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issues do not detract from what is a well-conceived ethnographic piece that should contribute toward a more progressive discourse about personhood.

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MARY RACELIS

Siquijodnon Voices Speak to the Philippine Church: Rethinking Personhood in Culture

Anthropologist Hannah C. M. Bulloch's (2016) ethnographic account of the Siquijodnon understanding of when a fetus becomes a person adds significant new elements to the long-debated reproductive health (RH) question, when does life begin? Her research reveals that the women of Siquijor see personhood as evolving through a gradual process of bodily formation during pregnancy. Respondents affirm that the soul is infused at conception, while personhood "is made" gradually over time into a social being endowed with a capacity to live a life. In their view, ensoulment is important but not sufficient to produce a person. This *processual* understanding of the fetus's personhood diverges significantly from the Catholic Church's view of conception as the fixed, one-time moment when *both* ensoulment and personhood take place.

Personhood in Siquijor as a Process Linked to Soul Spirits

Bulloch's findings may be summarized in four sets of observations. First, personhood and ensoulment represent two different processes: a soul (*kalag*, *kaluluwa*) is infused at conception but does not constitute a sufficient condition for being a person (*tawo*). Rather, a person is formed over time, developing certain competencies during the life course. For some Siquijodnon, the transition from being only a partial to a full person finds its full achievement at birth; for others, at baptism; and for still others, later in life.

Second, when a woman misses her menstrual period for two months and subsequently bleeds, with or without taking any action to make that happen, the situation is simply defined as "delay" or *dugo ra* ("dugo lang," "just blood"). The discharge makes up the raw elements out of which a person *may* gradually emerge, but no more than that. An actual person develops "from blood to blood clot to a lizard-like entity that becomes a kind of person but not really a person" (ibid., 215). Evidence that a "real person" is in the process of formation comes sometime during the fourth to the sixth month when the woman feels movement in her womb ("quickenning").

Third, the soul has value and agency, and merits respect in its own right even if it has not yet achieved full personhood. Should that status be removed from it by the accidental or deliberate termination of the pregnancy, the soul may become a spirit being. In the view of some Siquijodnon, that soul can become an angel, for others it goes to purgatory, while for still others it may have a chance at reincarnation. All too often, these unfinished persons' souls continue to roam around their former homes, haunting or posing threats to the living. Not really malevolent, they simply yearn for attention and to be treated as the more complete person they might have been (*kulang sa pakatawo*).

Fourth, proper rituals performed for the incomplete person can make a difference in a soul's trajectory. A fetus lost at three to five months may be satisfied with a simple prayer and being tenderly wrapped in a cloth to be buried on the family premises. Those in advanced stages from seven to nine months may warrant a coffin and cemetery burial just like regular deceased adults. The usual novena and special mass held after forty days and then again during the first death anniversary may be applied to them as "almost persons" worthy of being seriously mourned. Practices vary according to the socioeconomic status of the family and sets of beliefs.

Thus, although the soul may not have achieved full personhood status (tawo, tao), it nonetheless deserves recognition and respect in its own right. For the family the hovering presence of a being in a partial state sustains the apprehension that they may not have given the personhood of this unborn soul its just due. Bulloch interprets this as an expression of moral uncertainty stemming from the (meta)physical liminality of these partially human, partially spirit beings. Anthropologist Scheper-Hughes (1993, 356) has observed that “the reality of maternal thinking and practice [is] grounded in specific historical and cultural realities and bounded by different economic and demographic constraints.”

Nowhere does this difference of view raise greater problems than the reality cited by Bulloch (2016, 197) of nearly 17 percent of pregnancies in the Philippines ending in abortions every year. Largely because women have not had access to or sufficient knowledge of modern family planning, she cites the estimated half a million pregnant Filipinas in 2008 who deliberately sought abortions. The irony that anti-RH groups might well consider is that, by depriving masses of mostly poor women the opportunity to delay or prevent conception through modern methods, militant church and Catholic lay groups appear in effect to have pushed these women into making the only choice the latter deemed viable—abortion.

The Everyday Realities of Poor Women

The Siquijor findings shed important light on the agency of poor Catholic women, that is, their capability to exercise some sort of power derived from their being knowledgeable and competent human beings (Giddens 1984, 14). The moral underpinnings accompanying a woman’s decision to regulate her menstruation or pursue an abortion stem overwhelmingly from her commitment to a better future for her family and the children she already has. Given her limited knowledge and lack of access to modern forms of family planning, and certain that family well-being will be severely undermined by an additional child, she finds her answer in abortion. It is not a decision taken lightly but actually in great anguish. Most cite the economic cost of raising a child; others believe they have enough children, or that the pregnancy occurred too soon after their last one. Unspoken is the woman’s gnawing realization that she may actually die during the procedure. Nonetheless, having turned her ambivalence and worry into a decision to seek an abortion, she prays for forgiveness, hopeful that “God will understand.”

Although harboring some degree of guilt, the woman’s answer is in *paggawa ng paraan* (finding a way) during the two to possibly three months of “dugo lang” to deal with this latest threat to her family’s survival. Taqueban’s (2013, 10) abortion narratives of eight poor Tondo women emphasize that the cultural value of being poor plays a pivotal role in the mothers’ interpretation of the law; moral norms in poor communities support this forced necessity. A mother’s notion of entitlement expressed in *paggawa ng paraan* sustains her creative interpretation of the kind of agency needed.

Aling Rena echoes this notion in discussing abortion in light of legal pronouncements, government responses, and her own rights:

Hindi nga legal yon. Alam ko yun . . . Kasi naman, kung batas ang anuhin mo, kung doon ka natatakot sa batas, papaano? Nakakatulong ba yung batas sa buhay mo pag naghirap ka? Kapag naghirap yung anak mo? Na isisilang mo na nahihirapan ka rin. Hindi makakatulong ang batas. . . . Karapatan ko ang inaano ko dito. Anong sabihin mo na nagpalaglag ka, ipakukulong ka nila. Hindi! Panakot lang sa iyo yun. (ibid., 20, 35)

Of course it’s not legal. I know that . . . But you see, if you’re thinking about the law, if you’re afraid of the law, then what? Will that law help you when you suffer such a difficult life? When your child is having a hard time? You already gave birth and still have to undergo such hardships. The law can’t help. . . . It’s my right that I’m [asserting] here. If you said you had gone for an abortion, they’re going to jail you? No way! They’re just scaring you.

Aling Patricia (ibid., 20) adds: “Desisyon mo talaga yon. Pinanindigan mo talaga yong iyong desisyon” (It’s really your decision. You really have to stand by your decision). Taqueban (ibid., 28) explains that, in the Tondo community studied, “the power of the state to prohibit [abortion] has all but lost its legitimacy on mothers because the obligation of the State to provide reproductive health services has been grossly neglected, conveniently forgotten.”

Despite serious threats to their lives and well-being from unsafe and botched abortions, the trend continues. To highlight Bulloch’s assertions, 68 percent of poor women in the Philippines inserted a catheter into the uterus, or underwent a massage by a *hilot* (traditional healer/masseuse), or

resorted to herbs or hormonal drugs *pamparegla* (to induce menstruation) (Finer and Hussain 2013, fig. 2). Taqueban (ibid., 10) adds that others opt to self-abort by jumping desperately up and down or inserting a clothes hanger in their vagina. A relative few with money buy Misoprostol or Cytotec, which were originally manufactured to treat gastric ulcers but discovered to have successful pregnancy termination side effects. These pharmaceutical drugs, according to clandestine community information systems, work best if taken during the first three months. Pregnant women are reassured by their 96–98 percent success rates. Since Cytotec is not easy to obtain in regular pharmacies in the Philippines, “paggawa ng paraan” calls for covert shopping trips to the vendors in front of the Quiapo Church.

Risking community gossip and sometimes ostracism, together with rejection by church authorities if she is discovered, many a woman contemplating an abortion pursues it nonetheless, convinced that given poverty, desperate circumstances, and a triage situation of anguished choices, she is making the only moral decision possible for her. Better, she reasons, to risk an abortion than bring another child into the world. She cannot undermine the life chances of the children she already has; their needs and the overall survival of the family must come first. She feels entitled to make the decision “even if she must exercise that right in small private spaces owing to structural and institutional constraints” (Lactao-Fabros et al. 1998, 248).

Toward a More Culturally Responsive Pastoral Church

How far can the Catholic Church, especially its theologians as frontline thinkers, go to recognize these Filipino notions of fetal personhood coupled with wandering spirits representing displaced souls and incomplete persons? Bulloch proposes a framework that moves away from Bulatao’s split-level Christianity to favor the more contemporary sociology of religion perspective of “everyday authenticity.” As Jayeel Cornelio (2014, 481) explains, “Everyday authenticity refers to the local contexts and experiences of being Catholic in which individuals are able to express themselves in ways that do not necessarily align with institutional prescriptions of religiosity or orthodoxy.” Where church figures separate standard Catholic beliefs from “folk beliefs,” to most Filipinos these are intertwined in the mode of everyday authenticity.

How does the church see its commitment to women and the family in the context of *inculturation*: “the Church transmits [to local cultures]

her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within” (*Redemptoris Missio* 52, quoted in Pontifical Council for Culture 1999). Can discerning theologians unearth any links between Bulloch’s findings that personhood is culturally constructed and Pope Francis’s recent exhortation that the human person is always situated in a culture (*Evangelii Gaudium* 2013, 92)?

Some church figures are now applying this more integrated formulation to positive interpretations implying some degree of cultural legitimacy, for example, the annual Black Nazarene procession on 9 January that wends its way from Quiapo Church to Luneta accompanied by masses of frenzied men engaging in personal penitential rites. Will the equivalent everyday practices and authentic beliefs of Filipina women as described in Siquijor enjoy similarly supportive attention?

In particular, can the church’s insistence on personhood and ensoulment as being fixed simultaneously at conception be held in abeyance long enough for progressive theologians to explore differential kinds of understandings embedded in Filipino culture and established in women’s knowledge of their bodies? Or must the Filipino processual view of personhood be forced to give way to the more Western derived fixed-personhood view? The call to develop a pastorally focused theology of evangelization derived from the authentic wellsprings of Asian cultures offers Filipino theologians a golden opportunity to contribute a developing-world expertise to the compassionate church Pope Francis envisions.

Before condemning women who go for an abortion, and in the spirit of Pope Francis’s call for compassion in an evangelizing pastoral approach, church authorities might well take another look. Let them exercise true compassion by listening to and comprehending why poor suffering women, overwhelmed by their mothering roles in dire economic circumstances and striving to defend their families, believe that choosing abortion is the only practical and morally principled path open to them. At the very least, theologians might take a first step to review seriously the situations poor women face in view of the long-standing opposition to contraception as a modern means of family planning. Otherwise the church appears complicit in aiding and abetting the hundreds of thousands of abortions that take place every year in the Philippines.

Finally, Bulloch’s ethnographic work in Siquijor has brought out the need for new understandings of ordinary Filipinos’ perspectives on everyday life,

specifically, fetal personhood. In her conclusion Bulloch (2016, 216) quotes Morgan's (1989, 93) statement, which is akin to Pope Francis's exhortation on culture: "People are 'defined by people' [Knutson 1967]. There can be no absolute definition of personhood isolated from a sociocultural context."

Clearly, it is time for theologians and anthropologists to talk.

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