

【論文】

“Blocking” the Rosary?
Filipinas, Mama Mary and Block Rosary Controversy

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ロザリオお断りーフィリピーナ、ママメアリとブロック・ロザリの論争

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Abstract : The rosary is generally accepted as a universal practice of Catholic devotion. The same cannot be said for the Block Rosary, a Filipino style of prayer with heavy European overtures that has been transported across the globe through the Filipino diaspora. In Japan, Block Rosaries are offered by Filipinos living across the country, but this presence has yet to be accepted by the local parish. Perhaps the reason is because Block Rosaries center around the home and the personal lives of the Filipino believer in contrast to the parish. This has produced a cultural insularity with Filipino indigenous overtones that discourages Japanese husbands, Filipino-Japanese children and Japanese parishioners from attendance. Research based on over a decade of parish work conducted in the Tokyo Archdiocese and a single multicultural church reveal the politics and controversy behind accepting foreign practices under the guise of multiculturalism.

Key Words : Filipina, Mama Mary, Inculturation, Catholic Church, Block Rosary

要旨 : ブロック・ロザリはフィリピン文化によるマリア（イエスの母親）への献身である。「ブロック」というのは、市街地のブロックで、「ロザリ」はカトリックのロザリオの祈りを指す。この祈りの手法によれば、フィリピン人が信者の家に集まり、ロザリオを祈り、お互いの悩みを話して、最後に食事を共にする。この習慣は1920年代にフィ

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リピンで人気となり、やがてフィリピンのディアスポラによって全世界に普及し、日本でも2000年頃にフィリピン人女性によってカトリック小教区に定着した。ブロック・ロザリが13世紀ヨーロッパで発祥したそれとは違うのはマリア像（通称ママ・マリア）の有無である。この聖像に対して彼らは自分の悩みを打ち明け、まるで自分の母親のような親近感をマリアに対して抱く。個人の家に集まり、マリアに祈ることで、ブロック・ロザリは男性中心であるカトリックのミサと対照的であり、教会によっては認めないこともある。多文化化する日本のカトリック教会が、フィリピン人独自の宗教行為を認めながらどのように共同体を作るかは大きな課題である。本研究はブロック・ロザリを中心に、グローバルとローカルの宗教行為に焦点を当てる。

The Block Rosary (BR hereafter) is a Filipino-Catholic style of neighborhood devotion that combines rosary prayer with patron saint veneration. The BR originated from a surge in Catholic piety in the wake of a 1917 Marian apparitions in Fatima, Portugal. According to faithful, Mary called on the world to increase its devotional prayers, especially through reciting the rosary. Filipino Catholics answer this call by creating a ritual that passes a Marian statue around a neighborhood 'block'. Each week, a separate host is expected to recite the rosary daily as the statue resides in their house (Villianueva 2017). BR communities have sprung up in Catholic communities around the globe from Malaysia, Dubai, Australia, Israel, and the United States (Bonifacio 2009, 153; Gonzalez III 2009, 17; Ichikawa 2016, 9; Liebelt 2014; Tondo 2014, 452). Added to this list are Filipino BRs in Japan (Faier 2009; Jabar 2015; Mullins 2011; Nakanishi 2016; Terada 2010, 2013). The BR occupies a unique position in the parish for the way its activity occurs outside church walls. In fact, most BRs are completely independent from clergy and church activity. This distance incentivizes constructing bonds around the home and away from the male-centered and public climate of the parish.

Filipino migrants are a source of new life for the Roman Catholic Church in Japan (RCCJ hereafter). Their presence has been good news for its

shrinking 440,832 members (CBCJ 2017)¹. Over the past forty years, an estimated half million Filipinos have entered Japan nearly doubling the RCCJ’s membership. Yet this massive influx has not been without conflict, as Filipinos argue with Japanese or amongst themselves for church authority (Ichikawa 2016; Jabar 2015; Muncada 2008; Mateo 1995; Toyoda 2012). The BR is sometimes at the heart of these arguments.

Do BRs contribute or detract from the RCCJ’s multiculturalism? In other words, is the BR only for Filipinos or is it open to other parishioners? These questions are left for parish priests to decide. Which many—understandably—avoid. Fr. Tanaka, for example, is the Japanese pastor of a multicultural community located on the north-side of Tokyo called Yamagoe Catholic Church (pseudonym). He has possessed a contentious relationship with the BR. Since 2013, Fr. Tanaka has been involved in BRs to various degrees. His story, from involvement to detachment, illustrates many of the complications surrounding multiculturalism and the acceptance of ethnic practices into the RCCJ.

This paper is divided into five parts. Part one begins by introducing the parameters of research. Part two provides a detailed description of the Yamagoe BR for later reference. Part three discusses the history of the BR and its Filipino traits. Part four discusses ‘affect’ and how Filipinos use Mama Mary as a conduit to express their emotions. Finally, part five touches on the controversy in Yamagoe Church behind Fr. Tanaka’s mixed acceptance of the BR.

¹ These numbers do not include roughly the same number of foreign-born Catholics who are not officially registered at any church, but who attend.



Figure 1: Yamagoe Church's Mama Mary

1. Parameters of research

The following study was carried out at nineteen BRs from 2015-2017. Fifteen of these were conducted at the Yamagoe Church (Tokyo diocese) and the remaining four were conducted at Ishikawa Church (1), and Kasai Church (3). Each Block Rosary lasted between 90 to 180 minutes (not including transportation) and administered to Filipinas' homes. From 2015-2019 semi-formal interviews and casual conversation was conducted with Fr. Tanaka, the leaders of the Yamagoe BR, and a handful of Filipina hosts. With few exceptions, the BRs I attended were led and hosted by Filipino women between the ages of fifty and sixty. These women I refer to simply as 'Filipinas'. All names and places hereafter are pseudonyms to protect the identity of those involved.

Key words used below are 'Mama Mary', 'inculturation' and 'syncre-

tism’. I use ‘Mama Mary’ hereafter to distinguish it from plaster statues of the Virgin Mary. The latter is an object used in prayer, whereas the former is a statue that has been ontologically transformed into something holy. ‘Mama Mary’, as Filipinos call her, is an iconic figure they interact with almost as a personification of the Virgin Mary herself. They allude to this in the Tagalog words they use. For example, when they talk about carrying her from house to house, they do not use the word ‘dalhin’ (carry) which is used with inanimate objects, but ‘ihatid’ (escort) which is reserved for living people. Such use of language signifies their association with Mama Mary as an iconic figure, rather than a mere object for prayer. I have captured this difference by referring to the blessed statues used in BRs and other popular religious practices as ‘Mama Mary’. In similar English parlance, I refer to Mama Mary as ‘her’ instead of ‘it’ or ‘she’ instead of ‘the statue’ accordingly.

This paper considers the difficult decision clergy make as they entertain ethnic practices that can potentially sow division within their parish. Since the Vatican II Council (1963-1965) there has been a push in the global Catholic Church to recognize local cultures through the word “inculturation”. Inculturation has been described as a “double process of inserting the gospel into a particular culture and inserting this culture into the gospel so that both...are challenged and enriched by each other” (Phan 2008, 213). Filipino Bishop Francisco R. Claver (2008) reminds the believer that when inculturation occurs “a synthesis takes place of faith and culture—a unity of two distinct parts, yet a unity that does not destroy or negate the one or the other, culture remaining authentically culture, faith authentically faith” (Claver 2008, 120). When inculturation is successful, Francis (1999) claims all the “faithful” come to participate in the works of the church (108). On the contrary, when one selects “like a consumer” according to one’s “discretion and pleasure whatever myth and doctrine, ethnic practice and ritual, and meditation and healing technique [that] best suits the temperament

and needs of one's body and mind, without regard to the truth values and mutual compatibilities" syncretism, not inculturation occurs (Phan 2011, 62). The Roman Curia encourages inculturation, but rebukes syncretism. The problem is that Rome arbitrates authority to parish priests to discern whether a culture is to be discouraged or promoted along these lines.

In its current state, it is difficult to consider the culturally saturated BR practice as being for "all the faithful" as Francis requires. Notwithstanding, its ability to capture the hearts of millions of Filipinos worldwide has made clergy unable to block this practice. The solution has been a pseudo acceptance as Block Rosary groups are neither openly promoted nor actively discouraged leaving Filipinos to practice this style of devotion alone.

2. Description of the BR Practice in Japan

The BR begins by 'introducing' Mama Mary to a new home, encouraging the hosts' interaction with her through rosary prayer, and leaving her at the new residence until she can be picked up later. Before moving forward to analyze why the BR is, in fact, heavily Filipino, this section lays out the order of the BR including the actions and words recited by host and participant.

The author participated in BRs in other locations in the Tokyo Archdiocese to provide a framework for comparison. The three practices I observed were similar in style, but differed in transportation. For example, on the west side of Tokyo, the old host will 'introduce' Mama Mary to the new host by using the church as a drop-off point. When Mama Mary exchanges hands a customary rosary is recited. Due to the small number of participants in this community, and schedule conflict this BR does not escort Mama Mary from house to house. By comparison, on the east side of Tokyo another BR uses cars to transport Mama Mary, and with her a large Bible and pictures of Filipino foster children the group financially sup-

ports. This BR has continued for twenty years and has a wealth of contacts willing to drive women around the city. The last group is Yamagoe Church. This BR uses buses and trains to carry an 80-cm tall statue through wind, rain and snow between Tokyo and Saitama prefecture. Despite the variety of transportation each group uses, the scripts used were nearly identical.



Figure 2: Leaders ‘escorting’ Mama Mary (wrapped in summer shawl)

2.1. Arrival

The BR begins when a group of church volunteers arrive at the host’s house. After a brief greeting, all participants sit in front of Mama Mary and distribute rosary beads. A leader begins the rosary with a sign of the cross and a request for any prayer intentions. Participants may ask others to pray for their sick or dying relatives or more mundane intentions such as good test grades or easy entrance into prestigious schools.



Figure 3: Altar: Home Mary (left), BR Mary (center), and Black Jesus (right)

2.2. Mysteries and Reciting the Rosary

After intentions, the leader begins reading a ‘mystery’ according to the day of the week. A mystery is a rosary theme participants use to center the content of their prayers on one of four topics about Mama Mary’s life and her relationship with Jesus. These mysteries are divided according to days of the week.

The Joyful Mysteries (Monday and Saturdays)

The Sorrowful Mysteries (Tuesday and Friday)

The Glorious Mysteries (Wednesday and Sunday)

The Luminous Mysteries (Thursday)

Each mystery has five decades (ten Hail Mary, one Our Father, and one Glory Be Prayer) and each decade corresponds to a story based on or inspired by the Christian Bible. The following is taken from the Joyful Mysteries that should be recited

on Monday and Saturdays.

First joyful mystery:	The Annunciation
Second joyful mystery:	The Visitation
Third joyful mystery:	The Birth of Jesus
Fourth joyful mystery:	The Presentation
Fifth joyful mystery:	Finding the child Jesus in the Temple

An example of appropriate recitations for the first mystery are as follows:

The Annunciation. The angel Gabriel said to Mary: “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you, among women. You shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name, Jesus”. Mary answered, “behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to your word”.

When the five mysteries are recited, there are some auxiliary prayers and the rosary session ends with a song devoted to Mary such as “Salve Regina”.

2.3. Dinner, Donations and Advice

The BR typically begins around 7:00 pm because most leaders and hosts work during the day. This concludes several hours later around 10:00 pm. After rosary prayer concludes, food is served.² In addition to preparing dinner, hosts make a monetary donation to the ‘church’. BR leaders reciprocate through leading prayer.

² Magno (2000) explains how cooking ethnic food is used as a means of performing national identity.



Figure 4: Chicken adobo, packaged cheese and potato salad

2.4. Farewell

After dinner, the ceremony ends with a farewell prayer. This prayer is the emotional climax when many become distraught or weep as they read:

O beloved mother, the time has come for your departure from our home, your home also during your stay with us. Our lips cannot express the joy overflowing in our hearts. Inspired by your love mother, you desired to be with us, even for only a while. Thank you, Mother. Thank you. Come back some other day. We will wait for you with profound ardor. Upon your departure, take with you our hearts. Never allow us to forget you nor to stray away from your care now and forever. Amen

The farewell prayer signifies the end of the BR. According to Yamagoe custom, leaders place a scarf over Mama Mary's head before escorting her to the new home. She is the last one to leave the residence. On some occasions this departure is ritualized through the passing of Mama Mary from host to leader. Hosts often escort the group to the nearest bus stop or train station, or accompany them to the

next house.



Figure 5: Leader with Mama Mary (wrapped in winter scarf)

2.5. A New Home for Mama Mary

When leaders arrive at the new house, Mama Mary is the first to enter. She is warmly invited in and given a prominent position there (Figure 6). Frequently, hosts will construct elaborate altars for Mama Mary and move their televisions or furniture for her comfort.

After everyone sits and introduces themselves, they make the sign of the cross, and recite an Our Father, three Hail Mary, and one Glory Be prayers. The beginning of a new BR is signified by the ‘acceptance prayer’.

Our mother and mother of Christ, we are happy and honored by your visit in our home, which you have made worthy to be the abode of our

love and affection. During these days that you will stay with us, please bless our family and always abide with us through your graces. Give us, beloved mother your blessings. Bless this home and those members of our family who are away and deliver us from evils. From now on we are consecrating our minds, our hearts and our works to you, since you are our mother, and grant that we may comply with the commandments of your son Jesus Christ and with the commandments of mother church. We pledge to make this visit arouse us to a true love of God and to true devotion to you, so that we may fulfill our duties to ourselves, our neighbors, and to society. May peace reign in the world. Our lady of the Rosary, pray for us.



Figure 6: BR altar for deceased father next to Buddhist altar

Following this prayer, a light snack is served and leaders pass a BR folder to the host, explain what is expected of them, and promise to return a few days later.

3. Origins of the BR and its Filipino Characteristic

The BR is initially accepted into Japanese parishes because of its close connections with the rosary, -a ritualistic prayer with deep roots in thirteenth century European Catholicism. But the Filipinos who perform the BR interject uniquely Filipino values that originate from pre- and post Christian sixteenth century religious practices. Understanding this connection is essential to comprehending the many cultures housed within the contemporary BR.

The story of the rosary began at a convent in Germany. Religious brothers developed a tradition of saying one-hundred and fifty ‘Hail Mary’ prayers in succession.³ The rosary beads used today were constructed as a tool to keep devout believers from falling asleep or from losing count as they prayed. They achieved this by dividing Hail Mary prayers into groups of ten, separated by a single ‘Our Father’ prayer (Winston 1993, 123 and 620). Shortly after this 59-bead rosary’s first recorded use, a confraternity to Mary was formed in Cologne, Germany that grew to half a million members by 1474 (Carroll 1987, 488-9). By the fifteenth century, the Dominican Order published several short compendiums on how to say the rosary and these became instant best sellers (Brewer 2004, 46). The popularity of this string of beads mixed with Spanish forms of popular piety to elevate the Virgin Mary from her position as the ‘mother of Jesus’ to theotokos ‘the mother of God’ (Demetrio et al. 1991, 157 (Cited in Wendt 2016, 100-101)). This ‘Marian devotion’ was brought to New Spain during the sixteenth century Age of Discovery. When Catholic missionaries arrived in the Philippines, there were only a handful of priests to teach millions of indigenous who varied in language, customs and belief. Placing the church at the city center for easy access was a method used to deal with clergy shortage. Others included introducing an elaborate array of feast days and novenas where patron saints could be celebrated

³ The Hail Mary is a prayer based on Luke 1.28 and 1.42 in the New Testament Bible.

(Wendt 2016, 111). Of these, one of the most popular practices was, and still is, the rosary. Illiteracy of indigenous Filipinos complicated missionaries' attempts at teaching theological concepts. Instead, they devised a plan to combine the rosary with a reenactment of the life of Jesus. If believers could not follow the Latin Mass, clergy encouraged them to pray the rosary during Mass. Even today it is common to see a church peppered with Filipinos praying the rosary individually during Mass (Francis 2014, 128).⁴

Devotions to patron saints and the Virgin Mary became the hallmark of lay involvement under this counter-reformation brand of Catholicism. This popular Catholicism was how clergy maintained control throughout the nineteenth century though only 800 priests were assigned to the Philippines (Schumacher 2009, 121-122). In the twenty-first century, the Catholic Church continues to stress the importance of personal devotions encouraging mothers to teach their children how to say the rosary outside church (Suzuki 2015, 227).

3.1. The Feminine in Pre-Catholic Philippines

The fact that personal devotions to the Virgin Mary has become a hallmark of Filipino spirituality can be attributed in part to the efforts of foreign missionaries. But one cannot forget the heavy feminine nature of deity worship existing in pre-Christianity Philippines (Wendt 2016, 100). Remnants of this past are mentioned in Durre S. Ahmed's book *Gendering the Spirit*, which devotes two chapters to indigenous movements made by Filipino women. These include the Supreme Isabel Suarez, leader of the Ciudad Mistica de Dios, a religious group founded in the early nineteenth century connected to the sacred mountain of Banahaw in the province of Quezon (Mananzan 2002). Another is the Mutya (Water

⁴ Until Vatican II, lay people were largely excluded from participating in the Mass. In addition, indigenous in the Philippines were also excluded from the priesthood and holy orders.

Goddess) connected to the Pasig river on the island of Luzon (Odal 2002). Central to these goddess cults is a belief that history is “divided into three periods, the period of the Father, that of the Son, and that of the Mother” (Mananzan 2002, 131). Odal explains how a mother spirit existed in the Philippines before Christian missions arrived, and has erstwhile combined with Christian imagery, such as seen in the many figures of the Virgin Mary. Odal claims that this goddess figure is divinized in stone-like figures, amulets, or objects of “great power, beauty [or] wealth” (Ibid., 107-108).⁵ Throughout Odal and Mananzan’s account of these goddess-centered religions one can imagine how the Virgin Mary and the rosary have become extensions of pre-Christian goddess beliefs.

Ironically, while Europe moved away from Marian devotions in the sixteenth century in the wake of Tridentine reforms, the lack of clergy in Asia gave priests little recourse but to continue supporting popular religious practices to maintain control (Francis 2014, 127). An extension of this devotion came in the form of festivals and venerating patron saints. These practices became popular in mountainous regions that were detached from the church activities of the urban centers. Missionaries used fiestas, feast days and saint veneration in conjunction with pre-existing goddess cults to create a fluid transition from spiritualities of the past to the present.

Part of the rich culture of Filipino saint veneration is adorning statues in gorgeous attire and placing these upon floats, which are carried or pulled by participants in a public show of pageantry (Rodell 2001, 140-3). Francis (2014) explains how these practices are imbued with an “instrumental” sense of piety where devotions are “practiced for specific outcomes such as healing and fertility” (Francis 2014, 129). Cannell (1999) explains how this sense of piety remains with preexisting forms of indigenous worship. In rural Bicol, for example, the Catholic feast day helps Filipinos form a contractual relationship with their town’s patron

⁵ For more on the holy power of amulets called *anting* see Iletto 1997.

saint. As the saint's feast day approaches, statues are repainted and new clothes for them are made. When the day(s) activities conclude and the festivities formally end, the statue 'returns home' to a dwelling secured for its use and a nighttime celebration ensues. Devotees bring food and drink dedicated to the saints' honor and many festivities last until the morning (Cannell 1999, 186).

This relationship between host and patron extends to how saints are present in the lives of their hosts through the practice of inheriting saints' land. Cannell writes,

Most saints were endowed with land, typically a rice field and a fish-pond. The land and the saint were inherited together, and were when necessary rotated among siblings (...). Siblings took turns both in holding the devotions for the saint and in farming the land which went with it. During that year, the saint was cared for in the house of that branch of the family (Ibid., 185).

According to the relationship between patron saint and host, any purchases used in celebrating the former's feast day comes directly from the coffers associated with the saint, such that through vicarious payment the saint "literally preside[s] over the occasion" (Ibid., 186). The host, by way of procurement or entitlement, is expected to care for the saint statue and their lands in exchange for this-worldly blessings.

Cannell's description of the relationship between patron saint and its hosts is by no means peculiar to the Bicol region. Studies by Brewer (2004), Kawada (2002), and Wendt (2016) illustrate how the blessings conferred upon host by saint are practiced throughout the Philippines in Luzon and Mindanao islands. On occasions, some might catch a glimpse of pre-Christian beliefs at cele-

brations dedicated to patron saints.⁶

3.2. Connection between the Saint Veneration and the BR

Preserved within the BR are cultural connections to patron saint devotion. For example, BR hosts cling to Mama Mary for the holy power she provides. Her efficacy is so great they believe it can heal cancer, alter childbirth and perform countless miracles. The affection Filipinos heap on Mama Mary begins with the statues’ transformation after receiving divine blessings. From this point forward, participants believe Mama Mary can watch over them and protect their family. In return, it is their responsibility to introduce her to new ‘children’ and teach them the rosary.

As Cannell explains how patron saint families care for their statue through communal meals and dress, so too hosts at the BR went to lengths to make sure Mama Mary enjoyed her time at their homes. This could be witnessed as they dressed Mama Mary for outside weather. The Yamagoe group explained how they covered her to avoid the disapproval of others on the train. In addition, they would change Mama Mary’s clothes from summer to winter depending on the weather (Figures 2 and 5). Other signs of affection include ensuring Mama Mary is the first to enter and the last to leave each house. Finally, even the food served at BRs looks like Cannell’s observations of land inheritance and communal meals. BR participants treat Mama Mary like their patron saint, and in return expect she treats them well.

⁶ Jaime C. Bulatao coined the term “split-level Catholicism” to explain how Filipino indigenous views while contradicting orthodox views, often existed side by side them (Tesoro and Jose 2004, 77). Julius Bautista examines this contradiction further in the Sinulog Festival of Cebu City and within the Santo Niño devotion (Bautista 2010 and 2016).

4. Mama Mary, the Filipina, and Suffering for Family

Why is it that Filipino women affectionately lavish the Marian statue with their touch, tears and prayers? The affective responses Filipinos exhibit toward Mama Mary is illustrative of the BR's importance in their lives. The BR leader Alma (60s) told me she felt Mama Mary accepted her 'trials'—a rocky marriage, her husband's early death, and the single-handedly raising of her daughter. As only a mother could, Mama Mary gave her the peace of mind and strength to get through the long work week.

Alma told me her relationship with Mama Mary reached its pinnacle with the pregnancy of her daughter, to whom she gave birth to in the Philippines after a fight with her husband. "At that time," she told me after a BR, "I prayed to Mama Mary for a girl. I wanted a companion and not a boy. When my daughter was born, I was overjoyed and knew Mama Mary had answered my prayers. Thanks to her, I returned to Japan and made amends with my husband". Alma reciprocated this blessing by becoming a BR leader.

Next is Judy, whom I first met at a BR she hosted. This fifty-year-old Filipina and mother of three boys broke down in tears while thanking Mama Mary for her healing. She had been convinced that a week's worth of stomach pain meant she was to have cancer. But Mama Mary, "made the tests come back negative". I met Judy one night at a club where we discussed her prayer activity. "Please don't tell the BR leaders you met me here," she pleaded, embarrassed she had to flirt with older Japanese men for extra money. Judy felt guilty for not being able to attend church because of working at night, but she felt Mama Mary understood her intentions were good. "I can't always go to church because I am so busy at work and home. But I often say the rosary while doing laundry".

Alma and Judy paint a picture of the Filipina as a caregiver responsible for the livelihood of family regardless of personal cost. The image of Filipino

migrant as caregiver is a common trope that motivates Filipinas to sacrifice themselves for the will of their families (Suzuki 2015). Both Alma and Judy suffered within their international marriage and places of employment. They are indicative of Filipinas who travel to Japan as teenagers to make money for their families in the Philippines (Takatani 2018, 51). Filipinas sacrifice their desires to care for their children whether in Japan or the Philippines. They suffer, says theologian Gemma T. Cruz (2006), under a “double burden” of “manag[ing] a career and, still, the household”. This is called a “tagasalo syndrome”, where daughters “compulsively and single-handedly take responsibility for their families’ troubles, at very heavy physical and emotional cost to themselves” (Cruz 2006, 229). The Filipina looks to Mama Mary to validate their choices and intervene through strength and good health. This narrative is further explained through the story of Nadia.

4.1. Nadia Hosting Mama Mary

Nadia (50s) is a Filipina mother who can be seen in the back of the church during most Sunday morning Masses silently fingering through her rosary. Her story illustrates how Filipinas depend upon the BR and prayers to Mama Mary as an opportunity to release their pain, loneliness, regret and anger toward their precarious position in Japanese society. Nadia has requested a BR from Yamagoe Church twice, once after the death of her mother, and the other after a near-death encounter with ovarian cancer. Both were traumatic experiences she felt only Mama Mary could understand.

Nadia was born into a Catholic family of ten. As a child, she could remember her family always attending church. “Two of my siblings are religious sisters” she stated proudly. Unlike her siblings, however, Japan did not offer her the time she needed to attend Mass on Sundays. Instead, she would take time out of her day to pray to Mama Mary. There was even a time she built a house for her mother in the Philippines and had a life-sized Marian statue erected in its yard.

This statue remains on her mind to this day.

After coming to Japan for work, there were times when Nadia felt lonely or depressed and would call home and ask her mother or sister to place an apple or some other gift at Mama Mary's feet. "Whenever I returned to the Philippines, I would buy a towel to wipe Mama Mary's face or buy flowers or rice to place at the foot of her altar stand. Finally, I would light a candle and ask for her compassion." Over time, Nadia married and had a child in Japan making it difficult for her to return home. For years, she would call her family requesting they attend to Mama Mary on her behalf. Nadia would eventually divorce her husband and lose custody of her only child. She also lost her mother and was diagnosed with cancer. These were the "hardships" she recollected when I met her in her apartment during a BR in 2015.

It is traditional for most BR hosts to keep Yamagoe church's Mama Mary for a few weeks—Nadia took six. She justified her actions by telling me about her operation and how she needed the extra time to show her appreciation. She reciprocated her thanks in prayer and cooking. When we arrived, Nadia and a friend had been in the kitchen all day and her small one-room apartment was wafting with the smell of lumpia and shrimp. The amount of food she prepared was enough for twice those in attendance. In addition, after dinner she donated 10,000-yen (US\$120) to the church as a sign of appreciation—far beyond her perceived means.

As the time for parting neared, Nadia became downcast. Then during the 'farewell prayer' she broke down uncontrollably, caressing Mama Mary's feet and mumbling inaudible words of affection. Seconds felt like minutes and minutes, hours. Nadia told me later she was saying to Mama Mary "even if you are not with me, please guide other families as you go". Nadia could not part with Mama Mary and followed the BR from her house to the next. "The entire time you (BR leaders) came to retrieve Mama Mary from my house I was thinking about the Mama

Mary statue I had in the Philippines. I would love to bring her to Japan, but she is too big. I want a statue of my own,” she confessed.

For Nadia, saying the rosary to Mama Mary transported her through space and time to points in her life she wanted to relive. She explained how it took time for the mood to be set before she could approach Mama Mary. “Before praying, I would wait until my boyfriend went to sleep or to get used to reciting the rosary in English.” When the atmosphere was just right, she would remember her mother’s death and her own battle with cancer. “My mother and I would always say the rosary together. We even said it together in the hospital before she died. That’s why I buried her with her rosary”.

Nadia would also remember praying the rosary in the hospital before her surgery. “When I was in the hospital, I prayed every night before my operation. I even brought with me some icons of Mama Mary and rosary beads. *This really saved me* (italics mine). I asked the doctor to touch the pictures and placed them under my pillow during my operation. I knew Mama Mary would watch over me. After the operation, the doctor recommended that I take medicine for the pain, but I was in no pain.” Nadia recollected her surgery, convinced Mama Mary was the one to thank. “I asked Mama Mary to watch over the doctors and me and she did!”

Nadia’s affection toward Mama Mary is indicative of the intimate space many BRs become. These are private spaces between hosts and other Filipina leaders whom they share a common migrant experience.

4.2. Block Rosary as Uniquely Filipino

The kinds of affectionate relationship Filipinas have with Mama Mary are not often observed by Japanese parishioners. The affection Filipinas lavish on Mama Mary is unique within the RCCJ. But how they show affection, albeit an obvious difference, is merely one difference preventing Filipinos from introducing the BR to ‘all the faithful’ of Yamagoe Church. The biggest obstacle is a lack of

effort, deduced from the following shortcomings:

1. Traveling long distances by train and bus, for which cost is borne by participant
2. Disseminating information independently through private SNS channels (that obstruct access to other ethnic and language groups)
3. Unstated expectations of hosts to cook for all guests (while guests come empty-handed)
4. Assumptions everyone can read and understand English by providing no translation for prayers within the BR
5. An inability or lack of concern to invite family members to participate

These and many more complications stand in the way of transforming the BR into a multicultural practice the RCCJ can use. Why has it taken so long for Filipinas to make changes to this practice? A possible reason BRs continue to be attended almost exclusively by Filipinos is because they are, by design, made for Filipinos. This was the conclusion Fr. Tanaka came to after years of BR participation.

5. Fr. Tanaka and the Future of Yamagoe BR

It has been seven years since Fr. Tanaka blessed the Marian statue one Sunday afternoon in 2013. For the first few years of its operation, he accompanied BR leaders to Filipinos' houses in northern Tokyo and parts of Saitama. When doing so, he made a point to discuss with them about employment, their livelihood in Japan, and other small talk. When husbands were present, local politics and culture were frequent topics of discussion that lightened the heavy atmosphere which accompany these religious events. Into the third year, however, Fr. Tanaka's absences

increased. Instead of BRs, Fr. Tanaka began attending only those associated with house blessings.⁷ “I prefer house blessings because they are attended by the entire family and even sometimes (non-Christian) neighbors,” he said.

By 2018, Fr. Tanaka stopped attending BRs completely. He thought this had nothing to do with him; and told me so in 2019, but I suspect otherwise. First off, Fr. Tanaka has long possessed a contentious relationship with the BR. A leader hinted at this at a house blessing when they complained about his attitude toward Mama Mary. “We asked Father once who Mama Mary was,” one Filipina said, “and he asked us ‘Mary who?’ Can you believe he didn’t know who Mary was?” This incredulous leader took this as a sign Fr. Tanaka was indifferent toward Marian devotion. The reason is more nuanced.

Fr. Tanaka’s suspicion of the BR comes not from his ignorance of the Virgin Mary (after all, he is a Biblical scholar), but rather from his fear that Filipino groups might band around the BR and rip his parish apart. He complained to me on several occasions of Filipino communities doing just this in other parishes in the Tokyo Archdioceses. This was a fear he shared with some of the BRs architects with whom he helped start the Yamagoe BR for the purpose of strengthening weak communal bonds between church members. There were several BRs where I witnessed Fr. Tanaka downplay talk of Mama Mary by focusing on her minor position in the Bible. He commented on these actions in 2018, saying how he had “tried to make the BR digestible for Filipinos’ children and husbands,” but to no avail. He told me how he sometimes felt at odds with the way [Filipinas] affectionately touched Mama Mary and petitioned her for health and wellbeing; but knew little about her presence in the Bible. He also did not approve of how leaders ignored their husbands and children during BRs and remarked how the BR meant “nothing” to them.

⁷ House blessings are often held by Filipinos who desire blessings from clergy of a new or remodeled house in the belief this will protect them from harm.

On one Sunday, Fr. Tanaka looked at me disheartened and said, “it makes no difference whether I refuse them [his Filipino parishioners] or not, because they will continue regardless.” Whether Fr. Tanaka stopped being invited by BR leaders, or became tired of attending is unclear. What is certain, is that he no longer attends. “In the end,” he paused to add impact, “Mama Mary beat me”. Regardless of this conclusion, Fr. Tanaka continues to comply with Filipina BR leaders by giving them space after church to gather support. He continued, “I comply with their [Filipino parishioners] requests because they need the BR *as a kind of coping mechanism for their lives in Japan* (italics mine). Thus, I am happy so long as they do not join some other Filipino community”.

In the end, Fr. Tanaka understood that parts of the BR may not fit well within Yamagoe Church’s multicultural aim; but he felt it necessary to provide his Filipina parishioners with a cultural outlet. Does this mean the BR should be inculturated into every Catholic Church in Japan? Not necessarily. His decision to cautiously support the BR through Filipino proxy illustrates how rather than talking about foreign practices in terms of inculturation or syncretism, it is more important he understands how such practices impact the lives of his parishioners. Fr. Tanaka has achieved this politically by supporting a small group of active Filipinas he trusts understand him.

The BR never became the divisive wedge Fr. Tanaka had feared it would. Then again, it also never became a conduit for multiculturalism. It has remained, as it was in the beginning—Filipino. This should be of little surprise, however. The BR was not designed for the parish, but rather the individual devotions of the laity. The reason BRs are popular in Japan has to do with the independence they offer the Filipina from male-dominated church structures. Filipinas use time with Mama Mary to fill this gap. This was their time, and not something they wished to ‘translate’ into another language for the sake of strangers. Perhaps the reason BRs are attended exclusively by Filipinas is intentional.

Conclusion

The Block Rosary is a combination of Filipino and Catholic practices that come together in the shape of a Marian statue Filipinos call Mama Mary. The BR is practiced by Catholic communities across the country, but still has not infiltrated into the Japanese structure of the RCCJ. One reason for this is in part due to the affective relationship Filipinos have with Mama Mary, something seldom seen by Japanese Catholics. Another reason might be due to Filipinas’ need for change. The BR remains Filipino—and this is how its participants want it. Through their actions, Filipinas in this paper ‘speak’ loud and clear that they approve of the BR in its present form, even when the parish priest remains skeptical.

This case study illustrates the limitations of multiculturalism within the global Catholic Church. As immigration increases in Japan, local cultures must cautiously choose what aspects to include into their evolving multicultural identities. Simply because foreign practices seem similar to indigenous equivalents might prove otherwise upon further inspection. In the RCCJ, the large numbers of Filipinos dominating this church structure has made rejecting the BR forthright an unpopular, if not impossible conjecture. For the meantime, this means more clergy like Fr. Tanaka must learn to engage with Filipino practitioners in hopes that one day the BR can benefit the entire Catholic community.

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