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Representations of Suffering. Confronting Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ and Rituals of Self-Flagellation and Crucifixion in the Philippines

The passion of Jesus Christ seems to have fascinated people throughout the centuries. It has been re-enacted in various ways. One thinks of the countless passion-plays or the passion by famous composers like Bach. In the 20th century, the cinema became the main venue for re-enactments of the passion. Just to mention a few classics: Nicklas Ray's "King of Kings" (1961), Pasolini's "The Gospel According to Matthew" (1964), "Jesus Christ Superstar" (1972), Monty Pythons "Life of Brian" (1976), and Martin Scorsese's "Last Temptation of Christ" (1988).¹ They all produced their own version of the life and death of Jesus. And many of them caused debates. So did lately Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

This paper aims to contribute to that debate and add a new dimension to the discussion: first by criticizing Gibson's version of the passion, and then by confronting it with the rituals of self-flagellation and crucifixion in the Philippines. I shall thereby elaborate two very different ways of representing the suffering of Jesus Christ.

1. Critiquing The Passion of the Christ

Usually the critique of a movie starts with the description of its narrative. But in the first place, the story of the passion of Christ is well known. Moreover, there is not much of a story to tell in this case, since Gibson in his movie is not telling a story, but rather describing an event – in other words, the movie does not have a narrative structure. How then does Gibson represent the event of Christ's suffering? Let me describe my perception: The event starts in the garden of Gethsemane. There we can observe Jesus fighting with Satan – an encounter the Bible does not tell us about. In this fight Jesus proves to be a

¹ See Drehli Robnik, "Jesusfilm: Sandalen, Skandale, Bananas", in: *Falter* No. 12/2004, 57.

real super-hero, and he will prove that again and again throughout the movie. For two long (and rather boring) hours, the audience will witness Jesus being battered, abused, tortured, and treated in a violent way that is indeed beyond any human imagination. After the flagellation, which lasts for 12 minutes (!), Jesus' body looks more like a hamburger than a human body. Yet still he carries his cross. Again and again he falls, under the weight of the cross and under the slashes of the Roman soldiers. Again and again he gets up. I personally found that quite a macho performance, and I was reminded of the Rocky movies I watched as a kid despite my parents' disapproval. Rocky gets knocked down and gets up again to continue his fight until he finally wins. So does Jesus. He successfully endures all the pain and the suffering, and by so doing he redeems men from sin. In his resurrection, he overcomes death.

The resurrection, by the way, is shown in the final scene of the movie, rather briefly and in an embarrassing way – for two minutes one sees Jesus sitting in his tomb, his tortured body fully restored, the pall beside him looking like a leaking air mattress. This is very much according to the general theology of the movie: all aspects of the biblical message are subordinated to Jesus' suffering. Resurrection is not the climax of Gibson's re-narration of the passion, but some kind of postscript: it matters only as far as it demonstrates that Jesus suffering was "successful." Some scenes of Jesus' life are shown, but only in flashbacks: Jesus teaching, the last supper, Jesus as a carpenter, Jesus as a child who falls and is caught and comforted by his mother, Jesus saving the adulteress who is about to be stoned to death and who – in contrast to the biblical original – is equated with Mary Magdalene. His life, his teaching, the social message lose their importance in the face of Christ's suffering. Thus, what *really* matters is Christ's suffering. And Christ's suffering is not from this world, meaning Christ is shown to suffer in a way no human being could stand. His suffering is unique, cannot be outbid, is beyond human reality and any historical human suffering.

At the same time, Gibson interprets Jesus' suffering as a struggle with evil. And evil as it is portrayed in this movie is also far from any account of evil in human reality and history. Here, evil is portrayed as a metaphysical power or dimension, represented by Satan, who wants to seduce Jesus not only in Gethsemane, but throughout the whole story. Satan is always there, witnessing Jesus' suffering, smirking at Jesus as if to say: see, this is what you get when you think you can and must fight me.

By portraying Jesus as a lonely hero who bears unbearable pain, by representing his suffering as a struggle with evil/Satan, and by subordinating the

whole biblical message to the importance of Christ's suffering, Gibson narrates the passion as an event beyond history. He erases and neglects the historical context of the biblical story itself as well as the historical contexts of today's readers. The political and social content of the Gospel gets lost. That a re-narration of the passion doesn't need to be a-historical at all was shown by Pasolini in his movie "The Gospel According to Matthew" (1964). Pasolini sites his narration of the passion within the context of the poor, agricultural south of Italy, and thus links it to a critique of the unjust social relations between the North and the South of Italy in the 1960s.

But Gibson tries to hide the fact that his narration of the passion is a-historical. Indeed, he claims to tell the story as *it really was*. To highlight the "historical" character of his movie, he uses the languages Latin and Aramaic. Nevertheless, at least to me those ancient languages emphasize more the mythological and a-historical character of Gibson's representation of the passion – aside from the fact that the Gospel was written neither in Latin nor in Aramaic, but in Greek.

Gibson's representation of the passion of Christ as an a-historical event is also a crucial point when it comes to the anti-Semitism present in the movie. His a-historical re-narration of the Gospel, which at the same time attempts to give the impression of a factual report (as *it really was*), obscures the historical circumstances in which the Gospel was written as well as the theological message that shapes the biblical texts. Therefore, people who are unaware that Jesus himself was a Jew and that the gospels talk about a conflict between different Jewish groups (and not about a conflict between Jews and Christians), get the anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jews as God-killers confirmed. The members of the Sanhedrin are portrayed as "gaunt and saturnine characters". The Jewish people are depicted as mob demanding Jesus' death. In contrast to the Jews, Pilate is shown to be a thoughtful person who gets engaged in a philosophical discussion about truth with his wife, and who wants to protect Jesus – another non-biblical and a-historical account, since it obscures the brutality of Roman imperial rule as well as the fact that crucifixion was a common lethal punishment for Jews and other people who were subjugated by the Romans and fought for freedom.²

² For a closer analysis of the role of the Jews in the Gospel – especially in the Gospel According to Matthew, which talks about Pilate washing his hands in innocence and about the Jewish people calling for Jesus' crucifixion – see Andreas Bedebender, "'Sein Blut komme über uns ...': Überlegungen zum Passionstext Matthäus 27,1-26", in: *Texte und Kontexte* 87 (3/2000) 32-48.

This anti-Semitic message of the movie is heightened by other anti-Semitic motifs which were prominent during the 19th century. In fact, Gibson gets those motifs – as well as other non-biblical motifs like Satan, the exaggerated torture of Jesus or Jesus falling down a bridge – from a specific source: the visions of the supposedly stigmatized Augustinian nun Anna Katharina Emmerich (1774-1824), which were written down and published in 1833 by the romantic author Clemens Brentano.³ Anti-Semitic motifs in the book quoted in *The Passion of the Christ* are: Judas, bedevilled by regret, runs away and is chased by kids with ugly, distorted faces. The background of this scene can be found in Emmerich's visions. She sees Judas running away, while Satan whispers curses into his ears about the valley of Hinnom, where the Jews are said to have sacrificed their children. Another anti-Semitic motif: According to the Gospel, the curtain in the Jewish temple is torn apart after Jesus' death. In Emmerich's vision and in Gibson's movie the temple tumbles down and buries the members of the Sanhedrin.⁴

Another interesting aspect in the movie that requires critical examination is gender-constructions and gender-roles: Satan is portrayed as a mannish woman: a probably female body, bald, with very angular features and a male voice. Looking at Satan, one is not quite sure whether one sees a woman or a man. The impression of a woman prevails though. Hence, evil is not only represented as female, it is moreover represented by unfeminine femininity and crossing gender boundaries. Indeed feminine in a stereotypical sense are Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene, who together with John compassionately accompany Jesus all the way. While Jesus' suffering is heroic and finally successful (redeeming men from sin by fighting and triumphing over evil), the suffering of the women is just passive. Jesus fights the pain, gets up again and again after falling under the weight of the cross and being thrown to the ground by the Roman soldiers. The women throw themselves onto the ground, crying. While Jesus' body gets more and more distorted, Mary Magdalene gets more and more sexy. After Jesus' flagellation, the two Marys wipe his blood. In order to do that Mary Magdalene takes off her veil. For the rest of the movie, she will be unveiled, her hair getting more and more messy, her face getting dirty and sweaty, her whole appearance more sexy. Thus, the way Mary Magdalene

³ Anna Katharina Emmerich / Clemens von Brentano, *Das bittere Leiden unseres Herrn Jesu Christi* (Christiana Verlag: Stein am Rhein 2003).

⁴ See Friedrich Pieper, "Gibsons 'Passion': Eine Wiederkehr deutscher antijüdischer Traditionen des 19. Jahrhunderts", in <http://www.jcrelations.net/de/?id=2247>

is portrayed repeats a stereotypical representation of women: sexualized on the one hand and suffering on the other hand.

In commentaries and critiques about Gibson's movie, it was sometimes compared to rituals of self-flagellation and crucifixion stemming from Spanish colonial Catholicism which are still practised e.g. in the Philippines. This comparison mostly is just mentioned *en passant* and not elaborated. I intend to elaborate this comparison and thereby show that there is a significant difference in the representation of Christ's suffering in *The Passion of the Christ* and in Lenten rituals of self-flagellation and crucifixion.

2. The Suffering Christ and Good Friday Rituals in the Philippines

The image of the suffering Christ is indeed a very popular image of Jesus Christ in Filipino (folk) religiosity.⁵ It is highlighted in different ritualistic practices, among them self-flagellation and even crucifixion on Good Friday.

During Lent 2003, I had the chance to observe those rituals in the province of Pampanga, located in the Island of Luzon, two to three hours by car north from Manila. When one drives to Pampanga on Good Friday, one will see self-flagellants in almost every village one passes by. In small groups, men with naked upper bodies, many of them with hooded heads, some with leaf-crowns on their head, walk along the streets and whip their backs with lashes, which usually have pieces of wood, ropes and even razor blades on their ends. This is quite a bloody exercise, even though the wounds on their backs supposedly heal within three days. At the same time, people gather at the house of a member of their respective communities to read the *pasyon*, an epic which re-narrates the passion. Reading the *pasyon* or *pabasa ng pasyon* is a widespread practice in the Philippines, as is the performance of passion-plays or *senakulo*. The *pasyon* is read – or rather chanted – mostly during Lent and Holy Week. People assemble in the house of a community-member, where the owner erects a little altar. If the house is not big enough, people also gather in front of the house. The *pasyon* is also sung at other occasions; for example, it is sung for 24 hours over a dead person's body or in courtship rituals.

⁵ See Benigno P. Beltran S.V.D., *The Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus the Christ* (Devine World Publications: Manila 1987), Leonardo N. Mercado, *Christ in the Philippines* (Devine World University Publications: Tacloban City 1982) and *Inculturation and Filipino Theology* (Asian Pacific Missiological Series No.2; Devine World Publications: Manila 1992).

In an urban-poor community in San Fernando, the capital of the province Pampanga, crucifixions are performed on Good Friday. The event is organized by the *barangay* (municipality, community) not by the Church.⁶ Hundreds of people – tourists, journalists, some locals and street vendors – gather in a big sandy site with a little hill on its far end, where three wooden crosses are positioned. Around noon time, the site gets more and more crowded. Everybody is waiting for the group, which is performing a passion-play or *senakulo* – Jesus, his mother, Mary Magdalene, Veronica, some Roman soldiers – to arrive. At the foot of the hill, some of the 14 men and one woman who are going to be crucified are preparing themselves for the event by praying or just waiting. Finally, they arrive and ascend the hill. One sees the man who performs as Jesus and will be the first to be crucified pray. Then things get started. The first three men, Jesus and the two criminals who were crucified together with him, are nailed onto the cross. Nails are driven through their palms. To support the weight of their bodies, their arms also get tied to the cross with ropes. Then the cross is erected. They stay on the cross for about two minutes, then they are put down and other people are nailed onto the cross.

Who are the people who flagellate themselves and have themselves be crucified? What are their motivations for these practices? Generally, people who participate in self-flagellations and crucifixions belong to the poorest of the poor.⁷ Most of them are religious, yet they do not attend mass. According to

⁶ The official church disapproves these practices.

⁷ A few notes on poverty in the Philippine context:

According to the government, which says that a family of six in the national capital region needs a minimum of 280 pesos (= at about 5 dollars) per day in order to not be considered poor, around 30% of the 80 million Filipinos live below the poverty line. The NGO IBON estimates that a family of six would need around 545 pesos a day in order to cover the costs of their basic needs (including health care and education provided by public institutions). Based on that figure, 88% of the population are considered to be poor. The UN Report on the Human Development Index for 2003 states that the Philippines are one of 56 countries which were poorer in 2002 than they were in 1990.

The biggest problems of the poor are the instability of their income and lack of land. 60-70% of the population work in the informal sector (as day-tillers in agriculture, fishers, laundry-women, domestic helpers, street vendors etc.). They earn little, have no stable income and no social security. 80% of the people living in the countryside do not own the land where they are living nor the fields where they are working. In the cities, thousands live in so called squatter-areas, slums built on land that currently is not used by its owner. These homes can be demolished any time and they themselves can be displaced any time (See Rosario Bella Guzman, "The 'Strong Republic' Falls in Deeper Crisis", in: IBON Foundation Inc. [ed.], *Birdtalk: Economic and Political*, Manila July 2003, 3-17).

Father Vic, professor for New Testament Studies at the diocesan seminary in San Fernando, who accompanied me to the site, the churches are too neat and nice for them, the liturgy is alienating. Moreover, the parish-churches would be too small to host them (the population of one parish usually consists of around 30,000 people), and they are also too far away from their homes (the poor cannot afford the cost of transportation to go to church). What is meaningful to them though are practices of folk religiosity – which are sometimes rejected by the official church and sometimes tolerated – like devotion to the suffering Christ, the reading of the *pasyon*, self-flagellation and crucifixions. These are rituals people can identify with.

There are various reasons for people to indulge in self-flagellation and to let themselves be crucified.⁸ Some do it for penance; they think they have committed a grave sin and want to make up for it. Others want to ask a favour from God – a concept which is called *panata* (literally a vow) in Tagalog. I was able to talk to one man who, while waiting to be nailed onto the cross, told me that he started doing the crucifixion ritual because his mother was always sick, and they could not afford a proper medical treatment. He was getting crucified for the seventh time that year, and since he started it, his mother had not gotten sick. The *panata* also can have a trans-generational dimension. Some sons are carrying on their fathers' vows. A third reason for self-flagellation and crucifixion is purification. Some people believe these rituals can strengthen the body by letting out impurities. A fourth motive is *damay*, or a test of friendship with the suffering Christ. Last, but not least – this refers to crucifixions only – some people do it for money. They get paid by the *barangay* (municipality) which organizes the event.

The fact that some people get paid for being crucified indicates that the rituals of crucifixion in San Fernando are highly commercialized. The passion-plays and crucifixions attract tourists and media from all over the world, and hence not only contribute to a certain fame of the *barangay* where they take place – which, as mentioned above, is one of the poorest *barangays* in San Fernando – but also provide economic opportunities, especially for the street vendors who sell food and drinks during the event. All in all, the prevailing atmosphere during the event is as much a spectacle as a spiritual exercise.⁹ It would

⁸ Motives according to Father Vic and Mercado, *Inculturation*, 142f.

⁹ This analysis refers to the crucifixion only. The self-flagellations are practiced all over the province, also in very remote areas where no tourist sets foot. They are not commercialized, and – even if there might be a certain spectacular element to it – are indeed spiritual exercises.

be interesting to elaborate the elements of spectacle and performance in the crucifixions, yet this paper aims to explore the representations of Christ's suffering and the theological implications of these rituals and their relation to Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

3. Confronting Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* with Filipino Lenten Rituals of Self-flagellation and Crucifixion

What makes the representation of Christ's suffering in Filipino Lenten rituals of self-flagellation and crucifixion different from the one in Gibson's movie?

First of all, these rituals and their representation of Christ's suffering are situated in a specific historical context. The historical message of the Gospel is integrated into the specific context of the people practising these rituals. Not only those who flagellate themselves or get crucified, but the people as a community, by reading the *pasyon*, identify themselves with the suffering Christ. Therefore, secondly, the rituals of self-flagellation and crucifixion embedded in the reading of the *pasyon* have a collective character, whereas Gibson follows the highly individualized script of the lonely hero.

A closer look at the *pasyon* reveals how people identify with Jesus Christ. The most common and popular *pasyon*-text is the *Casaysayan nang Pasiong Mahal ni Jesuchristong Panginoon Natin* (the Account of the Sacred Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ), also referred to as *Pasyon Pilapil* or *Pasyon Hene-sis*. It is named *Pasyon Hene-sis*, because it begins with the story of creation and ends with the Last Judgement. *Pasyon Pilapil* refers to Fr. Mariano Pilapil, who in 1814 edited a *pasyon*-text of unknown authorship already used by people. The *Pasyon Pilapil* is the least polished of three Church-approved texts of the *pasyon* which have seen print. From a literary and theological standpoint, the *Pasyon Pilapil* is not remarkable. Its significance lies in its being a "mirror of the collective consciousness."¹⁰ Being one of the few literary works available to the rural population, the *pasyon* in the 19th century as well as today functions as a traditional social epic. People learn it by heart as a child since they hear it on many occasions. Hence, it is not surprising that the *pasyon* shaped folk consciousness and at the same time became an expression of folk memory.

The *pasyon* talks about Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, and provides powerful images of transition: from despair to hope, from misery to salvation, from death to life, from ignorance to knowledge, from dishonour to

¹⁰ Reynaldo Clemena Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Atteneo de Manila University Press: Quezon City 41997).

purity etc. Furthermore, it provides the peasant masses with an image of Jesus they can identify with:

“He is from Galilee,
A man poor and lowly
Who shelters in others’ roofs.

Furthermore, his father
Is just a simple carpenter
Devoid of fame and wealth
Living in poverty
Without property of his own.

His behaviour and character
Are just as we described
But, you ask, can he claim
To be a gentleman of rank?
No, absolutely not.”¹¹

Jesus is portrayed as a simple man, poor and uneducated like those who read the *pasyon*. The same can be said about the disciples:

“Poor and lowly people
Without worth on earth
Ignorant people
Without any education.

These were the ones selected
By Jesus the beloved master
To popularise his teachings
To perform astonishing feats
Here in the universe.”¹²

So, in Filipino folk religiosity Christ’s suffering is not – like in Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* – something “out of this world” or beyond human reality. On the contrary, the identification of the people with Jesus Christ implies that their suffering mirrors the suffering of Jesus.

¹¹ Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17f.

This identification with the suffering Christ by the poor reading the *pasyon* and performing self-flagellation and crucifixion can be understood as a ritualistic expression of what Latin American proponent of theology of liberation Jon Sobrino calls “the crucified people.”¹³ The notion of the crucified people maintains that Christ is not only present in the liturgy – as traditional theology tends to phrase it – but also in today’s victims of oppression, injustice and violence. The crucified people mark Christ’s presence in history. In other words, the notion of the crucified people aims to understand the reality of suffering people – the reality of the poor to be more precise – as a *theological* reality:

From the viewpoint of the Third World, there is no doubt that the cross indeed exists, not only the individual cross, but collective crosses: the crosses of whole peoples. In the face of the present situation, I. Ellacuría used to say that it is important to talk about the ‘crucified God’, but it is no less or even more important to talk about the ‘crucified people’. By that their reality is ennobled to a theological reality.¹⁴

Furthermore, the notion of crucified people points to the “historical catastrophe” which the Third World is facing, and provides a term which is more capable of describing the situation of the Third World as a whole than terms like “the South,” “developing countries” or even “Third World.”

Sobrino points out the three-fold implication of the notion of the crucified people. On the factual level, the cross points not only to poverty but to death. People die slowly because of poverty. Dying too early is one of the three elements which according to Gustavo Gutierrez define poverty.¹⁵ On the ethical-historical level, the notion of crucified people alludes to institutionalized violence: being crucified is not just any death, it is a specific way to die: crucifixion was the death penalty for people who waged revolution against the

¹³ See Jon Sobrino, *Christologie der Befreiung*, Bd. 1 (Matthias Grünewald: Mainz 1992), 345-368.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 345 [translation MKM]: “Aus der Sicht der Dritten Welt kann kein Zweifel daran sein, daß es das Kreuz gibt, und zwar nicht nur individuelle, sondern kollektive Kreuze: die Kreuze ganzer Völker. Angesichts der gegenwärtigen Situation der Dritten Welt pflegte I. Ellacuría zu sagen, es sei gut, vom ‘gekreuzigten Gott’ zu sprechen, es sei aber genauso oder noch wichtiger, vom ‘gekreuzigten Volk’ zu sprechen. Damit hat er die Wirklichkeit der Völker in der Dritten Welt zu einer theologalen Wirklichkeit erhoben.“

¹⁵ The other defining characteristics of poverty according to Gutierrez are insignificant/marginal existence and guiltlessness for the experienced suffering. See Gustavo Gutierrez, *Theologie der Befreiung* (Matthias Grünewald: Mainz 1992).

Roman empire. Being crucified means being murdered by a powerful apparatus. Hence, the cross indicates that the victim is juxtaposed to a perpetrator, and the perpetrator does not fall from heaven but represents unjust structures or – to phrase it with a liberation-theological term – structural sin. On the theological level, the cross is important because it reminds us of important concepts of Christian faith: sin and grace, damnation and salvation. The notion of crucified people helps the religious consciousness connect the reality of the poor, suffering and disenfranchised with these central theological concepts. If, according to Sobrino, Jesus Christ's suffering was a historical reality which brings redemption/salvation, redemption/salvation must also be understood in the realm of history. This implies that redemption/salvation comes not only from the crucified Christ but also from the crucified people when they struggle and resist oppression, exploitation and poverty.

When we understand the Filipino rituals of self-flagellation and crucifixion as a spiritual, ritualistic expression of being a crucified people, we will notice that Jesus' suffering is not – as Gibson would like to make us think – beyond human reality and experience, but is indeed essentially connected to human suffering. People identify with his suffering and believe and know that he identifies himself with them. This interpretation, of course, is the effort of a theologian trying to make sense out of those rituals. In a way it is by no means surprising that those rituals are so meaningful to people, especially the poor masses in rural areas. Their life is basically suffering anyway. If one's life is suffering, one's spirituality – in order to be meaningful and connected to one's everyday experience – will be based on suffering, too. It is precisely because of this connection to everyday experiences that the described Good Friday rituals become meaningful expressions of faith, which are situated beyond the Church doctrine.

In addition to that, those rituals gain meaning from their spectacular quality. According to liberation theologian Luzenir Caixeta, the position of the Third World and its people has shifted from dependence to worthlessness.¹⁶ The resources of the Third World get less important, its peoples are less needed in the working-force. They neither produce nor consume, hence they are useless. Moreover, the Third World becomes a threat to the rich North and West

¹⁶ Luzenir Caixeta, "Befreiungstheologie in Lateinamerika" (unpublished paper presented at the seminar "Globalisierung als Herausforderung an ethisches Denken und pastorales Handeln im Kontext der 'Kirche der Reichen' in Österreich und der 'Kirche der Armen' auf den Philippinen", Vienna, Summer semester 1998).

(migration, over-population, pollution, sicknesses etc.). Being third-world not only means being poor and exploited, but being excluded from economic, political and cultural participation, and therefore existing without being recognized by society. In this situation of non-recognition, rituals of self-flagellation and crucifixion provide the chance for the poor to step forward from behind the curtain of marginality into the spotlight of public attention – at least in one's own community. By being transformed into a ritual, everyday experiences of suffering find a venue of public expression. Through the attention people get for performing these rituals, they become "somebody," even if only once a year and for a few hours.¹⁷

4. Ritual of Acquiring Power

So far, I have tried to point out the main difference between Gibson's representation of Christ's suffering as a-historical and beyond human reality on the one hand and the representation of Christ's suffering in Filipino folk religiosity as closely linked to the historical experiences of the poor. I have tried to make sense of the practices of *pabasa ng pasyon*, self-flagellation and crucifixion from the perspective of liberation theology.

However, we have to ask whether this interpretation fails to recognize the original purpose ascribed to the *pasyon* by the Spanish colonizers, which was clearly a domesticating one: The *pasyon* was meant to inculcate loyalty to the Spaniards among the indigenous people and to make them resigned to the status quo. Did this strategy of the Spaniards work? Are these rituals an expression of the acceptance of colonial oppression and suffering due to poverty?

According to Reynaldo Ileto, the *pasyon* developed a function which most probably was not intended by the Spaniards: "to provide lowland Philippine society with a language for articulating its own values, ideals, and even hopes of liberation. After the destruction or decline of native epic traditions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Filipinos nevertheless continued to maintain a coherent image of the world and their place in it through their familiarity with the *pasyon*, an epic that appears to be alien in content, but upon closer examination in a historical context, reveals the vitality of the Filipino mind."¹⁸ The *pasyon* replaced the epics sung in pre-colonial times at the graves of local

¹⁷ However, this should not obliterate the fact that there is always a danger of exoticizing these rituals and more so the people performing them.

¹⁸ Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, 12.

hero-martyrs (*bayani*), which functioned as collective memory and historiography. The Spanish colonizers not only banned the singing of those epics, but prohibited any public speech. Accordingly, under the censorship of Spanish colonial rule the *pasyon* was one of the few means of public speech and made available a “language for venting ill feelings against oppressive friars, principals, and agents of the state,”¹⁹ for example, through the idea found in the *pasyon*, that in comparison to a beautiful *loob* (inner self) social status based on wealth and education has no real value. This notion contradicts the prevailing practice of the ruling class at that time of attracting and maintaining followers by wealth and of perpetuating itself by education. There are more specific themes like that to be found in the *pasyon*, which “far from encouraging docility and acceptance of the status quo, actually probe the limit of prevailing social values and relationships.”²⁰

Still, Iletto states, whether the *pasyon* encourages resignation or hope, subservience or defiance, will always be open to argument, since the meaning of the text is not fixed but depends on the social and historical context. Iletto shows, though, how the *pasyon* among other practices of folk religiosity in the Philippines encouraged revolt against the Spaniards in the 19th century. In order to do so, he develops an alternative historical perspective on the revolutionary movements in the Philippines in the 19th century. What is usually studied is the “great tradition,” the anti-colonial struggle against Spanish colonial rule led by the *illustrados*, the Filipino elite, which often was educated in Europe and from there supposedly brought the idea of enlightenment and national independence to the Philippines. Iletto, however, is interested in what he calls the “little tradition,” a peasant tradition of unrest, which often is considered anti-nationalist, irrational, millenarian and doomed to fail. He demonstrates how the peasant masses created their categories of meaning which shaped the revolutionary events and how they conceptualized a world-view which underlies their struggle. Investigations in the little tradition require the use of sources from below such as poems, songs, folk sayings, confessions, prayers – and the *pasyon*. According to Iletto, it was precisely through folk religious traditions (which usually are said to promote passivity), and especially through the way the masses experienced Holy Week, that the style of peasant brotherhoods and uprisings was shaped.

¹⁹ Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

To comprehend Ileta's argument, it is useful to say a few words about folk religious traditions. Folk religiosity or folk Catholicism is to be distinguished from official Catholicism. It "includes elements, at times viewed as harmless and at others condemned by Church authorities, which are all derived from and sanctioned by the community where these are believed and practised as expressive of human needs and longings. (...)

Folk Catholicism has implications for the way reality is perceived, constructed and maintained by the masses. It is related to the totality of social relations because its rituals renew and validate fundamental convictions about how reality is constituted and what the human being's place is in the scheme of things."²¹ In a "catholic underworld," doctrines and rituals of official Catholicism are modified to suit local needs and conditions. Many times, official Catholic doctrine is syncretized with animistic beliefs and practices. Folk religiosity is how the poor experience God and appropriate the truth in their way of life. Even though popular religiosity is always ambiguous and one should be careful not to romanticize it, liberation theologians have come to an understanding of folk religiosity as the poor's "vehicle and articulation of their hopes and aspirations. In a society where the vehicles of articulation are controlled by the elite few, popular religious practice has become the outlet for the people, the 'sigh of the oppressed'."²²

Now, using the framework of Ileta's work, I want to attempt to read self-flagellations and crucifixions as a ritual of acquiring power instead of a representation of suffering. Ileta, referring to Benedict Anderson, notes that the Western concept of power is an abstraction and a way of describing relationships between individuals and/or groups. Generally speaking, to the Western mind, power refers to social status, formal office, wealth, weapons etc. On the other hand, Javanese (Benedict) and Filipino (Ileta) concepts of power derive from an animistic, cosmologic worldview and view power as a formless, creative energy, which can be acquired through extreme asceticism, meditation, ritual purification. Self-flagellation thus can be a form of ritual purification of the *loob*²³ (see motives for people engaged in these rituals, mentioned above). Purity here is not a moralistic concept but is supposed to enable the concentration of power. Therefore, as Ileta states:

²¹ Beltram, *Christology*, 5.

²² Arche Ligo, "Liberation Themes in Philippine Popular Religiosity: A Case Study", in: *Voices from the Third World* XVI (2/1993) 137.

²³ *Loob* can be roughly translated with "inner self".

... those whose loob are pure, serene, and controlled, have 'special powers' granted to them by Christ. They can control the elements, cure the sick, speak in different tongues, interpret signs, and foretell the future. (...) Surely the friars did not intend the *pasyon* themes of self-purification and renewal to amplify indigenous notions of concentrating the 'creative energy' of the universe in one's loob. But in the end, the colonized had their way.²⁴

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show that Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is problematic – and ultimately bad theology – because it separates Christ's suffering from human suffering in history. In contrast, rituals of self-flagellation and crucifixion embedded in the reading of the *pasyon* as they are practised by rural poor communities in the Philippines contain a representation of Christ's suffering which is situated in a concrete historical and political context. I have tried to read those practices as ritualistic expressions of being a crucified people and therefore as marking Christ's presence in history. Furthermore, I have tried to read those practices as a way of acquiring power based on the world-view of animistic traditions and folk Catholicism.

Some Christians claim though that by watching *The Passion of the Christ* they can meditate on Christ's suffering. I would like to answer them: if you want to meditate on Christ's suffering look at today's crucified people. But watch out – you might see more than meditation when you look at them. Behind poverty, death and broken bodies you might see people who, despite being forgotten by the world, still live their lives in meaningful ways and create meaning beyond Church doctrine, and are possibly fighters for social change. What Iletto says about poor Filipinos revolting against Spanish colonial rule in the 19th century also can be true for today's poor and disenfranchised: in the end, they will have their way.

Die Passion Christi hat Menschen durch die Jahrhunderte fasziniert. Immer wieder und in vielfältigen Formen wurde sie in Szene gesetzt. Eine der jüngsten Re-Inszenierungen, die breites Echo gefunden und lebhaft Diskussionen ausgelöst hat, ist Mel Gibsons Film *The Passion of the Christ*. Dieser Aufsatz setzt sich kritisch mit Gibsons Version der Passion Christi auseinander und vergleicht sie mit Selbstgeißelungs- und Kreuzigungsritualen auf den Philippinen, in denen die Passion Christi alljährlich in der Karwoche nachgespielt wird. Damit wird eine Parallele, die in

²⁴ Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, 26.

manchen kritischen Kommentaren zu Gibsons Film en passant gezogen wurde, näher beleuchtet und in ihrer Unmittelbarkeit hinterfragt. Bei genauer Betrachtung lassen sich nämlich signifikante Unterschiede zwischen dem Film *The Passion of the Christ* und philippinischen Passionsritualen hinsichtlich der Repräsentation des Leidens Christi erkennen. Während ersterer das Leiden Christi enthistorisiert und es durch die Inszenierung Christi als unvergleichlich leidenden Superhelden von menschlichem Leiden abtrennt, situieren philippinische Selbstgeißelungs- und Kreuzigungsrituale, die in materiell armen, ländlichen Gemeinden veranstaltet werden und in das traditionelle Beten der *Pasyon* eingebettet sind, das Leiden Christi in einem konkreten, historischen, politischen Kontext. Sie können gelesen werden als ritueller Ausdruck eines gekreuzigten Volkes (Jon Sobrino), als Ausdruck der Präsenz Christi in der Geschichte und als Akt der Selbstermächtigung im Rahmen animistischer und volksreligiöser Tradition.

La passion du Christ n'a cessé, pendant des siècles, de fasciner les hommes et d'être mise en scène sous des formes très variées. Une des plus récentes remises en scène qui eut un écho retentissant et suscita de vives discussions est le film de Mel Gibson *La Passion du Christ*. L'article de Maria Katharina Moser analyse d'un point de vue critique la version donnée par Gibson de la Passion du Christ et la compare avec des rituels d'autoflagellation et de crucifiement au cours desquels la Passion du Christ est représentée tous les ans durant la Semaine Sainte aux Philippines. Les parallèles qui furent accessoirement établis dans certains commentaires critiques sur le film de Gibson sont ainsi examinés de plus près et remis en question dans leur immédiateté. En y regardant de plus près, on reconnaît, en effet, des différences révélatrices dans la représentation de la souffrance du Christ entre *La Passion du Christ* de Gibson et les rituels de Passion des Philippines. Tandis que la première représentation déhistorise la souffrance du Christ et la sépare de la souffrance humaine dans la mise en scène d'un Christ superhéros souffrant incomparablement, la seconde, celle des rituels d'autoflagellation et de crucifiement philippins organisée dans des paroisses rurales matériellement pauvres, et intégrée dans la traditionnelle prière de *Pasyon*, situe la souffrance du Christ dans un contexte concret, historique et politique. Ils peuvent être lus comme l'expression rituelle d'un peuple crucifié (Jon Sobrino), comme expression de la présence du Christ dans l'histoire et comme acte de pouvoir auto-proclamé dans le cadre d'une tradition religieuse populaire et animiste.

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