

Negotiations of a Gay Identity Among Openly-Gay Filipino Santero Community and its Resultant Contradictions in the Culture of Pagsasanto

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Abstract

This research was conducted with the aim of looking into the curious prevalence of Filipinos who identify as gays in the Santero community and how they negotiate their gay identity with a form of devotion in a religious idea system that generally does not favor homosexuality. Through a combination of interviews with openly-gay santeros and a series of unobtrusive observations of the online Santero community in three Facebook groups, the study was able to identify three important contradictions in the aforesaid community. These are contradictions in (1) the interactions within the Santero community, (2) the meanings ascribed to the practice, and (3) the norms on the presentation of the Imahes. This paper takes inspiration from extant sociological knowledge on the management of deviant identities and argues that these contradictions are present in the Santero community due to the fact that the Philippine society merely accommodates the deviant identity of gay santeros by obscuring the “sin” of their gayness with the “divinity” of their Santero devotion.

Keywords: deviant identity, Filipino gays, homosexuality, religiosity

Introduction

The presence of religious images made of ivory or wood dressed in fine garments on top of floats adorned in different levels of grandeur is an ubiquitous part of the culture of the predominantly

Roman Catholic Filipino community. These religious images, oftentimes locally known as Imahes or Poon, take center-stage during the Lenten Week processions wherewith a large proportion of religious Filipinos take part either as mere spectators or members of the procession. The care and beautification of these Imahes are entrusted to people who are oftentimes locally called as Santeros.

Scholarly works that inquired into the Santero phenomenon such as that of Sestoso and Madula (2019) and Piamonte et al. (2020) have noted the presence of a large proportion of gay members among the Santero community. This predominance of gays among the ranks of the Filipino santeros is salient in our interactions with our previous study's participants:

Interviewer: "*Sa circle mo ba ng mga santero, mas marami ang bakla na nag-aalaga?*" (In your circle of santeros, are there many gays?)

Participant: "*Wala kang makikitang straight. Halos lahat. Siguro sa one hundred percent, may makikita kang mga three percent na straight na babae at straight na lalake. Pero ramdam mo pa rin na may bahid.*"

(You will not see straight people. Almost all of them are gay. Maybe in a one hundred percent, you will only see three percent who are straight females and straight males. Even among them, you can still sense that they are not completely straight.)

This paper serves as a continuation of our exploration into the social reality of openly-gay Filipino Santeros. The previous study, "An Exploratory Study on the Practice of *Pagsasanto* by Openly-Gay Santeros", focused on the experiences and motivations of openly-gay Santeros with emphasis on how they started and why they continue the practice. The discussions from the in-depth interviews we had with our openly-gay Santero participants revealed information about the world of *Pagsasanto* that produced insights beyond the parameters of the earlier paper. In particular, our interviews with our participants brought to light three contradictions within the reportedly gay-dominated world of *Pagsasanto*. These are contradictions can be found in (1) the interactions within the Santero community, (2) the meanings ascribed to the practice, and (3) the norms on the presentation of the Imahes. These three contradictions will be discussed in detail in this paper. We further posit that the existence of these contradictions may be a result of the precarious

position of Filipino gays in the community and their collective attempt to navigate their often-viewed as deviant gender identity in a less than tolerant religious Filipino society.

Methodology

The data used in this paper were obtained from a combination of interviews and observations. The interview data were those that were obtained during our interviews with five openly-gay Santeros, each of whom has cared for at least one Imahe and has been a regular participant in Lenten processions for at least five years prior to their recruitment as participants. Many ideas emerged in the process of our *pakikipagkwentuhan* with our Santero participants which, though relevant, were not necessary to answer the research questions of the previous paper (Piamonte et al., 2020). We used those ideas in this paper instead.

Furthermore, the inputs given by our Santero participants gave us new avenues to explore about pagsasanto. In particular, we were introduced to the active community of Santeros online. We conducted online unobtrusive observations on these online Santero communities which yielded rich insights, especially in terms of social control and norms on presentation of Imahes – particularly the concept of *playtime*. Due to the limitations on opportunity and mobility brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, physical observations and interactions with Santeros were deemed impractical to pursue. Ethical conduct of research was observed. All interview participants were briefed regarding the study and their consent to participate was obtained prior to data collection. The participation of the Santeros for interviews was voluntary. Data were treated with utmost confidentiality and identifying information about the interview participants were removed in this paper.

Results and Discussion

The flow of the discussion is guided by the three kinds of contradictions that we observed in the Openly-gay Santero community. These are the contradictions in (1) the interactions

within the Santero community, (2) the meanings ascribed to the practice, and (3) the presentation of the Imahes.

(1) Contradictions in the Interactions within the Santero Community: The Santero World as Religious and Transformative on one Hand and Chaotic on the Other

We asked our participants to describe the Santero world in the Philippines. One participant attempted to capture the Santero world in a description:

Magulo in a sense na every little thing is a big issue. Tapos sila-sila rin nagpapatulan. Kumbaga, sila-sila rin naman yung magboboyfriend, mag-e-ex, tapos pagdating sa Imahe-related na mga bagay, ang bitter nila, hindi sila nagpapansinan. Tapos you always have to be perfect. Kailangan lagi kang perfect kasi one little mistake can turn into a big issue na talagang kailangang mabalitaan nito, mabalitaan ni ganiyan. Ikaw ang magmumukhang masama. Kahit yung issue ay maliit lang that can be settled between the two people involved, maraming nakikisawsaw. Tapos there are cases of blackmailing pa. There were threats. There were threats sa family ko, sa partner ko, ilalabas daw nila yung baho ko, sisirain daw ako. So those are bad things talaga, and they are really happening in the Imahe world. And with the involvement of social media, lalo siyang lumalaki, lalong lumalawak, lalong gumugulo. (It's chaotic in the sense that every little thing is a big issue. Like, they engage in relationships but when they break up, they will become bitter and will not talk to each other when it comes to Imahe-related things. Then, you have to be perfect. You need to be perfect because one mistake can turn into a big issue that will be known others. You will appear bad. Even though the issue is small and can be settled between the two people involved, others will come in. Then, there are cases of blackmailing and threats. There were threats in my family and my partner where they will destroy my image. So those are bad things and they are really happening in the Imahe

world. And with the involvement of social media, these issues become larger.)

These sentiments run parallel to the sentiments of another participant who opined that the Santero world is fun because you get to meet other individuals yet it is chaotic because of issues such as conflicts in carroza slot reservation, envy in each other's imahe, and encounter with arrogant Santeros:

Masaya kasi marami kang makikilala, marami kang matututunan, at marami kang makakasalamuha na mga tao na hindi mo aakalain na ganun pala sila ka-down-to-earth. Pero magulo rin kasi andyan yung mga issues inggitan, andun yung mga taong pa-high-profile na hindi ka tinitignan na, kumbaga, hindi ka kinikilalang magsasanto na ka-level nila... Maraming issues like inggit sa Imahe, inggit sa gayak, sulutan ng slot ng karosa, yung mga ganun. (It's fun because you get to know other persons, you will learn a lot, and you will encounter people that you don't know that they are down-to-earth. But it's also chaotic because there are issues, envy, wannabes who will not see you as a fellow santero. There are issues like envy in the image, design, and carrozas.)

In order to cope with this kind of contradicting community, some of our participants believed that the solution was on the individual and emphasized the need to rise above the pettiness and become more mature:

Uhm, mundo ng magsasanto, magulo na maayos, depende sa kung paano mo titignan. At pati kung paano ka makikisalamuha sa iba. Kasi magigiging magulo kung ikaw mismo ay parang nakikipagpatalbugan, nakikipaglaban sa mga gayak, sa pagandahan ng poon, ganun ganun. Pero kung titignan naman sa kabilang side, madami kang magiging friends, marami kang matututunan sa ibang magpopoon rin – paanong tamang pag-aalaga, paano ang tamang pag-aayos, ganun. (The world of santeros is chaotic and proper

depending how will you look at it and if you will interact with other santeros. It will become chaotic if you yourself will compete with others in terms of the design of the carroza and the image itself. But if you will look at the other side, you will have many friends. You will learn from other santeros like how to properly take care of the image and how to properly design.)

Another participant echoed this opinion and recognized that he was once one of the competitive members of the community. He said, however, that he had gotten past that over time and matured:

Nagpapatalbugan. Hindi mo talaga maiiwasan na magkakabugan 'yan. Before, talagang kapag malapit na yung Holy Week, post ako nang post na ganito ang bihis, ito ang mga tela ko, ito ang gagamitin ko, ito ang gayak ko, ito ang budget ko, lahat pinagmamalaki ko kasi para maipakita na I am the most capable, I am the richest, I am the youngest. Pero ngayon, I know I am capable, I know na kumbaga ako ang nakikita – sa sinasabi ng iba na sa akin ang pinakamaganda. Pero hindi na ako nagsasalita kasi I let the people speak for me kasi mamaya kapag ako ang nagsalita hindi ko naman matupad. (They compete with each other. You will not avoid that. Before, when the Holy Week approaches, I post online the vestment of my image, the clothing I use, the carroza design, and my budget. I proudly tell them to show that I am the most capable. I am the richest. I am the youngest. But now that know I am capable, I no longer talk about those things because I let the people speak for me because I might not be able to fulfill what I tell.)

Another participant had this to say on the matter:

*Ang santero world, magulo kasi madaming echoserang baklitang bata. *laughs* Andaming echosera na pine-playtime, bina-barbie, kanyakanyang pabonggahan, pasabog-pasabog, wala namang ganun noong araw. Ayun, magulo.*

Jusko, parang showbiz. Kasi hindi naman nila alam kung ano talaga ang meaning ng ginagawa nila. Hindi nila alam na for devotional saka spiritual purposes lahat iyon. Hindi naman yun competition; hindi naman yun pageant. 'Yung ibang ganun ang motibo, nakikipagpatalbugan, kabugan, kabugin si ganito, sapawan si ganiyan. Hindi dapat ganun. (The santero world is chaotic. There are young gays who do *playtime* – they treat the image as a Barbie. They compete with each other and it was not like that before. It's chaotic like showbusiness. They do not know the meaning of what they do. They do not know that it's for devotional and spiritual purposes. It's not a competition nor a pageant. It should not be like that for those with such motives.)

Interviewer: *Bakit kaya ganun ang motibo ng karamihan?*
(Why do many santeros have such motivations?)
Bakla eh. (Because they are gay.)

What we can observe from the sentiments expressed by our participants is that the prevailing theme of their answers painted a picture of the Santero world as a community that is both enjoyable and stressful, spiritually rewarding yet possibly petty, friendly and supportive but also snobbish and bogged down by unnecessary competitions. When we asked them to try and give an explanation as to why the Santero world is like this, the answer seems to center on two elements: youth and gayness.

As part of our efforts to dig deeper into this line of inquiry engaged in unobtrusive observations of the online community of Santeros situated at Facebook.com. This is after our participants explained to us that santeros had an active online community. We became witnesses to these contradicting self-presentations and interactions among santeros. The first thing that we tried to confirm during our unobtrusive observations is the claim that the santero community is indeed predominantly comprised of gay Filipinos. This proved to be a difficult endeavor and we adjourned our observations without the capability to confirm this claim with absolute certainty. This was due to the limitations in ascertaining the identity of the

persons behind the Facebook accounts. Some accounts were locked to private which limited our capability to gain any information about them. We also noticed that some of the member Santeros seemed to be using dummy accounts, thereby making them anonymous. What we can confirm from our online observations, however, are the following:

1. There is a notable frequency in the utilization of words associated with gay lingo among the interactions in the online Santero community. This may suggest that many, or even most, of the active members are indeed gay just like what was claimed by our participants.
2. There is indeed a combination of a supportive and hostile atmosphere in the online Santero community. While there are efforts to give praise to fellow santeros, the online community is also filled with many engagements that can best be described as either passiveaggressive or aggressive mudslinging. The online Santero community seems to be able to juggle these opposing natures of interaction by having more than one Facebook group wherewith one group has a more formal and supportive atmosphere while the other has a more informal atmosphere that serves as a possible venue for conflicts among member santeros.
3. The most active members engaged in the mudslinging among members that produce a conflict-rich environment in the online community are gays. At least one of these aforesaid members also serve as group administrator of one of the Facebook groups of the online community. This was confirmed through videos posted in the Facebook group where they showed themselves. The frequent use of words often associated with the aforesaid gay lingo was observable.

(2) Contradictions in the Meanings Ascribed to the Practice: Pagsasantero as Both Sacrificial Devotion and Self-Expression

Our interviews and observations provided us with deeper

insights into the world of gay Santeros and the importance of pagsasanto in their lives. The most poignant of our findings is the treatment of the Imahes as a doll (or commonly referred in the Philippines as a “Barbie”) in a bid to express a form of creativity oftentimes associated with gays. Our participants explained:

*Ay Diyos ko po! Walang nagsasantong straight. Siguro kasi deprived sila na maglaro ng mga Barbie. *laughs*. Siguro na-deprive kasi nga siyempre pag bata ka, pag lalaki ka kailangan robot ang nilalaro mo. Siguro yun nga, parang na-deprive. (Oh my God! There are no straight people who own religious images. Probaby, gays are deprived to play Barbie. *laughs* They seem to be deprived.) Aminin na natin na halos lahat ng mga santero, ginagawang Barbie (ang Imahe) kasi gusto nilang i-express yung pagigiging bakla nila, dahil hindi sila makapagsuot ng pambabae, sa imahe nalang ine-express yung gusto nila. Pero sa pag-eexpress ng art na gusto nila sa imahe, mayroon pa rin namang debosyon. (Let us face it. Almost all of the santeros make their images Barbie dolls because they want to express their gayness and not wear feminine clothes. They express what they want through the images but in that expression comes devotion.)*

Pagsasantero, therefore, is a way to embrace their “gayness” in a manner tolerated by the patriarchal and heteronormative religious community. This was particularly the case for some of our participants who grew up in Catholic households and studied in Catholic schools where the only activity that involves dressing up that will be tolerated is this one that is veiled as a devotion. At the same time, however, our participants claimed that their pagsasantero is an act of contrition for the said gayness:

Maraming bakla ang nagigiging santero kasi siguro doon nila nakikita yung ano... kasi makasalanan ka na nga eh, di ba? Kaya madami, kasi siguro makasalanan ka na nga, yung katauhan mo, gagawa ka pa ng another kasalanan, itutok mo na lang sa pagsasanto, parang ganun. Parang way nila (ang

pagsasanto) ng paghingi ng tawad, parang ganun. (A lot of gay men become santero because they are sinful. You can focus on pagsasanto as a way to ask for forgiveness of sins.)

The devotion, therefore, is both an act of sin and repentance – two sides of the metaphorical coin. The contradiction is made more nuanced by the description of pagsasantero as a sacrifice by our participants. This pagsasanto as a form of sacrifice is often contextualized in the season of Lent in the Philippines wherein it has become the practice of many Filipinos to take the Lenten holidays as an opportunity to go to beaches and other tourist destinations for some rest and relaxation (Uy, 2011). For some participants, pagsasantero is a sacrificial devotion because the Santero foregoes earthly leisure during the Lenten week in order to make the Imahe presentable during the Lenten processions. Interestingly, however, the same sacrificial act is something that the santeros enjoy as a form of their creative self-expression. It is, in a way, something that appears to be an enjoyable sacrifice.

(3) Contradictions in the presentation of the Imahes: “Patalbugan” amidst standards revolving around beautiful simplicity: The “Playtime” Phenomenon

One very interesting finding that we derived from our interviews with our participants is the concept of *playtime*. In the Santero community, the term refers to a particular way of dressing up the Imahe. When we asked our participants to explain to us what Playtime specifically meant, they gave the following comments:

Yung playtime na ginagawa nila, masyado nilang ino-OA-yan ‘yung mga gamit, ‘yung mga vestment, dinadagdagan nila ng kung anuanong burloloy na hindi naman kailangan talaga. Ganun din sa mga gayak na parang hindi naman kailangan para dun sa karo dun sa poon. Ganun din sa mga accessories. (With playtime, they exaggerate the clothing of the religious image. They put a lot of unnecessary accessories to the vestment and design of carrozas.)

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Haynako, yung ngayon, hindi nila alam yung ginagawa nila. Sugod nang sugod, gawa nang gawa, experiment nang experiment. Minsan disaster yung outcome. Pinaglalaruan nila. Sinusuotan ng koronang pangtao. Exaggerated na damit, accessories, halos magmukha nang manika. (Oh my! They do not know what they are doing. They experiment on the image which yields bad outcomes. They play with the image. They dress it with crowns supposedly for people. The vestments and accessories are exaggerated making the image seem to resemble a doll.)

According to our participants, discussions between santeros about the presentation of the Imahes are often done in their online community. The online Santero community we observed was situated at the popular social networking site, Facebook. There are several Facebook pages related to pagsasanto. Their Facebook names range from the more formal ones such as “Esculturas PH” to the more informal such as “*Ang Chaka! Kabugera!*” The self-styled description of these pages also reflect their formal-informal divide. Esculturas PH (n.d.), which has a membership of fourteen thousand users as of August 2023, fashioned its group description as “an advocacy group that highlights the essence of religious images and church traditions.” Meanwhile, “*Ang Chaka! Kabugera!*” (n.d.), which has a membership of nine thousand users as of August 2023, fashioned itself as a group where one can critique santeros who do *playtime* as well as their religious Imahes that are deemed by other santeros to be presented in an undesirable or unacceptable manner.

It is worth noting that this second Facebook group for santeros appears to function as a successor to another Facebook group that ceased activities in 2020. This inactive Facebook group, “Anyare?!” (n.d.), had almost seven thousand users as of January 2022.

In our observations of these online communities, we took note of the usual content of the posts made in these two Facebook groups. True to its self-description, the first Facebook group - Esculturas PH - is comprised of four different kinds of content.

a. Posts Related to the Celebration of Religious Occasions

Often at the initiative of the group administrator, a thread were made in the group signaling the start of the celebration of religious occasions. The members are then prompted to comment in the thread the pictures of their Imahes which are dressed up in accordance with the occasion. It is also worth noting that due to the restrictions on public religious activities because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the community also engaged in “online processions” wherein the Imahes of the member santeros were showcased in the

b. Posts Related to the Showcase of Imahes and the Accessories Related to Their Presentation

Aside from the showcase of Imahes in threads commemorating certain religious occasions, the online community also served as a space for member santeros to post pictures of Imahes which they either owned or were owned by others. This kind of activity is done even during days when there are no religious occasions to celebrate. In such posts, the focus is often on the presentation of the Imahe instead of any occasion or the santero that takes care of the Imahe. Featured Imahes are posted either because a member has claimed that the Imahe is their favorite, or because the Imahe is historical, or simply because the members have found the Imahe’s presentation to be praiseworthy. In some cases, members also post pictures of accessories like veils and crowns which they believe others might be interested in, as part of the presentation of their Imahes.

c. Posts Related to the Featured Santeros

Another notable kind of content in the online community were posts featuring praiseworthy member santeros. These posts usually included the name and picture of the santero as well as pictures of the Imahes that were currently or previously under their care. The post also contained discussions about their accomplishments in relation to their being santeros. This kind of post served as a space

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for other santeros to give compliments their fellow santero.

d. Posts Related to Consultations on Standards in the Presentation of Imahes

The final kind of content that can be found in the Facebook group were posts by members seeking input from fellow member santeros regarding the standards in the presentation of the Imahes. These would usually come along the lines of asking whether certain Imahes should be included in specific religious occasions or whether certain accessories were allowed or required to be included in the presentation of the Imahe during processions.

Meanwhile, the second page – Ang Chaka! Kabugera! – and its predecessor – Anyare?! - had been observed to be generally comprised of the following kinds of content.

e. Posts Related to the Showcase of Imahes

Similar to the kind of posts found in Esculturas Ph, this Facebook group also contain posts that give praise to noteworthy presentations of imahes.

f. Posts Related to Activities and Content they find Undesirable

The Facebook group also contained memes and other content from social networking sites, like Youtube and Tiktok. These shared content come in the form of humor that pokes fun at religion. These were shared in the Facebook group to give the members a space to voice their collective displeasure.

g. Posts Related to the Critique of Presentations of Imahes

This kind of content forms the bulk of the posts in the Facebook group. These posts involved pictures of Imahes which they considered as presented in a wrong, undesirable, or even offensive manner. The approach of the captions of these posts may vary from (a) very passive wherein the member santero would merely post the

pictures of the Imahe with a caption asking for the opinion of others (e.g. “*Ano pong masasabi ninyo sa itsura ng santo?*”) with the hope that the other members of the group would collectively express displeasure over the pictures of the Imahe, to (b) passive-aggressive wherein the member santero will ask a leading question that will make a flaw in the Imahe’s presentation salient to the other members of the group (e.g. “*Tama bang ganiyan ang korona ni Maria?*”), and (c) blatantly aggressive where the member santero would post pictures of the Imahe with a caption of overt condemnation and/or displeasure over the perceived deviation.

It is in this kind of posts that we encountered what our participants and the other members of the online santero community as *playtime*. The label, as we have observed, is used to identify presentations of Imahes that the santero community label as a deviation from what they considered as the proper way to dress up the religious icons. We dug through the interactions and posts in the Facebook group and we were able to obtain some samples of presentations of the Imahes which the santeros gave the deviant *playtime* label to. These samples are found in Figure 1.

Our participants connected this *playtime* phenomenon with the fact that the Santero world is predominantly comprised of gays and the aforementioned treatment of Imahes as Barbie dolls:

*May iba kasi na binabakla eh. *laughs* ‘Yun ‘yung term eh, ‘yung binabakla na. Na ang damit aypatong-patong. Kumbaga, may kapa na, nilagyan pa ulit ng kapa. May kapa na, may belo pa, nilagyan pa ng sobre belo. Sobrang over!(Others tend to exaggerate (lose interpretation of binabakla). That’s the term “binabakla.” The image already has a cape, a veil. It’s too much!)*

Figure 1*Sample Images of Imahes Considered by Many Santeros as Deviant*

“Sa damit, kailangang maganda, may dignidad. Kapag lumalabas yung poon, dapat makikita siya ng mga tao na may dignidad, hindi yung nagdadamit ka ng patung-patong na tela, na na gagawin mong Barbie. Kailangan maipakita sa damit yung kabanalan kasi merong ibang magsasanto na ginagawang manyika talaga ang poon. Nawawala na yung essence nung holiness nung image. ‘Yung playtime, hindi maganda. Walang divinity, walang holiness. Hindi mo nakikita yung – hindi naman kasi basta nag-gagayak ka ng Imahe, nakita mong maganda ay nangangahulugan na appropriate na doon sa Imahe. Maganda nga sa paningin niya, pero sa paningin ng iba, at sa liturgical aspect niya, unliturgical.” (The vestment should be beautiful and should give dignity. When the image comes out, people shall see it as having dignity, not having too much clothing like a Barbie. The vestment shall reveal the image’s holiness because there are other santeros who treat the image like a doll. The holiness disappears with that. Doing a *playtime* is not good because it does not have

divinity and holiness. Beautiful vestments do not translate to appropriateness to the attire of the image. They may be pleasing to the santero's eye but for some, in terms of its liturgical aspect, it's not liturgical.)

From these sentiments, we can deduce that to practice *playtime* in pagsasantero is to dress up the Imahes in an exaggerated manner or in a manner that deviates from what is expected from the Santo represented by that Imahe in the religious narrative. This practice was generally viewed negatively by the Santero community, and many posts online were made with the purpose of condemning the act. Furthermore, this practice of *playtime* was allegedly a consequence of the predominance of gays in the Santero community who wished to make use of the Imahes as Barbie dolls through which their creativity could be expressed freely – unopposed by the patriarchal heteronormative community. This is probably why one participant opined that Santeros must make it a point to consult priests or the scriptures in order to avoid making their Imahe a manifestation of *playtime*: “*Para sa akin, dapat aralin muna nilang mabuti yung pagsasanto. Kumunsulta muna sila sa pari, or sa liturgies. ‘Yun lang.’* (For me, they should really study the act of pagsasanto. They should consult with priests, or liturgies. That’s all). In a world filled with competitive “patalbugan” based on the presentation of their respective Imahes, what, then, is the Santero community’s concept of a beautiful presentation? Our participants gave the following opinions – traditional and simple dress, maintenance of holiness, appropriate jewelry:

Kasi meron kaming tinatawag na traditional na pagdadamit. Traditional na maganda. Simple na hindi mo matatabunan yung Imahe. Sa damit, hindi naman kailangang elaborate ng damit. Minsan mas maganda pa nga yung simple, walang burda, basta mapapadasal ka talaga. (There’s this so-called traditional vestments. Traditionally beautiful. It’s simple and will not overpower the image. You do not need elaborate clothing. Sometimes, simple vestments without embroidery is better. As long as you will feel its holiness.)

Nasa tao kung anong mabibigay niyang best para doon sa Poon niya. Pero burdado man yan o kahit tela-tela, masasabi mong namemaintain yug holiness nung poon. Kasi yung iba, nagigiging OA, ino-OA-yan nila, masyadong accessories, parang nawawala na yung holiness. Nagiging, parang sabi nga nila, nagigiging mannequin 'yung poon. (It's up to the person what best he can offer to the Image. Whether the clothing is embroidered or plain, one must retain the Image's holiness. Others exaggerate the image by putting unnecessary accessories which seem to alleviate the holiness of the image.)

Appropriate na alahas. Kasi usually may mga iba na talagang yung mga dangling, talagang mahahaba, ang dami dito may nasa leeg, may nasa tainga, may singsing, may bracelet, talagang parang tunay na tao. Pero ano dapat eh, sa perspective ko, dapat hikaw lang, kasi the focus is the face ng Imahе, kasi paano nga naman mapapapnsin kung marami masyadong mga burloloy 'yun? (Appropriate jewelry. Usually, others put dangling and long accessories whether it is on the neck or ear, has a ring, bracelet, as if it's a real person. But for me, earrings suffice because the focus is the image's face. How can you notice the face of the image if it has so many accessories?)

Kasi may kanya-kanya tayong expression ng art eh. May kanya-kanya tayong gusto. Ako, gusto ko ay simple lang. Ayoko ng may kapa, ayoko ng masyadong maburloloy. Sa gayak naman ng karo, ayoko ng sobra. Para sa akin, mas kaiga-igaya siguro sa mga Imahе kung makikita natin silang simple kasi namuhay silang simple. (We have different expressions of art. We have different wants. I want it simple. I don't like capes and unnecessary accessories. In terms of carroza design, I don't like putting too much on the carroza. For me, it's better for the images if we will see them as simple, since they lived a simple life.)

The above-quoted sentiments speak of the maxim of

“simplicity is beauty” – one wherein the sanctity of the saint represented in the that the new, more extravagant, manners of presentation that are called *playtime* are in contrast to the tradition of *pagsasanto*. One member *santero* posted in the online community:

Tama naman na sa kasalukuyang panahon, wala tayong mababasa na naka-detalye ng bawal na ganito or ganiyan sa mga Santa for the simple reason na ang basic rule is you dress them according to their role or station. We call that common sense and propriety and decency. (It's right that in the current times, we don't have rules on how to design your saint for the simple reason is the basic rule that you dress them according to their role in Jesus' life.)

Tingnan ninyo ang mga lumang retrato, 'noong mga panahon na iilan ang nakapag-aral o noong wala pang internet or Google, alam mo kaagad ang pagkakaiba ng Virgen sa isang Santa. Mula sa tindig, sa bihis, sa mga gamit, maging sa gayak ng karo, etc. because ang lahat ng mga Camarera sumusunod sa unwritten custom handed down through the centuries. Ngayon lang nagkalabu-labo ang “rules” kasi naging avenue for creativity or talent o “pasabog” ang paglabas ng mga imahen.” (Look at old photos during the time when only a few had education or when there was no internet nor Google. You can really differentiate the difference between the Virgin and another female saint – from their posture, vestments, accessories, carroza design, etc. because Camareras really follow the unwritten custom handed down through the centuries. It is only today where we don't have an established rule because processions became avenues for creativity or talent, or “pasabog.”)

The above-quoted sentiments were supported by several others who made claims that the tradition on how to properly present the Imahes should be respected and preserved. It appears that despite the fact that *Santeros* would tend to treat the Imahes as Barbie dolls which acted as venues of their free expression of their

creativity, the normative expectations on how to treat the divine and their worldly representations was still enforced in the Santero community. Deviation from these norms of how to present the saints were met with disapproval by many members of the Santero community, and many of the older Santeros dismissed this tendency for a *playtime* approach to presentation as a product of undesirable youthful competitiveness that was ignorant of the essence of pagsasantero. In spite of this collective efforts by the community to establish norms on the presentation of Imahes and social control mechanisms to enforce these norms (e.g. online praises and social ridicule), we were able to observe that there are incidences of backlashes to these critiques. While some santeros accept the criticisms posted against them and respond with a message of gratitude and a pledge to rectify the supposed mistakes in presentation, not all santeros whose Imahes were posted in the online community and branded as deviant remain silent; some responded to defend themselves from the attempts at social ridicule. As we observed the interactions that emanated from these situations, we were able to note two kinds of reasoning that are used by those who were subjected to ridicule.

- a. *There is no right to critique because there is nothing wrong with the presentation of the imaha.* Some santeros claim that the social ridicule is unfounded because there is nothing inherently wrong in the manner by which the Imaha is presented. Such sentiments also point out that the objective of the online community is to correct wrongs, but that this is being corrupted and abused by those who wish to attack the character and work of other santeros. A sample of this sentiment obtained from the interactions in the online community is provided below:

Ano kaya ang mali sa gayak? Wala naman akong nakikitang mali? Ang nakikita ko lang ang mga mapanghusgang nilalang na kung makapang lait eh akala mo ubod ng linis at walang bahid ang pagkatao at siguradong makakarating sa langit dahil ubod ng mga banal.” (What’s wrong with the design? I

don't see anything wrong. I only see judgmental humans as if they are free of sins and will be able to reach heaven due to their holiness.)

b. There is no right to critique because there are different standards among parishes on the presentation of imahes. Some santeros who had become the object of social ridicule had also pointed out the narrow-mindedness of fellow santeros who criticized their manner of presentation for the Imahes. According to these santeros, what the critics failed to realize was that there were differences among parishes when it came to traditions on how to present the Imahes. This sentiment was adequately captured by the response of one santero in the online community quoted below:

Respeto lang hindi puro kuda makasalanan din naman! Pumunta kayo sa parokya namin dun kayo mag reklamo hindi yang pinagpipyestahan 'nyong mga bakla kayo. Kausapin niyo ang kura. Doon niyo ilabas ang tapang nyo hindi dito. Mas nakaka-offend ang ginagawa nyong pagkritiko. Pumunta kayo sa parokya dun niyo ipaabot ang saloobin niyo hindi dito kayo kuda ng kuda. Idepensa nyo yang mga nalalaman niyo. Humarap kayo sa PPC meeting sa parokya. (Just respect and don't be a hypocrite. Go to our parish and tell your complains there instead of making ridicules. Talk to the parish head and show your confidence there and not here. Your form of criticism is offensive. Go to the parish and express your sentiments there. Defend your thoughts especially during PPC meetings.)

Discussion

How can we make sense of all of these findings about the Gay Santero Community? In a 2014 publication by the United States Development Programme (UNDP) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) entitled, *Being*

LGBT in Asia: The Philippines Country Report, it was observed through research, consultation, and the National LGBT Community Dialogue that the lived experiences of LGBTs in the country are still marred by challenges related to prejudice and discrimination. This is despite survey results which indicate that the Philippines has high acceptance of homosexuality (Pew Research Center, 2013). Claims by local LGBTs captured this dissonance aptly – they are “tolerated, but not accepted” (Magsambol, 2019).

The aforesaid experience suggests that LGBT life in the Philippines is one where gays actively manage a deviant identity in their struggle to integrate themselves in society. Conversely, the greater Philippine society, while not being completely accepting of LGBTs, accommodates or “tolerates” the LGBTs. In the extant literature of the Sociology of Deviance, it is said that when society encounters a deviation, it tends to adopt one of following strategies: (1) optimize, (2) neutralize, (3) normalize, or (4) pessimize. Rubington and Weinberg (1969) explains these four strategies succinctly in this manner:

To optimize is to hope that the deviance will pass away, that the problematic behavior is no more than a transitory episode. To neutralize is to accommodate to the deviance in a way that obscures it. To normalize is to regard deviance as but a special case of normal behavior. And finally, to pessimize is to accept the worst – thus the deviance may be defined as basically irreversible. (p. 30)

We argue that Philippine society accommodates gays by obscuring homosexuality – a neutralization strategy. This obscuration of homosexuality in the Philippines is manifested by giving gays “niche roles” in everyday life. The most iconic, perhaps, of these niche roles is the local parlor or salon and comedy bars where openly-gay men abound. Beside these elements of everyday life, certain events or occasions done at least once a year have also been created for openly-gay men. An example of these events are the various Ms. Gay pageants held in various localities, oftentimes during town fiestas. The existence of these social spaces is often

taken as proof of the acceptance afforded to gays in the Philippines. An argument can be made, however, that these social spaces are anything but indicators of acceptance.

First, the very existence of these niches can be taken as proof that there is a line that divides gays and the greater Filipino society. Second, the prevalence of a heteronormative patriarchal culture is still very evident in the treatment of gays in these niche roles. Gays in parlors/salons are often made the subject of jokes such as, “*basta macho at gwapo, libre!*” or how it is easy to convince gays to give their service for free as long as the male customer is good-looking or physically fit. In the same vein, gay pageants are often received with deprecating laughter and ridicule. In fact, in the town fiestas where gay pageants are often featured, it has also been traditional for men to cross-dress – though not as a form of recognition for other genders, but as another manifestation of deprecatory humor. Despite all these criticisms of these niche roles and their inefficacy as indicators of acceptance, it remains true that these niche roles provide gay Filipinos with more freedom to express themselves than in other social spaces.

We propose that the same attitude of “tolerance through neutralization, but none of acceptance” can be said of Pagsasanto especially during the Lenten Week where the Lenten religious processions of Imahes take center-stage. In his study of bathhouses in the Philippines, Evangelista (2014) described bathhouses in the following manner:

...bathhouses are spaces where gay identities are both liberated from and shaped by the dominant heteronormative discourse. Bathhouses can create fortresses against dominant heterosexual practices by providing stealthy spaces where heterosexual discourses are reconfigured to fit homosexual practices.

In the practice of *Pagsasanto*, Filipino gays are accommodated by allowing them to project their creative spirit in an activity that is deemed to be socially acceptable. In the context of the Lenten season and *Santeros*, men dressing up large “dolls” is a praise-worthy

devotion rather than a violation of gender norms. In this sense, the devotion of pagsasanto, despite being a practice of a heteronormative religious idea system, becomes a safe space.

The safe space of *Pagsasanto* is indeed a “fortress” - a niche space where gays are tolerated but they are unlikely to find similar accommodations or tolerance in many other spaces of Philippine society. This isolated space, being one of the few spaces where they can thrive, breeds competition. This fortress-esque nature of *pagsasanto*, therefore, is the reason why it is safe and supportive on one hand, and toxic and competitive on the other.

It was also salient in the study that *pagsasanto* - especially the act of dressing up the Imahes like dolls - is used as an opportunity for creative self-expression by gay santeros. In spite of this, it is the very same gay santero community that actively monitors its ranks and chastises what they perceive as undesirable or unacceptable presentations of the Imahe. What is very noteworthy about this situation is that what is considered undesirable by the santero community are methods of presentation that are considered as “too homosexual” or “*binakla*.” We argue that this aversion towards methods of Imahe presentation that are considered as “*binakla*” is likely because of the recognition among gay santeros that the aforesaid devotion is originally a heterosexual activity that has been – to use the term of other scholars – “colonized” or “reterritorialized” by homosexuals with the accommodation of the greater heterosexual community. Once again, this accommodation – one that is characterized by tolerance but not acceptance – requires from the gay santero community to tread carefully and toe the line. Gay self-expression is only tolerated as long as the presentations of the Imahes are still within the bounds deemed acceptable by the Catholic community. To go beyond those bounds is to make it harder for the larger community to obscure the deviance of the gay santeros and see the “sin” beyond the “devotion.” It is for this reason that the gay santero community actively polices its ranks. In doing so, they internalize, and perhaps even become more loyal believers of, the standards of the greater Catholic, heteronormative community. Indeed, this is perhaps captured by the fact that the term “*Bakla*” is used both as the label for a part of their identity but also as the label

to capture attitudes and behaviors that they find undesirable. This presents a scenario wherein the prejudicial sentiment of the heteronormative majority is also subscribed to and internalized by the object of the prejudice – the Bakla themselves.

Notes

The description of Esculturas PH (Esculturas Religiosas en las Filipinas) states that it is “an advocacy group that highlights the essence of religious images and church traditions. It is composed of Camareros or stewards of holy images; Santo enthusiasts; and advocates of church traditions. The group was founded by Christian Layug on December 29, 2007 originally on Flickr then it was transferred to Facebook Groups on July 27, 2013.” Its rationale is as follows:

1. One of the leading proponents in promoting the essence of holy images in the Church. It also advocates proper veneration and presentation. 2. A defender of church traditions to emphasize the maintenance and keepsake of a piety that nurtures devotion and faith. 3. Inspire people to be witnesses of Christ and to live in the word of God.” Meanwhile, its core values are: “1. Caritas - Helping People in Need 2. Pietas - Sincere Devotion and of Being Religious 3. Fraternitas - Comradeship Within the Group”

The description of the Facebook group Ang Chaka! Kabugera! reads: “Dito ninyo masasaksihan ang mga kapangitan at ka chakahan ng mga camarero ng mga poon. Mga binakla, pinaglaruan, binaboy na banal na imahe bawal dito ang oei mg react at banal banalan. Pangising sa matitigas na ulo at mapaglarong mga bakla.”

The group Anyare?! has the following as group description: ““BATO BATO SA LANGIT... ANG TAMAAN, HUWAG MAGAGALIT... ANG PIKON AY LAGING TALO... ITINATAMA LANG PO NAMIN KAYO.... Let this be our guide: DIRECTORY ON POPULAR PIETY AND THE LITURGY: PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES””

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