious practice, the Moriones phenomenon has also caught the attention of religious scholars and social scientists wanting to make sense of what may appear as either an authentic or misplaced religious tradition.⁸ The Filipino psychologist Jaime Bulatao's concept of split-level Christianity has remained a salient critical lens in these efforts to understand a seemingly problematic religious practice.⁹ Interestingly, Bulatao has later softened his originally critical stance on popular religion. In a much later writing, he seemed to have admitted that popular expressions of faith, such as devotion to the Santo Niño and the Nazareno, may also be authentic personal experience of religious faith.¹⁰ Nonetheless, current religious scholars and social scientists continue to ask new questions on popular religiosity now challenged by secularizing and modernizing changes. For example, McGuire¹¹ and Ammerman,¹² pointed out that popular religion's apparent incoherence or inconsistency with the prescribed beliefs or practices of institutional Catholicism must not be taken as problematic given that popular religious practices have their own practical logic. In the same way, Paterson observed that the Moriones festival in particular provides for many Catholics in the province an active experiential route into the story of Jesus' sacrifice during Holy Week.¹³ Cornelio, a sociologist of religion, observed that since the 1990s, however, there has been a growing interest in everyday religion as authentic expressions of spirituality for individual Catholics.¹⁴ According to Cornelio, this turn in the scholarship of social scientists and religious scholars has been driven less by the question of secularization than the demand for religion's local relevance.

Although the relevance and meaning of popular Catholic practices have been widely and deeply examined by religious scholars and social scientists, their underlying spirituality has not been given the attention it may rightfully deserve. Spirituality refers to 'the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live. In other words, 'spirituality' implies some kind of

⁸ See Cornelio, 2014; Braulein, 2009; Cornelio, 2008; Alcedo, 2007; Peterson, 2007; Bulatao, 1992; Zialcita, 1986).

⁹ Bulatao (1966)

¹⁰ Bulatao 1992 as cited in Cornelio

¹¹ McGuire 2008

¹² Ammerman

¹³ Peterson, W. (2007). Holy Week in the "Heart of the Philippines": Spirituality, Theatre, and Community in Marinduque's Moriones Festival. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 24(2), 309-337.

¹⁴ Cornelio, J. S. (2014). Popular Religion and the Turn to Everyday Authenticity Reflections on the Contemporary Study of Philippine Catholicism. *Philippine Studies Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 471-500.

vision of the human spirit and of what will assist it to achieve full potential.’¹⁵ In recent years a shift has taken place especially among emerging scholars who, drawing from empirical research, have given attention to the agency of contemporary Catholics themselves.¹⁶ In contrast to the theological and pastoral concerns of previous religious scholars, current studies have approached popular religiosity without the theological baggage of a coherent set of beliefs and practices or institutionally defined ideals. The novel dimension of personal spirituality recognizes that popular Catholic practices may seem meaningful to their practitioners, a point that concepts like syncretism and split-level Christianity tend to overlook in the literature. As Schilderman puts it, the problem of defining spirituality is not only a topic in systematic and moral theology, but in pastoral or practical theology as well.¹⁷ In its simplest expression, practical theology refers to the theological study of religious practice of which spirituality is a basic expression. Understanding them from the standpoint of their practitioner will help reveal the spirituality that underlies or underpins them. In the absence of scholarly research on its spirituality, it will provide an insider’s perspective of how the domains of spirituality are experienced and understood by its practitioners. It can serve as a possibly an instrumental case that can shed light on the issues and challenges besetting popular Catholic practices.

Most of the earliest studies on popular religiosity were geared towards determining their authenticity or conformity with the religion of theologians and leaders of the institutional religion. Moreover, researchers called attention to qualitative research to capture a detailed and nuanced account of the phenomenon. But beyond description of the practice, there is scant or little appraisal of what their devotees think or do when they were being or practicing popular religiosity. This study aims to describe the phenomenon based on the devotees’ actual experiences and consciousness. The study was guided by the question: How is it like to be a morion?

2.0 Methodology

This study is based thematic content analysis of the collected semi-structured data. There are fifteen (15) chosen respondents who fulfilled the three necessary requisites of participation, namely: a) aged not lower than 18 years of age, b) a devotee of Moriones of at least five years, and c) a permanent and native resident of the province of Marinduque, where the study was conducted. All participant (n=15) are males with an average age of 42 years and have been a devotee for at least 12 years. Almost all of them are married and belong to the low-educated and low-income sectors of the province where they work as farmers, fisher folks, and construction workers. Most of them reside in the municipalities of Gasan and Boac, the capital of the province and where the annual Moriones Lenten Rites are held.

Research Site

The province of Marinduque is one of the minor islands of the archipelago that is mainly known because of the Moriones Lenten Rite, one of the oldest religious rites of the country. It is called by several names like the land of legends, the enchanted isle, isle of the Moriones, the mystical island.¹⁸ The name Marinduque comes from the terms ‘malinduk’ or ‘malindik,’ which is derived from the word ‘malindig,’ which means ‘stately posture or height

¹⁵ Sheldrake, Ph. (2007). *A Brief History of Spirituality*. Malden, Blackwell Publishing. 1-2.

¹⁶ Cornelio, *Popular Religion*:

¹⁷ Schilderman

¹⁸ Carrion, A. (1997). *Mabuhay! hamos na! parna na! the 1997 Marinduque lenten rites, rituals and morionan festival*, Souvenir program of the office of the Governor: 1-2.

or gallant stance' which characterizes and describes the highest point of the isle, which is the peak of Mt. Malindig (found in the town of Buenavista). Based on the 2020 data of the Philippine Statistics Authority, the province of Marinduque has an overall population of 239,207. The Latin-Rite Christian Catholics account for 70% of the believers (from 91.6% in 1995).

Figure1: The Map of Marinduque



(Source: PhilAtlas.com/luzon/mimaropa/marinduque.html.)

The Participants

We chose 15 respondents for the study based on the three selection categories: i) aged 20 years old and above, ii) a Moriones devotee of not less than ten years, and iii) native of Marinduque. All of the participants (n=15) are male, aged 21-62. The average age is 42 years old. The majority is a devotee of 12 years, the least. Their respective livelihood comes from farming, fishing, construction work, government employment, manual jobs, teaching, environmental work, studentry, carving, health allied works. Ten of them are married, and five are single. Eight of them finished secondary schooling, seven finished elementary schools. Nine come from the town of Boac and six from Gasan.

Collection of Data

The data were collected using first-person interviews that described their experiences and their views on their devotional practice. After establishing rapport with them and explaining the purpose of the study, the researcher started to conduct the interviews. The prepared questions, in turn, are answered based on their free and spontaneous reactions. As much as possible, the interview strictly fixes on their actual, respective experiences.¹⁹ The interviews lasted for about an hour each, carefully voice-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

¹⁹Morrow, R., Rodriguez, A., & King, N. (2015). Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. *The psychologist*, 28(8), 643-644.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the interviews are analyzed based on the categories of thematic content analysis of Paul Colaizzi.²⁰ First, there is bracketing, an attempt to achieve the state of neutrality by putting aside prior understanding or analytic preconceptions about the phenomenon under observation. Second, according to Colaizzi,²¹ There is the analysis which constitutes six steps, namely, (a) reading and rereading the participants' description of the phenomenon to acquire a feeling for their experience and make sense of their account, (b) extracting significant statements, formulating meanings for these significant statements, (c) categorizing the formulated meanings into clusters of themes that are common to all participants, (d) integrating the findings into a detailed description of the phenomena being studied (e) validating the findings by returning to some participants to ask how it compares with their experiences, and (f) incorporating any changes offered by the participants into the final description of the essence of the phenomenon. Third, intuiting involves a conscious attempt to honor insights about emerging evidence while simultaneously refraining from prematurely foreclosing on the researcher's hunches about the emerging concepts. It would be like to "live in the participants' skin" or "put oneself in their shoes" through attentive listening, deep critical reflection about commonalities across participants, and concerted effort to understand "what it must be like."²² Fourth, a description will offer a theoretical model to represent the essential structures of the phenomenon under study. According to Swanson-Kauffman and such a model is like a "universal skeleton that can be filled in with the rich and detailed story of each informant."²³

3.0 Findings

The thematic content analysis of the accounts and experiences of the chosen group of Moryons identified three characteristic which we may consider as the underlying theme of being a Moryon of the Moriones Lenten Rites: a sacred commemoration and remembrance, sense of gratitude, and collective social consciousness with the other Moryones.

3.1 Remembering the past

This study distinctly manifests the respective shared experiences and perspectives of the selected Moryones regarding their devotion. According to them, becoming a Moryon is a voluntary choice of 'getting near to God', especially in the Holy Week exercises, to commemorate His expiatory acts for them. The following statements are some only of their several sentiments about this theme:

The Moryonan is itself the Moriones Lenten festival, for it is one of the essentials of Holy Week celebration focused on suffering, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is a misnomer to call the rite Moriones Lenten festival, for it is not a feast but a sacred remembering. The Moryonan has been instituted before not as a festival or gaiety but days of expiations and faith.

Becoming a Moryon reflects the devotees' lives as both a mirror of joy and hardship. That spirit of solidarity with the sufferings of the Lord is an effective means to confront the challenges and dire straits in life.

²⁰ Morrow et al., *Colaizzi's descriptive*.

²¹ Colaizzi (1978) (Routledge-Taylor and Francis): 48-71.

²² Wojnar & Swanson, 2007: 176.

²³ Schonwald, 1988: 104.

As a practicing Mormon, it gives immense joy thinking that we are one with Him, as we perform our devotional practice in faith and with assurance. Summarily, and for purposes of expressing their religious beliefs, interpret them in a language that gives order and meaning to their lives, the first theme in this study is referred to as *remembering the past*, of their lived experiences as Moryones.

3.2 Giving thanks to the God they owe a debt of gratitude

In Filipino culture, acknowledging a 'sense of gratefulness' is one of the most treasured traits. One who is greatly despised is 'ungrateful, and such attitude is remarkably unacceptable in social relationships.²⁴ The more outstanding the debt of gratitude simply means the same amount of gratitude is at stake. Becoming a Moryon devotee is a 'symbol' of great recognizance of the great providence afforded by God to His people. The recognition of one's debt is a profound and voluntary appreciation and thanksgiving to the God who hears petitionary prayers. According to the participants, becoming a Moryon is not only an urge to perform meritorious, sacred duties during the Lenten Season but can transform into a yearly devotional thanksgiving for all the blessings believed 'to have been heard' God of their various supplications.

Yes, I am a Moriones devotee. I started this religious devotion in 1996 as a 'way of thanking God for all the favors granted to my family and the ardent wish that He would spare us from all harm and maintain the health and saneness of our physical bodies.

In my life, I have received countless blessings, and for this, I am eternally indebted and likewise offer such gratitude. In my experience, the small favor to bigger blessings granted by God is not only pleasant experiences but a call to thanksgiving and a good reason to deepen and strengthen my devotion.

I started my Moryon devotion in 2011 because I have a disability. As proof, my operation proved successful, and I got healed of my illness. that is all.

To become a Moryon devotee is one way of demonstrating a heartfelt faith and trust in God. It is a form of witnessing that, the trust, guidance, and aid of God are reliable in moments of dire needs in their ordinary depravity of life.

Yes, I am a practicing Moryon devotee because as a believer, this is my way to express my belief and deep faith in a Divine Creator.”

Faith in the gracious providence of God and granting our wishes is that which strengthens my faith to be a Moryon devotee. I decided and professed as a Moryon devotee, in a yearly basis so that the Lord would continuously guide my family.

Summarily, the theme, 'giving thanks to the God whom they owe a debt of gratitude' depicts the personal vow to make manifest the recognition and an act of solidarity with the One to whom they have received great favors and blessings.

3.3 Embracing the fellow others

Being a Moryon is not only a means of establishing a close relationship with God but also a recourse to turn to in their direst moments. It also serves as an avenue to establish 'social

²⁴ Rungduin, T., Rungduin, D. C., Aninacion, J. G., et al., (2016), "The Filipino character strength of utang na loob: Exploring contextual associations with gratitude," *International Journal of Research Studies in Psychology*, 5(1), 13-23.

relations' and training ground for socialization with the other Moryon devotees, with whom they share the same predicaments in life.

As a Moryon and member of a recognized circle of personalities in Marinduque, what strengthens me and my relations with my group is our recognition that we are 'brothers in this devotion,' in which we carry in our hearts our ever readiness to help other people, even if it is not Holy Week.

Through Moryon devotion, I developed a closer relationship with God and learned to be an authentic, sociable, and good person."

By wearing the Moryon mask, there are many good things that transpire especially establishing several friendly relations with people."

I learned to be nearer to God and developed by myself to relate with others and become a better person."

Summarily, and for purposes of expressing their shared experiences as Moryones devotees, the theme, embracing the fellow others, captures the social aspect being a Moryon.

4.0 Discussion

This study mirrors the notion that see popular religion as a practical, technique-laded approach to being religious, one that emphasizes the function of religion in enabling ordinary people to deal with the problems they confront in daily life. It is thus linked to sentiment or feeling more than to formal, reasoned doctrine or practice.²⁵

The recognition of the benefits and value of popular religiosity, like the Moriones Lenten Rite of Marinduque, mirrors a primal urge to express an intense need to express inner sentiments about their lived experiences.²⁶ This phenomenological study unveils the dynamics of the Moryons in three distinct but interrelated themes, namely, remembering the past, giving thanks, and solidarity with others.

The Moryon devotion of the Moriones Lenten Rites of Marinduque is a free commitment to commemorate one's traditional belief.²⁷ It is a symbol of a personal conviction to express inner sentiments and the experience of the good-naturedness of God in their lives.²⁸ Life's sad predicaments and vicissitudes sparked due recognition about the importance of 'religious piety and a more reverent 'clinging to God.' The moment that these personal and needs are believed to be granted by God a firm conviction that 'one is greatly indebted is developed and which creates a sense of deep gratitude. The significance of 'solidarity in faith' and participation in unity with others gives credence to the works of devotion.'²⁹ The relationship generated in devotion, solemn vow, religious piety, and social alliances serves as a 'mirror' of the unified goals of life.³⁰ It is valuable to the Moryons that it is not sufficient to 'be a showboat'; instead, it needs a sincere and voluntary action and fulfillment of the devotion.³¹

²⁵ Schneider & Dornbusch

²⁶ Reading, A. K. (2016). "Of the Religious Experience of the Black Nazarene Popular Devotion," *Kritike*, 10(2), 29.

²⁷ Mong, A. (2019). *Power of Popular Piety: A Critical Reflection*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books: xviii.

²⁸ Mong, *Power of Popular Piety*.

²⁹ Parker, *Popular Religions*,

³⁰ Aquino, C. C. (1999), "Mula sa kinaroroonan: Kapwa, kapatiran at bayan sa agham panlipunan," *University of the Philippines, College of Social Sciences and Philosophy Publications*.

³¹ Sapidula, M. V. J. (2013). "Ang pagiging deboto bilang pakikipagkapwa: isang panimulang pagsusuri sa mga liham pasasalamat ng mga deboto ng Ina ng laging saklolo sa Baclaran," *Daluyan: journal ng wikang Filipino*, 19(2).

In these present times, works of popular piety do not suggest a supplanting of 'traditional faith' but rather serve as life-transforming expressions of lived religion. Many routes can traverse the authentic spiritual way of life. These are evidenced by various expressions of symbolisms and traditional cultural acts emanating from the more significant, poor folk devotees. Behind the findings of former research, brand 'popular piety' as a 'religious chagrin to institutionalized faith' is found instead, a more profound theology and more active social engagement in a closer analysis.³² According to Peterson, the Moriones Rite during and every Holy Week provides a way to relive the story of the sacrifices of Christ for the devotees.³³

Therefore, the Moriones Rite, come to Holy Week, is deeply rooted in the conviction that a generous, provident God exists amidst the numerous pressing circumstances of life. For the blessings received, a more profound and forceful faith is developed in the devotees. Being 'incognito,' behind the masks,' can be gleaned an "ancient yet contemporaneous opposition in expressing sentiments and faith which is called '*folkloric innocence*' and *festive abandon*."³⁴ Through the donning of the mask, a more profound, significant meaning appears amidst the 'tense friction of ostentatious displays and abject humility.'

The most relative term is 'inculturation,' an amalgamation of faith and culture, faith and tradition, the face of 'intercultural theology.'³⁵ Religious piety embraces the central themes of repentance, sacrifices, ardent love, and devotion to Jesus Christ. This expiatory spirit is knitted with authentic fraternal, communitarian concern and the conviction that "the more that one suffers for the brother, the nearer the proximity to God. This is the be-all and end-all of the celebration of the Moriones Rite together with its solemn vow, gratefulness, and solemn promises to God.

The Moriones devotion is the 'ritualization' of the vow of the devotee, the penitence and oblation of one who strongly manifests to people one's close alliance to God through real works of piety. It is a spiritual avenue to exhibit '*solidarity of a community* to achieve genuine unity which gives an order to society.'³⁶

5.0 Conclusion:

This study attempted to describe and understand the Moryons of the Moriones Lenten Rite of Marinduque through the phenomenological method using the personal and collective experiences and worldviews of chosen respondents manifested in the dutiful themes of remembrance, thanksgiving, and social relations. These affirm their Moryon experiences, deeply embedded in a personal and reverent connection with God, who serves as the refuge amidst the vicissitudes and depravity of human existence. Their devotion serves as the channel to accessing and forging solidarity with the object of faith.

Popular religiosity is an efficient instrument to mold that Catholic persona of the Moryon devotees made more emphatic when Holy Week observations occur. The Catholic religion subscribes to the institutionalized liturgical life and blends harmoniously with the genuine and subdued faith of the devotees, characteristic of popular religiosity. In particular, the Moryon devotion is an expression of this spirituality, though not one of facile compliance,

³²Ferris, M. M. (2020), "The Religious Bildungsbürgertum in the Queen City: Race and Cultural Politics in Cincinnati's German Denominational Newspapers," 1830-1862 (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Chicago).

³³Peterson, W. (2007), "Holy Week in the Heart of the Philippines": Spirituality, theatre, and community in Marinduque's Moriones Festival," *Asian Theatre Journal*, 309-337.

³⁴Aching, G. (2002). *Masking and Power: Carnival and popular culture in the Caribbean*. U of Minnesota Press.

³⁵Timoner, G. F. P. (2006), "Intercultural theology as a way of doing theology," *Philippiniana sacra*, 41(121), 5-45.

³⁶Heilman, S. C. (2017). *The People of the Book: Drama, Fellowship, & Religion*. Routledge:91.

which demands stringent sacrifices which engender an incessant coherence with the self, other people, and God Himself.

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