

From The Sacred To The Defiled: The Oblation Ritualized

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(in Memoriam)¹¹

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Abstract

The sacralizing narrative of the pasyon is linked to the Oblation as both the monument to heroism and the sacred symbol of sacrificial passion. First, the Oblation on its pedestal and plaza in Padre Faura and later in Diliman is analogous to a crucifix enshrined on a Catholic Church altar that, in pre-Vatican II days, was physically separated from the public of parokyanos via a railing or wrought iron gate to denote the inviolable division between "profane space" (the congregation) and "sacred space." It was an "inviolable space" fit only for proper rituals that interpellated the UP public (the "congregation") with its sacred symbol (the Oblation as a "Crucifix") through the intermediary organization of UP's administration and faculty (the "priesthood and its acolytes").

Second, then UP president Bocobo's uses of pasyon phrases and terms like "light," "dark," "sacred," and "martyr" to exhort readers to action is relocated from a marginal folk culture to a developing national bourgeois culture. This indicates not only Bocobo's appropriation of the pasyon language as a foundation for his heroic poetics, but also that the bourgeois and elite members of Philippine colonial society themselves were aware of and felt the effects of the pasyon discourse just as the "lower classes" did. Third, the "secular-as-sacred ceremonies" held since inauguration to later anniversary celebrations of the Oblation have asserted the symbol of sacrificial passion that the monument represents for the subsequent decades.

¹¹ **In Memoriam**, Dr. Reuben Cañete, professor and curator of the UP Asian Center, who died last February. This article is part of the second chapter of his dissertation, "Sacrificial Bodies: The Oblation and the Political Aesthetics of Masculine Representations in Philippine Visual Cultures" (2009), UP. He had sent the article to me [aafucero] with an email which reads, "Please find attached the relevant sections dealing with the narration and ritualization of nationalist patriotism within UP, the genealogy of the Oblation, and its sources from the mindset and biography of President Jorge C. Bocobo, as found in Chapter 2 of my dissertation titled "Sacrificial Bodies." I hope that this meets with your satisfaction."

Reprinting this article is our way of honoring our esteemed colleague, former associate editor of the *NRCP Research Journal*, and officer of Division XI, the Humanities.

Introduction

...One striking section in Bocobo-Olivar's account of the acceptance speech of Pres. Jorge Bocobo during the *Oblation's* inaugural on November 30, 1935 reads:

*In accepting the statue, President Bocobo said that it was of **great spiritual value** in the university where it was created (382, emphasis mine).*

Two quotations bolster Bocobo's interlinking between the martyric heroic commemoration, and the feeling of solidarity that demarcates the nationalist credo of the *Oblation* as an imitative model for nationalist passion. The first deals with Bocobo's call for schools to be centers for learning patriotism based on its consecratory ability to edify heroic sacrifice:

*Filipino patriotism should be made the inspiration, both of the content and the aims of inspiration. Love of country should be made an **intense passion**, an increasing purpose for a child as he grows up...Veneration for Filipino heroes, knowledge of Filipino achievements in the past, appreciation of the charm and beauty of the country, should be cultivated in and out of school. Above all, we should develop a sense of **consecration to our beloved Philippines** in order that the youth may consider their lives dedicated to this one supreme national objective: the future grandeur of our country (496, emphases mine).*

The second quotation reinforces this call for youthful consecration to the nationalist ideal by evoking "Spartan virtues" of (naturally!) masculine fortitude and strength:

The Filipino youth must toughen his moral fiber through a consecration of heart and soul at the altar of his country if he is to meet the challenges of Jose Rizal...The Filipino youth must learn sufficient initiative, determination and self-reliance to help work out the economic salvation of the country (497).

By locating these calls within the academy, and by addressing particularly the youthful student body to meet Rizal's challenge, presumably those enounced at *El Filibusterismo*, Bocobo reasserts the praxis of nationalist sacrifice idealized by the *Oblation* as a representation of that public's offering of themselves as "worthy" of the sacrifices of heroic martyrs, who, in turn, are seen as performative representatives of the primary "folk model": the crucified but redeeming Christ. A more thorough exposition of nationalism as a knowledge system that informs the *Oblation* as a sign for the public's re-imagination of itself as a sacrificial body will be discussed. For now it is worthwhile to remember that the "passionate feeling" that these thoughts engender to their publics lie in their (mixed gendered) public's grasp of these narratives as cross-referents of the *pasyon's* metalanguage of intensive material preparation, spiritual edification of the martyric model, and total consecration to a sacred objective, *i.e.*, the entry into paradise...

Body

How does the study establish the connection made between the sacralizing narrative of the pasyon (as transferred into the nationalist realm of informing the discourse on "messianic" martyrs) and its transference into a sacralized embodiment of sacrificial passion that is the Oblation? One answer was the repeated reference to the Oblation situated on its pedestal as a "sacred symbol" that is detached and unsullied by everyday, "merely mortal" events—analogous to a crucifix enshrined on a Catholic Church altar that, in pre-Vatican II days, was physically separated from the public of parokyanos via a railing or wrought iron gate to denote the inviolable division between "profane space" (the congregation) and "sacred space" (the altar and its officiating bureaucracy of priests and altar boys).

In this case, the space of the first Oblation (which from 1935-1947 meant the UP Manila quadrangle defined by the threshold between Palma Hall and Rizal Hall; and between 1948-1958, the plaza in front of Quezon Hall in UP Diliman) was thought of as a sanctum that not only defined UP's institutional identity for the benefit of "outsiders," but was also treated as an "inviolable space" fit only for proper rituals that interpellated the UP public (the "congregation") with its sacred symbol (the Oblation as a "Crucifix") through the intermediary organization of UP's administration and faculty (the "priesthood and its acolytes"). It is the ritualizing aspect of this discourse that confirms the spiritual and pasyon-like homology of the Oblation as a sanctified—therefore "inviolable"—statue, positioned like an atrial cross traditionally found in cathedral squares and plazas, and retaining the conflated function of these crosses as signs of sanctified public space. The Oblation's original erection within the UP Padre Faura Quadrangle also identifies the specific representation of a martyred hero as the university's "saint," which is analogous to the various sacred statues erected at a church plaza during the early 20th Century, such as the Kristong Hari. Public ceremonies sanctifying these sacred outdoor sculptures (that also stood on plinths) were common in the lowland Philippines during the turn of the century, climaxing in the devotion of the Kristong Hari as well as the Santo Rosario, Birhen ng Lourdes and Immaculada Concepcion during the Eucharistic Congress of 1937.

In the case of the Oblation, the presence of a living heroine, Gregoria de Jesus-Nakpil, the remarried widow of Andres Bonifacio, served as the sacred link to the memory of martyrdom during the Oblation's unveiling at UP Padre Faura on November 30, 1935, being one of the guests of honor who unveiled the statue's dedication plaque. President Bocobo's acceptance speech congratulated Tolentino for a job well done, and highlighted the key iconographic values of the statue and its pedestal as appropriate metaphors for the public reproduction of a religious passion for national sacrifice. Bocobo also charges his "congregation" with their duty to re-memorize and re-pay this represented sacrifice:

...On this solid and immovable base rests the spirit of sacrifice of our national heroes. There the heroic figure opens his arms and exposes himself to every manner of danger and suffering—without fear, without thought for himself and with his face towards the distant heights, the summits of abnegation and of patriotic duty...it is well, therefore, that our students and faculty members go about their daily tasks, should see in their midst this monument which stands

as a perpetual rebuke to every unworthy design and act, and is at the same time a continual encomium for every worthwhile and wholesome ambition and resolve. When a student is discouraged in his studies but beholds this monument to heroism, he shall, I am sure, take heart. When selfishness begins to loom in the vision of our students for their life plans, the sight of this remembrance of the sacrifices of our heroes will dispel selfishness from the horizon of the mind...I wish to thank the initiators of the idea for having added not only to **the artistic beauty of the campus, but also to the moral assets of the institution.** For certainly such a monument as this which embodies Rizal's ideals and high vision, Bonifacio's indomitable fighting spirit, Luna's military talent, the political philosophy of Mabini, and the supreme patriotism of all the unknown compatriots who have died in a thousand battlefields, I say a monument of such high symbolism is of great spiritual value on this campus where we strive especially to cultivate the spirit of patriotism (Bocobo-Olivar, 164).¹²

Note the narrative construction that interlinks "sacrifice," "seeing," and "moral values." They are situated in such a manner as to privilege not only the Oblation as a central symbol of sacrificial passion that results in patriotic duty; it is also crucial that one envisions this "symbology" to produce the requisite psychic reflection, and social action. The Oblation thus serves as a representation of what Foucault would consider as a "panoptic gaze," a discursive narrative that subjects and renders all who gaze at "him" to "his will."

It is the performance of this "duty" that we will briefly note in the period of ritualistic passion during the tenure of Bocobo as UP President. Between 1934 and 1939, Bocobo celebrated National Heroes Day using the combined student and faculty bodies of UP as his "congregation" to "re-enact" the sites of sacrifice. [There was] the 1934 "commemorative pilgrimage" at Fort Santiago; whereas the unveiling of the Oblation constituted the 1935 celebrations. By contrast, the 1936 celebrations seemed like a typical "University Day," featuring a flag ceremony at the UP campus, a military parade, first aid demonstration by coeds, and a "sham Battle of Burnham Green, complete with gas masks." The 1937-39 celebrations, on the other hand, hewed closer to the "pilgrimage" aspect of ritual re-memorization to the sites of passionate heroic sacrifice. The 1937 celebrations consisted of "a pilgrimage to Calamba, Laguna, birthplace of Jose Rizal. On this occasion, President Bocobo stressed the need for making the birthplace of the country's foremost hero a national shrine, adding that the idea of the pilgrimage was to call attention to the sad neglect of the historical spot another pilgrimage, this time to the Barasoain Church, marked the 1938 celebration."¹³

¹² In the published biography of her father, Celia Bocobo-Olivar in addition states that: "Late in 1896, the revolutionists from Concepcion, Tarlac under the leadership of Gen. Servillano Aquino attacked the Spanish garrison in Gerona, resulting in the population being caught in the crossfire. The next year, when [her father] was eleven, he was thrilled to be one of the throng that greeted Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo and his party as their train stopped at Gerona on its way to Dagupan after the revolutionary hero had just signed the Pact of Biac-na- Bato.

¹³ Another milestone was the arrival of Gen. Antonio Luna in Gerona to inspect the Filipino military hospital housed in the convent" (5). The location of Gerona as a train stop along the Manila-Dagupan railroad guaranteed that Jorge would see action throughout the events from 1896 to 1899.

Four thousand students participated in the pilgrimage during which occasion the U.P. placed a historical marker to commemorate the site of the Malolos Congress. This marker was unveiled by Miss Maria Paterno, niece of Pedro Paterno, president of the Congress" (383).

The year 1939 was particularly significant for ritualizing the Oblation, for as Bocobo-Olivar relates:

...President Bocobo initiated a ceremony of allegorical significance by the graduating class of the UP before the Oblation monument. It was featured by responsive readings from excerpts from Rizal's *El Filibusterismo* and Mabini's 'Decalogue,' and a symbolical dedication and recitation of the patriotic pledge by the graduating class. Other numbers included the singing of the 'Philippine Triumphant' and 'Aking Bayan' and the declamation of Guerrero's poem, 'Patria' by Alberto Cacio. Leading the entire graduating class in the responsive reading of Rizal's challenge to (the) youth and Mabini's moral invocations was Ahmed Garcia. Felix Makasiar, as the 'Spirit of Ibarra,' handed a lighted torch to one of the seniors, enjoining the new graduates to spread enlightenment to their countrymen. With this torch, the torches held by other seniors were lighted, and the latter lighted the torches of the rest of the class. It was impressive to see the entire class in cap and gown holding lighted torches. Macario Evangelista, as the 'Spirit of the Revolution,' gave a sword to a representative of the class, asking the seniors to defend their country as their fathers did in 1896 while Luz Balmaceda as 'Mother Philippines,' passed the Filipino flag to another member of the class, telling the graduates to consecrate their lives to the people. The graduating class was represented by Benjamin Roa, Ernesto Santos, and Ramon Fernandez. The graduating class (then) recited the following patriotic pledge: "I hereby renew my love of the Philippines, my country. This I do out of full-hearted gratitude to those who dared and died to make the Philippines lift up her head in rightful pride. Further, I hereby resolve to consecrate my life, my noblest thoughts, and my utmost endeavors to the freedom, the strength, the prosperity, and the happiness of my beloved country and people" (384-385).

Bonifacio Salamanca's evaluation of these rituals indicated its primary pedagogical function, and its brief tenure: "It was typically Bocobian, a bit ostentatious but not frivolous and, in a way, Bocobo's redemption of a forecast by an obviously ardent admirer...that "his rise to the presidency of the university is most fortunate for the youth of the land in whose welfare...he has always been interested. " Unfortunately for Bocobo, it was to be the first and last such ceremony during his presidency.¹⁴ Shortly thereafter, Quezon appointed him Secretary of Public Instruction..." (Salamanca, 217).

The memory of this particular event may have faded quickly, but the practisational discourse was still operant as the Oblation "moved base" to UP Diliman in February 1949. The asserted symbol of sacrificial passion that the Oblation represents for the subsequent decades would be elevated into a virtual dogma, especially during the ritual-conscious period of UP President Carlos P. Romulo, when

² Akin to the "biblical time" posited by Ileto as operating during the pasyon discourse of the Lent season. However, unlike the pasyon, heroic time and current time are kept separate by the canonical gap that distinguishes the former as ideal and almost god-like in their virtues and attributes; from the latter that can only imitate (if poorly) or sully the work already done.

¹⁴ Another guest of honor was then newly-elected Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon, whose own role in the Oblation's formation would be discussed in a later chapter.

the by-then accepted practice (among protesters, anyway) of dressing up the Oblation with black cloth would be construed and decried as "acts of sacrilege and desecration"...

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