

# **HIGUGMAA ANG DIYOS, KAHADLOKI ANG DIYOS (LOVE GOD, FEAR GOD): POST-ORMOC DISASTER MASS HYSTERIA IN AN URBAN CENTER**

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Mass hysteria has been a neglected area of study in Philippine social science largely due to the absence of reported events labeled as mass hysteria in the country. The opportunity to study one came a few months after the Ormoc disaster of 1991 when residents of Cebu, individually and collectively, participated (on their own volition) in a mass activity. The incident is one that Western scholars may well call mass hysteria.

This paper provides tentative answers to what happened in Cebu during that short but remarkable period in its history. The theoretical traditions of sociology and anthropology are utilized to investigate and subsequently arrive at inferences regarding the phenomenon.

*"The Lord commanded the Israelites to put the blood of the lamb on their door as a sign. Their lives would be spared while the angel destroys those without the sign and those of the first-born of the Egyptians. The Lord revealed His word to the prophet." (Amos 3:7)*

## **Introduction**

The study of mass hysteria lies properly within the realm of collective behavior, a terrain more familiar to sociologists and, to a lesser extent, psychologists than to anthropologists. For the latter, however, studying

such a phenomenon may, in fact, provide some clues on how symbols and meanings can move people to act in certain ways considered apart from everyday life. The opportunity to dissect the various cultural elements that come into play in mass hysteria must not be missed if we are to understand how culture's dynamism affects the trajectory of a society like the Philippines, in an age of increasing complexity. For no matter how unbelievable or weird a phenomenon may be, "it reveals the fundamental and common social processes at work" in society (Goode, 1988). Unfortunately, understanding the cultural make-up behind collective behavior is an area where anthropologists are absent.

In this paper, we present an instance of mass hysteria with religious (and probably political) undertones that came in the wake of what has now become known as the Ormoc tragedy of 1991. Using a combination of basic sociological and anthropological inferences, we outline a few of the literature on mass hysteria and relate these to the anthropological understanding of religion and of symbols to explain what happened in Cebu City (and elsewhere) and why. This is a very tentative exploratory study; as such, we will not, for obvious reasons, delve into the theoretical arena of collective behavioral studies.

Macionis (1987) defines mass hysteria as the "widespread anxiety and frantic behavior (exhibited by a large aggregate of people) in reaction to a perceived threat," the source of which may either be fact or pure fiction spread by rumor or the mass media. It contains an element of true emotional contagion characteristic of some crowds and tends to reinforce itself in a vicious cycle. This feeling eventually leads to hysteria and panic as people realize the ineffectiveness of their actions. In the pioneering research on collective behavior done by Neil J. Smelser (1962), mass hysteria is considered one of many attempts by people to alter their environment when they are under conditions of uncertainty, threat or strain. It comes in the form of a relatively unstructured response (Kenkel and Volland, 1975), unorganized and uncoordinated behavior (Robertson, 1987) and irrational, compulsive beliefs (Federico, 1975).

Contagion is a necessary element in this type of collective behavior because people in such a situation often behave as others do since they find themselves "spontaneously infected with the emotions of others" (Goode, 1988). Hence, people often see not what is happening but what they are predisposed to think is happening. This makes them accept whatever confirms their preconceptions while resisting facts that do not fit them. A typical example of mass hysteria was the belief of a Martian

invasion of Earth during Halloween of 1938, which was traced to the airing over a radio station in the New York area of H. G. Wells' "War of the Worlds" (cf. Cantril, 1940).

Smelser (1962) has outlined six successive preconditions in all types of collective behavior. These are: structural conduciveness (social conditions must favor collective action); social strain (like disasters, calamities); generalized belief (which explains the strain being experienced); precipitating events (something that happens to confirm people's generalized belief); mobilization of participants; and, social control. The last occurs when the governing elite try to put a halt to the collective action.

## Methodology

This is an exploratory study that adopts the purposive/judgmental sample of 51 respondents found to have responded positively to the event. The sample gathered covered an entire area of Metro Cebu. A simple interview schedule was used as instrument to elicit information needed for the study. It consisted of closed-choice (Part I) and open-ended questions (Part II). The latter was used since the effort was directed primarily at knowing the respondents' perceptions about the event. Such variables as age, occupation, civil status, level of schooling, place of origin, religious affiliation, and respondents' perceptions about the event were included in the instrument. Data from the study is based largely on the respondents' point of view.

Interviews were conducted by enrollees of the course Rural-Urban Sociology offered to student majors at the USC Department of Sociology-Anthropology late 1994 as part of the course requirements. The authors conducted spot-checks to ensure and ascertain the validity of the data gathered. As a backgrounder on the event, secondary data from local newspapers were used. Attempts were made to secure a copy of the letter and/or a tape recording of the letter as it was read over the radio and which started the event. These efforts proved futile; less than four years after the event, not even the *Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster sa Pilipinas* (KBP) or the radio station where the letter was read have any copies left. Most unfortunately, the anchorperson who read the letter passed away in 1993.

## Historical Background

On the evening of November 16, 1991, radio commentator Nash Aliño, host of *Pulso sa Katilingban* (Community Pulse), a radio program aired over the radio station dyHP-am (Radio Mindanao Network) read a letter that began the series of events leading to the subject of this paper. The letter-sender, whom a newspaper article (Mangubat, 1991) later identified as a certain Edgar Zamora, warned of a catastrophe worse than that which befell Ormoc City over two weeks before (i.e., on November 5 due to Typhoon Uring). That is, unless “people turned to God and post(ed) signs in their homes and in public places calling on others to “love (*higugmaa*) and fear (*kahadloki*) the Lord.”

Zamora, whose identity has never been ascertained even up to the present, wrote that he met a strange boy in Freedom Park (Plaza Independencia, in another newspaper) in September of that year, who foretold the coming destruction of Ormoc.<sup>1</sup> In one version of the story, the letter-sender was sitting on a bench in the park/plaza reading a newspaper and eating peanuts during a very slight drizzle when a boy wearing tattered clothes approached the bench and sat beside him. The letter-sender did not give the boy much attention and went on with his reading until the boy asked for some of the peanuts he was eating. It was then that he noticed that the boy was not even pelted with rain despite the slight drizzle.

While eating peanuts, the boy vividly described how the people of Ormoc would be buried alive in mud and water. According to Zamora, it was only after the tragedy struck Ormoc that he realized the boy had made a prediction. Zamora went on to say that a few days after the tragedy, the same boy appeared to him again while he was sitting on a bench in the park/plaza. This time the boy predicted a calamity for Cebu City three times that which befell Ormoc. This was to be a “punishment for Cebu City’s participation in relief efforts for the ravaged city in Leyte (Paller 1991a) or because it had helped “rescue Ormoc from the punishment of God” (Mangubat 1991). The only way for Cebu to be saved would be to have its residents post public places with posters

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom Park is now part of the network of native goods shops in Carbon Market, downtown Cebu. It used to be a place for political rallies and *miting de avance* of political parties before Martial Law. Plaza Independencia is an old, airy park facing the Spanish-era Fort San Pedro.

proclaiming the words: "*Higugmaa ang Diyos, Kabadloki and Diyos*" (Love God, Fear God).

The following day, Cebuanos woke to see numerous posters bearing those words all over the city. Some were even posted on taxis, public utility jeepneys, and even government trucks and vehicles. One newspaper reported that the sign was even placed outside a gate of an elementary school run by a Catholic religious order. The signs ranged in size and elaborateness, from mere scraps of paper with hand-written words to computer printouts and plastic billboards. Some were written/printed in English. There were no reports of panic buying but churches began to fill with people and prayer vigils were made in many a barangay hall or chapel. In the meantime, numerous tape recorded copies of Aliño reading the letter over his radio program began circulating. A newspaper succinctly described and not without irony the situation thus, "As a result, the city is now practically flooded with the prescribed posters" (Paller 1991:5).

Owing to dyHP's popularity and reach as the number one radio station when it came to soap operas, the signs also proliferated beyond Cebu to as far as Cagayan de Oro, Gingoog, Butuan, Pagadian, Ozamis, Dipolog, Surigao, and Butuan in Mindanao; and Bohol, Negros, and Leyte, in the Visayas. (When we conducted a reconnaissance survey for a different project in Comota, La Paz, in the remaining forested interiors of Agusan in October 1994, we were pleasantly surprised to see the signs in one of the houses of the Manobos there!)

Interestingly, days before Aliño read the letter, a local newspaper reported the appearance of three moons over Argao, a scenic resort town in southern Cebu and a big, rare, 450-pound fish caught by fishermen from the nearby town of Talisay. The moons were explained by a local meteorologist to be the result of light refraction. The big fish, described as one-eyed with no scales and tail, was identified by a government fish examiner as a rare but not non-existent species. Still, people reportedly considered these portents (*talimad-on*) of things to come.

It took four days before the Catholic hierarchy reacted to the events that unfolded with no less than the Archbishop, Cardinal Vidal, expressing concern over the reported letter and advising people to ignore scare stories circulating the city. (Together with the dyHP broadcast, numerous radio stations had by this time also broadcast reports of unverified paranormal happenings in Ormoc before and after the tragedy, like the eerie cries of children heard in many parts of the city during the evening and at dawn.) Cebu archdiocesan spokesperson Monsignor

Achilles Dakay also came out with a statement denigrating the letter, saying nobody but God himself knows when such things happen (Benedicto, 1991).

To further defuse the tension, Cebu City Mayor Tomas Osmeña issued a memorandum banning the putting up of posters and streamers bearing the sign. Also included in the ban was the use of city-owned properties (ball pens, pentel pens, printers, typewriters, etc.) and facilities (vehicles and buildings) for the posting of the signs. Osmeña even clarified that Cebu did not give much material assistance to Ormoc, adding that it instead provided manpower and loaned equipment. Osmeña also derided the possibility of flooding in Cebu similar to that of Ormoc (Cabaero, 1991a). An environment specialist, Renato de Rueda, consultant to a USAID-funded project on environmental concerns, however, discounted the Mayor's views, arguing that in fact Cebu was in danger of having flash floods due to its "very critical forest cover" (Cabaero, 1991b).

Meanwhile, the KBP issued on November 22, 1991, an injunction against dyHP, compelling the latter to stop airing a taped reading of the letter, which up to this time was still being broadcast by the Station. Telephone calls had flooded the Station since November 16 from people requesting the repeated airing of the letter. All other stations since November 16 were similarly enjoined from reporting on the letter. It was at this point that the story began to gradually fade away. (In a sidelight to the story, an enterprising resident's vehicle was caught on camera by a local daily, the vehicle bore the sign: "*Higugmaa ang Kabit, Kahadloki ang Asawa*" [Love the mistress, fear the wife!]).

### **Findings from the Purposive Sampling: Some Data Four Years Later**

Of the 51 respondents to the survey conducted, 25.5 percent (13 respondents) were males and 74.5 percent were females (38). Their average age was 38 years, the youngest at 19 and the eldest at 73 years. In terms of civil status, 66.6 percent were married (34) and 27.5 percent (14) were still single at the time of the survey. The rest were either widowed (3.9 percent) or separated (two percent).

In terms of level of schooling, 39.2 percent of the respondents were college graduates, 35.4 percent high school graduates and 25.5 percent elementary school graduates. There was not a single respondent who had

been unable to attend any schooling whatsoever.

Forty-two percent of the respondents came from the Visayas (including Cebu), seven percent from Mindanao and the rest (two percent) from Luzon. Of this number, 50 percent were native residents of Cebu City. When considering their employment status, 41.2 percent of them were self-employed, 13.7 percent employed elsewhere, 19.6 percent unemployed, and 25.5 percent homemakers.

Remarkably, all the 51 respondents were Roman Catholics with the following religious affiliations: the Knights of Columbus (1.9 percent), Charismatic Renewal (11.7 percent), and one percent each from El Shaddai, Mother of Perpetual Help, Basic Ecclesial Communities, Fatima Apostolates, Legion of Mary, and Opus Dei.

When asked where they first learned of the letter, 49 per cent (25) answered that they heard it over the radio; 29.4 percent from neighbors and the rest from friends and relatives. Interestingly, five percent of the respondents heard of the letter from the Church.

Three final questions were asked of the respondents. These were:

1. How did you react and what did you do in response to the call of the letter-sender?
2. At that time, did you really believe that something was going to happen?
3. What are your additional comments regarding the incident?

The answers to question number one can be lumped into seven categories. One is the respondent was frightened and decided to follow the instructions of the letter sender (43.1 percent said so). Second, the respondent was not frightened but still believed and posted as instructed (29.4 percent). Third, the respondent doubted the story but still posted the sign (3.92 percent). Fourth, the respondent did not believe and did not post the sign at all (9.8 percent). Fifth, the respondent posted the sign because others did it (3.92 percent). Sixth, the respondent believed but did not post any sign (1.96 percent). Finally, the respondent felt he had to be neutral (neither for nor against the posting) (1.96 percent). Three respondents (5.88 percent) did not answer this question.

On the second question, three categories can be roughly outlined. One, the respondent believed something was going to happen (52.94 percent); two, the respondent doubted or had second thoughts (15.7 percent); and, three, the respondent did not believe at all (25.5 percent).

Many of the respondents commented that the event made people move closer to God, go to Church more often, and become aware of the many calamities that have befallen other cities, including Ormoc because the people there lacked faith. In the words of one respondent, "*gituyo to para* (it was intended) to reawaken the people of their wrong-doing." A number of the respondents also realized that it was just probably all a gimmick. One wondered who may have started it and why.

### **Analysis and Conclusion**

We may never find out who sent the letter and whether he or she really met the boy in some park or plaza, but we can infer much from the events that unfolded, and even from the data four years later. While no correlation was made between the demographic characteristics of respondents vis-à-vis their answers, certain patterns have emerged from the survey when considered as representative of the Cebu City population. One, it is probable that only a few members of non-Catholic religious denominations or none at all participated in posting the sign. Two, many people did believe that something was going to happen and so they posted the sign. Fear of the wrath of God or some supernatural being was apparently their greatest motivation. Third, the mass media (especially radio) is a very potent force for influencing people's decisions especially during periods of stress. Fourth, even the schooled can resort to what may be considered irrational behavior. Lastly, people may not have believed the story but had to post the sign because they were influenced by others.

In analyzing the mass hysteria of 1991 using Smelser's preconditions, the social conditions that favored such an action were most probably the high population density of Cebu City, the pervasive folk Catholic beliefs and practices and the large radio audience of dyHP. The Ormoc tragedy and the appearance of three moons as well as the big fish were definitely the causes of the social strain. The generalized belief came as newspaper reports of the portents and omens people saw before and after the Ormoc disaster. The precipitating event was the Ormoc disaster itself.

What is the culture of the Cebuano that contributed to the mass hysteria?

The roots may lie in our religious heritage. Findings of the July 1991 Social Weather Survey of 14 nations on the topic of religion showed



that the Philippines ranks first in terms of belief in God (97 percent). Eighty-nine percent of Filipinos also believe that “there is a God who concerns himself personally with every human being.” Defining religion, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1970) states that religion “attempts to interpret the inescapable — dreams, suffering, death, human treachery, natural disasters, and so on. It helps adjust people’s understanding of the-way-things-are to the way we would like things to be.”

This probably explains what Mercado (1976) opines as the Filipino reaction to calamities or accidents, which is to attribute it to Divine Providence. Thus, according to him, the killer flood that devastated Central Luzon and brought floods to Manila in the 1970s was attributed by no less than the Manila city mayor as God’s punishment for the loss of the venerated statue of the Sto. Niño (p. 184). Bulatao (1987) adds that the Filipino “uncluttered by a systematic philosophy, is especially open to the acceptance of God’s direct action in his soul.”

In Cebuano, this supernatural retribution may come as *gaba*. *Gaba*, according to Garcia (1976) may be similar to Piaget’s concept of immanent justice. Based on extensive research, Garcia points out a number of characteristics of *gaba* that have some relevance in this discussion. First, *gaba* may happen gradually. Second, it occurs in this life (as contrasted with the Hindu concept of *karma*). Third, it may fall on innocent, non-offending parties. Fourth, the suffering as a result of *gaba* is often greater than the transgression itself. To ward off *gaba*, Cebuanos accordingly say “*pwera* (from the Spanish *fuera*, “outside” or “away”) *gaba*.” In this regard, the putting up of signs may be considered a written form of *pwera gaba*.

We must hasten to add the role symbols played in the story. Geertz (1966) states that “... religious symbols work by inducing responses from the worshipper. These responses take the form of motivation, the inclination to perform certain acts and experience certain feelings in particular situations.” In the letter sent to Aliño, the mention of a boy in tattered clothes and the Plaza Independencia or Freedom Park are very emotive symbols for Cebuanos steeped in the tradition of the so-called miraculous Sto. Niño de Cebu. Many tales have been told revolving around the Sto. Niño taking the form of a young boy roaming around the plaza, fish market or Fort San Pedro. One sacristan would find the Sto. Niño statue’s feet full of fish or another would find *amorsecos* (brambles) on the legs of the image, evidences of numerous walks around the city. The Sto. Niño, when he “walks” out of the altar, is often described

by those who meet him as a curly-haired dark-skinned young boy.

The veneration of the Sto. Niño is the focal point of all religious activities in Cebu City culminating on his feast day (third week of January). Every Friday, novenas are said in his honor, a devotion that hankers to the days when *anitos* and spirits were prayed to by pre-Spanish Filipinos. This strong devotion to the Child Jesus and the religious fervor in Cebu most probably contributed to the ease with which the letter was accepted as true by so many Cebuanos.

Hence, despite the political undertones of the letter (the author of the letter may have wanted to discredit the city government of Mayor Osmeña who personally led the rescue efforts of Cebuano volunteers in Ormoc), Cebuanos identified more with its religious underpinnings.

In the end, is it safe to conclude that Cebuanos who participated in the mass hysteria cannot be really reduced to labels like "ignorant" or "gullible" because they were merely playing out the cultural elements that make the Filipino what he is? Whatever your answer to the question is, one thing is clear, many Cebuanos found that by following the instruction of the letter, they had something to hope for, another day to look forward to, another lease on life. They had something that made them contend with the difficulty of understanding the tragedy that befell Ormoc.

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