

The Language of Piety and Sympathy
A Reading of the Culture of Spirituality in Bicol Region through Pasion Bicol

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Abstract

The profound sense of piety and religiosity in the Bicol region can be seen in the way people view the roles and functions of Catholic faith and practices in their lives. The language of sympathy/pagcaherac is embedded in the Pasion Bicol text, a Bicol language translation of Pasyon, a Philippine epic narrative of the life of Jesus Christ, focused on his Passion, Death, and Resurrection sung and recited in stanzas of five lines of eight syllables each evoking dramatic themes. The paper presents a comparative study of the two translations of Pasyon, the Bicol language and Tagalog. It will establish an argument that the concept of sympathy and piety are strongly felt in Bicol language. The people's sense of religiosity and their response to suffering and penance is articulated in the text, following the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic anthropology.

Keywords: language and culture, culture of spirituality, Philippine Studies

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Introduction

“Language, by providing habitual grooves of expression, predisposes people to see the world in a certain way and so guides their thinking and behavior.”

- Benjamin Lee Whorf

On Language and Religion

People’s understanding of the world, nature and self is articulated and expressed through language – in verbal, non-verbal, written and visual/sign forms of communication. Their experiences and beliefs are affirmed or negated, questioned or interrogated through language and its various platforms. These are formed into narratives, myths, chants, songs, prayers, folktales, that speak so boldly and powerfully about their experiences as individuals or as part of a group/community who are at the threshold, faced with either confidence or uncertainties in life. In order to deliver the message effectively across the intended recipient/s, the language used for communication must be understood clearly not just by knowing the meanings they convey but also understanding the rules and structure of a specific language.

According to Wittgenstein’s “language game” (1953), languages are governed by their own

distinct rules and conventions. Therefore, it is pertinent that the messenger and receiver should be aware of these rules and structures as they exchange/converse their ideas, thoughts, and feelings to one another.

In the context of religion, articulating one’s belief through language entails action (Keanne 2004) using the approach of Wittgenstein and as performative. It explains that when a belief is expressed or spoken under certain conditions, the meanings that can be derived and evoked from the act or performance or utterance are drawn from understanding that the idea/concept or belief performed in a ritual is transformed into something real therefore “changes in a state of affairs”. In addition, religious language or language use for articulating beliefs - affirms one’s faith. When taken into action through performance in rituals or ceremonies, these religious doctrines become real only when understood through semiotic¹ practice. The belief/faith can be enacted, embodied, experienced, and transmitted into one’s consciousness and action. Beliefs then do not just happen in one instant. The manifestation of one’s faith is mediated by the “linguistic forms and practices through which they are remembered, transmitted, and made available for acts and reflections”. Therefore, given this approach, interpretations of beliefs are rather contextualized taking into consideration the importance of the condition within the social field for the interpretation of linguistic form/s.

¹ Study of sign and symbols and their use and interpretation, which consists of a signifier (form/material/physical) and signified (concept/value it represents) which should be viewed not in isolation but as part of the whole system. Language can be understood using the structural model of semiotics (de Saussure), which is a set of combined elements that can transform rules or syntax or grammar for arranging its bits or words.

Another approach in understanding language in religion is placing it within the framework of myth (Eller 2007). Considered as extremely common and important form of religious speech, myth together with other genres such as prayer, incantations or “magical speech”, songs, proverbs or wisdom literature, and liturgies; these are often interpreted based on their content (information or ideas or beliefs, events, characters within the events). Eller cited to Malinowski, stating that the most common definition of a myth, a story or a history; use to represent an explanation for things; can also be etiological or concerned with the causes and expresses, enhances and codifies belief. In addition, myth can be a symbolic representation or as expressive symbol of one’s belief.

A prayer, a verbal genre, has eight general types. These are:

1. blessings;
2. prayers of restoration/recovery by re-identification/re-association with the means of health;
3. prayers of restoration by expulsion of foreign malevolence;
4. prayers of restoration by expulsion of the malevolent influence of native ghosts or witches;
5. prayers of restoration by the removal of the malevolent influence of Holy people;
6. prayers of restoration by the recovery, return, and re-association with the means of health;
7. prayers of procurement of protection against potential attack; and
8. prayers of restoration by remaking/redressing the Holy Person’s means of health and life.

Prayers or myths are recited, enacted or sung alone or as part of ritual performances. The performance is relative to a range of variables and conditions in a particular event in a society. Whether myth or chant or prayer, the performance can and must be creative and responsive to the needs of the people. The language of prayer or chant can be approached in terms of its content, ideas, beliefs it represents. However, content- based reading should be accompanied by understanding language that can draw certain forms of behavior or action in order to accomplish a goal or intention.

Religious language does not only represent or portray the world, it can also produce a certain model or representation of the world. Words have power to inform and transform individuals and community, “transforming humans from one social or spiritual status to another”.

On Language of Piety and Sympathy

Piety and sympathy - the traditional and contemporary spiritual practices among the Bikolanos are believed to be attached to these two distinct emotional and highly personal gestures in relating to their Gugurang, the Lord God, the Supreme Creator. Their intense relationship with the spiritual and supernatural beings stretches a wide spectrum in the history of the region - from the pre-colonial societies to the Catholic evangelization under the Spanish rule and until the current period in contemporary society. Such profound

attitude and treatment to the spirit world does not only manifest in the physical sense through rituals, devotions and pageantry but also felt and experienced deeply within, as it is embedded in the people's attitudes, behavior and approaches in life as they deal with their everyday realities: from birth, growth, industry, social relationships, illnesses and death. This has remained a potent element in the construction of a regional identity and culture in Bicol.

Historical documents state that Bicol region – which comprises the provinces of Albay, Camarines Norte, Camarines Sur, Sorsogon and the islands of Catanduanes and Masbate - does not follow similar historical developments found in other regions in the Philippines, even to the Tagalog provinces, which are considerably closer and adjacent to Bicol. By 1898, the Kabikolan had not developed a widespread distrust against the Spaniards. “There were no ambivalent feelings towards the Catholic Church that characterized other Filipinos of the time. The Bikolanos were probably more solidly Roman Catholic than any other group among the Filipinos” (Churchill 1992). The reputation of being pious and religious can be attributed to the success of evangelization during the early 1600. In the accounts of Gerona, the success of Catholicism in Bicol during the period from 1600-1850 was due to a strategic approach used by the Franciscan friars – employing “gentle persuasion” plus the noble image of the Church projected to the natives which was well received for it led the people to preserve their “unwavering submission” to Catholicism (Gerona). Their deep sense of religiosity can also be attributed to the Bikolanos’ strong adherence to the practices of the Catholic Church due to the strong connection and trust that were established. In addition, such well-established relationship can be explained by the manner by which Church’s power over the natives was not perceived as abusive and exploitative. Churchill (1992) stated that there were no large estates owned by the Spanish friars in the region, and Filipino seculars rather than Spanish friars administered half of its parishes.

Another factor in the success of evangelization is the translation from Spanish religious texts into vernacular language by the Spanish friars. From 17th to the 19th century, 62 Bikol translations of novenas, devociones, history of saints, catecismos, prayers, ejercicios, and other related pious materials written mostly in Spanish were found (Regino 1992). In addition, as early as 1795, bilingual diccionario, a vocabulario and a grammar book were published that served as useful references for Franciscan priests who were obliged to learn Bikol in order to communicate to the natives the doctrines of Christian faith. Such teachings were then transmitted and transferred to religious practices.

From the onset of evangelization in the 16th century until the contemporary period, religious practices like festival of saints are considered a common occurrence – from town fiestas which honor their patron saint for good harvest; festivals commemorating a miraculous episode like the popular devotion of Our Lady of Sorrows or the Dolor at Barangay Batong Paloway² in San Andres, Catanduanes or the devotion to the Amang Hinulid, the dead Christ in Calabanga, Camarines Sur; and a regional event like the “Ina” or Our Lady of Peñafrancia in Naga, Camarines Sur. Another significant festive event is

² A miraculous stone that contains a clear image of the face of Virgin Mary embedded on its surface.

the Kagharong, a yearly pageant anticipated by the locals of Catanduanes that commemorates the preparation of nativity and birth of Jesus by Mary and Joseph as they seek refuge from each house in Bethlehem. In addition to these joyful events, Bikolanos practice the Lenten celebration in a highly emotional and personal manner. The Kalbaryo or Pasion (the Passion and Death of Christ), is rendered with intense feelings of sorrow, penitence and mourning – emphasizing heavily on Jesus’ suffering and death.

Reading Pasion Bicol

The pasyon³, from Spanish passion, a doctrinal, verse narrative and didactic poem about the life of Christ, is one of the significant religious texts believed to have come from the Retablo de la vida de Cristo in 1585 written by a Spanish priest Fr. Juan de Padilla. Inspired from this text, a Tagalog pasyon was written and published in 1703 by a Batangueno, Gaspar Aquino de Belen, the Mahal na Pasion ni Jesu Christong Panginoon Natin na Tola⁴. During the 18th century the pasyon became popular that by the beginning of 19th century a new text emerged - the Casaysayan nang Pasiong Mahal ni Jesu Christong Panginoon Natin na Sucat Ipag-alab ng Puso ng Sinomang Babasa, written by an anonymous Tagalog poet, it presented an expanded version of the Mahal na Pasion by Aquino de Belen which included the Creation, the Fall and the awaited Judgment of the World. It is also known as Pasyon Genesis, or Pasyon Pilapil⁵. This version became so popular that it was eventually translated into various languages: into Pangasinan, Bikol, Ilokano, Ilongo, Waray, Pampango, among others.

The Pasion Bicol, “Casaysayan can mahal na Pasion ni Jesucristo cagurangnanta, na sucat ipaglaad nin puso siisay man na magbasa,” was translated by Tranquilino Hernandez, “Capitan pasado” of Polangui on October 4, 1866. Believed to be instigated by the Archbishop Francisco Gainza of Nueva Caceres, the intention was to create a binicol pasion, or translate in standard Bicol language (McFarland 1980) the Tagalog Pasyon. In the dedicatory letter by Archbishop Gainza, he stated his aim to make the text widely available in the vernacular language in order to increase Bikolanos’ understanding of their religion, familiarize the people with the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and its implications for Christian salvation. Hernandez affirmed the need to create a binicol pasion “so that it might illuminate our cloudy understandings...that we Bicolanos up until now, the most part of us, were just mouthing the Pasion in Tagalog, getting some information from it if we got some information from it, and not if not, and otherwise just reading only...” (Cannell 2006).

In the accounts of Rene Javellana, S.J. (1992), Tranquilino Hernandez’ Bicol translation of the Tagalog Pasyon intended to stick to the source and since the anonymous author of

³ The pasyon is written in quintilla verse (a stanza of 5 lines containing 8 syllables per line), usually read/sung by 2 or more singers as they alternate the verses of the text. The pabasa is performed during Holy Week and the Sundays of Lent. This may be held at home, in a chapel or a makeshift tent.

⁴ According to Rene Javellana, S.J., the Mahal na Pasyon by de Belen was appended to a book of prayers for the dying, Mga Panalanging Pagtatagobilin sa Caloloua nang Taoung Naghihingalo, 1703.

⁵ From Mariano Pilapil, an ecclesiastical censor who corrected and edited the text prior to its approval for publication.

the Tagalog Casaysayan used not only the pasyon of Aquino de Belen but other devotional and religious images and iconographies in order to enhance the understanding and interpretation of the verses, Pasion Bicol used pictures that illustrated the text as well. The use of images, illustrations and other visual art elements had been considered as part of the construction of meanings of the texts.

The production of meanings of religious texts of the Pasyon and other religious literature such as the Doctrina Christiana, novenas, and other prayer books were mediated by images, illustrations, the visual arts: religious prints, paintings, reliefs and sculptures, even retablos and urnas. The primary function of these art works was didactic or to enhance the public's understanding of some esoteric concepts – to teach the illiterate using images and pictures. Literature was translated through pictorial representations. Visual art elements functioned primarily as significant tools in introducing a certain consciousness to the people. In Hernandez' Pasion Bicol, it contained woodcuts of illustrations depicting different episodes in the pasyon. According to Javellana, from the 10 prints that survived, 8 depict scenes of the passion, namely: The Last Supper, Christ washes the feet of the disciples, Judas meets Jesus in Gethsemane, Christ meets Annas, Jesus in the Court of Pilate, Christ carrying the cross, Christ is crucified and Calvary (119).

From the woodcut prints in Pasion Bicol, they are largely concentrated on Christ's suffering and death. Since the primary intention of the Casaysayan was to supplement other religious texts that concerned conversion, Christian death and the fate of the soul, moral behavior, confession, absolution and penance for the salvation of one's soul, the concept of living a pious life was greatly embedded in the pasyon texts.

Performing Piety and Sympathy

Piety refers to the act of devotion through deep reverence to what the religion espouses by performing rituals, celebrations and practices that commemorate and observe what they stand for. These practices are often shared and witnessed by a group of people or community. The Casaysayan⁶ serves as an instruction manual on how to achieve favors from heaven through devout acts and therefore attain salvation after death. These lessons are inserted in between pasyon texts. Piety as an act of pure submission to the belief of one's religion is repeatedly highlighted in Pasion Bicol. For instance, the lesson, aral, hulit after the narrative on the genesis – the story of Virgin Mary accepting the role as the Mother of Christ:

Cristiano, an canigoan
Sinda an satong arogan
Sa gaueng orog carahay,
An boot na matiuasay
Sa harong nindang mabansay.

⁶ The Casaysayan is also referred to as Pasyong Genesis because it begins with the story of Creation in the Bible.

(Kristiano ang katampatan Sila nga'y ating turlan
Sa kagandahan ng asal,
At loob na malumay
Sa kanilang pamamahay.)

It tells the readers, listeners and devotees to follow and imitate the pure act of faith (Cristiano, an canigoan, Sinda an satong arogon) of Mary as she accepted the message delivered to her by the Archangel Gabriel to conceive a child that would become Christ the Savior. To experience and achieve peace within, Christian values should be practiced in their homes (Sa gaueng orog carahay, An boot na matiuasay, Sa harong nindang mabansay). Another lesson is given after the narrative of Jesus being found in the temple. It tells the readers about obedience and respect that children must give to their parents and the sacrifices that parents provide for their children:

An pagcacua ni San Jose asin Santa Maria sa mahal na Nino sa tahao nin mga camaisipan sa laog nin Templo

(Ang pagpapalumagak ni Hesukristo sa templo ng Herusalem)

Guinaha, gnayang aqui co,
Tadao cami siniring mo,
Aco sagcod qui Ama mo?
Baga lancas na totoo
Sa paghanap mi saimo.

Anong samuyang casalan
Guibo ming di mo namotan,
Samuyaca siminuhay:
Icatlong aldao na gnunian
Pagtios nin casaquitan?

(Bunso, aniyang Anak ko
Ano't kami'y ginayon mo?
Ako't sampu ng ama mo,
Parang ulol na totoo
Ng paghahanap sa iyo?)

(Anong aming naging sala
Gawang di mo minaganda
At kusang humiwalay ka?
Tatlong araw na nabalisa
Nang sa Iyo ay pagkita.)

The verses above speak about the finding of Jesus in the temple and how his parents, Joseph and Mary felt about his supposed misdeed. In the version of Pasion Bicol, the

sacrifices and hardships (Pagtios nin casaquitan) of Joseph and Mary are highlighted and given more weight in contrast to the subtle and light dispositions in the Tagalog Pasion.

Sympathy/pagcaherac which involves putting oneself in the position of another in order to feel what other person feels - is a recurring motif found in the text of Pasyon emphasizing not only the deeds and sufferings of Christ, also the actions of other biblical characters that show their unwavering submission to God. In the episode on Genesis, Pasion Bicol uses sympathy/herac as a motive of the Gugurangnanta in crating the world for the people.

Martes guinibo an dagat
Saralac nin pait, sarat;
May matabang, may maasgad:
Biayang labat casangcap,
Nin Dios na pano nin herac.

(May ginawa siyang dagat
Na sakdal pait at alat,
May matapang at masarap,
Biyayang di-hamak-hamak
Nitong Diyos na mataas).

The length of verse that covered the entire episode on the suffering, crucifixion and death of Christ range from verse 821-2148, the episodes are sung with passion. The devotion to the suffering and the Santo Entierro or the “dead Christ”, creates an emotional tension throughout the week long celebration, especially during the reenactment of the crucifixion and death. This figure represents a painfully realistic image of Christ taken down from the cross. The Bikolanos perceive the event as “real”, for they practice penance and sacrifice by participating in the novena prayers and reading the pasion for three straight days and nights. And as they approach the part where Christ is about to die, their singing has turned into a lamentation. This religious tradition interweaves into their lives in a profound way as this is repeated in the funeral for their loved ones. The concept of suffering/dying, death and a promise of being with the spiritual beings after life are paralleled to the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.

Et cum iniquis reputatus est, S. Marc.Cap. XV, v. 28

Digdi gnani nagnanaan
Colog asin casaquitan,
Timinignag uminarag
Sa Dios na Amang mahal
Ini, iyo an inolay:

Pater, dimitte illis non enim
Sciunt quid faciunt!

O Dios, gnaning Ama co
Magdalita nganing gayo
Na ngunian patauaron mo
An magna lolong na tauo,
Nagpaco sacco digdiho.

Day sindang pagcaaram
Can guibo nindang anoman,
Daing boot lamang,
Magdalitang caheracan
Day mo na pagisipan.

(Et cum iniquis reputatus est. S.L.C. 22.)
(Dito ng nga nalubhaan
Nang hirap at kasakitan
Tumingala kapagkuwan
Sa Diyos Amang maalam
Ito ang siyang tinuran:)

(Peter dimitte illis, non enim
Sciunt quid faciunt.)

(Ama kong Diyos na giliw
Ang hingi ko po at hiling
Ay iyo pong patawarin,
Ang lahat ng taong taksil
Na nangagpako sa akin.)

(Di nila namamalayan
Itong kanilang inasal
Walang loob kamunti man
Magdalita ka po naman
Sila'y huwag pag-isipan.)

The verses above strongly suggest the notion of pity/sympathy of Christ to the people who persecute him. This gesture of giving out sympathy to those who wronged him creates an image of a deep sense of mercy and compassion.

Conclusion

Language and Culture

The Bikolanos' profound sense of piety and religiosity can be seen in the way people view the roles and functions of Catholic faith in their lives - a highly personal one. People perform rituals and devoutly show their faith by practicing penance to evoke pity and

sympathy from the Gugurangnanta, from God. This platform serves as the ground for devotion to Christ and saints.

The language of sympathy/pagcaherac is embedded in the Pasion Bicol text. And this idea is transferred in their everyday conversations, or to the emotionally imbued events like the reading of the pasion, or during wake and funeral.

Borrowing from the anthropological theory of language and environment by Sapir (1912) which states that elements of human culture are highly influenced by the environment, the prevalence of piety and sympathy in Bicol language can be further explained. Language contains symbols that reflect the physical (geographical characteristic, climate, flora, fauna, minerals, etc.) and social (religion, ethical standards, political organizations and art) environment. Environmental conditions are reflected in language in terms of the following elements: (1) vocabulary (subject and content); (2) phonetic (sound/utterance); and (3) grammatical forms [formal process which contains the morphology or the structure of words; and the syntax or methods in combining words into units/sentences].

From the elements stated above, vocabulary can explicitly reflect the physical and social environment of its speakers. In addition, this theory recognizes that change is part of the life of a culture, therefore, vocabulary also changes. However, some words and their concepts are retained primarily because of the speakers'/people's interests.

The concept of sympathy/herac is strongly felt in Bicol language - specifically if pertains to their beliefs and practices. It is part of their performance of piety. Their deep sense of religiosity is articulated and performed through celebration, fiesta, devotion and rituals which re-affirm the intimate communal/family relations among the Bikolanos. These are celebrated in various forms – in a quiet and meditative mode in an intent prayer or having a conversation with the Supreme Being; or as a festive affair which commemorates a bounty harvest/productive industry or planting/start of a promising investment, birthing/fulfilling creative endeavors; and dying or going back to the realms of the spiritual world. In addition, it can also be a form of struggle in the guise of religious spectacle, to be themselves – to experience being human, to feel the sensations of the physical and spiritual realms through the music and movement of the body in the procession, or as the healers perform the rituals. Perhaps, it can also convey a venue for a convenient conversation with God. And lastly, it can be their way of negotiating with the Supreme Being.

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