

# Between Mourning and Joy: A Geertzian Reading of the Sabet Ritual in San Narciso, Zambales

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the *Domingo Sabet*, a distinctive Holy Week practice observed in San Narciso, Zambales, Philippines, through the theoretical lens of Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology, complemented by ritual performance theory, memory studies, and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) discourse. The research had three objectives: to produce a thick description of the *Domingo Sabet* rituals; to interpret the symbolic meanings and cultural narratives embedded in these practices; and to examine the broader role of these rituals in shaping community identity, social cohesion, and religious continuity within a rapidly modernizing context. Fieldwork was conducted across nine days during the 2024 Holy Week season (Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday), with intensive participant observation on Black Saturday and Easter Sunday. Data collection included approximately 22 hours of direct observation, 14 semi-structured interviews with purposively selected informants, and analysis of 11 documentary sources. Data were coded thematically using a two-cycle process (descriptive and pattern coding) with inter-cycle memo writing. Findings indicate that the *Domingo Sabet*—a pre-dawn procession of the Risen Christ (*Apo Nagungar*) and the Virgin of Joy (*Virgen de Alegria*) culminating in the *sabet* (encounter)—operates as a layered cultural performance encoding theological, social, and historical meaning. Yet the ritual is neither static nor uncontested: declining youth participation, migration, and pandemic-era disruption have prompted adaptive responses, including digital live streaming, that reshape what the ritual is and who counts as a participant. Read through Geertz's "model of" and "model for" framework alongside performance and heritage perspectives, the *Domingo Sabet* emerges as a contested site of ongoing negotiation rather than a transparent vehicle of tradition. The study contributes to scholarship on Philippine religious ritual and to current debates about safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in modernizing societies.

**Keywords:** Clifford Geertz; *Domingo Sabet*; Holy Week ritual; intangible cultural heritage; interpretive anthropology; ritual performance; thick description

## INTRODUCTION

The Philippines, a predominantly Roman Catholic country shaped by more than three centuries of Spanish colonial rule, observes Holy Week (*Semana Santa*) with regional intensity and variation. Local communities have developed distinctive ritual practices that interweave Catholic theology, pre-Hispanic elements, and community-specific historical experience (Cannell, 1999). Among the less-documented of these practices is the *Domingo Sabet* of San Narciso, Zambales—an Easter Sunday observance in this predominantly Ilocano municipality.

The term *Domingo Sabet* itself signals cultural hybridity: *Domingo* derives from Spanish, while *sabet* is the Ilocano cognate of the Tagalog *salubong*, meaning "meeting" or "encounter." The ritual stages the reunion of the Risen Christ with the mourning Virgin Mary at dawn on Easter Sunday and is one of the most affectively charged observances of the local liturgical year. Despite its cultural specificity, *Domingo Sabet* has received limited scholarly attention, particularly compared with its Tagalog counterparts, leaving a gap in the ethnographic record of regional Philippine Catholicism.

This study addresses that gap through Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology and his methodological program of thick description (Freeman, 2014). Geertz (1973) treats culture as a "web of significance" that

humans themselves spin, and the ethnographer's task as the interpretation of those webs rather than their mere documentation. Applied to *Domingo Sabet*, this orientation requires moving beyond surface description of processions and ritual actions toward the layered meanings—theological, social, historical, personal—that participants invest in and extract from these practices.

The study also draws on Geertz's (1973) distinction between culture as a "model of" reality (representing the world as understood) and as a "model for" reality (providing templates for action and feeling). To avoid the limits of an exclusively Geertzian reading, however, this analysis is supplemented by three additional perspectives. Ritual performance theory, particularly the work of Schechner (2013) and Bell (1992), reframes ritual as enacted, contingent practice rather than transparent symbolic text. Memory studies, drawing on Connerton (1989) and Assmann (2011), illuminate how embodied repetition produces collective memory and identity. Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) discourse, especially as developed in UNESCO frameworks and critically examined by Smith (2006) and Bortolotto (2007), situates local rituals within global heritage politics and the often-ambivalent dynamics of safeguarding.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To provide a thick description of the *Domingo Sabet* rituals in San Narciso, Zambales, capturing their cultural, social, and historical context.
2. To interpret the symbolic meanings and cultural narratives embedded in these practices, drawing principally on Geertz's interpretive approach and engaging selectively with ritual performance theory, memory studies, and ICH discourse.
3. To examine the implications of *Domingo Sabet* for understanding the role of religious ritual in contemporary Philippine communities, with attention to the conditions and tensions that shape its continuity, transformation, and safeguarding.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Holy Week Practices in the Philippines

Philippine Holy Week is among the most elaborately observed periods in the global Catholic calendar, shaped by colonial history and continually re-inflected by local actors (Abinales & Amoroso, 2017). Cannell's (1999) ethnography of Bicol Holy Week showed that such practices are not passive enactments of universal Christian narratives but embodied performances reworked by local social conditions. Practices such as the *pabasa* (chanted Passion) and the *Senakulo* (Passion plays) absorb vernacular elements that render abstract theology emotionally accessible.

Ileto's (1979) influential historical study of the *Pasyon* argued that ostensibly devotional texts also encoded political imagination: the suffering Christ became a frame through which colonial subjects articulated experiences of loss and aspirations for liberation. While this reading has been productively critiqued for its sometimes redemptive tone—Aguilar (2004) and others have urged greater attention to coercion, exclusion, and class differentiation within ritual—the underlying point that Holy Week practices carry simultaneous theological, social, and political registers remains widely accepted.

Zialcita (1986) characterized Filipino Holy Week traditions as syncretic, fusing pre-Hispanic ritual sensibilities, Spanish Catholic forms, and contemporary popular culture. More recent scholarship cautions, however, that "syncretism" can obscure asymmetries of power: not all elements blend on equal footing, and the language of fusion can naturalize colonial residues. The present study therefore treats *Domingo Sabet* as a localized configuration shaped by specific historical pressures rather than as a harmonious synthesis.

### Geertzian Interpretation and Its Critics

Geertz's (1973) semiotic conception of culture - "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms"—and his method of thick description (Freeman, 2014) remain foundational for the interpretive analysis

of ritual. His Balinese cockfight essay (Geertz, 1973) continues to model the move from surface behavior to deep cultural text.

Yet Geertz's framework has been critiqued on several fronts that this study takes seriously. Asad (1993) argued that Geertz's definition of religion is overly textual and decontextualized, neglecting the institutional, disciplinary, and power-laden conditions under which symbols acquire force. Crapanzano (1986) questioned the authority Geertz claims when translating others' meanings, noting that the ethnographer's interpretation can occlude the contested and partial character of cultural knowledge. Bell (1992) cautioned that treating ritual primarily as a "text to be read" risks underplaying its strategic, performative, and bodily dimensions. These critiques do not invalidate Geertz's contribution but indicate why a Geertzian reading benefits from being placed in dialogue with performance, memory, and heritage perspectives.

### **Ritual Performance, Memory, and Heritage**

Ritual performance theory, advanced by Schechner (2013), Turner (1982), and Bell (1992), emphasizes that rituals are made through doing: their efficacy lies less in static symbolism than in the framed, repeated, and bodily quality of their enactment. Performance is contingent—rituals can fail, drift, or be contested—and this contingency is itself analytically important.

Memory studies offer a complementary lens. Connerton (1989) distinguishes inscribed memory (texts, monuments) from incorporated memory transmitted through bodily practice; commemorative ceremonies, in his view, work largely through the latter. Assmann's (2011) notion of cultural memory similarly stresses how communities reproduce identity through repeated, ritualized acts. Together, these perspectives reframe *Domingo Sabet* less as a stable representation of belief than as a recurring practice through which a particular community remembers itself into being.

Finally, intangible cultural heritage discourse situates such practices within global frames of recognition and protection. UNESCO's (2003) Convention defines ICH to include "social practices, rituals and festive events." Critical heritage scholarship, however, warns that "safeguarding" can also produce new forms of regulation: practices may be standardized, externally evaluated, and detached from the communities that produce them (Smith, 2006; Bortolotto, 2007). The present study draws on ICH discourse not to celebrate Domingo Sabet as exemplary heritage but to examine the tensions that arise when local ritual life intersects with modernization, migration, and the heritage gaze.

### **Religious Ritual and Cultural Identity in the Philippines**

Across theoretical traditions, scholars have argued that ritual practices do not merely express prior beliefs but constitute primary sites where identity is performed and transmitted (Bell, 1997). In the Philippine context, De la Cruz (2015) has shown how Marian devotion and processions articulate community distinctiveness while negotiating colonial and post-colonial authority. Pertierra (2002) reads the *salubong* in its various regional forms as a social practice that enacts religious conviction together with the bonds of locality and kinship.

These accounts are complicated by recent ethnographies that highlight uneven participation, generational tension, and the gendered politics of devotion. Reading *Domingo Sabet* through both interpretive and critical-heritage lenses, this study aims to attend to both its meaning-making power and the structural pressures it negotiates.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The study employed an ethnographic case study design grounded in interpretive anthropology and informed by performance, memory, and heritage perspectives. A single-site case study was appropriate given the bounded character of *Domingo Sabet* within one municipality and the depth of contextual analysis required by interpretive description (Geertz, 1973).

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## Research Setting

Fieldwork was conducted in San Narciso, Zambales, a coastal municipality in Central Luzon with a predominantly Ilocano Catholic population. The municipality hosts both Roman Catholic (San Sebastian Parish) and Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI San Sebastian Parish) congregations, each of which observes its own version of *Domingo Sabet*. The principal research site was the area surrounding San Sebastian Parish Church, where the Catholic *sabet* culminates; the IFI site was visited for comparative observation.

## Sampling and Participants

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball referrals from initial contacts. Selection criteria were: (a) sustained personal involvement in *Domingo Sabet* (defined as participation across at least five Holy Weeks); (b) occupancy of a ritual role (clergy, lay leader, *camarero* family member, *naunos*' parent or former *naunos*, choir member, procession lead); or (c) generational depth of community knowledge (residents aged 60 and above with family memory of the practice). Recruitment continued until thematic saturation—operationalized as no new descriptive or interpretive categories emerging across two consecutive interviews.

A total of 14 informants were interviewed (8 women, 6 men; ages 22 to 84; mean age 57). These included a priest, two lay parish leaders, two members of a *camarero* family, one IFI lay leader, two former *naunos* (now adults), one parent of a 2024 *naunos*, three elder community members, and two return-migrants who travel home for Holy Week. Interviews lasted between 35 and 90 minutes and were conducted in Filipino.

## Data Collection

Data collection extended across nine days of the 2024 Holy Week (Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday), with intensive observation on Black Saturday and Easter Sunday. Total observation time was approximately 22 hours, documented through structured field notes (handwritten in the field, expanded electronically each evening), an observation protocol covering spatial setup, sequence of acts, participant categories, sensory environment, and emergent surprises with informed consent.

Semi-structured interviews followed an interview guide organized around four domains: personal involvement and biography of participation; perceived meanings of specific ritual elements; experience of recent disruptions (including the COVID-19 period); and views on transmission to younger generations. The guide was used flexibly to allow informant-led elaboration.

Documentary sources comprised 11 items: parish bulletins and pastoral letters covering 2018–2024; one social media narrative (Ramos, 2020); a parish anniversary souvenir program; archived photographs held by the *camarero* family; and six published academic and feature accounts of regional *salubong* practice. These materials were used to triangulate observation and interview data and to reconstruct longer-term changes in the practice.

## Data Analysis and Coding

Field notes and transcripts were managed in a single project workspace and analyzed through a two-cycle qualitative coding procedure. In the first cycle, descriptive coding labeled discrete units of data (e.g., “veil removal,” “role of *naunos*,” “diaspora return,” “pandemic adaptation”). A preliminary codebook of 47 codes was developed iteratively across the first six interviews and the Easter Sunday field notes. In the second cycle, pattern coding grouped related descriptive codes into higher-order categories that became the analytic themes used in the discussion (symbolic vocabulary; gendered participation; intergenerational transmission; institutional differentiation; resilience and adaptation).

Analytic memos were written between coding cycles to record interpretive moves and points of tension between participant accounts. To enhance trustworthiness, three procedures were used: triangulation across observation, interview, and documentary data; member checking, in which preliminary interpretations were

shared with four informants for feedback and revision; and a reflexivity log in which the researcher recorded positionality, prior assumptions, and decisions taken during analysis.

### Researcher Positionality

The researcher is a Filipino Catholic with prior, though non-resident, familiarity with San Narciso. This positionality afforded linguistic and cultural access but also risked over-identification with informants' framings. The reflexivity log was used to flag moments where the researcher noticed sympathetic alignment that might soften critical questions, and follow-up probes were used to test such alignments.

### Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained orally and in writing from all interviewees. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, data handling, and their right to withdraw. Names of clergy and the *camarero* family are used with explicit permission; other informants are referred to by demographic descriptors only. Photographs of identifiable individuals were used only with consent. The research was conducted with awareness of the sacred character of the observed events; the researcher refrained from intervening in ritual sequences and obtained clearance from church leaders prior to fieldwork.

### Limitations

The study is based on a single Holy Week season at one site and therefore cannot fully assess year-on-year variation. The sample, while diverse, skews toward active participants; people who have disengaged from the ritual were underrepresented and warrant attention in future research. Translation across Filipino, Ilocano, and English may have flattened nuances despite checks. These limitations shape how strongly the interpretations should be generalized.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section integrates findings with interpretation. It begins with a focused thick description of the ritual sequence; turns to the social organization of participation and the tensions running through it; analyzes the symbolic vocabulary; and closes with a theoretical synthesis that places Geertz's framework in dialogue with performance, memory, and heritage perspectives.

### Thick Description of the Ritual Sequence

Preparation begins on *Sabado de Gloria* (Black Saturday). Both Catholic and IFI communities erect the physical infrastructure of their respective *sabet* sites. At the Catholic site near San Sebastian Parish, a permanent concrete choir deck and hoisting spar serve as the annual stage; preparation involves checking the hoisting mechanism, dressing the floral apparatus that will carry the *naunos*, and decorating the surrounding space. Preparation drew older residents who supervised and corrected younger volunteers, an intergenerational labor through which procedural knowledge moves by demonstration rather than by document.

The ritual proper begins around 4:00 a.m. on Easter Sunday. Two *carrozas*—one bearing *Apo Nagungar* (the Risen Christ), the other *Virgen de Alegria* (the Virgin of Joy, veiled in black)—depart from separate locations and move along distinct routes, accompanied respectively by male and female cohorts. The two processions converge before the parish church, where a child selected as the *naunos* descends from the floral structure on the hoisting spar. As the choir of children dressed as angels sings the Alleluia, the *naunos* removes the black veil from the Virgin's image; flower petals fall from above onto the gathered crowd. The community then enters the church for the Easter Mass, after which the now-unveiled image is processed to the home of the *camarero* family, where a communal breakfast is held. A small ritual transaction follows: the family "purchases" the veil from the *naunos*, returning it to family custody until the next Holy Week.

Two features merit emphasis. First, the temporal placement (pre-dawn) and the chromatic contrast (black veil, white vestments and petals) are not incidental aesthetics; they organize sensory experience around a

theological narrative of darkness giving way to light. Second, the post-Mass passage to the *camarero*'s home routes the sacred image back into a private dwelling, embedding the ritual's public moment within a domestic and kinship infrastructure that sustains it for the rest of the year.

### Social Organization of Participation—and Its Tensions

Participation is structured by gender, family, age, and institutional affiliation. The split processions—men with the Risen Christ, women with the Virgin—are described by most informants as a meaningful inheritance rather than a constraint; female elders framed the women's procession as a privileged form of devotional intimacy with Mary in mourning. At the same time, two younger female informants questioned why the gendered division persists, suggesting it reflects assumptions about emotional labor as feminine and about leadership as masculine. These contrasting accounts indicate that the gendered ordering of the ritual is meaningful but also a site of low-key disagreement.

The *camarero* system locates ritual responsibility within a single family across generations. This concentrates expertise and continuity but also concentrates dependency: the practice's viability is tied to the demographic and economic stability of one household. Informants acknowledged this fragility and described informal succession discussions within the family. The *camarero* system thus functions as both an asset of cultural transmission and a structural vulnerability.

Selection of the *naunos* confers public honor on a child and her family. Two adult former *naunos* described the role as formative; one also described being “watched” throughout the year as her selection year approached. This more ambivalent account is a useful corrective to a purely celebratory reading: ritual roles can carry social pressure as well as honor.

Several informants described Holy Week as a period of provisional reconciliation in which everyday tensions are bracketed. This temporary leveling is real, but interview data also suggested that not everyone is equally included. Two younger return-migrants reported feeling like “guests” in the ritual rather than full participants, and one informant outside the principal kinship networks of the parish noted that visible roles tend to circulate within familiar families. The ritual, then, both produces solidarity and reproduces existing patterns of access.

The parallel Catholic and IFI observances illustrate that a shared Ilocano cultural practice can be sustained across an institutional schism dating to 1902. This is not, however, evidence of unproblematic coexistence: informants described occasional disagreements over scheduling, public space, and the legitimate “ownership” of the practice. The shared name conceals a low-grade negotiation over whose *sabet* is the authentic local form.

### Symbolic Vocabulary

The ritual's symbolic system is condensed and redundant—several elements carry the same meaning across modalities, which gives the performance its emotional force. The black veil compresses the Holy Week narrative into one visible object; its removal by a child, from above, materially enacts the theological transition from death to life (Aguilar, 2004). The veil is preserved rather than discarded, and its annual return cycles the community through mourning and joy in step with liturgical time.

The chromatic contrast (black versus white), the sensory descent of petals, and the acoustic shift from quiet pre-dawn to the choral Alleluia operate together as a multi-channel sign of resurrection. One male informant described the petal moment as “*parang binuhusan ng biyaya*” (“as if graces were poured upon us”), translating bodily experience into theological meaning—precisely the ethos-worldview convergence Geertz (1973) identified at the heart of religious symbolism.

The two routes and their convergence place the ritual within the geography of San Narciso, temporarily reorganizing public space (Rafael, 2005). The *naunos*, descending from the floral apparatus, occupies a mediating position between elevated and ground-level space; her gender (traditionally female) and age (a

child) align with widely shared associations of innocence and purity but also locate the heaviest symbolic burden of the ritual on a young girl—an arrangement worth naming rather than naturalizing.

### Continuity, Adaptation, and the Heritage Question

*Domingo Sabet* has persisted across more than a century of disruption: the transition from Spanish to American rule, the Pacific War, post-war modernization, and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022. This continuity is real but should not be read as evidence of an unchanging tradition. Informants described several shifts: the elaboration of the floral apparatus over recent decades; the construction of permanent infrastructure replacing earlier bamboo structures; the growing role of social media in publicizing and recording the event; and, in 2020 and 2021, live-streamed observances that allowed quarantined residents and overseas *Narciseños* to participate at a distance. Each adaptation alters what counts as participation and what counts as the ritual.

Read through ICH discourse (Smith, 2006; Bortolotto, 2007; UNESCO, 2003), these adaptations raise questions that a celebratory framing tends to elide. Live streaming extends reach but also recasts viewers as audiences, potentially reinforcing a spectacle dimension at the expense of co-presence. The professionalization of the floral apparatus and the increasing visual ambition of the descent invite comparison with neighboring towns, which can subtly standardize what was previously variable. Recognition of *Domingo Sabet* as “heritage”—still informal in San Narciso—could secure resources but might also subject the practice to external evaluation and freezing of forms that have, in fact, been continuously revised.

Memory studies (Connerton, 1989; Assmann, 2011) help explain why these adaptive pressures matter. If the ritual’s reproductive power lies in incorporated, bodily memory, then changes that shift participation toward screen-mediated observation are not neutral. They alter the channel through which collective memory is produced. This is not a reason to oppose adaptation; it is a reason to track its consequences with care.

### Theoretical Synthesis: Geertz in Dialogue

Geertz’s (1973) “model of” and “model for” distinction remains analytically generative. As a model of, the *Domingo Sabet* represents the Easter narrative in embodied form and renders the community’s social order—gendered, familial, intergenerational, ethnically Ilocano—visible to itself. As a model for, it provides a template through which participants reorganize their own experiences of loss and hope; one bereaved informant explicitly described the unveiled Virgin as a frame for her own mourning.

Yet the ritual is more adequately described when this Geertzian reading is supplemented. Performance theory (Schechner, 2013; Bell, 1992) highlights that the ritual’s force depends on the contingent quality of its enactment—weather, the steadiness of the descending *naunos*, the strength of the choir on the day. Performance can fail, and the community’s investment is partly in ensuring that it does not. Memory studies (Connerton, 1989; Assmann, 2011) direct attention to the bodily and repetitive dimensions through which *Narciseño* identity is sedimented across years; the ritual is less a representation that the community holds than a practice that holds the community. Heritage discourse (Smith, 2006; Bortolotto, 2007; UNESCO, 2003) situates these dynamics within broader political and economic forces, including diaspora-driven media circulation and the growing public legibility of “intangible heritage” as a category.

Asad’s (1993) critique remains pertinent: a purely symbolic reading risks leaving aside the institutional and disciplinary conditions of the ritual—the parish, the *camarero* household, the parish council, the implicit norms about who may speak for the practice. Bringing those conditions into view does not diminish Geertz’s framework; it specifies where its limits lie.

## CONCLUSION

This study offered a thick description and interpretive analysis of the *Domingo Sabet* of San Narciso, Zambales. Drawing on Geertz’s interpretive anthropology and supplementing it with ritual performance theory, memory studies, and intangible cultural heritage discourse, it argued that the *Domingo Sabet* operates

simultaneously as a representation of an Easter theology, a performance through which a community is reproduced, and a contested local practice negotiating modernization, migration, and mediatization.

Three contributions follow. First, the study adds an underrepresented Ilocano case to the ethnographic record of Philippine Holy Week ritual, complementing the better-documented Tagalog and Bicol traditions. Second, it demonstrates the analytic gain of placing Geertz in dialogue with later frameworks, especially when interpreting a ritual whose meanings are produced through embodied repetition under shifting structural conditions. Third, it contributes to current debates about safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in modernizing societies.

The implications for safeguarding deserve direct statement. Local rituals such as *Domingo Sabet* are vulnerable in ways that are not always visible: the *camarero* system depends on a single household; the role of *naunos* depends on continuing parental willingness; the elaborate floral apparatus depends on craft knowledge held by a small number of older residents. Migration redistributes participants across distant cities. Digital mediation extends reach but reorganizes the channel of participation. Any safeguarding response—whether community-led, parish-led, or supported by local government and heritage offices—should therefore (a) prioritize support for the kinship and craft networks that already carry the practice, rather than attempting to standardize its forms; (b) document not only the ritual itself but the everyday infrastructure that produces it; (c) engage younger residents and return-migrants as co-producers rather than as audience; and (d) treat digital mediation reflexively, recognizing both its reach and its tendency to convert participation into spectacle.

Future research could pursue comparative ethnography of *sabet* and *salubong* across Ilocano and Tagalog communities; longitudinal study of how *Domingo Sabet* changes over a decade of post-pandemic adaptation; and focused work with disengaged former participants, whose absence is itself analytically informative. Treating *Domingo Sabet* as living and contested—rather than as inherited and stable—offers a more accurate picture of how local ritual traditions persist, and a more useful basis for the work of safeguarding them.

### Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data generated and analyzed during this study—including anonymized interview transcripts, field notes, and the analytic codebook—are not publicly available due to the sensitive, sacred, and community-specific character of the material and the confidentiality assurances provided to participants. De-identified excerpts and the coding scheme may be made available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to community consultation and ethical review. Photographs and audiovisual materials are held by the researcher and are restricted in accordance with the consent terms agreed with depicted individuals and the parish community.

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