

A phenomenological inquiry on the devotees of the miraculous image of San Agustin De Tanza, Philippines

LORENZO ALVIN T. CAPIO *, SUSANA R. REYES

¹ De La Salle Medical and Health Sciences Institute, Cavite, Philippines

² Asian Social Institute, Manila, Philippines

Abstract

Aim: This paper aims to provide greater clarity between Church authorities and churchgoers by gaining profound insights into the lived experiences of one of the popular devotions in Cavite, Philippines.

Method: This research uses a phenomenological method to describe, interpret, and reflect on the experiences of devotees who have visited the San Agustin shrine in search of signs that the miraculous image of San Agustin holds meaning for Catholic spirituality. Creswell (1998) suggests conducting in-depth interviews with six participants to achieve a multi-perspective understanding of a phenomenon. The current study followed this advice. The interviewees' permission was also required to use their audio recordings and their raw experiences to analyse data.

Findings: According to the results of this research, believers' faith in the miraculous image of San Agustin de Tanza stems solely from their personal encounters with God. If you ask Pieris (2007), this is not a form of idolatry or animism; rather, it is cosmic religiosity.

Implications/Novel Contribution: There is a need for a healthy and innovative relationship between churchgoers and church officials, and this study sheds light on some of the challenges the church faces today, like a growing number of churchgoers who are inactive in the church's activities. This research can potentially improve communication between laypeople and religious leaders over time.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Miracle, Religiosity, Devotees

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INTRODUCTION

Background and Motivation

The well-known Saint Augustine of Hippo was born in San Agustin de Tanza. The real name of the man commonly known as "San Agustin" is Aurelius Augustinus, and he was born on November 13, 354, in the city of Thagaste, in the province of Numidia, in what is now modern-day Algeria. The extraordinary depth of St. Augustine's impact on the worldwide Church is attested to by the fact that there are Augustinian communities in fifty different countries (Azhar, 2015; Zenit, 2007). Not only is he revered as one of the most creative minds in history, but his work spans the breadth of human knowledge (Portalie, 1907).

41 different communities make up the 96.30 square kilometre municipality of Tanza. With a population of 206,178 (2010 projection) and a population density of 1,784 persons/sq. Km, this 1st class municipality is considered highly urbanized due to several housing projects and proximity to the Cavite Export Processing Zone. The annual rate of expansion is quite healthy at 7.80%. About 33 kilometres to the south of Metro Manila. It is easily accessible by land and sea and is bounded to the north by Rosario, east by General Trias, and southeast by Trece Martires City. Naic is located southwest of Tanza, and Manila Bay forms the western boundary. The five coastal barangays of (Cavite, 2013; Tatiyanantakul, 2017) share 10.20 kilometres of coastline. Agriculture and fishing are the mainstays of the economy.

According to Austria (2006), two well-known accounts of the statue's discovery exist. Fire heralded the statue's arrival, and subsequent folklore in the Poblacion and the village pointed to a single instrument.

On July 26, 2016, members of the Sta. Cruz Parish in Tanza and devotees of San Agustin de Tanza gathered

* Corresponding author: Lorenzo Alvin T. Capio

† Email: alvin.capio@yahoo.com

to celebrate the parish's elevation to the Diocesan Shrine of St. Augustine. The local popular devotion has been widely influential on the lives of Christians in the municipality, the province, and even some neighbouring provinces for hundreds of years, which is something the Church acknowledges.

Significance of the Study

My sincere hope is that the members of the Local Church will benefit from this research into a religious phenomenon. This research can be used to shed light on some of the most pressing problems facing churches today, especially those facing churches in the New Evangelization era. Some churches are reportedly seeing a rise in the percentage of members who do not participate in church-related activities. A worrying fraction of Catholics is also leaving the church. The research results could help clergy members better comprehend laypeople's faith by placing it in the context of their individual experiences. In the long run, this research may help laypeople and clergy members work together in productive ways. This research may be useful for spreading devotion to San Agustin in today's rapidly expanding parishes and communities. San Agustin should be honoured with more than just a name for churches; his likeness should be prominently displayed, and appropriate devotions should be in place. The findings of this research can be shared with the devotees, and the faithful can be mobilized to go door-to-door testifying. This research was commissioned by the local government to improve relations between the church and the agencies responsible for promoting the town's annual fiesta, held in honour of St. Augustine on August 27 and 28, as well as other programs, such as the organization of festivals in the municipality, that have significant cultural and spiritual underpinnings.

Statement of the Problem

After presenting the context and objective of this study, these things led me to the following inquiries:

1. How may our lived experiences as devotees of San Agustin de Tanza be described and reflectively analyzed?
2. What essential meanings and insights may be learned from this study?

LITERATURE REVIEW

[Susana \(1999\)](#) the objective of the study is focused on the cultural changes in the community and the rise of integrating socio-communal relationships derived from the myth of Santo Sepulcro in Landayan, San Pedro, Laguna. The whole text is in Tagalog and introduces a new ethnography. The study tries to answer the problem, How the culture of relations among people inside and outside of Landayan begun and evolved from the myth of Santo Sepulcro? This study is hermeneutical in the sense that it opens up the world of meaning systems of the myth of Santo Sepulcro in Landayan. The myths as *kuwentong bayan* were stories put together by the people themselves to understand the new order of life they were experiencing from the Church and the State. They created their own myths (with two versions) and rituals of *pagpapabalan* or God-experience based on inherent sense of spirituality, native intelligence, commitment and social relations nurtured in family households and the community. From these myths came out the personal experiences with the miraculous wooden statue of Lolo Uweng, the Emmanuel (God who dwells with us and one with us), and the themes of relationships between man and nature, man and his material works, man and the spirit world (*kabatlayaan*) and man his *kapwa* (fellowmen). Various forms of *panata* devotional commitments come to be expressed publicly and privately. Consequently, tensions arise between the church and the people as the church brings down its doctrines and discipline to the devotees and community of Lolo Uweng. Social control of resources came to be negotiated and the continuing accommodation between them brings forth a reconfiguration of local Catholic Christianity as a socio-cultural system that is dynamic and changing with the Landayan community as the power base.

[Regala \(1992\)](#) the study traces the growth of the said devotion of Filipino-Chinese devotees. His masteral thesis is one of theologico-anthropological inquiry such that he exposes some theological, religious and cultural themes in understanding the devotion itself and its significance to the Church especially in the Diocese of Daet and to the Filipino-Chinese devotees. The distinct cultural expression of the said community, as devotees, enriches the devotion itself and vice-versa. This is in connection with a magisterial mandate that the efforts of every evangelization must be towards full evangelization of cultures wherein there is a close encounter with the gospel. Clarifications are given to those expressions of devotions that are considered to be non-Christian. In this way, he

gets to realign the devotion guided by Christian teachings. His approach is anthropological live-in observation in Capalonga, participant observation, etc.

[Arabit and Auria \(1996\)](#) the author is captivated by the profound beauty of the growing indigenous and local culture. This is the main reason why she gets into this masteral study. She describes the said well-loved devotion based on the experiences of the devotees (how they perceive it) and its influence in their lives in terms of their relationship with God, others and themselves. Factors, such as personal and social events, that led them to such devotion are also presented. She tries to show that to understand the culture better is to know very well the religion. This study is her way of preserving the Christian values by presenting the beauty of its expressions that has cultural elements.

The studies done by the following: ([Arabit & Auria, 1996](#); [Regala, 1992](#); [Susana, 1999](#)) are very notable in the field of popular religion, specifically popular devotion. They meticulously investigated the historical, cultural and social aspects of their studies. Sanchez used the qualitative and phenomenological method so well. Reyes ethnographic study is so connected to my study since there are so many things in common especially the myths of the wooden image. And so, her study is very helpful especially in processing the narratives or lived-experiences in the context of our local culture.

I believe my study offers essential insights in relation to the religious consciousness of the Caviteño devotees. The devotion to San Agustin de Tanza has been recognized by the Diocese of Imus (Cavite) since the parish church where the miraculous image is enshrined is now declared a Diocesan Shrine of St. Augustine. This remarkable development in the community may pose some great challenges in the future in which this study can already present. Based on the results of this study, I would like to provide our parish a formation program for the fathers (family men) and would-be fathers since San Agustin is fondly called Tata in our locality. The devotees lived experiences could provide some themes that would somehow help me draw as formation program for men. The impact of this study will hopefully draw light in the challenges that the local church is facing right now with the ever-growing population and culturally diverse communities wherein Tanza is a microcosm of such a huge challenge. This study is a humble contribution to address such challenges especially the decreasing number of active male church-goers to renew their commitment as Christians and in the long run be able to participate in the social issues affecting the church these days.

METHODOLOGY

Phenomenology studies the structures of human consciousness that are observed from the lived experiences of the respondents as they appear. The phenomenon is carefully examined and processed based on their context or perspective.

This study, *A Phenomenological Inquiry on the Devotees of the Miraculous Image of San Agustin de Tanza*, used the phenomenological approach which is an empirical, although not a statistical, approach ([Ramirez, 2012](#)). This is a unique type of empiricism which acknowledges epistemologically those experiences that are intuitive in nature, its emphasis on the concreteness of lived experience, its radical openness to modes of consciousness, and its inclination to interpret essences (*Ibid.*). According to Husserl, phenomenon is the subject matter of this approach that focuses on ourselves, other people and the objects and events around us. So, the primary object of this approach is the study of phenomena. These phenomena are studied as experienced in the various acts of consciousness. Inductive logic is used, that is, introducing new theoretical concepts and profound insights provided by the data analysis.

Selection of Co-Researchers

For this study, I used the following criteria in selecting my co-researchers: (1) those with at least 10 years of residency in the Municipality of Tanza, who are devotees of San Agustin de Tanza, and their age range is from 28 to 75 years old; and (2) they are most especially open, available and willing to share their lived experiences. On the next page is [Table 1](#) on the profile of co-researchers. I have chosen three (3) devotees who head a certain ministry in the church and who went through Catholic formation in the past. The remaining three (3) devotees are churchgoers and actively participating in the parish activities since they are members of some church organizations but not officers. To ensure that this study is ethical, I made use of informed consent ([Holloway, 1997](#)). To arrive

at an intersubjective and in-depth examination (long interviews) of a phenomenon, [Creswell \(1998\)](#) recommends long interviews with up to ten (10) people. I have chosen six (6) co-researchers in this study. interviews) of a phenomenon, [Creswell \(1998\)](#) recommends long interviews with up to ten (10) people. I have chosen six (6) co-researchers in this study.

Table 1: Profile of co-researchers

Name	Age	Sex	Educational Attainment	Church Ministry	Work
1. Onesto	56 years old	Male	High school graduate	Carries andas Holy Namer	Staff in Funeral home
2. Mel	28 years old	Male	College graduate	Parish liturgical head	Human Relations Officer
3. Tatang	71 years old	Male	Mater of business Administration	Parish Executive Secretary	Retired Executive Director Tesda
4. Xander	45 years old	Male	Master of Business Administration	Family life minister	MSWD Officer
5. Zeny	75 years old	Female	Mastral Degree	Keeper of Saints	Retired School principle
6. Benny	68 Years old	Male	Vocational	Members of Church organizations	Owner of Funeral Home

Gathering of Narratives on Lived Experiences: Data Collection

I conducted an in-depth interview. This method is basically one of the so-called human approach because it considers the specifically human nature of man, the subject of social science ([Ramirez, 2012](#)). I conducted a qualitative interviewing, an informal interview ([Wilson, 2002](#)) using some guide questions. It is reciprocal in nature, that is, a dialogue between my co-researchers and myself (as researcher). I used raw experiences as material for data analysis. I used audio-recording in all the interviews ([Bailey, 1996](#)) with my co-researchers permission.

Data Analysis

After the interviews, I transcribed the recorded interviews and narratives in verbatim form in Filipino and then translated them in English. Then, I read and re-read the transcribed lived-experiences and stopped when I have a substantial understanding of the lived experiences.

I have categorized the experiences of each co-researcher and reflected on them and came up with at least nine themes of each co-researcher in order to categorize the subject matter of those experiences. So for seven narratives, I have 74 themes. Then after this first reflection, I prepared a summary reflection taking into account those more or less nine themes that I have provided. Here, I made use of bracketing method wherein I entered into my co-researchers worldview. Bracketing here means that I set aside my predetermined ideas and presumptions about the phenomenon, which is the devotion to the miraculous image of San Agustin de Tanza. After such method, I was able to get the essence or the nucleus of truth ([Ramirez, 2012](#)) and expressed in around ten themes. These themes, describing the phenomenon, were considered the first thematic reflection. These themes expressed the core of meanings of lived-experiences and associated to its over-all context. This leads to the formation of creative insight. I categorized the topics that are related and form the units of meaning ([Moustakas, 1004](#)). I drew out the principal themes, the general meaning of the lived experiences, by cross-examining the meaning of a number of clusters which express the essence of these clusters ([Hycner, 1999](#)). This is how I determined my first thematic reflection. When the ten principal themes are thoroughly processed, I summarized all the interviews individually integrating those themes leading to the formation of a creative synthesis. Afterwards, the eidetic insight, or the very principle where the meanings of our shared experiences are found, is framed. I have checked its validity by asking my co-researchers to look at the principle or essence of our experience if it really captures the inner world of experience ([Hycner, 1999](#)).

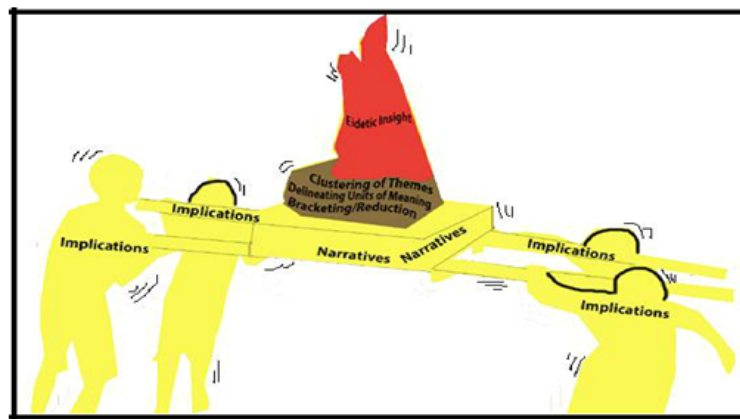


Figure 1. The creative symbol of phenomenological method

Meaning of the Symbol of my Phenomenological Method

In Figure 1 the symbol represents one of the elements of popular devotions, that is, caracol (prayerful dance) of San Agustin. The andas, or stable stand for statues used during procession or caracol, represents the narratives (1st reflection) or the firsthand experience of devotees who are fortunate enough to get hold of the very experience of San Agustin. The base of the statue represents the bracketing/reduction, delineating of units of meaning and the clustering of themes (2nd reflection). The statue firmly stands on it wherein experiences are processed. The base of the statue is where the devotees put their letter addressed to San Agustin. It symbolizes the deeper consciousness or expressions of the devotees. Eidetic insights or third reflection is represented by the lower part of San Agustin's vestment. Every devotee finds time to get close to the statue and to touch even the lower part of his vestment and several devotees even find themselves crying while doing it. The persons carrying the andas represent the implications of this study. All these elements capture the creative synthesis of the whole devotion attributed to San Agustin de Tanza.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The lived experiences of the six co-researchers are interpreted here. Based on the written consent form, my co-researchers remained anonymous all throughout the study. The interview is done in Filipino. I tried my best to translate their narratives in English based on how they have presented their thoughts and raw experiences.

After I reading again and again their lived experiences, I came up with the following essential insights leading to the formulation of the eidetic insight.

1. The devotion is really God-experience of the people. The fruit of this devotion is really a God-experience to the devotees. Everyone regards San Agustin as someone who is very close to the family of God. And when the devotees call him Tata Usteng, (Father Agustin) there is a feeling of closeness to God's family as well through him. He was considered an intimate family member displaying God's love and blessings. Aloysius Pieris, SJ, spells out this phenomenon as cosmic religiosity (Pieris, 2007) and not just a form of animism, and even idolatry.
2. The devotion, as a God-experience, has a transformative aspect (metanoia). I saw how each one of us was transformed by this devotion. Only God can transform our hearts. One remarkable transformation was that of Onesto's, that is, from a failed marriage to drug-addiction to church active member again. Two equally emotional transformational experiences here were that of Benny's and Mel's. They experienced healing and protection.
3. This transformative experience is an encounter with the unknown. I have experienced this and have observed also from Xander, Mel, Benny. I think the best expression of this encounter is from Mel's story. He said, I cannot explain the experience when I touch the lower part of the image near his feet while my eyes are closed. It is just breathtaking.
4. Myths and culture are constitutive elements of the devotion (God-experience). I saw how those myths shaped the devotees consciousness. They have high regard and honor for Tata Usteng because of those myths. Some have fears and great reverence because of those moving stories. According to Zeny, the devotees; who could not go home to Tanza brought with them these devotional practices wherever they are. So, devotion like this is

deeply rooted in the culture. There is a saying, You are not from Tanza if you do not know Tata Usteng.

Eidetic Insight

In understanding the lived-experiences of the devotees of the miraculous image of San Agustin de Tanza, this study leads to an experience of the self-revelation of God, or the God-experience.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This patronal devotion is indicating the people's spirituality. We have seen that this spirituality of our people is our own way of understanding and experiencing the unknown, the divine. This is popularly termed as the theology of the people. It is expected that the evolving ideas of the people would have some conflicting ideas with the mainstream religions. But this does not invalidate their expressions and experiences. In this study the essential insight from those lived-experiences boils down to unfolding of the experience of God. San Agustin's devotees are led to this essential reality of, God as a God of order and inner peace. It goes well with San Agustin's famous line, My heart is restless until it rests in thee, my God.

Implications

I have seen how my co-researchers have developed a serious bond towards the miraculous image and how the devotion spread through those powerful myths and religious observance of devotional practices like novenas, caracol (prayerful dance), pahalik (practice of kissing the image), etc. The experience especially of Benny and Mel played a significant role in this study when they shared about their profound experience of divine presence when touching the image. This study claims the authority of human experience in interpreting one's spiritual journey. The community of devotees giving such witnessing is such a powerful motivation. Even, the title given to San Agustin, Tata Usteng, is dictated by our distinct culture. Bulatao (1998) puts it beautifully, when he said, If grace builds on nature, devotion can be said to build on culture (1998). Based on the animist worldview of the Filipino, the spiritual world co-occurs in the material world according to Bulatao (1998). And the supreme being among these spirits is God. And we, Filipinos, regard this spirit as our Father. He further explains that not only God assumes such forms, but even saints. So, having known these things, we can better understand why some devotees regard Tata (Father) Usteng (from Agustin) as one of the gods (initial understanding of Tatang). So, it is better enter into their worldview before we make any judgments so that there would be no big conflicts. The Church officials need to enter their worldview to understand the devotees. Now that the truth is unfolding before us that this devotion draw people closer to God since this is a God-experience. This must be observed since the devotion is growing fast after the parish is elevated into a shrine. The Local Government saw that this devotion brings people together and in some way is helping the economy of the municipality and even its tourism industry since the devotees multiplies by the thousands every year. It also addresses the problem of the decreasing number of churchgoers. The Church officials must learn from the creative energy emanating from the said devotion and use it to inspire churchgoers. They can start by organizing a church group composed of fathers who are devotees of San Agustin. Their loyalty to San Agustin can be channeled to church activities.

Limitation

This study does not cover the lived experiences of devotees from other provinces or other parishes and the historicity of the image and its founding. This study is neither an assessment nor an evaluation of people's religiosity but as a phenomenological study, it is meant to describe and reflectively analyze the themes from narratives of experiences towards an eidetic insight.



Figure 2. The miraculous image of San Agustin de Tanza with and without vestments (photo from the Parish)

Recommendations

There are still so many avenues to improve this study. The participants may come from other provinces or other parishes. The clergy can be selected as co-researchers also. And even for the ecumenical study, one can select from other denominations that share the same beliefs with the same patronal devotion. Though this is phenomenological in nature, I believe one can also make use of the power of the myths in interpreting the experiences of the devotees and may include the historicity of the origin of San Agustin de Tanza.

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