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## **The Dolor's Traslacion Ritual as Conflict and Compromise**

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# **The Dolor's *Traslacion* Ritual as Conflict and Compromise**

This article traces the history and meaning of the *traslacion* or ritual transfer of the Marian image Dolor in Catanduanes province between the origin village and the parish center. In the course of the twentieth century, the location of the image and the control of its devotion have been contested. The ritual first emerged as a compromise between advocates of popular and institutional devotional forms, which eventuated in the full-blown religious procession at present. However, the persistent struggle between the parish center and the village has made the *traslacion* into an arena for enacting power and the politics of place.

**KEYWORDS: RITUALIZATION · RELIGION · POPULAR RELIGIOSITY · CATHOLICISM · MARIAN DEVOTION**

The fascination with ritual in the social sciences harks back to the pioneering days of the disciplines. Ritual has become a central concept, having been imputed with key implications not only in religion, but also in the more totalizing constructs such as “society” and “culture.” For one thing, ritual is such a diligent and efficient reproducer of order and structure. For another, it bears the dual but contradictory features that define both society and culture: the taken-for-granted givenness as immutable reality on the one hand, but a constructedness on the other. According to Peter L. Berger (1969, 3–28), humans construct society and culture as they pour out their potentialities unto the world in which they find themselves. In due course, however, their contrivances appear back to them as objective ramparts of the reality out there and bear weight on them so as to dictate their way of life. Apparently, the contingent character of human social construction is glossed over in the process so that it takes on an appearance of inevitable reality. Hence naturalized, evolved ways of life become compelling enough to hold society together. Ritual exemplifies this scheme of things. Like society and culture then, the efficacy of ritual rests on the concealment of its constructed nature.

In Berger’s conception, products of social construction as such necessarily become conservative mechanisms. Being so, “ritual” has become almost synonymous with “tradition” (Bell 1997, 24–33; 245–50). Basically, ritual is formalized action imbued with sacred significance. It is able to convey meanings and render such meanings into a compelling lived experience.<sup>1</sup> The whole point of a ritual is to turn some eternal truth into a lived reality in the immediacy of the here-and-now. It is the activation of a supposed timeless, essential vitality into a time-and-space-bound currency. In other words, ritual is an economical bundle of symbolic performance available for reenactment on demand. Ritual’s conservative potency lies in the way it prescribes an eternal truth and adherents reinforce this truth by living it out. For this reason, the symbolic dimension of ritual must dominate in the mind of those who observe it even as its historical constructedness is marginalized. The process of ritualization may then be seen as the employment of strategies that emphasize the symbolic content of ritual and conceal its constructed character.

But despite its tendency to stability, social construction is basically a dynamic process. No social or cultural artifice could be so robust as not

to absorb challenges posed by the forces of history. Ritual therefore goes through an initial production, is then repeatedly reproduced, indeed becoming “ritualized,” but in the process sustains transformation. Such a more thorough reckoning of ritual goes under the purview of what is known as practice theory (Bell 1997, 76–83). In this view, society and culture are seen to take concrete realization only in the everyday practices of actors. The social enterprise is none but the continuing interface between structures and agents, each one impacting the other, through history (Ortner 1989, 11–18; see also Comaroff 1985, 3–9). The student who aspires to gain full understanding of the workings of ritual must therefore see it in this dynamic. Ritual action is not the simple profession of an immutable set of beliefs. It is rather a totality of experience involving mind, affect, and body all at once, which brings into motion a complex of processes. Its operation involves the playing upon each other of forces that do not always cohere but could very well be contradictory, thereby working to undermine the established order. Being so, ritual does not merely reproduce values and structures: it can actually transform them (Turner 1969, 96–97; see also Comaroff 1985, 194–99; Kibiten 2006, 9–10). One must take note not only of the more explicit aspects of the sorts of eternal truths a ritual tries to convey and make real through certain performative symbolisms, but also the social processes by which the ritual is constituted historically (or ritualized), how it is produced, reproduced, and transformed.

### **The Problem and Methodology**

This article presents an illustration of the dynamic character of the social construction of ritual through a case study of the *traslacion* (derived from the Spanish word for movement, transfer, conveyance) involving the Dolor religious devotion in Batong Paloway, San Andres, Catanduanes. The term Dolor derives from the fact that the object of the devotion’s piety is the Nuestra Señora de los Dolores (Our Lady of Sorrows). Broadly this study undertakes to (1) describe the *traslacion* ritual according to its various components, such as the participants, setting, performance, materials, and the meanings evoked; (2) narrate the historical development of the ritual according to the larger context of the history of the Dolor devotion; and (3) establish the significance of the *traslacion* in the dynamics of the Dolor devotion’s history. This study hopes to demonstrate that (1) the *traslacion* is the ritualization of the compromise between contending forces in the

Dolor devotion, namely, the institutional and the popular; (2) the system of meanings of the *traslacion* ritual, even as it is a celebration of unity, is full of contradictions reflective of the essentially contending positions of the two forces involved; (3) conflict continues to play upon the affairs of the devotion long after the compromise had been sealed in a ritual; (4) the *traslacion* ritual itself has become a staging ground in which conflict is played out; and (5) the *traslacion* as ritual serves to manage social space, that is, a mechanism with which to act out the politics of place making. On the whole, the *traslacion* is exemplary of the ritual that, rather than being a passive reenactment of an eternal truth, is the active arena for mediating the tensions brought forth by the struggle between competing interests in the definition, and indeed the shaping, of truth.

Data for this article were drawn from ethnographic fieldwork in 1992 to 1993 (Sarmiento 1993). However, my interest in the devotion started in the early 1980s when I first visited the Dolor shrine as a college student. Since then I have been systematically gathering information on the Dolor up to the present. Continued observation for more than twenty years has allowed not only the accumulation of information but also the discernment of both the broad strokes and the nuanced turns of its history. Aside from extensive participant observation, this article has made use of accounts given by some twenty key informants<sup>2</sup> in and out of Batong Paloway; I have also used data from a number of primary documents.<sup>3</sup>

The rest of this article tackles, firstly, the history of the Dolor devotion to highlight its character as popular religiosity. It then discusses the historical development of the *traslacion*, with emphasis on how it has been shaped by the intramurals between the institutional and the popular and how it has become the embodiment of their eventual compromise. This discussion is followed by an analysis of the meanings of the ritual components, beginning with the belief system as a coherent whole. The analysis then moves to a critical consideration of the inherent contradictions in those beliefs, which are seen in terms of the larger social relational aspect of the Dolor devotion, specifically as reflective of the dynamics between the contending forces. Finally, the article presents recent developments in the devotion to show how the *traslacion* ritual, while supposedly a celebration of unity, has itself become a means for enacting conflict.

## The Dolor Devotion as Popular Religiosity

The Dolor devotion is best characterized as a form of popular religiosity because it assumes considerable marginality vis-à-vis the dominant institutional Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup> Popular religiosities, while possibly operating within the hegemonic formation, carry their own dynamism. The result is a center-periphery arrangement. The institutional aspect occupies the center, which consists of the officialdom that is invested with authority to promote and maintain a mandated set of beliefs and practices. What may be considered as the “elite” religious center is concerned about the purity of doctrine and its approach is highly formal and rational. The periphery, in contrast, thrives on spontaneous and emotional forms of expression that are concerned with addressing the immediate conditions of day-to-day living. It favors personalization and improvisation, which is conducive to beliefs and practices that undermine official dogma. These forms of piety become the staple of common people, the *masa*.

The Dolor devotion started out in the early years of the twentieth century when a boy named Pasyo, while tending carabaos in the hinterlands of the village of Batong Paloway, found a strange-looking object containing the two-dimensional image of a beautiful lady. According to accounts, he threw it away as he feared it belonged to *Adlay*, a malevolent being believed to inhabit the place. But he fell mysteriously ill. So his mother sent somebody to look for the strange object. As soon as it was found and brought to Pasyo, his health was restored. The news of the wondrous phenomenon spread rapidly and hordes of people started to flock to Pasyo's house. Among them was Gilang Ninay Zuniega, the local *para poon* or novena prayer leader. According to her, she found a novena booklet floating in the stream that she crossed on the way to see the wonderful object.<sup>5</sup> When she picked it up, she had the surprise of her life to see that it was dry. It was the novena to the *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores*. This she took as a sign and so hurried to Pasyo's place and announced that the woman on the found object was none other than the Dolor or the Virgin Mary as the Lady of Sorrows. With that declaration, the devotion acquired a Catholic context and a proper subject of piety. Having been accorded definitive identity, the sacred object seemed to have become even more prolific in exhibiting works of wonders the most notable of which was its gradual expansion in size.

It appears then that the Dolor devotion took on a popular character right from its inception. For one thing, the circumstances of its origin were imbued with animistic elements identified with precolonial religious practice, which the church frowns upon as pagan. For another thing, it was from the obscurity of Batong Paloway's wilderness, in a site particularly known to be the lair of fearful nature-spirits, where the boy Pasyo, son of poor farmers, plucked out the strange object that became the center of the Dolor devotion. Indeed, they thought it was something of these elemental spirits, until Gilang Ninay gave it a Catholic character. One enduring animist feature of the devotion is the belief that the sacred object is a *bato*, a piece of stone, something that is an aspect of the natural environment. While there is reason to believe that what Pasyo found was a humanly crafted devotional medal, believers have assumed that the Dolor miraculous object is a stone with an image on it, the work of some supernatural photography (fig. 1). In fact many devotees mistakenly think that the name of the place, Batong Paloway, refers to the Dolor itself, the name believed to suggest a stone (*bato*) that grows slowly (*paloway*). But the place-name had been established long before the advent of the devotion, with older informants saying it refers to a kind of plant endemic in the area.

Another indication of the Dolor's early marginality was that, during its initial stage, it operated independently of church authorities. As the number of devotees and the curious grew, Pasyo's mother Bingge took on the role of overseer of the devotion's affairs and had a free reign of control. As mother to the finder of the sacred stone, she presided over the day-to-day activities and managed the supply and demand of spiritual and material goods. But it was not for long. The parish priest took a keen interest and observed from the sidelines, waiting for the opportune time to make his move. When Bingge blatantly violated an important church regulation, the priest interfered. It happened that during the *vigilia* (or vigil, held the day before a feast day) of the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, then observed by the church with fasting and abstinence from meat, Bingge had a cow butchered to feed the people encamped near her house where the sacred object was enshrined. The priest's sudden appearance in the midst of the throng of devotees was a dramatic face-off between the institutional and the popular. Enthroned on a makeshift sedan born on shoulders (in mock pontifical regalia), the parish priest breached the barrier between the nascent devotion and the ancient church, crossed the rice paddies and creeks to Batong Paloway,



Fig. 1. The Dolor sacred stone (measuring 4.75 cm. in width and 7 cm. in height), as it appears now.

appeared unannounced, and plucked the Dolor sacred stone from amid the “paganistic” crowd feasting on meat. Caught unaware and dazzled by institutional majesty, the devotees did not resist. The priest then brought the Dolor to the parish church. With its sacred material centerpiece removed from Bingge's hold, the devotion shifted locus from the popular site to the institutional stronghold that is the parish church (fig. 2).

Although there is no definite information on the matter, the founding episode of “paganistic” autonomy of the devotion was quite short-lived and may have lasted for less than a year only after Pasyo found the revered stone. The official center proved too strong a presence for such autonomy to remain. When the church authority decided to take over, the process was swift and absolute. According to accounts, the Dolor stayed undisturbed at the parish church of San Andres for some twenty years after its removal from Batong Paloway.



Fig. 2. The Dolor sacred stone inside its encasement and enshrined on the altar, being viewed by devotees

The marginality of the Dolor devotion vis-à-vis the institutionalized authority is found not so much in the differences in beliefs and practices but in the social relations between center and periphery. Much of the so-called animistic elements of the Dolor were regular features of Catholicism as a whole. Indeed, many scholars have noted the remarkable similarities between the preexisting religious system and the foreign one, making for easy assimilation of precolonial Filipinos to the Catholic faith (Sarmiento 1993, 38–41; Mulder 1992, 240–54; MacDonald 2004, 78–93). The distance then between the Dolor popular devotion and the official church is manifested more on the configuration of power between them than on the cultural component. It happened that the devotion started out in relative autonomy from the church, developed its own constituency and dynamism, and built up a distinct set of interests to pursue.

The initial victory of the institutional formation appeared robust and long lasting. But while this domination remained unchallenged for some two decades, the popular sentiment in the village continued to fester in the undercurrents. In reality the people of Batong Paloway resented the removal of the icon from their place. With Pasyo's family discredited, the Batong

Paloway folk moved in to fill the gap and asserted their position as the proper “owners” of the Dolor. Stories began to circulate to the effect that the Dolor did not like her new place at the parish church. There, devotees reported, the Dolor's face went even more dolorous. Some would also hear a voice emanating from the mountains of Batong Paloway, tearing the silence of the night and imploring *Ibarik sa kagrogaring* (Return to the proper owners). Allegedly the stone stopped growing altogether. The recurring theme underlying all these was that Batong Paloway was home to the Lady of Sorrows, and her extended exile was not making her happy at all. In the latter part of the 1920s, it happened that the community leaders of Batong Paloway mustered enough courage and approached the parish priest of San Andres to ask if they could “borrow” the *Ina* (“Mother,” a term of endearment for the Dolor) for the sitio's fiesta observance on 13 December. With the original episode of conflict already way into the past and the concerned priest long gone, the request was granted.

### The *Traslacion* Ritual Evolves

The concession created a new set of practices for the Dolor devotion. Every 4 December, ten days before the fiesta of Batong Paloway, a small delegation of elders from the community would fetch the *Ina* from the parish church and convey it “home.” The eldest woman would carry the sacred stone, which would be wrapped in a white cloth, while in transit; the rest would carry lighted candles, pray the rosary, and sing Marian hymns. They would negotiate rice paddies, cross over creeks, and hurdle fences that got in the way. The Dolor would stay in a makeshift chapel in Batong Paloway during the nine days of novenas and on the feast day itself. On the *segunda dia*, the day after the feast day, the icon had to be returned to the parish church.

As the years went by, fiestas in Batong Paloway became lavish and well-attended affairs because the *Ina* presided over it. The observance went on for about twenty years. In 1945, after the Second World War, then parish priest Fr. Andres Tablizo granted that the Dolor reside permanently at Batong Paloway. It was in that place where the priest took refuge during the war, and his favorable action was seen as a gesture of gratitude for the village's hospitality. In addition, community leaders had demonstrated ample good behavior to back up their long-standing petition that the Dolor stay in Batong Paloway for good. However, the priest laid down two conditions to ensure the devotion stayed within church control. First, no single family could have

exclusive charge over the devotion, which must rather be managed by a committee democratically constituted by the community. Second, the Dolor must visit the parish church during the nine days of novenas for the town fiesta on 30 November. The leaders conceded to these terms. In a moving procession led by Father Tablizo himself, the sacred image was brought from the parish church to Batong Paloway for permanent residence there. From then on, the pattern of movement between the large parish church and the small chapel was reversed: nine days before the town fiesta on 30 November, the Dolor would be brought to the town center, and then returned on the first of December and be “home” in time for its own feast day on 13 December. Thus was established the basic pattern of the *traslacion* ritual as it is known at present ([San Andres Town Fiesta Souvenir Program Committee] 1991).

Through the years, the number of devotees that accompanied the transit of the Dolor to and from the parish church kept on increasing. Later on, the days of passage through rice paddies saw their last when the streets that connected chapel and church were paved. It allowed the event to become a proper religious procession (fig. 3 shows the procession’s route). Sometime in the mid-1970s, the local committee in charge of shrine affairs took measures to further upgrade the pomp and pageantry of the annual journeying of the sacred stone. They invited the high school students of the San Andres Vocational School and employees of government offices in the locality to join, considerably beefing up the crowd of penitents. They also contracted the services of a marching band. The Dolor itself was mounted on a decorated *andas* or professional dais that was born on the shoulders of key devotees. A priest was in attendance. It was also the first time that they called the procession the *traslacion*, taking after the practice and terminology associated with the grand annual procession of the Virgin of Peñafrancia in Naga City, political and cultural center of the Bicol region. The final touch that sealed the Dolor’s *traslacion* as the major ritual of this local devotion was the formal adoption, a few years later, of the Dolor of Batong Paloway as secondary patron saint of San Andres town (fig. 4). As such it was honored with its own feast day during the *segunda dia* of the town’s fiesta on 1 December, just before it was carried back to Batong Paloway. The ritual became an obligatory fixture in the religious life of the parish.

With its institutionalization, the *traslacion* became even more elaborate. New features were added, like the annual grooming of the miraculous stone in preparation for the journey. It used to be a mundane routine, but as

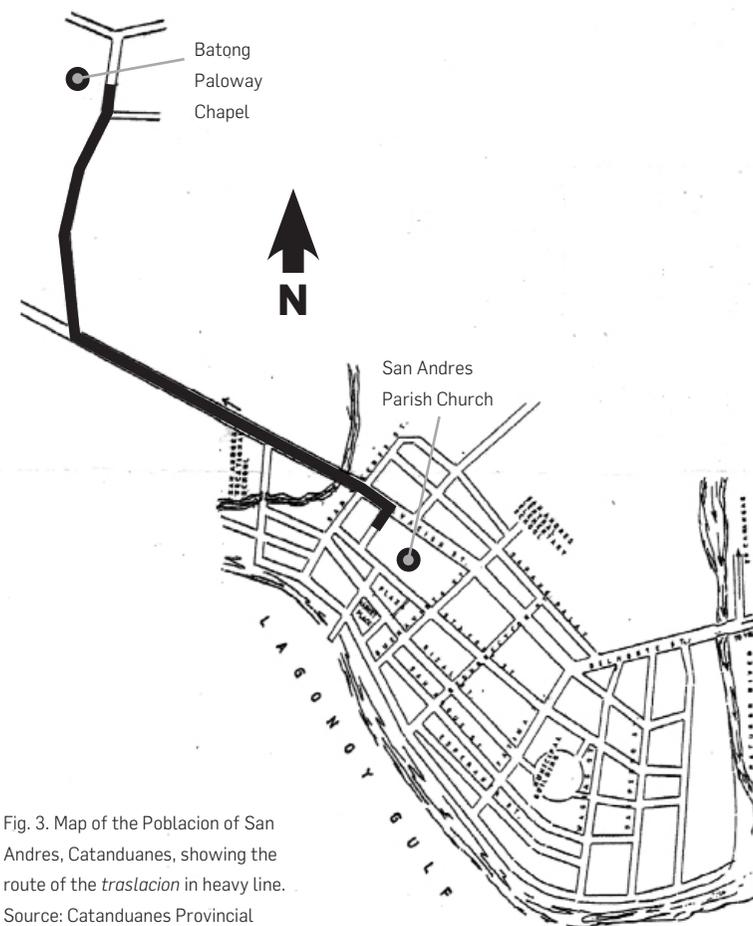


Fig. 3. Map of the Poblacion of San Andres, Catanduanes, showing the route of the *traslacion* in heavy line. Source: Catanduanes Provincial Planning Office

time went by the process became formulaic and took the quality of ritual. Cautious steps were observed as a matter of divine prescription, and only the few “elect” could undertake this grooming procedure. The belief that evolved was that only on this occasion could human hands handle the Dolor and disturb its enthronement inside its glass-and-wooden case. Accordingly any attempt to clean the stone outside of this proper time was proscribed. Anecdotes began to circulate to underscore this rule, such as one concerning the wife of a powerful general of the Marcos regime who tried, but failed, to open the encasing frame (Vargas 1992). Another practice that evolved had to do with the flowers that adorned the *andas*. As soon as the cycle of

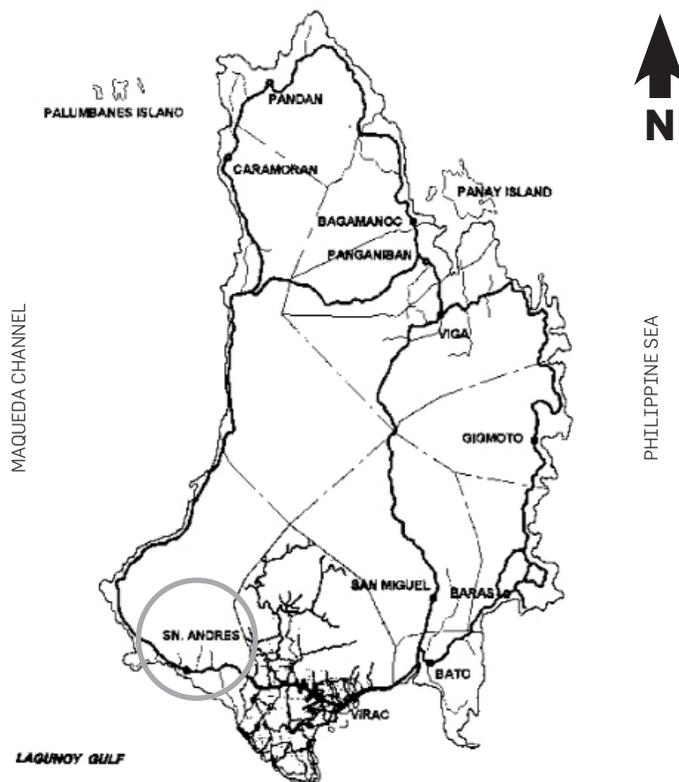


Fig. 4. Map of Catanduanes indicating the Municipality of San Andres in circle

going and returning was completed, people would scamper to get pieces of these flowers. These objects were said to possess a miraculous potency for a variety of purposes, like attracting money if these were placed inside wallets, ensuring an abundant harvest if mixed with germinating rice seeds, or bestowing invincibility on fighting cocks if these fowls were fed with these flowers.

### Making Sense of the *Traslacion*

The Dolor devotion maintains a set of year-round observances but the *traslacion* is the central ritual, the peak point in the annual devotional cycle. As such, it serves as a watershed of meaning and vitality. It involves the most number of devotees, bringing together the personal, social, and institutional

dimensions, and commands the most intense of preparations. While the *traslacion* is an elaborate complex of practices, it is basically a religious procession that involves a two-way cycle of conveyance of the sacred stone between two points: a going and a return trip between the chapel in Batong Paloway and the parish church of San Andres town. The most important components therefore of the *traslacion* are twofold, namely, the sacred image of the Dolor itself and the performance of the procession. To make sense of the *traslacion* is to explicate each of these components and their interconnections.

The existence of the Dolor devotion depends wholly on the sacred stone that bears the image of the Lady of Sorrows. The finding of this object started it all, and the stone remains the motive force that holds the devotion together. This fact also gives the devotion its popular character. The varying ways by which the sacred image is regarded spell an important differentiation between the belief systems of popular piety in the village and the institutional church. Careful not to appear as tolerating the practice of idolatry, the church insists that sacred images are merely representations; they may be venerated but not worshipped. But this distinction is simply disregarded by most devotees, who continue to regard images as possessing power in and by themselves, treating them as if they have their respective personalities.

Most popular Filipino Catholic devotions center on icons and are characterized by this fetishism. For example, Fenella Cannell (1999, 165–82) in her ethnography of a Bikol village described how the Amang Hinulid, a graven image of the dead Christ and a popular object of piety in Calabanga, Camarines Sur, is treated very similarly to an actual dead person. The statue is bathed, clothed, and accorded the proper wake and funeral. Furthermore, people see Amang Hinulid as an individual person (albeit a very special one), quite apart from other manifestations of Christ such as the Nazareno or the Santo Niño. It is a sort of Christ-deity like no other, dwelling in a particular address. The Amang Hinulid is even afforded personal amenities such as a wardrobe and an allowance.

The worldview at work here is that the supernatural beings involved are not merely symbolized in these material objects but are actually embodied in them. Human access to these beings therefore can be obtained through such objects: they are the means by which these beings gain presence and contact among people. What one does to the sacred object are deeds done to the being it contains. The Dolor is thus treated accordingly—kissed fondly

or caressed, talked to, showered with gifts, groomed. In the same sense, the Dolor is said to express itself through the sacred stone, dispensing favors, displaying wonders, making its state of mind known. The handkerchief that has been wiped on the Dolor when made to touch an afflicted body part will cure it, or the flower that adorned it can attract good fortune. So, too, the Dolor's picture on the stone manages a smile when approving of the state of things, never mind that she is supposed to be the manifestation of sorrow. Or, she becomes even more dolorous when disappointed. When sufficiently displeased, she will altogether withhold favors. In peak moments when she wishes to convey intense affect, the Dolor is said to exude light or perspire with oil.

Considering the central role of the Dolor icon in the devotion, the *traslacion* must be seen as an affirmation of this centrality. However, the performance component, which is the procession, embodies a crucial significance in terms not only of beliefs but more so of the social dynamics of the devotion, especially as a form of popular religiosity. Generally a procession is a progressive movement of human bodies through broad space. While space takes significance in every ritual, as indeed ritual is essentially an interaction between bodies and space, space takes central meaning in specific rituals such as processions or pilgrimages. In both cases, the whole point is to cover broad distance, a pushing of geographical reaches. This is so because processions and pilgrimages are ways to make claims over space, conquer it, and imbue it with vitality. The logic of this mechanism is that space is a gaping emptiness bereft of meaning unless permeated, occupied, and marked by material presence such as by acting human bodies whereupon it acquires form and significance. But, surely, not only human bodies can give form and meaning to space. Material objects do the same. In fact, many processions and pilgrimages typically involve the transit of holy items such as icons and relics. In such cases, the ritual becomes one of interaction between bodies, objects, and space wherein these elements constitute each other.

One can then make complete sense of the *traslacion* as the cooperation of the devotees (bodies), the locality (space), and the Dolor icon (object) for mutual bestowal of sacral significance. In terms of the devotees, they gain favors by investing in a sacrifice through the ordeal of covering space, that is, by walking in the company of the source of vitality itself, which is the Dolor icon. In terms of the locality, a sacred quality rubs off on it too after having been physically filled with the presence of the icon in the company

of its throng of penitents acting out their will for the divine. As for the Dolor sacred image, while in the mind of the devotees it is the very source of power, it too acquires renewed vitality as it is acclaimed and affirmed by the votive sacrifice of devotees and by the claim of dominion over an expanse of spatial territory. The engagement between the icon, bodies, and space is reciprocal, even as the Dolor is accorded primacy. In fact, according to popular belief, the Dolor will withhold its display of wonders—becoming less potent—if devotees fail to fulfill the annual *traslacion*. In this sense, the agency of devotees and the geography of the place are also constitutive of the Dolor's essence.

If space is a defining aspect of the procession, it is even more so in the case of the *traslacion*. Its two-way transit between two places makes geography of utmost importance in determining its set of meanings. In the *traslacion* two locations of specific significance are made to connect, namely, the shrine at Batong Paloway, which represents the popular devotion, and the parish church, the seat of institutional authority. The completion of movement between the two locations means that the popular and the institutional form unity and continuity. In the mind of the devotees, therefore, the whole *traslacion* exercise is a mark of the devotion's legitimacy. Furthermore the timing of the ritual, held within the period of the parish town fiesta, speaks of the devotion's favored place in the religious life of the parish. Indeed, when enshrined at the parish church as secondary patron saint, the icon claims a prominent place on the altar, side by side with the patron saint, San Andres. To the average devotee, on the one hand, all these mean two things. First, it affirms the general importance of Mary in Catholic reckoning as the Mother of God. Second, it is evidence of the legitimacy and importance of the Dolor devotion, demonstrating that it is not merely about some commonplace roadside shrine or neighborhood observance that can be easily established by believers; rather, it is officially recognized and sanctioned by the institutional church. On the other hand, the directionality of the two-way procession evokes specific meanings. The movement from the shrine to the parish church represents recognition of the primacy of the institutional formation, while the return movement means that the shrine is a legitimate adjunct of the institutional church, a legitimacy not to be taken lightly because after all the shrine is "home" to the Mother of God.

After some four decades since the *traslacion* was established in its present form, it has become a tradition as far as contemporary Dolor devotees

are concerned, a far cry from its humble beginnings; the meaning system engendered by it has been regularized as essential sacred truth. To them the ritual and its significance could only be but inevitable aspects of their practice of the faith. Therefore, the question of how the *traslacion* came to be hardly matters to them, as indeed it would be irrelevant to the sustenance of their devotion. They do love to propagate other historical aspects, such as the narrative of the finding of the sacred image, but only to dramatize its supernatural character and origins. With the divine nature and beginnings of the Dolor so assumed, the *traslacion* being its central ritual is simply taken-for-granted as essential prescription for the observance of devotion. When asked about the beginnings of the *traslacion*, the average devotee hardly knows that it started out with very modest features as a pragmatic measure to effect a compromise between the contending parties. It appears then that the evolution of the *traslacion* involved the obscuring of its historical construction.

Essentially the process of its ritualization was the smoothening out of the oppositional relations between two places, namely, Batong Paloway and the parish center. In this consideration, place is not simply some neutral piece of geographic space but imbued with significance by human agents (Feld and Basso 1996, 11). Place making happens when people invest places with specific interests; a place is nothing but space that evokes particular significations of favor or disfavor to certain parties. In short, geography becomes the relative engagement between locations where people enact their interactions and transactions. Furthermore, place making is a continuing enterprise and ritual becomes an effective mechanism by which this is done.

A ritual may be seen as a way to manage space, a technology to produce and reproduce place. This type of ritual efficacy has been reported by other studies. For example, Steven Sangren (1993) describes how in Taiwan devotees from various local shrines take annual journeys, carrying respective images of the goddess Ma-Tsu to Pei-kang, home to the central temple of the goddess. It is believed that these images' efficacy is restored upon contact with the chief image. The premise is that the power of the original icon can transcend space and be divided, transferred, and distributed to other locations. Pilgrimages are the means by which such power is acquired, conveyed, and renewed. What is established is a network of locations oriented to the central shrine, a geography of power relations. Another study takes

account of how a ritual of the Catholic Church redefined the geography of the sixteenth-century German city of Naumburg. Gerritdina Justitz (2002) attributes the procession's reason for being to the political-economic dynamics between the traditional church and the nascent capitalist class that was becoming hospitable to the Protestant faith. These two persuasions were geographically sited into the cathedral grounds (tradition) and the market place (the challenge to tradition). The procession that traversed the road that connected the two was the church's means to symbolically demonstrate its ascendancy over the developing economic sector.

In both examples ritual served to configure the engagement between social locations by physically linking them through ritual journeys, creating the appearance of unity and continuity accordingly mandated by sacred orders. In the Taiwan example, the production and distribution of vital power throughout the landscape is rationalized and sustained, while in the case of sixteenth-century Germany the traditional authority of the church is upheld over emergent political-economic formations. In the Catholic Philippine town of San Andres, the popular and the institutional are embraced into a common spiritual realm. In all three, as the ritual journey is repeated through time, the more that the evoked order appears as divinely ordained the less that the historical process of construction becomes of interest. The ritual serves to regularize the status quo.

However, the surfacing of this constructedness is key to a complete understanding of the *traslacion*. Although it might be "antiritual" to do so, in the interest of critical understanding this process of construction must be scrutinized in greater detail. To start with, it must be noted that the opposition between the two forces was a feature right from the very inception of the Dolor devotion. Here, the social and cultural distance coincided neatly with the geographical divide. The center-periphery arrangement of the social formation is homologous with the spatial configuration of the devotion. The devotion, sporting clear "paganistic" tendencies and operated by simple folks, germinated out of the remote wilderness of Batong Paloway. It was a sparsely populated place, known to be the lair of enchanted spirits and separated by formidable physical barriers from the "civilized" center of the town or the *poblacion*, seat of political power and the Catholic Church's officialdom. With the "paganistic" tendencies of the Dolor practices and beliefs being frowned upon by Catholic doctrine, the conflict between the two forces was latent at first. But it heightened

when the parish priest intervened and confiscated the sacred stone and brought it to town.

The initial face-off scored an early victory for the institutional church, which prevailed for many years, but the popular force of the village would later move to reclaim its hold, albeit in a soft, protracted approach. First, stories circulated around the common theme that Batong Paloway is the proper home of the Dolor. Later, with the confrontational episode of confiscation already quite distant in the past and the people responsible already out of circulation in the affairs of the devotion, the people of Batong Paloway started “borrowing” the Ina for their own fiesta celebrations. This actually established the basic performative structure of the *traslacion* ritual, which is the conveyance of the sacred image between two points in a complete cycle of going and returning. Fueled by the popular belief that Batong Paloway is the proper home of the Ina, fiestas in the place had become such well-attended and lavish affairs when the sacred stone was in residence. After some time when the process had become routine, the leaders of the community made their next move, which was to request that the Dolor stay at Batong Paloway for good. Cognizant of the popular sentiment, the priest conceded. All that had to be done was to reverse the cycle of going and returning, with Batong Paloway as the point of going and the destination of return.

It must be recognized then that the Dolor’s return to Batong Paloway as its permanent home represents a people’s successful reappropriation of their symbol. But this was achieved through negotiation and compromise and the *traslacion* is a product of this agreement. And since a compromise is the meeting of two sides, both parties involved stood to gain. Indeed, the ritual created a symbiotic relationship between them wherein both derived vitality from each other. As for the popular devotion, in addition to its being able to reappropriate the sacred symbol, it clearly acquired legitimacy when it was securely embraced into the church’s orbit of operation. The special place given to the Dolor as secondary patron saint of the parish afforded the devotion a kind of prestige not otherwise available to other such popular forms of piety. For its part, the institutional church was afforded its own set of premiums. While the *traslacion* clearly instructs that *barangay* Batong Paloway is home to the Dolor, it also puts across the message, in no uncertain terms, that the institutional church exercises authority over the devotion. The ritual is the obligatory annual gesture of the village to demonstrate recognition of this authority. Thus, the village

and its popular piety cannot assume exclusive proprietary rights over the Dolor; the institutional authority remains to be the final dispenser of the sacred. It was such a masterstroke of strategic acumen when the parish declared the Dolor as its secondary patron saint because with it the parish sealed its own proprietary claim over the sacred object. Put simply, the *traslacion* synthesis had placed a potentially wayward force at bay, while providing needed vitality to the church, as indeed it is mostly from popular religiosity that the church draws sustenance.

### **The Continuing Conflict**

The glossing over of the historical construction of the *traslacion* ritual was brought about in large part by the appearance of cohesion in the belief system engendered by the ritual. Accordingly the *traslacion* unifies two basic beliefs, namely, that Batong Paloway is home to the Dolor, and that the institutional church takes the upper hand in the Catholic faith to which the devotion belongs. While the ritual connects these two seamlessly, close scrutiny makes it plain that these twin beliefs represent the interests of the popular and the institutional, which are inherently contradictory. Pursued to their extreme, these two will surely get into each other’s way because, as formulated, they are essentially assertions of power. On the part of the village’s popular religiosity, the insistence that Batong Paloway is home to the Dolor is also a tacit caution that it is best to leave it alone. For its part, a claim of authority by the institutional church is always a claim of absolute primacy. But with the belief system dehistoricized and essentialized as immutable truth, the contradiction is effectively denied. Every time that the *traslacion* is rendered, the devotion is affirmed by the backing up of immutable truth, renewing it and its status quo all the more made robust. This could only be appropriate, considering that the *traslacion* is the reenactment of unity and reconciliation between two contending parties.

But if integrity and harmony could be performed smoothly in the ritual, it cannot be sustained in the day-to-day affairs of the Dolor devotion. The thing is that conflict is inherent to the Dolor devotion; it is bound to surface despite the *traslacion* synthesis. The history of the devotion, from the beginning to the present, is marked by recurring conflicts. There have been episodes of relative peace, but tension seems to always lurk in the undercurrents. Therefore, after a period of latency, conflict would again express itself. In the aftermath of the compromise that saw the return of the

Dolor to Batong Paloway in the late 1920s, the abundance of goodwill saw a relatively long stretch of harmony that allowed the devotion to prosper considerably, particularly after 1945 when the parish priest allowed the Dolor to reside permanently in Batong Paloway. In the 1970s, however, a major conflict erupted between the parish church authorities and the local chapel committee over the project of building a new altar in the wake of a rise in donations from devotees.

Since the local committee had direct control over the funds, unilaterally it started to build the altar. Only belatedly did the parish authorities get into the picture. The problem was that the two parties had different designs in mind. Interestingly the design favored by the institutional center was one that conformed to liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, while that of the local village committee was the traditional altar set-up practiced prior to the Second Vatican Council. A struggle ensued, which deteriorated and dragged on all the way to the court. It underscored the more basic issue of whose decision must prevail in the affairs of the devotion. Asserting power, the parish priest eventually withdrew recognition of the duly elected local leadership and appointed his own handpicked caretaker. Being influential himself in the barangay, the new caretaker took no time in taking things into his hands, had the altar-in-the-making wrecked and a new one built according to the will of the parish authorities.

For their part, the locals petitioned the mayor of the town to intervene. Under his sponsorship, a new set of local committee officers was elected. The parish priest refused to induct them and, resenting the interference of the secular government, left the devotion to the pleasure of the locals but forbade the saying of masses in the chapel. This move resulted in the decrease in the number of devotees visiting the chapel. Later on, when a new parish priest was assigned in San Andres, harmony was restored but it too proved precarious. Soon the locals were again at odds with the new cleric, who wanted greater transparency in the disbursement of the Dolor's finances. Taking this as the priest's scheme to claim a share in the devotion's revenues, the people of Batong Paloway resisted supervision and monitoring by parish authorities. Luckily this renewed tension did not prosper into a full-blown intramural. Eventually the locals gave in. However, the residue of distrust between the parties seemed to have become permanent. Even in relative peace, the people of Batong Paloway and the church authorities continue to be vocal of their ill opinion of each other.

The most recent episode of open conflict started in the immediate aftermath of the Lenten season of 2006. At that time, the chapel's renovation had been underway and the increased devotional activity during Lent had the donation box brimming with money. Meanwhile, the parish priest had decreed that the opening of the box be done in the presence of representatives from the parish pastoral council. The local committee regarded this as undue interference. When the parish representatives came, the locals padlocked the chapel. So the priest himself decided to go to the chapel in order to enforce his rule, this time bringing with him a group of police escorts. The people of Batong Paloway, in a show of their own power, barricaded the premises of the chapel. Seeing the situation, the priest did not insist and withdrew. But he went to court.

All the while, did all these recurring dynamics bear on the ritual of unity and harmony that is the *traslacion*? To the credit of the parties involved, the ritual has been realized every single year since its inception, come high and low in the relationship between village devotion and parish center. However, in the most recent episode of heightened conflict described above, the *traslacion* took on a new significance. For the two consecutive years of 2006 and 2007 when the conflict was raging, the annual observance of the *traslacion* faced a dilemma. As the event became imminent, word circulated that the local committee would not release the sacred icon for conveyance to the parish church. Surely this created so much anxiety among the devotees. To avert a crisis situation, the parish council came and talked to the local committee to get assurances that the Dolor would make the journey for the town fiesta. Come *traslacion* time, the Dolor rode the *andas* and hit the road to the parish church, to everybody's relief. Asked whether indeed the withholding of the Dolor for the ritual was considered, local committee members confirmed it was discussed as a possibility.

It would seem that the weight of tradition became decisive in this issue. It would seem too that, with the ritual neutralized of its historical context, it had transcended the very social dynamics that gave it form and substance, that of enacting harmony, with the fact that withholding it was entertained at all by the people involved. It may not have pushed through, but this episode represents a significant passage in the history of the *traslacion*: from being a ritual celebration of compromise and unity it has become a strategic tool of contention by the parties at odds. Viewed differently, from being the ritual to reinforce harmony, it has become the very arena to stage conflict. Thus

the history of the *traslacion*, if not of the devotion itself, has perhaps entered a new phase, a new turn in its journey. In the future, granting that conflict may crop up again and even worsen, it will not be surprising if the *traslacion*, together with the entire devotion and its relations with the institutional church, will sustain profound transformations. As in the sixteenth-century city of Naumburg (Justitz 2002), the evangelicals, representing the nascent capitalist class, eventually took the upper hand. They used the same ritual procession of the Catholic Church but reversed its direction, starting from the marketplace and on to the cathedral. They took over the house of worship and performed their own religious service, in symbolic and actual appropriation of power. Ritual is transformed in the hands of agents, depending on their political agenda.

At the Dolor devotion, meanwhile, the conflict was dissipated in 2008 when, at the instance of the bishop, a special election was held to choose a new set of local committee officers, who this time grudgingly conceded to the wishes of the authorities. The locals bowed to institutional majesty, apparently after the defiant head of the former committee served two weeks in jail for contempt of court after refusing to turn over to the judge the keys to the chapel and the donation box. But if the past is any indication, this restoration to normalcy is just a lull; discord is bound to manifest again so long as the Dolor devotion remains a balancing act between the popular and the institutional, the *traslacion* ritual notwithstanding.

### **A Way to Conclude**

The history of the devotion is one of continuing intramurals between two social and physical locations, namely, the village and its popular devotion and the parish center and its institutional interests, with the *traslacion* being a journey ritual forged to manage such contending forces. Specifically, the *traslacion* is the ritualization of the compromise arrived at by these two sides. It consists of a set of two processions that convey the central icon of the devotion, the Dolor image, from the chapel of Batong Paloway to the parish church, and back. The corresponding symbolism is that the first movement represents the devotion's recognition of institutional authority, and the second signifies that the *barangay* is home to the Dolor.

On closer inspection it becomes apparent that these two basic precepts embodied by the ritual are inherently contradictory. They are essentially assertions of power by the contending forces. What the ritualization

accomplished precisely was to create the appearance of a smooth and compelling synthesis whereby the contradiction became invisible, making it the form most appropriate for celebrating harmony. Year in and year out, the faithful of the devotion renew their oneness through the *traslacion*. But what is being reproduced at best is a precarious, if not fictitious, unity because the actual affairs of the devotion are continuously beset with conflict. In between ritual reenactment of harmony, there is recurring discord.

It is not to say, however, that the *traslacion* is the empty choreography of an illusion. It is not a contrived set of symbolic actions intentionally fabricated as ritual. It is rather the natural outcome of efforts to forge an agreement between two contending parties. The elaboration into its present grandeur has contributed further in no small measure to the popularization and stability of the devotion. Ritual and reality have been companions in the same journey, so to speak, and continue to reproduce and transform each other. At present, both the *traslacion* and the devotion are on the crossroads of further transformation. Shielded from the power dimension for the longest time, the ritual has taken a new phase after having been opened to the possibility of becoming the very arena for struggle when the local committee representing popular religiosity started looking at it as a tool for strategic bargaining. A mediator of conflict for the most part, the ritual might just now become a more active ingredient in the next round of contention. Meanwhile, there is no telling what transformation the devotion itself will sustain after emerging from this latest episode of conflict, in the same way that it has always emerged changed after every confrontation in the past.

In short, ritual and reality are always locked in a dynamic interaction, and in the case of the Dolor at Batong Paloway the narrative of engagement between the *traslacion* and the devotion is never a done deal. As such the *traslacion* is exemplary of the ritual that, rather than being a passive reenactment of an eternal truth, is the active arena for mediating the tensions brought forth by the struggle of respective interests for the definition, and indeed the shaping, of truth.

On a more theoretical note, the case of the Dolor's *traslacion* offers nuanced illustration on how ritual, journey ritual in particular, is a mechanism to create and recreate places and to configure their relationships. Because ritual is constituted by acts of human agents, the *traslacion* example may as well suggest that ritual is nothing but an enactment of the politics of place. It is a performance, at once formulaic and improvisatory, of social-relations-in-space.

## Notes

This research had built upon the contributions of many, foremost among them the people of barangay Batong Paloway and San Andres town in Catanduanes. I must mention some of them such as the venerable old timers of the home of the “Ina”: Pomposo Magno, Jose Magno, Jesus Manlagnit, Dolores Vargas, and Agapita Masagca. Also, former parish priests of San Andres such as Msgr. Honesto Sarmiento, Msgr. Francisco Molina, and Fr. Edison Bernardo. Likewise, Msgr. Jose Sorra and Fr. Pietro Ferrari provided important insights and information. Parishioners and devotees Antonia Talion, Felicidad Manlagnit and Jose Jacobo also shared crucial information and interpretive ideas.

1. For features of ritual action, see Bell 1997, 138–69.
2. Those accounts surfaced in interviews of the following: Bernardo et al. 2006; Ferrari 1992; Jacobo 1991; J. Magno 1991, 1992; P. Magno 1985; F. Manlagnit 1991, 1992; J. Manlagnit 1991, 1992; A. Masagca 1992; R. Masagca 1992; Molina 1991, 1992; Romano 1992; Socao 1992; Talion 1992; Vargas 1992.
3. Among such documents are baptismal records in 1895, 1897, and 1900 as well as records of deaths in 1955, both from the San Andres Parish Church, San Andres, Catanduanes.
4. For the characteristics of popular religiosity, see Gaerlan 1991, 149–51; cf. Sarmiento 1993, 13–18.
5. The novena booklet must have been a copy of the *Novena sa Mahal na Virgen de los Dolores* (1892).

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