

## MATERIALIZING DEVOTION: EXPLORING IDENTITY NEGOTIATION IN PARAÑAQUE CITY'S *SAYAW NG PAGBATI*

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### Abstract

Catholics in several Southern Tagalog towns in the Philippines express the joy of Christ's resurrection through a ritual dance called *Sayaw ng Pagbati* (Dance of Greeting). In Parañaque City, children in elaborate costumes and holding flags perform the dance ritual in the cathedral early Easter Sunday morning and in their corresponding neighborhoods throughout the day. This study intends to frame the Easter dance through material culture by exploring how ritual objects relate to both performers and the community. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 respondents and unstructured observation of the ritual dance in San Dionisio, Parañaque. The study identifies that ritual objects in the Easter dance mediate and materialize the sacred and entangle both performers and the community in networks of obligation, reception, and identity. As prestige goods, ritual objects function as social markers for the performers and their families.

**Keywords:** *Sayaw ng Pagbati*, *pagbati*, Easter Sunday, Easter dance, Parañaque City, Philippines

**Discipline:** cultural anthropology

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**Absztrakt****A JÁMBORSÁG MATERIALIZÁLÁSA: AZ IDENTITÁSTÁRGYALÁS VIZSGÁLATA  
PARAÑAQUE VÁROS *SAYAW NG PAGBATI* RÍTUSÁBAN**

A Fülöp-szigetek déli tagalog régiójának több településén a katolikus közösségek Krisztus feltámadásának örömét a *Sayaw ng Pagbati* („köszöntő tánc”) elnevezésű rituális tánc keretében fejezik ki. Parañaque városában a gyermekek díszes, gazdagon ornamentált viseletben, zászlókat tartva adják elő e rituális táncot húsvétvasárnap kora reggel a székesegyházban, majd a nap folyamán saját lakókörnyezetükben is. Jelen tanulmány célja, hogy a húsvéti táncot a materiális kultúra perspektívájából értelmezze, különös tekintettel arra, miként viszonyulnak a rituális tárgyak az előadókhoz és a közösséghez. A kutatás kvalitatív módszertani keretben zajlott: tíz válaszóval félig strukturált interjúk készültek, továbbá strukturálatlan megfigyelés történt a Parañaque-i San Dionisio negyedben bemutatott rituális tánc során. Az elemzés rámutat arra, hogy a húsvéti tánc rituális tárgyai mediáló szerepet töltenek be a szent és a profán szférák között, miközben materiális formában jelenítik meg a transzcendens jelentéstartalmakat. E tárgyak egyúttal kölcsönös kötelezettségek, befogadási aktusok és identitáskonstruáló folyamatok hálózataiba ágyazzák mind az előadókat, mind a közösséget. Presztízsjavakként funkcionálva a rituális objektumok társadalmi markerként szolgálnak az előadók és családjaik számára.

**Kulcsszavak:** *Sayaw ng Pagbati*, pagbati, húsvétvasárnap, húsvéti tánc, Parañaque város, Fülöp-szigetek

**Diszciplína:** kulturális antropológia

**Introduction**

The sustained interest among Filipino scholars in examining historic texts and archaeological artifacts provides a rich tapestry for understanding the significance of material culture in early Philippine society. In the study of burial goods in the Philippines, funerary objects were found resting with the deceased. These were identified as prestige goods symbolizing the elite's power and affluence. For early Filipinos, prestige goods included various objects that were hard to procure and made of uncommon materials such as gold, silver, ivory, beaded ornaments, iron and bronze weaponry, ceramics, among others (Tesoro, 2003). In Cebu, glazed ceramics used during feasts between the mid-fourteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries served as symbols of administrators' socio-political status (Nishimura, 1992). The Spanish colonization of the Philippines from the 16th to the 20th century extended the impact of prestige goods among the

natives. Clothing, for example, became a marker of class, ethnicity, and sophistication. What lacked in physical traits was overshadowed by one's attire. The *mestizos* – those born out of interracial marriages between the natives and Spaniards or Chinese – not only became a racial identifier but also a coveted social status (Coo, 2017). Filipino anthropologist Stephanie Marie Coo (2017) highlights, “the inclusion of the term Tagalog to refer to the attire emphasized the dichotomy between the urbanized Tagalogs of the capital city (*taga-bayan*) and those from the countryside (*taga-bukid*).” By the middle of the nineteenth century, towards the end of the Spanish colonial period, the Tagalog mestizos gained prosperity. They were able to establish a social hierarchy that distinguished them from the rest through their manner of dressing (Coo, 2017).

Spanish colonization of the islands also meant the imposition of Christianity among the native population. The conversion of the natives did not

produce immense psychological difficulty, as Christianity had characteristics parallel to precolonial beliefs (Macaranas, 2021; Elesterio, 1989). The new religion also brought with it ritual objects that can be classified as prestige goods, which made their way to the dwellings of the local elites. During the Spanish occupation, the Catholic Church introduced sponsorship systems – such as *santo* sponsorship and the custom of *hermano mayor* – which gave rise to ritual objects that have endured into the contemporary period. Caretaking and funding religious images or *santos* used during processions and associated rituals were assigned by parish priests to prominent individuals or families. Later on, given the affordances brought by the galleon trade and the opening of the Suez Canal in the nineteenth century, the local elites started commissioning religious images in classical or baroque style, which were fashioned from a combination of valuable materials such as wood, ivory, gold, silver, imported textiles, bullion threads, and precious stones (Tamayo, 2020). Religious feasts or *fiestas* centering on the town’s patron saint were highly anticipated events. As these feasts consumed expenses, the burden was placed on prominent individuals who assumed the role of *hermano mayor* (*fiesta* sponsor). The affluent clamored to attain this honor, as it led to the expansion of their social prestige in the community. Moreover, the social stature of *hermano mayor* in various religious and secular events during the *fiesta* time was not only determined by their monetary contributions but also by their elaborate attire and religious accoutrement (Tamayo, 2022).

This article examines the Easter dance sponsorship system known as the *Sayaw ng Pagbati* (Dance of Greeting) or *Bati*, practiced in Parañaque City in Metro Manila. For clarity, the author uses the former term for consistency. The ritual dance is performed on the dawn of Easter Sunday at the Cathedral and Parish of St. Andrew, also known as the Parañaque Cathedral (Picture 1).

Picture 1. The façade of Parañaque Cathedral, also known as the Cathedral and Parish of St. Andrew. Photo by Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo (2025).



With their own set of performers, several *barangays* (neighborhoods) participate in this annual event: La Huerta, Don Galo, Tramo, San Dionisio, and Sto. Niño. In the book “Palanyag to Parañaque: A History,” Dulce Baybay (2001) notes that the term *bati* is derived from the Tagalog word *pagbati*, which means to greet. The dance requires little girls between the ages of nine and thirteen to dance before the image of the Risen Christ and to the Virgin Mary after the customary *salubong* ritual, where the two images meet in the church plaza complex during the dawn of Easter Sunday. In the *barangay* of Don Galo, the dance is customarily performed by both male and female dancers. Choreography consists of “sway balance steps in a waltzy manner with one arm placed on the waist and the other holding a white flaglet” (Baybay, 2001). Dancers who are seen as angels wave the flaglets, serving as an allegory to the joy brought by Christ’s resurrection. The beginnings of this Easter dance are unclear; however, the two

oldest surviving participants, Emilia Rodriguez Hernandez and Avelina Rodriguez Carabeo, mention that it was already practiced in the early twentieth century. At the time, there were only two dancers who could perform for several years. Traditionally, the dance was performed as part of two coordinated religious feasts: in La Huerta on Easter Sunday and in Don Galo on Ascension Sunday. For reasons of impracticality, it was decided later to perform the *Sayaw ng Pagbati* only on Easter Sunday. In the 1970s, other *barangays* organized their own dance troupes. Participation grew as parents undertook a *panata* (devotional pledge) and sought divine intervention for favors or the cure of illnesses (Baybay, 2001).

Specifically, this article focuses on the material components of *Sayaw ng Pagbati*. While Baybay's (2001) excerpt provides a background regarding the Easter dance ritual, the lack of empirical sources that deal with the collective experience of the community inspired the author to analyze the dance ritual based on materiality. German cultural anthropologist Birgit Meyer (2008) emphasizes that the sacred becomes tangible through rituals, images, bodily techniques, and aesthetics, which she termed "sensational forms." For Meyer, these sensational forms do not simply transmit meaning but shape experience. Closely related to sensational forms, David Morgan (2016), professor of religious studies and art history, indicates that material objects do not merely express belief, but they aid in constructing it. He discusses the "reception" of material objects, which he identified as "the uses to which objects are put by devotees that may vary from original or designed intent." The way the community uses ritual objects helps in structuring devotion and shared religious worlds. Moreover, Webb Keane (2013), an American anthropologist, says that written words and signs make spirits materially present. The transformations of these texts give them power, while their durability and portability shape their authority. In his book "*Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships Between Humans and Things*," British

archaeologist Ian Hodder (2012) proposes the concept of entanglement, a dialectic of dependence and dependency in which humans depend on things that, in turn, depend on humans. He adds that cycles of dependency, maintenance, and social obligation equate to human-thing entanglement. For Filipino archeologist Grace Barretto-Tesoro (2003), prestige goods signal devotion, people's identity, and alliances, which are valued beyond utility. Non-utilitarian objects, such as those used in rituals, gain meaning through the difficulty of acquisition and cultural associations. Meanwhile, clothing historically reflects status and identity. It likewise mediates social perception, especially in the Philippines (Coo, 2017).

Through the lens of materiality, the author argues that *Sayaw ng Pagbati* demonstrates that material culture is not peripheral or merely decorative but a central component of the people's religious devotion and identity in contemporary Parañaque City. Drawing on the concepts of mediation (Meyer, 2008), materializing the sacred (Keane, 2013), entanglement and obligation (Hodder, 2012), reception (Morgan, 2016), prestige goods (Tesoro 2003), and social markers (Coo, 2017), the present study poses the following questions: (1) How does *Sayaw ng Pagbati* use costumes, props, and gestures to mediate and materialize the sacred? (2) In what ways do material objects entangle performers and communities in networks of obligation, reception, and identity? (3) How do the costumes and ritual items function as prestige goods and social markers that shape communal identity and religious participation?

### Methodology

Data gathering for this empirical study employed qualitative approaches. Ten respondents were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Additionally, the respondents signed an informed consent form and agreed to be named in this study. The interviews were done in phases, either online (e.g., Zoom) or in person (e.g., café or residence),

between October 2024 and April 2025. The respondents were divided into three categories: performers (Eloisa Espeña, Bernadine Bernardo, and Abigail Eunice Carabeo), choreographers (Dr. Soledad Santos, Judith Marcelino, and Evelyn Mago), and a local family who descended from the line of the oldest *Sayaw ng Pagbati* dancers and were active in local church affairs (Dr. Erwin Carabeo and sons Andre Joseph Carabeo and Anton Maria Francesco Carabeo). Moreover, the respondents were selected through purposive sampling. Eloisa Espeña and Andre Joseph Carabeo helped in referring the author to other respondents. By email correspondence, the author also interviewed Prof. John Paul Domingo, a dance teacher at De La Salle University, regarding the origins of the Easter dance ritual. In addition to conducting interviews, the author visited the centuries-old chapel of *San Dionisio* (St. Denis), whom locals fondly call ‘*Tata Dune*,’ on the afternoon of Easter Sunday, April 20, 2025, to observe the *Sayaw ng Pagbati* in Barangay San Dionisio. During the dance ritual, the author imposed unstructured observation to document the locals’ behavior and practices in their natural social and cultural environment. To analyze data from the interviews and observations, the author conducted thematic analysis to generate themes, compare data, and interpret meanings.

### **Sayaw ng Pagbati in Parañaque City**

*Sayaw ng Pagbati*, as an Easter ritual dance, is not solely practiced in Parañaque City. It is a dance tradition that can be categorized as regional and exclusively practiced in the Southern Tagalog Region. Other variants of this Easter dance can be found in Angono, Rizal; Ibaan, Batangas; Boac, Marinduque; and other towns (Tamayo, 2023; Viray, 2019). In Angono, the ritual dance is performed exclusively by two female dancers, the *kapitana* and *tenyenta*. The choreography is distinguished by a dance step called *bali*, which involves bending the torso. The one in

Ibaan is performed by a female dancer, the *kapitana*, and two gentlemen, the *kapitan* and *bise kapitan*, who execute a routine inspired by the polka dance (Tamayo, 2025). In contrast, the performance in Boac is reminiscent of a waltz conducted by a pair of female and male dancers (Viray, 2019). Despite the variations, a common aspect of all the performances is the use of a flag.

According to Dr. Soledad Santos, choreographer of *Sayaw ng Pagbati* in Barangay San Dionisio, around 22 to 24 dancers perform the ritual dance in their group. The same number of performers is visible in other *barangays* in Parañaque City. Dr. Erwin Carabeo, a descendant of pre-war dancer Avelina Rodriguez Carabeo, notes that ten rows are required in the formation, as it involves a sequence with a group of three dancers. Anton Maria Francesco Carabeo, the son of Dr. Carabeo and a folk dancer who has witnessed the tradition for a long time, adds that the routine follows the waltz but “at a faster pace.” In an email correspondence, Prof. John Paul Domingo recounts that the choreography of *Sayaw ng Pagbati* is influenced by a Spanish dance called *Los Bailes de los Años Pasado*. While there is still contention as to which *barangay* the choreography originated, an excerpt written after the war by Philippine National Artist for Dance, Dr. Francisca Reyes-Aquino, shared by Prof. Domingo, indicates that the dance ritual was already performed in La Huerta and Don Galo at the time. Dr. Carabeo stresses, “If you consider La Huerta being the original, as the pure form ...Anything outside this is a modification.” In the contemporary period, while each *barangay* follows the traditional dance pattern derived from the one documented by Aquino, they have incorporated certain steps that identify them from other dance troupes. Meanwhile, the tune accompanying the choreography is attributed to the composition of Francisco Rodriguez (Baybay, 2001). Anton notes that local brass bands, including the City Band of Parañaque, the San Nicolas Band, and the Magsikap Band, are well acquainted with the piece.

Preparations for this annual tradition start as early as December, when the list of potential performers is drafted and finalized. Eloisa Espeña, who performed the *Sayaw ng Pagbati* in 1991 and has since passed the tradition to her daughter, recounts that the organizers in San Dionisio announce the call for participants to the mothers of former dancers who remain willing to take part. Participation is completely voluntary, and interested performers may request that their names be included. In addition, practices vary per dance troupe.

Bernadine Bernardo's experience as a performer for nine consecutive years recalls that the practices in San Dionisio depend on the day of Easter. If Easter falls in March, practices usually begin in late December; if it falls in April, practices start in January. She adds that since her family has a spacious garage, they conducted the practices at their residence. In La Huerta, Abigail Eunice Carabeo, a performer for four years, mentions that they usually start practicing after Ash Wednesday in a small area near the river. During the technical dance rehearsal, which happens at five in the afternoon on Black Saturday, all dance troupes convene for the first time to conduct the general rehearsal in the cathedral's plaza. While each *barangay* has its own choreography, the cathedral imposes a uniform dance routine for all the performers. Bernadine notes that there is a separate practice for this purpose. Meanwhile, the distinct choreography of various *barangays* can only be performed once they return to their neighborhoods.

At around 4:30 on Easter Sunday morning, the local community, along with the performers, gathers for a dawn procession in which images of the Risen Christ and the Virgin Mary are paraded through the streets. The procession ends at the cathedral's plaza, where the traditional *salubong* ritual is performed. After the *salubong*, the performers conduct their first *Sayaw ng Pagbati*. A mass is then offered inside the cathedral after the performance. As the sun gradually shines and the mass ends, the performers return

to formation to conduct another round of the Easter dance ritual. Once the performance concludes, each dance troupe walks in procession towards their respective *barangays* to start a series of dances. Each *barangay* sets specific stops where the dancers perform the *Sayaw ng Pagbati* until midday. This is usually held along the road in front of private residences. Several respondents recounted how, along the route, families would halt the performers on the spot and spontaneously request them to perform in front of their houses. Such instances create moments of lively interaction between dancers and the community. Anton also elaborates that these families would often provide food and refreshments to the dancers after their performance.

On Easter Sunday in 2025, the author was invited to witness the performance in San Dionisio, a nearby neighborhood adjacent to La Huerta, where the cathedral is located. While other *barangays* conduct the street dancing right after the performance in the cathedral, the one in San Dionisio happens late in the afternoon. According to the choreographers, the reason behind this is to avoid the intense summer heat, which may lead to dehydration and untoward health risks for the children. The meeting point was the old chapel of San Dionisio.

By three in the afternoon, all the performers and their parents were already seated inside the chapel, while the band was gathering and practicing their instruments outside. Before starting the program, a series of pictorials was taken in sequence: the dancer, the dancer with Dr. Santos, the dancer with their parents, and several group shots (Picture 2).

This was then followed by a preliminary performance of *Sayaw ng Pagbati*, which the choreographers note as a salutation to San Dionisio, the patron of their *barangay*. The congregation gradually moved outside the chapel to perform another round of the Easter dance ritual. Here, the locals were already flooding the vicinity as they awaited the street dancing. If the performance in the chapel was in salutation to the patron saint, the performance

outside was the customary *bati* to the Risen Christ and the Virgin Mary.

*Picture 2. The San Dionisio pagbati dancers posed with their choreographer before the main event. Photo by Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo (2025).*



Two sets of small *andas* (shoulder-borne platforms), adorned with bright artificial flowers and bearing images of the Risen Christ and the Virgin Mary about two feet tall, were carried by groups of men. As the dancers performed, the images appeared to be dancing as well, given that the men carrying them swayed the *andas* intensely.

Once the performance concluded, several men appeared holding long ropes that formed two lines along the processional route. The dancers walked to the barrier, followed by the two images and the local band. The long ropes secured and guided all the participants to the designated points where the *Sayaw ng Pagbati* were performed. Meanwhile, the congregation, as well as the parents, could be seen walking beside the barriers or following the band. The dancers performed at various locations within the jurisdiction of their *barangay*. Since the streets were narrow, the parade consequently caused heavy traffic. Still, the community seemed to be understanding, given that most residents went out of their homes to observe the performances. Locals riding jeepneys leaned out of the windows as their curiosity

was piqued by the gathering. By the time the parade reached the main road leading to the cathedral, which was wider, a loud siren emanating from an ambulance stuck in traffic could be heard. As the ambulance tried to navigate the road, the organizers signaled the congregation to halt the parade and make way for the ambulance to pass by. Everyone immediately returned to formation to continue the parade once the ambulance passed by. When all the performances were over, the children and their parents, as well as the band members, headed to a nearby fast-food restaurant to rest and dine. Dr. Santos notes that it was through the sponsorship and generosity of her sister that the supper was possible.

#### **Mediation and materializing the sacred**

Philippine culture and art scholar Nicanor Tiongson's (1983) landmark work, "Four Values in Filipino Drama and Film," discusses the value of "*Masaya ang May Palabas*" (Shows are the Best), which explains the Filipinos' obsession with "*bakbakan*" (quarrel), "*iyakan*" (simultaneous crying), "*sayawan*" (dancing), "*kantaban*" (singing), and "*tawanan*" (merriment). While Tiongson contextualizes these obsessions in terms of drama and film, they are also distinguishable in the conduct of Catholic rituals in the Philippines, particularly in public performances that occur in major festivities. Material objects in these rituals do not only become a conduit for the sacred to be felt, but they also add spectacle that triggers the sensibilities of Filipino devotees. The *Sayaw ng Pagbati* in Parañaque City and other towns in the Southern Tagalog Region is an example of what Tiongson notes *Masaya ang May Palabas*. In the context of folk Catholicism, this Easter dance ritual is the devotees' response to the story of Christ's resurrection in the gospel. While priests proclaim the good news of the resurrection in the pulpit, devotees translate the gladness they feel into both drama (*salubong*) and dance (*Sayaw ng Pagbati*).

Moreover, the tradition's connection with the written narrative of the resurrection in the gospel iterates Keane's (2013) idea on the materialities of language in spirit writing: "Writing lends itself to appropriation within activities that deal with the invisible world by virtue of the way in which it lends to language some of the properties common to physical artefacts." Meyer's (2008) concept of mediation and sensational forms is also helpful in understanding why *Sayaw ng Pagbati* remains a permanent fixture in the Easter celebration in Parañaque City. Through ritual objects such as flags and costumes, together with sacred images, choreographed movements, and the resonant sounds of music, the Easter dance ritual surrounds participants in a sensory environment that makes the sacred tangible and immediately perceptible to devotees. These are sensational forms that structure the devotees' sensibilities (e.g., sight, hearing, touch, movement) and allow the divine to feel immediate and actively present in their lives.

The gospel message of Christ's resurrection is continually expressed throughout Parañaque City's *Sayaw ng Pagbati*. The most important ritual objects are the two *andas* bearing the images of the Risen Christ and the Virgin Mary, which impose and resonate the theme of Easter (Picture 3). For the devotees, the two images allude to two important rituals in town: the *salubong*, which happens in the cathedral at dawn, and the performances of *Sayaw ng Pagbati* in various *barangays*. While the images belonging to the *barangays* can be categorized as smaller replicas, there are larger images exclusively used in the *salubong*. Despite this, the images owned by the *barangays* are visually present in both settings and convey a sense of hierophany during the dance parade. The author observed several ways in which the images were given proper veneration and spotlight during the ritual dance. Some devotees approached, prayed before the images, and touched them even before the street parade started. Furthermore, the images of the Risen Christ and the Virgin

Mary always come after the dancer. During the street performances, these images are gently swayed by men ferrying them as if joining the performers in their *sayawan* (dancing).

Picture 3. The most important ritual objects during *pagbati* are the statues of the Virgin Mary and the Resurrected Christ. Photo by Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo (2025).



Dr. Carabeo also points to an important component of the choreography, in which a specific step towards the end requires the dancers to face the image of the Risen Christ. The dancers also wave in salutation to the two images. He specifies, "the underpinning meaning is *yung greeting and well-wishing*" (the underpinning meaning is the greeting and well-wishing). While this pattern is noticeable in all dance troupes, other *barangays* inserted unique steps to highlight religious iconography. Bernadine explains that a "Tridentine sign" is a feature of San Dionisio's dance routine, which she also considers the hardest step, given the fast body coordination it requires. The Tridentine sign originates from the "Sign of the

Cross,” with the first three protruding fingers symbolizing the Holy Trinity (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit), and the remaining two signifying the two natures of Christ: divine and human (Agolia 2016). The feeling of gladness is conveyed not only through the dancers’ swift movements but also through their facial expressions. In Eloisa’s experience, the choreographers always remind the dancers to smile, as it signifies the feeling of “*galak*” (joy) in Christ’s resurrection from the dead.

The dancers’ costumes also contain religious connotations. In the contemporary period, there is a preference for white gowns. White iconography fills churches during the Easter season: the Risen Christ is depicted in white garments, and the Paschal candle, likewise, bears the same color. However, Dr. Carabeo explains that white costumes are not strictly traditional, since her sister, who performed for six years in the early 1970s, had yellow, orange, blue, and pink gowns. He notes that a preference for white gowns emerged in the late 1970s to early 1980s, when popular fashion designers such as Christian Espiritu, a certain Dandan, and Feliciano began creating gowns for the performers. In San Dionisio, Eloisa explains that the choreographers discuss the symbolism associated with the costumes. White is associated with the Virgin Mary, while the ribbon and veil symbolize the religious dimension of the event.

The conservative nature of the occasion, as imposed by Catholicism, also influences the costume. While the gowns are above or below the knee, a white stocking is required for the performers. “*Kailangan balot na balot pa din. Conservative*” (Everything should be covered. It must be conservative), Eloisa adds. An important element of the performers’ costumes is the flaglet, a 60-centimeter staff adorned with a white cloth, synthetic flowers, and ribbons. According to Anton, it signifies the resurrection banner of Christ, which alludes to His victory against sin and death.

### Obligation, reception, and identity

Religious events in the Philippines, particularly those commemorated by the Catholic Church, incur plenty of expenses. This paved the way for sponsorship systems to flourish in many localities in the archipelago. Evidence from studies on *santo* sponsorship (Tamayo 2020) and *bermano mayor* (Tamayo 2022) underscores the central role of individuals and families of considerable means. These people are obligated to sponsor the entirety or a portion of certain rituals to sustain them. Compared to the cited sponsorship systems, sustaining the *Sayaw ng Pagbati* is less costly; however, the practice remains considerably gentrified, as it continues to cater to a particular social class. In *Sayaw ng Pagbati*, this gentrification is highlighted by the material elements in the dance ritual, which are reliant on the financial capacity of the performers’ families. Hodder’s (2012) theory of entanglement supposes that both humans and things depend on each other. A thing can become a bridge that can be explored in terms of its usefulness and how it functions in “bringing different components together.” He adds that humans have various dependencies on things (e.g., physical, economic, social, psychological), which pose constraints and limits. In Parañaque City, the way locals devote time, labor, and resources to sustain the *Sayaw ng Pagbati* and its material forms shows a mutual dependence between the community and the ritual objects and, in turn, gives rise to particular obligations that, as per Hodder (2012), are bounded by rules, systems of management, and care. Morgan (2016) also points that the concept of reception can be the basis of material analysis, where forms of circulation offer evidence of an artefact’s appeal. From the interviews and observations gathered, it becomes clear that ritual objects actively shape how the Easter dance ritual continues to thrive in the contemporary period. Entanglement and reception create an identity, wherein participants and spectators recognize themselves as part of a community through ritual objects. Certainly, *Sayaw ng*

*Pagbati* is not merely a spiritual practice, but also a social contract that is sustained materially.

The author's field notes reveal that most children perform for several years. Once the parents enlist their children, both are subjected to specific obligations. Parents are obligated to finance the expenses, particularly the costumes, while their children are expected to attend the practices and participate in actual performances on Easter Sunday. More than anything, the costume is a crucial element that exemplifies both constraints and reception (Picture 4). Since *Sayaw ng Pagbati* is performed annually, costumes are commissioned from the *barangay's* chosen couturier. The performers or the parents must take care of the costumes. As long as the costumes fit the performers, they can be reused, as in the case of Abigail, who wore the same set for four consecutive years. The choreographers in San Dionisio and Bernadine elaborate on how the costume can become a form of constraint. They recount an instance before the declaration of quarantine protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic, wherein the organizers had already commissioned costumes for the performers. However, since all forms of gathering, including religious activities, were prohibited, the costumes were unused. Two years later, when Easter activities were allowed, the costumes were already unusable, as the performers had outgrown them. The expenses doubled for the parents as they commissioned new ones and ballet shoes for their children. In contrast, Eloisa shares how the costumes successfully depict the concept of reception, which paves the way for the tradition to survive and continuously attract the younger generation. She admits that her motivation to join the dance tradition when she was a child was her desire to wear a gown. Surprisingly, the same reason became the driving force for her daughter to become a performer. She recalls in verbatim what her daughter said, "Mommy, ang gaganda ng gown! Gusto ko magsuot ng ganun. Isali mo ako" (Mommy, the gowns are

beautiful! I also want to wear one of those. Let me join).

Picture 4. The *pagbati* dancers wear elaborate costumes that match the mood of the occasion. Photo by Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo (2025).



The music used in *Sayaw ng Pagbati* is another component that also mirrors the reception. Dr. Carabeo explains that the music has taken a life of its own. There are times when it is hard to get a band to play the music because all of them are booked. As the musical composition is easy to learn, it leads some communities to study the music. In addition, the music has been incorporated into another local tradition, *komedya* (play). There is a section in *komedya* that features a *balse* (waltz) in front of the king, where the music in the *Sayaw ng Pagbati* is played. Given the costumes and festive music used in the Easter dance ritual, these have become potent symbols in Parañaque City. Andre emphasizes that it is part of the city's cultural fabric: "Pag sinabi mong bati, Parañaque kaagad. At pag sinabi mong bati sa Parañaque, ibig sabihin nun Easter" (When you say *bati*,

it recalls Parañaque. And when you say *bati* in Parañaque, it means Easter). While other towns in the Southern Tagalog Region have their own renditions, he maintains that Parañaque's version will always be part of the choices. The local government came to recognize the significance of this Easter tradition and eventually assumed responsibility for its preservation. Aside from inscribing it in the tourism calendar, it is now maximized to promote tourism in the city. Dr. Carabeo notes that City Hall produces dolls modeled after the performers, which are both exhibited and sold. The local government also invites all the dance troupes to perform *Sayaw ng Pagbati* during the celebration of the City Charter every February.

### Prestige goods and social markers

The previous section showed that *Sayaw ng Pagbati* functions as a form of sponsorship that appeals to a particular social class. While the tradition is open to any children who want to perform, the financial investment of parents, the elaborate costumes, and accessories are clearly markers of prestige. Barretto (2003) indicates that the prestige value of a cultural object depends on several factors, including the raw material, its source, the time and energy required for its creation and procurement, and its cultural meaning. She adds that the value ascribed by society to cultural objects is dependent on what it perceives as “worthy, desirable, and important.” Within Parañaque's Easter dance ritual, the costumes and accessories function as non-utilitarian objects whose prestige value arises not only from their ornate design but also from the difficulty of acquiring them. Moreover, Coo (2017) reinforces the idea that clothing is a marker of status. Clothing communicates one's class, ethnicity, and sophistication. It can also be manipulated to express identity, devotion, and respectability. Through their costumes and accessories, the performers in *Sayaw ng Pagbati* become ritual actors, which sets them apart from spectators. Coo

also indicates that the perceptions of beauty during the Spanish colonial period were strongly influenced by “white supremacy,” wherein beauty was “associated with the fair skin and sharp features of the Spanish and Europeans.” As the following discussion illustrates, this perception continues to influence Filipinos' standard of beauty, a phenomenon that is clearly observable in the practices of Parañaque's Easter dance ritual. Barretto's (2003) notions on prestige goods and Coo's (2017) assertions on clothing and fair skin as a social marker position the material culture in *Sayaw ng Pagbati* as an indicator of communal and religious identity. The costumes and accessories are not merely decorative; they are active symbols of prestige, devotion, and social status.

*Picture 5. As the procession navigates the streets of the barangay, the dancers' costumes offer a stark contrast to the surroundings.*



Anton shares that one set of costumes, including the gown, accessories, and flaglets, costs PHP5,000 (USD85.93). All barangays, except San Dionisio,

commission their costumes from Alex Borja, a local fashion designer based in Don Galo. In San Dionisio, parents pay PHP5,500 (USD94.52) for the same set of costumes. According to Dr. Santos, they order these costumes from Edward Teng, a couturier whose atelier is based in Sampaloc, Manila (Figure 5). She notes that, beginning next year, the cost of the costumes will rise because of increasing raw material prices, a change that may affect how performers and their families plan and participate in the ritual. The participation of local couturiers adds to the prestige of the Easter dance ritual. It also resonates an air of exclusivity among the community's elites. In the case of La Huerta, Dr. Carabeo explains that most families in the neighborhood are affluent and can afford to commission gowns every year. Performers with fewer resources may be perceived as "*kamawa*" (pitiful) if they are unable to secure gowns from the period's reputable designers. This highlights the social nuances embedded in the ritual. To curb such social perception, the parish priest in the late 1970s decided to standardize the color of the costumes. All dance troupes were mandated to wear white costumes from then on. Despite this mandate, the perception of the dance ritual's exclusivity persists, as many performers come from families of doctors, engineers, and other prominent professions.

Several respondents re-count local social behavior. They note that the townsfolk of the city are unreserved in expressing their thoughts. Derogatory remarks are abundant and infiltrate even in *Sayaw ng Pagbati*. Most of these degrading remarks refer to the skin color of the performers, which proves that locals still perceive a fair complexion as something beautiful. Eloisa recalls an instance when two elderly women remarked on her daughter during a practice. One of them said, "*Ay ano ba yan! Bat napasali yan ang itim-itim naman?*" (Oh, what's that! How did she get included when she's so dark?). When Eloisa confronted them, one of the ladies stressed, "*Ay nako hija kung hindi ka mapuna, hindi ka taga Parañaque*" (Oh

my, daughter, if you don't notice these things, you're not really from Parañaque). Dr. Carabeo also shares that there is a derogatory term in La Huerta called "*rosas ibayo*." *Rosas* means fuchsia pink, and *ibayo* refers to the outskirts. People usually say this in reference to other locals who live outside the *población* (city center). In particular, well-to-do individuals make this remark when they see a performer from the *ibayo* with a darker complexion wearing a bright fuchsia pink gown.

### Conclusion

The *Sayaw ng Pagbati* of Parañaque City illustrates the vibrant heritage of Philippine folk Catholicism. It is not a static cultural tradition, but a dynamic practice that is continuously reshaped through its material forms. This study employed material culture as an analytical lens to demonstrate how ritual objects (e.g., costumes, props, music, choreography) are not peripheral embellishments. They constitute several elements: religious meaning, communal identity, and social prestige. Meyer's (2008) concept of "sensational forms" is actively present in the Easter dance ritual. They aid in structuring sensory experience and mediating the sacred to the community. The sacredness of the occasion and the divine presence of the Risen Christ and the Virgin Mary become recognizable to the locals through the waving of flags, elaborate costumes, festive music, and symbol-laden choreography. This idea connects with Keane's (2013) concept of "spirit writing," wherein a text, in this case the story of Christ's resurrection in the gospels, has been reinterpreted. Ritual objects are part of this reinterpretation that binds the performers and the audiences in a shared religious atmosphere.

Hodder's (2012) theory of entanglement is also observable in *Sayaw ng Pagbati*. The dependency between humans and things in the ritual is clearly apparent. Obligations permeate the practice, which require parents to shoulder the expenses in line with the costumes, and in turn, obliging the children to

perform for several years. By imposing obligations, it facilitates the shaping of social behavior, the perpetuation of communal memory, and ensures the transmission of the Easter dance ritual across generations. While the respondents are motivated by *panata* or the allure of wearing a gown, their Narratives exemplify that the obligations they carry are both material and social in nature. In terms of reception, Morgan's (2016) concept depicts how the community reinterprets and revalues the ritual objects. This is exemplified by how future participants aspire to wear costumes, how the music gains life of its own beyond the ritual, and how devotees venerate the images of the Risen Christ and the Virgin Mary. Such forms of reception ensure that the ritual remains relevant in contemporary religious life, which continually renews its symbolic force each Easter.

The material culture in *Sayaw ng Pagbati* also aligns with the framework of prestige and social status. Through Tesoro's (2003) analysis of prestige goods and Coo's (2017) study on clothing, this article reveals that costumes and accessories function as markers of wealth, devotion, and social standing in the community. The respondents' narratives demonstrate how costumes can become an indicator of social belonging. It also reinforces boundaries between insiders and outsiders, as well as between participants and spectators, and between the affluent and families from modest means. The study also highlights the significance of local couturiers. Their craft elevates the status of the costumes into prestige goods. Moreover, these ritual objects also indicate the ongoing contesting and negotiating of identity. Despite issues of exclusivity among members of the local elite, the expanding involvement of performers from various social classes makes the Easter dance ritual culturally relevant. *Sayaw ng Pagbati* has also become a source of local pride in Parañaque City. As the local government recognizes it as a cultural heritage and promotes the tradition as part of its tourism calendar, this institutionalization

highlights the dual character of the Easter dance ritual: it is both a religious expression and a cultural symbol.

As this study reveals, material culture has the power to shape religious and social life. Reflecting on how *Sayaw ng Pagbati* materializes the sacred, entangles performers and their families in cycles of obligation, and signifies prestige and social status, the author affirms that folk Catholicism in the Philippines is not only a spiritual experience but something embodied, mediated, and sustained through ritual objects. While this Easter dance ritual commemorates Christ's resurrection, it is also a celebration of the local community's ongoing redefinition of faith, identity, and social bonds, which are expressed through its material culture. The sacred then becomes tangible to all devotees from diverse backgrounds.

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