Shortly after Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law, Anton Juan directed a production of *Marat/Sade*.

The military closed the theatre after the first performance, so the young director turned to Roman Catholic rituals to protest against the Marcos’ regime and to depict the injustices of society. As Juan said, “[the government] closed my theatre . . . but they could not . . . punish me for putting on a Passion of Christ, where Christ would symbolize the Filipino people (Fox).” Since then, he has become an internationally acclaimed playwright and director, known for pushing the edges of theatre. He also earned a doctorate in Semiotics, taught at the University of the Philippines, and now teaches at the University of Notre Dame. This article explores two of Anton Juan’s recent plays, *El Flamenco Senaculo* and *The Waters of Golgotha*, which are based on the *Senaculo*, a traditional Filipino ritual and theatre form. Both plays transform Christ’s Passion into a lament for global suffering and an invitation of hope to create a world where peace and justice reign.

In order to understand these plays, it is important to understand the significance of Holy Week in Filipino culture. The predominately Roman Catholic country (80–85%) observes rituals, processions, street theatre, religious practices, and folk traditions that draw communities together, encompass all social groups, and reconfirm their Catholic beliefs (Diamond, 142).

One of the primary dramatic rituals is the *Senaculo*, a Passion play. Each town that holds a *Senaculo* develops its own interpretations with thousands turning out in the streets, town squares, basketball courts, and churches. The Passion play was based on the Spanish *auto sacramentales* which Spanish colonizing friars brought to the Philippines in the 1700s. Originally, the *Senaculo* served the ideals of colonialism by replacing the adventurous hero in Filipino precolonial epics with a meek, obedient Jesus (Cruz-Lucero, 48). Since then, it evolved into a synchronistic ritual merging Catholicism with animist folk and agricultural cycles, which also symbolizes waiting for the transformation of the earth. Furthermore, the Filipinos have transformed the themes of compliance into a theatre of resistance. The religious symbols of Christ’s suffering have been dramatized to address unfair labor practices, martial law, and other injustices.

The *Senaculo* and other Holy Week rituals are accompanied by acts of penance in popular devotion. Thousands show their sympathy with Christ’s suffering during Holy Week by undergoing their own physical mortifications that include: depriving themselves of sleep to chant the Passion narrative at shrines and churches (Peterson, 314), crawling in the streets, carrying heavy crosses, and flagellation.

Some offer themselves for crucifixion with actual nails in the Passion play (Peterson 326). In order to be nailed, they need to take a vow of sacrifice and be accepted for the role.
The first play, *El Flamenco Senaculo*, merges the Filipino passion Passion play with the Spanish dance-theater form flamenco. Although flamenco has become associated with shallow tourist performances involving castanets and dresses with giant flounces, Andalusian Gypsies in Spain developed music of the region into their own distinctive flavor (Leblon, 22) with strong complicated rhythms, emotional songs with heart rendering cries, and forceful expressive dances that express human anguish or joy. The Andalusian Gypsies were a marginalized ethnic minority who were poor, persecuted, harassed by laws intended to exterminate them, and hounded by the Spanish Inquisition (Totten, 26). Juan was inspired to create a libretto including flamenco because it arose from the Gypsy’s’ struggles as an oppressed people and served as a symbol of resistance in a movement parallel to the Filipino *Senaculo* tradition (Juan, *El Flamenco Senaculo*, 3).

*El Flamenco Senaculo* has twelve scenes of dance, song, movement, and media. The performers include Jesus, Judas, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, two guitarists, a percussionist, and male and female singers who sing different roles. The libretto for *El Flamenco Senaculo* begins with a woman’s lamentation about Christ’s entry into Jerusalem that starts as a *Senaculo* and segues to a flamenco cry. A passionate percussive flamenco hosanna follows. Judas pleads with Jesus to be a hero rather than a martyr in a flamenco cry.

Mary Magdalene and other women encircle Jesus in a dance while a video document shows marginalized women and sex workers. Judas criticizes her for wasting perfume on Jesus. Then the Blessed Mother embraces both Judas and Jesus dancing her agony of her cleaved heart crying that all children are her children:

- Rich and Poor
- Man and Woman
- Oppressor and oppressed
- Two navels have I
- And one heart,
- Half a heart of light
- Half a heart of night (8).

While Jesus agonizes between his political ambitions versus his divine call, Judas enters covered in white gauze as the Angel of Death and kisses Jesus. The Blessed Virgin sings a Passion flamenco lament to the rhythm of vulture shrieks and stamping feet. Then as Jesus is whipped, the screen flashes images—first of flagellants, then children running from bombing villages and other images of violence and oppression. The final scene is the crucifixion dance. As Jesus dances, the multimedia panorama shows scenes from current crises and global suffering. But the pain of the crucifixion ends with “ecstasy of Salvation and Victory of Hope” (11). Interspersed with images of global injustice are scenes of caring and human kindness. Jesus’s dance ends with his “hands outstretched with the mark of nails and His face up in a cry of Joy, like an athlete crossing the finish line to meet with Resurrection” (11).

*El Flamenco Senaculo* is a lament, but not just for Jesus’s pain and sacrifice—a lament for Christ made flesh in the agonies of all who suffer from injustice, violence, war, poverty, and abuse. Jesus is Liberator, yet not a political leader like Judas demands:

- Must we eat bees and fast and move on again
- When the next conqueror invades the land?
- Why not prove yourself and claim power for us? (4).

Jesus wrestles with the temptation to political power, but ultimately chooses suffering and sacrifice. The theme of sacrifice does not focus on personal salvation from sin (even Judas is embraced by the Blessed Virgin). But Jesus sacrifices out of love against the oppressive structure of society:

- Because Love in order to teach
- Must first know pain
- Because love lies with Death. (7).

NOTES

1. The complete title is *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*. Peter Weiss wrote this play, which depicts the revolution and murder of Jean-Paul Marat.

2. Holy Week traditions are especially important to the Filipino communities. Three of the dramatic rituals are the *pabasa*, a lyric narrative chanted in churches and in front of small shrines late into the night (Peterson 313–14); the *salubong*, a predawn Easter procession with statues of Christ and the Virgin Mary that culminates when an angel child lifts the veil of mourning from the Virgin Mary (Peterson 332–34); and the *Senaculo*.

3. Flagellation was introduced to the Philippines by friars between the sixteenth an seventeenth centuries as a penitential activity of the church (60 Tiatco). Although the church now questions this type of penitential activity, it continues to be a popular act of faith.

4. These acts of faith are prompted by the following purposes: (1) to ask for divine help, especially for a loved one’s illness, since they cannot afford medical help; (2) to praise God with thanksgiving, especially for cures; (3) to atone for their sins out of guilt or other people’s guilt; or (4) to gain healing or spiritual power (Tiatco 59–60).

5. The ritual is called a *panata*. For more information see Peterson 326ff.
Jesus is not the sole liberator but is both an archetype and a leader to invite others to join in fighting injustice. He prays:

Many will even be nailed like me
Because of their fight for the Oppressed . . .
Make them who die for the sake of others live too
As I live through death (9).

By combining the two art forms developed by Filipinos and Andalusian Gypsies with histories of resistance, Juan forges his Passion theatre-dance from the artistic traditions of the disenfranchised, the oppressed, and outcast, for a liberation theology from the underside expressed in music, image, and dance.

Although this theatre-dance is a lament, the angel of death and crucifixion does not have the last word and picture. Jesus is not defeated by his death or the crisis of the world, but empowered by running the race for justice and his self-giving love. Juan states in the introduction, “the liturgical traditional rituals around the Passion and Death of Christ became a large symbolic source for hope of a better life” in the Filipino tradition (2). As Jesus sings in the garden:

It is not the Passion or my dying
But my rising again
That will give people a new sense of forgiveness
A new sense of hope (9).

Just as the suffering on the cross is made incarnate through multiple images of people suffering around the world, images of resurrection and hope are made incarnate through the final images of caring and human kindness. El Flamenco Senaculo calls Jesus’ followers to be agents of Resurrection.

The second play, The Waters of Golgotha, tells the story of a mother who requests to be elected as the Christ for the Good Friday Senaculo after her young son is dragged under the sea by nets from illegal trawler fishing called muro-ami.

Muro-ami, or reef hunting, is a system of net fishing in which children dive into the depths of the sea to scare fish out of the coral into huge nets. They hold their breath and wear no diving gear other than hand-made wooden goggles. As many as three hundred to four hundred young men and boys as young as seven are sent off for months on trawlers where they dive between seven and ten times a day, live in congested, rat-infested trawlers, and endure abuse from their guards. After the public was outraged when the bodies of one hundred swimmers, mostly children, were found in a graveyard, this form of fishing was banned in the 1980s. However, this illegal practice continues (Bengwayan; Macasil).6

In Act I, Martha goes to the priest for confession, asking to be the Christ nailed to the cross on Holy Friday because the sea stole her only son. He is appalled that she would ask, first because she is a woman, and furthermore because she has become a prostitute for the seamen. Then in a flashback, Martha’s son Miguel dances an eerie dance in which he gets caught in the giant fish net and comes up trembling and shaking like an upside down Christ hanging on the cross.

6. An award-winning film, Muro Ami, was made about this abusive practice.
Act II begins with an image contrary to Martha’s down-to-earth faith. Rev. Dan Shane leads a flashy Hollywood-style of televangelism with false testimonies and tributes to Jesus, the Lamb, as Dolly the cloned sheep. (This false religiosity becomes a counterpoint to the peasant’s faith throughout the play.) Then, a chorus of women sings as they fish and gossip. (They also appear throughout the play depicting the joys and pathos of the community, their social conditions, and their disdain for Martha.) Then in a heart wrenching memory scene, Martha is peeling tuber crops (like hairy sweet potatoes). Miguel wants to try peeling one, but Martha explains that his hands are too small. If you scrape an eye of the tuber crop even with the slightest scratch, it will bleed inside the fruit and poison it. No visible sign or smell warns of the danger, until your neck begins to stiffen and you can no longer breathe. However, if you don’t hit the eye, you can boil the crop in salt, the eye disappears and you can eat it. The choices for survival are to fish or dig the tuber crop. Miguel volunteers to fish and claims “I have gills mother. . . . I . . . stayed longest in the water” (The Waters of Golgotha, 21). She pleads with him not to; her hand shakes and she knows she has made the tuber bleed.

In Act II, Miguel appears like a mirage to declare that he is teaching children to read under the sea. He has been chosen to be the angel in the early morning Easter procession.

In Act IV, after the women sing a Sinaculo Passion hymn the priest comes in carrying one of the women’s children—a boy with sea goggles, apparently dead. Martha heaves him upside down. She shakes him, cries to him, and brings him back to life. The women interpret her act as miracle and claim she deserves the right to be crucified. In the last scene Martha is crucified and has a vision of her son on another island.

The Waters of Golgotha continues the Filipino tradition in which the incarnation is made real in the lives of struggling people. Miguel first becomes a Christ figure. He is pulled from the ocean arm outstretched like Christ on the cross, in his sacrifice for his mother so they can eat. This child’s death explores the awful “price of human salvation” (1). In turn, Martha becomes a Christ figure when she brings the drowning boy back to life and when she is nailed to the cross. The Christ figure of Miguel is innocent and pure, but Martha is earthy, sensual, and very human. So this play illustrates that all are made in the image of God even with human sins. The focus on Christ is transformed as a symbol of the heroic sacrifices that children and families make out of the harsh choices of survival and out of love for one another. Furthermore, Martha’s crucifixion symbolizes how people have been nailed to poverty, colonization, and injustice throughout history.

Like El Flamenco Senaculo, The Waters of Golgotha is a lament. Like many of Juan’s plays, it uses memory to address grief and loss through injustice. Martha faces the excruciating choice between her son possibly dying by tuber crop poison or dying from fishing. If Miguel survives he could bring home money equivalent to a year’s low-income wages. While the play addresses the particularities of muro-ami, it lifts up child labor abuses everywhere, and the conditions of poverty that force agonizing life and death decisions that families have to make every day in order to survive.

Just as El Flamenco Senaculo offers images of hope and resurrection in addition to crucifixion, so too, The Waters of Golgotha raises two images of hope. First, Miguel appears to his mother, saying that he is teaching the other children to read and going
about his father’s business. Then he tells his mother that he is the angel who has pulled off the Virgin’s veil of mourning. This scene is clearly a Resurrection image based on the Filipino Easter rite with two processions, one with a statue of the Virgin Mary, and another procession with statue of Christ shown to be whole again, without blood or wounds.

Martha has a vision of Miguel when she is on the cross. This time she sees him rising to the light to another island where fishermen see him, raise him, and he grows to be a handsome fisherman with a village girl for his wife. This is an image of paradise. As Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker have shown in Saving Paradise, the early church depicted Jesus transformed in paradise in a way that also invites Christ’s followers to create peace, compassion, and justice in the present. Like ancient visual images of paradise, The Waters of Golgotha invites us to seek paradise now amid poverty, child labor, and child abuse, in order to create a world where peace and justice reign.

In 2010, when I asked Anton Juan where I could purchase copies of his plays, he said he would send me a couple as an attachment to an e-mail, and he graciously did. I expected that they would take a similar approach to religion, community, social conditions, and theology in general. I did not expect that both plays he would be sending would be Passion plays that transform Christ’s Passion into a lament for global suffering.

As I have said throughout the paper, both plays link Jesus’s suffering and Passion with the world’s suffering especially among poor and oppressed. Through the background of fishing abuse in The Waters of Golgotha and against a panorama of world crises in El Flamenco Senaculo, Christ comes as Liberator, who shows divine preferential option for the poor.

Yet, even as both plays give us agonizing images of injustice, they also represent Christ’s Passion with images of resurrection and hope as an invitation to join in the struggle to create a world with peace and justice. As the program notes for El Flamenco Senaculo state, the core intent is to give a “vision of hope” and “to put across the true message of the passion and Death of Christ: peace and reconciliation” (Juan, El Flamenco Senaculo, 3).

Works Cited


“*Muro Ami [Reef Hunters]*.”

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