

Philippine Urban Rituals Amidst Calender Change

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Abstract: Changes in the academic calendar have been implemented in a number of higher education institutions in the Philippines. The most obvious and pragmatic motivation for the move for change was the difficulty that students face in school during the rainy season, such as cancellation of classes during heavy rainfall events, floods, and typhoons. Additionally, there was the issue on the educational standard in the country, and the need for its educational institutions to participate much more globally, especially when it comes to foreign exchanges and scholarship grants. The decision is said though to be primarily a scholarly move, an attempt to improve its academic ranking, as well as an attempt to foster ASEAN collaboration.

This study shows the consequences of these changes on the performance of rituals – both sacred and secular – particularly in urban areas where most of the country's premiere universities are located. The cessation or continuous pursuit of the conduct of these rituals will be discussed and analyzed to reveal individual and community valuation. Factors in the innovative conduct of some of these rituals will also be discussed.

Keywords: academic calendar, calendric ritual, Flores de Mayo, Misa de Gallo, Nuestra Senora de Buenviajo, Simbang Gabi.

1. Introduction

Calendrical rites are ritual events marking particular times of a year or annual cycle. These rites or rituals are fixed periods that mark important events within the year. Calendrical rites give social meaning to the passage of time – one whole

year – creating repetitive weekly, monthly or annual cycles. Some of these rites are oriented towards seasonal changes and, thus, may be fixed or scheduled by the observance of either the solar or lunar calendar. The rites fixed by the solar calendar fall on the same day each year (such as New Year's Day which obviously falls on the first day of January), while the rites observed using the lunar calendar fall on different dates each year (such as the Chinese New Year or the Islamic Ramadhan which are scheduled based on the physical sighting of the moon).

Parallel to this discussion of calendrical rites, we have the academic calendar (observed in educational and training institutions or centers) which is unique in the sense that, although it follows the solar calendar, it does not have a fixed start. In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 4116 (enacted 20 June 1964) set a school calendar of not less than forty weeks (or 200 days on a 5 day a week class schedule) (Philippines 1964). While on August 25, 1994, the Philippine Congress enacted Republic Act No. 7797, which lengthened the school calendar “from 200 days to not more than 220 days” (Section 1) and which set the start of the school year “on the first Monday of June but not later than the last day of August” (Section 3) (Philippines 1994).

The Philippine academic calendar does not have a definite end because it may be extended when a particular semester experiences days of class cancelations due to typhoons and other calamities, or when the country or a particular city hosts an international event of major importance (e.g. in November 2017, when the Philippines hosted the 31st Summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, classes in all levels were suspended for two days in Metro Manila (region which consists of 16 cities and 1 municipality).

A move to change the academic calendar in the Philippines was expressed due to a number of reasons: the most obvious and pragmatic motivation was the difficulty students faced during the rainy season, such as cancellation of classes during heavy rainfall events, floods, and typhoons. Additionally, there was the issue on the educational standard in the country, and the need for its educational institutions to participate much more globally, especially when it comes to foreign exchanges and scholarship grants (Navarrete, 2015).

The academic calendar shift was finally implemented in 2014, aligning the Philippine educational system with universities in Southeast and Northeast Asia, America, and Europe. This also manifested the country's pursuit for economic integration with the ASEAN region. The integration would allow for more international scholarships for Filipino students, as well as an overall higher standard of education – one that can be at par with the global standard. In addition to the general potential effect of the program, it had been argued that the shift is truly pro-Philippines, in that it “can create globally competitive professionals who could help the country develop and progress” (Academic calendar 2014).

Although the legislative act proposed in 2014 did not materialize at first, some universities, namely the University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University, De la Salle University, and University of Santo Tomas, decided to implement a new academic calendar in order to enable more flexible participation of students in exchange programs and eventually promote their global competitiveness. These institutions are the so-called “Big Four” universities of the country. The trend has caught on since, with a total of 34 universities and colleges adopting the August to May calendar by 2017 (Luci-Atienza 2017).

2. Objective

This study shows the consequences of the changes in the academic calendar on the performance of rituals – both sacred and secular - particularly in urban areas where most of the country’s premiere universities are located. The cessation or continuous pursuit of the conduct of these rituals are discussed and analyzed to reveal individual and community valuation.

3. Methodology

To collect data, interviews were conducted and questionnaires regarding their views on the new academic calendar were distributed to students, faculty, and staff in the University of the Philippines Manila (UP Manila) Data from the UP Manila populace were examined in conjunction with data coming from local and international studies. Continuity, accommodation or the cessation of the practice of rituals were then analyzed and viewed in pursuit of possible secularized manifestations of rituals.

4. Results

4.1 Sacred or Religious Rituals

An offshoot of more than three centuries of Spanish colonization, the Philippines is one of the only two predominantly Roman Catholic nations in Asia (the other being East Timor). It ranks fifth in the list of countries worldwide with the greatest number of Catholics and has been projected to rank fourth by 2050. According to the 2010 census of the Philippine National Statistics Office, an estimated 90.1% of Filipinos are Christians; 80.6% of whom are Roman Catholics (Philippine National Statistics Office 2010).

Philippine history is riddled with numerous accounts of revolt primarily

due to local and colonial socio-economic and political conditions, not the practice of Christianity itself. This is reflected in a unique academic calendar followed by most schools, colleges, and universities in the Philippines which allots and allows the longest time for both preparation and celebration of two Christian feasts most important to Filipinos: Christmas and Easter Sunday. Dr. Bernadette Abre-ra, former Chairperson of the Department of History in the University of the Philippines Diliman, wrote that historically, the basis for academic breaks in the Philippines have been economic practice, comfort of students, and cultural practice, and indeed, a lot of these are anchored on rituals which follow the Christian liturgical calendar (Abrera 2018).



Fig. 1: A shopping mall in the UP Town Center with Christmas decor and lights on the 1st Sunday of November, 2022. Photo: Honey Libertine Achanzar-Labor.

Christmas Celebration

It is said that the Philippines celebrate Christmas the longest. As early as September, Christmas decors already appear for sale in a number of city malls, Christmas songs are played on some radio stations, and on-line reservations of possible gifts for Christmas are already marketed. As early as October, some Filipinos are actually done buying Christmas gifts, since the tradition of Christmas *tertulias* (parties) and exchange of gifts starts as early as the second half of November. Besides, the

shopping malls at Divisoria, the commercial center in Manila, known for shops that sell low-priced goods, already get unbearably crowded with people by November. Shopping during the months of November and December in Divisoria should in fact be avoided, when possible. Although an average of 600,000 people go there daily, according to the Manila Police District, almost 1 million shoppers were recorded in Divisoria in November 2017; this number is usually sustained until December (Badilla 2016).

Although the season of Advent has been established by the Catholic Church as the period of preparation for Christmas, a devotional nine-day series of masses are practiced by Roman Catholics in the Philippines in anticipation of Christmas Day and to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary. These Night Masses (*Simbang Gabi*) in the Philippines are held daily from December 16 to 24 and occur at different times, ranging from as early as 3:00 to 5:00 in the morning. Despite its apparent untimeliness, the churches are filled with people. In fact, it is customary for Filipinos to bring stools to church aware that getting a seat inside is uncertain.

The entirety of Holy Week, on the other hand, which used to take place at the end of the academic calendar, marks the start of the two-month long summer break. Students and professionals working in academia have now the luxury of time, devoting the entire week to the preparation and participation in Holy Week liturgical events. Since the Holy Week can be spent anywhere, some Filipinos take the opportunity to leave the urban areas or even the country during this period. There is also time to do the traditional *Visita Iglesia*, the practice of visiting seven churches on the evening of Maundy Thursday. In the case of the Philippines, there is the option to do the *visita* during Good Friday and recite the Stations of the Cross, or even on any other day(s) of the Holy Week when groups take the *visita* as an opportunity for sightseeing, either to visit churches that have not been seen before, or to focus on a particular province of interest, where several churches can be visited. Two stations are recited in each church if the goal is just to visit seven churches, or one station per church if fourteen churches are aimed for.

The Holy Week in the Philippines culminates with the *salubong*, or pre-dawn reenactment of the encounter of the risen Christ with his Mother on Easter morning. This event is said to be most theatrical in the Philippines, where a young girl clothed as an angel in white is strapped to a contraption to make her appear to hover in midair, and instructed to sing the *Regina Coeli*, as she is lowered towards Mary's statue. With confetti falling all around her, she unveils Mary's black headpiece. Participants join in the celebration of the Resurrection and the end of Mary's sorrow through the liturgy.

Christmas in the New Academic Calendar

In the old academic calendar, semestral breaks happen between October and November. When the students come back, they enroll for the second semester and attend school for around one more month before having their Christmas break – typically starting a week prior to Christmas day (25 December). School resumes as soon as the last of the official holidays for the season have ended. The students usually go back to school as early as the first week of January.

Philippine schools and universities that have adopted the new calendar provide their students and staff a longer and uninterrupted Christmas break, as this coincides now with the semester break. Because Filipinos are accustomed to begin to celebrate Christmas very early, the academic calendar shift is actually seen as a beneficial thing in this sense (Casal 2017). The new academic calendar will allow schools to merge the semester and Christmas breaks together, creating a new, month-long Christmas holiday for students and teachers. Christian families may now complete the *Simbang Gabi* – a tradition of celebrating mass at midnight for nine straight days –, passing on the significance of the tradition to the younger generation. More time with the family also means more opportunities to venture out and take part in many activities such as travel and shopping, a benefit to both big businesses and small, private ones. Most importantly, it has an impact on the calendar shift that had not been mentioned in most discourses prior to its implementation (Lacuata 2016).



Fig. 2: Family clan reunion during Christmas season, December 2022.
Photo: Honey Libertine Achanzar-Labor.

The earlier start of the Christmas break has challenged a number of rituals carried out within the urban university setting. Among these are the traditional Christmas lantern parade and the lighting of university buildings, carried out at the start of the Christmas break to officially welcome the season in the university. These used to take place merely a week before Christmas, but will be too early now, after the calendric change.

The Holy Week in the New Academic Calendar

Since it used to mark the start of the summer break, Holy Week in the Philippines is a yearly celebration, when Filipinos travel en masse to their home provinces for a long vacation. The week begins on Palm Sunday (usually around mid-April) when Catholics carry woven palm fronds to be blessed by the priest. Weaving palm fronds for Palm Sunday is actually a very lucrative job to have around this time which is usually done by entire families. The Easter exodus starts straight after the blessing of fronds. Prior to the calendar shift, students would have already been on their summer break, and in order to maximize their time with the younger ones, many members of the workforce take extra time off work to enjoy a weeklong vacation. Holy or Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are national holidays, but many companies also give employees Wednesday off, although Holy Monday and Tuesday are almost never considered. Maundy is when Catholics observe the last Mass before Easter or the Institution of the Lord's Supper. Priests also renew their sacerdotal vows in an elaborate ceremony that attracts thousands. The washing of the feet of the apostles is re-enacted in many churches, followed by the procession of the Blessed Sacrament to the "Altar of Repose". The traditional *Visita Iglesia*, or church visit, starts after Maundy Thursday rituals. People visit several churches around town, supposedly to meditate on the Way of the Cross (Torres, 2016).

The Holy week – a time for reflection, commemoration, but also togetherness with the family – will have to be celebrated within the second semester of the new academic year, meaning that schools will have to provide off-time to their staff and students outside of term break. Typically, schools will begin the official Holy Week break on Maundy Thursday, giving students and employees a total of only four straight days to celebrate the holiday. As a result, many workers in the education sector do not have the luxury of taking time off early due to the fact that students are still in school. This gives them less time for their families, and the same goes with the students as well. In universities, there is a particular issue with dormitory and boarding house policies that prohibit residents from signing out for vacation early lest they be given a misdemeanor, hurting their chances to acquire a spot in the dorm in the future. Since many students cannot afford better housing, most opt not to leave early, resulting in them missing out on the holiday with their families.

Perhaps the most disheartening effect of the calendar shift, on the family rituals during the Holy Week, is the type of activities families end up doing due to the short vacation time they have. Less time is spent (especially among city folk) on going to mass and conducting traditional activities, such as the *Visita Iglesia*. Many families would rather spend time going out and participating in other forms of entertainment with their children (which was originally done during Holy Monday and Tuesday) in order to make the best out of the limited time (Torres & Torres 2016). With this trend, there is potential risk of many of the Holy Week traditions eventually dying out, at the very least in urbanized areas.

Flores de Mayo in the New Academic Calendar

Characterized as the “Queen of Philippine Festivals,” the *Flores de Mayo* (Engl. “May Flowers”) is a Marian festival held in the Philippines in the month of May, the month dedicated to Mary, the mother of Christ. The traditional feast is marked by a 9-day or *novena* prayer and a month-long daily offering of flowers to the image of Mary at the altar in the church. Flowers and petals are either sprinkled while walking to the altar, or bouquets of flowers are brought and offered. The celebration comes to an end on the 31st of May with a grand procession of the Holy Cross widely recognized as the *Santacruz*.



Fig. 3: Flores de Mayo with a twist, a parade of Philippine endemic flowers. May 2018.
Photo: Honey Libertine Achanzar-Labor.

The fact that this festival continues to be celebrated has a lot to do with the old academic calendar, which presents all the reason to celebrate the month of May, as

this signifies the start of the two-month long summer break. It is the month when most flowers in the Philippines are in bloom; it is the month when beaches which abound in the Philippine archipelago are most welcoming; it is the month when the greatest number of feasts and festivals take place in the Philippines. In fact, in the province of Bohol, one may be invited daily as a house guest for lunch or dinner, as long as one have at hand the schedule of the town *fiestas*. It is also therefore the month when families allot time to bond and rekindle family ties.

Slowly, more and more universities will be shifting to the new academic calendar wherein classes will be held in the entirety of May. Attempts to incorporate the Flores de Mayo celebration have been made by some school organizations. The sustainability of the celebration of the festivity will greatly depend on this inclusion in the academic calendar.



Fig. 4: Poster for the 2023 Flores de Mayo Festival and Conference organized by the Faura Project with the University of the Philippines Manila.

4.2 Secular Rituals

There are also some rituals that are not connected to the Christian liturgy. Secular rituals included in this study are those related to the agricultural practice, annual summer family reunions, as well as rituals related to the opening of classes and the start of the new academic calendar itself.

With summer vacation moved from April and May to July and August, students in the agricultural sector will actually have more time to assist in the farm during harvest season which, in the Philippines, is during the months of June, July, and August (Behance 2018). This not only increases the amount of hands available to help, but it also gives more time for family members to bond. In contrast, it is also an issue come sowing season, which usually starts around May. Agricultural production may be affected by the new academic calendar, as some students may choose to help out in the farms rather than go to school (Lacuata 2016). Moving the start of classes will also mean students, especially in farming communities, might not be able to afford to go to school because of the conflict with the agricultural calendar (de Santos 2014).

On the other hand, it has been a ritual for students studying in the urban centers to go home to their hometowns during summer time. And as the Philippines is archipelagic, it is routine for them to spend some time at the beach during this period for their much-needed break and relaxation. Logically, it is also around this time that Filipino families schedule their family reunions.

5. Discussion

Accommodation of Rituals within the Academic Semester

Since Christmas break usually takes place just a week before Christmas, various forms of celebrating the Christmas season have been accommodated in the Philippine academic calendar. The most established may be the ceremonial lighting of building facades, as well as the competitive parade of lanterns at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, the conduct of which is always made a part of national news coverage. Even long after graduation, it has been a custom for some people to spend a night at one of the sprawling campuses of the University of the Philippines to watch the parade of multi-themed Christmas lanterns as they sample different types of street food; this also marks their last activity of the year in campus. Also scheduled throughout the Christmas season are free Christmas concerts to carol the members of the academic community; this is usually open to the public as well.

Common to many academic institutions are multiple Christmas parties organized at different levels, wherein members of the teaching staff are enjoined to

attend a Christmas party organized for his/her assigned class, another one organized for his/her school department, another at the college level, and in the case of universities, another one at that level. The expense for these parties is sometimes shouldered by the academic institution, but oftentimes, the ones who attend are asked to share in the expense.

The ritual of exchanging gifts is carried out in some of these parties. A simple way of exchanging gifts is to take a gift, the cost of which is agreed to in advance by participants, to the Christmas party. Each gift is numbered and raffled off during the party. This tradition has been sustained since it removes the expectation of receiving a gift from each one of your friends, thus lowering one's holiday expense.

Another version of giving gifts during the Christmas season is the Kris Kringle. This is most often done among classmates, office mates, or among a group of friends. It slightly differs from the usual exchanging gifts because one knows in advance to whom a gift will be given during the group's Christmas party. A small gift is given to the Monito or Monita¹ each day, if the activity is done close to the Christmas break, or once weekly if this is done on the first week of December.

However, the new academic calendar in the Philippines has made December the end of the first semester. Although classes in the University of the Philippines now end in the first week of December, final exams are scheduled for the following week. The Lantern Parade is set on the last day of the final exams..

With the Christmas rush, together with all the activities Filipinos have traditionally taken part in during the Christmas season, the scheduling of final examinations in the middle of the season can be stressful and disconcerting. Many students are also tasked to make Christmas lanterns and ornaments and are part of rehearsals for Christmas themed productions adding additional stress. Many school teachers and university professors find it difficult to get into the Christmas mood when their minds are still on the piles of paper they need to check and final grades that need to be computed.

Accommodation of Rituals Outside the Academic Semester

Unlike Christmas, the Flores de Mayo - as an event in schools and universities - has never been accommodated in the regular semester since this used to take place during summer break. But universities that have opted for the change in their

¹ In the Philippines, Secret Santa is also known as *Monito Monita*, or *Manito Manita*. This is a tradition of gift exchange that finds its roots in early Christmas traditions. The original *manitos* or *manitas* were the gift-bearing helpers of St. Nicholas. The said tradition requires everyone to write their names on strips of paper which would be individually "raffled" to everyone involved. The title "manito" is given to a male gift recipient, with "manita" being its female equivalent.

academic calendar, classes on the month of May have generally prevented student participation to the said event.

To address this concern, Project Faura² incorporated in its campaign to conserve heritage, a week-long event called *Flores de Mayo: Endemic Flowers in the Philippines* last May 2018. Right along Padre Faura Street, where the Manila campus of the University of the Philippines is located, images of flowers endemic to the Philippines were paraded by a number of UP students. The parade culminated at the UP Manila Museum of a History of Ideas, with a lecture and painting exhibit on the theme of endemic flowers. The activity sparked much interest and was covered and aired by CNN Philippines on national television. Project Faura intends to make this a yearly event, and to accommodate this in the academic calendar.

The change is most beneficial when the conduct of a ritual is made more conscious, deliberate, and not just done out of routine. Although the rites of the Holy Week remain a sacred and essential aspect of worship for most Catholic families in the Philippines, it has been become quite common for Filipinos to schedule out of town vacations during Holy Week. Since the Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country, there is a church in practically every town, thus allowing everyone to attend the Paschal Triduum, the three days that begin with the liturgy on the evening of Maundy Thursday. It reaches its high point in the Easter Vigil, and closes with evening prayer on Easter Sunday. Unfortunately, and perhaps a consequence of the latter practice, the attendance to the Triduum has become a routine for some. Since only two days of the Holy Week are now declared as national holidays – Holy Thursday and Friday – the attendance of rites may be more deliberate and made more significant.

Ironically, despite the prolonged Christmas break, confirmation of practices related to the season of Christmas needs to be also affirmed as one encounters members of the teaching faculty who complain of “no longer having Christmas breaks” since this is spent checking papers and working on student grades at the end of the semester. Again, owning the moments of preparation for Christmas break can be done and needs to be done through basic planning and setting of individual deadlines.

Alternative family traditions: this should not be a problem in the Philippines now, since several indoor sports and wellness facilities have been built in the past decade – from gyms, to archery arcades, dance studios, and wellness centers. Since

² The Faura Project is an organization of faculty, students, and alumni of the University of the Philippines Manila that aims to position Padre Faura Street as a heritage zone. The group magnifies long-overlooked issues across fields through weeklong events that focus on heritage conservation and other related issues along the street and its environs that are taken for granted. At the core of the project is the awareness that promotion of heritage can be best undertaken if its culture-bearers increase their awareness of heritage and thus, pride of place.

the Philippines is archipelagic, nearby beaches can be visited on weekends even during the regular semesters of the new academic calendar. However, gone are the days when families could linger on these beaches during the two-month long summer breaks.

6. Conclusion

Calendric rituals serve to simplify the chaos of life and impose a more or less coherent system of categories of meaning onto it (Bell, 1997). Although the change in the academic calendar has posed problems for the conduct of some rituals, reconfiguration of these rituals has been accomplished by means of accommodation, simplification of form (focused on the essential), and/or alternation of ritual.

1. *Accommodation and simplification of form.* In the course of using the old academic calendar, several Christmas rituals have been accommodated and made more complex and elaborate. All these need to be simplified in the new calendar; perhaps one Christmas party in the workplace would suffice, although since Filipinos are highly festive people, this will most likely not happen.

On the other hand, rituals which did not used to be acknowledged in the old academic calendar might have to be accommodated now. The Flores de Mayo may be a means not only of fostering a Marian devotion, but also the importance of the preservation of endemic flowers, which used to grow in abundance in the month of May. A campaign to raise awareness on the existence of these flowers is now much needed in an age when imported flowers are made more accessible in flower shops.

2. *Alternation.* Two-month long summer breaks used to be accommodated in the old academic calendar. The intense summer heat has made visits to public beaches or private resorts customary for Filipino families who make sure that this is scheduled accordingly, right before the months of unpredictable rainy season that usually begins in the month of June. These visits to the beach are considered essential summer rituals and are often times the venue for annual family reunions. Unfortunately, as June now marks the start of the term break in the new academic calendar, visits to the beach and family reunions have to be scheduled during summer weekend breaks, which should not be difficult to do since the Philippines is archipelagic and beach resorts will always be accessible.

As in the old academic calendar, classes start in the month of June, the school year begins with the celebration of the country's independence from under the colonial rule. Philippine Independence Day is celebrated on June 12. Classes usually start after this, but occasionally, this takes place a few days before the opening. Independence Day is always celebrated in school as this serves as a perfect teaching tool for instilling patriotism and love for the country. With the new academic calendar that starts in August, this will no longer be done. And for a country that

has gained independence only after World War 2, rituals which instill patriotism, and which foster national pride are still necessary. The government may need to be more conscious of this and make use of media as an alternative venue of instruction. A campaign in which individual families foster patriotism and national pride can and should be carried out since Philippine law in fact requires it. What is wanting is the stricter implementation of law, starting with the simple act of putting a flag on every edifice during Independence Day.

3. This study shows that the change in the academic calendar has consequences on the performance of both sacred and secular rituals, particularly in the urban areas where most of the country's premiere universities are located. Furthermore, the cessation or continuous pursuit of the conduct of these rituals reveals valuation. Rituals of utmost value to Filipinos are reconfirmed either through the confirmation of essential aspects of old rituals or through the accommodation of new ones. The innovative conduct of some of these rituals has also been shown and suggested. It has also been suggested that rituals which could no longer be incorporated in the new academic calendar be supported through other means and promoted by media and individual families themselves.

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Bibliographical Note

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