

# Palabas, Paloob at Palalim: The Historical, Socio-political, and Catechetical Significance of Sinakulo in Malolos, Bulacan, Philippines

Arvin D. Eballo, PhD<sup>1</sup> and Mia B. Eballo<sup>2</sup>

University of Santo Tomas, Philippines, adeballo@ust.de.ph<sup>1</sup>

De La Salle University, Philippines, mia.eballo@dlsu.edu.ph<sup>2</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

During the 1970s, many barangays in Malolos, Bulacan, faithfully staged the Sinakulo, dramatizing the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In 2014, the residents of Barangay Tikay in Malolos, Bulacan, celebrated the centennial staging of their traditional Sinakulo. Scholars like Doreen Fernandez and Nicanor Tiongson already examined Sinakulo in the context of Philippine theatre history and aesthetics. In addition to its historical implications, this research article explored the social and catechetical contributions of Sinakulo. The researchers used a traditional triangulation method, which involved conducting library research, making observations with field notes, and carrying out informal or semi-structured interviews to verify the data. They applied a tripartite framework developed by Prospero Covar, where Filipino personhood is likened to a jar (banga) with the characteristics of labas (exterior), loob (interior), and lalim (depth/meaning) (Covar, 2015). They effectively adapted the said framework in presenting the evolution of Sinakulo from an agricultural landscape (historical context) to an industrial workplace (socio-political context) and then to a pastoral/catechetical necessity for present-day evangelization.

**Keywords:** Evangelization, Holy Week, Pasyon, Paschal Mystery, Pastoral Necessity, Religious Drama

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## Introduction

Expressing and understanding emotions like love, happiness, resentment, and compassion are fundamental to the drama of human existence. Vindication attributed to God makes religions more dramatic. Take Judaism and Christianity as examples. In the Old Testament, Israel is exemplified as the paragon of this drama, where Yahweh's journey with His people is vividly narrated and documented, and it even becomes the foundation of a nation. The Israelites wandered, then suffered in Egypt as slaves, then underwent a thousand years of vicissitudes but eventually were vindicated, freed, and blessed by Yahweh. In the New Testament, the gospel narratives about Jesus Christ are not lacking these dramas as well, e.g., the triumphant entry of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, His miracles, the agony in the garden, the carrying of the cross, the crucifixion, and the grandeur of His resurrection. Noteworthy are the experiences of Christ's apostles during the early years of Christianity, which can qualify for an award-winning film or television series. Thus, calling the whole Christ event the 'greatest story ever told.'

A ritual is a solemn ceremony consisting of a series of performances of an established and prescribed procedure, ranging from a family event such as Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner to elaborate religious events such as the Roman Catholic Mass (Wilson & Goldfarb, 2006). During the celebration of the Eucharist, the entire Christian community commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus Christ, including His Paschal mystery. This mystery is made present in the Eucharist. Likewise, the gospels are narrated through characters, plots, and settings, complementing conflict and climax. The Pharisees and the Sanhedrin are the antagonists. While Jesus, Mary, and the rest of the apostles, except Judas Iscariot, are the protagonists. Jesus' death as the consequence of instituting the Kingdom of God through love and justice is acknowledged as the conflict, while His resurrection serves as the climax. Indeed, the salvation history of the Judeo-Christian tradition can be appreciated through a dramatic onstage performance popularly known in Malolos, Bulacan, as Sinakulo.

## Methodology

This research article comprehensively studies the historical, sociological, and catechetical significance of Sinakulo in Malolos. The researchers used a traditional triangulation method, which involved conducting library research, making observations with field notes, and carrying out informal or semi-structured interviews to verify the data. They applied a tripartite framework developed by Prospero Covar, where Filipino personhood is likened to a jar (banga) with the characteristics of labas (exterior), loob (interior), and lalim (depth/meaning) (Covar, 2015). They effectively adapted the said framework in presenting the evolution of Sinakulo from an agricultural landscape (historical context) to an industrial workplace (socio-political context) and then to a pastoral/catechetical necessity for present-day evangelization. Inspired and guided by Covar's framework, the authors thematically aimed to describe and discuss Sinakulo as (1) a form of religious drama or palabas depicting the passion narratives, (2) an opportunity for people to discern or paloob, become conscientious of their present context, particularly the state, and experience concern for one another as they clamor for justice and human rights inspired by the Catholic Social Teaching, and (3) a venue to propagate, inculcate, and deepen (palalim) the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the people known as evangelization based on the Bible, particularly the New Testament. This study also recommends that members and viewers be aware of the crucial role of Sinakulo in the community through communal discernment and conversation. It invites sinakulistas to reflect on their identity and mission.

## Definition of Terms

For a better understanding of this research article, the following terms are defined:

**Budhi** – Refers to graciousness (kagandahang loob), conscience (konsensiya), mercy (awa), and compassion (damay).

**Comedia/Komedya** – A full-length play in verse and prose and known for being formulaic and stylized (Fernandez, 1986).

**Evangelization** – The proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. This study refers to the promotion of the Catholic Christian faith through Sinakulo.

**Labas** – Refers to the externality of a person and his/her capacity to express.

**Loob** – Refers to the internality or core of a person and his/her ability to discern. Real beauty or goodness is found in the deepest core (loob) of one's personhood.

**Lalim** – Refers to the depth of a person and his/her capacity to transcend.

**Orihinal** – Referring to the script used in Sinakulo.

**Pagdakip** – A simulation of the arrest, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the Garden of Gethsemane to the Calvary. It is a shortened form of a Sinakulo.

**Palabas** – In this paper, Sinakulo is a form of religious drama and serves as an opportunity for the sinakulitas and their supporters to express their faith explicitly.

**Paloob** – In this paper, Sinakulo provides an opportunity for the people to discern (paloob), and criticize their socio-political context in the light of the Catholic Social Teaching conscientize their present context, particularly the state, as they clamor for justice.

**Palalim** – In this paper, Sinakulo serves as a venue to inculcate and deepen the Gospel narratives to the members and viewers.

**Panata** – Refers to a religious or solemn vow/promise.

**Pasyon** – Refers to the verse narrative focused on the life, sufferings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It provides text to Sinakulo.

**Personajes** – refer to the actors and actresses who perform on stage during Sinakulo.

**Sinakulista** – Refers to actors, actresses, and the entire Sinakulo production staff.

**Sinakulo** – A dramatization based on Pasyon text. It is taken from the word 'cenacle' referring to the large room where Jesus and His apostles held the Last Supper (Tiongson, 1999).

## History of Religious Drama in the Philippines

In the Philippines, during the Spanish colonial era, Catholic missionaries found innovative ways to teach the native people about their faith. One successful method they used was staging religious dramas to convey their teachings. The friars utilized religious dramas throughout the liturgical calendar to instill Catholicism in the Filipinos. Religious dramas are appropriate approaches to teaching religion, being aural, visual, and participatory (Fernandez, 1996). In addition to the Church's official liturgical celebrations, traditional and "unofficial" religious dramas are also performed. For instance, during the Paschal Triduum, Sinakulo is staged, while Salubong is held on Easter Sunday, and Tibag is commemorated for Santacruzán. Another festival in May is Flores de Mayo, where devotees of Mary offer songs, prayers, and flowers as a tribute. Panunuluyan and Tatlong Hari are dramatized every Christmas season to complete the calendar (Retana, 1910). Panunuluyan reenacts the struggle Mary and Joseph experienced in looking for an inn because Mary was about to give birth. Tatlong Hari depicts how the three kings were able to find the Messiah.

Declamaciones graves, loas, and coloquios were the early dramatizations characterized by verse recitations and religious content. The friars taught these to their Filipino students for important and festive occasions such as the exultant arrival of Church hierarchies, the feasts of saints, or the launching of churches and schools (Retana, 1910). In 1598, when Pedro Agurto arrived for his installation as the first bishop of Cebu, a comedia in Latin was performed under the direction of Fr. Francisco Vicente Puche, a scholastic who had come from Spain with Agurto. It was considered the first documented theatrical presentation in the Philippines (Retanan, 1910). Thus, the Spaniards introduced religious dramas as one of the strategies for propagating and inculcating the Catholic faith (Fernandez, 1983).

The Galleon trade facilitated centuries of cultural and commodities exchange between the Philippines and Mexico. The Mexican language, government, commerce, and religious practices influenced Filipino culture. From 1565 to 1815, the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade created one of the greatest commercial systems in the history of the world. It established Manila as a major marina of goods from Asia and linked the Philippines to Mexico economically, culturally, and politically (Capili, 2008). Moriones was introduced to the Philippines via Mexico through Fr. Dionisio Santiago. As early as 1807, the people of Marinduque already observed the Moriones festival in the towns of Gasan, Boac, and Mogpog. This colorful Lenten festival is about Longinus; a Roman soldier whose one eye was blind. Before the body of Jesus was taken down from the cross, He pierced the side of Jesus with a lance and came forth blood and water. According to tradition, the drop of blood that spurted the blind eye of Longinus miraculously cured him of his blindness, which led him to conversion (Cruz, 1971).

The Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ began to be staged in the middle of the 17th century and the first decades of the 18th century after the oldest Pasyon, the vernacular verse narrative of the life of Christ attributed to Batangueno Gaspar Aquino de Belen was published in 1704 (Retanan, 1910). The tradition of staging Sinakulo in the Philippines has evolved through time. Its early phase is chanting texts about the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, popularly known as Pabasa ng Pasyon (reading of the passion). Eventually, the folk tried to act or dramatize simultaneously with Pabasa. A debate about the content of the Pasyon also took place as an intermission to keep people awake and appraise if they were attentive (Aligan, 2001). This Pasyon debate is called Tapatan. The loser in the debate was asked to impersonate Jesus' suffering, like the crowning of thorns or the carrying of the cross. The punishment in the Tapatan contest is considered a short and simple form of Sinakulo.

In some parts of the Philippines, Kalbaryuhan is staged every Good Friday. It is considered an amateur type of passion play since it is a simulation of the march to Mount Calvary and a reenactment of Christ's crucifixion. At the same time, Sinakulo is a professional one since it is a full-length drama guided by a script depicting biblical

narratives, particularly the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Tiongson, 1975).

Sinakulo bloomed into a full-blown play in the 19th century; however, its content is no longer from Aquino de Belen's Pasyon but from a prolonged version, the Casaysayan nang Pasion ni Jesucristong Panginoon Natin na Sucat Ipag-alab nang Puso ng Sinomang Babasa. Finished in 1814, this Pasyon is called Pasyon Genesis by the devotees because its narrative begins with the world's creation.

The oldest surviving Sinakulo group in the Philippines is the Malibay (Pasay), popularly known as Cenaculistang Pasay, which began performing its passion play brand in 1903. During the 1900s, Malibay was agricultural land. It was marshy and wet, so only water buffaloes could pass P. Santos Street. Bamboo trees grew thick at C. Jose Street, and due to the increasing number of people who opted to reside in Malibay, it has become an urbanized area known for heavy traffic during rush hour. The key element in the continued existence of Malibay Sinakulo is the panata, a religious vow or promise done by a devotee as a manifestation of his/her faith, thanksgiving for the blessings he/she received, or penance for his/her sins (Manipon, 2003). One important factor that keeps Malibay Sinakulo alive is the commitment or panata of families, passed down from generation to generation. For instance, Edgar Geronimo Granada acts as one of the casts of Malibay Sinakulo; he is the son of Francisco Granada, a septuagenarian, who serves as the current director of the said community theatre. Francisco's grandfather, Dionisio or Isiong Pilato, has been recognized as one of the group's founding members. Its script or orihinal<sup>1</sup> is based on Mahal na Pasyon written by Gaspar Aquino de Belen, Pasyong Genesis, Pasyong Candaba, and Martir sa Golgota<sup>2</sup>. In the 1980s, a segment of Via Crucis was added. Part of the panata of the members is the procurement of their props and costume (Manipon, 2003). Thus, the observance of Holy Week in the Philippines mobilizes the most significant number of individuals as actors, audience members, and participants, making it the premier week of the year (Peterson, 2016; Mesquida, 2018).

1 The scriptwriters of the traditional Sinakulo firmly believed and asserted that their scripts were entirely original.

2 A 19th-century Spanish novel written by Enrique Perez Escrib.



## Malolos

Malolos is the capital of Bulacan. Its name possibly comes from Paluslos, which refers to the river's downstream flow due to the water passing through nearby towns such as Plaridel, Paombong, and Calumpit. This city was founded in 1580 under the tutelage of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Before Spanish colonization, Malolos was a Katagalugan settlement known as Lihan, led by a tough and brave leader named Gat. Locals commonly called him Gat sa Lihan, which eventually became the Gatchalian clan (Santos, 2000).

After the defeat of Rajah Soliman and his men, the Spaniards arrived in Malolos nine years later. Miguel Lopez de Legazpi eventually conquered Manila. From Calumpit, Spanish missionaries reached Barrio Canalate to build a chapel. They expanded their territory through a land clearing process known as the “kaingin” system, which led to the origin of Barrio Caingin. Eventually, they reached a place called Kalumpang, where they built a church made of bamboo and nipa. In 1673, Malolos was officially established as a town (pueblo) through the effort of Fr. Francisco Lopez, an Augustinian who served as the first parish priest. The number of newly baptized inhabitants successfully indicated the propagation and instilling of the Catholic faith conducted by the missionaries (Reyes, 1967).

Agriculture and fishery were indicated as the chief means of livelihood, with meat, metal, and rice as their primary sources, and there were approximately 46,089,400 square meters of rice land area in this historical site. In April 1892, the opening of Ferrocarril de Manila-Dagupan (train) benefited the Malolos people by bringing their products to Manila and different parts of Central and Northern Luzon (Reyes, 1967).

## From Malibay to Tikay

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Cenaculistang Pasay, also known as Malibay Sinakulo, attracted crowds during Holy Week by staging its version across many towns and provinces (Tiongson, 2000). When the group performed in cockpits and public arenas in Malolos, it inspired

the people of the barrios to produce their version of the traditional passion play. In 1926, Herminigildo de Guzman, locally known as ‘Ang Gildo,’ produced the maiden Sinakulo of Tikay, Malolos, Bulacan. He wrote the script based on the Bible, Pasyong Genesis, Pasyong Candaba, and Martir sa Golgota. The characters of Dimas, Samuel Belibet, Claudia Procle, and Herodes Hakobo were taken from Martir sa Golgota, a 19th-century Spanish novel by Enrique Perez Escrich translated into Tagalog by Juan Evangelista. ‘Ang Gildo’ served as both dictator (prompter) and director (Tiongson, 1975). The traditional Sinakulo is a series of performances that takes place over seven consecutive nights, starting on Palm Sunday with the story of the world's creation and concluding on Easter Sunday with the coronation of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the highlight (Tiongson, 1975).



*Sinakulo of Tikay, Malolos, Bulacan  
(Photo Credit: Mr. Aljeru Pagtalunan)*

## Palabas

Sinakulo is traditionally performed during Holy Week, which coincides with the break between planting and harvesting. This allows farmers to rehearse and hone their acting craft (Tiongson, 1994). The traditional Sinakulo also reflects the concept and practice of time among farmers. It does not follow a fixed performance schedule. The show will start if all the performers are complete and prepared, which is a clear manifestation of the so-called Filipino time. In an agricultural village, it is imperative to harvest rice at the appropriate time. Rushing the process is unnecessary. Similarly, it is best not to pick mangoes too soon. As the saying goes, naturally ripened fruits taste sweeter, while artificially ripened ones can be bitter. (Ang bungang

hinog sa sanga, matamis ang lasa. Ang bungang hinog sa pilit, kung kainin ay mapait.)

The traditional Sinakulo performance showcases a slow tempo that mirrors the pace of agricultural life. This is evident in the pattern of chant or *punto* that identifies character type. Christ's chant is humble and gentle, as if He cannot harm even a fly, depicting His holiness. The Virgin Mary's prolonged and melancholic tune, categorized as *tagulaylay*, resembles the chants derived from indigenous epics. The apostles and holy women also have a slow pace but are less sentimental than Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. Annas, Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate all use a quick, snappy style of *punto*. At the same time, the soldiers and *Hudyo* follow the same *punto* or speak *bulalas* or straight speech (from Spanish *hablada*) - the way villains speak in movies.

The *mustra* (actions) and *arte* (acting) of the *personajes* are typical, just like the *punto*. Christ appears meek, with eyes on the verge of tears, carrying his head at an angle like a gentle lamb. He only has the energy to gracefully raise his hand in his enemies' benediction. The Virgin appears to be the statue of the *Mater Dolorosa* stepping down from her *karosa* (float). The holy people are often depicted with clasped hands, closed eyes, and gentle gestures, while kings are pompous and prideful. Accompanied by a brass band, holy characters slowly march to the tune of *punebre*, while soldiers and *Hudyo* march to the tune of *pasodoble*, a fast-paced Spanish military march.

As the song goes, *magtanim ay 'di biro maghapong nakayuko, 'di man lang makaupo, 'di man lang makatayo* (planting rice is no fun, bent from morn to set of sun; cannot stand, cannot sit, cannot rest a little bit). The farmers' challenging lives have inspired them to perform Sinakulo as entertainment during Holy Week. Injecting the character of '*pusong*' (Balagtas & Medina, 1990)<sup>3</sup> among the notorious characters like Judas, the two

3 In a *komedya* performance (a Spanish colonial theatrical tradition with plots that revolve around social, political, and religious themes), the character of '*pusong*' or trickster is usually loved by the audience. His role is to provide comic relief through his humorous actions and excessive sarcasm to hint at the seriousness of the upcoming scenes. For instance, he makes fun of the pretentiousness of the royal characters by repeating their lines in a mock-heroic tone.

thieves, and Barabbas can make Sinakulo more captivating for viewers and eliminate boredom.

For instance, Judas became intoxicated during the Last Supper and went to the Pharisees to report the whereabouts of Jesus while singing and dancing to popular disco music. However, the Sinakulistas acknowledge that it is sacrilegious to mock the good characters like Christ and holy men and women of the passion narrative. To make the Sinakulo more engaging, the romantic courtship between Boanerges and Magdalene, based on apocryphal texts, thrilled the audience (Tiongson, 1999).

Sinakulo also utilizes special effects and visual tricks to recreate and simulate important episodes. The use of mechanical devices, known as '*artipisayos*', is necessary to make certain scenes more awe-inspiring. The scenes depicting the world's creation, the creation of man, the Resurrection of Christ, the Assumption of Mary, and the death of Judas leave audiences astonished. This is due to the clever use of improvised devices like ropes and pulleys and special effects like sparklers and pyrotechnics. Using vibrant tropical colors for costumes is a strategy to make them more attractive to the audience. Props, costumes, set designs, stage, and makeup are all used to enhance the appeal of Sinakulo to the people. In creating these elements, the ingenuity and creativity of the sinakulistas are showcased, resulting in appealing yet appropriate props and set designs (Tiongson, 1999). Thus, although most of its scenes depict sorrowful events, hints of fiesta can be observed.

According to Hornedo, a fiesta is a community celebration lasting several days. It is meant to commemorate significant and happy events and is accompanied by artistic presentations such as music, poetry, and dance. Lastly, during the fiesta, regular occupations of the community are temporarily suspended (Hornedo, 2000). These characteristics are present in the staging of Sinakulo. During the week-long activity, the community can unite and participate as both members and viewers. Peterson asserts that the majority of the "Filipinos connect in communities through the performative, by emplacing fun and celebration into major shared communal experiences around which much of the rest of their lives are organized" (Peterson, 2016).

## Faith Drama

Sinakulo's religious nature aims to propagate the messages and examples of Jesus Christ and spread the seed of the Catholic faith among the people of the barrio, particularly the youth. Those involved in Sinakulo consider their participation a commitment or promise known as panata, which is why they take it seriously. Panata is one of the reasons for the sinakulistas for being involved in the Sinakulo without expecting any remuneration (Eballo, 2004). A member seeks blessings from God, including good health, a decent job, guidance during the crisis, and a healthy marital relationship. They are requesting God to grant their prayers. Once a promise is made, they hesitate to give it up due to the fear of misfortune. Sometimes, when they cannot fulfill the promise due to age or illness, the panata may be passed on to their children or younger siblings. A sinakulista is loyal to the promise made to God, as they want to maintain a good relationship with Him (Tiongson, 1975). Panata is often viewed as a way for farmers to express their faith. They generate income from their crops to give thanks for all their blessings during the year, which sustains their staging of Sinakulo.

## Maintaining the Cosmic Order

The sustainability of an organization (samahan) depends on the cooperation (pakikisama) of its members. The level of cooperation among Sinakulo members determines its existence (Tiongson, 1994). The director considers the family background and behavior of the actresses being considered for the role. In Malolos, those who portray holy characters are expected to adhere to high standards of conduct and public decorum. It is considered both a privilege and a duty to be a sinakulista (Tiongson, 1975). Once the director has identified a potential actress, e.g., the role of Mary, he has to convince the woman's parents to give their approval for her to join the Sinakulo. This process is similar to the traditional Filipino customs of panunuyo and pamamanhikan, which aim to maintain a harmonious relationship and order within the community.

An agricultural environment, a feudalistic

system, and a conservative Roman Catholic religion have influenced the traditional Sinakulo. The sinakulistas recognize a hierarchical order of natural and supernatural realms. The idea of God as the creator and His authority over all beings falls under the supernatural/metaphysical order. Therefore, farmers must comply with the Catholic Church's basic tenets and be familiar with the order of saints enshrined in the church retablo<sup>4</sup>.

The social hierarchy was visible in the respectful obedience of the tenants (kasama) towards their landlord (panginoong may lupa), who in turn provided them with support and security. They were mindful not to cause any disruptions in their cooperative relationship (samahan), as any animosity would affect their ability to work harmoniously together. In Sinakulo, the hierarchy is observable. The director oversees the entire production, cast, and crew. To ensure production success, performers must cooperate with the director, while adhering to the established structure and its authoritative worldview (Tiongson, 1994).

## Through Obedience

The Filipinos have created their persona of Jesus Christ, known as the obedient and suffering Christ in the traditional Sinakulo. This is a result of colonialism's influence and adherence to hierarchy. The images of Jesus highlighted in it are the Nazareno<sup>5</sup>, Santo Cristo<sup>6</sup>, and Santo Entierro<sup>7</sup>. It seems that Filipinos identify with the Suffering Christ, seeing their own struggles and sufferings in the humiliated Christ (Mercado, 1992). A lot of Filipinos are affected by poverty, and as a result, they can easily relate to the image of the Suffering Christ. Another reason many Filipinos are fascinated by the devotion to Nazareno and Christ of the Pasyon is their heroic-martyr sentiment. The Nazareno inspires many Filipinos to follow Jesus' example by obeying the will of the Father and performing good deeds for others. Filipino parents often make sacrifices for their families<sup>8</sup> (Mercado, 1992). The

<sup>4</sup> Refers to a frame or shelf enclosing decorated panels or revered objects above and behind an altar.

<sup>5</sup> The image of Jesus Christ while carrying His cross.

<sup>6</sup> The image of the Crucified Christ.

<sup>7</sup> This image of the dead Jesus Christ is the highlight of the Good Friday procession.

<sup>8</sup> According to Mercado, the top three favorite images of Christ in the Philippine setting are that of Jesus Nazareno, Santo Nino,



sinakulistas are also willing to sacrifice their time, treasure, and talents for the sake of Sinakulo.

## Samuel Belibet: The Unforgiven

In the Sinakulo play, some of the characters who played the role of villains eventually had a change of heart and sought forgiveness. For instance, Longinus, a Roman soldier, turned to a better path. Even Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, expressed regret for his actions but miserably ended up taking his own life.

In the traditional Sinakulo, a character named Samuel Belibet shows absolutely no remorse after cursing Jesus. He refuses to allow Jesus to rest on a bench in front of his house, under the grapevines that serve as a shed, when Christ struggles up the hill of Golgotha carrying His cross. When Jesus requests water from the well, Samuel heartlessly denies His request. Jesus asks Samuel to help Him in carrying His cross, but instead of helping, Samuel cruelly pushes Him, forcing Jesus to fall to the ground. Samuel mocks Jesus, saying, "Why do you loiter? Go faster, Jesus, go faster up to Calvary," adding insult to injury (Martinez, 1902).

Jesus turned to him, saying, "I am going, but you shall wait until I return." And so it was that Samuel Belibet was condemned to roam the earth in despair, awaiting Christ's return, wandering from place to place. When asked when he arrived, he inevitably answers, "Yesterday." When asked when he will leave, he always replies, "Tomorrow" (The Manila Times, 2014). Samuel Belibet<sup>9</sup> was punished for failing to demonstrate humane attributes such as mercy, forgiveness, and compassion toward those suffering. He was deemed unfit for the Kingdom of God due to his lack of charity and justice. His actions serve as a warning not to follow his example.

## Palabas as an Expression of Faith

Despite not receiving monetary compensation, most sinakulistas remain devoted to their faith and continue to perform the play during Holy Week. They do this to fulfill a religious

and the Crucified Christ. The first and the third images can be combined with the image of the Suffering Christ.

<sup>9</sup> There was a Jew named Ahasuerus known in Filipino legend as Samuel Belibet.

vow they made or inherited from their parents. This devotion brings individuals satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment in serving their community. They believe it is their duty to express gratitude to God for favors that have been requested, even if they have not yet been granted. This is because they believe that the timing of receiving blessings is in God's hands.

The faith of the poor is unshakeable, even if they have no control over their economic or personal fate. They turn to rituals like the Sinakulo to ask God for personal favors and to gain control over the controllable parts of their lives. These rituals offer a way of taming fate and tempering its effects. The Sinakulo is primarily a prayer and secondarily a play for farmers who perform it, giving it a transcendental significance (Tiongson, 1999).

## Paloob

Authentic goodness is in the deepest core of one's personhood. Loob, literally the inner self, is where the true worth of a person lies. Authentic graciousness (kagandahang loob) springs from this personal core, the loob (de Mesa, 1996). Budhi is welling up from the inner self (bukal sa kalooban) as an expression of graciousness (kagandahang loob), conscience (konsensiya), mercy (awa), and compassion (damay). Sinakulo, a form of religious drama, provides an opportunity for the people to discern their loob, conscientize their budhi, and initiate (kusang loob) resistance (lakas ng loob) against unjust structures, e.g., Martial Law, unfair labor practice, and human rights violations from the 1970s to the present. Obviously, paloob refers to the evangelical task that the Sinakulo plays in leading the people to reflect on what is happening in their society as they clamor for justice (katuwiran) and authentic human development (kaginhawahan) reiterated by the Catholic Social Teaching<sup>10</sup> (John Paul II, 1987). Peter Phan says, "The modern mission paradigm (evangelization) understands salvation to

<sup>10</sup> The Catholic Social Teaching, is at present a comprehensive body of theological positions of the Roman Catholic Church, intended to guide its faithful as well as all people of goodwill towards conscientious actions on an extensive variety of issues such as respect and the development of the human person, human rights, the common good, family life, human work, the economy, the political community, protection of the environment, and the promotion of peace.



include forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God, liberation from all forms of socio-political oppression and promotion of economic wellbeing.”

The agricultural or feudalistic paradigm has been drastically disturbed by the opening of manufacturing companies and other industries, aggravated by the transformation of agricultural lands into commercial and residential areas, e.g., a huge facility for tobacco threshing and redrying was constructed in Tikay, Malolos, Bulacan where the company’s processing plant was later established and mushrooming of subdivisions in the said town. These scenarios forced many farmers to become factory workers. The luxury of time due to the loose cycle of tropical seasons enjoyed by the farmers has gone, for the factory workers are now monitored by a supervisor and strictly required to sign for daily attendance with a lack of job security.

The groups (samahan) of Sinakulo have been impacted by the paradigm shift that transpired in the economic and working conditions of the members. The value of pakikisama (interpersonal relationship), which is the foundation of Sinakulo, is at risk due to the emergence of the crisis of individualism in an industrialized setting. The workers find limited time to maintain their good ties with their neighbors. Their time to actively join Sinakulo is also limited. Another difficulty the groups (samahan) have encountered is the economic aspect. It is expensive to showcase and sustain the staging of Sinakulo for seven consecutive nights.

A modification has been made to continue the tradition of staging the Sinakulo. Some groups composed of workers, teachers, religious, and student activists have continued to stage Sinakulo but simplified the script due to their tight schedules in their workplaces. Thus, they have shortened the presentation. These groups are no longer conscious of the venue, stage, and backdrop. An open space is enough to stage their brand of Sinakulo. A good example is pagdakip, an excerpt from a full-length Sinakulo that begins in the Garden of Gethsemane and ends in the Calvary. Many sinakulistas in Malolos opted to present pagdakip because it is more practical. They can perform in the street, inside a conference room, or even in front of a market. Eventually, they introduced a new form known as socio-political Sinakulo. The conflict is no

longer God versus sin but workers versus capitalists, peasants versus landlords, and the masses versus oligarchs who manipulate the economy.

## Socio-political Sinakulo

According to Ileto, during the revolution of 1896, the Pasyon allegedly instigated the members of Bonifacio’s Katipunan to struggle against Spain to attain their elusive freedom. He adds that some of the texts taken from Pasyon raised the nationalistic consciousness of the people and inspired the revolutionaries to unite and overthrow their Spanish oppressors. The most provocative text in the Pasyon is the appearance of the seditious figure of Jesus Christ who attracts mainly the lowly and the common people (taong bayan), draws them from their families, and forms a brotherhood (katipunan) that will proclaim a new era of mankind (Ileto, 1979).

The purpose of socio-political Sinakulo is also to raise the level of consciousness of the people on the injustices and contradictions that prevail in our country (Tiongson, 1978). These groups want to conscientize the people to condemn injustice and oppression. Aurelio Tolentino’s Bagong Kristo is the matrix of all political Sinakulos. It portrays Jesus as a labor leader who organizes farmers and workers to demand better pay, and his heroism leads to his death (Fernando, 1964). During the 1970s, activist students staged a Sinakulo where Christ represents Juan de la Cruz, tortured by the agents of imperialism, feudalism, and capitalism.

The Babaylan Theatre Group and the Anak Tibawan staged a modern Sinakulo at the U.P. Chapel after the declaration of Martial Law. Christ personifies a farmer, and the Virgin is dressed in the tricolor of Inang Bayan. After the play, the Christ character leads a procession around the chapel, holding up a figure of the Motherland in chains, while the community sings Bayan Ko. In the Sinakulo of Rene Villanueva, the real workers are the performers. Pilate and his wife portray American imperialism; Herodes and Herodias act as Marcos and Imelda, respectively. Caiphas represents local and multinational corporations. Christ acts as a labor leader. The conflict is when Pilate and his wife are to visit Herodes, and Herodias coincides with a

march that the workers and Christ have organized. Christ is arrested and undergoes torture of the 'toilet,' 'the bullets-between-the-fingers,' and the 'gun butt.' Various military cruelties are detailed. The *Sinakulo* ning Balen, written by Virgilio Vitug, was staged in 1983 and 1984 in Lubao, Pampanga. It exposes corruption in the government, like fiscals who accept bribes to dismiss capital crimes, fake recruiters who abuse miserable peasants, and candle sellers who make the blessing of the Pope a commodity. Jesus Makabalen (Jesus the Patriot) attacks corrupt and abusive officials, forcing Annas, Caiphas, and Malko to connive over his downfall. He dies on the cross but never resurrects. The various sectors of Philippine society unite to take his place (Cristobal, 2008).

*Sinakulo* has become a rich source of metaphors for social, political, and economic issues, ranging from the government's lack of response to the victims of Typhoon Yolanda to Manila's Zero Obstruction Policy to the demolition and relocation of informal settler families from so-called "danger zones." The *Kalbaryo ng Mamamayan* (Calvary of the People) has since been showcased annually by militant groups, who associate the Filipino experience and its myriad social ills with the suffering and persecution of Jesus Christ. In 2014, the *Kalbaryo* was transformed into a caravan that visited the symbolic 14 stations of the cross, depicting Filipino sufferings (Moya, 2014).

## Socio-political *Sinakulo* in Malolos

In 1980, 'Dulaang Malolos' a community theatre guild, showcased its maiden presentation of political *Sinakulo* entitled *Ang Kristo ng Bayan* at the Cathedral of the Diocese of Malolos patio. Jose 'Johnny' Cruz was the director, and Fr. Jose Eusebio (a fictitious name) served as the scriptwriter. Its theme, plot, and setting were progressive and subversive, explicitly resisting Marcos's declaration of Martial Law.

'*Ang Kristo ng Bayan*' described the problems that the Filipinos experienced during that time, like poverty and human rights violations due to militarization. Based on the play, Jesus Christ was born in the Philippines. Eventually, he became an activist to voice out the rights of workers,

farmers, and the Filipino masses due to his time's societal and political conditions. The government accused him of sedition. He was arrested and tortured by the Philippine Constabulary. The play utilized a lot of symbolism, e.g., the nails used in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ represented the qualities of an imperialist government attributed to Marcos' dictatorship, such as feudalism, bureaucracy, and capitalism. The Seven Capital Sins symbolized the unholy characters in *Sinakulo*:

1. Pontius Pilate = Pride
2. Herod the Great, Father of Antipas = Greed
3. Caiphas = Gluttony
4. Herod Antipas = Lust
5. Anas = Sloth
6. Judas Iscariot = Envy
7. Herodias = Anger

The group was lauded by theatre critics from Metro Manila because the group committed to exposing the systemic evils and social injustices during Marcos' regime. Military personnel and policemen surrounded the area while the group was performing at the Cathedral of the Diocese of Malolos patio. After the presentation, several members of 'Dulaang Malolos' were arrested and brought to the Headquarters of the Philippine Constabulary/Integrated National Police (PC/INP) Command located at the Provincial Government of Bulacan, Malolos, Bulacan, for investigation and interrogation (Giron, 2023).



*'Ang Kristo ng Bayan' of Dulaang Malolos*  
(Photo Credit: Mr. Isagani Giron)

In the socio-political Sinakulo, a new paradigm of Christ has been presented. The pious and meek Jesus was replaced with a subversive one, i.e., He can be described as a labor leader who confronts the evil of the present capitalist system. He can lead the fight for the proper implementation of agrarian reform, act as a student activist, and work to liberate the oppressed, including the squatters' association at Smokey Mountain<sup>11</sup>.

Jesus was described as a revolutionary leader because He confronted the Scribes and the Pharisees (Salgado, 1986). His triumphant entry to Jerusalem is an act of insubordination (Salgado, 1986). He intended his people to become free from oppression. He was a threat to the Jewish council and the Roman Empire as well, so He was killed.

Jesus Christ is a liberator because He always stands with the oppressed. He brings hope to the poor, sick, and sinners. He is a liberator not through violence but through ministry, courage in speaking, steadfastness in conflict, suffering love, and reliance on God. He aims to improve the oppressed's situation and change the oppressors because his rule is for everyone. The liberation that Jesus talks about involves promoting the welfare of the people. Thus, Christians are now being called to become liberators of their fellow Christians, freeing them from all injustices that dehumanize them.

The different socio-political Sinakulos encourage the people to work for justice and denounce injustice. The Gospel message of bringing justice and love to the people, especially the oppressed, still resonates. The socio-political form of Sinakulo just situates the Gospel in the context of the people. It is also a venue for activists to renounce the systemic evils and social injustices like extreme poverty and human rights violations that still exist. Through conscientization, people are called to become aware of their duties (pananagutan) in realizing the transformation of their community and the Philippine society.

Sinakulo, as a religious drama and a vehicle for evangelization, should "proclaim above all of salvation from sin, the liberation from everything oppressive to humankind, the development of

11 Smokey Mountain was a large landfill once located in Tondo, Manila.

humankind in all his/her dimensions, personal and communitarian, and ultimately, the renewal of society in all its strata through the interplay of the Gospel truths and human's concrete holistic life" (Paul VI, 1975). However, many Filipinos have faith in the victorious Risen Christ who will come on the Parousia, the second coming, to punish the unjust, and the oppressed will be vindicated (Elwood & Magdamo, 1971).

## Palalim<sup>12</sup>

Today, the City of Malolos<sup>13</sup> has been commercialized and industrialized due to its proximity to Metro Manila and Clark, Pampanga. A lot of companies have established commercial centers, business spots, and industrial hubs around the city, which include banking, business process outsourcing, courier services, private schools, food service, private hospitals, hotels, resorts, restaurants, communication technology, insurance, manpower, realty, transport services, and travel and tours. Malolos' transformation from an agricultural into an industrialized city is undeniable.

The emergence of modern culture influenced by social media, the advancement of technology, and the sudden shift of the economic system from agricultural environs to industrialized settings have threatened many Sinakulo groups (samahan) in Malolos. Another dilemma is the director's or organization's refusal (samahan) to adjust Sinakulo to the modern genre. But then, some Sinakulo groups continued their performance every Holy Week in areas where leadership had addressed the challenge of adaptation and creativity. They have maintained their passion play through the reappropriation of their presentation to the milieu and interest of the current generation while maintaining the messages and tradition of Sinakulo.

## Parochial Sinakulo

Inspired by religious movies such as Jesus Christ Superstar (the musical), The Passion of the Christ, and Jesus of Nazareth, and aware of the significance of Sinakulo, many parish churches

12 Focused on the theological significance of Sinakulo.

13 Republic Act No. 8754 - An act converting the Municipality of Malolos, Bulacan province into a component city to be known as the City of Malolos.



in Malolos, Bulacan have adopted the practice of staging Sinakulo organized and sustained by the Parish Commission on Youth (PCY). This initiative is led by the parish priests, who have undergone workshops for community theatre and faith drama as part of their training in the seminary. The purpose is to creatively communicate the teachings and examples of Jesus Christ to the parishioners as a form of pastoral necessity to stage the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ through Sinakulo amidst emerging ideologies such as consumerism, secularism, and capitalism.

The opening part of the parochial Sinakulo focuses on raising awareness by highlighting the ongoing struggles people face, including issues such as extreme poverty, discrimination, and the significant disparity between different social classes. It serves as an introduction, connecting to the passion of Jesus Christ, and aims to inspire the audience to watch the entire faith drama. In the end, the character of a child, a poor woman, or a person with a disability appeals to the audience, encouraging them to maintain their faith, reconnect with Christ, and experience His unconditional love as they reintegrate into their family and community.

## Expression of Faith and Values

Sinakulo allows the casts to fulfill their religious vows, which are taken as an expression of gratitude for favors received from God. For them, it is a prayer that only happens to be, secondarily, a play. It is an avenue for people to practice and experience pakikisama or cooperation. It is an example of community theatre, which is produced, acted in, and sustained by the solidarity of the common people.

Happiness is another Filipino core value associated with Sinakulo. As Peterson explains, it is in being happy where “the self only truly exists concerning the other.” He maintains that theatre (performance) in the archipelago “through celebration and ritual is the key productive, purposeful activity that links the individual to the collective in ways that contribute to happiness in the Philippines” (Peterson, 2016).

## Form of Religious Education

Religious education should critically investigate and understand what is communicated and, on the other hand, must attend to the methods, context, and effects of the communicative process. Religious education aims to help people discern, respond to, and be transformed by God’s presence and work for the continuing transformation of the world in the light of this perception of God (McBrien, 1994). Sinakulo can be considered an artistic/dramatic method of articulating the Gospel message to the common people.

The National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines calls for a competent and relevant learning process rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition connected to our context (National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines, 1985, #412). Education of faith is no longer limited to memorization of formulaic doctrines and dogmas. It is informational and transformational as well. NCDP reiterates the integration of doctrine, morals, and worship based on the Scripture and Church teachings related to the students’ concrete experiences (NCDP, #482). The catechetical approach using theatre (Sinakulo) is both culture-based and experiential.

Catechism for Filipino Catholics mentions that catechesis should consider inculturation to respond to the concrete situation of today’s Filipino families. Inculturation is an expression of faith using symbols and actions originating from the culture of the people. A theatre is a tool for the inculturation of faith expression (Catechism for Filipino Catholics, #2). Inculturation through the presentation of Sinakulo is attainable considering the dynamic culture of the people embedded in Sinakulo.

Sinakulo promotes Jesus Christ and articulates faith in Him. Perhaps, it is one of the meaningful ways of inculcating the teachings and examples of Jesus Christ to the people. Inculturation may also be applied to it. Sinakulo adapts indicators of Filipino culture like sakop (sense of belonging), utang na loob (debt of gratitude), pakikisama (solidarity), pagsasakripisyo (unconditional love) in presenting the Gospel. Community building and fellowship can also be achieved by the group (samahan).



## Theatrical Way of Evangelization

Evangelii Nuntiandi<sup>14</sup> calls for the promotion of Christ to those who do not know Him and this process is called evangelization. It includes all the activities that lead to the proclamation of the Gospel among non-Christians or non-practicing Christians. Evangelization is both personal and communal. Likewise, Sinakulo is a personal pinata performed by a community. Evangelization can be done by preaching. Sinakulo is more captivating than preaching as it vividly represents the Gospel. Teaching religion creatively, using auditory, visual, and participatory elements, is highly encouraged to deepen the fundamental tenets of the Catholic faith (Eballo, 2022). Evangelii Nuntiandi encourages the faithful to bring the message of Christ to the people. Sinakulo can creatively announce the Gospel to a multitude of people. However, the challenge of Evangelii Nuntiandi is to witness Jesus Christ in everyday life, which is also a challenge for Sinakulo's members and viewers (Paul VI, 1975, #51-52).

Drama as a pedagogy in catechesis or religious education is recommended because integrating faith and life on stage may inspire the cast and audience. Through religious drama like Sinakulo, members and viewers may imbibe values and practical lessons that apply to their real-life situations and necessary for their faith formation (Pantaleon, 1989). Transformation may take place depending on how the members and viewers have received and applied the message of Sinakulo in their lives.

## Conclusion

It is appropriate to use the lens of theology, particularly the social teachings of the Church and Covar's labas (historical), loob (socio-political), and lalim (theological) framework in articulating the evolution of Sinakulo coherently and thematically. Communal discourse on rhetoric narratives of Sinakulo members and viewers through their collective consciousness helps realize their identity

14 Apostolic exhortation of Pope Paul VI, "On Evangelization in the Modern World," issued Dec. 8, 1975, following the third ordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops (Sept. 27 to Oct. 26, 1974). The assembly was charged with clarifying the church's evangelizing identity in a way that did justice to traditional theology and the liberationist construction of mission and evangelization.

as sinakulistas and the significant contributions that Sinakulo plays in the community.

There are traditional Sinakulo groups (samahan) that still exist. According to anthropologists Redfield and Singer, "little tradition is marked by popular customs, attitudes, and practices largely produced in rural areas. This tradition continues to survive amidst the spaces of the mushrooming cities due to the strategies applied by the devotees." The Sinakulo of Malibay still exists because of the strategies employed by the members. The same is true with the Sinakulo of Tikay, Malolos. Understandably, the main reason for the continued existence of the traditional Sinakulo groups (samahan) is the promise or panata of the members and viewers. The members experience satisfaction or happiness whenever Sinakulo is performed and accomplished. The stage is a sacred space where Sinakulo is performed. Sinakulo (samahan) serves as a support group for the members in which fellowship and solidarity are experienced. Moreover, Sinakulo is a product of pananagutan (responsibility and spirit of volunteerism), pagganap (performance) of the members, and pagtangkilik (continued patronage) of the viewers. Socio-political Sinakulo corresponds to the mission of the Church of condemning unjust social structures that prevent people from achieving their full human development. Militant groups continue to conscientize and resist current social problems like massive poverty, graft and corruption, and human rights violations.

Many parish churches in Malolos have produced and staged their own Sinakulo. This indicates that Sinakulo, a form of pastoral drama, has been used purposely to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sinakulo is a creative and dynamic proclamation of the Gospel, i.e., a theatrical way of evangelization. It is a unique key to making the faith alive in people's hearts, imagination, and daily experiences because it is participatory. Here is a living proclamation. Here is an authentic inculturation of the faith. The highlight of Sinakulo is Jesus' resurrection. It is easy to convince a five-year-old boy that Christ has resurrected because you will hear him whispering, "Mama, Christ has risen! I saw him on the stage with His mother and His disciples."

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