

OBANDO: LEGEND OF A DANCE

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Each year, during the middle part of May, as the bamboo musicians of Obando are energetically blowing air into their wind instruments, the old men and women in antique Pilipino clothes are continuously dancing and teasing each other along the street, and after them follow the carriages of Saint Paschal, Saint Claire and the Our Lady of Salambao. The hymn of "Santa Clarang Pinung-pino (Very Fine St. Claire)" is heard all over the place. Most of the pilgrims, whom most came from the nearby provinces of Bulacan: Pampanga and Nueva Ecija; and even until Manila, are dancing while reciting the Rosary and the Litany. Most of them are wishing for a child, spouse, or a good business. Some of them are doing this dancing every year as their perpetual devotion. For example, the members of the women's organization of Barangay San Pascual and Barangay Hulo dance every year during the feast days as this is their lifetime commitment. Ms. Adang of Barangay San Pascual has been given a daughter. Hence, she is dancing every year to honor St. Claire. Ms. Sima of Barangay Paliwas feels so healthy and energetic while dancing, even without stopping! There are also couples who have been doing the nine-day novena before the feast day and during the feast day itself, they are vigorously dancing behind the carriage of St. Paschal while making their wish of having just even one child.

This is the magic of Obando. Thousands of people are going to Obando to celebrate the feast and they are dancing to St. Claire in order to ask for children. The dance turned to a prayer. The *fandango* dance is a combination of feet, hands and hip movements so as to make the *Spirit of Life* enter the womb.

The feast lasts for three days: May 17th for St. Paschal, May 18th for St. Claire and May 19th for the Our Lady of Salambao. The dancing lasts for three days, as well.

Throughout the years, the *Obando Fertility Dance* can be considered to have a very strong and solid foundation. From this, we can also find some answers to the questions such as what image and how our town's (Obando) culture progressed before the time of the Spanish colonization of the Philippines.

Also, why was it that Obando became the famous town for doing this fertility dance? Where is this little town located? What was its history?

Prologue

The town of Obando was established on May 14, 1753 and it was named after the incumbent Governor-General of that time, Don Jose Francisco Solis de Obando. The decree on the said establishment was enacted the following year, 1754.

Before, Obando just used to be a town of Meycauayan during the 16th century. It was called by the name *Catangalan* (now Catanghalan), derived from the word *tangal*, which is a kind of tree growing abundantly in the swampy part of the place. The extract of skin of the *tangal* was made into *dampol* for the *kutod* (things used for fishing) and fisherman's net.

In 1588, Catangalan has been declared an *encomienda* under the supervision of a native, Don Felipe Armanlangangui. There were about 800 people living in Catangalan at that time, and their ways of living was through fishing and farming.

There came the time when Don Felipe Armanlangangui has been imprisoned and was exiled outside the country under the charge of collaborating with the Bornean Moros to object the Spanish government. All of his wealth was divided among the treasury of the King of Spain and for the expenses of the *junta nacional*.

During the 16th century, the topographical feature of Catangalan was divided into two important portions: the swampland, where the *tangal* and *ape-ape* trees were growing; and the forest and grasslands in which the centre has been the place for building homes of the people. In the present, the entire swampland has been divided into rivers and fish ponds. Parts of the forest and grasslands were turned to paddies where rice and different crops were planted.

Although it has been said that there are only rumors or no concrete evidence at all as to where the image of culture in Obando before the coming of the Spanish can be based, the people of Obando (Catangalan), like the native Filipino people has a set of traditions concerning their life, death, faith and government.

For a native Filipino, all stages of life starting from birth until fighting in a war, for farming, fishing and even in love, has to be accompanied by performing a ritual.

The early Filipinos were performing a ritual called *Kasilonawan*, headed by a *katalonan* or high priestess. Normally, the ritual lasts for 9 days; and within they celebrate through endless drinking, singing and dancing. The ritual was being held in the home of the datu or head of the barangay.

Fertility had become important for a Filipino. The sterile women were considered as low class and had been mocked by the society.

Because of this, performing a ritual for sterile women had also been important. The deity they call as the *linga* was the center of the *Kasilonawan* ritual. The early Filipinos were celebrating so that their lives or destiny would be in the hands of nature.

Many years had passed; Catangalan remained as a small village. However, Polo, another village, was separated from Meycauayan in 1623.

The Franciscan friars established a church in Polo. They also established a chapel in Catangalan and there they enshrined an image of St. Claire.

Hence, St. Claire was the very first patron saint of Obando.

Saint Claire



Who is Saint Claire? Why did she become the patron saint for dancing in order to bear a child?

St. Claire was a nun from Assisi, Italy during the 13th century. She founded the congregation called "Poor Claires" according to the doctrines and devotion of St. Francis of Assisi.

She has been regarded as the patron saint of good weather because of her name, which in Spanish means the clearing of the skies after the rain. Therefore, many of us still believe until now that offering eggs at the feet of St. Claire is an effective prayer to ask for the stormy weather to be fair.

Why egg? It is because the name "Claire" has been taken from the Spanish word "*claro*" which means egg white (albumen).

Even until now, the power of St. Claire is being recognized most especially in the world of "mass media". She has also been regarded as the patron saint of television.

Franciscan friars did not hesitate to attract the native Filipinos to go under the umbrella of Christianity. Baptizing the natives had been performed. Teaching the Catechism had started. The rites offered to the deities had been replaced by devotions to the Christian saints.

The fertility dance so that people will not become sterile had been made to be a *fandango* dance in honor of St. Claire.

This strategy hastened the changing in the beliefs of the Filipinos from their adoration for the things around nature like the skies, the sun, and the stars until they fully embrace the magic of Christianity. We can also claim that religion is the reason why the Philippines had been a colony of the foreigners (especially, of the Spaniards) for over three centuries.

From then on, St. Claire had been the center of pilgrimages for the people who want to bear a child. Also, since then, Obando became the center for pilgrim dancing and egg offerings.

Saint Paschal of Baylon



At the turn of the 18th century, many years after the establishment of the town of Obando, one parish priest was tasked to supervise the construction of a church. The people were made to pay taxes for two years and the money collected was spent to build the church. The image of St. Paschal of Baylon was added in the church altar.

If we will think about it carefully, St. Paschal is one suitable replacement to the native deities, as a patron of dancing for fertility and plenty. The surname of St. Paschal, which is *Baylon*, means "fond of dancing" in Spanish.

There had been many anecdotes on the miracles performed by St. Paschal. Included in these was according to the testimony of a couple from Hagonoy, Bulacan. According to them, they met a crab seller and the seller encouraged them to attend the festivities in Obando. After that, the couple went to Obando to hear mass. They were surprised when they saw the face of the image of St. Paschal as it looked very similar to the face of the crab seller.

Until now, St. Paschal of Baylon is the leading patron saint of Obando. If we are to base on history, St. Claire should be considered as the patron saint as to whom the fertility dance is to be offered. But St. Paschal had came to be the main patron saint during the three-day festivities. And as time goes by, he too, has been considered as a patron saint to be asked for a child.

The Our Lady of Salambao

A few years later, on the 19th of June, 1763, another patron saint was added in the church of Obando, completing the triumvirate of the blessed. Two fishermen, Juan and Julian de la Cruz, as they were fishing over the Huling Doong of Binoangan, Tambobong (presently known as Malabon City), unexpectedly caught the image of the Immaculate Conception in their fishnet. According to the legend, when they were trying to bring the image to Navotas, the fishnet became very heavy and they could not move. But when they tried to move the boat towards the Obando area, the fishnet and the boat moved very easily. Since then, the image of the Blessed Virgin was enshrined in the church and was included among the patron saints of Obando.



In the unexpected sequences of the events, the third patron saint, the Immaculate Conception, known as the Our Lady of Salambao, is also appropriate to be a patron saint for the childless. Also, the sea, where most people are getting their living, is a symbol for the source of life.

Aside from this, the inclusion of the Our Lady of Salambao in the triumvirate of the patron saints of Obando started the spread of practice of honoring the Blessed Mother in the town. In short, Obando became one of the towns that gave importance to the role of the Blessed Virgin in the wholeness of the Catholic faith.

The Our Lady of Salambao, since then, also became the patron saint of the fishermen of Obando. In the past few years, the image of the Blessed Virgin has also been included in the annual "FEAST OF THE CROSS" that is being held in the river connecting the villages of San Pascual and Hulo every May. In this way, the Our Lady of Salambao has been given an appropriate celebration suitable to Her history and imagery.

New Zest

The Obando Fertility Dance continued until the latter part of the American governance of the Philippines.

However, the fame of the said dance reached many places in the country. Even the National Hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, mentioned this tradition in his novel, the "*Noli Me Tangere*".

The political events in Obando did not affect the annual fandango. Despite that Obando and its people were members of the *Katipunan* (revolutionaries against Spanish colonization of the Philippines), and were involved in the revolt against the Spaniards during 1898, the dance was still performed and pilgrims were continuously going to Obando to express their devotion for at least during the three-day festivities.

It is nice to think the beauty of this tradition being held in Obando during those times. The pilgrim, whom most of them were coming from different provinces by boats and barges with multi-colored decorations, received accommodation from the Obando people and were staying there until the festivities ended. The most common form of payment in exchange of the accommodation and food was through buying the candles being sold by the household.

Perhaps there would never be a better and concrete example than this accommodation being offered by the Obando townsfolk, to show the being hospitable of the Filipinos.

During the height of the Second World War, the church and a big portion of the town had been burned, including the original images of the three patron saints in the altar. The images that can be seen in the altar today are just replicas of the original images. The initiative to produce these replicas was pursued by some families and confraternities.

A few years after the war had ended, the Archbishop of Manila and the incumbent parish priest of Obando prohibited the dancing during the feast as they were allegedly without Catholic background. In other words, they speculated that the ritual had been of pagan origin.

Although the order to stop the dancing had been strictly implemented and realized by the local clergy, some of the pilgrims were not stopped from doing the fandango during the feast of Obando. Some people were swaying discreetly on the streets as the procession passed by.

This has been the time for stopping a very beautiful tradition that had been deeply rooted among the very old ancestry of every Filipino from coming up to life.

Came 1972, and the whole town got into a new zest when the restrained tradition had been brought back to life. Under the supervision of a new parish priest under the name of Rev. Fr. Rome R. Fernandez, and through the cooperation of the Cultural Commission of Obando, the people of Obando started to dance the fandango. Many of them formed their own groups and had different types of Filipino clothes. Obando woke up again from a long sleep.

There had been light all around. The procession came back to life and full colors. The trombone musicians came back. The images of the three patron saints had been dressed up and offered with never-ending dancing.

Form of the Dance

The dance as an expression of feeling of a person is based on the environment where the person is and also on the passing of time.

During the early time, the dance of the native Filipinos were offered to the native deities of nature so that the deities will be waken up and asked to go down to earth. In the rhythm of clappers and horns, the natives are stomping their feet and were swaying while moving around the image of the deities. There had been no standard hands and feet movement. What was important was for them to express their feelings.

When the Spaniards came, the Philippine native music was combined with European melodies. The natives were dressed up with *baro't saya* (upper garment and long skirt), taught certain dances like the fandango.

The original version of the Obando Fertility Dance was dance in the tune of "*Santa Clarang Pinung-Pino*". In the rhythm of waltz, the dancers sway their hips and at move their hands and waist in unison. What is nice in dancing the fandango is the frequency of movements of the waist. Through this, the dance becomes livelier and the womb is shaken so that the Spirit of Life will come in.

Next was the influence of the Americans. The radio and cinema cultures had been introduced little by little to the Filipinos, as well as the jolly dance music like "Coca-cola", "Charleston", "Foxtrot", and the like.

The pilgrim dancers were not just dancing the fandango, but also started to sway the Charleston, in the tune of the trombone musicians that also learned to play jolly music.

Obando seemed to be like a carnival, a dance ball where everyone shows their dancing skills. The pilgrim dancers had their own dancing styles-some of them retained the old fandango, some danced the newer form of foxtrot, rumba, tango and the like.

In this way, we understood that cultural influences from outside the country may affect the form and fate of our own tradition.

In the fertility dance itself, we can see that according to the progress of time, it is not the form of the dance that is important but the intention and devotion of the pilgrim.

Until now, these forms of the dance can still be seen in Obando. In between the music of "*Santa Clarang Pinung-Pino*", some marching sounds are played as well like the chacha, "*De Colores*" and some disco music. This is being done so that the pilgrims would not feel monotonous while dancing the fandango. However, unlike before that the dance was being performed in the church patio only, nowadays, it is being performed as part of the procession and ends in front of the altar. Because of this, the old tradition might begin to lose its true energetic form (spontaneous movements) as movements are being replaced by restrained ones as prescribed by the church and the society.

Epilogue

What will happen to the Obando Fertility Dance as time goes by?

Although the Obando Fertility Dance is already an old tradition, we can not deny the fact that in the next few years to come, the said tradition may be changed or disappear at all. May God forbid!

First, the town of Obando is very near to Metro Manila. Thus, urbanization has very strong effect in the mentality of the townspeople.

The power of media, especially, of radio and television, are affecting to much the taste and the likes of other professionals in Obando with modern lifestyles and are currently going to work located within Metro Manila. For people like them, the Obando Fertility Dance may seem to be just a very good tradition suitable only for the past and is already not applicable to the modern living. In short, these people might get a wrong viewpoint with regards to their very own tradition.

Secondly, the new generation of Obando is being raised within the fantasies of modernization. It has been important for them to dream about the culture of tomorrow instead of understanding the traditions of the past and incorporating them with those of the present. The influence of the American culture has been very strong. They would rather go to disco houses or attend rock concerts than dance the *fandango* every May.

Thirdly, the schools of Obando and even those in Manila had been lacking emphasis to the proper understanding of our country's customs and traditions. What have been giving importance in today's education are the lessons on industrialization of our country. It is not bad but the result is the students are losing the opportunity of learning the different aspects of our culture, especially the customs and traditions reflecting our identity as a Filipino.

Perhaps all of the people of Obando do not want a tradition embodying their beloved town to disappear. The popularization of this very beautiful tradition depends on the cooperation of people of all sectors of Obando - the church, the local government and the people themselves.