

Hesukristo superstar: Entrusted agency and passion rituals in the Roman Catholic Philippines

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In this article I draw from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2013 in San Pedro Cutud, a village located in the Philippine province of Pampanga. The focus is on the performance of the *Via Crucis y Passion y Muerte*, a passion play held there every year on Good Friday. Central to the play is the individual pursuit of *panata*, or divine pledge, by the cast of around forty actors, and particularly by the play's main protagonist: the Kristo, who is nailed to a cross in front of tens of thousands of spectators. In the first part, I describe how the cast engages in the production of a particular theatrical aesthetic that is coterminous with the embodied pursuit of their respective appeals for divine intervention. In the latter portion, I focus on the act of nailing as a context for the formation of intersubjective bonds of trust, or *tiuala ya lub*, between the Kristo, and his ritual associates. By describing how rituals of pain are premised upon the shareability and entrustedness of ritual agency, I situate the ethnographic data on passion rituals in relation to wider discussions about the anthropological turn to affect.

Keywords: Passion rituals, performance, empathy, trust, affect, Philippines

C'mon King of the Jews! I only ask things I'd ask any superstar. What is it that you have got that puts you where you are?

“King Herod's Song,” from Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970)

There is a place in the outer rim of the village of San Pedro Cutud where three full-scale crosses stand on a mound of soil and volcanic ash. Described in the Philippine media as “the Calvary of the Philippines” (Orejas 2005), it is here that thousands of spectators amass every Good Friday to witness arguably the nation's most popular passion play, one that culminates in the actual nailing to the cross of a local resident who has been referred to as the “Hesukristo superstar.”¹

Following one such nailing in 2011, the Kristo himself emerged from one of the medical recovery tents with both palms still wrapped in medical gauze. Almost immediately, he was surrounded by scores of journalists and reporters brandishing microphones and recorders of all shapes, sizes and elongations. All at once they asked him questions, most of which were variations on the theme of physical pain and its

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significance to the ‘true’ Christian message: *Does it hurt? How long does it take for your wounds to heal? Why do you do this? When will you stop? You want to be like Jesus, right?* “Yes, it hurts,” the Kristo patiently replied, “but I made a vow (*panata*) to follow Jesus . . . to give thanks to God. I really don’t know how long I’ll continue doing this, but I won’t stop until the vow I made to God is fulfilled.”

To be ‘like Jesus,’ –to personalise his suffering ordeal –has conventionally been extolled by the Filipino Roman Catholic Church as the standard to which all should aspire (Bautista 2014, 2015). Like the journalists that day, it may well be intuitive for any keen observer of passion rituals to inquire into how the Kristo’s ritual nailing relates to the pious ideals encapsulated in Thomas A Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ* (1494), a book so influential that it has been described as “the best-loved book of Christianity, after the Bible” (Chadwick 1999, xviii). But there is something more to this line of questioning than the journalistic impudence of asking the Kristo to justify the theological bases of his pain experience. Most lay Roman Catholics I have spoken to viewed rituals of voluntary pain with a great amount of skepticism, even while they can relate to the principles that motivate them. That is, while the Kristo’s wanting to be ‘like Jesus’ is reconcilable with a pious, Roman Catholic ideal, there are many who take issue with the incongruity between the ritual means (i.e. self-inflicted pain) and ritual intentions (of being like Christ). “One does not have to nail oneself to imitate Christ,” muttered one journalist amidst the litany of questions. A high-ranking Catholic cleric I consulted later qualified that “The early missionaries introduced rites of self-flagellation in the Philippines to emphasise the Passion, but we no longer condone this way of painfully mimicry. . . we are not meant to be so literal about it.” When the Kristo says that he will indefinitely subject himself to excruciating ritual pain, he is pressed to qualify his religious agency into an explicatory logic (*why do you do it?*). Time and again, the Hesukristo superstar is subjected to the symbolic violence of Herod’s interrogation: *What is it that you have got that puts you where you are?*

Anthropologists are inheritors of a tradition that, in seeking to determine not just what ritual is *about* but what it is *for*, channels themes that resonate with this interrogation. This is a discourse summed up by Sax, Quack and Weinhold who, in *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy* (2010), argued that scholars see ritual as “a problem,” not necessarily because the motivations of its protagonists are irrational or nonsensical, but because ritual action is deemed *ineffective* in achieving any practical, operational efficacies. In this paper, I confront the issue of incongruous and ineffective ritual action by arguing, with Stewart and Strathern (2014), that an understanding of ritual intent cannot be fostered by situating the actions of its protagonists on either side of the practical versus symbolic divide.

As the Kristo himself pointed out, the divine pledge that is channelled in ritual nailing is *by default* defined by a sense of indeterminacy in which not even the practitioner knows when or if rituals have been deemed to ‘work.’ Rather than seeking to contort this indeterminacy into a functionalist logic, I direct the discussion to the kinds of subjectivities and agencies that are cultivated in the process of conducting ritual. The questions that frame this discussion are: How are ritual intentions pursued

in and through deliberately stylised public performances? How does the stimulation of the body's physical and affective states correspond to the fulfillment of divine vows? How are bonds of intersubjectivity, for example of empathy or trust, formed in the process?

In the first part, I describe the Passion play in Pampanga, as a 'spectacular' arena in which the pursuit of ritual intentions is enacted in the public domain. I show how the ritual enactment of *panata*, or personal vows made to God, is 'braided', as performance theorist Schechter (1988) had put it, with the capacity of performers to project a performance aesthetic that conforms to script and choreographed stylised movements. In other words, I focus on how, in the pursuit of a vertical communion with the Divine, the demonstrative 'showing' component of ritual is crucial to 'doing' it properly.

The analytical turn that I make in the second section draws upon an approach by Susanna Rostas (1998), who made a distinction between 'performativity' and 'ritualization'. Whereas performativity refers to ritual actions done in relation to an audience, ritualisation is conducted without being cognizant of spectators (nor even conscious of its own ritual agency, as in ritual trance). Rather than assume, with Emile Durkheim (1965 [1915]), that the end function of passion plays is the cultivation of a broadly effervescent performance of sociality, or with Victor Turner (1969) who saw ritual as the facilitative context for an intense feeling of *communitas* among those bound together in liminality, I sharpen the focus to examine the more personal ritualisations that occur within the larger spectacle of passion play. I consider how the ritual agent's intentions (incongruous as they may seem) are pursued through the delegation of agency onto one or two 'trusted' facilitators. In so doing, I argue against the grain of a growing trend in 'religious affect' in which ritual intentionality is reductively defined in terms of sensory states that are ontologically prior to language and human cognition.² Instead, I argue that in being nailed, the body-in-pain manifests the ritual agent's conscious and deliberate cultivation of intersubjective, person-to-person bonds that are resonant with Kapampangan concepts of empathy and trust.

THE VIA CRUCIS AS SPECTACLE

The nailing of the Heskristo superstar is the culmination of a passion play formally entitled *Via Crucis y Pasion y Muerte* (*Way of the Cross, the Passion and Death*), but more popularly known as Via Crucis. The production crew in San Pedro Cutud involves about forty non-professional local residents, who have inherited their respective roles from relatives or close friends before them. Since the mid-1980s the production has been orchestrated by Allan Navarro, or simply "Direk," who oversees the production based on a script written his own grandfather in 1955. Wherever the cast members may be living (some work overseas) they come back 'home' during Semana Santa (Holy Week) to perform lines from the script, which unfolds as a series of short

skits in front of various residential homes, each designated as one of the fourteen stations of Christ's passion.

Towards midday on Good Friday the cast members, all in costumes provided by local donors and sponsors, move out onto the streets of the village from a compound in which they conduct rehearsals. By this time masses of people — from itinerant vendors, media, celebrities and government dignitaries — jostle with cars, tour busses and horse-drawn vehicles, congesting the already narrow streets of the village (Barker 1998; Tiatco and Bonifacio-Ramolete 2008). There are no barricades that separate the cast and the audience. In this frenetic context, the Via Crucis starts in earnest when actors and supporting crew are gathered by Direk in front of the Gethsemane station — the house of the Kristo himself, where the latter awaits in calmness for the rest of the troupe to arrive.

Although he has no dramatic role in the play, Direk too is dressed in a Roman tunic. This costume allows him to blend with the production aesthetic and enables him to circulate in close proximity to the performing cast. He casts a formidable presence, barking cues and instructions to the actors, as well as admonishing people to allow some breathing space for his cast. The actors playing Roman centurions (*hudjo*) effectively act as crowd control ushers by using the blunt-end of their spears to form a cordon around the actors. In this way, the Via Crucis is performed within a theatrical framing that is not demarcated by physical backdrops but by the bodies of cast members themselves.

All the performers deliver the lines from the original 1955 script in deeply emotive local vernacular. Lapel microphones — donations by the city government — broadcast their voices through speakers carried on lorries that follow the play. The play unfolds up to midday, during which the Kristo is captured by the *hudjo*, and taken to a makeshift stage in the village leisure centre where he stands trial facing Pilate and the two Pharisees. After being condemned to death, the *hudjo* manhandle Kristo and drag him towards another station at the entrance of the village where a heavy, full-scale wooden cross is hoisted onto his shoulder. Dragging the cross through the village, the Kristo makes a few designated stops to deliver lines — in the process meeting his mother Mary, along with Mary Magdalene and Veronica, who join the procession of actors which grows larger with each stop.

Although the drama follows a prescribed order of events, unscheduled stops are made as the Kristo falls to one knee in the course of his journey. While the play is suspended, the audience bursts through the centurion barricade towards the Kristo, who is fanned by all those surrounding him. Cold drinks are offered from random strangers, while still others surge through if for no other reason that to make contact with Kristo. Audience members seek to break through to touch the cast, the vicarious *compassio* with Christ's suffering shifting away in favour of a more strongly *intercorporeal* engagement. On one such occasion, in 2010, an elderly woman squeezed through the *hudjo* to wipe her handkerchief on the Kristo's body. From a purely observational standpoint, it would appear that the woman was personifying the Biblical role of Veronica, who in the Passion was so moved by pity at the sight of Christ that she

offered her own veil on which Jesus had wiped his face. Kristo later explained to me that he does not mind people trying to touch him: “We are all just trying to connect with God . . . [that lady] was merely performing her own panata.” Making contact with Kristo, including the efforts to defy the centurion borders, is an effort to forge a real immediacy with the suffering God, manifested in the performing bodies of the cast, and of the Kristo himself.³

After a while, the hudjo reassert their authority and once again demarcate the performance space with their spears. The Kristo resumes his journey, reciting lines on cue, as the surrounding crowd again jostles for proximity and prime position. By the time the troupe meets Simon the Cyrene, who momentarily takes Kristo’s cross, there is palpable sense of aghast and excited expectation as the first two centurions, on horseback, lead the troupe from the streets of the village into the area in which the crucifixion will take place. Steel barriers have been erected by local government to enable a clear path leading to the nailing mound, or *burol*, keeping at bay the thousands of spectators who have accumulated at this place. As the Kristo is led up the burol, he is stripped to the waist and forcibly pushed onto the dusty ground where he grimaces in despair. The cross that the Kristo had dragged across the village is thrown aside during the fracas and is discreetly dragged away by one of the crew. The Kristo is laid down on to a wooden cross that is already fastened to a custom-made steel contraption, which contains hinges that attach it firmly to the ground and allow it to be easily hoisted up from a lying position. On the cross, the Kristo lies motionless, seemingly deep in thought and prayer, before reciting a few more scripted lines. The lapel microphone remains fastened strategically onto his crown of thorns. His voice echoes through to the receptive thousands who bear the searing afternoon sun in anticipation of the climax of the unfolding drama.

In the moments before the nailing, isopropanol alcohol is poured onto the Kristo’s outstretched palms and onto his feet. The centurions stand on each side of him, the same two who have done so for the past few years, and begin inspecting and tracing the exact point at which the nails will be driven into his palms. The nails are extracted from a glass jar filled with sterilising liquid. An older centurion uses his hand to push the sharp tip of the nail firmly and decisively into a precise point in the Kristo’s outstretched flesh. At the point of insertion, the Kristo lets out a moan, audible through the lapel microphone. It is a shriek of pain that one might have been expecting to occur upon the strike of the hammer. Audiences would have little or no recognition of it. From their vantage point, they would not be able to perceive any corresponding action that would signify this sound as an exclamation of pain from the nailing. It is only after the nails have been pushed into his palms that the nailer takes the hammer and lifts it over his head with dramatic effect for the crowd to behold. He swings the hammer downward in a way that suggests the application of swift, blunt force. But the actual strike on the nail is but a few firm, precise taps to drive the nail deeper into the Kristo’s flesh and muscle, just enough for it to touch the wooden cross beneath. It is at this point that the audience lets out a collective yelp, probably imagining and vicariously experiencing what they presume to be a single, somewhat brutal stroke.

After his nailing, the Kristo is then fastened to the cross with a long white cloth that acts both as support and a tourniquet. His feet are placed on a wooden foot stand attached near the base of the cross. The centurions slowly and ceremoniously lift up the cross and, for a few moments, display the Kristo to a rapt and eerily silent audience. From this position, one of the centurions climbs onto the stool and positions two nails on the bit of skin separating the big toe and the second. With the hammer, he nails them through, eliciting a yelp of pain from the Kristo. When his feet are nailed, Kristo breathes deeply as he recites his remaining lines: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he bemoans in the Kapampangan vernacular, with clear strain on his voice. At the final moment, where Christ commits his own spirit to God, the Kristo delivers with more enunciation and volume before he hangs his head forward and seemingly passes out.

PANATA: A SHOWING OF A DOING

The Via Crucis that is performed in San Pedro Cutud emerges from the tradition of passion plays transplanted to the Philippines by Spanish missionaries, who sought to ingrain Roman Catholic liturgy through the dramatisation of the metanarrative of Christian salvation (Ileto 1979; Trimillos 1992; Blanco 2009). What was ceremoniously conveyed through the liturgy was in the plays manifested publicly through gestural and dramatic elaboration that communicated religious instruction to onlookers unversed in Latin.⁴ The format of the passion condenses the last days of Jesus into their most crucial events, and splits it into distinct stages for the purposes of encouraging a heightened reaction among an audience of spectators. The Via Crucis is the Passion *in actu*, a topographical mapping out that effectively sanctifies local domiciles as discrete stages of Christ’s ordeal. As a follower of the Stations of the Cross, the passion sequences preclude anyone from glossing over specific moments. Every stage of Christ’s suffering is deemed worthy of reverence and commemoration in its own right. The passion play is, as Xygalatas (2012) called it, a “high arousal ritual” that involves the stimulation of the viewing audience’s aesthetic sensibilities. Viewers and audiences are physically and viscerally thronged along with the play, caught in the kinesthetic momentum with the performers who move from station to station.

No formal Church authority is involved with the staging of the play. However, it was a sense of duty to the Church’s liturgical prescriptions that led to the development of the passion play as a devotional outlet in itself. Direk conveyed to me that the intention of his grandfather in writing the Via Crucis in 1955 was to encourage people to attend Mass during Holy Week, and thereby “use theatre to remind people that Jesus saves us no matter how hard our lives are.” In this sense, the Via Crucis can be considered a form of “archetypal liturgy,” described by Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) as rituals that seek to involve an audience in an accurate enactment of a set of stylised and formalised rites, including a communal performance of gestures, movements and utterances. Enhanced by the use of recognisable symbols and objects, the stylised features of the Via Crucis are “archetypal” since it draws from a range of

cultural and traditional resources to encourage particular pious practices, further reinforcing and expanding them through collective social behaviour.

As the production has grown larger over the years of its performance, however, there has been less of an emphasis on associating the Via Crucis with Church attendance. This has more to do with logistics rather than a shift in religiosity among the cast. “It’s too hard to go to Church, with so many people in the village, and so many things to take care of with the production,” explains Direk. In this sense, the production and performance itself serves as the conduit towards cultivating a *direct and personal* (rather than liturgical) relationship with God: “Yes, the Via Crucis is a performance,” says Direk, “but it is like we are talking to God at the same time anyway.”

Whether one has written the script or performs in the play, the Via Crucis is a “panata” - a vow or pledge to act in accordance with ritual obligations. There is a strong sense from the cast members that I have spoken to that each of them have their own panata, which, particularly during Holy Week, they needed to “perform well” by ensuring the quality and “dramatic effect” of reciting lines and the ‘authenticity’ of its material forms (costumes, paraphernalia props). The emphasis on the performativity of *panata* was corroborated by Direk, who, during the rehearsals that I attended, would emphasise above all the importance of vocal enunciation, intonation and the ‘sincerity’ (*pagka-sincere*) of recited dialogue as coterminous with ritual agency: “Each of [the actors] must respect that they are pursuing their own panata. So they have to perform it well.” This resonates with what Van Alphen, Bal and Smith referred to as “doing sincerity,” which requires not just a correspondence between inner thought and outer action, but a corporeal performativity in enacting a ‘theatricality of sincerity’ (2009, p. 16, see also Brown, this volume).

Panata is essentially a vertical relationship predicated upon what performance theorist Schechter called a “showing of a doing” (1988, 105), where the objective was for a ritual agent to channel religious agencies through stylised performances and commemoration in front of a viewing and appreciating audience.⁵ Beyond this, as I have shown previously (Bautista 2011, 2014, 2015), panata also manifests a way in which one’s vertical relationship with God can be fostered extra-liturgically, without the need for sacramental participation or sacerdotal intervention.⁶ I turn now to how this embodied “showing of a doing” takes on a more personally affective dimension by considering the Kristo’s body-in-pain.

RITUAL FACILITATORS AND THE CULTIVATION OF RITUAL AFFECT

The man who plays Kristo in the Via Crucis is a locally born labourer named Ruben. He, by his own admission, is not theatrically gifted or endowed with exemplary spiritual knowledge that would mark him as especially deserving of the main role. Indeed, it is precisely his lack of distinction that made him suited to perform in the Via Crucis, something that he has been doing for more than two decades. “After all,” he says, “Jesus was a humble man, a working man (*trabajador*), just like me.”

There was another more important and more personal reason why Ruben performs the Via Crucis. In 1985 he fell from a building site he was working on: an accident that he believes should have killed or at least seriously injured him. Having emerged unscathed Ruben became convinced that God had blessed him. From that point on, he made a pledge, a panata, to devote himself in ritual to repay God's positive intervention. For more than two decades the Via Crucis was the only ritual act that he deemed commensurate with God's magnanimity — nailing to the cross. His panata is to be conducted indefinitely because there is no particular point at which one's gratitude, and hence one's ritual obligations, can be fulfilled. (Hence, Ruben's declaration that "I don't really know when I will stop.").

For Ruben, nailing is a ritual that emphasises a mode of self-identification that is intrinsic in the pain itself. "I don't become Christ, but pain from the nails makes me feel like [someone who is] close to him . . ." he would say. Nailed on the cross and physically immobile, Ruben is seeking not a perfect mimicry or even depiction of Christ. For him, the pain sensation has the effect of temporarily arresting the entirety of his awareness, sequestering any imitative or theatrical virtuosity. But this does not mean that he is rendered an inert, unconscious ritual agent. The pain he feels upon nailing is itself a manifestation of the "realness" of his ritual action — of his subjective intimacy ("*close na close*") with God. This much was suggested by Elaine Scarry (1985), who argued that pain is the most absolute definer of a person's ontological reality. As a nailee Ruben is, in fact, far removed from the drama, *ritualised* (in Rostas' sense) in his own overwhelming sensation, not necessarily feeling part of the transcendental effervescence of the theatrical spectacle, but achieving a profound sense of personal intimacy with the divine. It is to this distinct, ritual-within-spectacle, one that occurs in a stylistically synchronous manner to the larger theatrical frame, that we shall turn in the remainder of this paper.

INTERIORITY AND TRUST IN RITUAL NAILING

Thus far I have shown that the Via Crucis is a ritual that involves, to evoke theatre scholar Joachim Fiebach (2002), acts of performative communication with an audience through all-encompassing movements and expressions; and the corresponding use of objects/props/paraphernalia to convey a sense of theatricality. Although panata is a personal ritual commitment, even at the point of nailing, Ruben's ritual agency is reliant on the efforts of others such as Direk and the hudjo. In the mechanical amplification of Ruben's wail of pain, in the stylised movements of the nailer's hammer, in the corresponding comportment of the centurions and cast members, spectators are encouraged to witness and respond vicariously to Ruben's "showing of doing". However, the impact of the Via Crucis for the ritual practitioner lies not only in the technical aspects of performance. To an extent greater than the other members of the cast, Ruben's ritualisation is predicated upon the *entrustment of ritual agency* to others who co-inhabit the ritual frame.

Most of the journalistic articles and reports written about Ruben convey a popular belief that nailing is an expression of strong ‘faith’ in God (see Barker 1998; Tiatco and Bonifacio-Ramolete 2008). Ruben acknowledged that ‘faith’ is indeed important, but also emphasised themes of trust in his fellow cast members, who he calls *catiuala* or literally “co-trusted”. According to Ruben: “I get through it every year because I have trust (*tiuala ya lub*) in Direk and those who nail me. They know how to nail me properly, and [because] they have good timing.”

Ruben conveyed two aspects of *tiuala ya lub* as it pertains to ritual nailing. First of all, nailing is possible because of his confidence in the capacity of certain cast members to facilitate his ritual action in a way that is technically effective (they “know how to nail . . .”) and synchronous (“they have good timing”) with the larger theatrical aesthetic and flow of the Via Crucis production. In this sense, *tiuala ya lub* corresponds to the logistics of nailing which can only be delegated to someone else who possesses a specific set of technical proficiencies — the ‘know-how’ of arranging his body on the custom-made cross, the sanitary procedures of when and where to apply chemical disinfectant, the sequence and mechanics of placing of supports and tourniquets, and the right methodology hammering and insertion of the nails onto his hands and feet. These are technical proficiencies that must be deployed in a way consonant with the theatrical frame — that is, a *catiuala* is not simply anyone who is an expert in the use a hammer, or even one who is medically trained in safety protocols, but “they also have to know the script so that they know *when* to use. [the hammer].”

The second aspect of *tiuala ya lub* goes beyond the matter of technical proficiency, evoking what has been described by some scholars of Filipino Roman Catholicism as a sense of “trusting faith or believing trust” (Silos 1985, 32). This is tantamount to a confidence in a complementarity of interior states between the ritual agent and his *catiuala*. In this very important sense, *tiuala ya lub* is effectively a volitional extension of one’s *interiority*, as indicated by the word *lub* (and in Tagalog as, *loob*), to a trusted servant or steward (Mercado 1974, 1994; Tangingco 2006, 106). In its simplest usage, *lub* is defined as the inside, the interior of something.⁷ When thought of in terms of ritual, *lub* refers to someone’s attitudes, innermost feelings and emotions as well as one’s intellectual, moral and spiritual dispositions.

In emphasising *lub* in the context of ‘trusting faith’, Ruben disputes the notion of an impervious interior state. In *A Secular Age* (2007), the philosopher Charles Taylor described the modern secular condition as composed of “buffered selves” undergoing a process of “excoriation” in which there is a “transfer of our religious life out of bodily forms of ritual, practice and worship, so that [religion] comes to reside more and more ‘in the head’” (Taylor 2007, 613). For Ruben, on the other hand, religious agency is predicated upon a *porosity* of interior states, one that involves the outward channeling of inner personhood — which is to say one’s volition and intentionality — towards an intersubjective relationship with a trusted inter-subject. This is not just ‘in the head’ but corporeally embodied in the complicit facilitation of pain, both for the nailer who inflicts it, or the nailee who feels it.

In his discussion of ritual solemnity in this volume Brown notes the impact of ritual lies in “more subtle and solemn gestures that can bring about new emotional connections” (Brown, this volume). In this way, Ruben’s shared interiority, rendered *in actu* through the painful pursuit of panata, can be seen as a facet of ritual solemnity, one that derives its meaningfulness through an intersubjective delegation of ritual capacities between a person and his *catuuala*. This is not tantamount to a complete surrendering or relinquishment of agency but rather an entrusted agency in which, as the ethnolinguist Nick Enfield (2013) has observed, we “involve others in our agency, not only in the sense that others can be patients of our actions but also in the sense that one person’s actions may be means to another person’s ends . . . or that two people’s behaviours are a combined means to a shared end” (Enfield 2013, 115–116). Ruben’s pursuit of panata is a subjectively embodied experience of affect, but one in which his agency is not bounded by the parameters, or the interior “bufferedness,” of the human body. He entrusts his agency upon the expectation of corresponding facilitative action on the part of the *catuuala*. In ritual nailing, where one person becomes consumed in an affective pain experience, there are actually multiple subjects who are complicit in the ritual frame, constituting a conjoined ritual embodiment.⁸

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I have shown that the Via Crucis is not simply an assemblage of performers and spectators. The play is a portrayal of the metanarrative of Christian soteriology by a troupe of performers for whom the deliberate effort to project a certain theatrical aesthetic is coterminous with the ritual pursuit of panata, or their promises to God, as a way to appeal his positive intervention into their personal life struggles. Whether we consider it from the perspective of the actors who channel their panata, or from the audience members who seek tactile contact with them, the Via Crucis is a ritual in which a ‘showing of a doing’ fosters a real, immediate and corporeal relationship with the suffering Christ. The anthropologist Bruce Kapferer (2004) makes this point well in arguing that ritual is not an abstract, ineffective, make-believe domain, but a ‘really real’ actuality, in which “human psychological, cognitive, and social realities are forged anew, so that ritual participants are both reoriented to their ordinary realities and embodied with potencies to restore or reconstruct their lived worlds” (2004: 49).

By refracting the analytical lens away from the wider performative domain, I have also confronted the ‘problematic’ incongruity between means and intentions in passion rituals in Pampanga. Much of the tension between these two aspects of ritual arises because the nailing that frames the ‘spectacle’ of the Via Crucis evokes in us a visceral response, one that arouses our deeply ingrained biomedical aversion to pain. This response can be seen in the tone and content of media depictions of every Holy Week event in Pampanga, most of which carry with it the implicit assumption that the Kristo’s actions are not intentional or agentive *per se*, but blindly imitative of prior traditions and conventions. To interrogate the Kristo about his pain, is not to cast

doubt about the sincerity of his ritual commitment. To fixate on the pain is to reduce his ritual intentions to its affective components — to the body's "autonomic processes that take place below the level of conscious awareness and meaning" (Leys 2011:437, 443). For how can anyone 'in their right mind' subject their bodies willingly to pain, if not because their ritual motivations (however relatable they may be) were driven entirely by 'fanaticism', 'literalism' or blind devotion?

Against this impression, I have considered an attenuated position on the anthropological "turn to affect" in thinking about ritual agency in a more nuanced way. The ethnographic data on tiala ya lub and panata encourage us to avoid an overemphasis on affect theory's tendency towards the "banishment of subjectivity" (Martin 2013: 149) and "anti-intentionalism" (Leys 2011: 443), ascribing a greater role to intersubjectivity — to the trust people place in each other in order to keep one's promises to God — in our understanding of the ritual body-in-pain. As I have shown in the latter sections of this paper, Ruben's nailing experience can be considered affective, but only to the extent that it is a subjective experience of pain. I have argued that just as crucial as the affective experience of nailing is interpersonal and inter-individual relationships of 'trusting faith' that facilitate and make nailing possible. I have shown that for Ruben, tiala ya lub is a ritual intentionality that is meaningful in an interior space (i.e. the lub aspect) externalised through its deliberate entrustment (i.e. the tiala aspect) to ritual facilitators. In response to Herod's interrogation, what Hesukristo 'has got' in the end is not a superhuman capacity for pain, nor a divinely bestowed mental fortitude for spiritual transcendence, or even a radical interpretation of theological forms. Hesukristo superstar is, as he says, "just an ordinary man" who has made a pledge to repay God's grace through his own willingness to share what is 'inside' with co-trusted associates in order to foster the conditions in which one can make good the promises made to God.

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NOTES

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- 2 A robust discussion of affect theory and its influence on the humanities and social sciences can be found in Leys (2011) and Martin (2013), particularly concerning the question of how the "turn to affect" reduces the body to forces that are prior to language, cognition and intentionality.
- 3 There are several works on Filipino Roman Catholicism which describe and analyse the ritual act common in Pampanga and other parts of the Philippines in which Divine power is believed to be transmitted through physical contact. See Bautista (2010); Cannell (1995, 1999); Love (2004); Tiatco (2012, 128).

- 4 Talal Asad's work in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) is important in demonstrating that the function of such plays was beyond a didactic theological pedagogy. He cites St. Victor in showing that passion plays were ways of 'cultivating' the body's subjective will, as "part of the Christian program for creating in its performers, by means of regulated practice, the "mental and moral dispositions" appropriate to Christians . . ." (Asad 1993, 78–79).
- 5 Dutch historian John Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1955) was a precursor of the large number of anthropological works that posited this kind of correspondence between ritual and performance theatre. See Turner (1967); Geertz (1973).
- 6 Similar dynamics of promise and reciprocity can be found in the *promesa* as described by Cannell (1995, 1999) and by Buenconsejo (2013) from in other parts of the Philippines.
- 7 The Augustinian Friar Diego Bergaño, who wrote one of the earliest and most comprehensive dictionaries of Kapampangan terms in 1782, defined *lub* as "... that which the root says, it is within the soul . . . It is understood as the will, what he wants" (Bergaño 2007, 225–226).
- 8 The entrusted agency that I describe here resonates with the ideas of actor-network theorists, notably Bruno Latour (2005) and Law and Hassard (1999), who have critiqued the human-centeredness of agency and included animals and objects in its conceptual range (Enfield 2013, 116). Similarly, in *Art and Agency* (1998), anthropologist Alfred Gell has argued that an individual who uses a tool or an object extends his agency across time and space. In that sense, objects are repositories of "distributed personhood" (p.21).

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