

Flowers for 'Mama Mary': Cultural Hegemony and Change in Argao's Traditional *Flores de Mayo*

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ABSTRACT

Anthropologists acknowledge the importance of memory, performance and oral transmission as manifested in various forms of intangible cultural heritage which are passed on from one generation to the next, thus providing a sense of cultural identity and continuity. This paper focuses on the *Flores de Mayo* in Argao, a southern town in the province of Cebu in the Philippines. This is a month-long religious ritual among Catholic Filipinos paying tribute to the Blessed Virgin Mary through the offering of songs and flowers. Specifically it discusses:

1. the performances involved in the ritual
2. the meaning of the rituals to the participants
3. the changes that have taken place in terms of performance and meaning
4. how Argaoanons perceive such changes in relation to their cultural heritage

Using Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, the author argues that the loss of this intangible heritage was largely due to the former parish priest's interventions which went unopposed by the locals because of their reverence for religious authority.

Keywords

religious hegemony, Catholic rituals, Cebu in the Philippines, Gramsci, *Flores de Mayo*, Argao, *Ijas de Maria*, *Belen*

Introduction

The Philippines, located in Southeast Asia, is considered the only country in Asia where the majority of the population are Catholic Christians. Catholicism in the Philippines traces its roots to the Spanish colonialists

who ruled the country for over three centuries from the 16th to the 19th century. Guerrero (1970) wrote that the union of church and state characterised the colonial rule of the Spaniards during that time as the population, especially in town centres, was under the control of

friars. According to Guerrero (1970), the friars propagated a culture among the masses that was *obsessed with novenas, prayer books, as well as religious feasts and processions*. Fitzpatrick (2013) stated that the people's reliance on ritual and religion may have facilitated Spanish Catholicism and, in effect, colonial rule. However, the level of religious influence by the Spaniards was not the same in all areas since there were areas where the only Spanish presence was a friar who occasionally visited the place to administer the sacraments. In these areas, pre-Hispanic religious elements remained, producing a form of 'folk' Catholicism that persisted into the 20th century (Fenner: 1976). On the other hand, areas that were established as *pueblos* (towns) and *parroquias* (parishes) in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries were much more influenced by Spanish culture, and Argao, a southern town in the province of Cebu, was one of these. [Figures 1 and 2]

One ritual introduced by the Spanish friars is the *Flores de Mayo*, a month-long activity in May that focuses on paying tribute to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is based on the Catholic belief that Mary is holy because she is the mother of Jesus Christ and thus she acts as an intercessor for believers. Offering flowers is one way of gaining her favour and to express veneration for her holiness. *Flores* is a Spanish word meaning flowers, and thus *Flores de Mayo* literally means

'Flowers of May'. Generally, this tradition began during the Spanish colonial period when the inhabitants of what would become known as the Philippines were converted to Christianity. Argao, being one of the earliest-established pueblos and parishes in the province of Cebu at that time, incorporated many Catholic rituals, including the *Flores de Mayo*, into its culture.

Even though the practice was introduced by another culture, this ritual has endured over the centuries in this town with its own style of performance adapted to fit the local context and preferences of the practitioners (N.B. This will be explained in detail later in this paper). Thus, this has become part of Argao's intangible cultural heritage as manifested in oral traditions, performing arts, traditional craftsmanship, social practices, festive events and rituals. It is passed down from generation to generation by means of oral transmission or through continued performance, providing people with a sense of identity and continuity. Teaching the young about cultural practices, rituals, beliefs, and other intangible aspects of culture is thus very important for the preservation of this type of heritage. However, the performance of the Argaoanon *Flores de Mayo* was changed by the intervention of the parish priest (assigned from 2000 to around 2011) to his own version, without regard for its meaning to the locals who had practised it over a long period of time.



Figures 1 and 2
Maps of the Philippines showing Cebu and Argao. Source: Wikipedia.

This paper attempts to provide a 'thick description' of the *Flores de Mayo* in order to situate it in the religious culture of the Argaoanons. A 'thick' (or in-depth) description (Geertz: 1973) provides details of the actors, actions, and meanings of an aspect of culture. This is widely utilised in symbolic and interpretive anthropology to interpret meanings of symbols used in rituals from the perspective of the practitioners themselves. These interpretations form a shared cultural system of meaning, i.e. understandings shared, to varying degrees, among members of the same society. Thus in this paper, a detailed description of the *Flores de Mayo* will be provided from the perspective of informants belonging to different age groups.

However, an interpretive approach may not suffice in this case as a major factor – the interventions of the parish priest assigned to Argao in 2000 – has affected the performance of the ritual itself. Thus I shall also make use of Gramsci's concept of hegemony in discussing why there was not much resistance to the priest-imposed changes among the Argaoanons. The position of the priest in Argaoanon culture is in keeping with what Gramsci calls *intellectuals of the rural type*¹. According to Gramsci, these intellectuals in the countryside generally have a higher standard of living compared to the average peasant and thus serve as a social model to whom they look up. The most typical category of these intellectuals, according to Gramsci², is that of the ecclesiastics, who have historically held a monopoly on a number of important services, including those connected with religion, education, morality and charity, among others. In such a position, these intellectuals have historically exercised a form of cultural or social hegemony comprising consent being freely given by the population to the ideas and practices imposed by the dominant group. Historically, this consent is given because of the prestige which the intellectual (i.e. the priest) has in the area. This is what Gramsci called 'cultural hegemony', which means that a diverse culture can be ruled or dominated by one group or class through everyday practices and shared beliefs.

Hegemony is a concept that has been used to describe and explain the dominance a ruling group exercises over a subordinate group without necessarily using force. Researchers use hegemony to explain how dominant groups or individuals can maintain their power, by persuading the subordinate groups to accept,

adopt and internalise their values and norms. Gramsci³ describes how the dominant culture captures the subordinates' ideology and makes them absorb the perspectives of the dominant class. Gramsci's analysis suggests that prevailing cultural norms, including institutions, practices and beliefs, should not be accepted as natural or inevitable, but rather, that they should be viewed as one of the roots of domination. (Morton: 2007).

From the narratives and accounts of key informants from different age groups who actively participated in the *Flores de Mayo* in Argao as young children in the past, a 'thick' description of the *Flores de Mayo* ritual emphasises the practices, symbols and their meanings for Argaoanons. Changes imposed by the former parish priest which led to the loss of this important intangible cultural heritage will be analysed using Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony as explained earlier. A total of ten (10) key female informants (two informants for each of the 70s, 60s, 50s and 40s age groups, one 35 year old and one 99-year old informant), as well as five (5) key male informants, were interviewed. Their narratives were analysed thematically and form the basis of this paper.

Cultural hegemony in religion: the case of Argao

Religion is one social institution that greatly influences people's thoughts, feelings and actions, especially with regard to what is considered sacred in society. According to Marx, religion should be analysed in relation to other social systems especially the economic structures of society. Economic disparities are temporarily negated through religion as it makes people servile and more amenable to accepting the status quo. He further describes religion as the *opiate of the masses* which creates illusory happiness and provides reasons and excuses to maintain society as it is.

In the case of the Philippines, the Spanish colonialists used religion to subjugate the locals. The belief in a Supreme Being or God brought by the Catholic missionaries terrified the natives, and thus many were converted to Christianity. During that time, the Spanish friars wielded much power in the towns, and as such, the locals had a high regard for them. Mendoza (1983)

explains that during that time religious interventions in political matters were justified by the principle of union of church and state which previously laid the foundation of the Spanish *conquista* which was to 'civilise and Christianise' pagan lands initially assigned by fiat of the Pope. In the Philippines at that time, some friars of the Catholic Church encroached on the jurisdiction of the civil government. The Spanish friars became virtually the most visible element of stability and continuity of Spanish sovereignty in the rest of the Philippines outside of Manila.

This reverence for religious authority has continued over the centuries and so priests are still seen as the sole authority in terms of parochial affairs. People see priests as the mediators between God and the laity, and thus people have a high regard for them. The fear of divine retribution (locally called *gaba*) is very strong among Catholic believers, especially when someone shows disrespect for what is considered sacred (including objects, places and people).

The Spaniards' use of religion for colonisation is an example of cultural hegemony. Such hegemony of the church has extended beyond the period of Spanish colonisation into the present day in the Philippines. There have been many cases of Catholic priests' disregard for cultural heritage in the parishes to which they have been assigned, including the modification of old structures, relics, and traditional religious practices. Yet parishioners accept these without complaint. Such seems to have been the case in Argao as the Parish Pastoral Council⁴ did not protest against the parish priest's interventions in their age-old religious traditions, as well as in the church buildings. A young municipal councillor said that the Municipal Heritage Council was very vocal at that time about the parish priest's painting of the church altar and statues gold, the destruction of the old Spanish-period arch leading to the cemetery and other things. However, the parish priest would say in his sermons that government officials were meddling with church affairs. This account illustrates how the parish priest asserted his power and authority over the town's religious objects, practices and structures, totally disregarding local people's 'ownership' (as embodied in the Municipal Heritage Council) of these as part of their cultural heritage.

A similar case of interventions by parish priests in age-old religious traditions in Philippine towns was cited

by Galang (2012) in his paper regarding sponsorship of processional images during the Holy Week in Cabiao, Nueva Ecija. He stated that changes were initiated by various parish priests to the town's Holy Week activities including the changing of the procession day from Holy Thursday to Holy Wednesday, and disallowing the tradition of leaving the *carrozas* inside the church after the procession without consultation with the image *carroza* owners. Even if these may be considered minor changes by the parish priests, the *carroza* owners say that they have made a big difference to their family traditions.

Based on the *Code of Canon Law* (1983), the functions of the priest in the parish are *teaching, sanctifying, and governing, also with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and with the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful, according to the norm of law*. In the Philippines, because of its long history of colonisation, the reverence placed on friars during the Spanish colonisation period has been sustained until today in many parishes in the Philippines, giving parish priests blanket authority over all the religious activities (including the *Flores de Mayo*) in the area under his jurisdiction, which usually goes unquestioned.

Argao: pueblo and parroquia

Argao is located approximately 66 kilometers from Cebu City in the southeastern part of the province of Cebu. It was first established as a *vicaria* as early as 1599. (Redondo: 1886). A *vicaria*, or a vice-parish, is an area similar to a parish in size but not yet sufficiently advanced in its development to be elevated to the position of a parish. Then in 1608, Argao was set up as a *pueblo* (town); however, it remained a *visita* of Carcar until 1730 or 1733 (Labrado: 1992). *Visitas*, as the term implies, were places that were only visited by the Spanish missionaries from time to time as they did not have permanent priests living there to officiate and give the sacrament to new converts. The Church of Argao was officially founded on October 16, 1733, with St Michael the Archangel as its patron saint, and administered by the Augustinians. The building of the church took several years to finish and the structure was completed only in 1788.



Plate 1
An example of a *Belen* featuring the whole Christmas story and other important events in the life of Jesus Christ.
Photo: Nestoria G. Saniel.



Plate 2
A *Carroza* depicting the scourging of Jesus Christ at the pillar.
Photo: Nestoria G. Saniel.

Having been colonised by Spain for more than three hundred years, the Philippines has become acculturated to several aspects of Spanish culture, especially with regard to religious beliefs and rituals.

Argaoanon religiosity

Argaoanons are known to be deeply religious, and they claim that Argao is the place that has produced the greatest number of priests in the province of Cebu. Based on my 99-year old informant's account, *Kaniadto kasagaran sa mga pamilya dinhi sa Poblacion ug sa sikbit nga mga barangay magpasulod gyud og ilang bata sa seminaryo kay buot nila nga adunay pari sa ilang pamilya kay grasya kuno na sa Ginoo.* ('In the past, most families here in the town centre, as well as in neighbouring villages, would send one of their sons to the seminary because they wanted to have a priest in their family to receive more grace from God.') However, precise figures as to the total number of priests the area has produced was not verified at the time of writing.

Catholic religious occasions, including Christmas, Holy Week, feast days of patron saints, and *Flores de Mayo*, are considered important occasions for Argaoanons. Christmas is marked by the making of *Belen* tableaux (Spanish for Bethlehem, believed by Catholics to be where Jesus was born) depicting not only the birth of Jesus but other events as well, including the so-called 'Joyful mysteries' and the Christmas story.

Every household displays a big *Belen* in its living room for visitors to see. [Plate 1]

For Holy Week during Lent, a number of *carroza* (carriages or *carro*, for short) depict the passion of Christ. Each *carroza* is sponsored by one or several families who take charge of its decoration and of providing food after the solemn procession for the faithful. This is similar to what Galang (2012) describes in his paper regarding sponsorship of processional images and *carrozas* by prominent families (mostly landowners and political officials) in the town who were responsible for the maintenance, decoration and participation in the procession. [Plate 2]

Several *capilla* (chapels) are located all over the town, especially in the *Poblacion* (town centre), either built by communities or prominent families in honour of a specific patron saint. For example, the Lucero-Galeos family has a *capilla* in honour of Our Lady of Fatima, while the Lucero-Kintanar families have a *capilla* in honour of the Holy Cross. These families were among those prominent in the town during the Spanish and American colonisation periods. This is also similar to Galang's (2012) assertion that most of the prominent families held positions of power such as *governadorcillo* and *cabeza de barangay*, and/or were landowners and thus could very well afford the expenses entailed before, during and after the religious procession.

Children are the main participants on these occasions. As my 99-year old informant said, *mas maayu nga ang mga bata matudlu-an na gyud daan sa pangadyi ug mga buluhaton sa simbahan samtang sayu pa. Mas maayu nga ang ilang oras anha sa Ginoo aron dili mahisalaag.* ('Religiosity is best initiated early in life, because children are very receptive. It's better if they spend their time with God so that they will not go astray.') At Christmas time, children go from house to house to view the *Belen* depicting the events leading to the birth of Jesus Christ. During Holy Week, they participate in the rehearsals for songs to be sung during the procession. For feast days and the novenas preceding them in the different *capilla*, children are also the main participants as they lead the rosary. But the most-anticipated event primarily for young people is the *Flores de Mayo*. Children in Argao look forward to the month of May, as they consider it 'their' month in church.

The Argaoanon *Flores de Mayo*

Belief in Mary. The underlying tenet of the *Flores de Mayo* ritual is the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Catholics believe that Mary is the Mother of God, and is Queen of Heaven. She has many titles in the Catholic faith, as contained in the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary composed during the Middle Ages, and faithfully used at the shrine of the Holy House at Loreto. It was approved by Pope Sixtus V in 1587. Mary's exalted privileges, her life of holiness, her amiability and power, her motherly spirit and queenly majesty are all enumerated. Hence, Catholics hold to the conviction that whatever virtue and holiness is found in angels and saints must be present in Mary in an immeasurably higher degree. This belief in Mary's holiness is the basis for a number of Catholic prayers and rituals. The Hail Mary prayer briefly confirms the creed of Mary as the Mother of God.

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women and
Blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners
Now and at the hour of our death, Amen.*

The statue of Mary has served as a symbol of this belief in her holiness. Kissing the statue's feet is a



Plate 3
The angels and the name 'Maria' at the altar.
Photo: Nestoria G. Saniel, c.1973.

common practice after offering flowers to her. This symbol holds meaning for the believers and *Flores de Mayo* participants. My 99-year old informant expressed her strong faith in Mary, *Inahan jud na nato sa kanunayng panabang. Di ta niya pasagdan kung mudangop ta niya.* ('She really is our mother of perpetual help. She will not abandon us if we just ask for her help.') This belief is echoed by my 70-year old informants as well as the younger informants who refer to Mary as 'Mama Mary'.

The Ritual. The *Flores de Mayo* is a month-long church ritual in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It has been a common practice among Catholic Filipinos in many parts of the country. Believed to have been started in 1865, this devotion to Mary takes the form of rituals performed with several variations in chapels across the different provinces of the Philippines, but common to all are the offering of flowers and singing of songs for the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Argaoanon *Flores de Mayo* has a similar pattern, but with variations. Based on what my informants told me, they participated in the ritual between the ages of around four and twelve. Children were grouped based on the several roles they played during the entire ritual. One group was composed of 'angels' who were dressed in long gowns wearing 'wings' made of stiff cardboard covered with chicken feathers. [Plate 3]

The next group was composed of the so-called *tubag* [respondants] who wore white dresses and were assigned to give flowers directly to the 'angels' to be

offered to an image/statue of Mary. One *tubag* was assigned to each angel. The other groups acted as leaders for the other children who lined up to offer flowers to Mary at the altar. These groups took turns at their specific roles, every other day. This meant that the 'angel' group would become line leaders the next day, while one of the groups who were line leaders would become the *tubag*, and the *tubag* would become the 'angels' the next day, and so on. This role-playing added a creative and playful aspect to the ritual which attracted the children to join in. In interviews with former *Flores* participants who are now adults, they said that *kaniadto ma-excited jud mi kung Mayo na kay mag-anghel-anghel na sad mi. Lingaw man kaayu to gud* ('We really were excited when it was already the month of May because we could play our angel roles again. It was fun.') It gave them something to look forward to every day because they had an important role to play for the entire duration of the ritual.

The ceremony usually started at four o'clock in the afternoon, with the Holy Rosary led by a child-volunteer. After the Holy Rosary, a seminarian assigned to the parish read the *Pag-ampo sa Flores de Mayo* (Prayer for the *Flores de Mayo*). While he read the prayer, a group of five young adults and/or adolescents wearing white clothing and a miraculous medal or *sinta* (also known as the medal of the Immaculate Conception) worn on a blue ribbon around the neck, took their places in the middle aisle of the church. Called the *Ijas de Maria* (children of Mary) each one knelt at the back of each of the five letters spelling the name, MARIA. A group of six to eight angels then went to the middle aisle of the church, arranging themselves into two groups on either side of the aisle. As soon as the prayer ended, the organist played the first version of the *Dios te Salve Maria* ('Hail Mary'), while the *Ija* assigned to the letter M slowly brought the letter towards the altar, with the angels walking alongside her. The letter was left on a board on the altar, and the *Ija* and the angels walked back to the middle of the church.

Five different arrangements of the same musical piece were played, one for each of the letters. This was one of the unique aspects of the Argaoanon *Flores de Mayo* since in most churches in Cebu there is only one tune for the *Dios te Salve Maria* played over and over again. But in Argao, each letter had a different tune with the same lyrics. These were sung by the *cantoras*

(church singers) to the accompaniment of the organ. When interviewed, the organist said that these musical pieces had been handed down from her parents and her grandparents before them. They are hand-written on thick paper which has yellowed with age and according to my informants, these were the original papers given to them at the time of the Spanish friars. They are now displayed in the parish museum.

As soon as the last letter was placed on the altar, the angels accompanying the *Ijas* went back to the middle of the church and other smaller angels lined up with them; they then all returned to the altar and took their places there – a group of three to four older angels standing on each side of the altar, while the smaller ones stayed in the middle. [Plate 4]

The smaller angels were called 'flowers', meaning that they were just there as decoration, and they did not really have important roles to play in the ritual. Older angels took leadership roles throughout the entire ritual. The other groups of children then started to line up in formation. The *tubag* stayed in front, while the line leaders led each of the lines of children bringing flowers. As soon as all the children had settled down, the angels started to sing a Cebuano song calling on the children to come and bring flowers to Mother Mary. Again, this is peculiar to the Argaoanon *Flores* in that they had three different tunes for these Cebuano songs. The first one, which is most common and which I have also heard elsewhere, starts with the line *Tana kita nga tanan niining bulak nga ani-a; Maghalad kang Maria kay maoy atong inahan* ('Come, all of us with flowers to offer to Mary, because she is our Mother'). The other two tunes are less common, and were only sung in Argao. One starts with the line, *Mga hinigugma ni Maria dad-a ngari kanang kabulakan, ihalad ninyo diri kaniya kay malipay, kay malipay og inyong halaran* ('All loved ones of Mary, come and bring flowers to offer her because it will make her happy.') The other one starts with the line *Umari diri, Umari kamo, mga debotas ni Maria; Duol diri kamo kaniya kay siya nagpaabot kaninyo* ('Come here, Come all you devotees of Mary; come to her because she has been waiting for you.') According to the musicians, these songs were originally in Spanish but have been translated over the years to make them more meaningful and easier for the Argaoanon children to understand. Unfortunately the musical scores for the songs are now on display in the museum and could not be photographed.



Plate 4
One of the author's informants, now in her 50s, as a 'flower angel'.
Photo: Nestoria G. Saniel, c.1961.



Plate 5
The group of angels and the seminarian assigned to the parish after the end-of-May procession.
Photo: Nestoria G. Saniel, c.1977.

After the singing of the introduction, the angels faced the image of Mary on the altar and started singing a solemn Cebuano song. One song begins with the line *O dalaga nga putli, maanyag pa kay sa bulan, naghapa sa imong tiilan kining imong pinili...* ('Oh pure woman who is more beautiful than the moon, we your chosen ones are here kneeling at your feet.') The other song starts with the line, *Kining putli ug diosnon nga inahan, labing maanyag pa siya kay sa bulan ug sa katahum ning kabulakan. Labaw pa siya nga dili hitupngan...* ('This pure and godly mother who is more beautiful than the moon and more beautiful than the flowers; she cannot be compared to others.') The third version of the song starts with the line *O putli namo nga inahan, maanyag pa siya kay sabulan, nia kami sa imong atubangan ug naghapa sa imo nga tiilan...* ('Oh pure mother who is more beautiful than the moon, we are here kneeling at your feet.') In the middle of the song, the angels faced the *tubag* who sang about their coming to offer flowers to Mary, and then they gave their flowers to the angels, who accepted them and immediately placed them at the foot of the image of Mary on the altar. This role-playing depicted the angels as mediators between the people and Mary, and in turn Mary is their mediator with God. The other children then sang about their reasons for coming to offer flowers to Mary. In each of the songs

there are lines for the angels, for the *tubag* and for all the other children, all of whom usually sang at the tops of their voices to prove their worth in the roles they were playing, especially the angels.

Next, the *tubag* stayed at the sides to give way to the *ljas*, the other people and children lining up. Originally, the *cantoras* would sing a Spanish religious song while the angels started accompanying each of the *ljas* to offer flowers to Mary. But this was later changed to a Cebuano song with a similar meaning. After all of the *ljas* had offered their flowers, the other worshippers lined up facing the altar. The angels meanwhile took the flowers from the other children in the line and offered these to Mary at the altar. They did this in various ways. They might either take the flowers one by one, or two of them would just hold a cloth where the children could put their flowers in one at a time, still in formation.

As soon as everyone had offered their flowers, a goodbye song was played and sung, led by the angels, while everyone (except the angels) knelt down. This was a Cebuano song with some Spanish terms like *Adios* (goodbye) and *Señora* (lady). It starts with the line *Adto na kami, Maria. Adios kanimo Señora*. ('We are going, O Mary. Goodbye to you, lady.') Again the children sang at

the tops of their voices. As soon as the song was sung, the children stood up and made the sign of the cross. Then they started running towards the church doors. Other children went to the altar to choose the best flowers and place them in vases at the altar.

The role playing, the songs and music, and the interaction with other children, motivated most children to take part in the ritual. This is a month-long annual event that had been repeated from one generation to the next. As soon as the children became teenagers they stopped being angels and became *Ijas*. A sort of rite of passage was held every 30th day of May, when the new *Ijas* received their *sintas*. This created a commitment to come back every May and take part in the *Flores de Mayo*, even when they were no longer children. It also assured the continuity of the tradition as the older ones encouraged the younger ones to take part in the ritual because of how much they had enjoyed taking part when they were children.

The culmination of the *Flores de Mayo* ceremony was celebrated on May 30th and 31st. Instead of the usual Cebuano songs sung for the ritual, a Spanish song, entitled *Venid* ('Come') was sung by the angels and the other children. This was sung on both days. But on the 30th, the goodbye song was still the same as on the other days. It was on the 31st when a Spanish goodbye song, entitled *El Mayo* was sung, signalling the end of the month-long ritual. On both days, all the *Ijas* from the different *barangays* (villages) lined up at the sides of the church before going to the altar. On the 31st, the *Ijas* held lighted candles while the *El Mayo* was sung. After the church service, all the angels and *Ijas* walked in a procession honouring Mary around the town's *Poblacion*, on the same route taken for all other religious processions, starting from the church going through major streets and then back to the church, along with all the other characters typical of the Sta. Cruzan ritual celebrated in other parts of the Philippines at the end of May. [Plate 5]

All the children who had taken part in the ritual during previous years looked forward to participating in the ritual year after year. This had become a tradition which brought the believers closer together in honouring Mary. In general, the ritual followed the same format. My 99-year old informant described the identical pattern as my 70, 60, 50, 40 and even 30-year old informants.

According to my 70-year old informant *kaniadto lahi-lahi nga letra among line arrangement, pero nagkadugay linya na lang. Pero pareha ra jud ang mga kanta ug mga buhatanon. Lingaw mi.* ('During our time, we formed different letters in our line arrangement but in my children's time they only formed a simple line. We had fun.')

Interventions and changes to the ritual.

Members of the younger generation said that the *Flores* they have joined in is just ordinary – all the people, whether adult or child, whether wearing angel costumes or not, would just offer flowers while a singer (imported from the parish priest's previous parish) sang a Marian song. This is now the new format of the *Flores de Mayo*, as introduced by the parish priest upon his assignment to Argao in the year 2000. My informants lamented the sudden changes deliberately made by that parish priest to the performance of the ritual, including the songs, the role playing and the end-of-May activities. According to one of my 40-year old informants, *bati na man uy, giwala man gud sa pari. Akong mga anak wala na jud kaapil og Flores de Mayo nga pareha sa atoa kaniadto. Di na sad ta kaapil inig tapos sa Mayo kay wala na man, murag katapusang Domingo ra sila magprusisyon unya mura rag wala sa simbahan.* ('It is no longer what we had before because the priest changed it. My children have not taken part in the *Flores de Mayo* that we used to have. We could not join in the end-of-May activities anymore because they transferred the procession to the last Sunday of May and there was no ritual in the church.')

Over time, there had been gradual changes to the ritual, including the 'Cebuanisation' of the song lyrics, the method of collecting the flowers, the line patterns, and the like, initiated by the participants themselves. But the drastic changes made to the ritual by an outsider to Argaoanon culture (in this case, the parish priest), constitute what some of my 40-year old informants describe as *gipatay sa pari ang atong Flores de Mayo* ('The priest murdered our *Flores de Mayo*.') One change was to the singing of five different tunes to *Dios te Salve Maria* for each of the letters of the name Maria. Now, only one tune is sung, primarily because the priest's imported *cantora* did not know the other tunes. The original *cantoras* and church musicians were replaced

by an outsider who had no idea about the songs passed on from one generation to the next. Likewise, the *Flores de Mayo* songs sung by the children were changed, also because the imported *cantora* did not know them.

Another change is to the roles played by the children. Although there are still children wearing white angel costumes they no longer play an important part in the performance of the ritual. They merely offer flowers just like all the other children. The *tubag* and the line leaders are now gone. This is because the entire ritual pattern has been disrupted. The end-of May activities have also been cancelled. The priest now conducts the Marian procession during the last Sunday of May instead of on May 31st. This change created confusion at first, especially among those who only came on that day to participate in the end-of May *El Mayo* activities. The long absence of the original Argaoanon *Flores* has gradually erased this tradition from the collective memory of the younger generation. However, it has not yet been forgotten by those who always participated in this month-long annual ritual in the past; in fact, when mini-reunions are held among the former 'angels', they still look back fondly to their *Flores de Mayo* experiences.

The President of the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) at the time of this study, stated that *wa man mi mahimo ana kay pari baya na, sya man ang magbuot unsay buhaton sa parokya* ('We could not do anything about it since it was the parish priest initiating the changes; he is the one who decides on what to do in the parish.'). Thus they were not able to stop the parish priest from instituting these changes, not only to the *Flores de Mayo* but also to other religious activities as well. The President of the PPC said, *Ingnon ra man mi niya, nga siya'y magbuot kay siya gud kuno ang pari, unsa ra gud kuno mi.* ('The priest told us that he should be followed because he is the parish priest, while we are just ordinary people.'). This illustrates the hegemony within the Catholic religion itself. People's reverence for priests as God's representatives on earth has led to passivity and acceptance of whatever the priest does, even when religious traditions are being tampered with and disregarded. The priest's authority over religious affairs blurs the fact that he is also tampering with a people's cultural heritage as embodied in intangible media such as the performance of rituals and oral expressions. The priest's modification of tangible religious structures and relics in the town (i.e. the

destruction of the stone gateway leading to the Catholic cemetery to create a parish office, and the painting in gold of the life-size statues of the Archangels Michael, Rafael and Gabriel and the Virgin Mary on the church altar) has been met with passive acceptance, so why should it be any different with intangible heritage?

In 2013, a positive development was the effort of the new parish priests to revitalise the Argaoanon *Flores de Mayo*, as I learned from one of my 60-year old informants. Although it is a first step to try to revive the songs and the processes in the ritual itself, there is still a long way to go to really revitalise the performance of this ritual. My informants hope that these efforts by the new parish priests will continue so that their children or grandchildren in the future can experience and treasure the same *Flores de Mayo* as they did when they were children.

Conclusion

External intervening factors have greatly disrupted the performance of the Argaoanon *Flores de Mayo* church ritual for long enough to erase it from the collective memory of those children who should have participated in the ritual between 2000 to 2010. This case is indeed a clear illustration of what Gramsci describes as the cultural hegemony exercised by intellectuals, in the person of the priests or ecclesiastics, who are looked up to and are unquestioned by ordinary people, especially in rural areas. Religious hegemony - as embodied by the parish priest in this case - is threatening this element of Argaoanon intangible heritage. Unlike the era of colonisation when the Spanish colonialists used persuasion as well as force to coerce the people into following a totally new religion, this time the feudal and dominant position of the priest over religious affairs has tampered with a people's cultural heritage. And worse still, the parishioners passively accepted the priest's actions because of their reverence for his authority (in fact, a priest is called 'Reverend'). This is cultural hegemony.

As the municipal government of Argao is very active in promoting and preserving the cultural heritage of the town it needs also to look into the intangible religious cultural heritage and work for its protection and preservation through its continued performance.

Furthermore, this study points to the need for the Catholic hierarchy to educate and reeducate its priests about the importance of cultural heritage in the lives of the townsfolk, and explain to them that tampering with traditions could gradually begin to affect the participation of parishioners in religious affairs. If they do not, this may in my opinion, point to the Catholic religion itself as still exercising an even greater hegemony over its followers in their everyday lives.

From the perspective of symbolic anthropological interpretation these symbols and processes in the *Flores de Mayo* ritual have meanings that go beyond religion for those Argaoanons who were involved in them as children; it is part of their identity. While children strengthened their religious beliefs through performance of a ritual which they enjoyed, they likewise developed values, skills and attitudes that have contributed to their character as individuals belonging to a particular culture. Intangible cultural heritage expressed through memory and the performance of the *Flores de Mayo* ritual illustrates that cultural heritage is

not a dead relic of the past but an on-going process of traditional practices that are constantly recreated and renewed by current generations to connect with the past. The commitment of the children and their elders to the performance of such a ritual has spanned centuries and has been handed down from generation to generation. This intangible heritage has made a mark on every Argaoanon child of the past and should continue to leave a mark on contemporary and future Argaoanon children as part of their cultural identity.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the University of San Carlos for providing the opportunity to do this study in relation to Anthropology classes on intangible heritage, and the Ugnayang Pang-Aghamtao (UGAT), the Anthropological Association of the Philippines, for providing the venue for presenting this paper at its national conference in October 2008. 🇵🇭

ENDNOTES

1. Gramsci, 1999. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.
2. *The Gramsci Reader*, 2000.
3. Gramsci, 1999, op cit.
4. an advisory and consultative body to the Parish Priest on parochial matters composed of members appointed by the Parish Priest upon the recommendation of religious organisations in the parish..

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