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Testimony and music as vehicles for the construction of identity and the displacement of power

Jeremy IANNI – Panel 8, Oct 22, 2023

Good morning,

My name is Jérémy IANNI and I'm a doctoral student in Education Sciences in the Paris 8 University. I'm also an associate doctoral student at the Institute of Research for Contemporary Southeast Asia or IRASEC. I would like to thank you so much for giving me this space to share a part of my work with you today. Unfortunately, I am not able to attend on site, it's because I live in the Philippines. I would also like to thank the organizers of this conference for their remarkable work.

I've been involved in this research for the past 4 years. Maybe, you're wondering how a study in Education Sciences can make sense to study religious practices in the contemporary context. Religious practices are likely to trigger and induce changes on several levels: existential with the way new believers will make sense of their own past and present experiences. From the self-narrative point of view, it also creates many changes (Dubar, Fer). As I study the switch from Catholicism to a Born Again denomination in the Philippines, the conversion is an intense time of changes in many aspects. Newly converted people have to adopt new practices, find their marks in a different leadership system. All these changes can be seen as reconfigurations and new socializations from a sociological point of view. From an education point of view, these transformations are sources of new learning, new converted people are to join trainings, adopts new practices, under the gaze and the guidance of a new master. Therefore, education as a multi-referential point of view is relevant to study conversion.

In my university, the department of Education I'm involved with was co-funded by Gilles Deleuze. It has therefore a strong opening to multi-referentiality and invoking several points of view, among other philosophy, socio-history, anthropology, and sociology, in my case applied to study the conversion. Sociology can bring a unique view on studying the new socializations. But as we know, the reality is not only social but also sensitive and subjective. Philosophy is also one of my reference disciplines, especially the study of the scheme of conversion, founded by Augustin, and metamorphosis, founded by the first humanism. In one hand, conversion and its radicality will lead the self to adjust to a transcendental and external truth. In the other hand,

metamorphosis will base its ontology on the personal experience which can be source of learning and transformation. The radicality of conversion, in Augustin's framework, will tend to set aside the personal experience (especially the child one). Thus, the educational project of Melanchthon during reformation was inspired by **stoicism** and can be qualified as neo-**stoicism**, and led to the Bildung theory in Germany. From an educational perspective, this is the end of the radicality of the conversion and the reintroduction of the personal experience. We'll see later that it's not really the case with the Born Again denomination I study as the experience is likely to be used by the leaders to justify their theology and that self-education has been abandoned. I hope I was able to convince you about the importance of the Education Sciences view to study religion, not only as a social reality but also as the expression of a subjectivity that cannot be explained nor rationalized with any framework. Thus, my epistemological view is :

1) to recognize the plurality of epistemological paradigm and not to impose the Western epistemology, in the line with Boaventura de Sousa Santos work. I strongly believe that intercultural translation of concepts does not function without acknowledging a plurality of epistemology.

2) to not consider the reality only as a social reality, but also as a sensitive, sensible reality, in line with phenomenological Maurice Merleau-Ponty's epistemology and flesh philosophy or more recent anthropological work such François Laplantine or in Education Sciences Martine Morisse. She argues that it's precisely our capacity to reveal each other's singularities in our field experience, through interrelations, who is a vector to produce a sharable knowledge. I'm not talking about a field work, but a field experience.

3) to not try to explain everything and to conceptualize everything, in the line of the **vagueness** logic of Pierce or the Right of Opacity of Édouard Glissant.

4) to acknowledge the epistemological violences in line with ethnography practices in line with See's recent work in the Philippines. She argues that the fact to try to accumulate knowledge for the sake of protecting people's culture is likely to be interpreted as an accumulation from a Marxist perspective, which leads to a dispossession of culture.

I've lived in the Philippines for the past 10 years, and I've learnt how to speak Tagalog. I arrived here as an international volunteer, then I decided to stay. I worked in a call-center, and I came

back to school 5 years ago. I graduated my master's in education sciences, and I did my research about the War on Drugs under Rodrigo Duterte's administration. It was raised to my attention that this war on drug was supported and waged by several evangelical groups, especially through the intervention of two Senators to reestablish the death penalty. The War on Drugs [*Laban sa droga*] is a disciplinary campaign [*Disiplina Muna*] launched by the Filipino government in June 2016. This campaign's aims were to identify people suffering from addiction, place them under surveillance and prevent them from using narcotics. Although he was already President of the Philippine, Rodrigo Duterte did not hesitate to compare his plan to put an end to drugs with the Holocaust. During the 2016 parliamentary debates, Manny Pacquiao stated that "death penalty is legal, moral" and that "on the eye of the Lord this is **biblically** allowed by the government, the authority, which is established by God, to impose it." I was in need to understand more about this articulation between the religious and political powers and eventually I decided to start a research because it triggered me as a person.

Manny Pacquiao belongs to an evangelical church known as Born Again and set up his own church of the same denomination in General Santos, a city in the south of the Philippines islands, in 2017. My research started from this observation, in one hand the Catholic Church in the Philippines opposed the war on drugs, while some other denominations such as the Born Again supported it.

In the Philippines, more and more people are leaving Catholicism to convert to a Born Again denomination. This denomination implies a reconfiguration of intramundane and extramundane identity as a result of the new birth as its denomination implies. This observation is discursive, but it's also important to study the practices of the people who do not necessarily follow from a t z the new set of rules and regulations they are subjected to.

I am involved in my research in two different fields to study these practices : I enrolled a seminar for pastors in a public school to study how these pastors and missionaries are being trained. I also attend a small Born Again denomination fellowship events, religious services, evangelization activities every week. I've performed and experience 66 participatory observations and also did 33 interviews with several participants. 8 of them were previously part of a Born Again denomination but eventually decided to stop being members. Some of them live in a public cemetery in Manila, and I've known them for the past 10 years. The people who participate and

contribute to my research are for most of them experiencing severe poverty. Through my field experience, I was able to identify different sets of practices :

- 1) The first one is practices to dialogue (talk, listen, learn) with and from the divine, called Panginoon (Lord) or Jesus, or the Holy. These are the prayers, the Bible's reading, and scriptural practices such as writing a journal.
- 2) The second set of practices are psycho-religious: it aims for the missionaries to provide counseling and healing through the integration of psychology, theology, and spirituality.
- 3) The third set of practices is the one I will talk about today, because they match the argument our today's event : the public testimony, and the public enthusiasm with the use of music. I propose to start from these questions to talk about these practices : how is identity constructed, shaped, and maintained by religious activities - How do religions change the identities of their new members ?

1. Testimony: a common place for asserting a new identity

The members of the fellowship I study are regularly asked to give their personal testimonies of the changes that have taken place in their lives since their conversion. These testimonies have an autobiographical dimension, since they may include personal elements from the life of the narrator, as this example shows:

In 1998, I met the Lord Jesus Christ because at the time I had a lot of vices, I was a former drug user, and I nearly lost my sanity. In 1998, I had planned to go to a rehabilitation center, a detox center, but my girlfriend, who is now my wife, told me that before I went to the detox center, she was going to take me to someone. It was a pastor who shared the word of God with me from the Bible, so we went to this church and this pastor shared the word of God with me. Then the pastor talked about God's love, and I realized that it was very simple: God loves me according to what the Word of God says. He simply shared with me John chapter 3 verse 16 [quote the verse] and that's what I heard this pastor say. Finally, there was this inner conviction in my heart that this was what I needed. I began to believe God's word and I embraced what God's word said about me and that's when my spiritual journey began. Instead of going to a rehab center, I had this supernatural experience with the Lord and that's where my spiritual journey began.

In addition to its autobiographical dimension, this testimony, like many others, has a transmission dimension, since the narrator, by exposing his life, transmits a message to those who listen to him: this is evangelization, which aims to share the Good News, and which can also be done on the basis of personal testimony. In addition, this testimony shows a third dimension of providing proof, because the narrator declares his new Born Again affiliation, and thus contributes to the elaboration of a new truth, by agreeing with the dominant discourse. The autobiographical, transmissive, and evidentiary dimensions are interconnected, raising the question of how personal experience is taken into account and its value. In his work on religious crises and conversions, Claude Dubar shows that the transition from one religion to another also corresponds to a change in the social world and the implementation of new forms of social identification (Dubar, 2000: 5). In this new socialisation, there are figures of power, pastors, who help to maintain the new social reality. Even if they remain in the background, these authority figures or significant others remain present as **guarantors** of the truth. In other words, the process of putting into words the experience of conversion, through testimony, is guided by the demands of the power of the pastors, who by their presence govern the content of the testimonies in some way: this is the return of intercession, not **explicitly** but through a presence that implicitly imposes certain guidelines on the phrasing of personal experience. Let's see now more example to discuss the power-knowledge relation within testimonies:

For instances, Pedro (June 2022), a member called Bro. Pedro gives a musical testimony. The song talks about the fact that without God, the world is a jail, he implores God to make him understand his own situation and thanks him for having changed his life. He also declares that his life was borrowed, and God provides him his life to be used by Him. Brother Pedro has indeed been in jail and uses this personal experience in this testimony. He also integrates some parts of a recurrent preaching, that life is borrowed and that one should be use by the Lord.

Hid (July 2022) shares her personal testimony during her sermon on the theme of joyAs a mother, I have difficult days, I was upset and sometimes my kid was hyperactive all day, capricious etc., and in the evening, the child was very happy. And in the evening, the child slept without any problems, and that enraged me because I thought it was unfair. What God is showing to me is that the child is fine. God gives us the best and we have to thank him. She also mentions

her personal experience and doctrinal elements in her testimony. Her experience aims to illustrate a doctrinal point, and her preach becomes more relatable for the participants.

During the preaching (November 2022), Joshua gives his testimony about the need for self-control. Without self-control I fall apart. For example, my voice is too strongly modulated, I mustn't speak too loudly and control myself, I'm self-critical but it's necessary. His personal testimony is also based on biographical elements and are illustrating a doctrinal point of view he develops in his preaching.

From a pedagogical perspective, we can consider that the preachers and the members, while providing their personal testimonies, are role-models. They also illustrate and embodies the dogma and the vision and mission of the fellowship. The question is now : should we consider that these testimonies only aim to convince people, to illustrate a dogma?

Giving a testimony, it's also putting an experience into words, and it requests a dialogue between oneself and oneself, and can be a source of reflexivity, since history is the "trace of the inner dialogue between oneself and oneself" (Dubar, op.cit.: 211). The testimonies of new converts should not, therefore, be limited to a submission to authority or illustration of a dogma. The people who provided a testimony in this fellowship are also in capacity to justify their choice to leave the majority Catholic institution and join a minority religious denomination. This is what Dubar identify as the transition from a communal identity to a societal identity. He argues that this switch is related to an identitarian crisis. The way out of this crisis is through reflexivity, and the ability to present and justify these choices. I personally observed that the testimony can be one of the means of bringing out this reflexivity for the new members.

Between submission to the demands of the intercessor's power, the inclusion of the experience in a dominant discourse and the possibility of the emergence of a form of reflexivity, the testimony gives us to think of a non-coercive mode of intercession - the pastor does not directly order the people who testify to orient their discourse. There is the presence of both the pastor and the religious community, as guarantors of the inclusion of the testimony in a dominant discourse. I believe that this presence mediates in the process of reflexivity and the inner dialogue that makes it possible to justify conversion to a Born Again denomination through a personal testimony.

To conclude, I think that testimony is guided by power figures. But I also think that the reflexivity it enables allows the person testifying to justify his or her choices. In other words, the figures of power are all partly present (which means they are also partly absent) during the process of formulating an experience through words. And one has to get to the bottom of his or her own experience in order to be able to justify by him or herself his choice to leave Catholicism to join a Born Again denomination. This is reflexivity. Testimonies also make it possible to declare oneself Born Again, and to justify this change. This justification finds its source in personal experience, the theology developed by the Born Again leaders and the level of intervention of the said leaders. Some are more or less **directive**. The identity who is stressed is the one of having been able to resolve, deal with, solve, find out how to overcome an identitarian, existential and spiritual crisis. This echoes the Born Again denomination itself. I will now discuss another facet of the identitarian reconfiguration provided by the conversion to a Born Again denomination.

2. Enthusiasm: a sensorial taming?

Musique, singing, and songs are practices who are often present in the evangelical denominations. Scholars have shown that music aims to cultivate a group culture or to indigenize the religious services. Few is said about music as mediation between believers and divine. Music is not an additional practice to prayers, Bible reading, testimony, journaling. It's the main practice who will shape the religious experience. It has therefore a structural role. It is important to understand that music can lead people to enthusiasm or pagpuri in filipino. This is the moment when people can physically feel the presence of the divine in their body, in their flesh, they are invaded by feelings, they shout, some cries also. David Hume defined enthusiasm as produced by a presumptuous self-trust and allows to approach the Divine without the intercession of a human mediator.

A participant describes these moments like this : I feel it, when I sing, sometimes during adoration, the music is entering my heart, it's like He is speaking in my heart. I don't know but when I praise, like last Sunday, we started to sing, then I started to cry. And our Pastor told me : Gloria, you've have been called by God.

Music is present more than a third of the total time of the religious service in the fellowship I study. Participants stand up, raise their hand to the sky, put them in their heart. Music is

sometimes joyful, sometimes sad, it's played in live by a band. Singers insist on the fact that music aims to directly talk and meet Jesus, to feel His presence in the participants' heart. Faith therefor is a feeling who can be expressed through music and God's presence in the heart, in accordance with the discourse of pastors.

As Hume noticed, this practice is different than superstition. It's a kind of autonomy and independence of faith, who oppose the power of religious leaders. Superstition needs healing and intervention while the faith not. Luther also opposed enthusiasm as he said here is a risk of sectarian abuses. Enthusiasm therefor needs to be channeled and controlled to not dissolve the institution nor the pastor's power.

My observations show that the Born Again pastors are not unaware of the danger of too much enthusiasm, and they developed strategies to control it. They do not fight it as it has traditionally been the case, but they channel it. In many of the interviews, members of the Born Again denomination mentioned that if they like the service in their new church or fellowship, it's clearly because of the music:

I Think that most of the singing in my church [Born Again fellowship] are dynamics in a sense that the Born Again songs are not like catholic religion. In the catholic service songs are like in the XIXe century. Born Again we are more contemporary, and it makes sense nowadays, that's why I decided to align with a Born Again church, as it resonates more being an adult. Service is more beautiful, more alive, it's like going to a party, it's alive in a sense we have group, songs, we are active, unlike in the Catholic Church.

Another testimony of a former member: The singing and dancing is divided into praise and worship, I don't know if you had already heard about it, I think I really benefited from that personally. There were this kind of feeling of communion but in terms of what I learn not a lot I mean it was just few. I think it was a bit selfish from me because I wanted that kind of feel. That's why I did it and even now that I am not religiously going to mass or to the sessions or whatever you call it, I do feel that I have to go sometimes just for this portion of the service because I want to, I really miss emotions or whatever.

Singing practices are likely to be attractive for people who are discovering a new way to celebrate their feelings towards the divine. Before the singing time, the pastors and preachers

constantly remind the participants that it's through feelings they would be able to meet Jesus, feelings His presence. Music is a framework for participants to have this feeling of direct connection with the divine. It therefore can give the illusion that the members have a direct relation with the divine, an interpersonal relation. In that way, music is a structural element of the religious service and not only a practice, as all the discourse and other practices are consequences of the physical encounter with the divine. These moments are framed and shaped by the pastors and the church leaders who are in total control. These times happen only in the physical building of the fellowship, they are prepared in advance with rehearsals. There is a prompter to lead the preacher and the singers. The members are in a way allowed to experience enthusiasm at the very time the pastors and the church leaders included them in the service program. Music is therefore structural and a mediation of the Born Again services who allows to reintroduce enthusiasm, to frame it during specific, organized and prepared time. It fosters a common Born Again identity through sharing a common experience of feeling a godly presence in one flesh

This practice is a particularity of the evangelical denominations as it is not often seen in the Catholic services neither in the Lutheran churches. This practice is framed by music and pastors, who become both intercessors between the members and the experience they live or believe to live.

Conclusion

Through these examples of practices, I wanted to highlight the place of three intercessors between the believer and the divine: first of all the pastors, traditional figures of power, who pretend to step aside in evangelical worship, then also the community of believers, and finally the music itself. These mediations influence educational practices in several ways: at the level of the inner dialogue between the self and the narrative self, as I have shown using the example of testimonies. I also wanted to show that in moments when the intercessor between the believer and the divinity seems absent, this is not the case, since the pastor controls and channels these moments through music or ritualized dialogue with the divine. Based on these observations, which are in counterpoint to the discourse produced by pastors, the question of self-education and its status remains unanswered.

As I have pointed out, the educational model inherited from the Lutheran Reformation is one of educational metamorphosis, founded on Stoicism. The aim of self-education was to return to oneself and achieve a total transformation of one's moral life through the practice of spiritual exercises. By returning to the Stoic source of metamorphosis, the theorists of the Reformation reintroduced the idea of the educable self and the infinitude or timelessness of education: metamorphosis is a self-education that never ends. In other words, personal experience is important, and the self can access his or her own truth while experiencing the group, through exercises. The pedagogical orientation that follows from this is to "help the self to understand and interpret himself through his own formative process, without a transcendent truth interfering in this quest of the self by himself" (Moreau, 2014: 48). It has to be said, however, that the practice of the exercises in evangelicalism does not enable the self to access his or her own truth, but an external truth, to which he or she must adapt or convert: "This is the path of conversion to the truth held by an institution represented by the benevolent master, to which the disciple must conform by imitation" (Moreau, 2018: 10). Personal and singular experience is denied, and only conversion to an external truth, guided by figures of power, provides access to salvation. These figures of power therefore act as mediators between the person and the divinity, but also between the person and his or her own truth.

The dominant discourse of pastors, however, insists on the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus in order to gain access to eternal life. This 'relationship' with the divine is framed and channeled by techniques that make it possible to maintain the feeling, in all senses, of the privileged and interpersonal nature of the relationship with the divinity, on condition that one conforms to the moral order of the community and participates in devotional sessions or pays tithes by donating 10% of one's monthly salary to the Church. Acting as an intermediary between the believer and the divine, the pastor also acts as a mediator between the believer and him or herself, undermining self-education. He is the pure charismatic authority who, by pretending to be in the background and dissolving the institution, inspires the newly converted on a path mapped out in advance between them and themselves.