



“CORDERO”
A Descriptive and Functionalist Study
of the Maundy Thursday
Potato Lamb Feast
in Morong, Rizal, Philippines

EDRIC C. CALMA

Introduction

ON MAUNDY THURSDAY, the town of Morong, Rizal, forty-two kilometers east of Manila, hosts a grand *Cordero* procession under the scorching mid-afternoon sun. The *Cordero* – Spanish for “lamb” - is carved out of a mixture of mashed potatoes, *kamote* (sweet potato), milk and sugar, and coated with icing. It is placed on a bamboo platform and carried in a festive procession that starts at the home of the *hermano* and *hermana* (sponsors; Spanish for “brother” and “sister” respectively) and passes through the town plaza until it reaches the church of Morong.

This paper is a descriptive and an evaluative case study of Morong’s *Cordero* tradition. It provides a detailed picture of the event (its origins, features, and procedures), evaluates its relation to Roman Catholic beliefs, and briefly examines the various functions it plays.

A resident since birth of the locale and an active community member, the researcher was most at ease doing an anthropological participant observation held weeks before, during and after Holy Week. He likewise conducted in-depth interviews to obtain and validate observed practices and information.

History

It is not surprising to see and experience very old traditions, nonexistent in adjacent locales, still being practiced in Morong, the old capital town of Rizal province during the Spanish era. After all, it was the venue of old cultural and socio-religious activities, including those for Lent (if not the whole year round). One such activity is the *Cordero*.

The earliest recorded mention of the *Cordero* was in 1931; the yearly invitations to the illustrious residents of the town list the names of the *hermanos* and *hermanas* from that year to 2008 (Invitation 2008).¹ The list also forms the basis of a 1993 two-page write-up on the *Cordero*:

*Nagsimula ang tradisyong ito noong 1931. (This tradition started in 1931) (Kordero ng Diyos 1993).*²

However, holding a feast on the date of the *Cordero* could have started as early as pre-colonial times. In the absence of other written accounts, this statement is mere speculation, but one based on the *Cordero*'s similarities with the pre-Hispanic feasts.

A reading of Scott (1985), Junker (2000) and other anthropological accounts of pre-colonial Philippines points to some indigenous feasts whose elements and rituals are similar to the *Cordero*. Such feasts celebrated a bountiful harvest, victory in war, or the birth of a child of the local chief. These auspicious events were seen as favors from the gods, but they were also opportunities for others to assert social status and to vie for social standing and power among the elite, among others (Junker 2000).

At any rate, the festivities of the pre-Hispanic community in Morong during or immediately after each harvest season may have been the precursors of the *Cordero* festival as we know it today. Like the *Cordero*, these indigenous celebrations feature:

- Feasting that is a calendrical ritual or periodic activity;
- Sponsored by the local elite;
- Serving of specialized or high-value foods, such as pigs or cows;

- Voluntary participation of local people termed *panunulungan*;
- Expansion of social prestige and political patronage on the part of the feast sponsors, etc.

The Cordero, however, differs from pre-Hispanic traditions since it has been incorporated into Roman Catholic belief systems. This fusion is consistent with early anthropological and historical studies, which show that Spanish friars proselytized the natives by merging Catholic teachings with local beliefs and rituals. This convergence resulted in what has been called “folk Catholicism,” of which the Cordero could be an example.

Such convergence is also seen in the timing of the Cordero and the pre-Hispanic festivities; Holy Week celebrations coincide with the first harvest season of the year, which is around March to May. Thus, it could be inferred then that the Spanish colonizers, seeing that the locals were holding feasts at this time of the year, merely adopted the tradition and injected it with a Christian flavor.

Defining the Cordero

For this study, the term “Cordero” covers the following definitions:

1. a lamb offering
2. a lamb-shaped potato and *kamote* delicacy
3. a procession that carries the Cordero delicacy
4. a ritual that takes place before the mass of the Last Supper
5. a feast that is held on the night of Maundy Thursday after the Cordero processions and the mass of the Last Supper
6. a tradition found only in the town of Morong involving nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5 above.

As a Roman Catholic event, the Cordero can be best understood in the context of Philippine Lenten traditions. Unlike other Catholic countries, the Lenten season is one of the more colorful events in Morong.

Morongueños (people from Morong) from other parts of the globe usually come home to take part in the community observance of Holy Week traditions. Activities include processions and plays that reenact the suffering of the Christ; the *pabasa* or chanting of the Christ's passion; novenas and acts of contrition, among others. The Cordero is held on Maundy Thursday and is a preliminary ritual before the Mass of the Last Supper.

Traditional preparations

Selection of the hermano and hermana

The hermano and the hermana, with help from the local moneyed class, manage and finance the preparations for the procession and feasting. Indeed, social status and wealth are two important factors in the selection of the hermano and hermana. Hence, the role commonly falls to the elite and influential families of Morong.



The Cordero

Participants

Although the Cordero is commonly led by Roman Catholic-based organizations of lay people and families of the sponsors, everybody is expected to participate. In fact, the formal list of the participants in the Cordero procession, as included in the yearly invitations, includes various church-based organizations, local politicians, the town mayor and the town council, the “Apostles” (lay people appointed to take part in the various church activities during Lent), *hermanos/hermanas pasados* (past sponsors) and their representatives, the family of the current hermano and hermana, future hermanos/hermanas, and the men who carry the Cordero. In the past, students from high schools and colleges were also asked to join. The participants represent a cross-section of the community, from the rich to the poor, and from the young to the old.

Food

Preparations for the ritual begin as early as three in the morning and last until the afternoon procession. The participants, regardless of age and social background, take part in the *panunulungan* (ie. providing voluntary help or labor). The actual Cordero is made of mashed potatoes, *kamote* (sweet potato), milk and sugar, which are mixed and molded into a shape of a lamb, and coated with icing to create a fluffy woolen coat similar to that of the real animal. The food is shared in a feast that serves various other Filipino dishes.

Physical structures

A *papag* or bamboo platform, where the Cordero is carried in procession, is constructed and beautifully decorated. Traditionally, the construction also involves artisans, and an accompanying *baluarte* or arch and *habong habong* or dining tables welcome the guests and visitors.

Procession

The procession begins at 3:00 in the afternoon in a festive and lively mood. A marching band alerts the townspeople to the arrival of the procession. The sponsors plan the routes, taking into consideration the location of major thoroughfares, the proximity of the hermanos' house to the church, as well as their individual preferences. Weather conditions are also taken into account; for instance, because of extreme heat or the inaccessibility of the hermano and hermana's house from the church, the Cordero is sometimes paraded only around the plaza and then to the church. Also, when the house of the sponsors is very far from the church, they could opt for a nearer, more suitable starting point for the procession. At any rate, the route traditionally includes the hermano's house, the town plaza, and the parish cathedral or church. Men who carry the Cordero are handpicked by the hermano and hermana depending on their connections and perceived standing in the community.

After the procession reaches the church, the Cordero is blessed with holy water. As an act of offering, the hermano performs the ceremonial and partial severing of the head, but reserves it for the feast. Public readings from the Old and New Testaments are held, followed by the Last Supper Mass. Afterwards, the whole procession leaves the church and returns to the hermano's house, where a lavish feast awaits the whole community.

In the procession following the church ceremony, the hermano carries the Cordero banner (a white cloth bearing the haloed sheep symbol of the Cordero with a cross) while his wife or the hermana would have a serving of the delicacy on a small plate with a *banderita* (a small flag, bearing the haloed sheep symbol of the Cordero with a cross), as would other participants.

After the feast, the head of the Cordero is handed over to the following year's hermano and hermana. A procession then proceeds to the house of next year's sponsors. There, festivities continue until late in the evening, though on a much smaller scale.

Attire

The hermano and the hermana, their immediate family and participants of the procession typically dress in *Filipiniana* attire: *barong Tagalog* for men and *terno* or *baro't-saya* for women. Everyone would be carrying a matching umbrella made of either *jusi* or *piña* fiber to match the formal *Filipiniana* wear. The Cordero procession cannot do away with umbrellas, not because of any religious significance but because of the sheer necessity of shielding the participants from the sun.

Feast

After the traditional procession and mass, the Cordero is sliced and shared among the community. It is believed that once blessed, it represents the body of Christ and that the community of believers should partake of it (Santiago, 2008). Some attribute healing powers to the Cordero and thus bring home a portion to sick family members. This belief is stressed in the following:

Bawat isang dumalo sa pagdiriwang ay nagsisikap na makakain o makapag-uwi ng Cordero dahil sa paniniwala ng mga taga-Morong na ito ay nakapagpapagaling ng maysakit at nagpapalakas ng katawan. Marami rin ang nagsasabing nagiging maswerte o tumatanggap ng biyaya ang mga nagiging Hermano ng Cordero. (Everyone who comes to the feast tries to eat or take with him a portion of the Cordero in the belief that it will heal the sick and strengthen the body. Other people also say that those who become an hermano of the Cordero become lucky or are blessed.) (Kordero 1993; Soriano 2008)

The Cordero and the Roman Catholic Tradition

The Roman Catholic faith in the Philippines observes and maintains a list of festivities that occur all over the country; however, the Cordero tradition is nowhere to be found on this list, as well as in the doctrines of the church.³ A thorough research by this writer of published materials and interviews yielded the same conclusion.

Prior to the late 1980s, the Cordero ritual was held in the early afternoon of Maundy Thursday. The procession of the potato lamb commemorated the lamb offering of the Jews during the time of Moses. The lamb also signifies Christ, who is the “Lamb of God.” In the Old Testament, the Jews used to kill prized lambs for the Passover as an offering to God (Exodus 12: 3-28). However, since the Philippines is not a pastoral country, the sheep offered in the Cordero is not a live animal.

By the late 1980s local parish officials and the religious lay people began associating the celebration of the Cordero with the Last Supper of Christ. The latter refers to the following biblical passages from the Book of Mark in the New Testament:

“On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, ‘Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?’

He sent two of his disciples and said to them, ‘Go into the city and a man will meet you, carrying a jar of water. Follow him.

Wherever he enters, say to the master of the house: ‘The Teacher says, ‘Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’”

Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Make the preparations for us there.’

The disciples then went off, entered the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover.

When it was evening, he came with the Twelve.” (Mark 14:12-16, NASB version)

Later, these two biblical stories—the Jews’ offering and the Last Supper—have been combined to underscore the biblical relevance of the Cordero, which, as stated above, commemorates Christ as the Lamb of God, who offered His body and blood to save mankind from sins.

It is symbolic. Lamb of God is one of the titles given to Jesus in the New Testament and consequently in the Christian tradition. It is believed to refer to Jesus' role as a sacrificial lamb atoning for the sins of man in Christian theology, harkening back to ancient Jewish Temple sacrifices in which a lamb was slain during the Passover, the blood was sprinkled along the door, and the lamb was eaten. (Kordero 2007).⁴

In addition to this, San Miguel⁵ (2008) commented that the *hermano* symbolizes the owner of the house where Christ and his twelve apostles held the Last Supper. Just as the owner hosted Christ and the Twelve, so does the *hermano* host the people and spend for the feast.

Changes in the tradition

Over the years, the Cordero tradition has undergone some changes, especially concerning the selection of the *hermano* and *hermana*. While the sponsors are generally taken from the elite of Morong, the non-elite (the traditional elite anyway) have now received the privilege to take over the management of the festivity. Most of these new *hermanos* and *hermanas* are *balikbayans* (Filipinos who have lived or worked abroad), who have acquired a new social status because of their (modest) wealth from foreign-currency earnings. Indeed, from 1997 to 2007, except in 2006, the *hermanos* and *hermanas* were taken from such a group. All in all, the selection of the sponsors now largely depends on one's volition and financial capabilities. In 2007, the *hermano* spent approximately Php 800,000 – Php 1,000,000.

The impact of the *balikbayan-hermanos* on the Cordero has been felt in several other ways. For instance, they have introduced M&M chocolates and Sun Maid raisins, which are popular coming-home presents, as ingredients of the Cordero. The potato lamb has acquired a new look, yet the change has also opened up and reinforced differences from traditional practice.

Moreover, since they arrive a few weeks before the festivities, the balikbayan-hermanos are not able to perform traditional responsibilities thoroughly. At times, the communal preparation (the *panunulugan*) of the food is set aside; the food is now simply catered. In addition, the construction of the traditional physical structures has now been relegated to labor outside of the town for cost-efficient purposes. They recruit craftsmen outside Morong who do not necessarily practice the indigenous, traditional artistic styles when building the *baluarte*, *habong habong*, and the *papag*.

Functional study of the Cordero tradition

The Cordero festivity is performed primarily for religious reasons. For the locals, it serves as an offering (lamb) to God and a celebration of God's gift (Jesus Christ) to men. For the *hermanos* and *hermanas*, it is a venue to "pay forward" the blessings they have received and to seek divine favor (it is a local belief that becoming the *hermano/hermana* brings good fortune). For the believers, the partaking of the blessed *cordero* heals ailments. However, as may be derived from this study, it has social and economic benefits as well.

Reconstitution

As an annual "public event" (Handelman 1990, quoted in Breeman 1993), the Cordero has the function and effect of "reconstituting" the town and its people. Beyond the religious significance, the act of coming together re-draws the town folks as a community. Held during the Lenten season when the locals are in a time of rest and reflection, it gives them the opportunity, despite recent changes, to:

- (1) catch up on each other's and the community's concerns as they come together to prepare and contribute to the *panunulungan*
- (2) express community spirit through communal artistry
- (3) watch the procession, or
- (4) attend the feast as a community.

The tradition brings together families, colleagues and old friends who may have been separated by distance or work. The Lenten season, the Cordero ritual and the tradition of working together for the *panunulungan* have effectively functioned as a “reconstituting” agent of the Morong community.

Outlet for collective art

Despite the recent changes, the Cordero has been a traditional outlet of Morong’s collective art, tangible (i.e. the Cordero delicacy, the kinayas and the baluarte) or otherwise (the panunulungan and the actual cooking of the delicacy). Regardless of the output these expressions provide, they become manifestations of the living spirit of the community.

Assertion of social status

For the balikbayan hermanos/hermanas of the past decade, the Cordero validates their ascension to a new social class. Since being a hermano was a sign of community approval, it also becomes an affirmation of the person’s social standing and prestige. Clarke (2001) stresses that “feasts as mechanisms for redistribution, others as means for demonstrating heritable holdings and status, while many claim that they demonstrate and amplify prestige” (x). Likewise, Hayden (2001) argues that in societies all over the world, people hold feasts to demonstrate status and amplify prestige, among other things. Indeed, the idea of social prestige attracts the community’s new moneyed class to flaunt their newly acquired status by taking on the responsibility of the hermano and hermana, a post which was traditionally reserved to a different set of privileged few.

Business Opportunity

Small and medium entrepreneurs profit in the celebration, which serve as an avenue for them to sell their merchandise and products to locals and visitors. Food and beverage vendors work tirelessly to serve the volume of participants who join in the procession. Laborers also get commissioned projects for the construction of the physical structures prior to the event.

Conclusion

In keeping with the tradition and maintaining its relevance to the lives of the Catholic observers, the local people of Morong commemorate the passion and death of Christ through the Cordero. Over the years, it has undergone significant changes in its preparation and observation. Such changes, however, are inevitable if this tradition is to survive in a shifting social atmosphere. After all, living community traditions are expressed not in a vacuum, but within the whole social spectrum where they exist and act in.

In looking at the functions of Cordero tradition, the paper used the concept of a “public event” (Handelman 1990, in Breeman, 1993). By means of its structure and yearly enactment, the Cordero has the function and effect of “reconstituting” the town and its people. It was likewise determined that taking part in this tradition has varied significance for its participants, from the simplest reasons (i.e. religious, communal expression which may be artistic or otherwise, good neighborliness and *panunulungan*) to the grandiose and sociological (i.e. validation and assertion of social status) ones. More importantly, the performance and observance of community expressions, like the Cordero, enable the people to achieve a sense of unity in their privileged participation in a significant tradition.

Notes

- 1 (2008 Kordero Invitation, unpublished data)
- 2 (1993 Kordero Invitation, unpublished data)
- 3 Rev. Fr. John Gallagher, a former parish priest of St. Jerome in Morong, confirms that the tradition is nowhere to be found in the list of festivities or in the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.
- 4 Armeen (Morong resident), comment on the Kordero 2007
- 5 Mike San Miguel, (local patron of arts and culture; Morong resident), personal interview on 22 March 2008.

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