

Trance and Ritual among Filipino Born Again Christians

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Before I begin this paper I must explain the source of my knowledge of born again Christians. After my one-and-a-half year sojourn in a Marcos prison from August 1984 to the end of the three-day EDSA revolt in 1986, I experienced a crisis with my mother, whom I had rarely seen, and for only snatches at a time since I went underground in 1971, as well as my fourteen-year-old son, who was under my care for only a total of six months of his life – for three months after his birth, and another three months when he was one and a half years old. My mother, 83 at the time, could not understand why I had to constantly go out of the house and earn a living, fully confident that her widow's pension of a few hundred pesos a month could support all three of us. I had to run away a second time in my life when she whiplashed me in the face in front of a friend of mine (while she had never whipped me even with her hands in my childhood and youth). I finally came back to live in her house late in 1988, after resolving to withstand whatever suffering I would incur in her hands, for her sake and my son's. The suffering, however, turned out to be greater than I had expected. For at 85, she had fairly lost her wits, I would think, so she constantly threatened to disinherit me of the only house I could ever have, and turn it over to a sister I followed who was married to a top-ranking AFP general and had all the resources she could get at her command. On top of this I had to deal with my teenage son, whose *Lola* had taught him all his life that his mother would some fine day come back and take care of him round-the-clock, in the very meek, self-sacrificing, "feminine" way expected of all the mothers of this world, which I was not, because I was a feminist, and was entering my forties under the mantle of the culture of feminism.

My elder brother and sisters, all fairly into their 60s at the time (I am the youngest), tried to help me by talking sense into my mother, but she would not listen to them. Finally, after two years of trying every Christmas, my brother, who was stationed in Indonesia at the time, told me that he and our sisters had done all they could. It was I who lived with my mother, he said, so I would just have to learn to deal with her, for none of them were there to grapple with her day-to-day changes of mind.

All this is in the personal, psychological sphere, of course, and has nothing to do with the science of anthropology, but I am constrained to provide this background for my ethnography, for without it I do not think that the ethnography would be as valuable.

And so, to continue, I was left alone to deal with my problem. In the years between 1986 and 1990, I could recall experiencing bouts of depression, which included the urge to kill myself. I had no one to turn to. My legal husband had been killed in an encounter in 1981, and I would not have asked for his help anyway even if he had lived, for in 1978, I had divorced him through the auspices of the Communist Party. Moreover, I had no

close friend to confide in, for I had chosen to closet myself in my world, unaware that somewhere someone was bound to have encountered problems of a similar nature, and could help.

I did, however, continue to work. In 1988, I stopped teaching at St. Joseph's College to be able to live with my mother in the way she wanted – that is, without my having to go out everyday – and founded the Institute for Filipino Cinema (an organization that went into video documentary production because film was too expensive), situating it in my late father's office in the basement of our house. For this venture I recruited my former students at St. Joseph's College.

One of those students, I was not aware at the start, was a born again Christian. It was she who became witness to my turmoil and stood gracefully by, nary a word about her beliefs. There were times when I would enter an empty Catholic church with her in my search for an answer to my problems, and she would come in with me, although, in hindsight, with some reluctance. Once in a while, however, she would drop words like, “Blessed *ka talaga, ano, Ma'am? Hindi ka niya hinayaan, binuhay ka niya kahit na ilang bala ang dinaanan mo!*” Or, “*Talaga namang God provides, ano?*”

I must explain again at this point that I became an atheist at the age of nine. My atheism was confirmed and strengthened with a dialectical materialist grounding when I entered the Communist Party in 1971. By 1983, however, I was starting to question the ideological moorings of the leadership of the Communist Party, beginning to liken their beliefs, humanist or ideational though they were, to belief in a God; so for this reason I tendered my resignation from my position as Chair of its National United Front Commission. It was prison that finally allowed me to see a glimmer of faith in a Being outside of humanity. But only a glimmer. The EDSA revolt was not enough of a miracle to shock me thoroughly into belief, for I suspected in it, aside from all else, the hand of the CIA, but it was enough of a phenomenon to convince me that the Communist Party, from this point on, was not to be the force at the core moving our cause forward.

It was, rather, my personal turmoil of four years that led me into the fold of born again Christianity, and that is the reason why I had to mention this background, in confirmation of Malinowski's thesis that “religion is not born out of speculation or reflection, still less out of illusion or misapprehension, but rather out of the real tragedies of human life, out of the conflict between human plans and realities.” (Malinowski 45)

To continue with my story, my young protégé (I taught her the art of video documentary production, which I myself was learning by doing) finally brought me to her church sometime in 1989, when my problems were at their peak. The church was then called the Asian Christian Charismatic Fellowship, or ACCF, located on Cambridge Street in Cubao, Quezon City, on the left side facing Stella Maris College, and across Aurora Boulevard from Isetann Department Store. But I did not go there for my first taste of the church, because my ward had chosen to bring me to their Greenhills branch, thinking perhaps that the atmosphere would suit my intellectualism and upper petty bourgeois tastes more. The venue was the Music Museum, which should definitely have afforded me a theatrical experience, but the pastor, tall, lanky and boring, tried too hard despite his stiff and expressionless exterior to drive his audience into penitence. He did not seem to mix with his surroundings. I was not impressed. She must have been sensitive enough to notice that, for next she brought me into the main church itself, where the celebrant was

the ACCF main pastor, a fat, burly, but jolly man in his late thirties by the name of Jarren Lapasaran.

Jarren was electric. Dark and rough-skinned with almost Negroid features but not quite, he had enough of a voice box to encompass a hall holding about 600 people, as well as enough energy to ease tears, joy or laughter out of his audience. Accompanying him was a set of combo drums, an electronic organ, an electric guitar, and three or four singers, each with a microphone in tow, not to mention their head singer who would rock and gyrate to music that was easy for the audience to remember and sing, especially with an overhead projector that threw up an image of the words on the wall behind them. When they sang, the whole congregation sang with them, lifting up one or both of their hands high above their heads, their eyes closed and tearful, their bodies swaying to the rhythm of the music, some fairly jumping up and down, sometimes the whole congregation going into a feverish dance. "Lift up your hands, lift up your hands," the pastor seemed to be talking to me, "Let go, don't be shy, just lift up your hands to the Lord and praise Him." I could not, of course, because I was observing them all.

My ward was soon lending me audiotapes of Christian songs. There were plenty. Each service seemed to dish up a new one, as easy to learn as the others, and just as vibrant as the rest.

I was not convinced enough to be a regular churchgoer, for Pastor Jarren's terrible English may have gotten in the way (although I could immediately perceive his gifts), but the words slowly sank in. Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Then confess your sins to Him, and repent, and ask Him to save you. And you will be saved. Would you like to pray the sinner's prayer? Lord, I am a sinner, forgive me Lord for all my sins, lift me up to you and save me, in the name of Jesus, Amen.

It was not inside the church that I broke down, but inside my room, with my ward as my minister. I was in bed crying out my utter despondency to her, when she put one of her tapes into my stereo, played it, and asked gently if I wanted to pray. Helpless, I said yes. So I proceeded to pray the sinner's prayer with her, in her own words, which were without embellishment and without recrimination. I think she must have left me afterwards in peace, asleep. It was March 3, 1990, three years to the day after – as she told me much, much later – she saw, in her dream, a cloud forming into the number three, and interpreted it as the three years it would take me, a confirmed atheist at the time she met me, to be born again.

It was on the same bed that I experienced the first two major miracles of my life. But this time, I was alone.

First, after I accepted the sinner's prayer, I felt an urge to give up smoking. I had smoked since I was 18, and now that I was 41, I was already feeling my lungs constricting, my phlegm already black and my teeth yellow with tar. I also wanted to do my son and my mother a favor, for my son at three months of age had contracted bronchopneumonia in my underground house from all the cigarette smoke of my comrades, and early in 1990 my mother had had to enter a hospital in Fort Bonifacio under the auspices of the sister I followed for a severe case of asthma. I was a half-packer and had tried to reduce my intake by the little, managing up to one cigarette a day, but always, I would shoot up again to three, and then again half a pack.

Finally, I could not take it anymore. Lying in bed with my arms stretched out like I was lying on the cross, I gave up trying entirely, and cried out, totally exhausted, "God, please, help me stop smoking."

The next day I could not stand the smell of cigarettes anymore. I have not smoked since.

The problem with my mother, however, remained. But even that I had given up on. She would constantly badger me, holding on to my wrists every time I was about to leave the house, refusing to let me go and threatening to call the police so that they would tie me up on a chair and pin me down to her house. I could not take it anymore. I was lying on the same bed a month after, in the same posture, my arms stretched out like I was nailed to the cross, when I blurted out, quite without meaning it, even more exhausted, and much more desperate, than before, "God, please, change my mother. If you cannot change her, TAKE HER AWAY!"

The next day, my mother changed. She became the sweetest old woman I have ever known. And she remained sweet until her dying day, six years after, her favorite expression being, "*Kun ano ang guinbuot sang Guino-o*" -- "whatever God wills."

After these two sudden life-changes that I construed as miracles, I began to read the Bible cover-to-cover, finishing, in six months, the Good News version that the head of the congregation at St. Joseph's College had given to me while I was in prison, and which I had never managed to read beyond Numbers or Deuteronomy, afraid as I was of Ecclesiastes, which my friend, a fellow prisoner for a while, had described to me as horrendous. I wanted to learn who this God was who had given me these miracles, for I had heard the pastor say several times that I must get to know Him myself, and besides, my intellectual curiosity had taught me long ago not to rely on anyone else for knowledge, for what came to me by some other tongue could very well be a misinterpretation. So after finishing the Good News Bible, I proceeded to the Douay edition, which I borrowed from Father Reuter, later going to the Claretian Community Bible, then the King James Version, and finally the Revised Standard Version.

I also started to be a fairly regular churchgoer, going to the ACCF as well as tasting of some other churches like Bread of Life at Timog, Victory Church at Makati, the Christ Commission at Valley Golf Club, the Greenhills Christian Fellowship at Ortigas, the Diliman Bible Church at Sikatuna Village, and two other small churches in Quezon City. In 1995, on my fifth year as a born again Christian, I began to attend bible study sessions with a group of artists at the Liongoren Art Gallery in New York Street, Cubao. I would regard my experience as a born again Christian, then, fairly complete, and though I have not been able to document these ten years of trance and ritual formally as ethnography, my reprise of them in the past months I believe serves to round out this account.

To justify my use of personal experience, I appeal to Renato Rosaldo, who in his essay "Grief and the Headhunter's Rage," recounted that he would not have understood the full range of the grief and anger that led to a headhunting ritual if he had not himself experienced the same grief and anger at learning of his wife and fellow anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo's untimely death from an Igorot precipice. I submit that I would not have fully understood and appreciated, much less intellectually comprehended, trance and ritual among Filipino born again Christians had I not become a born again Christian

myself, in full belief of the Holy Trinity and the Judeo-Christian Scriptures that these Christians believe in. That I should now call these phenomena “trance” and “ritual,” where both terms are vehemently denied by born again Christians themselves, is a measure of the degree to which I have detached my mind from the belief, and the degree to which I am willing to examine these particular phenomena scientifically.

The ACCF, n(ow).k.a. JOHIA

Pastor Jarren Lapasaran founded the ACCF in the mid-80s together with the other pastor whom I saw at Greenhills. While Pastor Jarren worked full-time on the job, the other pastor continued his other occupation as an engineer. They started with Sunday services at the Fiesta Carnival; later, according to church lore, after being fairly driven out of the Fiesta Carnival, they were able to buy a house and lot on Cambridge, where they put up a big roof on the back lawn, later building its walls, stage, mezzanine, and so on, until, as it is today, it became a fully adorned church in the Protestant tradition – that is, shorn of adornments, without statues of saints.

The ACCF was and is a Pentecostal church, established under the aegis of the Assemblies of God, which is based in the US. This means that, in the spectrum of Protestant churches, it is the most “radical” – that is, it does not, like the Baptists, hold back on their praise and worship of God, but lets go, singing and dancing, and sometimes crying and laughing, without restraint. It is evangelist only in the sense that pastors and members alike are encouraged to proselytize among taxi drivers and their seatmates in buses and planes, ending always in a recitation with them of the sinner’s prayer; but such types of evangelism as standing in buses and street corners asking for alms are frowned upon.

Compared with all the other churches I have mentioned going to, which mostly follow the Baptist tradition, the ACCF, now called JOHIA, or Jesus Our Hope International Assemblies, is the most vibrant and alive, and the most raucous in terms of worship services. One must add to the Pentecostal tradition the tradition established by Pastor Jarren himself, who, having had a pastor for a father, started out in church as a lead singer. Not lacking in dramatic skills, he soon drew around himself the most dramatically inclined young teenagers, one of whom was my ward. It was this batch of young dramatists, now almost in their thirties, that succeeded him in the leadership of the church, and that today holds sway in JOHIA.

The ACCF came to be called JOHIA because a serious break occurred in the leadership before the mid 90s. Pastor Jarren and his faithful found out that the other pastor, together with one of the young dramatists who had become a pastor himself though he was a philanderer, and one of the Sunday collectors, had siphoned a considerable amount of church funds to their private coffers. Since the other pastor had registered the ACCF name, the two founders came to an amicable agreement, the former retaining the name and the young philandering pastor, while Pastor Jarren got the house and lot.

The name became JOHIA because the new heads of the congregation had been bitten by the OCW bug, having sent quite a few pastors to Saudi Arabia on secret missions. They believed that the Philippines was the 10/40 window to the non-Christian world, 10/40 being the geographical markers for the tribes in Asia, the Middle East and Africa that have other faiths; the diaspora, they believed, was God’s way of sending out the Filipino

prophets to those parts. Soon each young pastor, with a retinue of singers and dancers that doubled as dramatists and trainers, got out of the country, to such Asian destinations as Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia and Myanmar. When Pastor Jarren was assigned by the Assemblies of God to become a regional supervisor based in southern California, at least two young pastors were given the chance to visit him there.

Today, the Cambridge church, as well as JOHIA, is headed by Pastor Tanny Planas, a nephew of the former vice mayor Charito Planas. The same build as Pastor Jarren, only taller (all four lead pastors and one regular lead singer who remained with JOHIA are rotund, though of varying heights), with great ambitions for his own rise as a pastor as well as for his church, Pastor Tanny carries on the tradition set by Pastor Jarren of drums, gongs and cymbals and song and dance, co-sponsoring a once-a-year 48-hour praise and worship session at such large places as the Cuneta Astrodome or the Marikina Stadium as well as other large-scale gatherings, with other Pentecostal churches.

The membership itself, though it has changed hands and faces many times, also remains the same: definitely rising lower petty bourgeois, of the type that would congregate in Cubao but venture out to Makati, previously young but getting older and older, and more and more established in their communities, jobs and businesses. These are not people who would want to remain employees forever; they may be employees now, and they may even be hard up, living in such enclaves as Project 2 and 3 or far out in Cogeo or Bulacan, but their dream has always been to establish their own businesses, be they big or small. “Blessings” are therefore what are mainly carried at services, and particularly, blessings for businesses.

Having set the background of JOHIA, let me go on to describe the subtle changes it has undergone in the past ten years.

JOHIA then and now

To dissociate themselves from Catholics, JOHIAans, and born again Christians in general, do not use the word “mass” or “*simba*.” Theirs are “praise and worship services,” and they “*samba*,” not “*simba*.” But since “*samba*” seems awkward – not being common in a Catholic country – they do not normally ask, “*Mag-sasamba ka ba ngayong lingo?*” but “*Mag-chu-church ka ba ngayong lingo?*” “*Saan ka nag-chu-church ngayon?*”

When I first got into a born again Sunday service, the centerpiece of all born again activity, attacks against the Catholic Church were rife. Catholic statues hoarded demons, the worship of Mary as the mother of God was satanic, and Catholics practice rites and rituals, which are abominable in themselves. In contrast, born again Christians do not engage in the worship of statues, obeying the commandment “Thou shalt not bow down before any graven image;” they worship only the one true God, who is Spirit, and sent His son Jesus to redeem the world by giving up His life, this Jesus being God Himself, having been born of the virgin Mary who was merely an exemplary woman; they do not have any rites and rituals, but praise and worship God in fellowship with other Christians in the most imaginative ways possible, songs, sequence and activities forever changing, depending on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

I could imagine how much more rabid the attacks on the Catholic Church could have been in the mid 70s, when Protestant revivalism had just started, and the born again mechanism had to break new ground. I had a glimpse of it listening to my born again sister (the one I followed) in the mid 80s who, with her Bible open, tried to show me that priests were in reality demons and Satanists and never existed before the founding of the Catholic Church, spiritual leaders at that time, she claimed, being simple pastors of their people. By the early 90s, born again pastors were already on firmer ground, having recruited a great many youth and an increasing number of stars, and so some of the fire had already been watered down. However, the great chasm between Catholic and “true” Christian practice still had to be emphasized, for the danger of losing the flock to Catholicism still remained. By the mid 90s, reports were already coming in that born again Christians comprised 20 percent of the population, and growing. Besides, a trend developed within the Catholic Church itself of imitating the songs, bible studies and sometimes even services of the revivalists, demonstrating the possibility of exercising a positive effect on traditional practice. And so, while no openness to dialogue with Catholics much less the Catholic Church can be seen as of now among born again pastors, the attacks have abated, supplanted now by efforts to firm up the internal doctrine (as spelled out by Ephesians in the Christian Scriptures) without reference to negative example from the outside. This is true not only of JOHIA but almost all born again churches, especially those not headed by whites.

A second change is the almost total takeover of Filipino pastors from their mainly American but also British mentors. This is true, for example, even of the Greenhills Christian Fellowship in Ortigas or the Victory Church in Makati, which in the late 90s was still pastored by Americans. That they started with white pastors is perhaps the reason why these churches up to today remain upper middle class and just a wee bit snooty – not, of course, as snooty as the Catholic Santuario de San Antonio at Forbes, but in weak imitation of it, nonetheless. When the Americans were preaching in these churches, the emphasis on repentance, all caps, was distinctly noticeable. These Americans invariably talked down to their audience, promising – nay, threatening – hellfire and damnation to all who did not obey God’s will. When Filipino pastors took over, the heavy veil of damnation lifted quite discernibly, and humor and wit began to come in, zealous sermons becoming tranquil albeit energetically delivered lectures punctuated by funny little episodes in the personal lives of the speakers.

The takeover also engendered changes in the rituals themselves.

In all born again services without exception, sessions always start with an hour to an hour and a half of mass singing, led either by a choir and organ, or a mini-band and mini-choir with lead singer, and, in the case of big prosperous churches, using an overhead projector. This is followed by the sermon, which takes about another hour. On the first Sunday of every month, the sermon is either capped or cut midway by the communion of bread and wine, where everybody partakes of both bread and grape juice. If it is not the first Sunday of the month, a last communal song caps the sermon. This pattern is universal, and is therefore the regular Sunday ritual that the born again Christians call their praise and worship service. While there may be changes in the pattern of the sermon, a testimonial coming before it or within it, while the songs, likewise, are never the same, and therefore the service cannot be said to be in the same mold of ritual as the mass of the Catholic Church, the pattern of congregational singing before the sermon, and a last song or two to cap it, is nonetheless the basic pattern of the service, making it a ritual in at

least one dictionary meaning of the term, which is, “a customarily repeated often formal act or series of acts.” (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

If you examine videotapes of Americans in the United States going through such services, you will notice that the center of attention is the preacher-healer, the audience congregating around his command, raising their hands in praise and worship of a God outside of them, responding to the “touch of the Holy Spirit” only through the direction of the central voice of the preacher-healer. Visually, you may not notice any difference between these and Filipinos worshipping in like services, with a Filipino pastor at the lead. Pastor Jarren, before he left for Los Angeles, however, was wont to say that Americans marvel at the vibrancy of Filipino praise and worship services. One reason could be his group’s flair for drama and the proficiency of the band that swings the congregation into collective song and dance, inducing speaking in tongues and other trance-like states in the process – though Pastor Jarren himself always pegged the reason to the presence of the Holy Spirit – but a closer look, from the point of view of anthropology, will reveal something else.

I must note that JOHIA rituals are quite unique when compared to the rituals of other born again churches that I have attended. While the basic pattern, as well as the changes they make within it, are the same, JOHIA’s main strengths lie in its song and dance routine at the beginning, as well as in the capacity of most of its pastors to follow through the mood set by the song and dance routine. Born again Christians would call these strengths a gift of God. But that is not my point. My point is that the other churches I have mentioned were started by American pastors or stemmed from the American Baptist tradition, and are therefore still constrained by this tradition (although quite a few, like the Victory Church and the Christ Commission, are faster in breaking out of it, as shown by the greater spontaneity of their services), while JOHIA had purely Filipino beginnings in the person of Pastor Jarren’s father, who started the church while he was still stationed in Bulacan, and this even as it is formally allied with the US-based Assemblies of God. It has been the recognition of being Filipino, and, as a Filipino church, bearing unique responsibilities in what born again Christians call God’s plan, that makes JOHIA more receptive to Filipino culture, even if it has not an iota of intellectual awareness of what that culture consists of.

That it has a feel of certain aspects of that culture, however, is physically evident at least in its stage décor. In front of the worshipping congregation, in place of the Catholic altar, stands a stage about two and a half feet tall, twenty feet long, and ten feet wide. At the start, this stage was bare. As the years wore on, however, it began to acquire banners with Bible verses on them. After a while, these banners were supplanted by a huge painting of a waterfall going down a hill on the left, joining a sea from the left-middle to the right, a small island to its side, and what after some time became a flying eagle soaring through the clouds above it. The decorative roof on top of this stage also acquired the name “Jesus” in neon on it, most likely a donation from one of the young pastors, whose family owns a neon-light advertising company. The neon name of Jesus is still on the decorative roof, but the background has changed with the departure of Pastor Jarren for the US. Today, the decorative motif is Muslim, with its gold woven cloth draped artistically over a pedestal holding an ornamental plant, and its geometric design used as wallpaper at the lower end of the wall, framed by thin flattened bamboo slats. On the left end of the stage, near the combo, are several bamboo tubes that one of the musicians gets once in a while, in the midst of a song, to tap on while he holds it near

his mike. Other native bamboo musical instruments have also been added to the repertoire.

Another indication of JOHIA's intuitive albeit uninformed sensitivity to Filipino culture is the eventual disappearance of the eagle from the scene. In the years before Pastor Jarren left for the States, he had made it his personal crusade to convince everyone, through his sermons mainly, that the national bird must be changed from the *maya* to the eagle, because the *maya* was too meek, whereas the eagle soared to great heights, looking the sun in the eye to gain energy – a symbol, he implied, of a people acquiring the power of God through the bounties of the Holy Spirit. It was perhaps his way of overcoming his own creeping desperation over the ennui of his people. The crusade did not seem to work, however; that it was eventually abandoned is a tribute to JOHIA's understanding of what is acceptable to its flock. As to whether this served as a lesson to Pastor Jarren of the true character of his people, I have no way of telling.

To demonstrate the intuitive sensitivity further, I will recount my experience of trance as practiced (though not as admitted) by born again Filipino Christians. But before I continue, I must explain how I only recently came to understand the Filipino practice of “trance” not in the Western sense of the word but in the indigenous “*sapi*” sense of the word, an understanding that came only after ten years of my born again experience and the few months with which I have been able to reprise the experience with my new-found knowledge of ethnography.

Lessons from Covar and Dagmang

For a common everyman meaning of the word “trance,” a meaning that I am sure is what born again Christians hold, I turn, again, to the Encyclopaedia Britannica. The word, Britannica's dictionary says, comes from the French “*transir*,” which means “pass away, swoon,” and the Latin “*transire*,” which means “to pass,” or “pass away.” As such, its first two meanings are:

1: a state of partly suspended animation or inability to function **2:** a somnolent state (as of deep hypnosis)

Words associated with “trance” are, still according to Britannica, “medium,” “hallucination,” and “hypnosis.” A medium in occultism is

a person reputedly able to make contact with the world of spirits, especially while in a state of **trance**. A spiritualist medium is the central figure during a **séance** and sometimes requires the assistance of an invisible go-between, or control. During a **séance**, disembodied voices are said to speak, either directly or through the medium. Materialization of a disembodied spirit or of a specific part of a human body can allegedly take shape from a mysterious, viscous substance called **ectoplasm** that exudes from the medium's body and subsequently disappears by returning to its original source. At times the medium, or a material object, appears to float in the air (levitation). (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

“Hallucination” and “hypnosis,” on the other hand, are explained in this way:

The mystic achieves hallucinations by gaining control of his own dissociative mechanisms; perhaps this is a form of **self-hypnosis**. Such individuals can accomplish an astonishing withdrawal from the environment by prolonged intense concentration (e.g., by gazing at some object). The hallucinations may be of the type in which the person perceives his "inner self" to leave his body to view himself (autosopic hallucination) or to be transported to new

surroundings. Alternatively, the hallucinations may take the form of unique visual imagery; for example, the *yantra* is a visual hallucination of a coloured, geometrical image that appears at a level of **trance** of the sort experienced by practitioners of Yoga. The recurrence of certain designs and patterns in human hallucinatory experience is probably related to structural aspects of the visual system.

Ordinary experimental hypnotic and posthypnotic suggestions of hallucinations are well known. The hypnotic subject (who can be described as a person in a controlled dissociative state) may on occasion also experience spontaneous hallucinations in the absence of specific suggestions.

Prolonged monotony or fixation of attention may lead to diminished responsiveness to the environment with a general effect similar to that of absolute reduction of stimulation or of hypnotic **trance**. (Ibid.)

Since this is the common, everyman meaning of “trance,” no wonder that born again Christians vehemently deny that they practice it. However, Britannica does offer a third, and presumably least, meaning, this being: “**3**: a state of profound abstraction or absorption.” With this meaning, I am sure, born again Christians will not disagree. However, the definition is still very Western, and out of touch with Filipino reality; “abstraction” and “absorption” are words that talk about preoccupations on a conceptual plane, preoccupations that do not mean much to the ordinary Filipino. Let me therefore turn to the Filipinologists who have studied Filipino spirituality and ideas of selfhood from the angle where they are most accurate: that is, the angle of the culture itself.

Prospero Covar, in his essays on Philippine culture, likens the concept of Filipino personhood to that of a Manunggul jar, or *bangâ*, dated 890 B.C. and found in 1964 in one of the caves at Lipuun Point in Palawan. (Covar 23) The Filipino regards himself as a vessel, he says, with a “*loób*,” “*labás*,” and “*lálím*.” The *labás*, which include the *mukhâ*, *dibdib*, *tiyán*, and *sikmura*, represent the *loób*, which include, respectively, the *isipan*, *puso*, *bituka* and *atay*. The *labás* reflects whatever is in the *loób*; if there is any effort at all to hide the *loób*, it shows nonetheless in a contorted *labás*. The *lálím*, on the other hand, is composed of the *kaluluwa*, and the *budhî*. While the *kaluluwa* may be construed in English as the soul, the *budhî*, he contends, is not equivalent to the conscience. “*Sa aking palagay*,” he continues, “*ang lokasyon ng konsiyensya ay malapit sa kaisipan*.” (Covar 9-15) Ferdinand Dagmang elaborates further, “*Ang budhî na panloób na aspeto ng lálím ng tao ay ang batayan ng pagtatalaga sa uri ng kaluluwa*.” (Dagmang 1996: 79) Indeed, in his construct of the *loób/labás/lálím* relationship, Covar places the *kaluluwa* under the column of *labás* and the *budhî* under the column of *loób*, without placing a vertical line between *labás* and *loób*. Thus:

| | |
|----------|--------|
| Labás | Loób |
| mukhâ | isipan |
| dibdib | puso |
| tiyán | bituka |
| sikmura | atay |
| Lálím | |
| kaluluwa | budhî |

(Covar 10)

This concept of personhood has consequences in the Filipino’s idea of death, and corollarily, trance. When a person dies, Covar reveals, his or her soul departs. “*Ang kaluluwa ay kumakalag sa katawan ng tao*.” He continues:

Sa sementeryo ay madalas nating makita na ang bansag ay 'Sumalangit Nawa.' Ang 'nawa' sa Malayo-Polynesia ay 'nawa' sa lumang Tagalog na tumutukoy sa espiritu o kaluluwa. Kung gayon, ang tahasang kahulugan ng SLN ay 'ang nawa, kalag, kaluluwa, anito, espiritu, atbp., sana ay sumalangit.' Ang salitang 'yawa' sa Cebuano ay masamang uri ng kaluluwa. (Covar 14)

This is because, Covar elaborates a few paragraphs later, “*Ang pagkataong Pilipino sa konteksto ng kaluluwa ay may ilang tambalang kategorya: (1) maganda/pangit na kaluluwa, (2) matuwid/halang na kaluluwa at (3) dalisay/maitim na kaluluwa.*” (Ibid.)

The idea is expounded by Dagmang as follows: “*Kaya ang kaluluwa ang siyang nagpapanatili sa tao bilang isang buhay na organismo. Ang kaluluwa rin ang nagbibigay ng kabuuan sa tao bilang isang humihingang nilalang.*” (Dagmang 1996: 78)

That is why, Covar adds, “*Kapag namatay ang tao, ang katawan ay nabubulok.*” (Covar 45) But, he says elsewhere, “*Sa Kanluranin [West], ang puso ang kaugnay ng buhay. Ang pagtibok ng puso ay tanda ng buhay, hindi tulad natin na ang buhay ay nakaugnay sa pagsanib ng kaluluwa at pagkalagot ng hininga.*” (Ibid. 12) This is why, even if a person is declared clinically dead, or brain dead, by Western standards, to a Filipino that person may not yet have died. (Ibid. 28)

Even the foreign anthropologist Thomas Gibson, limited as he was by his Western mind, after studying the Buid of Mindoro for his doctoral dissertation, confirmed this finding without having read Covar, writing as he was seven years before the latter:

A person is made up of three components: a physical body (*abilugan*), a soul or vital principle (*falad*) and a mind (*fangayufan*). The physical body is doomed to decay after death. As the Buid say, it then becomes the meat of the ghouls which infest graveyards. The body may also be attacked through its animating principle, the soul. While an individual is alive, the predatory spirits may bite, gnaw, stab or slash at the soul, causing it, and the body it inhabits, to weaken and eventually die. It is only when the soul departs from the body at death that the latter begins to corrupt and can be directly consumed by the spirits. The soul forms a sort of invisible double of the body, the latter reflecting the state of the former in invisible form. The soul is said to reside in the upper torso or shoulders, and is the seat of the emotions. Buid describe an intense emotional state such as anger or jealousy in terms of the soul rising up from the chest into the neck. If it is not controlled, it issues forth in bitter words or violence. (Gibson 126)

As for the matter of trance, Covar explains:

Puwede ring maglagalag ang kaluluwa kung natutulog ang tao sa pamamagitan ng panaginip o kung ito'y 'in a state of trance' sa pag-awit ng epiko.

Sa pansamantalang pagkawala ng kaluluwa sa katawan ng tao, maaaring ang isang katawan ay mapasukan ng ibang kaluluwa. Ang ganitong phenomenon ay tinaguriang langkap, sapi, sanib. Ang kaluluwa na sumasapi o lumalangkap ay siyang nagpapagalaw ng tao. Ang katawan ng tao ay nagiging kasangkapan ng kaluluwang lumalangkap o sumasapi. (Ibid. 14, emphasis mine)

Dagmang elaborates:

In the many pre-Hispanic rituals of healing, *sapi* (or *langkap*, *talaytay*, *suklob*, *sanib*, *tungtong*) was common. In this *sapi* ritual the babaylan was supposed to be possessed by a benevolent *anito* who brings blessings and healing to sick people. Prayers and sacrifices were the normal offerings to the benevolent *anito* who is supposed to be more powerful than malevolent ones. Within these rituals-meetings people would also ask the *anito* in the babaylan other favors like protection of their crops from locusts or their lives from the dangerous *buwaya* that inhabit their rivers. In the people's gatherings in a *simbahan*, there actually is a liturgy, a work or a drama, where the *anito*

and the people touch each other in propitiation and healing carried out through the person of the medium. (Dagmang 1994: 9)

This conclusion is upheld by separate and independent studies of the *babaylan* made by Zeus Salazar, Milagros Guerrero and Fe Mangahas.

Trance among born again Christians

I will now proceed to render my personal account of trance among born again Christians, made possible through my observation of as well as participation in their Sunday rituals and other activities.

One of the first things I learned in 1990, as one who had recited the sinner's prayer with all her heart, mind and soul and listened to a few Sunday services, was that God is Spirit. When one is born again, I was told, one is born again of the Spirit: the Spirit of God. My first reading was John 3, where Jesus told Nicodemus, the searching Pharisee,

3 Verily, verily, I say to thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

All I asked were hard put to explain exactly what verse 8 meant. But to be born again of the Spirit, they told me, one has to give up oneself, surrender one's will, to it. One must empty oneself, as one would a vessel – a *bangâ* – so that the Holy Spirit could enter one's body, and reside there. Though this was not exactly what was in the Bible, this was what I heard in the sermons, and in the conversations of the young people I met who were born again, and it satisfied me, striking a chord somewhere in my consciousness. I could understand it.

Shortly after the miracle of my changed mother, I lay down in bed again, in the same posture as before, in total surrender to the God who had awed me with His miracles, praising and worshipping Him by myself, in utter abandon. I was soon to experience another miracle. As I lay there, my eyes closed and reveling in the glory of my God, I felt what I imagined to be a cool, white light entering my upturned hands. The light seeped through my palms, traveling through my arms into my body. As it did, I felt like I was floating in air, borne by my ecstasy. It was a wonderful feeling. Some five years later, when I recounted it in my testimonial at a JOHIA evening service, Pastor Jarren, who "anointed" me that same evening, told me that that was the Holy Spirit entering my body, and it had entered through my hands because my particular anointing was to write.

It was from that time on, after my 1990 experience with the Holy Spirit, that I considered myself to have been "born again." From there, it was easy for me to raise my hands and close my eyes together with the Sunday fellowship as the pastor called on the Holy Spirit to respond to the praises of His people with His presence. "Can you feel it?" the pastor would often ask. "It is here. The Holy Spirit is here." And I would hear sobs, weeping, wailing, speaking in tongues, clapping, and all manner of exaltations among the congregation, all at the same time, my voice now among theirs.

Many times I would come to services with some pain or other in my body, and all times I would be healed, as if the Pastor Jarren had known exactly what was ailing me, though he would heal others as well. Sometimes, he would call all those who felt some ailment to

come forward, but sometimes he would not, just saying a prayer of healing for those who felt pain. Each time I would be healed. I myself became a healer for my mother. Every time she complained of some pain in her joint, I would place my hand over it and pray, with all my love, "Jesus, please heal my mother," and she would respond immediately, saying in Ilonggo, in the child-like manner of her last six years, "*Walâ na sing sakit!*"

Fearful as I was of the reaction to proselytizing among my fellows, however, I kept my faith to myself for five years. On the third year of my rebirth, I felt that the Lord was already telling me to go out and spread His word, but I prolonged my task another two years. Those two years turned out to be very bad for me. My business slumped terribly, until I could not tell anymore what I was giving my family to eat, or where it came from. Finally, feeling that my God was sending me a deadline, I told Norma Liongoren, who had been asking me to join her artists' bible study for two years, that I would go. So I did, in 1995, and again, experienced one miracle after another; the business perked up, I cannot even remember how.

Ecstatic once more, I came home one day from this bible study, seated myself on my late father's swivel chair in my office, thought about how kind God was to me, raising my hands in praise of Him, and immediately, without planning or meaning to, spoke in tongues. My tongue came out twisting and gyrating, in high and singsong pitch, words that I could not make out as I closed my eyes and raised my hands, in swift simultaneity asking for His forgiveness, thanking Him for all my blessings, telling Him how great He was, how much I loved Him, and much, much more than I could ever express in ordinary words.

This is not the last trance that I experienced alone in my room. Another time, again after a bible study, I was standing in front of the air conditioner when I suddenly raised my right hand, speaking in tongues. In my mind's eye I saw the figure of Jesus swathed in white linen, rising up to heaven. I was reaching out to Him, asking Him to take me, trying to catch His hand, so He could draw me up with Him. But He continued to rise fast, expressionless, not even looking down at me, rapt in His own ascension. I did not manage to catch Him.

After that, I felt the urge to fast. The message seemed to be that I should purge myself of all the dregs in my body and soul, *katawan at kaluluwa*, dregs buried deep down in my being, *lâlim*, dregs that were bothering my *budhî*. The Tagalog words, of course, come only now, after studying Covar and Dagmang, but they more than adequately express what I felt then.

The fast was to last three days. I felt exceedingly fine after it, having done all that had been prescribed through the stories I heard from other born again Christians. After that, I tried to fast again, but this time I could manage only one day at a time. I learned sometime after that one must fast only when the Holy Spirit says so; otherwise, instead of emptying one's body for the Holy Spirit to come in, one may just leave oneself open to the entry of malevolent spirits.

I was to discover, too, that the Holy Spirit does not reside permanently in one's body just because one has been born again, and despite the fact that one has fasted. I still had to deal with my demons, the nasty little spirits that infested my soul because of the life I had lived, and the beliefs that came with it. The message that came through during my fast

was that I would live five more years, after which something that I could not quite understand would happen to me.

The year was 1995. I thought I would die by the year 2000, so I had to hurry up and write the novel that God told me to do before that year came by.

All these experiences I recounted to my bible study. They appreciated them no end, but could not offer me anything more than I could myself feel. Among born again Christians, communication with God is personal, and unless one has been assigned by God to become a prophet for someone in particular, whether for one instance or for a prolonged period, one cannot just butt in on an ongoing conversation.

Having experienced speaking in tongues by myself, I again felt free to do it in public. I started to “loosen” my tongue while in service, as I was advised to do by the more “advanced” in my bible study, and sure enough I was able to come out with the lilted words that even I could not understand, but could comprehend deep in my heart. Once, at one session of my bible study where we had listened to a female artist I had met while I was underground talk about her personal problems and her experience with Buddhism (she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown), two in our group, the other being me, started speaking feverishly in tongues. Once she had left the two of us interpreted what we had said. It turned out that we had both felt the demons resident in our friend, and were speaking in tongues to protect ourselves, and the group, from them.

Tongues, I learned from my bible study, was the language of angels, the speech through which one communicates with the Holy Spirit one’s innermost thoughts. At the same time, it is also the Holy Spirit itself, telling one what to say.

Today, I am in the year 2000. In 1999, I began to get worried because I had one year to go, and yet had not added to the first two chapters of my novel, which I had started way back in 1989. By the beginning of the year 2000, however, everything became clearer. The novel that I was supposed to finish was not the novel of my life that I was writing, but the life itself that I held. The three-day fast that I had gone through in 1995 was only the beginning of my cleansing. In 1996, a few days before she joined her Creator, my mother had seen me kiss my son with feeling for the first time. It was the signal for her to go. But it took me four more years to reconcile myself with my role as a mother to my son, and to work out my own celibate sexuality. The birth of his daughter in 1999 eased my full reconciliation with him and with myself. By the start of the year 2000, I had emptied myself of my little demons, giving all my inner space totally to the Holy Spirit. I had gone full circle; my life was complete.

It is a belief among Filipino born again Christians that one’s face reflects the state of one’s soul. I have heard this not from formal sermons, but from everyday talk among the faithful. Thus, in more doctrinal terms, one can discern a person with problems. Some pastors, like Pastor Jarren, have the gift of the spirit of discernment. He can tell who in his congregation, during a service, feels some ailment, or is troubled. He also has the gift of prophecy. He can tell these people what God wants them to do. This is because he has attained the highest fruit of the gifts of the Spirit, which is Love. Having done so, he can reach out to others, read in their faces the reflections of the state of their souls, and by calling on the name of Jesus, invoke the powerful Holy Spirit to cast away whatever wicked spirits are bothering those souls.

Does my face reflect the state of my soul? Is there in it the love that I feel for my fellows? These are questions that I, being not only a born again Christian but a Filipino, don't even have to ask myself, for I know.

Conclusion

In separating framework from ethnographic account, I hope to have made my point clearer. The only real objection that born again Christians have to the word "trance," once the meaning of the word and its practice in the Philippines has been dissected, is its having to do with evil spirits. But once it is made clear that only the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit alone, has the right of entry to human bodies, trance is certainly what born again Christians experience during praise and worship services, bible studies, healing sessions, as well as alone by themselves in communion with God.

But this is not the main point of this essay. My main point is that, within the phenomenon of relatively new born again Christianity that was brought to the Philippines in the 70s by American missionaries, Filipino culture has already wrought some significant changes, aligning it with its own system of beliefs, subtly but ineluctably. The Holy Spirit that to American born again Christians could only be "touched," because the preacher alone, with his gifts, has the power to harness it, when it reached Philippine shores began to be admitted into multitudinous warm bodies, there to move as the wind does, "[blowing] where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth." (John 3:8) The raising of hands that to American born again Christians signifies the act of reaching out to Heaven, with a capital H, where God resides, became, as soon as it was transmuted to Filipino bodies, an opening up of these bodies in surrender, so that the Holy Spirit, which is just floating around, could enter them, and hopefully reside there. One can verify this by observing how American born again Christians raise their hands in their services, as contrasted to how Filipino born again Christians raise theirs, here in their Philippine churches.

John Phelan, writing in 1959 about the Hispanization of the Philippines, was to my mind almost awed to note that the practices brought by the Spaniards to the Philippines were as much indigenized as they were Hispanized, if not more so.

Juan Francisco, writing in the sixties up to 1971 about foreign, specifically Indian, elements in folk literature, stressed that

what is on the surface recognizable as foreign may turn out, after further consideration of the problems involved in this type of study, to be local in origin and/or development or local developments which in the course of long, mutual influences across the ages may have traveled to the Indian terrain and later on were exported back to these islands but now clothed in Indian garments. xxx ...Cultural elements undergo changes as they get incorporated into a host culture to fit into its accepted patterns of literary tradition. This perhaps happened in Philippine folk literature where it has become impossible to say that this or that element was borrowed from or was influenced by another culture, (Francisco 128-9)

pointing, in the light of his other studies in the same book, to the strongly assimilative character of Philippine culture.

In conclusion, it would therefore not be entirely preposterous to use Dagmang's description of pre-Hispanic rituals, changing only some words, to describe present Filipino born again Christian practices.

In many [born again] rituals of healing, *sapi* ... [is] common. In this *sapi* ritual the [pastor] [is] supposed to be [guided] by [the] benevolent [Holy Spirit] who brings blessings and healing to sick people. Prayers and [praises] [are] the normal offerings to the benevolent [Holy Spirit] who is supposed to be more powerful than malevolent [spirits]. Within these [praise and worship services] people ... also ask the [Holy Spirit] other favors like protection of their crops from locusts or their lives from the dangerous *buwaya* that inhabit their rivers. In the people's gatherings in a [*sambahan*], there actually [are] ... [spontaneous prayers], [songs] or a drama, where the [Holy Spirit] and the people touch each other in propitiation and healing carried out through the [leadership] of the [pastor]. (After Dagmang 1994: 9)

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