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**Author:** William Peterson

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#### **Abstract**

This article examines the gendered ritual practices connected with the veneration of Mary or 'Our Lady of Peñafrancia' at the annual Peñafrancia Festival in the Bicol region of the Philippines. Throughout the nine-day festival, key devotional practices have men and women assuming distinctively different roles. This analysis connects the Church's formal institutional framework for 'popular piety' and Saba Mahmood's understanding of inner and outer expressions of piety with Filipino understandings of how the self in relation to others is formed and reinforced through distinctive, communal religious practices. The research draws from personal experience at the Peñafrancia Festival and interviews with local participants and observers, mapping what Mary or *Ina* (Mother) means to participants in the festival's rituals, while showing how Mary serves as a touchstone to the divine.

#### **Author**

William Peterson is Adjunct Associate Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand.

## Mary as Mother

The interrelated religious, ritual, and performance practices connected with the veneration of 'Our Lady of Peñafrancia' at the Peñafrancia Festival, one of the largest and most singular festivals in the Philippines, offer unique insights into both Filipino Catholicism and the ways in which Mother Mary circulates outside the West through the operation of 'popular piety'.<sup>1</sup> The festival is held annually in the period leading up to the third Sunday in September in Naga City, the largest city in the Bicol region, south of the more densely populated island of Luzon. Unlike more famous religious festivals such as Cebu City's Sinulog Festival or Iliolo's Dinagyang Festival with their focus on the Santo Niño, Peñafrancia is largely a Marian event, with distinctive ritual and performance practices connected with the Virgin Mary, that bring communities together in ways organized around and linked to gender. Like other festivals linked to Catholicism in the Philippines, Peñafrancia is very much place-based, with the experience the faithful have at the festival reflecting and reinforcing their embodied connection to the Bicol region, enhanced by their belief that 'Our Lady' functions not only as a 'mother' to the region, but that she also intervenes personally for the faithful, acting as a second mother.



Figure 1. Our Lady of Peñafrancia image Naga City, Bicol, Philippines<sup>2</sup>

Two signature events anchor the festival, the first of which is the *traslacion* or 'journey' in which groups of men in *cofradías* fill the streets, accompanying the sacred effigy

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<sup>1</sup> Mother of the Americas Institute, 'The New Evangelization and Popular Piety', <https://mainstitute.org/tutorials/new-evangelization-and-popular-piety>

<sup>2</sup> All the photographs in this article are the copyright of the author.

of Our Lady of Peñafrancia from her home in a basilica on the edge of town, to the city's main cathedral in its centre. A fluvial procession on the final Sunday of a novena devoted to Mary marks its end, at which time *Ina* is returned quite spectacularly to her home upriver via a three-kilometer-long fluvial procession on a pontoon style boat, powered by *cofradias* of men rowing (known locally as *voyadores*) in long boats tethered to the larger structure.

Throughout the period of the novena, devotional practices connected with both Mary and Christ are interwoven, while in their expression, men and women assume distinctive roles. *Ina's* position in this devotional practice is unique in that, though people in the region are devoted to her and seek her intercession and divine grace in their lives, the Church hierarchy appears to be mindful that the event cannot sway too far toward one that places Mother Mary alone as its central figure. While the men in their *cofradias* are responsible for Mary's safe passage at the beginning and end of the novena, it is largely the women who wake up early every morning of the novena to connect with and honour both Mary and Christ with Masses and candlelight processions through the streets of town.

While I have previously written about mass performance events of a more secular nature associated with the related *Voyadores Festival*,<sup>3</sup> here I seek to map out and interrogate how Mary—commonly referred to as *Ina* or 'Mother' locally—functions at the context of the Peñafrancia Festival. As part of this investigation, I will also examine how key ritual practices reflect local understandings and experiences with Mary as a touchstone to the divine. This research builds on two decades of fieldwork in the Philippines, during which time I have sought to understand how community-based performance, often religious in nature and expression, responds to and fulfills basic human needs and in turn contributes to individual and community happiness.<sup>4</sup> My understanding of how Catholicism has shaped Filipino consciousness was initially influenced by the scholarship of Rey Ileto, whose foundational work on the connections between the drama of the *Pasyon* of Christ and its contemporary meaning in the fight for independence from Spain in the late nineteenth century revealed how the heroic and selfless actions of key individuals as well as the physical sites of resistance were seen by many Catholic Filipinos as connecting the present with the Christ story, linking eternal time not only with the present, but with specific sacred places in the Philippines.<sup>5</sup> My understanding of the power of so-called 'Folk Catholicism' in the Philippines, particularly

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<sup>3</sup> See W. Peterson, 'Dancing, Marching and Baton Twirling with the Virgin: Performing Community at the Peñafrancia Festival in the Philippines', *Australasian Drama Studies Journal* 76, 2020, 24-61. As with many religious festivals in the Philippines, a range of secular performance practices mobilising large numbers of participants are associated with Peñafrancia. Among them are competitions and folkloric-inflected street dancing reflecting foundational myths and beliefs with thematic or ancillary connections to core devotional practices.

<sup>4</sup> William Peterson, *Places for Happiness: Community, the Self, and Performance in the Philippines*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Rey Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movement in the Philippines, 1840-1910*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979.

among the poor and uneducated, owes much to Benigno Beltran's work,<sup>6</sup> while Deidre de la Cruz's more recent study of contemporary apparitions of Mary<sup>7</sup> demonstrates that belief in divine interventions in the here and now is not limited to folk Catholicism but extends to middle class Catholics. One of de la Cruz's informants, echoing the sentiment of millions of other Catholic Filipinos, describes the EDSA Revolution of 1986 that overthrew the US-backed Marcos regime as a 'Marian victory'.<sup>8</sup> As de la Cruz observes, Mary has a long history of not just being 'immanent in the material representation' but also 'attached to the land and the geographically bound'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it is the place-based nature of Our Lady of Peñafrancia, that marks both Mary's representation and the multiple sites where the faithful commune with her.

Popular piety and its long history of oversight and regulation by the Catholic Church provides the overarching entry point into this analysis. In 2001, the Church issued a comprehensive set of guidelines with respect to the exercise of popular piety by the faithful in the form of a 'Directory' that sets out the 'principles and guidelines' with respect to the relationship between 'popular piety and the liturgy'.<sup>10</sup> This document, which builds on and cites the Church's long doctrinal history on the subject, defines popular piety as designating 'those diverse cultic expressions of a private or community nature which, in the context of the Christian faith, are inspired predominantly not by the Sacred Liturgy but by forms deriving from a particular nation or people or from their culture'.<sup>11</sup> While popular piety has been an invaluable component of religious expression through Church history, it is deemed as 'genuine' to the extent that it 'must be based on certain firm principles, the first of which recognizes that the Liturgy is the centre of the Church's life and cannot be substituted by, or placed on par with, any other form of religious expression'.<sup>12</sup> As in many cultural settings where expressions of popular piety are formative in terms of the local experience of faith and devotion, we will see that Marianism in the context of Peñafrancia is of necessity modified and shaped by the local Diocese in ways consistent with the Vatican's precepts. Yet, as we shall see, though ritual and public displays of emotion connected with the veneration of Mary may well provide a pathway to the Trinity in theological terms, for the faithful on the ground at Peñafrancia, Mary remains the central figure.

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<sup>6</sup> Benigno P. Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus the Christ*, Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Deidre de la Cruz, *Mother Figured: Marian Apparitions and the Making of a Filipino Universal*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Deidre de la Cruz, *Mother Figured*, 199.

<sup>9</sup> Deidre de la Cruz, *Mother Figured*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship, 'Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy', Vatican City, Dec. 2001.

[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccdds\\_doc\\_20020513\\_vers-direttorio\\_en.html#](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html#)

<sup>11</sup> Vatican, 'Popular Piety', Introduction, section 9.

<sup>12</sup> Vatican, 'Popular Piety', Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II, section 5.

The final framework that underpins the analysis concerns the ways in which gender operates in the public-facing devotional practices, the primary focus of this inquiry. While it would be easy to see the playing out of what appear to be traditional gender roles through Peñafrancia's devotional practices as retrograde, I believe they align more meaningfully with Saba Mahmood's observations extending from her fieldwork with the urban women's mosque movement in Cairo in the 1990s. Rather than condemning these women as the instruments of their own oppression, Mahmood looks beyond the 'binary model of subordination and subversion' that characterizes the way devout Muslim women are generally seen and portrayed in the West.<sup>13</sup> The ways in which Mahmood seeks to go beyond the externals of the female pious subject in her work is useful, particularly in a Filipino context where the relationship between internal feelings and their external expression is so vital to understanding the experience of piety. As Mahmood observes of the pious subjects in her book, they 'posit a very different relationship between outward bodily acts (including rituals, liturgies, and worship) and inward belief (state of soul). Not only are the two inseparable in their conception, but more importantly, belief is the product of outward practices, rituals, and worship rather than simply an expression of them.'<sup>14</sup> Indeed, this impulse to connect the internal feeling with its external expression is a key component of Filipino self-expression, as many scholars have observed.<sup>15</sup>

### **Procession of *Lady of Peñafrancia* and the Positioning of the *Divino Rostro***

The *traslacion* or procession of the sacred image of our Lady of Peñafrancia (known locally as *Ina*, or 'mother') through the streets of Naga City marks the start of the nine-day novena, the religious foundation of the larger Festival of Our Lady of Peñafrancia, which incorporates a range of related civic and cultural events.<sup>16</sup> The *traslacion* involves the physical transport of both the *Ina* and a one-dimensional image depicting Christ's face on Veronica's cloth known locally as the 'Divino Rostro' from the Peñafrancia Minor Basilica<sup>17</sup> where they reside the rest of the year, to the Metropolitan Cathedral of Naga City near the town centre. And it is here, at its start, that the roles connected with the public presentation of devotional practices become gendered. Barefooted men have traditionally transported the image of *Ina* through the streets to the cathedral, holding her aloft from a large understructure resting on their shoulders. The structure has proved unstable at times, and indeed some senior informants

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<sup>13</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xv.

<sup>15</sup> See William Peterson, *Places for Happiness*; Landa F. Jocano, *Filipino Worldview: Ethnography of Local Knowledge*, Manila: PUNLA Research House, 2001; Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Virgilio G. Enriquez, *Indigenous Psychology and National Consciousness*, Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> W. Peterson, 'Dancing, Marching and Baton Twirling with the Virgin'.

<sup>17</sup> The 'Minor Basilica' designation was required as the 'Major Basilica' designation had previously been given to the home of Our Lady of Peñafrancia in Spain.



recalled that on more than one occasion *Ina* almost ended up on the street.<sup>18</sup> More recently, giant stainless steel orbs have replaced a flat platform, with the respective images secured on top of the orbs while two or three priests standing on a small platform at the back intervene to slow down the rate at which devotees seek to make contact with it. This is especially the case with the *Divino Rostro*—of which more will be said later—where physical contact with the image, protected by a pane of glass, is believed to impart blessings and healing powers.



Figure 2. Procession through the streets with Our Lady of Peñafrancia on steel orb, Naga City, Bicol, Philippines

Older respondents recall that the procession used to be quite rowdy, even dangerous, with the men, many quite drunk and jostling for position, tightly pressed up against one another as they moved *Ina* through the city's crowded streets. One senior informant recalled that a jail on wheels used to follow the procession and that 'anyone who was too rowdy was put into that tiger cage'.<sup>19</sup> More recently, and with institutional support from the church, the *Cofradia de San Jose* has largely taken over the *traslacion*, with all members required to attend a training seminar and refrain from alcohol prior to the procession.<sup>20</sup> Though the procession did not take place in 2020 and 2021 due to Covid restrictions, videos of the 2022 *traslacion* suggest it is not the male guardians of the image but rather young men who now behave aggressively, clamouring onto the platform and throwing themselves onto the orb as

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<sup>18</sup> Tito Valiente, Personal Interview; Dante Adan, Personal Interview.

<sup>19</sup> Paz Verdades Santos, Personal Interview, Naga City, 19 September 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Myrna Bermudo, 'Church to Voyadores: Let Us Have Safe and Solemn Procession', *Bicol Mail*, 7 Sept. 2002, <https://www.bicolmail.net/single-post/church-to-voyadores-let-us-have-safe-and-solemn-processions>

they seek to come into physical contact with the images, either with their outstretched hands or by flicking a piece of cloth outward.<sup>21</sup>

The power of as many as a million people<sup>22</sup> descending on a relatively small city of just over 200,000 for processions, rituals, Masses, structured novenas that reach out to different groups in civil society, and a program of civic events<sup>23</sup> clearly adds to Ina's power. But it is also about movement, that she moves from her permanent home and out into the streets with and among the faithful, returning home by travelling up river as hundreds of thousands cheer her on, that cements her power and presence. As Tito Valiente<sup>24</sup> observes of the ritual,

[I]t's about the liminal working. The Virgin is being moved from one place to another and there's something magical that happens. I mean she's travelling, she's travelling from one house to another house, and ... the distance is insignificant between the shine in the Basilica and the Cathedral over here. ... You can even walk from one place to the other. But I think the re-enactment is very important, that she's travelling from one place to the other, and people put a lot of emotions there. It's the mother, visiting another place.

Valiente continues: 'If you see her she's very small, she's tiny, but when she's moved from one place to the other she becomes bigger than life, she becomes the mother of all.' For the length of the nine-day novena, which also sees *Ina* processing through the streets in a pre-dawn procession, she literally walks among us. And as she moves, the faithful seek physical proximity to the images that serve as intermediaries with the divine. As with the floats bearing the images of the Santo Niño at the major festivals in his honour, devotees are drawn to particular images as if by magnetic force, something I have observed in my many years of participation in Kalibo's Ati-Atihan Festival.

At the end of the final procession, the *carros* bearing these images are typically stripped of their adornments which are distributed to the enthusiastic and sometimes rowdy crowd of devotees. Valiente characterizes this as an 'enchanted space', one created by 'the stripping of the flowers, and sometimes the cape, the mantle' of *Ina* with its 'tassels made of metal'. These adornments take on a 'magical' quality and while some will 'use them for cockfighting', others 'find some healing properties in the flowers' tossed from the *carros* and thrown into the crowd.<sup>25</sup> The journey and proximity to the divine imbue the flowers with a special magic, magnified as the flowers find their way into homes throughout the region.

While Ina's power is clearly the most potent force behind the event, the institutional church, following the Vatican's dictates with respect to Marian piety, ensures that the

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<sup>21</sup> Video of the 2022 *traslacion* at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Cu92VpBeSU>

<sup>22</sup> Juan Escandor Jr., 'Naga braces for a million pilgrims', *Inquirer*, 6 Sept.2014, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/635714/naga-braces-for-a-million-pilgrims>

<sup>23</sup> See Peterson 2020 for further detail.

<sup>24</sup> Tito Valiente, Personal Interview.

<sup>25</sup> Tito Valente, Personal Interview.

## Mary as Mother

framework behind the veneration of Ina always leads back to Christ. As noted, the two sacred images transferred through the streets of town that mark the beginning and end of the festival are Mary, formally Our Lady of Peñafrancia, and the *Divino Rostro*, or the Holy Face of Christ. The relationship between the two, and the clear preference for and attention given to Mary, reflect the foundational connection of Our Lady of Peñafrancia with the town of Naga—the history of which will be set out in the following section—but also the local church’s need to position Mary in a manner consistent with the Church’s own guidelines. Indeed, the Vatican’s 2001 Directory makes it clear that ‘Marian devotions, in varying degrees, should ... give expression to the Trinitarian note which characterizes worship of the God revealed in the New Testament, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit’.<sup>26</sup>



Figure 3. The *Divino Rostro*, Holy Face of Christ, Naga City, Bicol, Philippines

Mary not only makes Christ possible, but as Deirdre de la Cruz observes with respect to the practice of the rosary in the Philippines and elsewhere, ‘the chain of repeated prayers always delivers the orator back to Christ’s mother’.<sup>27</sup> ‘To Jesus through Mary’ is the oft-spoken adage associated with the rosary, and in its ecclesiastically prescribed usage, although Mary is the recipient of prayers—the destination signalled by the final mystery that positions her at Christ’s side in heaven—her role is but to act on the supplicant’s behalf in petition to God

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<sup>26</sup> Vatican, ‘Popular Piety,’ Decree, section 186.

<sup>27</sup> Deirdre de la Cruz, *Mother Figured*, 160.



the Son.<sup>28</sup> Again, this view of Mary is consistent with the Church's position on Marian piety, which asserts that 'the faithful easily understand the vital link uniting Son and Mother. They realise that the Son is God and that she, the Mother, is also their mother'.<sup>29</sup> As one of my informants observes, 'Mary leads you to Christ. All Marian devotions incorporate Christ. It's never just about Mary.'<sup>30</sup> Thus, here as elsewhere in the Catholic world, Mary intercedes on behalf of the devotee, offering an experiential pathway to the love of Christ and the possibility of divine intercession in his or her life.

### **Our Lady and the *Divino Rostro*: Place and History**

In terms of their respective iconic representations, the two manifestations of divine power—The *Divino Rostro* and the effigy of Our Lady of Peñafrancia—reflect complex local histories, informed by the history of colonialism, the nature of the spread of Catholicism in the Philippines, the necessity of linking faith to place, and a more recent local historical event which associates veneration of the *Divino Rostro* with a miracle. Our Lady, though associated with the Bicol region of the Philippines, is in fact a transplant from Spain's Salamanca region where the statue of La Peña de Francia was discovered in 1434 and a church was built to house her.<sup>31</sup> Nearly three centuries later, around 1710, Rev. Fr. Miguel Robles de Covarrubias, a La Peña de Francia devotee of Spanish parentage, was called upon to establish a church in Naga in the archdiocese of Cáceres, establishing the local practice of venerating her. Indeed, Naga's original name was Nueva Cáceres, the original Spanish city lying near the church housing the Spanish La Peña de Francia. After taking up his post, Fr. Covarrubias used the holy image of Our Lady fashioned of wood from a *stampita* (prayer card) he carried with him as the basis for the sacred image of Our Lady of Peñafrancia. Building on pre-conquest lowland practices in the archipelago where women and feminine men functioning as midwives and shamans 'maintained high social status' and 'negotiated and/or fulfilled both the temporal life cycle and the spiritual needs of the community', de la Cruz observes that when the Spanish arrived, 'it was the Virgin Mary who bore the closest structural resemblance to any figure that had previously existed'.<sup>32</sup> This history no doubt contributes to 'what is often perceived as the undue supremacy of Mary among Filipinos'.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>29</sup> Vatican, 'Popular Piety,' Decree, section 183.

<sup>30</sup> Dante Adan, Personal Interview, Naga City, 13 September 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Archdiocese of Cáceres, 'History of the Devotion of Our Lady of Peñafrancia', n.d.

<https://www.archdioceseofcaceres.org/peñafrancia-history>

<sup>32</sup> Deirdre de la Cruz, *Mother Figured*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 11. See also Vincent Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988, and Resil B. Mojares, *Waiting for Mariang Makiling: Essays on Philippine Cultural History*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2002.

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Veneration of the *Divino Rostro* dates from 1883, when it was introduced to protect the city from a cholera outbreak spreading throughout the archipelago.<sup>34</sup> Drawing from the practice in his hometown of Osa de la Vega in Spain, the Diocesan Vicar of the time, General Rev. Pedro De La Torre, instructed the Bishop of Nueva Cáceres to enshrine a picture of the face of Jesus in the town cathedral. The image is that of Saint Veronica displaying a cloth with Christ's face—the so-called Veil of Veronica—believed to have miraculously appeared after she wiped his face with a cloth when he stumbled and fell at the Sixth Station of the Cross. Veneration of the image was believed responsible for warding off a series of cholera outbreaks in the Vicar's hometown. As with the Peña de Francia, both Our Lady of Peñafrancia and the *Divino Rostro* quickly became associated with Nueva Cáceres—the town's original name itself a transplantation of a Spanish name onto Filipino soil. Today, far from being seen as imports brought to the Philippines from Spain by way of Mexico from where the colony was managed, both images are believed to have power by virtue of their connection with and emplacement in the region around Naga City. When prayers to both the *Divino Rostro* and Our Lady of Peñafrancia were believed to have been effective in ending the epidemic in 1882, the veneration of the two became formally linked by the local church. Though the dates of the Peñafrancia Festival have shifted over time, since 1905 it has commenced on the Sunday after 15 September, which allows for a nine-day novena to commence on or immediately after the day celebrated as Mary's birthday, 8 September.<sup>35</sup>

Though the *Divino Rostro* formally precedes Our Lady of Peñafrancia in the procession, *Ina* is the real reason for the occasion. Further, the position of the *Divino Rostro* in the procession appears to have shifted further in recent times. One of my senior informants recalls that when he was 'in grade school the *Divino Rostro* was practically ignored', noting that, while today there may be more people in the procession following the *Divino Rostro* than Our Lady, 'the Virgin is the star'. His observation about the crowd's response to the two is borne out by video footage of the 2022 *traslacion*: Compared to the *Divino Rostro*, 'when the Virgin passes by you'd see the throng, it's more fervent, more chaotic in many ways ... not bad chaos, but the chaos of faith'.<sup>36</sup>

Another senior informant finds the pairing of the two 'kind of ambiguous, kind of ambivalent, mainly because if you look at the image of the *Divino Rostro*, it's an image of suffering, it's Veronica's piece of cloth. And ... in the procession, it's ahead of the Virgin. The royalty comes last.' Considerable time sometimes elapses between the passage of the two in the procession and when Mary appears, he notes, 'she's carrying the child Jesus. So there are two images of Jesus in the Peñafrancia: There's Jesus the child, and Jesus the dying.' This, he observes, is 'difficult for me to reconcile', adding that 'The Feast of the *Divino Rostro* will

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<sup>34</sup> This and the brief history that follows is drawn from: Archdiocese of Cáceres, 'History of the Devotion to the Divino Rostro', n.d. <https://www.archdioceseofcaceres.org/divino-rostro-history>

<sup>35</sup> Archdiocese of Cáceres, 'Peñafrancia', <https://www.archdioceseofcaceres.org/peñafrancia-history>

<sup>36</sup> Tito Valiente, Personal Interview.

always be eclipsed by Peñafrancia.<sup>37</sup> As previously noted, in the local church calendar a nine-day novena for the *Divino Rostro* ends immediately prior to the start of Our Lady of Peñafrancia, ensuring it doesn't steal Ina's thunder. In practice, the *Divino Rostro* and Our Lady of Peñafrancia remain dialogically linked both by local history and theological necessity.

The actual image of Our Lady of Peñafrancia bearing the Christ child has a complex history, one filled with mystery, intrigue, and even rumoured political machinations as well. The image itself is slightly less than one meter from end to end<sup>38</sup> and distinguished by its large conical cloak, which obscures all but the faces of both Mary and the infant Christ, with an oval-shaped frame of rays fashioned in silver extending from a large crown atop her head. Due to the poor quality of the original wooden image, a replica is now used in public displays. It is widely believed by locals that the original is kept in the priests' residence behind the Basilica in which both Our Lady and the *Divino Rostro* are housed for most of the year.

On August 17, 1981, during the period of martial law under the Marcos dictatorship, and while the new Basilica was being constructed, the original Our Lady of Peñafrancia disappeared, and was presumed to have been stolen.<sup>39</sup> To this day, rumours persist that former First Lady Imelda Marcos had a hand in the abduction, motivated by her desire to have such a powerful female figure in her possession. Though such reasoning makes for a compelling story, there is no evidence of the First Lady's involvement in the statue's theft. A little over a year after her disappearance, the image, in a significantly distressed physical state, was delivered by an unknown party to the former rector of the shrine devoted to Our Lady, who was then based in Manila. The image was authenticated and returned via a caravan to Naga City in the middle of a typhoon in 1982, with the faithful braving the wind and the rain to welcome home the sacred image known to many simply as *Ina*, or mother. For many, *Ina*, the figurative heart of the Bicol region, long associated with its geographic centre around Naga City, had miraculously returned home.

When I conducted fieldwork in Naga City in 2017, at one point I became obsessed with understanding where the original or most sacred, 'authentic' image was located, and with discovering more about its provenance. Multiple informants asserted that the 'original', or at least the one that was abducted, is now out of public view and in the priests' residence. But with so many processions featuring both Our Lady and the *Divino Rostro*, I stubbornly sought to determine which version was on display or in use where and when. One of my informants, no doubt tiring of my ridiculous obsession, cut off one of my queries with 'Stop thinking about all the Inas!' adding, 'It really doesn't matter.' He explained that when devotees come to the town's cathedral to pay their respects to *Ina* during the novena and 'when they go to the altar to touch the image, it's the same'; thus whether the image is 'original' or not is irrelevant.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Vic Nierva, Personal Interview, Naga City, 19 September 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Dino Carlo S. Santos, 'Our Lady of Peñafrancia/Nuestra Señora de Peñafrancia/Ina', *Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*, Cultural Centre of the Philippines, n.d. <https://epa.culturalcenter.gov.ph/3/82/2249/>

<sup>39</sup> Archdiocese of Cáceres, 'Peñafrancia', <https://www.archdioceseofcaceres.org/peñafrancia-history>

<sup>40</sup> Dante Adan, Personal Interview.

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As another local informant observes with respect to her transformation: ‘The ritual imbues her with authenticity....She becomes real once she is used for the procession.’<sup>41</sup> The gathering of the faithful around her and their shared beliefs imbue the image with power. Whether or not the image is ‘authentic’ in the sense of being the ‘original’ is simply not important to the informants I interviewed.

### ***Ina*, Women, and the Novena**

While the men take on an active public role during the *traslacion*, it is the women who have the most visible presence during the nine-day novena prior to the festival’s culmination when *Ina* is returned to her home in the Basilica via a fluvial procession. Devotees present for the pre-dawn processions featuring both the *Divino Rostro* and Our Lady, and the morning Masses for Our Lady at the temporary shrine facing the cathedral are largely female. Though the start time and the structure of these events have changed from year to year, in 2022 the final three days of the novena began at 3 a.m. with pre-dawn processions through the streets of town, followed by Mass at 6 a.m.<sup>42</sup> The morning processions are solemn, quiet affairs, in contrast with the relatively boisterous and noisy *traslacion*. As with the *traslacion*, participants enact a *panata* or vow, a visible expression of faith in which one seeks Mary’s divine intercession and/or expresses gratitude for past blessings.

Some participate in the pre-dawn hours to connect both with the divine and the souls of those who have passed on. One of my informants recounted an incident related to her by a friend whose mother had recently died of cancer. In a story not uncommon, one of her mother’s friends reported that they had seen the woman’s mother at the dawn procession.<sup>43</sup> Another informant observes that, ‘[e]ven in the prayers the devotees to the *Ina* would think about dead devotees, those who have already died, and pray for them’.<sup>44</sup> As the first informant notes, ‘they keep on joining the procession, because maybe they want to catch a glimpse of their mother. They tell me that.’<sup>45</sup> My experience at my first pre-dawn procession on Easter Sunday in the town of Boac in Marinduque, recounted in detail elsewhere,<sup>46</sup> was similar; I had just returned to the Philippines after burying my father in a snow storm in the American Midwest and as I turned the corner to walk up toward the Boac Cathedral, just as the bells started clanging I felt my father’s hand on my shoulder as I ascended the hill. No doubt similar experiences of comfort motivate many to return year after year. Mary Jane Uy

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<sup>41</sup> Tito Valiente, Personal Interview, Naga City, 18 September 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Peñafrancia Basilica, General Schedule 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/Peñafrancia.basilica/posts/pfbid028jzbZdPBbWQujNVonNPXrSjmaYf8bL9XucxDSpRSm6MN21XqTyvKtqhj6Zb7yzk6Ll>

<sup>43</sup> Mary Jane Uy, Personal Interview, Naga City, 14 Sept. 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Dante Adan, Personal Interview.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Jane Uy, Personal Interview.

<sup>46</sup> W. Peterson, ‘Holy Week in the Heart of the Philippines: Spirituality, Theatre, and Community in Marinduque’s Moriones Festival’, *Asian Theatre Journal* 24.2, 2007, 309-336.

observes that in these pre-dawn processions where we straddle the line between life and the afterlife, devotees from the Catholic and independent Aglipayan churches ‘meet and mingle’,<sup>47</sup> something otherwise unthinkable in a shared religious context.<sup>48</sup>

As is the pattern with novenas elsewhere, each day and thus each Mass is built around and targeted to different groups. In 2022 for instance, this meant individual days for families and children, youth and young adults, religious and consecrated persons, the poor, indigenous people and prisoners, and so on.<sup>49</sup> Masses conclude with draping the mantle or cape worn by the Virgin over those who are sick or in need of protection. In a longstanding practice, families pay for elaborate mantles, many with intensely detailed beadwork, to be created and briefly worn by Our Lady. Then, as part of a ritual ceremony typically after Mass, priests wrap the mantle around a family member or members in need of *Ina*’s healing powers or hold them aloft as the family gathers underneath. After the ceremony, the mantle is returned to the donating family where it is revered as sacred. As one informant observed of a mantle his mother had made which she believed cured her of cancer, ‘it is now in a special place in their home’.<sup>50</sup>



Figure 4. Draping of mantle of Our Lady of Peñafrancia over devotees, Naga Metropolitan Cathedral, Naga City, Bicol, Philippines

<sup>47</sup> Mary Jane Uy, Personal Interview.

<sup>48</sup> The nationalist Philippine Independent Church or Aglipayan, broke off from the Catholic Church in 1902, though it retains many of the features of the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>49</sup> Peñafrancia Basilica, General Schedule.

<sup>50</sup> Art Cantos, Personal Interview, Manila, 23 Sept. 2017.



While the *traslacion* and fluvial procession are the iconic festival events, it is through participation in Masses and processions that the vast majority make a personal connection with Our Lady. Many have stories of *Ina*'s intercession into their lives through opportunities that they believe followed from their devotional practice during the festival. One such story, similar to those I have heard from informants at festivals associated with the Santo Niño, follows:

Back in 2012, I was looking for some guidance, so I asked for help from *Ina*...where should I go, what should I do.... Because I was already practicing here in Bicol as a lawyer, but it seems I wasn't so satisfied with what's happening. So ... I attended the Novena, joining the processions, attending the Masses, really praying the novena. ... On the seventh day of my novena, I was at the cathedral, my phone rang, and a friend of mine told me that the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is requesting to see me. ... She was just appointed at that time as the new Chief Justice. ... So after the fiesta I went to see her and she asked me if I can join her, to help her in the judiciary. So it's a very personal experience for me to go through the prayer and ask guidance from the lady and immediately there was an answer.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, supporting the belief in the power of Mary to intercede in the lives of the faithful is consistent with recent Church doctrine on Marian Piety: 'They [the believers] intuit the immaculate holiness of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and in venerating her as the glorious queen of Heaven, they are absolutely certain that she who is full of mercy intercedes for them. Hence, they confidently have recourse to her patronage.'<sup>52</sup> Adan's account also points to an aspect of *panata* that generates an obligation that extends into the future resulting from such divine intercession. Repeatedly returning and enacting a few or many of the rituals connected with the novena is also a way of thanking *Ina* for the blessings devotees believe have been bestowed on them.

But throughout, it is the fact that *Ina* is a mother that navigates the devotional pathway inevitably toward grace. As poet and author Vic Nierva observes of the larger context:

It's still striking for me that the patron of the region is a woman, is a mother actually. So in Filipino culture it's a very strong statement, the woman, the mother. That's why for me there is no more relevant period to reflect on the devotion than now, when there's a lot going on around the country, the motherly love, the motherly affection is so much needed. .... So it's really a very important thing to be intimate in our devotion to the mother.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Dante Adan, Personal Interview.

<sup>52</sup> Vatican, 'Popular Piety', Decree, section 183.

<sup>53</sup> Vic Nierva, Personal Interview.

Referring to the dominant devotional practice around the veneration of the Santo Niño in Cebu and Panay to the south and west, he concludes that ‘Peñafrancia a more enduring ritual than the Santo Niño: because it’s a mother to her children.’ Whereas the relationship with the Santo Niño is fundamentally that of the individual to the child Jesus who serves as the intermediary to God, with ‘this one, it’s me to a mother’.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, the feeling that Mary is strongest here, in this part of the Philippines, is commonly expressed. As Allen Reondanga, Chief of the city’s events office, proclaims, ‘the Peñafrancia fiesta is what makes Bicol, Bicol’.<sup>55</sup> As an informant who grew up in the region observes, ‘We even call Naga City the town in love with Mary.’<sup>56</sup> Others, like Art Cantos, expressed this connection in very personal terms:

As someone who has left the country, to me it’s a reminder of our childhood. Once a year, the Catholic community in the Bicol converges on one day a year to honour the Virgin. That has left a permanent mark in my being, in my heart, that as a Bicolano I have my mother—biological—and I have a mother who is watching over me all the time. I think most Bicolanos have that feeling.<sup>57</sup>

Another informant, who identifies herself as ‘not religious’, observes how ‘somehow it taps into something, maybe the concept of mother’. Though there appears to be no commonly-known narrative to support her view, she believes that ‘The Catholics used the idea of the Blessed Virgin Mary to replace whoever was the ancient goddess.’<sup>58</sup> Indeed, when stated with such conviction, it is hard not to agree.

### **Fluvial Procession: Men ‘Safely’ Bring Mother Mary Home**

The Fluvial Procession, the final and closing act of the festival, is both the most dramatic and the most embedded in specific geography of place. Naga City, formerly Nueva Cáceres, sits in a fertile plain in the geographic heart of the Bicol region, straddling the Naga River. As Vic Nierva asserts, the river, which he and others I interviewed link to the idea of a mother, defines the region:

The river and the mother are so inseparable, so that even in Bicol art, even in Bicol poetry, the image of the river as the etymology of the name of the region Bicol, it is said that Bicol comes from the word *bico*, *bico*, meandering. And on this same river the Blessed Mother is carried through from the Cathedral back to the Basilica, back to

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<sup>54</sup> Vic Nierva, Personal Interview.

<sup>55</sup> Margaret Claire Layug, ‘Thousands join Peñafrancia dawn procession in Naga City’, GMA News Online, 13 Sept. 2019, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/regions/707997/thousands-join-Peñafrancia-dawn-procession-in-naga-city/story/>

<sup>56</sup> Jerek Cantor Moral, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 27 May 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Art Cantos, Personal Interview.

<sup>58</sup> Paz Verdades Santos, Personal Interview.

## Mary as Mother

the shrine. When I talk to you now, I find it difficult in distinguishing—am I still talking about the river or am I talking about the mother?<sup>59</sup>

Mary Josefti C. Nito's scholarship on *Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buen Viaje*<sup>60</sup> reminds us that Mary's deep connection to place and community goes back to the beginnings of Catholicism in the Philippines. Writing on the role and function of *Inang Maria* or 'Mother Mary' in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century fluvial processions along the Pasig River in Luzon, she observes: 'For some communities, the *Inang Maria* served as a catalyst to the process of their own place-making, the forging for their community identity, and the narration of their local histories.'<sup>61</sup> Centuries later, the same can be said of the relationship Bicolanos have with their *Ina*.



Figure 5. Our Lady of Peñafrancia (centre) on the 'pagoda' transported on the Naga River back to her home at the Peñafrancia Basilica Minore, Naga City, Bicol, Philippines

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<sup>59</sup> Vic Nierva, Personal Interview.

<sup>60</sup> Literally 'Our Lady of Peace and Good Travel'

<sup>61</sup> M. J. C. Nito, 'Folk Devotion in the Waterscape of the Pasig River: The 1653 and 1748 Fluvial Processions of the *Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buen Viaje*', *BANWAAN: The Philippine Journal of Folklore* 1.1, 2021, 50. Nito's research draws from a key Spanish-language historical account of the fluvial processions of the image of *Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buen Viaje* (Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage) to multiple sites along the Pasig River in 1653 and 1748. Though a fluvial procession, it differs from Peñafrancia in that the power of the image derived from its history of accompanying galleons along the Acapulco to Manila route as they travelled safely across the Pacific. The image was essentially 'retired' to land, and today Our Lady of Antipolo (also known as *Morena Graciosa*) resides in Antipolo Cathedral.

If the women are numerically dominant in the novenas and early morning processions throughout the seven days that mark the most church- and liturgy-based components of the event, on the final Sunday of the Peñafrancia Festival the men once again take on a leading role, in this instance again ensuring the 'safety' of Ina as she moves through the streets, but in ways that excludes active female participation. On this day men attached to various *cofradías* are tasked with safely transporting *Ina* back to her home in the Basilica following a route from the cathedral to a departure point along the river in the city centre. As with the *traslación*, *Ina*, following behind the *Divino Rostro*, is placed on a giant silver orb on wheels commandeered by groups of men clad in t-shirts denoting their *cofradía* affiliation. As noted earlier, the *Cofradía de San Jose* has more recently been given this task. Their Facebook page<sup>62</sup> makes clear that they see their job as that of safely and respectfully transporting Our Lady through the streets. Indeed, the procession through the packed streets of town is typically slow going and a large group of men as well as priests on the float itself are needed to keep young men from flinging themselves on the orb to make contact with the image. As with Santo Niño processions, the statue's power is enhanced at this time, elevated by the nature of the event and the power of the devotees present who share the same beliefs.

At the river's edge Mary is brought into a large pontoon boat, referred to locally as a 'pagoda',<sup>63</sup> where she travels upriver accompanied by priests and Church hierarchy, as well as a specified group from civil society that changes each year. Tradition has it that only men should be on the pagoda,<sup>64</sup> while the platform itself is towed upriver by a flotilla of men in small boats with paddles. In the past, the men were typically comprised of fisherfolk, and as with *cofradía* participation on the streets, they are visibly linked to their *cofradía* by their matching t-shirts. The boats, which in 2019 were estimated to number around one hundred,<sup>65</sup> are tethered to one another and at times the rowing appears chaotic and far from solemn. Indeed, as one pulls ahead, they often end up crashing into one another and it is not unusual for one of the rowers or *voyadores* to end up overboard. There is something aggressive in this performance of masculinity, and to me at least, it appears as though some of the men are overacting, eager in their desire to show how tough they are as they essentially compete with other *cofradías* in terms of raw muscle power. Yet with respect to pious expression, there is a way in which this brief and sometimes unintentionally comic display of macho strength is

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<sup>62</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100069353581675>

<sup>63</sup> The somewhat improbable term 'pagoda' most likely points to a Chinese connection with the boat. While some locals I spoke with noted that the transfer point to the boat is in an area of town that was historically the home of many Chinese businesses, a more likely explanation for the term may have to do with the fact that funds for the first boat's construction in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were provided by Simon Li Tuanqui, a wealthy Chinese trader and philanthropist. See L. R. General, J. Perez, T. G. Valiente, *Kinunot, Kinalas, Kinamot: Essays on Bicol History and Culture* 2013, Naga City: Goldprint Publishing House, 37. Whether or not the boat resembled a pagoda in some manner is a matter of speculation.

<sup>64</sup> Arnulfo Fortunato et al., 'Peñafrancia Festival and Divino Rostro feature novenas and fluvial procession', Catholics and Culture Website, 2023, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/feasts-holy-days/Peñafrancia-divino-rostro-philippines>

<sup>65</sup> Philippine News Agency, Republic of the Philippines, 'All set for Naga's Peñafrancia fluvial procession', 19 Sept. 2019, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1080957>



consistent with the need to unite the inner feeling of devotion with its external expression. Like the pious women in Mahmood's study, perhaps the men are also demonstrating how 'belief is the product of outward practices, rituals, and worship rather than simply an expression of them'.<sup>66</sup>



Figure 6. Men in *cofradia*, identified by shirt colour, in tethered boats 'pulling' the pontoon containing Our Lady of Peñafrancia up the Naga River, Naga City, Bicol, Philippines

Hundreds of thousands line the banks of both sides of the river, with younger children and teens climbing buildings and fences for the view. Devotees wave at the Virgin as she passes while shouts of '*Viva la Virgen*' come from the assembled crowd. As one informant observes, 'when the image is actually passing in front of you, and feeling the anticipation of the crowd, you will have goosebumps'.<sup>67</sup> Having witnessed this myself, I can attest to the feeling that something transformative seems to happen as the Virgin passes. After all she's on a boat, floating along the water, and even though the *voyadores* may be paddling frantically and some are probably more than a little bit drunk by late afternoon when she passes by, there is something magical about Mary moving against the current to her home.

<sup>66</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xv.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Arman, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 27 May 2017.



Once a year she comes out in public in this spectacular, special display and moves among us, so as she returns home, while we know this is necessary, it also feels like this is the moment when our connection to her is the strongest and the most communal in expression.



Figure 7. Crowds along the Naga River watching Our Lady of Peñafrancia pass by, Naga City, Bicol, Philippines

Michael Arman, an Australian who lived and worked in Naga City and who rowed with one of the *voyadores* teams, recalls that even though ‘it’s mayhem from a practical point of view because the boats are all tied together’, it feels that ‘there is a special power on that particular day’. Though he admits to an ‘adrenaline rush’ when you’re down there on the water, locals ‘believe that the river becomes sacred on that particular day’.<sup>68</sup> As the sun sets the last of the fluvial procession is lit by the candles held by devotees along the river. Arman recalls that time as ‘a very special moment’, one where everything is ‘very, very beautiful’, adding that ‘it’s something I will always remember’. The aesthetic experience may be just that, a moment of great beauty, or it can be seen as a manifestation of the connection with

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<sup>68</sup> Michael Arman, Personal Interview.

## Mary as Mother

the divine that Mary provides the faithful. In his preface to the Church's guidelines on popular piety, Pope John Paul II speaks to this power:

Genuine forms of popular piety, expressed in a multitude of different ways, derives [*sic*] from the faith and therefore, must be valued and promoted. Such authentic expressions of popular piety are not at odds with the centrality of the Sacred Liturgy. Rather, in promoting the faith of the people who regard popular piety as a natural religious expression, they predispose the people for the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries.<sup>69</sup>

Drawing from my own longstanding personal connection with the *Ati-Atihan* Festival devoted to the Santo Niño, another mass participation religious event, I have long asserted that its power is not merely from the actions associated with the ritual, but that on a cellular level, 'my body compels me to return'. Central to that embodied experience are the ways in which event and place come together. As Edward Casey has observed, humans are 'placelings, and our very perceptual apparatus, our sensing body, reflects the kinds of places we inhabit'.<sup>70</sup> Human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's observations about how place is constituted are relevant to the *Peñafrancia* experience: 'Place is known not only through the eyes and mind but also through the more passive and direct modes of experience, which resist objectification. To know a place fully means both to understand it in an abstract way and to know it as one person knows another.'<sup>71</sup> The additional power of place-based events such as *Peñafrancia* is in their potential to imprint on us so deeply that we carry that body memory with us throughout the year, compelling us to return. As the description of the event's conclusion below suggests, the final moments of *Peñafrancia* have such power.

By the time Mary is returned to her home, it is dark, and tens of thousands line the streets and pathways around the Basilica, where a Mass is held. Hundreds, possibly thousands, gather around the Basilica with its open sight lines in this final shared act of devotion. For the many present who identify Our Lady variously—as *Ina*, as the mother of the region, as their own mother, as the deity who hears their prayers, as the one who intercedes on their behalf, as the mother of Christ, as the experiential pathway to Christ, as the person who made Christ possible and gave him a mother's love—these final moments, when thousands stand in semi-darkness with candles, transmit a power and energy that is both collective and highly personal. This is the force among Filipino Catholics that is unstoppable, the 'popular piety' recently reaffirmed by Pope Francis.<sup>72</sup> *Ina's* power goes beyond the formal teachings of the church through her deep connection to folk, to land, to place. As poet and author Vic Nierva observes of *Ina* and his native Bicol region, 'From the point of view of art, I

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<sup>69</sup> Vatican, 'Popular Piety', Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II, section 4.

<sup>70</sup> E. Casey, 'How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena', in S. Feld and K. Basso (eds), *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press 1996, 19.

<sup>71</sup> Y.-F. Tuan, 'An Experiential Perspective', *Geographical Review* 65.2, 1975, 151-165, 152.

<sup>72</sup> Mother of the Americas Institute, 'The New Evangelization and Popular Piety', <https://mainstitute.org/tutorials/new-evangelization-and-popular-piety>

think that's also why *Ina* has become our muse.<sup>73</sup> In this respect, for many Bicolanos, they have a second mother. And whatever your beliefs, this is surely a blessing.



Figure 8. Devotees lighting candles, Peñafrancia Basilica Minore, Naga City, Bicol, Philippines

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<sup>73</sup> Vic Nierva, Personal Interview.