

Becoming a gay caretaker of a religious image (Camarero): Catholic devotion in the Philippines as a gendered social practice

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Keywords:</i> gay Camarero Pagsasanto gender performativity social practice</p>	<p><i>Pagsasanto</i> or the beliefs and practices associated with the caretaking of religious images is a Catholic devotion brought by the Spanish colonization in the Philippines. The history of <i>pagsasanto</i> illuminates a religious tradition exclusively performed by old-rich women (<i>camareras</i>) and prominent political families. At present, the changing gender roles in <i>pagsasanto</i> through the growing participation of gay caretakers of religious images (<i>camareros</i>) has redefined the practice. This shift prompted the researchers to investigate how gender mediates a devotional practice and how gender is constructed, negotiated, and performed through <i>pagsasanto</i>. Using ethnography, the researchers did participant observation to examine the meanings and practices associated with <i>pagsasanto</i> activities such as decorating the image and its carriage as well as joining the procession. To facilitate further analysis, interviews and focus group discussions were undertaken among four gay informants, highlighting their life histories as image caretakers. Data were categorized through themes and analysed from a critical cultural perspective. The research found that gender mediates <i>pagsasanto</i> and vice versa. The becoming of a gay <i>camarero</i> is rooted in cultural practice and familial Catholic tradition. The changing meanings of <i>pagsasanto</i> are contingent on gender performativity, market, social media and the growing community networks.</p>

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Introduction

Civilization thrived in the Philippine archipelago even before the country was named. Early settlers of the islands had their own culture, political system, economic relations, religious beliefs and practices, and fascination in the arts. Modern archaeology provides empirical data on how ancestors lived in the pre-Hispanic era (Miller, 2016).

The pre-Hispanic belief system of the Filipinos consisted of a pantheon of gods, spirits, creatures, and people that guarded the streams, fields, trees, mountains, forests, and houses. *Bathala*, who created earth and humans, was superior to these other gods and spirits. Regular sacrifices and prayers were offered to placate these deities and spirits (Miller, 2016).

Animism or the belief of the Filipinos in different deities guiding their moral and cultural way of life has its own system. They have spiritual leaders who act as priests/priestesses known as the *Babaylan*. Anyone who had reputed power over the supernatural and natural was automatically elevated to a position of prominence. Every village had its share of shamans and priests who competitively plied their talents and carried on ritual curing (Miller, 2016); To be a *babaylan* is a gift to the person chosen by the spirit (Geremia-Lachica, 1996).

As a common practice, the *babaylan* is usually female as the male roles are implied in the more political aspect of the society. Be that as it may, there are males known to be the spiritual mediator of a society. In his report, Priest Alcina noted that priests and sacrificers were commonly women, but there were also male *babaylans*. He wrote, "If there was a man who might have been one, he was (called) *asog*." Priest Fernandez also mentioned that an *asog* or male *babaylan* of Lambunao, Iloilo (a province in the Philippines) dressed and acted like a female. Priest Alcina further explained the *asog* as

"impotent men and deficient of the practice of matrimony, considered themselves more like women than men in their manner of living or going about, even in their occupations (Geremia-Lachica, 1996).

It is not foreign to ancient Filipinos to see males dressing up or acting in the female role. In his notes on the Sambals (local language), Priest Domingo Perez mentioned about male priests called *bayoc*. The term *bayoc* is close to the Cebuano (local language) "*bayot*" which refers to a male homosexual (Geremia-Lachica, 1996). Looking into this context, is homosexuality something not only tolerable but widely accepted back in the day. Having been lifted up to a social category with much importance and power, gays of the pre-hispanic Philippine society may have more of the freedom and luxury to exercise their gender in the role they play. According to Priest Francisco Ignacio Alcina, the *asog* was deficient in his performance as a male and thus deficient for matrimony. This might have lowered his worth or value in society which expects males to enter matrimony and beget children. But it was also this deficiency – his being more female which qualified him into the *babaylan* sisterhood. As a *babaylan*, the *asog* raises his worth and gains honor in a society which might have been unwelcoming of his kind (Geremia-Lachica, 2011).

In 1521, the Spaniards reached the Philippine Islands headed by Ferdinand Magellan and brought with them Christianity. The conversion to Christianity was enabled by the impressive display of pomp and circumstance, clerical garb, images, prayers, and liturgy attracted the rural populace (Miller, 2016).

Currently, reflections of this pomp and pageantry transcends to modern Filipino Catholics. From floral decorations to the images venerated in both public venues and private homes, aesthetics and proper iconographies are observed. The Church took over the technical aspect of maintaining

these images through the Directory on Popular Piety while caretakers of the images observe different practices to make sure their images look presentable and aesthetically pleasing to the public eye.

Many images of old are kept by families handing it down from one generation to the next. In doing so, they also impart the knowledge on how the images are vested and kept, including how to observe the traditions of *pagsasanto*. Apart from these age-old images are new-ones being commissioned by new Santo Enthusiasts or those who are interested in the practice of taking care of *santos*. To note, these new breed of *camareros* or image caretakers commission new images not only because of their passion for the religious arts but also of devotion.

To date, image caretaking illustrates an increasing number of *camareros* who belong to the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community. Notably, LGBT community prefers women saints to take care of. They have sprung forth not only for the aesthetics of vesting female images but also the interests of understanding of their social significance as minorities and their religious devotion towards the female saint.

With social media taking over modern-day society, these *camareros* converge in different social media groups especially in Facebook. One of the more popular Facebook groups for Santo Enthusiasts is *Esculturas Religiosas En Las Filipinas*, consists of mostly gay men. The group started from Flickr, a photo-sharing site. It continued to exist on Facebook with different discussions about holy images including vestments, accessories and floral decorations.

Pagsasanto is redefined in a manner that this devotional practice shifts from the old ways of the families doing it altogether to *camareros* having individual inclinations. Such This shift has welcome new identities, demonstrating new meanings and practices

in terms of commissioning and taking care of sacred images.

Taking the feminist and post-structural view of *pagsasanto*, this study analyzes the construction, negotiation and reproduction of gender identity is associated with the issues of power and structures. Such a religious landscape is continuously redefined and appropriated through the structure-agency nexus (Ortner, 2006b; Shilling, 1992). *Pagsasanto* is mediated by complex dynamics of socio-cultural forces. To unravel this issue, the ethnography sought to answer the following problems: a) What constitutes the historic turn of *pagsasanto* from *camarera* to gay *camarero* as a caretaker of a sacred image?; b) How is gender performed, negotiated, and constructed through *pagsasanto*?; c) What conditions facilitate, constrain and perpetuate *pagsasanto* as a social phenomenon?

Method

This paper employed ethnography as a research method. Ethnography aims at understanding the culture of a group of people (Fetterman, 2010; Angosino, 2008; Wolcott, 1990; Woods, 1986). Conversely, concept of culture is central in this research. Specifically, it investigated the changing culture of *pagsasanto*, taking the post-structural perspective of culture (Ortner, 2006). This assumption views culture as a contested process of meaning-making. Thus, *pagsasanto* as a culture is reconstructed and negotiated, reflecting the positioning of gay *camareros* and the ways they navigated the dominant ideologies within the realm of Catholic devotion.

It is crucial to note that in ethnography, the researcher is also a research instrument (Ortner, 1995; Woods, 1986), who has the duty to analyze and interpret the material to the readers (Madison, 2005). Crucial to the

understanding of the culture is participant observation (Hammersely, 2019; Ingold, 2008). To illustrate, the researchers observed the *camareros* during the *paggagayak* (decorating the image and the carriage or *carroza*) and joined them in the procession the following day as part of celebrating the feast of our Lady of Holy Rosary – La Naval at a Catholic Church in a city in Metro Manila (see Picture 1).



Picture 1. The La Naval Procession.

Source: <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/fast-facts-what-you-should-know-about-our-lady-of-la-naval>

During these events, the researchers observed how gender was performed through *pagsasanto* activities and interviewed key actors or *camareros* whose religious images were paraded in the procession and prominent or seasoned members of the *camarero* community, including event participants (both old and new) and observers or spectators (see Picture 2). Notably, informal interviews were conducted since the researchers themselves were also participants in the procession.

Mental notetaking was deemed necessary because actual events were embodied.

A focus group discussion (FGD) with gay *camareros* was undertaken days after the procession. The goal was to further elaborate key concepts or themes culled during the participant observation, and triangulate data as observed in the said events. Following a feminist perspective, an FGD offers creative ways of framing experiences, perspectives, and issues from actors in context (Wilkinson, S. 2004; Blumbger, R., & Soas, 1997). In this activity, four gay *camareros* participated in a group discussion to discuss important data that needed further explication. They come Philippine provinces where *pagsasanto* is strongly observed. The discussion highlighted their life histories focusing on the becoming of a gay *camarero*. Data were categorized through themes and analysed from a critical cultural perspective.

Results and Discussion

Pagsasanto is a social arena that allows gay *camareros* to exercise their agency, cultivate their capacities, and negotiate their identity. As a dominant religious practice, gay *camareros* play a crucial role in the reproduction of the said popular culture. The changing meanings and practices attached to *pagsasanto* reflects the dynamic, complex, and interdependent social mediations, shaping the new landscape of Catholic devotion. Gay *camareros'* repositioning of their roles and identities illustrates the restructuring of authority from the periphery to the center within a Catholic devotion. Central to this shift is the performance of gender.

For Butler (1988), the performativity of gender is a stylized repetition of acts, an imitation of the dominant conventions of gender. The performance of gender reflects the changing religious culture, gender roles and gender identity (Bonifacio, 2018), highlighting *camareros'* identity, social roles



Picture 2. Gay camareros gathered at the lobby of the church in preparation for the procession.
Source: Taken and owned by the authors

and power. From a micro perspective, *pagsasanto* is a field of gender performativity, identity construction and negotiation articulated in *pag-aalaga* (caretaking), *gayakan* (decorating the image), and *pagsamasaprusisyon* (joining the procession).

Pag-aalaga (Caretaking)

Pagsasanto is a crucial part of growing up from childhood to adulthood in the Philippines. It is a family tradition that shows commitment and relentless socialization with catholic devotional practices that stems from domestic enculturation and upbringing. This religious family tradition sustains ties with the religious catholic tradition of the town. Surprisingly, the three-gay interlocutors come from different provinces in the Philippines (i.e. Marikina, Laguna and Bulacan) where *pagsasanto* is strongly practiced. These provinces are known to have been exposed to strong Catholic influence.

Family values and beliefs are also articulated in religious practices. Inevitably, traditional catholic beliefs do not favor early expressions of gayness. Males are made to act firmly, while females are trained to behave modestly. In a mainstream religion, gender is performed through social practices that demarcate masculinity from femininity. For a rigid Catholic family, a boy is expected to play with a car or a gun. Interestingly, the three gay *camareros* lamented that their gender expressions during children were restricted to male-specific toys and games. It was a taboo for a boy to play dolls. However, the strict Catholic family is tolerant to boys who opt to take care of a female saint. Part of each participant's vivid *pagsasanto* childhood experience was playing with an image of a saint, Jesus Christ, or the Virgin Mary. They dressed up the image and spoke to it. It never escaped their childhood memory how they creatively made a *karu-karuhan* a Tagalog term for little carriages for a sacred image which they decorated with flowers or colorful cloth.

Apparent in their narratives were their active engagement in church activities as church-goers, members of choir and altar boys. Adolescent period is a continued stage of life of exploring *pagsasanto*. As shared by the four informants, within the adolescent period or towards the adult stage, several *camareros* tried to enter the seminary in preparation for priesthood. It is important to note that the admission of gay identity usually occurs after realizing that priesthood was not a vocation for them.

On the other hand, gay *camareros* were able sustain and enrich their devotion through *pagsasanto* in spite of venturing into a different field. As *camareros* earn more, they spend more in terms of taking care of their religious images. It is a normative practice for a seasoned gay *camarero* to own a saint image made of ivory and dress up with stylish and elegant dresses usually made of expensive cloths and precious stones.

The Camarero and his religious images

For gay *camareros*, taking care of a saint is enmeshed in the family day-to-day activities that involve consulting the saint for intercession, yielding to supplication, asking for guidance, and divine providence. The relation is seen as bidirectional because saints provide luck, blessings and protection. Oftentimes, saints reveal their messages in dreams. They communicate through signs and hints behind life-changing circumstances. As one interlocutor shared, *when my sister got pregnant, she kept it to herself. She thought of committing abortion, but the Virgin Mary appeared and spoke to her in her dream. She developed the courage to tell us and continued her pregnancy.* Since then, Jorryl's (informant) sister began to take care of her own image of the Virgin Mary. Unlike his sister, Jorryl's story as a caretaker did not emerge from a cathartic experience. His fascination towards

patron saints developed as he got exposed to religious routines involving *pagsasanto* which began during childhood. His faith was challenged when his mother was diagnosed with cancer. He prayed to Virgin Mary to save his mother but eventually her mother died. He developed hatred with the Virgin Mary. His devotion was revived when he realized that her mother's memory lives in their familial Marian devotion through the persuasion of his father.

Passing the responsibility of patron saint caretaking among members of the family is a crucial decision is called *pagpapamana*. This practice involves selecting the new caretaker based on qualifications. Qualifications include strong inclination towards *pagsasanto* usually cultivated in early childhood years; apparently, someone who can devote sufficient time for caretaking (i.e. dressing up the image, offering of prayers, and preparing for the processions). S/he should also be adept with knowledge about the image's history as well as their family history of *pagsasanto*. Conventionally, family members (mostly women) confined with household chores were assigned to perform patron saint caretaking. As an informant recalled, the chain of female *camareras* had stopped when there was no straight female successor in the family. Only his lesbian aunts were left next in line but no one among them accepted the responsibility. His gay uncle took the custody of their family patron saint. Such succession was strongly favored by the family because of his passion in *pagsasanto*. Another important family tradition of *pagsasanto* is that an image is used as an item for gift-giving. To the receiver, it is a blessing that needs to be taken care of. In turn, it is perceived that the patron saint protects and blesses the caretaker.

Gayakan (decorating the image and its carriage or carroza)

The process of learning

Gayakan is a social role dominated by *gay camareros* or florists. The skill of *paggagayak* is acquired through informal learning that usually stems from childhood experience of playing *karu-karuhan* (mini *carroza*). The skills start to develop as the child engages in an imaginative play and usually reinforces the acceptance towards the practice. As Jake narrated. I pick flowers from the surroundings and use them to decorate the *carroza*. *Gayakan* is ingrained in the *communities of practice* which is usually learned through observation, apprenticeship and mentorship. Adult *gay camareros* play a crucial role in the mentoring process.

Pagagayak as a domain of gay Camareros' artistry

Gayakan is the activity done on the day before the actual La Naval procession (see Picture 3). Many *camareros* in Metro Manila and nearby provinces flock to Dangwa in Manila to purchase freshly delivered flowers to be used as decorations for the *carroza*. Some flowers needed to be revived so it could sustain its form until the end of the procession. Usually, the *carroza* is decorated with flowers once the image is already fixed on top of the *carroza*.

Decorating the *carroza* follows the symmetrical and asymmetrical designs. A symmetrical design is executed through a balanced distribution of decorative materials or floral arrangement, whereas asymmetrical is its opposite. Designs are in line with the theme and usually planned through brainstorming for a week. It is common especially for *gay camareros* not to replicate the previous years' designs.

Apart from dressing up images for the procession, the *carroza* undergoes



Picture 3. The *gayakan*,
decorating the religious image and its carrier.
Source: Taken and owned by the authors.

beautification as well. The *sayal* or curtain under the *carroza* is washed or is replaced with a new one. The colors and patterns depend on the gender of the image (or the scene being depicted in case of tableaux) borne in procession. Most *gay camareros* prefer female saint images to be decorated because they can explore many colors and artistic designs. To *gay camareros*, their preference towards female saints especially to the Virgin Mary depicts their attachment to their mothers. Indeed, the patron saint as an object and subject of gender expressions mirrors *gay camareros'* identity and artistry including the meanings of the relations they have with their sacred images.

Pagsama sa prusisyon (joining the procession)

The procession is the most significant part of *pagsasanto*. Processions are considered as devotional practices done by the faithful

in observance of different religious aims. According to the Roman Catholic Church, processions are cultic expressions of a universal character and have multiple social and religious significance. In them, the relationship between Liturgy and popular piety is especially important (Congregation for the Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2001). In this event the holy image of the gay camerero joins the pageantry and is introduced to the public. Camereros with their (mostly) gay friends walk behind the *carroza* in the procession. In the La Naval's feast (the procession which honors the statue of the Lady of Holy Rosary of the Virgin Mary), gay participants in the procession wear white dress shirts and black pants. They also wear scapulars with rosaries in their hands while saying the prayer to the Virgin Mary during the procession. In such event, the performance of gay identity is construed to be a religious act. While the Virgin Mary is venerated as holy, gay *camareros* are likewise looked up to as dignified caretakers. That is, gays (regardless of types) behave in accordance to the norm. In one way or another, the masculine dimension of the gay gender performance is observed especially in terms of dress code and decorum.

For gay *camareros*, becoming a full pledged image caretaker happens when a camerero's patron saint has complemented the whole process of pageantry. This marks the end of the liminal period and the reincorporation of the *initiand* into his new social position in the world of *pagsasanto*. In this process, strong support system from other gay *camareros* (and other friends who are members of the LGBT community but not particularly religious) is extended to help the *initiand* navigate the challenges. Participating in preparation for the procession and joining in the actual procession are a site of cooperation among gay *camareros*. For example, one camerero shares his story that

he joined the procession without having a concrete plan. He never really intended to join the procession but was persuaded by his peers to join the longest Sto. Nino procession in mainland Luzon. It is a solemn procession in honor of the Sto. Nino de Malolos. He has no *carroza* nor has his own generator set. With the help of peers and networks, he was able to have a successful procession for his Sto. Nino last January 2016. He bought whatever was necessary and had a few sleepless nights just to get by and everything paid off in the end. And it was followed with another procession a week after with the celebration in honor of Sto. Nino in another town.

However, for a grand such as the La Naval, the cost for the preparations range from \$650.00 to more than \$2 000.00. Expensive *carrozas* such as those that cost more than \$2 000.00 are usually decorated with gold decorative materials. As the socio-economic status of a camerero gets better, the amount of preparations gets bigger as well. This entails that the social stature is defined by the price of the images under his possession. Famous *camareros* own images made of ivory or antiques acquired from old families or antique shops.

The glamorous and elegant presentation of the image during the procession contradicts the history of martyrdom and tales of simplicity of the saint it represents. As Henry noted (an expert florist and a camerero), the pageant explicitly conveys competing social status among *camareros*. From an observer's point of view, the pageantry seemed to be a parade of candidates in the beauty contest who wear exquisite and expensive gowns.

Factors mediating Pagsasanto as a gendered social practice

In this section, the research outlines the forces that mediate *pagsasanto* as a gendered social practice. These are political economy of *pagsasanto* and its growing social networks.

The political economy of Pagsasanto

Catholic tradition is full of life and meanings through *pagsasanto*. The increasing number of gay *camareros* and their legitimized social roles and talent has been reinforced by the social forces that (re) shape *pagsasanto*. Different types of business proliferate through *pagsasanto*. These include woodcarving of the images, job painting, dress-making, embroidery, flower business and accessories.

For wood carving, there are three types of images a person can choose from. The *detallado* (Spanish term) image or the fully carved image is a type of *santo* where the whole image from the hair to the vestment is carved in wood, (sometimes in ivory). There is also the *devestir* (not fully carved image) which has two types; the *manikin* (mannequin of a patron saint image) and the *bastidor*. It is called *devestir* because it gives the *camarero* the freedom to dress the image. The first kind of *devestir* is the *manikin*. It got its name from the way its body was carved.



Picture 4. *Bastidor*, an image frame of a saint.
Source: https://luxurylaunches.com/decor/spanish_colonial_cage_santo_bastidor.php

The head and hands are often detachable. The body is carved with pivots and joints so it can be easily moved like a mannequin or a doll. Most gay *camareros* have these type of *santos* especially when they have male images. For those who opt to save more or are in need of a shape based on the vestment the image has to wear, a *bastidor* image is best for them. *Bastidor* is an image frame of a saint (see Picture 4). Usually, its chest up to the torso is carved in the *manikin* manner but some wood pieces are then attached to the base as support to create the rest of the statue.

Many gay *camareros* have an inclination to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Oftentimes, they have an image of her made in the *bastidor* fashion so as to have the dress of the Virgin enveloping the shape that the *andador* or wood panels provide. This provides the A-shape needed for the skirt of the Virgin

From the carving comes the paint job for the images. Many people have their images carved by a certain wood carver and hand them over to an *encarnador* (carver) so s/he can beautify the image with a few retouches on the carving and paint the image over to give it life. Famous *encarnadors* like the late Tom Joven and Alberto Panganiban do repairs and restorations for images. Their *talleres* or workshops offer various treatments to *santos* who need their services. They do not only cater to newly carved *santos*, Tom Joven for example did some restoration works for a few coronadas or canonically crowned images in the Philippines like *Nuestra Señora del BuenSuceso* (Our Lady of Good Events), *Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria de Jaro* (Our Lady of the Candles of Jaro), and *Nuestra Señora de los Desamparados de Marikina* (Our Lady of the Abandoned of Marikina). Their works are sort of their resumes and *camareros* are willing to spend a lot of money just so they can have their services and have the best for the image/s under their care.

Now that the image has been formed and painted, the next task would be to dress them up. At this stage, there are several options for a *santo* enthusiast. A few of those who can afford usually bring home the image after production and have their *burdadera* or their trusted embroiderer do the fitting. Some ask the *imaginero* or the *talleres* of the carver/*encarnador* to deliver the image in simple garments. Many others, mostly gay *camareros* bring home the image. They have it delivered or they fetch it at the *talleres* and wrap the image in a cloth. They bring it home and do the measurements themselves. Either they have their own seamstress or they tailor the dress by themselves

Beads and patches are also common in the *pagsasanto* industry. Beadworks are sewn through a pattern laid out in the dress. This is also considered bead embroidery. Many intricate patterns can be done using beads. Patches on the other hand are ready made patterned designs from either readily available lace fabrics or the ones sold per piece with different designs to compliment a single dress. It is common to see patchworks done with gold patches to imitate the gold hand embroidered vestments. Others intentionally use other colors to provide variety in the patchwork commonly seen by people.

There are different embroidery styles and beadwork is just one of them. There are also machine embroideries, computerized machine embroideries and hand embroideries. Gay *camareros* love these embroidered designs for its intricacy and because these types of vestments have been around for years. Embroideries investments are never out of style as far as *pagsasanto* is concerned. They are already part of the culture in which these gay *santo* enthusiasts are accustomed to and every gay *camarero* aspires to have embroidered vestments for their images at some point in their life. After all, embroidery works come at a price

and regardless of the material, it is costly. For gay *camareros*, these intricate and costly designs are offerings they serve in humility, supplication, and thanksgiving to their image as part of their devotion.

In hand embroidery, you can have two options; you can either use synthetic gold thread or authentic metal threads. Synthetic threads are more budget friendly because the materials are inexpensive and locally available. It also does not tarnish and the color does not fade away. This does not mean it comes cheap. Using synthetic threads can save you money but you will still spend a lot considering that the process of hand embroidering a vestment is labor intensive. The second option is the use of authentic metal threads. These threads are made of metal gilt in gold or silver. They give of that natural shine because of the material itself. This is imported from Pakistan, India, the Middle East, or in Spain. These threads do not come cheap and when used, they will make an elegant but pricey ensemble. They are considered top of the line material and are usually seen in images of antiquity and with images under the care of prominent *camareros*. They tarnish and the color fades away which gives off the more antique effect. Many gay *camareros* love this look because it gives them a sense of antiquity with the whole image itself. The overall look of antiquity with century-old images owned by the prominent rich families of old left a mark in the hearts of these gay *santo* enthusiasts. The aged beauty sits well with their love for the artistry of the craft.

Now that the image is dressed, the accessories complete the overall look of the image. Most images use brass accessories gilt in either gold or silver. These are significant because they complete the iconography of a *santo*. There are varieties like the *aureola* used as a halo for saints both male and female. This is not used though for the image of Jesus Christ. Jesus uses the *tres potencias*

or the three powers it represents. It also symbolizes the trinity. For saints, it is usual to see the common *aureola* or the *aureola de paraguas* also known as the payong. This is the halo attached to a long slender metal rod to fix on the head. For female saints, it is usually accompanied by a *diadema* or short tiara. For the Virgin Mary, the *estrellas* is a variant of the *aureola* with stars attached at the end symbolizing what was written in the revelations where she was crowned with stars and clothed with the sun and the moon below her feet. Some *Virgenes* wear the *rostrillos* which encircles the face of Mary showing her countenance as radiant and full of grace.

It is crucial to note that the market for services, accessories, and products related to *pagsasanto* such as sculpted and painted images, flowers, metal artisans, and *carrozas* are located in different provinces where these items and services can be accessed through a reasonable price. The organized system of production and trade of *pagsasanto* reflects the role of economics in the performance of religions and the role religion to sustain economic activities (Ensminger, 1994).

In the age of social media and the growing population of *camareros* today mediate the *pagsasanto* economy. The artistry spreads among the circle as it grows larger. The social networks involved in *pagsasanto* cultivate the market by showing the latest trend in vesting images or the designs that are in season. As this trend continuous, market grows to the increasing demands of the consumers. The variety now raises quality at a lower cost to gain more patrons. Before, *santo* caretakers of old had a certain area of land dedicated to the *santo* so that whatever money is raised from that piece of land is given to the *santo* as funding for its needs. That is the reality before on how costly it is in taking care of religious images. Now, even students can raise money to commission an image and have it joined the procession. With the

current market readily available through social media and the aid of social networks in the world of *pagsasanto*, the shift from rich families to gay *camareros* is strengthened and is being sustained through inexpensive alternatives. This benefits those who cannot afford much but dreams of having their own processional image under their care. The more accepting Philippine society to gender also sustains this economy. Because more and more gays entering the professional, industrial and corporate world, many a gay *camarero* can afford what others were not able to acquire in previous decades.

The social networks and social capital of gay Camareros

Social media became a platform for gay *camareros* to share their passion. It united them in the things they love the most. For Bourdieu (1986), social network is a form of social capital. It is a resource built on support system which can be converted to other forms of capital (i.e., cultural capital, economic capital, and political capital). The increasing number of gay *camareros* has allowed them to form different networks to meet their needs.

Flickr was the first online platform for *Santo* Enthusiasts. Flickr is a photo-sharing site. It allows *camareros* to share authentic photos of their images. Photo-sharing also enables *camareros* express their interests, preferences, and skills as regards *pagsasanto*. From Flickr, the group transitioned to Facebook to accommodate the growing number of members with this social media account. The community evolved forming another online and offline community called *Esculturas Religiosas Hermosas en las Filipinas* in Flickr on December 28, 2007. The group is composed of owners, caretakers, and enthusiasts of religious sculptures or images that are maintained by Filipinos. As an advocacy group, it promotes the

essence of *pagsasanto* and religious artistry highlighting, locally produced wood and ivory sculptures.

Today, Esculturas is the largest of its kind in social media. It has remained strong because of the leadership of the administrators and with the continuous support of the members. It has launched several projects online like *Santo of the Week* and *Esculturas Awards* which recognizes exemplary images in the Philippines. They also give recognition to religious advocates and *camareros* who have exhibited exemplary behavior in the world of *pagsasanto*. The group plays a pivotal role in regulating *pagsasanto* practices. It also serves as an authorized body where honorary members in the country are consulted to address issues on *pagsasanto*.

These honorary members were given the title honorary members because of their exemplary work with their patron saint images and their influence on fellow *santo* enthusiasts. Within the new *pagsasanto* realm, new identities of power are created. These identifies become even more powerful as members venture into a political field. For example, one of the honorary members is popular transgender lawmaker. Her political position and influence affirm the increasing devotional practices among the gay community. In turn, the group has been a support-based community for her gender advocacies. Hence, through *pagsasanto*, the community implicitly and explicitly demonstrates their power not only within the Catholic faith, but also within the wider society. The legitimacy and authority of the whole community, particularly the positioned actors within *Esculturas* is construed in the context of their roles in the growing market of *pagsasanto*. As one of seasoned gay *camareros* put it, *pagsasanto* is here to stay and will continue to exist. It has market and strong support, and we make it possible.

Conclusion

Gay *camareros* repositioning of their roles and identities within the Catholic devotion of *pagsasanto* reflects the complex ways of gender negotiation, allowing them to occupy a space of authority and power. In making sense of *pagsasanto*, gender identity is reconstructed, redefined, and reproduced. These are ingrained in *pagsasanto* beliefs and practices such caretaking (*pag-aalaga*), decorating the image and its carriage (*gayakan*), and joining the procession and pageantry. Particularly, these practices are embedded in familial and cultural traditions.

Pagsasanto normalizes gender performativity and vice versa. This implies that the tradition of image caretaking allows for a specific gender identity to be performed and reproduced. On the other hand, the performance of gender has become a powerful tool that legitimizes devotional traditions. In the context of *pagsasanto*, gay roles are dominant. Such dominance is attached to artistry, values, aspirations, and identity. Gender expressions and performance through *pagsasanto* are deeply rooted in and constituted by the historical, political and material forces. This reflects in the increasing political economy and social networks of gay *Camareros*, (re)affirming their power and identity within the Catholic's church and wider society.

Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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