

Religious Attitudes Towards Altars and Images in a Maya-yucatecan Catholic Community, Mani.

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The aim of this paper is to describe and clarify several aspects of religio-cultural integration of a small Catholic community, Mani in terms of religious attitudes toward the altars and the images.

The study focus is on the concrete description and analysis of responses to six photos (two photos make one set for our TAT type research) to describe the degree to which religious symbols represent a social fact and clarify a specific way of thought of people in Mani about them. The main findings are as follows.

Family altars are evaluated in the light of the images and wooden crosses are believed to be traditional part of each family altar. Miracles or recovery from illness are believed to be worked by a mutual relationship of *do ut des* interactions between the images (*Guadalupe, Niño Jesus, the cross, Niño de Atocha, Asunción, Tres Reyes*) and the people. This sort of interaction is introduced into religious activities at family altars more than those in church.

The contents of their prayers before the altar are composed of petitions for everyday benediction, health, peace, help, favor for the sake of their whole family and each family member. The family altar plays a central role in religious services for the dead in which they offer food to the soul of the dead, kneel in prayer in order to ask God and the images for salvation of the soul of the dead.

In contrast to their prayers before the family altars, repentance is a major trait of their prayers in church. When they do evil deeds, they go to church, confess them to God and the images, and implore their forgiveness.

Key Words : religious attitude, images, altars, Catholic culture,

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Introduction

Religion is to be studied in terms of not only religious doctrines or rituals but also a socio-cultural integration viewpoint. A religion can exist only in the form of socio-cultural integration.

The aim of this paper is to describe and clarify several aspects of religio-cultural integration of a small catholic community, Mani. The study focus is on the concrete description and analysis of religious attitudes towards altars and images in a Mayanyucatecan Catholic Community, Mani. Catholic altars and images are one of the oldest religious factors derived from Europe and it constitutes meaningful aspects of Catholic cultural integration in Mani. Religio-cultural integration includes such various socio-cultural and historic factors as *ejido*, one of the latest economic factors brought about by Evolution in 1910, and provides legitimation for the integration of the whole society and the functioning of other social organizations. The study focus is on the concrete description and analysis of responses to six photos (two photos make one set for our TAT type research) to describe the degree to which religious symbols represent a social fact and clarify a specific way of thought of people in Mani about them

I Method

In Mani they light candles, offer the flesh of a deer, swear to do their pilgrimage in order to pray to the images on the altar for help and protection. Whenever they find their prayer answered, they take it for a miracle. Miracles are worked by a mutual relationship of *do ut des* between the images and the people.

This way of reciprocal actions of *do et des* is more expected on the family altar than in the church¹.

Replies to our survey of miracles show that the place where they pray for miracle or their miracle is worked is from the top, home 51, church 14, pilgrimage 3, home and pilgrimage 3,

other people's house 2, other community 1, home and church 1². We often can hear them use the word *siempre* (always) on occasions when they talk about miracles.

The present author took photos of altars and their everyday prayers before them to conduct a TAT type survey of religious attitudes towards the images and family altars in order to clarify a specific way of thought of people in Mani about the images and family altars.

Photo 1a and Photo 1b show typical family altars in Mani and the latter is more ordinary and simple for the sake of subjects' critical comparisons. Photo 2a and Photo 2b give an impression that they are more simple and unadorned than Photo 1a and Photo 1b. The objective of the survey is to elucidate their responses to various parts of the photos and comments on them.

Photo 3a of a family altar and Photo 3b of a church altar are used to find out every difference possible between their prayers at home and those in church.

The field survey was conducted as follows. A random sample of 69 subjects are asked to look at all the above mentioned Photos in order to answer at will the following questions : (1) which altar do you like better? (*¿Que altar te gusta más?*) Show us the reason why (*¿Por que?*). (2) To what image do you give more devotion? (*¿En que imagen tiene más devoción?*) Show us the reason why (*¿Por que?*). (3) What do you imagine the person in the Photo is doing? (*¿Que está haciendo?*) When the response is concerned with prayer, then (4) "imagine for what is she praying. (*Imagine ¿para que está rezando?*) No time limit is set for the answer.

II Responses to Photos

1 Family altars and the images

Photo 1a



Photo 1b



Photo 2a



Photo 2b



To Photo 1a such positive responses are caused as “lots of images (22 cases 91%)” “flowers are offered, neat and nicely decorated (11 cases 46%). This sort of responses with greater emphasis on the images are given to Photo 1b; “lots of images (9 cases 100%)” “flowers are put, due care and attention (7 case 77%)”

In the responses to Photo 2a primary emphasis is laid on the simplicity of altar form and structure ; “only images, saints, the cross are put (10 cases 53%)” “the form and style is nice and plain (7 cases 37%)” Similar responses are given to Photo 2b; “the wooden cross is put (8 cases 89%)” “flowers are offered, well decorated (6 cases 67%)” These responses show that images, flowers, and the cross are Catholic traditional dominant traits in Mani (D5:D16).

Religiously meaningful responses and comments given to the images on the family altar are in the order of highest frequency ; *Guadalupe* (44 cases 64%), *Niño Jesus* (16 cases 23%), the cross (7 cases 10%), *Dios* (5 cases), *Niño de Atocha* (5 cases), *Asunción* (4 cases), *Tres Reyes* (3 cases). The main reason for these responses is “because they bring about miracles (36 cases)” ; *Guadalupe* (19/44 cases), *Niño Jesus* (5/16 cases), the cross (4/7 cases), *Niño de Atocha* (5/5 cases), *Asunción* (3/4 cases). 5 cases of *Dios* are explained as the mighty power to make the images produce miracles. If these 5 cases are included, the rate of miracle increases. Their miracle experiences center around the complete recovery from some disease and the theme is frequently repeated in the responses to the photos.

The references to *Guadalupe* made by 64% of all the subjects are in the order of “she works miracles (19 cases)” — the highest at 43% —followed by “the patron saint for Mexico (8 cases 18%)” “Mother of *Jesus* (7 cases 16%)” The references to *Jesus* are 16 cases (23%) in which “*Jesus* is *Dios* (9 cases 56%)” outnumbers “he works miracles”

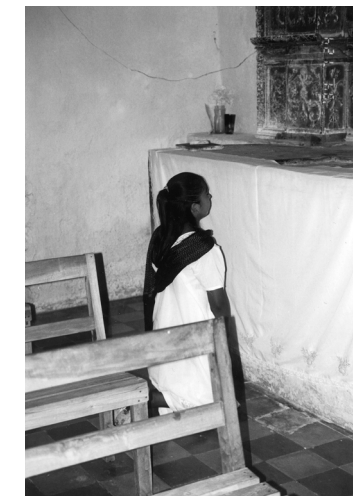
Only two references are made to *Niño*. If the photos had included *Niño*, the results would have been quite different from those in this survey. The ground for this argument is that, as our preceding investigation has shown, miracle works by *Niño* are related with great frequency in Mani³.

2 Prayers at home and in church

Photo 3a At home



Photo 3b In church



The answers to the question: “What do you imagine the person in the Photo is doing?” are in the order of most cases; “rosary (15 cases 22%)” “Confirmation and Confession (8 cases 12%)” “*promesa* (swear an oath to God) (6 cases 9%)” “*novenario* (9-day-prayer) (6 cases 9%)” “religious service for the dead (4 cases)” “offering to God (3 cases)” Here the details of each case should be described for further analysis.

Rosary is done “only because it is just a custom (D2:D52:D54:D55)” and it is done to pray for blessing or recovery from some disease; “She is doing rosary. It is the custom with her to do rosary every day. She is asking God’s blessing.” (D20) “She is doing rosary at home. She is asking God’s blessing for her family and herself. Otherwise, she is praying to God for her child’s recovery.” (D21)

Consequently, as the following D36 and D41 show, rosary is one of the traditional Catholic ways of expressing their thanks to God when they find themselves blessed by God by means of miracles or great successes ; “she is doing rosary to thank God because a lot of miracles are

caused for her.” (D36) “she is doing rosary. She thanks God for whatever blessings (*lo bueno*) by the grace of God.”

The references of “Confirmation and Confession” are concerned chiefly with their faith in *Dios* or the images. “She has faith (*creencia*) in *Dios* and she knows when to pray. She is praying. She never forgets it. She always remembers (*recuerda*) it, so she is helped by *Dios*.” (D11) “She is praying because she has faith in *Dios*. Where there is a prayer, there is deep faith (*creencia*) in *Dios*.” (D14) With true faith deep in their heart they are expected to kneel in prayer in front of their family altar.

Promesa, to swear an oath to God, is a very important religious activity in Mani. The following research data show that *promesa* to *Dios* or the images is connected with miracles and that it provides them with a religious orientation toward deep faith in *Dios*. “She is making *promesa* to *Dios* near the altar. She is asking *Dios* for miracles. She has completed her *promesa*, and she is once more asking the images for miracles” (D18) “In order to ask miracles, she is trying to complete *promesa* she made to *Dios*.” (D19) “She is doing rosary to thank *Sagrada Corazon de Jesus*. She is asking *Dios* to bless miracles for her. She is doing *novenario* as a token of gratitude to God's blessing or in order to complete (*cumplir*) her *promesa* to *Sagrada Corazon de Jesus*.” (D34)

They take it for an obligation to do rosary or *novenario* to thank *Dios* whenever their *promesa* to *Dios* is completed. If they neglect this, *Dios* and the images make them sick or inflict punishment on them. “If nobody can do rosary or *novenario*, then he or she must ask somebody else to do it for him/her.” (D25)

The contents of their prayers before the family altar are composed of petitions (*pedir*) for every day benediction (*bendición*), health (*salud*), peace (*bienestar*), help (*ayuda*), favor for the sake of their whole family and each family member (D3:D4:D9:D20:D21:D22:D23:D27:D29:D31:D32:D33:D34:D38:D40:D42:D44:D46:D47:D48:D49). Excluding D28 “She is repenting of her sins,” these contents are not so complicated as those of their prayers in church which will be discussed in detail below. In this connection, the persons for whom their prayers at home are offered are “themselves and their family” except for the following four cases; “their own family and Christians (D16)” “themselves and neighbors (D35)” “all people (D37:D39)”

The family altar plays a central role in religious services for the dead in which they offer (*entregar*) food (*comida*) to the soul (*alma*) of the dead, kneel in prayer in order to ask *Dios*

and the images for salvation of the soul of the dead (D6:D8:D10:D15:D17:D61).

A large proportion of the references to Photo 3b are “repentance (11 cases 16%)” and “prayer (*oración* 10 cases 14%).”

Repentance is a major trait to distinguish their prayers in church from those at home. A typical reference to Photo 3b is D1 “She is repenting (*penitencia*) her sins to *Santísima*. She is asking *Santísima*'s pardon (*perdón*) for evil deeds (*cosas malas*) she did for the last several days.” “evil deeds (*cosas malas*)” include “something that hurts her deeply (D4)” “to hurt somebody else (D25)” “she has not completed her *promesa* to *Dios* (D28)” and others. When they do such deeds, they go to church, confess (*confesar*) them to *Dios* and the images, and implore their forgiveness. Forgiveness is related in connection with sin (“*pecado*”) (D20:D53) and they should ask for forgiveness by means of prayers or rosaries of their own (D4:D25). Moreover, repentance includes not only “asking *Dios*' pardon for evil deeds” but also “making another *promesa* to that he or she will do good deeds” as D59 shows; “She is repenting (*arrepintiendo*) her sins, she is promising (*prometiendo*) to do good deeds.”

The crucial part of their prayers in church is to ask *Dios* and the images for protection (*cuida*), grace (*gracia*), help (*ayuda*), health, peace for the sake of each family member and for their own sake (D2:D8:D10:D14:D15:D19:D26:D30:D32:D43:D49:D56:D58:D61:D64:D65:D66:D68:D69). This is the case with their prayers at home.

But in their prayers in church they pray not only for themselves and their family members but also for those people who the following data show.

“She is asking or praying for all Christians” (D13) “She is asking *Santísima* for health (*salud*) for the sake of all people” (D15:D62) “She is praying and asking the images for their own happiness and for their neighbor's peace” (D19:D27:D36) “She is praying for God's blessing for the sake of all people” (D40) “She is asking for the sake of their family and close acquaintances (*queridos*)” (D47) “She is praying for recovery of all the sick” (D48:D54) “She is asking for the sake of sick people, family members, and those who are in great trouble” (D49)

The contents of their prayers in church, as the following data show a few aspects of them, include a firm religious orientation toward a more human and decent life in conformity to God's will.

“She is praying to *Dios* so that she may fight (*luchar*) her way in the world, she may obtain such strength (*fuera*), and she may possess the strength to push forward what we all should do.” (D11) “She is leading a life of religion, so she is following the teachings and designs

(*designios*) of God. She comes to church to thank to God, for God helps her live out her life at peace and God never leaves her for even a second.” (D38) “She is praying to God that he may help her to be a good woman and a good person. She is praying to God for her whole family.” (D42)

The following data concerning the prayers in church show that they find them answered by God more often than those at home. “She is praying because God does not receive (*recibe*) it when we pray at home and because the church is a special place for better prayers (*reza mejor*).” (D7) “The prayers in church are more accepted (*aceptaba*) by God.” (D33) “She is kneeling in prayer to God that he may not leave her or her family, because God hears (*escucha*) our prayer in church, that is, “*Dios*’house, more than at home.” (D35) “She is praying in church, because her prayer is answered by God more in church than at home, and when in church we stay much nearer (*cerca*) God. She thanks to God for his help at every moment (*todo momento*).” (D37) In Mani they take the church for a better place for prayer than their house and they believe that their prayers are more answered or received by God in church than at home because they stay nearer God when in church.

The contents of their prayers to *Dios* or the images include not only the realities of their life but also their constant awareness that they live by faith with the help of God at every moment.

“She is imploring (*encomendando*) God to help her every day wherever she may be” (D2) “Because she is a Catholic, she is devoting her time to her prayer in church. She comes to church to pray, for she asks God to concede (*conceder*) something.” (D8) “She is praying to *Santísima* so that she can live out the night and that she can start off on the day.” (D9)

“She is praying with her faith in God. She is making a promise to any one of the images or she comes to church to pray to *Santísima* because she helps us every day and to pray to *Santísima* is our obligation. She asks *Santísima* for happiness, salvation, health and the forgiveness of sins, for good Catholics think that way.” (D21) “She comes to church almost every day and prays to *Santísima* that she may lead a better life with her children.” (D14) “She is praying that she may be given enough illumination (*ilumine*) for her house, everyday food, and health.” (D32) “She is kneeling in prayer to ask *Dios* not to leave her or her family.” (D35) “She thanks to God for she is given help by God every moment (*todo momento*).” (D37) “She is asking *Dios* never to leave her” (D44) “She is asking *Dios* for protection from bad influences.”

(D45) “She thanks to God for favors (*favor*), graces (*gracia*), and important events (*algo bueno*) in her life.” (D46)

Conclusion

In Mani miracles or recovery from illness are believed to be worked by a mutual relationship of *do ut des* between the images and the people. They light candles, offer the flesh of a deer, swear to do their pilgrimage, and complete their promise in order to pray to *Dios* or the images for help and protection. Whenever they find their prayer answered, they take it for a miracle by *Dios* or the images, and they are expected to do rosary or *novenario* to thank for the miracles. This sort of *do ut des* mutual interactions between God or the images and the people is introduced into religious activities at family altars more than into those in church. In their references to the very place where they pray for miracles or they relate in connection with miracles, 51 cases are “at home” and 14 cases are “in church.”

Our TAT type survey to elucidate their responses to various parts of the photos of family altars and the images shows that, in the case of Photo 1a and Photo 1b, family altars are evaluated in the light of the images and comments on them. This evaluation is the case with Photo 2a and Photo 2b, but the crosses as well as the images are put more emphasis in their references to more simple altars. In this connection, especially the simplicity of altar is emphasized and wooden crosses are believed to be traditional part of family altar.

Religiously meaningful responses and comments given to the images on the family altar are *Guadalupe*, *Niño Jesus*, the cross, *Dios*, *Niño de Atocha*, *Asunción*, *Tres Reyes*. The main reason for these responses is “because they bring about miracles (36 cases)” Their miracle experiences center around the complete recovery from some disease and the theme is frequently repeated in the responses to the photos. This type of faith in the miracles by the images has been developed mainly in *Tizimin* (*Tres Reyes*), *Izamal* (*Virgen Maria*), *Chumayel* (*Jesus*) including various communities in the Yucatan Peninsula. The miracles by the images center around the recovery from disease, including good crops, marriages, pregnancies, favorable growth of domestic animals⁴.

The responses to the prayers at the family altar are in the order of most cases “rosary” “Confirmation and Confession” “*promesa* (swear an oath to God)” “*novenario* (9-day-prayer)” “religious service for the dead.”

Rosary is done “only because it is just a custom” and it is done to pray for blessing or recovery from some disease. Rosary is one of the traditional Catholic ways of expressing their thanks to God when they find themselves blessed by God by means of miracles or great successes.

In Mani they believe that “where there is a prayer, there is deep faith (*creencia*) in *Dios*.” In this belief they kneel down in front of family altar to pray. Among their prayers is *promesa* (swear an oath to God) which is closely related with miracles and is a motive for their religious orientation toward a decent life in conformity to the God's will. They find it indispensable for them to do rosary or *novenario* to thank to God when *promesa* is completed. If not, God or the images will make them sick or punished. If they can not do it themselves, they have to ask somebody else to do it for them.

The contents of their prayers before the family altar are composed of petitions (*pedir*) for everyday benediction (*bendición*), health (*salud*), peace (*bienestar*), help (*ayuda*), favor for the sake of their whole family and each family member. These contents are not so complicated as those of their prayers in church. In this connection, the persons for whom their prayers at home are offered are “themselves and their family” except for the few cases.

The family altar plays a central role in religious services for the dead in which they offer (*entregar*) food (*comida*) to the soul (*alma*) of the dead, kneel in prayer in order to ask *Dios* and the images for salvation of the soul of the dead.

In contrast to their prayers before the family altars, repentance is a major trait of their prayers in church. When they do evil deeds (*cosas malas*), they go to church, confess them to *Dios* and the images, and implore their forgiveness. Moreover, repentance includes not only “asking *Dios*' pardon for evil deeds” but also “making another *promesa* to *Dios* so that he or she will do good deeds.”

The crucial part of their prayers in church is, in the same way as their prayers at home, to ask *Dios* and the images for protection (*cuida*), grace (*gracia*), help (*ayuda*), health, peace for the sake of each family member and for their own sake. But in their prayers in church they pray not only for themselves and their family members but also for those people who are not closely related to them.

They find their prayers answered by God more often than those at home. In Mani they take the church for a better place for prayer than their house and they believe that their prayers are more answered or received by God in church than at home because they stay nearer God when in church. The contents of their prayers to *Dios* or the images include not only the realities of their life but also their constant awareness that they live by faith with the help of God at every moment.

Footnotes

The present author has been engaged in revising and enlarging the published works in order to publish a complete collected work : *A Study of Catholic Culture Integration of Lowland Maya Communities in Mexico*, part of which the paper is sure to form. Consequently some parts or sections of the paper duplicate closely the works already published before. The present author refers to it toties quoties in the Note and references to clarify the responsibility for it.

- 1 See Harukazu Nakabeppu 1991 *Images of Saints and Diseases in a Mayayucatecan Catholic Community, Mani. Bulletin of the Institute of Comparative Studies of International Cultures and Studies*. Vol.10 pp. pp.91-123
- See Harukazu Nakabeppu 1999 *Miracles in a Mayayucatecan Catholic Community, Mani. Religion, Region and Family*. pp.107-155
- See Harukazu Nakabeppu 1999 *Miracles in a Mayanyucatecan Catholic Community, Mani. Bulletin of the Institute of Comparative Studies of International Cultures and Studies*. Vol.17 pp.125-138
- See Harukazu Nakabeppu 1985 *Hot/cold Dichotomy and Men (Medicine Man=Priest) in Mani, Yucatan. Study of Catholic Culture in the South Mexican Villages*. pp.340-377
- 2 See Harukazu Nakabeppu 1999 *Miracles in a Mayayucatecan Catholic Community, Mani. Religion, Region and Family*. pp.107-155
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- 3 See Harukazu Nakabeppu 1991 *Images of Saints and Diseases in a Mayayucatecan Catholic Community, Mani. Bulletin of the Institute of Comparative Studies of International Cultures and Studies*. Vol.10 pp. pp.102-110
- See Harukazu Nakabeppu 1999 *Miracles in a Mayayucatecan Catholic Community, Mani. Religion, Region and Family*. pp.107-172
- 4 See Harukazu Nakabeppu 1987 *Men (Medicine Man=Priest) and Cha'chac (ritual for rain) in a Mayayucatecan Village, Mani. Study of Catholic Culture in the South Mexican Villages*. pp.225-254

- See Harukazu Nakabeppu 1985 *Hot/cold Dichotomy and Men (Medicine Man=Priest) in Mani, Yucatan. Study of Catholic Culture in the South Mexican Villages.* pp.340-377
- See Harukazu Nakabeppu 1989 *Men (Medicine Man=Priest), Ritual Practices and Padrinazgo/ compadrazgo in Mani. Religion, Law and Practical life in the South Mexican Villages.* pp.129-150

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- 2001 *Marriage Form in a Mayayucatecan Catholic Community, Mani — with special reference to Pudz — Bulletin of Miyazaki Municipal University Faculty of Humanities.* Vol.8 No.1 pp.205-220
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