

# POPULAR SPIRITUALITY AS CULTURAL ENERGY

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Let me start with a few personal notes, hoping that in the process I could slide slowly into my topic of "Popular Spirituality as Cultural Energy". First of all, I am happy to be back in UST. This is my alma mater. I started here in biochemistry because I wished to become a scientist. The other side of me, however, wanted to become a priest. Although in theory I could combine both scientist and priest within the same body, I shifted to philosophy for personal reasons. This philosophical turn provided me with the rubrics of asking a lot of questions and celebrating at least a few answers.

Secondly, I am happy that the Carmelites are sponsoring this forum. One of my favorite poetic works is my Tagalog translation of the famous *Noche Oscura* written by St. John of the Cross. I am now working on another one of his beautiful, powerful, mystical poems, *Qué Bien Sé Yo la Fuente que Mana y Corre*. These poems initiate me into a form of spirituality that does not shy away from sensuous imagery.

My third note is about my body. I am actually sick right now. As a matter of fact, I brought the Magnetic Resonance Image (MRI) of my spine to get a second opinion. My doctors in Davao could not pin down exactly what was happening. One doctor says it is this so and so disease. Another one smiles and reveals that that disease is only for teen-agers! What is most interesting here is how my anesthesiologist sees my sickness. "You know why we could not understand your sickness?" she asks. She answers her own question, "It is because it's not really a physical sickness. You are just under spiritual attack, because you're doing works for the indigenous peoples, and now you have a Cancer support group. You're also teaching in Davao as well as in Cagayan de Oro. You give talks here and there. The evil spirit just wants you to stop all this good work." And this is a medical specialist speaking!

This leads me to my last note. When I talk about popular religiosity or popular spirituality I do not think simply of the ordinary folks. Even our scientists and professionals share a lot in common with the so-called ordinary folks when it comes to religiosity. I would like to invite you, then, to reflect with me on this wonderful thing which is all around us---popular religiosity. My message is simple: popular religiosity, or better still, popular spirituality, is a form of cultural energy. I shall elaborate of this concept by and by.

My presentation now has three parts. I begin by sharing with you my own personal engagement in this popular spirituality. Then I shall offer a description of the patterns that I see in this spirituality's cultural expression. The third part is a political challenge to popular practices. I hope, then, to be able to theorize a little on the concept of cultural energy.

## II. DIVINING OUR CULTURAL SPRINGS

I start from my own experience. In this section, I recall and relish a few personal experiences that gave birth to my reflections on popular spirituality. I consider them as cultural springs, connoting an inner dynamism whose value could only be enhanced by highlighting them in an appreciative conversation.

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## 1. Dancing with my folks in Obando, Bulacan

I was born in Cagayan de Oro, but when I was nine months old the family moved to Bulacan. Obando. *Doon nagsasayaw ang mga walang anak. Puwede rin pong humingi ng asawa, pero kapag mali ang indak, anak agad ang ibibigay. Kung gusto ninyo pong magpaturo ay pumunta kayo sa akin.* (There, people would offer dances especially those who ask for a child. One can also ask for a partner in life, however, one must be sure that there's nothing wrong with the way he/she dances, or else a child will be given. Those who want to learn the dance you may approach me). So that's what you call fertility dance in Obando. The town fiesta is three days: May 17, 18, and 19. But I don't like the term fertility dance. Why? Because there is more to it than asking for pregnancy. I know of people who there for healing all kinds of sickness. It has expanded its miracles apparently because of globalization! If a couple has no kids and they are in the United States or Saudi Arabia, and they could not come here for the town fiesta, they could send text messages to their relatives or friends. Their relatives or friends could dance as their proxy, provided that the couple abroad would "also dance out there". Even if it's midnight in the US or in Saudi Arabia, they should dance. God, as it were, will understand.

Why do I tell you about my beloved Obando? Because it is one source of my rootedness in popular religiosity. When I was in high school I was very active in promoting the dance in Obando, promoting it simply as a tourist event. So we would conduct seminars. We would invite photographers from ABS CBN to document the thing. But when I was in theology, I thought maybe I should join my folks in dancing---for a change. I left the camera. I left the tourists. I joined my folks in the streets. So the tradition is to have a procession without candles. Instead, people dance around two barrios. What happened? During that time I was very much moved. I was in tears especially when we finally went back inside the church and everybody was singing, swinging and, of course, sweating.

*"Santa Clara, pinong-pino,"* (Most Pure, Saint Claire) people repeatedly sang. In the beginning, I was too shy to move. But I saw couples wanting to get children. In the beginning they were also shy. But as we processed, we were all put in a trance. Something happened, something moved us through the body that also moved us through the community and through the color and the sounds. We were touched. And I said to myself, now I understand why this thing will not die. There is something immortal in this practice. There is something spiritual here. I wonder whether the many people, including the priests who had worked in Obando really understood it.

## 2. Dining with Agusanon-Manobo hosts

The other experience I can recall now is my encounter with a Manobo tribe in Agusan del Sur. From Davao I took a bus, around eight hours of bumpy trip to Esperanza. I then took another long jeepney ride to a center. And from there we took a *habal-habal* (a motorbike that loads seven passengers). Finally, we got to the tribal area. In a small hut, we squatted on the bamboo floor. There was simple food. For several minutes, we looked at each other. 'Well, shall we pray?' somebody asked. 'Maybe we should pray', somebody else answered. 'Why?' 'Because there is a priest around.' 'Wait a minute', I asked them. 'What is your tradition here?' Then Datu Makalipay explained:

*Padre dinhi, dili na man kami nagaampu.* So we don't pray here before eating. It's like this. When we clear the land we pray to the spirits. When we sow the seeds, we call upon the invisible caretakers of the plants to bless the seeds. When we harvest our

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crops, we perform the proper thanksgiving rituals in honor of Megbavaya. So when the food comes before us, it's already blessed.

I must admit that after so many years in the seminary, taking up graduate courses in philosophy and theology, I felt both humbled and privileged to be learning so much from this people. Our prayer before meals then appeared to me quite superficial. Maybe that is the only thing we can do to bless the food, because we have nothing to do with the production of food. We do not have that intimate relation with the land.

### **3. Crossing from the Quiapo procession on my way to a hunger strike**

When I was director of the Archdiocese of Manila Labor Center, I had a chance to visit a group of teachers who were going on a hunger strike. They were hosted by the Aglipayan Church along Taft Avenue. On my way to Taft, I had to stop at Quiapo Church, because there was heavy traffic caused by the procession in honor of the Black Nazarene. It was a sea of people, almost all of them males. It is well known sociological fact that during Nazareno procession, the police do not have problems with pickpockets. They are all there participating in this peculiarly macho devotion to the suffering Christ. Devotees push and elbow each other trying to get hold of the rope that connects them to the source of their strength and forgiveness and healing. Some wear T-shirts with the color of Nazareno image. During that visit, I said to myself, there is something special here. I called it energy.

And then I went to the hunger strikers. There was a traditional wooden cross, with some lettering on it indicating poverty, hunger, oppression and all kinds of violations of human rights making the cross even heavier. I said, these are very Christian people and one of them was my teacher in high school. I wondered why they were very few. Why is it that this politically correct activity had no energy, whereas that devotion in Quiapo had plenty of energy, though the latter would probably not change the social structures of society? Is there a connection, or disconnection in the practices of popular religiosity? Can they be translated into political action? Can the direction and division of political actions be used to direct the energies in popular religiosity. I really had no answers but I had very real questions. I am telling this to you because I want to invite you to co-think with me. Co-feel with me.

### **4. Cultural regeneration in Mount Apo**

Finally, I add here my fieldwork in Mt. Apo where I stayed for one and a half years. I made the study of the conflict of culture, environment, development, ethics and politics in Mt. Apo National Park where the Philippine government built a geothermal power plant at the heart of its remaining rainforest. My study is published as a book, *Generating energies in Mount Apo: Cultural politics in a contested environment*. There I was witness to the movement of a family who refused to work with the protest movement even as they had serious apprehensions with the power development project. They wanted their own movement, a family reunion movement. They said they wanted to renew their culture because the culture in their sacred mountain has been bulldozed by development, but they wanted to do that through kinship ties. If we could revive our culture through family reunion there would be other families and clans will follow. Then the whole tribe will be regenerated. Then we would be strong enough to face other political issues in Mt. Apo.

What started as a simple family reunion grew into a decent social movement that recently claimed more than three thousand hectares of Mt. Apo National Park in favor of the Obo Manobo inhabitants. Again, I thought, there was something here in the inner resources of the

people that cannot simply be reduced to resistance. This what I call cultural energy is also power, but it is a power not meant to dominate nor to resist but creatively for a people to become themselves. I suggest there is something spiritual here as well.

## II. SPIRITUAL PATTERNS OF OUR CULTURAL PRACTICES

What can we glean from the foregoing search for the spiritual in the cultural? Spirituality has always been difficult to define. At the heart of the notion of spirituality, however, is the people's search for the sacred, for a transcendent dimension to life, for something that gives people meaning in their lives, something that ennobles them to think of and be concerned about a higher cause, something that offers them inner connection and deeper purpose in life, something that helps them celebrate life and existence.

From the data of my experience--I would not claim empirical precision here--I discern at least four spiritual dimensions of our cultural religious practices. I call them spirituality of the body, spirituality of the many, spirituality of celebration and spirituality of negotiation. There is no claim here of exhaustive listing. Let me not waste time being apologetic for my observation.

### 1. Spirituality of the Body

Much of our popular religious practices reflect a spirituality of the body. What does it mean? How do people experience their contact with the divine? It seems that the mediation we have in the contact with the Divine is not Dogma, it's not doctrine, and it's not true statements, but a kind of an experience that is bodily. Don't accuse me of forgetting the spirit. My earlier book *"Tao Po Tuloy: Isang Landas ng Pag-unawa sa Loob ng Tao"* is about human being's loob or relational interiority. But even this interiority is embodied interiority. *Walang loob kung walang katawan. Ang katawan ay pangangatawan ng loob.* (There is no interiority if there is no body. The body is the external structure of the interiority). Now, you notice that in many of our practices we use the body. People speak about healing. People say, "I was healed." "I was touched." That is how we experience the sacred.

I must confess that like most Catholic priests, I am a bit reluctant to proclaim Jesus as a healer, especially as healer of the body. Normally Catholic priests would resort to inner healing, healing of forgiveness. An average priest would be shy in doing what the Lord does. In contrast, Jesus really heals our physical pain. I'm praying to the Lord, right now, that He would heal my back pain. I'm having this pain right now, as I talk to you. The past week I had terrible pain. The week before that, I was scheduled to introduce a symposium on pain for cancer patients. When I talked, I gained some confidence. When I talked about pain, I realized that I really have to ask the Lord to heal me, not just interiorly, but heal me in my lower back spine, to change the result of my x-ray. And now I understand better why people would flock to healers, to El Shaddai, to the evangelists--which many priests would dismiss. But people are bodily. Even if they want inner healing, they also want body healing. And that is why popular religiosity is a spirituality of the body.

As we speak about touch, we can also speak about dance and other body movements. I go back to my experience of dancing in Obando. My Obando folks would not pass our theological exams, but I know that in their own peculiar way, they are in contact with God. It is pity that our Catechetical instruction misses this point. In our parochial high school, the Obando religious experience is not part of religion textbook. The same sad fate is true of the

Bicol devotions. When Our Lady of Peñafrancia is processed, the whole Naga City comes alive in a colorful devotion. And yet, nothing of this spirit occupies a page in our religious instruction. In the seminary, we mouth all this rationalist Cogito, I think therefore I am. But there could be other approaches to existence: I dance, therefore I am. We dance, therefore, we collectively exist and live as Christians. We wear colorful hats, therefore, we are alive in our faith. We shake our bodies, we sweat, and we feel the hurt and we feel the healing, and that is how we experience the Divine. My mother would always tell me, when you come back here, please bring *lana* or oil for my aching back, *yung bendisyunan mo*, ( Being blessed) etc. Many of us have been healed in this kind of spirituality but we have been de-inculturated by our own convents or seminary, by our formators and formation programs.

Some people say they do not understand Filipinos who, in their physical fatigue, still insists on walking on their knees when they pray. Why do they impose physical hardship on their bodies. I suggest this is explain by realizing that even their language is bodily. The body is a language. *'Yung kanilang buhay ay buhay ng katawan. 'Yung kanilang sarap, pagod, at pahinga ay sa katawan din, di ba?* (Their life is the life of their body. Their happiness, fatigue and rest is their body, right?) That is their language. That is how they communicate.

In addition, bodies are connected with things. How often have I heard derogatory remarks, criticizing the commercialization of shrines and pilgrimage areas. With a tone of arrogance, some people lament the proliferation of souvenir stalls around famous grottos and shrines. Perhaps what they should worry about is the shabbiness of the stalls. Their existence, however, should not necessarily mean a diminishment of spirituality of those who simply want to take home a material icon that connects them with the sacred site. *Sasabihin nila ano ba namang klase ginawa na lang commercials itong shrines, itong mga grotto, and dami-daming mga tindahan.* (There are some who commented on the commercial stores sprouting around the shrines, grotto.) To them I say, if you do not have stores around these sacred sites, then expect to lose the leaves and the twigs and the pebbles in the area. It is like attracting people to a shrine and providing no toilets. You are abstracting the spirit from the body. People are instinctively moved to bring with them something tangible, something they could touch or hold or drink or apply to or wrap around their bodies even when they leave the place. They would also want to share something concrete with their loved ones who were not able to go with them and who certainly wish to have at least a memento from that spiritual destination in order to share the spiritual experience. They know who human beings are. *Ang ganda nitong espirtualidad ng karaniwang tao!* (How beautiful such spirituality of the ordinary people).

Pilgrimages are also expressions of this spirituality of the body. The million of people who annually hike several kilometers to Antipolo normally bring food and even tape recorder. (Even some members of Iglesia ni Kristo join the lively event!). Some would dismiss it by saying, "Ano bang klaseng pilgrimage yan? Parang picnic!" Pero ano gusto mo? Pagpunta mo doon mahihimatay ka sa gutom? Parang seminar na walang meryenda. O hindi ba, hindi makatao? Sometimes we lose the logic of the ordinary people. Pilgrimages, with food and music, indeed belong to that spirituality of the body that does not negate the spirit. As a matter of fact, it celebrates it. Actually we host the spirit in our bodies that are alive, in elbow to elbow relationship with fellow human beings. Ang ganda!

## 2. Spirituality of the Many

A second dimension of popularity is that of being spirituality of the many. By this I mean that the Filipino approach to the divine follows quite closely our family and communal existence.

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We do not seem to have developed a tradition of individuals praying by themselves. We prefer to be with others, in masses, processions, novenas, passion plays, funeral wakes, and more recently, in huge transparochial crowds, with all the singing and the clapping of hands. Have you seen a little child, cupping his forehead, saying, "Who am I"? It is a little weird. In the same way, it would be a little weird for a Filipino to be alone in deep meditation. Whenever I did that at the back of the parish church in Cotabato, some people could not resist approaching me to ask if I had a problem! It is not very common in Filipino literature or in popular films to see the main actor, in tense psychological search for his identity. We do not have the Indian tradition of squatting and closing one's eyes, and contemplating for hours on just a single word or image. Filipino faithful would rather join a group of people lighting candles, or a long line of floral offering, or squeeze their way into a crowd of devotees.

In the seminary, we have the opposite. We pray in designated corners, with all the technologies of silencing our senses. Dim light, air-conditioned chapels, refined flower arrangement, and with matching instrumental music. I have no problem with this prayer technologies, except when as a result of the developed habit, the religious sometimes tend to look down on the religious practices of their grandparents. *Naiingit nga ako sa mga ordinaryong tao, namumuhunan sa kandilang ginagamit nila sa pagdarasal. Masaya at seryoso sa pagsali sa prusisyon sa harap ng mga tao. Nakikipaglamay sa patay. Nakikikain sa paglalamay. May tulungan sa karaniwang buhay. May bayanihan sa pagdarasal.* (I felt jealous with the ordinary people, they invest themselves with the candles they use in praying. I'm enjoying and at the same time serious in joining the procession in front of the people attending a wake. Eating while attending the wake. People help one another in the ordinary experiences in life. Helping one another is also present in prayer.)

*Dapat may kasama.* A person always has to have a companion. The sick are supposed to be under the care of the nurses in the hospital, and yet we still post a sister or a parent to sleep beside the sick to keep her company. Even the dead is not allowed to be left alone. During wakes, the well-lighted place is never without visitors. We want to be together and that is our form of worship. Somehow we do not go in heaven one by one. I was in London when Lady Diana died. In the morning of the funeral, Bombo Radio invited me to go on the air in the Philippines to cover the burial ceremonies of the English fair lady. During the broadcast, I received a lot of phone calls from Iloilo, Cagayan de Oro, Naga, and other places. One dominant question was the Royal family's gesture toward the dead. Why does the royal family not grieve over Diana? I checked said why they got that impression. It was because the royal family would not even look at Lady Diana. I had to explain that their tradition was very different. In the Philippines, when we visit the dead, we look at the face, "*Ah ang ganda ng make-up*". (How nicely the make-up had done) The dead becomes a text for communication, for gossip, interpretation. Why is she not smiling? It is because one of the children in Saudi Arabia has not arrived yet. If, on the following day, the dead seemed to smile, it is because the daughter has arrived, bringing some gifts, and other things. We relate even to the dead. That is why during All Saints Day and All Souls Day, the memorial park becomes a picnic ground. We form communities and we maintain relationships.

Of course, the quintessential manifestation of this community-building and community-transforming spirituality is best seen in fiestas where local people play host to strangers, both praying and shopping, engaged in sacred and the profane at the same time, and together. More recent forms of ecclesial formation challenge the standard parish-based communities under the control of the parish priest. The El Shaddai transparochial communities, for example, should not be seen as a transgression of the traditional Church structure but as an extension of the communal expression of the popular religiosity. And if the development of

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Information Technology could make us one big community, so be it. Ours is a spirituality of the many, not the soloist.

### 3. Spirituality of Celebration

Very much connected with the spirituality of the many is the spirituality of celebration. We celebrate harvest, planting, birthing, and dying. We are at home even with the wildness of the fiesta. In the frenzy of people going in all directions, we somehow know what to do. And we can even make a virtue out of this apparent chaos. "*Ang magulo ay masaya.*" (Chaos is enjoyable) Many times I get this expression of concern. "Father, you look very tired. You should take some time off and relax. Come to the house, the kids are there." Ha? Relax with the kids? For many families, "*Masaya ang magulo.*" (How enjoyable chaos is) We celebrate the free movement of persons.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is with food. We celebrate the presence of all the menus. Everything is there. All the dishes at the same time. In other cultures, they tend to separate the soup from the meat, main dish from the desert. We would rather have everything on the table, and enjoy them in any sequence. Other cultures adopt a kind of science of serving. We enjoy the art of mixing them up. Hence, our *sapin-sapin*, *sinigang*, *pinakbet*, *halu-halu*. Everything is celebrated together.

Let me just tell one story of this celebration, which has reference again to eating. During one Philippine Independence Day celebration, I said mass in the London cathedral. After the mass, what do you expect the Filipinos to do? Eat. There were loads and loads of food and also loads of leftover because people brought more food than they could consume. They also expected to bring home a little bit. Why? Because even those who did not able to attend could and should also partake of the event. What happen after the mass? I went home. Then a car ran after me. And my superior, a British Jesuit, author of books, and supposed to be a good theologian, opened the door. "This is for Fr. Alejo", the people said, laying a basket full bananas and other fruits. "Why? It is not his birthday." "But we have mass."

Then my superior confronted me. "Albert, why do you perpetuate this feudal relationship?" That question made me speechless. "You know your people are poor, why do you allow them to waste their money buying food for their priest?" I had to run to his room to argue. I said, look, we had our independent day. We celebrate our independence from our colonizers. Part of that celebration is the Holy Mass. In our tradition, this will not be complete without big feast. Now part of the leftover brought by the people are distributed to the different houses. They simply wanted to make sure that I brought home a few things. Is that feudal relationship? In the Philippines, our priests are in close contact with the people. Here you produce more theology books than Church goers." I knew I was being rough, but he added something more.

"Sorry for my ethnocentrism." Now, that's not my word. I drove home my point. "Last week, you shared with me your essay, your theological reflection on the kingdom of God as banquet. And I enjoyed reading it because it resonated with our experience and practice. Why can't you see that we are living out, what you writing about?" After all this feasting, we still do not have a theology of eating, of *salu-salu* (Eating together). Nobody seems to consider this gustatory celebration could be a source of theological inspiration. Theology in the Philippines is missing a lot when it refuses to recognize the spirituality of celebration.

#### 4. Spirituality of Negotiation

Another characteristic of our popular spirituality is the prevalence of what, for what of a better term, "negotiation". What do you mean by that? Originally, I would go call it a religion of struggle. Of course the liberation theologians will be happy about that. But I think, the proper term is negotiation. It connotes haggling, a kind of give and take bargaining, something that we often see in ordinary flea markets. This is probably why our Tagalog term for forgiveness "patawad" is derived from the "tawad" which is the rootword also for "tawaran", the art of asking for a bargain.

I am reminded of a simple case. At the back of our Jesuit house, there is a small but very lively evangelical group. I have only one problem with their proximity. I cannot get my precious peace and quiet on Saturdays and Sundays, because their loud speakers directed right toward my room. And every weekend they would rebuke many spirits. "In the name of Jesus, I command you, Out! Out!" I wonder how many devils they rebuke every weekend, and yet the spirits apparently have not diminished.

In contrast, I have witnessed many tribal rituals. In the mountains, there are also many spirits, some benevolent, some malicious, and some simply hungry. What do the tribal baylans do? In different forms, in different ways, they would reserve some food for the malignant spirits. "There is food for you here. Please don't bother us because we are going to have a special event. Please, do not go beyond this line." This "pasintabi" has many names in different ethnic groups. The idea is that we negotiate with the spirits. We don't shout at them. We don't rebuke them. I think that, in general, that is a better way to deal with spirits. This approach could be more fruitfully applied to negotiating with so-called and so-labeled "evil groups" in society. I know a university professor who is very astute in contemporary intellectual discourse, and yet he professes to be "a Catholic" precisely because in the ordinary faith life of the people, those who find solace in the image, for example of the Sto. Niño, religion allows for negotiation and even re-negotiation.

Our description here is far from romantic. There can be something sad about this. Consider the result of a master's thesis that studied the perception of God among the rich and the poor along the stretch of Katipunan Avenue in Quezon City. According to the results of the survey, the poor along Katipunan perceive God to be very far from them, whereas the rich feel God is accessible to them.. That's why the poor have to make so many sacrifices before God listens to them. It is apparently not enough to pray once; they have to have novenas, a series of nine days or nine weeks of unbroken devotion. Based on the people's experience, we human beings do not command the Lord to give us immediately what we want. We have to haggle. We combine official and non-official practices to achieve our spiritual goal. This seems to be a common experience.

I invite you then to reflect on these traits of popular spirituality. It is a spirituality of the body not of abstracted essence of the spirit. It is a spirituality of the many, not of the soloist individual. It is a spirituality of celebration, and never of denial of the self or of the world. It is also a spirituality of negotiation, not of dogmatic do's and don'ts. I am sure you could add a few other traits. This is not mean to be an exhaustive list. Now, shall we then theologize based on these typologies? My suggestion is no, at least not yet.

### III. THE POLITICS OF POPULAR SPIRITUALITY

We have to accept the fact that popular spirituality, as expressed in cultural practices, is also politicized. This means it is also a realm of power, of cooperation and contestation. For a start, popular spirituality may serve as an idiom of social transformation. For example, during the revolution of Katipunan, the *Pasyon* or the Bible translated in popular Tagalog verse and chanted in public provided the idiom of social advocacy against foreign domination. Instead of “*taming*” (shield/defense) the Filipinos for conversion, it offered a liberating image of Jesus Christ. The Jesus of the *Pasyon* was a humble man who was no stranger to pain. But he was on the side of righteousness. And being righteous, he had the right to be considered as better and purer than the most powerful political, and uneven ecclesiastical figures of the time. Jesus then became an exemplar for an idiom social critique. The text of the *Pasyon* circulated around. Chanting it in neighborhoods and *visitas* (small village chapels) became a venue for conscientization. The whole spiritual experience, mediated by shared symbols and language, flowed like an undercurrent that overturned the people’s social consciousness.

I believe we have witnessed something similar during the People Power revolution at EDSA in 1986. The people felt empowered to bring the symbols of their everyday religious practices like the images of Mama Mary, the rosary, Sto. Niño, in facing the lethal tanks of the military. They also staged a revolution while literally having picnic. They brought food and music player and they listened to the radio. They walked around visiting friends and making new friends. They prayed and sang together. It was, at least for the entire world watching them on TV, a strange way of facing and phasing out a dictatorship.

This display of the power of everyday forms of spirituality as applied to political transformation confused the leaders of the ideological left. I was in Davao during the EDSA revolution. I was teaching the High School but I was also working with the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines. Five detainees were under the custody of the Jesuits. I used to accompany the five during weekends. I remember very clearly their confusion when Marcos was dethroned and Cory Aquino took over. Cory started freeing political prisoners. But some of my friend detainees initially refused to be freed. They could not accept the fact that the revolution happened in a totally different way that they envisioned. How could rosary-wearing and flower-waving ordinary noncombatants oust a dictator? These ordinary people with their everyday spiritual practices did not figure at all in any political spectrum. The event was simply out of their political scenario. And the use of the vernacular forms of piety, instead of the revolutionary instruments of war, was totally unexpected. “*Hindi puwede!*” (not permissible) They thought that change was possible only through struggle using arms, not charms. The 1986 people power revolution, however, revealed the latent energy in popular spirituality.

We must realize, however, that these popular religious practices can also be politicized in the sense of being manipulated. For example, in a town fiesta, we must realize that although it is a very beautiful thing, is also an arena of infra or intra-politics. There is the politics of who is going to finance the procession. Where should the procession pass by? Sometimes one wealthy family dictates that the procession should pass by their house because they paid for the candles. In Obando, one rich woman paid for the renovation of the chapel, donated the marble for the altar, and installed electric fans. But she also put grills around the area and padlocked the whole chapel. If you wish to pray in the chapel, you have to ask permission from her in her house!

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The EDSA Shrine is another example. The people power revolution was the revolution of the many. Different kinds of symbols were there. All of a sudden, when the dictator has fled, there was this hegemonic presence of one symbol, a statue, sculpted by an artist who was commissioned by a prelate, apparently without proper consultation with other stakeholders. It was meant to synthesize all symbols. Many people did not like it. After several debates, a new shrine rose from another corner of the historic highway. So you have two shrines at EDSA. Symbols are quite important for collective consciousness, and they become objects of contestation of power. The climax of this politics of symbols was when the masses held a rally at EDSA shrine, some of our religious leaders dismissed the movement as “desecration”. It was a big insult to the poor coming from the supposed Church of the Poor.

The same thing is happening in Fort Pilar in Zamboanga. Fort Pilar used to be a common pilgrimage site for both Christians and Muslims. It still is, as a matter of fact. The Zamboanga city government officials, however, recently fenced the area and the ordinary Muslims are now less comfortable just dropping by. Public symbols and common spaces for popular religious practices continue to be a big temptation for the powerful to control. I am sure we can multiply cases like this based on our pastoral experience.

Some alternative theologians would defend popular religiosity against the hegemonic control of official Church doctrine and practice. They would offer to redeem the dignity of popular religiosity as “vengeance”, “vindication”, and even “tactical maneuver”, a kind of “weapons of weak” or “hidden transcripts” (to use James Scott’s famous phrases), vis-à-vis the dominant institutional Church. I think the intention of these authors is clear. But I think there is a danger in labeling these practices as resistance to the domination of the official religion. They are almost reduced to reaction, instead of being a peculiar way of being. That’s why my approach is to go to cultural energy so that we can at least be given a more nuanced approach, different from the vocabularies of power.

Certainly, there are other approaches to the affirmation of local knowledge. Take the Pedagogy of the Oppressed by the Brazilian Paulo Freire. It is a pedagogy that affirms the wisdom of the ordinary people, right? Teaching is participatory and not banking. But if you examine it more carefully, I think the presupposition is still the same: that the consciousness of the ordinary folk needs much rational input, and has to be liberated from this mythical consciousness into more analytical mode. I invite you to reflect on that. I believe Segundo Galilea, who is himself a respected liberation theologian, goes further than those who simply espouse Freire. He published a book here in the Philippines about popular religiosity, and he has much good to say about popular religiosity without labeling it as a resistance to institutional religion.

So this leads me to introduce the popular spirituality as cultural energy. In other words, what they like to do is to appreciate the call of this popular spirituality not they seen in it as dominant power always resisting the dominant power. I am introducing the word “energy” based on my experience to Mt. Apo to modify the new ones of idiom of power in political analysis.

Cultural energy is the people’s collective capability or desire to be themselves. Maybe I can quote here from my book (Alejo 2000):

“In this amazing, how those suffer sometimes generate energy not just for themselves but also for those who helped them. Scholars observed that at times unexpected creativity arises when subjugated people are set to have been crushed , new forms of knowledge are release,

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even new dances and songs come out, making new relations and definition of the world w/c are at least manageable if not normally feasible. History is re-interpreted funning the spurt of hope in the past. This reserve as strength, knowledge and imagination of cultural energy.

“Cultural energy seems to be what people need to collectively endure pain as well as to begin a protest or given to just sustain their existence. In this partly of what is shared where people sympathizers are around and partly what they generate from their own moral and cultural resources when the external allies have moved away. I supposed it could be associated with power and this is my point, but if cultural energy is related to power, it is more the power to will, whether than the will to power. The will to power is associated either with domination power over somebody or resistance power against somebody. The power to will is more on moral and spiritual on creative resource to be or to remain or at least become a people of self-confidence and self-affirmation. This is what ordinary people are ultimately trying to keep alive in the struggle against hopelessness.”

Now what I mean is I hope we do not see popular religiosity simply as a critique of the institutional religion. We have to appreciate that this is part of the struggle to be themselves. So when my Obando folk’s dance, it is not to criticize the parish priest, it is not to debunk the theology that we have in the seminaries. It is simply an expression of a particular way of being a human, a particular way connecting to the Divine. It is neither domination nor resistance. It is the energy to be themselves.

I can now see cultural energy as both fountain of meaning and a framework for action. So what do you mean by fountain of meaning and framework for action? It has something to do with meaning, not doctrine; not absolutely true statement, but meaning in the sense of the truths that help people to go on with life. It is also a framework for action in that it provides an interactive role for the self. So people refuse to be simply an object of study and or analysis; they go beyond being labeled as rebel to be controlled by the powerful, or a consumer who is considered always right. They have their agenda in their life.

The people of popular spirituality are a people with mixed motivation, with the struggle to find the way to go on with life, given the situation, given the powers, given the hierarchy. So it is a way of negotiating with the Divine, a way of celebrating who they are. Maybe in the discussion, we can go toward the challenge of social transformation. In what way can this popular spirituality be harnessed in the transformation of the society.

In the meantime, maybe I should stop here. Let me just appeal to all of us, just as I have appealed to myself: please let us give a serious attention to the way ordinary people are finding God. If we are serious about Jesus, we should be serious about the people he loves-- the poor, the ordinary people. If we are serious about the ordinary people, especially the poor, then we should also take their way of praying seriously. We should take their way of connecting to the Divine as seriously as we take our own way of connecting to the Divine. Thank you very much.