

Hermano mayor: fiesta sponsorship in the contemporary Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Religious rituals were a way of life for pre-Hispanic Filipinos even before the arrival of the Spaniards and the introduction of Christianity in the Philippines. The pagan practices gradually changed when Christianity deeply penetrated the culture of the natives. The conduct of the fiesta was introduced by the Spaniards, particularly the religious orders that came to the Philippines, to entice the *principalias* (nobility) and the ordinary people to transfer to the newly established pueblos (towns). As the fiesta came with a hefty cost, an *hermano mayor* (major sponsor) was selected from a pool of local elite to sponsor the expenses. After five hundred years, while the *hermano mayor* tradition is still apparent, it is only a passing theme in extant

literature. The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the centuries-old tradition, create a profile of those who have become an *hermano mayor* in modern times, and understand why such a tradition persists to this day. Moreover, personal interviews, a survey, anecdotes, and photo documentations were used in discussing this unique religious and cultural practice in the Philippines.

Keywords

hermano mayor, *hermana mayor*, *hermanos mayores*, sponsorship tradition, religious practice, colonisation, *cofradia*, *hermandad*, Catholicism, Philippines

Introduction

Philippine society already enjoyed advance social and cultural development even before its discovery and eventual occupation by Spanish colonisers. In the pre-Hispanic context, anthropological records showed that local communities were organised through four distinct leaders: the *datu* (chieftain), the *panday* (blacksmith), the *bayani* (warrior) and the *babaylan* (priestess) (Salazar 1989). Among the four, the *babaylans* or *catalonas*, who were normally women, wielded a certain prestige because they served as spiritual leaders of their communities. They were also keepers of the intangible cultural heritage of their ethnolinguistic communities, given that they mastered religious rituals, native songs, dances, oral traditions, and poetry. The importance of the *babaylan* was also solidified through the patronage and sponsorship of the *datu*, who was of noble lineage and was considered as the political and economic leader of the community. Through her knowledge of astronomy, the *babaylan* was consulted by the *datu* on matters pertaining to agriculture such as the auspicious time in clearing the forest for planting as well as the right time to harvest the crops (Villariba 1996).

Another way to explain the significant relationship between the *babaylan* and the *datu* is the precolonial religion. Ancient Filipinos believed that the natural environment was inhabited by either good or bad spirits and the only way to appease them was for the *babaylan* to offer sacrifices and perform necessary religious rituals (Reyes 1985). Hence, in the agrarian setting, rituals were conducted in the hope of gaining fair weather conditions, which would lead to a good harvest. In these ornate rituals, aside from the participation of the community, it was customary for the *datu* and the members of the local nobility to take part and sponsor the entirety or some aspects of the rituals, which at times would last for days. Del Castillo (2015) adds that churches as places of worship were unknown to pre-Hispanic Filipinos; hence, an altar for the *nagaanito* (worshippers) was erected in the house of the *datu*.

A proof to support this claim was the pre-Hispanic rites in the town of Morong in the province of Rizal. In his article on the potato lamb feast on Maundy Thursday, Edric Calma (2009) elaborates the five features of Indigenous traditions in Morong: feasting was a periodic activity conducted by the natives, feasting was sponsored by the local elite, high-value foods such as pigs and cows were served in specialised dishes, the lower class practised *panunulungan* (volunteerism), and the sponsorship of the local elites led to the expansion of their social and

political prestige. Analysing these features, there was a necessity for the local elites to sponsor the rituals given its ornateness and the hefty costs that came alongside it. When the Philippines was formally colonised by Spain in the 16th century, the ritual sponsorship tradition persisted, but it transcended to another form that fitted the colonial regime and the traditions of the Catholic Church. As the Spaniards introduced absolute ownership of land and the gradual improvement of agricultural technology in the late 18th century, the *principalias* ('the old nobility') took advantage of this transformation (Encyclopædia Britannica 2021), profited from their vast farmlands and reinforced their status in society. The early missionaries meanwhile introduced the concept of the fiesta which focused on the patron saint of the *población* (town proper) or *barrio* (neighbourhood) to efficiently convert the natives to Catholicism. As the fiesta gradually replaced the precolonial rituals of early Filipinos, it also came with a high cost. Such practice was then used to lure the *principalias* which, in later years, would be an instrument to elevate their social prestige when all (if not many of them) assumed the role of the *hermano mayor* (major sponsor) during fiesta time. In Spanish vocabulary, the term *hermano mayor* translates to an older brother. The *hermano mayor* in the Philippine context, however, is used to describe an individual (*hermano* for a male sponsor or *hermana mayor* for a female sponsor) or a group of people (*hermanos mayores*) who are chosen by the parish priest or a church recognised organisation (e.g. *cofradía*, *hermandad*) to sponsor the fiesta activities.

The purpose of this article is to explore the *hermano mayor* tradition in the Philippines. While this kind of sponsorship is still extant today and is apparent especially in the provinces, the custom has never been fully investigated, given the scarcity of available references. Even with present literature available, it is just a passing theme buried in extensive subjects. Soledad Borrromeo-Bühler (1985), for one, discusses the 19th century social class structure in Cavite and uses the *hermano mayor* narrative as one of the themes in depicting class struggles in the colonial days. Similarly, while the work of Braulio Sibug translated by Lourdes Vidal (2018) from Capampangan to Tagalog, vividly describes being an *hermano mayor* in the context of a *barrio*, it is nonetheless a work of fiction. The closest discussion is the article of Calma (2009), which discusses the unique Maundy Thursday tradition in Morong, Rizal called the *Cordero* (potato lamb) where the *hermano mayor* is central to the success of the celebration. One fact that can be

ascertained is the constant struggle among the social classes and the pursuit of social assimilation of the new rich. Therefore, this present study aims to understand and create a descriptive profile of those who served as an *hermano mayor* between 1980 and 2019. The study will then uncover whether the motivation of those who have become an *hermano mayor* in contemporary times is still about the need for social prestige in the community. In the process, the study will also explore the changes in the conduct of said custom. Calma (2009) identifies that old, rich families who can sponsor church rituals have been scarce through the years. Thus, one way to fill this gap is to explain how such a reality affected the *hermano mayor* tradition that generated a tolerance for certain variations in the practice today. The incumbent study will examine and discuss four domains: (1) fiesta as a religious pageantry, (2) the *hermano mayor* of earlier times, (3) imaging the *hermano mayor*, and (4) the *hermano mayor* in contemporary times.

In creating a descriptive profile of the *hermano mayor*, the writer supplements the discussions with information from personal interviews and a survey. Six respondents were interviewed for this study including Rev. Fr. Miguel Ramon Chan of the Archdiocese of Cebu; Dr. Louie Nacorda, author and cultural heritage advocate in Cebu; Arwin Paul Lingat, member of the Archdiocesan Committee on Church Heritage in the Archdiocese of San Fernando in Pampanga; and Mario Aniceto Sumera, Mrs. Ligaya Munar and Jeremy Niño de Vega, who were *hermanos mayores* in the past. The interviews were conducted personally, via video conferencing on Zoom, Facebook chats or calls through Messenger. In addition, a survey of 32 individuals who assumed the role of *hermano* or *hermana mayor* between 1980 and 2019 was also conducted. The survey was created through Google Forms, and the link to the survey was openly shared through the Facebook page, Instagram and YouTube account of Arte Sacra Ph. Cluster sampling was also maximised by creating an online group chat where the link to the online survey was shared with individuals who were former *hermanos mayores*. These respondents are personally known by the writer. More so, some respondents from the group chat referred the online survey to other individuals who have experienced becoming an *hermano mayor*. The survey contained both closed- and open-ended questions, and inquired regarding the respondents' overall experience as an *hermano mayor*. Given that the writer had been an *hermano mayor* three times in the past, personal anecdotes and photographic documentation were also shared in elaborating certain points in the study.

Fiesta as a religious pageantry in the Philippines

Native society in precolonial Philippines was composed of scattered communities throughout the archipelago. Early missionaries long noted the existence of the *barangay* ('local community') composed of at least 30 to 100 families. This posed a problem for the Spaniards as it was harder to impose control if communities were largely separated by proximity from each other. In solving this predicament, the Spaniards introduced a system called *reduccion*. The system aimed to encourage the native population living in scattered settlements to transfer to enclosed localities. Tamar Herzog (2018), a historian specialising in Latin American affairs, points that the *reduccion* stemmed from the notion that people who do not belong in established communities were considered harmful. This concept applies to religious, civil and political contexts. Those who lived outside the *reducciones* were branded as *cimarrones* ('untamed'), *remontados* ('people of the hills') or *vagabundos* ('vagrants') (Gutay n.d.). For the Spaniards, it would be easier to hone the minds of the natives under their noses and the *reduccion* was the perfect propaganda to complete the colonial agenda, which was to Christianise and Hispanicise the native population. In the *reduccion*, a rule called *bajo de la campana* ('under the bells') was imposed wherein the townsfolk would literally be under the administration of the church and daily life was guided by the pealing of bells (Gutay n.d.). Religious orders (e.g. Augustinians, Dominicans, Franciscans, Recollects, Jesuits) governed towns and municipalities given the scarcity of Spanish officials who came to the Philippines. In the *poblacion* or *cabecera* of the new *pueblos* established by the religious, the local church was the focal point while the sprawling plaza (normally in front of it) was framed with large dwellings occupied by the *principalias* and those people who mattered in town.

While early Filipinos were more tolerant of the Hispanisation process, some natives were hesitant to transfer in the *reducciones* because the majority were subsistence farmers or fishermen and transferring to new *pueblos* would affect their livelihood. The missionaries solved this problem by introducing the *visita* system wherein a small chapel was erected in various *barrios* or *sitios* ('hamlet'), which was attached to the mother parish located in the *población*. These *visitas* were dedicated to a patron saint and were often visited by the parish priest who would use these chapels in both administering civil policies and conducting religious services such as

scheduled masses, weddings and baptisms (Coseteng 1972). Regardless of whether one resided in the *población* or *barrio*, the conduct of the fiesta was introduced by the early missionaries to further their evangelical efforts. The fiesta was also used as a marketing scheme. Reinhard Wendt (1998), who examined Philippine fiesta and colonial culture, describes in detail how the Jesuits conducted the fiesta and the liturgical celebrations in the colonial days. In a report to the Holy See, the Jesuits mentioned that their fiestas were celebrated with pomp, diversity and plenty of entertainment. These fiestas would promote the grandeur of the new religion and shame the pre-Hispanic rituals of the natives by displaying much exuberance. In a recorded 17th century fiesta in Zamboanga, the Jesuit parish priest made sure that the fiesta would be nostalgic: the church was covered with clay tiles, which was a status symbol during those days; an assortment of fireworks displays was held; and a rather interesting bull fight caught the attention of many spectators, including the *Moros* ('Muslims') (Combés, Retana, & Pastells 1897).

These fiestas in Zamboanga were perfect templates of how the early missionaries used aesthetic fascination to convert the natives to Catholicism. In the fiestas of the Spanish colonial era, nostalgia and attracting the five senses mattered and this could be achieved through art, food, architecture, and public performance, among others (Tamayo 2020; Wendt 1998). In the end, these proceedings aimed to achieve two things: impose the Christian message and legitimise the power of the colonial regime. These were successfully achieved by subjecting participants to leave momentarily their present reality, and, in the process of participating, they were moulded to assimilate the ideas, values and concepts promoted by the Spaniards. Others, however, viewed the fiesta as a form of excess (Wendt 1998). The fiesta normally began with a nine-day novena in honour of the patron saint and culminates during the saint's feast day. In a span of ten days, a staggering amount of money is needed to fund all the activities related to the fiesta, especially in the *población* where fiestas were supposedly grander in scale. Those who say the fiestas as decadent would be reminded to contemplate instead (Wendt 1998). Amid the vanity of it all, what matters was the sincere devotion of the people to the patron saint. The natives completed the novenas and attended the activities during fiesta day in the hope that their prayers would be answered. This stemmed from the fact that the fiesta also adopted pre-Hispanic constructs (Wendt 1998), which paved the way for folk Catholicism to prosper.



Figure 1
The patron saint is central to the celebration of the town or barrio fiesta. In the picture is the century-old image of the Sto. Niño de Malolos, the patron of Barangay Sto. Niño in Malolos, Bulacan.
Photo: Ronaldo M. Santos, 2021

In contemporary Philippines where Catholicism is still the predominant religion, the celebration of fiestas and important liturgical events is alive and almost untouched despite the introduction of other Christian denominations and the constantly changing economic landscape. While the intention is neither to Christianise nor legitimise the power of a colonial regime, what remains interesting are the modern Filipinos' continuing fascination for aestheticism, ornate rituals and nostalgia, which still penetrate the fiesta of today (Figure 1).

The *hermano mayor* in earlier times

Soledad Borrromeo-Bühler (1985), a cultural observer and historian, clearly depicts the *hermano mayor* tradition during the 19th century in the context of Cavite. Recreation during this period in the Philippines revolved around four things: cockfighting, playing a card game called *panguingue*, chewing *buyo* (combination of betel leaf, areca nut, lime and tobacco) and the most anticipated

event of the year – the town fiesta. As was customary, the town fiesta was sponsored by an *hermano mayor*, who was part of the *principalia*. An *hermano mayor* was necessary because the fiesta incurred plenty of expenses. What drove the elite to sponsor such lavish tradition was the accompanying prestige that they gained from the occasion. In fact, acting as an *hermano mayor* would often become a topic of conversation that extended even after the town fiesta. This was a sufficient reason why the rich clamoured to sustain the custom and sometimes even pushed *hermanos* to outshine their predecessors. By fiesta time, the *hermano mayor* sponsored the brass bands and was expected to open house for a sumptuous feast. Historian Ventura Lopez Fernandez (1892) vividly describes a class structure that existed during a fiesta banquet sponsored by an *hermano mayor* in his home. This class structure could be observed in the placement of guests and the differences in the delicacies served during the banquet. For one, Spaniards and other esteemed guests of the *hermano mayor* were seated upstairs. They were treated to a decadent reception: the best dinnerware adorned the table; stuffed turkey, glazed ham, poultry, food imported from Europe and wines of all brands during the period were endlessly served. On the contrary, the commonfolk and the poor downstairs had all kinds of native delicacies with the *lechón* ('roasted pig') being the highlight. Soledad Borrromeo-Bühler (1985) added that cooperation between the elite and the commonfolk, especially those in the *barrios*, was observed despite the existing class structure of the era. As time passed, the number of *principalias* who could assume the role of *hermano mayor* dwindled; thus, members of the middleclass had the opportunity to finally secure a slot in the practice. While becoming an *hermano mayor* may drain middleclass coffers, the tradition also replenished their wealth – given the profit it could generate for their local businesses during the fiesta.

Mario Aniceto Sumera, a production designer by profession, recounts his motivations for becoming an *hermano mayor* in Paombong, Bulacan between the 1970s and 1980s. As a young boy, he first served as a *kapitan* ('minor sponsor') in the *barrio* fiesta of San Isidro (Saint Isidore) and later, in his teenage years, as an *hermano mayor* together with his father in the same fiesta. He indicated two reasons why he accepted the role: first, it was customary for each member of the family and other relatives to serve as an *hermano mayor* in the *barrio* fiesta as a form of devotion; second, he recollected that it was also a form of thanksgiving at the time. Sumera added that his name was inscribed by his mother and grandmother in the roster of

hermanos. In this case, he had no say regarding the matter and had to wait for a couple of years before he could finally take his turn as an *hermano mayor*. As a veteran *hermano mayor* who attended many fiestas, he clarified a common misconception that fiestas in the *barrios* are less expensive to conduct compared with the one in the *población*, which is not true. Fiestas in the *barrios* consume more resources because the *hermano mayor* is expected to open house to the entire neighbourhood, whereas in the *población* the guest list could be controlled. On the contrary, he cited a tradition in the *barrio* where residents would pool a certain amount of money to curb the expenses of the present *hermano mayor*. It is known as an act of *pangingilak* or solicitation. The money collected from residents could be used as payment for the brass band, choir or decorations.

In an interview with Mrs. Ligaya Munar, the writer's aunt who served as a *kapitana* for the fiesta of *Sta. Elena* (St. Helena) during her teenage years in the 1960s and as an *hermana mayor* during the fiesta of *San Antonio de Padua* (St. Anthony of Padua) in the early 1990s in Hagonoy, Bulacan (Figure 2), shared three reasons why people



Figure 2
Mrs. Ligaya Munar served as *hermana mayor* in the early 1990s during the fiesta of San Antonio de Padua in the *población* of Hagonoy, Bulacan.
Photo: Mrs. Ligaya Munar, 1990s



Figure 3
Mrs. Valenta Dizon-Garcia assumed the role of *hermana mayor* during the fiesta of San Antonio de Padua in 1954. Mrs. Garcia was wearing a *terno* that evolved from the *Traje de Mestiza*.
Photo: Tamayo Archives, 1954

assumed the role of an *hermano* or *hermana*, especially during her heydays: as a form of thanksgiving, because an individual had a special intention, or the individual was promised to the patron saint by a family member or distant relative. She cannot exactly remember the reason why she served as a *kapitana* in the May fiesta of *Sta. Elena* but affirmed that it was a common practice back then. On the contrary, being an *hermana mayor* for the fiesta of *San Antonio de Padua* had a deeper motivation. Mrs. Munar explained that her late aunt, Mrs. Valenta Dizon-Garcia, was an *hermana mayor* at the National Shrine of St. Anne in the *población* for the fiesta of San Antonio de Padua – to whom she was devoted – in the 1950s (Figure 3). Mrs. Garcia promised Attorney Cristeta Tamayo, Mrs. Munar’s sister and the writer’s mother, to become an *hermana mayor* for passing the bar examination. A few years later, Mrs. Munar was volunteered by her sister to the fiesta organisers. In a way, the custom of being an *hermana mayor* in Mrs. Munar’s family is motivated by the family’s devotion and as a form of thanksgiving for the blessings received through the intercession of San Antonio de Padua.

Imaging the *hermano mayor*

One reason why the affluent aspire to become an *hermano mayor* is the considerable prestige that could be attached to their names. While the highlight for being an *hermano mayor* is largely concentrated on the actual fiesta of the patron saint, the responsibility lasts for a year until a new *hermano mayor* assumes the role. The obligations of the *hermano mayor* start right after taking an oath of responsibility. Traditionally, the incoming *hermano mayor* is called in front of the altar before the *misa mayor* ends, and the new *hermano mayor* is joined with the incumbent *hermano mayor*. This practice is known especially in the Tagalog region as the practice of *salinan*. Some parishes, however, opt to do this activity separately – days or even a month after the fiesta. After taking the oath, the incumbent *hermano mayor* hands over an important emblem called *vara alta* (Figure 4) to the incoming *hermano mayor*. The *vara alta* is a symbol of authority, which equates to an influential person or staff of office. It looks like a long metal cane with a circular or oval receptacle covered in glass where an icon of the patron saint could be attached. This is also decorated



Figure 4
A *vara alta* is used by an *hermano* or *hermana mayor* during a fiesta as a symbol of authority, responsibility and social distinction.
Photo: Jose Antonio Lorenzo L. Tamayo, 2022

with flowers and various laces when in use by the *hermano mayor*. In other parishes, the *vara alta* is made of a wooden cane and a sculpted image of the patron saint is attached to it. The *vara alta* is usually provided by the parish, but there are times when a church organisation would request the incoming *hermano mayor* to commission one instead. The estimated price of a custom-made *vara alta* starts at PHP5,000 (USD98). The *hermano mayor* holds the *vara alta* most of the time during the *salinan*, *visperas mayores* (ninth day of the novena in honour of the patron saint) and *misa mayor* (pontifical mass). And it is definitely apparent during processions. In the St. Michael the Archangel Parish in Bacoor, Cavite, Jeremy Niño de Vega, a former *hermano*, narrates that the *vara alta* used in their parish – which was made of beaten silver, contains both icons of *San Miguel* (St. Michael) and the *Santo Rosario* (Holy Rosary) and has precious rubies attached to it – is as old as the town fiesta. He adds that the *salinan* of yesteryears did not happen in the church, but at the residence of the next *hermana mayor*. The incumbent *hermana* would go to the house of the incoming *hermana mayor* and hands over the *vara alta* outside the gate without much fanfare. In other towns, aside from the *vara alta*, it is also customary for a small or exact replica of the town patron to be enthroned in the residence of the incumbent *hermano*. The image stays with the incumbent *hermano* for a year and it is passed on to succeeding *hermanos mayores*. Regardless of the variation in both form and practice of the *salinan*, the *vara alta* symbolises the prestige, authority and responsibility of the *hermano mayor*.

Aside from the *vara alta*, outfits are another important emblem that an *hermano mayor* considers. This is proven by the survey results of this study, as the majority of the *hermanos mayores* mentioned that they allot at least 10.63 per cent of their total fiesta budget for their fashion ensemble. One clear expectation for any *hermano mayor* is to always look presentable. This is why *hermanos mayores* invest in the kind of outfit that they wear, especially during the *misa mayor* and procession where many eyes are looking. As the writer has observed, the trend regarding fashion choices for the *hermano mayor* tradition has not changed much over time. In many vintage and recent photo documentations, an *hermana mayor* opted for the classic *Filipiniana* attire and the styles varied (e.g. *traje de mestiza*, *balintawak*, *terno*) (Figure 5); meanwhile, an *hermano mayor* would simply wear the classic *Barong Tagalog* made of either *piña* ('pineapple fibre'), *jusi* ('abaca fibre'), silk cocoon or a combination. Delicate embroidery is also applied on the



Figure 5
Hermanos mayores, Mr. and Mrs. Arturo and Maria de Gloria Manansala and their children posed for posterity in front of the image of Sta. Ana, patron saint of Hagonoy, Bulacan, on 26 June 2021.
 Photo: Paulo Yamanaka, 2021

barong. The estimated price of custom made *Filipiniana* attire for women may cost today between PHP20,000 (USD392) and PHP150,000 (USD2,941) depending on the brand, designer and materials used. The same factors are true for fine *barong* produced by couturiers that may cost between PHP10,000 (USD196) and PHP30,000 (USD588). There are no restrictions as to the colour scheme of the ensemble an *hermano* or *hermana mayor* wears, but the more conservative ones would prefer a white or off-white colour scheme. Sometimes, a *cofradia* ('confraternity') or the parish prescribes the kind of outfit and colour scheme that an *hermano* or *hermana* must adhere to. An example is the practice of the *Cofradia de la Inmaculada Concepcion* in Intramuros, Manila where incumbent and past *hermanos mayores* are requested to wear a classic white ensemble with a matching blue-and-white sash during the festivity every first Sunday of December as a nod to the purity of the Virgin Mary. More so, there are instances when parish priests would like the *hermana mayor* to dress conservatively (i.e. no plunging neckline, no tight-fitting gowns, not too revealing). The outfit is not complete without some show-stopping jewellery – many of which are heirloom pieces, especially in the case of those *hermanos* or *hermanas* belonging to old wealth. Recently, an embroidered *escapulario* ('scapular') or medal containing the insignia of the patron has become quite fashionable for contemporary *hermanos mayores*.

The *hermano mayor* in contemporary times

A recent episode of an afternoon *teleserye* ('television

drama') on a known local television network featured a scenario wherein a maid informed a family matriarch that she was chosen once again by the bishop to serve as an *hermana mayor* for the town fiesta. Infuriated, the matriarch impatiently replied, "'Ako na naman? Wala na bang iba?" ('It's me again? Can't they select another person?'). This scenario on local television only proves that the *hermano mayor* tradition in the Philippines remains relevant even in modern times. Through the years, there have been different approaches to select a prospective *hermano mayor*. Traditionally, an *hermano mayor* is selected from any family that has the right pedigree, prestige and wealth. This practice could be observed in the selection of *hermanos mayores* between the 19th century and the 1990s based on extant literature, documentations (Borromeo-Bühler 1985; Calma 2009) and interviews conducted by the author. In Iloilo City, it was customary that those serving as *hermanos mayores* came from the line of landed Ilonggo families. This changed in 2020 when Mrs. Emma Galindez-Zapanta was chosen as the *hermana mayor* by Rev. Fr. Raymundo Alcayaga of the San Jose de Placer Parish for the Dinagyang Festival that honours the Santo Niño. Mrs. Zapanta, a 44-year devotee of the Santo Niño and a member of the *Cofradia del Santo Niño de Cebu*, admits that she came from a modest background and it came as a surprise when the parish priest approached her for the role. During her tenure as an *hermana mayor*, she was supported by her circle of friends in the parish (Albay 2020).

Starting in the early 2000s, the author noticed that there was a gradual shift in the selection and number of *hermanos mayores* serving a particular fiesta. In the case of the Diocesan Shrine and Parish of Our Lady of Mercy in Novaliches, Quezon City, it was customary to select an *hermano mayor* from distinguished families for the annual town fiesta (Figure 6). However, a transition happened in 2008, as the parish opened the practice to regular parishioners given that all prestigious families in town had already served their tenure as an *hermano mayor* and because nobody wants to shoulder the burden of the hefty costs. The parish then selected individuals representing each Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) to solve the problem. Instead of one individual or family spending for all the fiesta expenses, those chosen from the BECs were only asked a minimum of PHP10,000 (USD196) as an entry point to become one of the *hermanos* or *hermanas*. To this day, the same practice ensues and there are at least 10 *hermanos mayores* every town fiesta. The trend of having multiple *hermanos* in a fiesta is seemingly becoming



Figure 6
Mr. and Mrs. Noel and Lani Acoba represent the group of *hermanos mayores* from Barangay Novaliches Proper for the town fiesta this coming September 2022. Take note of the unique *vara alta* made of wood that Mr. Acoba holds. Photo: Jose Antonio Lorenzo L. Tamayo, 2021

normal these days as 17 out of 32 survey respondents admitted that they were accompanied by other individuals when they had assumed the role of *hermano mayor*. This trend can also be observed in many fiestas today (e.g. Sto. Niño de Malolos Foundation, Cofradia de la Inmaculada Concepcion). In line with the selection process, the survey results show that a prospective *hermano mayor* is mainly chosen under two circumstances: (1) someone from the parish invited a possible *hermano mayor*, or (2) an individual personally volunteered to assume the role of an *hermano mayor*. These two circumstances, however, do not always apply to all parishes in the Philippines. Some parishes do not discriminate parishioners who would like to become an *hermano* or *hermana mayor*. Arwin Paul Lingat, member of the Archdiocesan Committee on Church Heritage in the Archdiocese of San Fernando, shares that the process of selecting the *hermano mayor* in most Pampanga towns is done by people's acclamation. In Betis, for example, there is an annual gathering during the Epiphany where people cast their votes for the next president of the *comite de festejos* ('fiesta committee'). The elected president acts as

the supposed *hermano mayor*. In contrast, the practice in Bacolor is by selecting the members of the *Centro Catolico*, an organisation composed of the laity designated to plan the fiesta of the *La Naval de Bacolor* and the activities in line with Advent and Holy Week. Unlike other towns, the people selected in the said organisation are not necessarily members of the local elite; however, they are expected to donate or solicit money for the fiesta activities.

A recent development in the conduct of the town fiesta is the interest of the local government in meddling in religious traditions. This has an adverse effect and has challenged the traditional notion of being an *hermano mayor*. In some Philippine towns where the fiesta of a local patron saint has turned into a big festival or annual tourist attraction, the municipality would create a fiesta committee instead of having an *hermano mayor*. The role of the parish is limited to the conduct of the novena masses, processional route and church services, whereas the municipal government takes the role of the *hermano mayor* as it controls many facets of the fiesta, provides catering services and entertains guests and members of the media. The case of the Pahiyas Festival in Lucban, Quezon illustrates this context as the local government organises an executive committee that oversees the annual fiesta (Antolihao 2014). Arwin Paul Lingat also exemplifies the feast of *Apung Iru* (St. Peter) in Apalit, Pampanga where both civic and religious activities are managed by the annual fiesta committee. In other towns that celebrate the so-called *Pistang Bayan* (the town's foundation day), it is customary for the town mayor or a local politician to automatically assume the role of *hermano mayor* for as long as they stay in power (Figure



Figure 7
Honorable Francis Gerald Abaya, Cavite's 1st District Representative in the Philippine Congress, served as an *hermano mayor* and walked in the procession for the fiesta of San Jose at the Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Binakayan. Photo: Honorable Francis Gerald Abaya, 2022

7). The town of Hagonoy in Bulacan conducts this practice where a High Mass, a procession highlighting the town's patron saint and a reception open to the public are held, which are all sponsored by the local government.

In the Bicol region, it is also necessary to have a *cabo mayor* (the region's equivalent of an *hermano mayor*) during the singing ritual of the *dotoc* every May in honour of the Holy Cross. As such, *barrio* Sta. Cruz in the town of Baa signals the selection of the *cabo mayor* early in the morning when a crier awakes everyone by banging an aluminium basin or metal plate and shouts "'Miting kan magna gurang!'" ('meeting of the elders'), which means that a meeting will be held by evening of that day. The first issue to be settled during the meeting is the selection of the *cabo mayor* and *cabo menor* or *kagab-iyon* ('minor sponsors'). The *cabo mayor* serves as the chief sponsor during the *visperas mayor* and actual fiesta, while those chosen as *cabo menor* are in charge of the first eight nights of the *dotoc* (Llana 2009). In some regions in the Philippines, the practice of being an *hermano mayor* is, as a matter of fact, not in vogue and the tradition seems to have been adopted quite recently or is in transition. In Barili, Cebu, Rev. Fr. Miguel Ramon Chan of the Diocesan Shrine of St. Anne recounts that the practice was performed for a certain period, but the parish fails to sustain it. Despite this, the Basilica Minore del Santo Niño in Cebu City, which is under the Augustinians, revived the tradition. It is said that the practice of having an *hermano mayor* started in 1565 when conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legazpi was considered the first *hermano mayor*; on the contrary, there are no records of succeeding *hermanos* after Legazpi, and the practice stopped for roughly four hundred years until the Augustinians drafted a resolution to finally revive the tradition. It was only in 1965 that the first *hermano mayor* in modern times – through the person of former Chief Justice of the Philippines, Jose Yulo and his spouse – assumed the role (Ceciban 2019). Meanwhile, Dr. Louie Nacorda, a cultural heritage practitioner in Cebu, shared in an interview with the writer that the Cebu Metropolitan Cathedral only started having an *hermano mayor* in 2000 when he was still active in the Parish Pastoral Council of the cathedral and proposed the idea to the parish priest at the time. He adds that there were some years when the cathedral even had one *hermano menor* ('minor sponsor') per novena day while the *hermano mayor* would simply appear during the actual fiesta.

A survey of 32 individuals who served as *hermano mayor* between 1980 and 2019 helped to understand further their motivations and perceptions in accepting



Figure 8
The writer together with Mr. Ronaldo Santos, Rev. Fr. Vicente Lina, Jr., Mr. and Mrs. Roberto and Beth Villanueva posed for posterity during their tenure as *hermanos mayores* for the Flores de Maria in Malolos, Bulacan.
Photo: Twin Love Studio, 2017

such a daunting obligation. Out of 32 respondents, 27 were former *hermanos* and five were *hermanas*. The majority of the respondents assumed the role of *hermano* or *hermana mayor* when they were between 21 and 40 years of age (Figure 8). Interestingly, one respondent admitted that he first served as an *hermano* when he was 81 years old. The survey also asked the number of times the respondents have become an *hermano mayor* throughout their lifetime. Twelve respondents have become an *hermano mayor* more than four times, 11 respondents about two times, seven respondents one time and at least three times for two respondents. These numbers indicate that the majority of the respondents welcome successive opportunities of becoming an *hermano mayor* in their respective parishes. Moreover, the respondents suggested four criteria as to why they accepted the obligation: (1) thanksgiving for the blessings received, (2) special devotion to the saint, (3) *panata* or vow of the family, and (4) if no one in the parish would like to accept the role. When it comes to planning the town fiesta, most of the respondents mentioned that they were either “very hands-on” (13 respondents) or they worked “hand-in-hand” with the parish priest or fiesta committee (14 respondents). One respondent admitted that he just gave a specific amount to the fiesta committee to avoid distress. On the one hand, some respondents would go the extra mile by conducting several meetings with fellow *hermanos* to polish the activities and other matters related to the fiesta.

An important factor when one becomes an *hermano mayor* is the working budget; thus, the survey inquired about the total amount that the previous *hermanos*

mayores spent during their town fiesta. Most of the respondents admitted that they spent an average of PHP51,000 (USD1,000) to PHP200,000 (USD3,921). Four respondents, meanwhile, mentioned that they spent an average of PHP701,000 (USD13,745) to PHP1,000,000 (USD19,607) during their tenure as an *hermano mayor*, while two respondents spent a staggering amount of more than a million pesos. When asked about their source of funding for the fiesta, many of them cited that their funds either came from personal savings or that their family and friends extended financial support. Surprisingly, one respondent admitted that he secured a loan to fund the fiesta activities. In the interview conducted with Mario Aniceto Sumera, a technique that he and his fellow *hermanos* followed before they assumed the role of *hermanos mayores* in the fiesta of the *Sto. Niño de Malolos* in 2015 was through a *paluwagan*. For 12 months, each *hermano* would make mandatory monthly contributions, and the total money they saved for a year was used for the fiesta expenses.

Regardless of the budget, any *hermano mayor* would divide their budget based on the activities and essential needs of the town fiesta. Philippine fiestas are really expensive to conduct, and they consume a lot of resources that include, but are not limited to, the following: food, donations, decorations and labour. The *hermano mayor* puts prime importance on food being served during the fiesta reception. In fact, food takes the bulk in the fiesta budget, as the survey results reveal that an average of 35.41 per cent is spent for this aspect. Seldom does the parish shoulder the catering services during the fiesta unless it is generous enough to lend a helping hand to the *hermano mayor*. There are also instances in other parishes where the parish and the *hermano mayor* would have different receptions. The parish would probably conduct it in the *convento* (‘convent’) or parish hall, while the *hermano* may hold it either at home or any event space that could occupy dozens of guests. Although a rarity, there are also occasions when an *hermano* would foot the expenses for both the reception in the parish convent and at home. In the case of the Cebu Metropolitan Cathedral, Dr. Nacorda reminisces that the cathedral has sponsored the reception through the years. He estimates that the budget allocated for food per person in the 1990s was about PHP90 (USD1.8). In 2018, however, the *hermanos mayores* came from a family of successful entrepreneurs, so they specifically sponsored the fiesta reception as well. The said reception was opened publicly, and the budget for food per person tremendously increased to PHP500 (USD9.80).

Even though it is not mandatory (unless the parish priest has requested it), many *hermanos mayores* set aside a certain budget to donate to the local parish. In the survey, an average of 20.94 per cent of the total budget is donated to the parish. The donation may come in different forms. It could be in cash or in kind. Some would donate cash that is intended for repairs or improvement of the parish. An *hermana mayor* in Hagonoy, Bulacan, who is a successful professional in California, donated USD1,000 so that the parish could repair the kneeler padding of all the church pews. More so, a prominent family in Novaliches, Quezon City who served as *hermanos mayores* in the early 2000s donated PHP350,000 (USD6,862) to the parish after the town fiesta. In Malolos, Bulacan, the annual *hermanos* would donate in kind (i.e. microphones, sound system, lighting, air-conditioning units), or they would shoulder the repair works of the *Sto. Niño* chapel (i.e. renovation of the sacristy, painting work, altar restoration). The *hermanos* would also sponsor the decorations inside and outside the church as well as on the streets where the procession would pass. Until the late 1990s, Barangay Sto. Niño in Hagonoy, Bulacan used to be visited by throngs of tourists during their annual fiesta in February. The street decorations were noted for their intricacy. Visitors even tagged the decorations as “*langit-langitan*” (‘like heaven’), as the buntings made of plastic wrappers in various colours were intertwined with each other so that those walking below them would be sheltered from the sun. This activity was possible then because the *hermano mayor* at times motivated each *samahan* (‘street organization’) by giving a cash prize for the street with the best decorations. Most of the time, it was simply a communal gesture of the neighborhood to bedeck the streets with lavish decorations. Unfortunately, given the rising prices of basic commodities and migration from the community, the tradition faltered. The same reality is true for many parishes in the Philippines, and most of the time the decorations are mainly limited to the altar, the church patio and selected areas. Despite rising inflation rates, the survey indicates that contemporary *hermanos* spent an average of 15.37 per cent of their total fiesta budget on decorations. Last, there are miscellaneous activities before, during and after the fiesta that use labour such as the brass bands, orchestra and choir, dance troupes, decorators of the various fiesta venues, the *carroza* (‘processional carriage’) pullers, makeup artists, cleanup operations after the fiesta, among others (Figure 9). The survey respondents agree that they separated a budget averaging 11.18 per cent as payment for labour.



Figure 9
Dancers in Hagonoy, Bulacan added colour to the morning procession in honour of the town's patron saint.
Photo: Jose Antonio Lorenzo L. Tamayo, 2013

One thing that the writer personally learned after serving as an *hermano mayor* thrice in a row is to brace oneself for unexpected problems and challenges that may come before and during the fiesta. Those *hermanos* and *hermanas* who answered the survey reveal all kinds of challenges that they personally experienced during their tenure as *hermano mayor*. As expected, the most common concern is the unstable weather during the fiesta day. At least nine respondents shared that they experienced heavy rainfall during their term. Many of them resolved this problem by distributing umbrellas to guests, and some turned to folk Catholicism by offering eggs to St. Claire. In addition, scheduling meetings and limited preparation are also cited concerns, which were solved by proper communication and delegating tasks to the right people. Attitudes of individuals surrounding the *hermano mayor* could also make or break the fiesta preparations. Some respondents cited two types of problematic ethos: those individuals who are considered “*pakialamera*” (nosy) and those who spread malicious gossip. While these obstacles are somehow unavoidable, the respondents agree on

one thing: “the show must go on.” Surprisingly, seven respondents admitted that they did not experience any notable problems during their term as *hermano mayor*.

As per the overall satisfaction of the *hermanos* and *hermanas*, the majority emphasised that they were either extremely satisfied (16 respondents) or very satisfied (11 respondents) with the proceedings of the fiesta. The most significant moments for many respondents are the pontifical mass, the opening of religious exhibits as part of the fiesta activities, and the procession. The *hermanos* and *hermanas* also reflected that their position made them realised a thing or two: a sense of fulfillment; a realisation that being an *hermano mayor* is not about fame and glory; blessings received after assuming the role of *hermano*; and gratitude for all the help that people extended them. Three respondents pondered that their tenure as *hermanos* made their devotion to the patron saint stronger. Similarly, three respondents cited that “nothing is impossible with God.” One of the respondents also offered an alternative reflection for being an *hermano mayor*. For him, serving as an *hermano mayor* is not merely about one’s devotion to the saint, but the role is significant to the preservation of cultural heritage in a particular locality.

When the survey respondents were asked about their willingness to become an *hermano mayor* in future fiestas, 24 respondents answered that they would accept the role without a second thought. Those who said otherwise stressed that their decision would be influenced by their age and financial status. Others mentioned that they would probably let their children assume the role or give a chance to other parishioners. Meanwhile, two respondents emphasised that they would only accept the role if it is “*kalooban ng langit*” (‘God’s will’).

Conclusion

The fiesta is an important cultural tradition that defines the identity of Filipino society. While it has colonial underpinnings, it quickly assimilated to native culture because rituals were a way of life. The practice of having an *hermano mayor* may have been a foreign concept brought by the Spaniards and the introduction of Catholic Christianity in the archipelago, but it strongly resembles the ritual sponsorship practised by the natives early on. Thus, the *hermano mayor* narrative and its impact on the religious life of Catholic Filipinos can be analysed through the theoretical lenses of anthropologist Felipe Landa Jocano (1967) who conducted extensive studies on folk Catholicism in the Philippines. Borrowing from Jocano’s



Figure 10
Mrs. Victoriana Trillana-Crisostomo, a member of a prominent family, shown poised during the fiesta of the Sagrado Corazon de Jesus in Barangay Sto. Rosario in Hagonoy, Bulacan in the 1980s.
Photo: Dr. Roderick John T. Crisostomo, 1980s

framework, those individuals who assumed the role of *hermano mayor* are aware of the “social and cultural values” involved in the practice; moreover, “these social and cultural values are learned and acquired by individuals as they grow up and participate in the affairs of their society.” In the interviews and survey, many of the respondents made clear that they become an *hermano mayor* because it is a form of *panata* (‘vow’) of their family. Many saw how their ancestors performed the responsibility, and they were exposed early on to the social and cultural values inherent in the practice (Figure 10). As such, the role could be passed on from one generation to the next. Similarly, those who have become an *hermano mayor* in recent memory were a product of distinct communities that practise the *hermano mayor* tradition. Even if some did not originate from old wealth, they have consistently observed through the years how their predecessors assumed the role and they have sufficient schema of all the obligations that an *hermano* or *hermana mayor* should fulfil.

The *hermanos mayores* in contemporary times, despite the financial and logistical obstacles aligned with the role, give their utmost efforts in making the town or *barrio* fiesta a success because, by doing so, they are fulfilling a much higher form of devotion: some are doing it as a personal promise, for thanksgiving to an answered prayer, for curing an ailment or for a special intention. These contradict the notion that *hermanos* and *hermanas* only assume the role because of social assimilation or prestige in the community. In addition, one important aspect that many *hermanos mayores* fail to recognise is that the role they play has a direct impact on the cultural heritage of the church and their respective communities as well as in the local economy. Without their financial support, many practices would be diminished. Performing arts, including choral groups, brass bands and dance troupes, who are primarily responsible for setting a festive rhythm in a fiesta, would not thrive. Intangible traditions such as the *salinan* or *sunduan*, also known as *dapit* (an act of fetching the town patron or the *hermano mayor*), and other related practices would be extinguished. Through the fiesta patronage, the local economy also prospers even in the short term: the fiesta generates several jobs that positively affect both skilled and unskilled workers, businesses, artists and designers.

Anthropologist Liana Chua (2007) notes that objects are not simply used as a gateway to worship a higher being, but they act as facilitators of “‘doing religion’.” This could be observed in the use of iconography such as a *vara alta*, an *escapulario* or medallion and even the outfits of the *hermanos mayores*. These objects put meanings in the practice with an interplay between the social and religious spectrums. The *vara alta*, for example, is a sacramental that contains an image of the patron saint, but it also distinguishes the *hermano* or *hermana mayor* from the crowd. It may be a symbol of authority and piety; however, it also conveys social distinction in the community. The same is true for the *escapulario*, medallion and outfit that an *hermano* wears. These objects would also relate to the ceremonial side of religion, as they are used in “‘church-centered rites to secular rituals’” that are sanctioned by the community’s culture (Jocano 1967). What is probably true in the *hermano mayor* tradition beginning in the early 2000s is the modification of the practice to “‘suit one’s cultural ways of believing’” and restructuring it “‘to accommodate the nuances of the new pattern’” (Jocano 1967). In the past, those who were selected as an *hermano mayor* came from old wealth and prominent families. Additionally, it was common then for a single person or a

couple to assume the role. This has been modified, and a variation is tolerated in the practice such that a group of like-minded individuals, regardless of their social position in the community, may now become *hermanos mayores*. In contrast, the local government may also intervene these days and act as the *hermano mayor* instead of selecting particular individuals. These changes may imply four things depending on the community: economic hardships pushed communities to look for alternatives, so the practice or the town fiesta itself may continue; the fact that old families in various towns are dwindling in numbers as their heirs emigrate elsewhere or lose their fortunes; there is an increasing number of the new rich or middle class who have the resources to take the position; or there is a need to create a steering committee that would oversee the entire fiesta that turned into a bigger festival attracting both local and foreign tourists.

While the fiesta is a pan-regional event that has religious underpinnings, regional typologies would differentiate the *hermano mayor* tradition across the Philippines and could indicate whether they overlap with linguistic regions Christianised by certain religious orders. This has yet to be established and is worthy of longitudinal investigation. However, based on the writer’s observation given the present data, the only difference in the practice is the selection of an *hermano mayor* in certain towns or regions, but the obligation is just the same: to sponsor both church and secular activities aligned with the fiesta. Certainly, the practice is apparent in Tagalog towns and is currently being revived in the *población* of some regions as in the case of Cebu City. Why the practice is widely accepted in Tagalog territory compared with other linguistic regions and the reason why it did not successfully permeate in succession in some towns are lingering questions that still beg answers. Despite the limitations of the present study, the *hermano mayor* tradition, nonetheless, proves that three Filipino values are present during fiesta time: the spirit of *bayanihan* (‘community effort’), *pakikisama* (‘comradeship’) and *pakikipagkapwa* (‘shared self’). As the survey results and interviews suggest, when many of the previous *hermanos* volunteered to assume the role or when those teenagers showed willingness to decorate the entire street at night without expecting anything in return is already sufficient proof that these values are indeed alive in the Filipino soul. The practice of being an *hermano mayor* is here to stay because the fiesta clearly represents what it is to be a Filipino. 🇵🇭

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