

Are the Devotions of the Passion of Jesus in Macao still a “Dangerous Memory”?

João Marques Eleutério, University of Saint Joseph/ Macao

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Abstract

Among the multiple images used to promote Macao as a touristic destination, we can find some related with the Christian traditions, in particular with the Catholic devotions to the Passion of Christ and the cult of the Virgin Mary. Discussing the concept of “dangerous memory” as proposed by Johann Baptist Metz and analyzing the rituals associated with the devotions around the Passion of Jesus, this paper aims to look at, and present, the different perceptions of a message of subversion of unbalanced relations of power and domination, such as the image of the suffering Jesus in the contemporary society of Macau.

The method followed in this paper is ethnographic and structured around some major contributions in the field of Ritual Studies. The implications of this research are related with the different perceptions and usages of a religious image and the drift of its power.

Keywords: “Dangerous memory”, devotion, ritual studies, power, image.

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Introduction

The Christian tradition is based on proposals of peace and subversion of all kinds of violence. One of the biggest images to subvert violence are the different representations of the Passion of Jesus and his sufferings. Some of those representations were ritualised and are expressed as popular devotions. In some cases the devotions even became part of the official liturgies. In Macau there are some devotions related with the Passion of Jesus. They became part of the public manifestation of the identity of Catholic community, as well as an expression of Macao as a touristic destination.

We propose to look into the historical origins of the devotion of the procession of the Lord Jesus of the way of the Cross and its Novena of preparation. In a second moment, we propose to situate it as a ritualization process related with the shape of cultural and subjective identities. Finally, we propose to confront the simple remembrance of similar devotions or same ritual experiences in different cultural contexts with the impact of being a “dangerous memory”, the concept proposed by Johann Baptist Metz. The particular experience of being a migrant can be the field where the future announced by the memory of the sufferings of Jesus Christ can open to a future of hospitality.

1. The History of the Devotions of the Passion of Christ in Macau

Although the definition of devotion reveals difficulties and complexities, we can consider it as different kind of rituals expressing the piety of individuals and/or groups “that often represent a local culture perspective” (LaSalle, D. G., 2014, p. 99). The devotions cannot be considered just as a different reality and category comparing with the liturgy, or even as the opposite pole of the liturgy, as if one was popular and the other some kind of religious erudition ((LaSalle, D. G., 2014, p. 99).¹ The devotions and the liturgy are like the two faces of a coin, they allow people to express differently the same reality emphasising its diverse dimensions; it is in the interweaving of both categories that the ritual expressions of a religion develop and a particular religious identity can be expressed. Among the diversity of devotions that the Catholic world offers to the researchers to analyse, the ones related with the Passion of Jesus are the richest regarding the rituals and one of the most crucial regarding identity.

The impact of the devotions of the Passion of Christ in the history of Christianity is quite documented and it is not the main purpose of this research.² However it is in the context of the transformation and adaptation of these devotions in the history of Christian communities that we have to consider the case of Macau, in particular its procession of the Lord Jesus of the Way of the Cross and its Novena of preparation.

¹ Cf. Donald G. LaSalle (2014) proposes that the veneration of the Cross in the western Liturgy of the Catholic Church is the result of a progressive assumption by the liturgy of a devotional practice from Jerusalem in the IVth century.

² Among many references, we propose the works of Alex Stock (2005; 2009) and Richard Viladesau (2008a, 2008b, 2014) due to their approach from the perspective of the impact of the images of the Passion and its perception in the historical configurations of the Christian experience.

According to a document from the beginning of the XIXth century with some chronological data of Macau from the XVIth century to the XVIIIth, the procession of the Lord Jesus of the Way of the Cross³ existed already on 25 March 1708 (*Boletim Eclesiástico da Diocese de Macau*, 1964, p. 464). There was an interruption of ten years provoked by conflicts between the bishop and the Augustinians, the congregation who seemed to have introduced the procession and the devotion to Lord Jesus of the Way of the Cross coming from Spain via Philippines. This interruption was broken at a special request of the Chinese population of Macao, who were not Catholics. Due to a particular circumstance of lack of food and an increase of the prices in the settlement, the Chinese requested the Catholics to organize the procession and even assumed all the expenses to make happen the event (*Boletim Eclesiástico da Diocese de Macau*, 1964, p. 584).

In 1834, Anders Ljungstedt presents a description of the presence of the Catholic church in Macao and, among other information, offers us a description of the procession:

“We shall proceed from the amusing to the most seriously melancholic procession. The Sunday of the Cross (Domingo da Cruz), to judge from the emblem exhibited in this procession, represents a tradition from heathenism to Christianity. The Redeemer, an image of the size of a man, clad in a purple garment, wearing on his head a crown of thorns, and on his shoulder a heavy cross, bends on one of his knees on the bottom of a bier, supported by eight of the most distinguished citizens. The bishop with the secular and regular clergy, the governor, the minister, the nobility, the military, and the whole roman catholic population, it may be said, assist, deeply affected by a scene which prognosticates a divine sacrifice to be made for the sake of reconciling man to his Creator. Young children - of both clear and dark shades, arrayed in fancy dresses of angels, with beautiful muslin moving wings at their shoulders, carry, in a miniature shape, the instruments which were required at the act of the crucifixion. This procession takes the range of the whole city; when finished, the image of Christ is deposited in its shrine at the convent of Saint Augustine” (Anders Ljungstedt, 1834, p. 12-13).

Until today, the procession continues to be celebrated. Nowadays, the event is centered on the first Sunday of the liturgical season of Lent (in the Catholic Church). It is preceded by a Novena (nine days) of preparation and it is organised by a confraternity. It is interesting because it became part of the touristic landscape of Macao, together with the different churches, as well as the casinos, the grand prix and other events.

Such a history leads us to one of the questions that ritual studies must consider: the ritual change or, as Catherine Bell says, “Does the age of the rite, with its progressive distance from the rest of the social world, make it stand for something different today than centuries ago? Are meanings left behind or simply layered and relayered with new connotations and nuances?” (Bell, C., 2009a, p. 211).

³ In Portuguese it is written “Senhor Bom Jesus dos Passos”, other sources give different designations in different periods of the history of the procession, such as “Senhor Jesus com a Cruz às costas” - *Boletim Eclesiástico da Diocese de Macau* (1964), p. 444 - “Domingo da Cruz” - Anders Ljungstedt (1834, p. 12).

2. Devotions and Ritualisation

2.1. Ritualisation and suffering

Devotions are rituals. In 1982, Ronald Grimes affirms that “every ritual begins with ritualization” (Grimes, R. L., 2010, p. 34). This very short statement reveals a dynamic understanding of the ritual and the rites, expressed and related with the body, the person as a body, even if he implies a more physical and biological understanding of the body. He affirms explicitly that the “grounds of ritualisation as human necessity are ecological, biogenetic and psychosomatic” (*Ibidem*). More recently, and assuming that he changed already some of his perspectives regarding what he had been studying on the field of the Ritual Studies (Grimes, R. L. 2013), he said that “Ritualisation is the repetitious bodily stylisation that constitutes the baseline of quotidian human social interaction” (Grimes, R. L., 2013, loc. 4311 of 11248 in the *kindle* edition). We can consider that the ritualisation is a way to relate with the otherness, even when we are the other of ourselves. It is how we integrate things and people in our own existence as well as the way that we integrate ourselves, in a meaningful manner, on others’ life experiences.

Among the diversity of life experiences, suffering is one the most painful and dolorous. Instinctively, everyone will try all his best to avoid pain and suffering. When we have to endure it, we might experience loneliness and isolation. Ritualizing such experiences allow us to give or find meaning, in threatening and dangerous situations, especially when we consider long term experiences, such as being expatriated or being a refugee.

The way the Christians look to the relationship between the two natures of Jesus Christ has a long history. It is however in the articulation between the two natures that the theologians and the different Christian ritual practices try to understand and give a meaning to the human suffering by looking into the suffering of Jesus Christ. Richard Viladesau proposes an interesting approach to this issue through aesthetics and, in particular the aesthetics related with the Cross. It is with Saint Anselm, Saint Bernard, other monastic authors and, after Saint Francis, that we can see the development of a devotion directed to the humanity of Christ related with the Passion (McNamer, S., 2009)⁴:

“By activating the imagination, it drew the Christian into the events, even assigning him a role as an actor in the drama. Once inside the event, he responded to the scene with a variety of human emotions. This led to identification with Christ and a desire to imitate his virtues, especially humility and poverty, along with a willingness and a even a longing to suffer with Christ in his passion” (Cousins, E., 1989, p. 377).

The Middle Ages are, therefore, the moment when the humanity of Christ and all the emotions provoked by his sufferings that began an expansion of the devotion to the humanity of Christ in the Passion. Those different devotions were marked by the

⁴ Cf. Ewert Cousins, “Humanity and the Passion of Christ”, in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt, p. 380-384; also Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (2009).

increase of an affectivity towards Jesus and his sufferings, as well as its exemplarity to the Christians of the Passion of Christ: in and with Christ the personal sufferings of each Christian receive a somehow cosmic meaning that transcends the self in its own contingency.

2.2. Ritualisation and diversification of Christianity

Comparing Passion Rituals of the Philippines with European, P. J. Bräunlein justifies how different shapes Christianity can take depending on the cultures where it inscribes itself and the history that it develops in those particular cultural environments (Bräunlein, P. J., 2010, 2012). The notion of “continuity thinking” applied by the anthropologists and discussed by Joel Robbins (Robbins, J., 2007) to describe the impact of Christianity in the different cultures is fundamental. He suggests to think how Christianity evolved in different contexts it in terms of discontinuity. Based on this idea of interruption and discontinuity, we can look and understand the dynamics of such ritual practices in spite of their origins, European and marked by the context of the Counter-Reformation in the case of Philippines. P. J. Bräunlein introduces us into this problematic affirming: “It was the Spanish colonisers in the age of the Counter-Reformation who brought Catholicism to this place, but the native recipients changed it into something different” (Bräunlein, P. J., 2012, p. 385). Can we assume that something similar happened in Macau and its different ritual practices regarding the Passion?

The Passion and its devotions deal with images. As David Freedberg proposed, the images imply to think about what he called the response - symptoms of the relationship between the image and beholder (Freedberg, D., 1991). Hans Belting proposes a distinction between “image”, “picture” and “medium”(Belting, H., 2014). As he states, “The ‘image’, however is not defined by its mere visibility but by being invested, by the beholder, with a symbolic meaning and a kind of mental ‘frame’ (*Ibidem*, p. 9)” And also, explaining the distinction he adds, “I propose to speak about image and medium as two sides of the same coin, though they split in our gaze and mean different things. The picture is the image with a medium (*Ibidem*, p. 10).” Based on the premises of Hans Belting, we might look again into the ritual practices and assume the change as part of its identity, in particular as an experience of each one’s subjectivity. In fact, according to H. Belting, the media inscribe themselves upon our body experience and teach us self-perception or self-oblivion: in other words they both remind us of our body and make us forget it.

Among the *media* used in the devotions of the Passion in Macao, we can consider the statue of the Lord Jesus carrying the Cross and the Portuguese text used during the Novena. The latter is particularly interesting due to the style of the images evoked at the different moments of the Passion, almost a morbid devotion due to the “realistic” description of the wounds, effects of the aggressions and the description of the loneliness of Jesus as a victim. Another interesting dimension is the appropriation of the texts of the Gospel related with each one of the “pictures” of the different moments of the Passion: it is not a direct quotation but an interpretation of the text. And, finally, the emphatic tone of the text referring the sufferings of Jesus provoked by the sinners, who are participating in the ritual: they are simultaneously the agents who provoked that “drama” and the benefactors of the consequences. Among the actual participants, the main reasons invoked to live these practices are the gratitude

for the fulfilling of some vows/promises and the sense of belonging to the “Macanese” community.

The devotions of the Passion of Jesus in Macao raise the question of the identity. We can identify the continuity with similar practices in the matrices of the Macanese catholicism - Portugal and Spain, but the diversity of the nationalities of the missionaries and congregations who were present, and still are, cannot be ignored. However, these ritual practices reveal its own particularity in terms of the identity of a group, a Christian group, and a sense of belonging.⁵ In spite of the continuity, we should assume the discontinuity of the experience of living these devotions with the particular case of being a Christian Catholic in Macao. This diversification can be identified from the cultural point of view, but also in terms of subjectivity, the way that each participant perceives and lives the devotions.

3. Devotions and Memory

The memories are part of our lives. We remember to live, we remember to express our identity. We even remember to survive, especially in situations of being marginalized. It is common to find in different diasporas, national or cultural, the importance of the religious rituals to gather people. Those are moments to express identity and sense of belonging. Among the Catholic cultural groups, the devotions of the Passion can be quite important, as well as many of the devotions related with the Virgin Mary. Those remembrances, however, are not always related with the memory of the sufferings of Jesus. They are evocations of past experiences of living and inhabiting a different space.

The evocation and remembrance of “similar” devotions is one of the traits among the members of the actual catholic community, whether they are born and raised in Macao or elsewhere. When Johan Baptist Metz developed his idea of “dangerous memory”, he related it with the memory of the Passion of Jesus (Metz, J. B., 2007). In fact, he relates memory with the history of suffering, which is an inner moment of the history of freedom. Referring to the Passion of Jesus Metz affirms, “In the memory of His suffering it is the future of freedom that is being remembered” (*Ibidem*, p. 107). Are the evocations of the participants in these devotions anyhow related with this memory with a future? Or are they just evoking a past that alienates us from a disturbing present?

Through ritualisation, we can understand and see how these devotions of the Passion make people assume an identity, or identify particular moments of their lives with the sufferings of Christ. The images play a key role revealing and building up the different subjectivities, cultural and individual. But are they really assuming this dimension of being a “dangerous memory”, which by definition is an interruptive concept? Metz defines it this way: “ it is a memorative solidarity with the dead and the vanquished which breaks the spell of history as history of victors” (*Ibidem*, p. 69).

The history of Macao is made up of travellers and people who left their homelands. The history of Catholicism is quite rich and it has to be related with different

⁵ To speak Portuguese a condition to be a member of the confraternity which organises the procession and all the different events related.

dimensions of the history of the Catholic missions in Southeast Asia and China, but it is also made up of people who left their cultures and homelands. In spite of its diversity, expressed in the linguistic Catholic liturgical assemblies of Macao, not always the difference is considered as a value and an asset to overcome discrimination. The past can be a burden instead of a memory that points us to a future of freedom.

The migrants who come to work as domestic helpers are amongst the ones who can illustrate this affirmation. They come to Macau looking for better chances and dreaming to go back home, one day, in a better condition than when they left. In fact, they are people who crossed borders aiming to reach freedom and a promised land. However, they keep living on the border, which some authors define as an “open wound” (Cruz, G. T., 2010, p. 122):

“ an “open wound.” It is a gaping wound that serves as a testament to the violence of difference and the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. It is a bleeding wound inflicted by discrimination and infected by a sense of loss and isolation.”

Gemma Tulud Cruz published in 2010 a research about the situation of the Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong (Cruz, G. T., 2010), a quite similar situation with Macau. The experience of marginality and survival changes the existence, the identity and the sense of belonging, as she was able to demonstrate. She also proposes several theological suggestions how to look into the migrant situation and take it as an opportunity. The devotions to the Passion should be an asset in Macao to help in the integration of those migrants, at least the ones who have the same religious tradition as the Catholics of Macao. These devotions to the Passion of Jesus should be the common ground to live the dimension of hospitality of the Christian identity. If they are just an expression of an affective piety towards Jesus, they will not be a “dangerous memory”.

Conclusion

It is true that when ritual practices become so institutionalized that they are even used to promote tourism, we can fear that it lost their power, their transformative impact in peoples' lives. However, as long as suffering exists, human resilience will have the capacity and the ritual creativity to overcome it. It is true that the language and the gestures are marked by affectivity and emotion. Nevertheless, they express a memory with a future. It is not just a matter of being able to overcome violence and isolation by resignation or accommodation. It is the silent resistance of a “dangerous memory.”

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Contact email: jeleuterio@usj.edu.mo