

## Votive Offerings For Miracles: Ex-Votos For Apo Lakay At The Simbaan A Bassit In Vigan City

Ashley Paulino S. Martinez

[ashleymartinez22@gmail.com](mailto:ashleymartinez22@gmail.com)

University of Northern Philippines.

### *ABSTRACT*

The study is about the practice of offering silver votive offering also known as ex-voto of the Ilocanos at the Simbaan a Bassit in response to a divine intervention to a health concern in return for a hoped miracle, or a thanksgiving for graces received in answer to a prayer. These religious folk charms that are traditionally used for healing purposes both by individuals and by the community. The research design is a descriptive qualitative method of research using the semiotics and hermeneutics tools in analyzing data. Results show that those who practice religious activities tend to have a greater healing capability. It also shows that individuals who regularly participate in spiritual worship services or related activities firmly believe that spirituality or the presence of a higher being in power are sources of strength and comfort to them are healthier and possess greater healing capabilities. The premise that the ex-voto is the solemn promise of the supplicant to Apo Lakay in time of difficulty, illness, or to give thanks for granted petition is a concrete testimonial of the fulfillment of the vow. Ex-voto as a memorial practice can relate to both the past and the present, as current public demonstrations of health-gratitude or health-awareness extend beyond the divine, the shrine, and their community. The votive offerings are the material embodiment of the miracle itself.

Keywords: Votive / Ex-voto, Apo Lakay, Coping mechanism, Divine intervention.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Religious beliefs practices of the Ilokanos were already present even before the coming of the Spaniards. Early Filipinos worshipped different anitos (local gods) and would appease them through various practices, sacrifices, and rituals. Foronda (1970) reported that the Spanish chronicler, Fr. Juan Gonzales de Mendoza, had observed that the Ilokanos worshipped the anitos in payment and gratitude for the quantities of gold given to them. They believed that everything has a spirit, from animals, trees, rocks, and everything else on this earth.

These pagan practices are closely similar to Christian votive behaviors. Offering objects to spirits or deities to thank them for their protection traces back to ancient pagan beliefs of Rome, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. These offered objects are known as votives. Votive offerings (a.k.a. "ex-votos" – Latin for "from the vow") are commemorative, devotional materials vowed to God or promised to a Saint for their intercession with God in return for a hoped-for miracle. Reyes (2021) in his article stated that people's faith is reflected and expressed through popular devotions. They are manifestations of how individuals acknowledge God in their lives, and they nurture expressions as a common experience. As a result, dedication becomes a representation of prayer. Salvatori observed that some were offered as a thanksgiving for graces received in answer to a prayer (2019). People's experiences are profoundly embedded in their devotions. "Many of these devotional acts have strong origins in common culture," according to Lawrence S. Cunningham (2001). These devotions could be inherited from the family's ancestors or already be a regular practice within the family. Popular devotions as prayer and worship does not contradict the Sacred Liturgy, but it is recognized as valid by the Apostolic See. Furthermore, popular devotions in general lead to the development of certain values. Another notion is that this devotion is embedded in one's culture. Unciano, et al (2023) stressed that a person's identity is shaped by their culture. Hence, a person's behavior, beliefs, and perspective in life are influenced by the common values that are distinctive of their culture. Therefore, cultural identity is all about one's identity, belief system, feelings, and self-worth.

Initially, votive offerings were small figurines placed within Christian churches, places of martyrdom, or other holy sites. While some votive items may be "found objects" with special meaning to the giver, others are made from a variety of common materials like clay,

wood, metal, and wax by an individual for their own use or to sell to the general public. Still other votive items may take the form of exquisitely crafted works of art made of priceless metals and gems. Over time, it has evolved into a different form of art, tokens, the lighting of candles, offering flowers, among many others. It is also religious folk charms that are traditionally used for healing purposes.

According to Kitzinger (1990), like pagan votive practices, Christian votive traditions remained virtually unchanged for two centuries. However, religious imagery was afforded an increasingly important role within the church during the fifth to eighth centuries. Not without controversy, Christian imagery was believed by the faithful to have mystical powers that could protect, prevent injury, or produce material benefits for the supplicant. Additionally, the incarnate image facilitated communication with the divine. Despite the pagan roots of the tradition, ex-voto objects fulfilled these roles and were part of a popular form of devotional practice.

Art votives can range from the humble to a magnificent art piece. Great artists have made votives -- by their own volition or at the commission of wealthy patrons. Usually, paintings and other artworks offered ex-voto depict the miracles for which the votive is offered. Whatever the shapes and materials used, they are testimonials of miracles even when the details of the miracle can only be guessed by the viewer (Salvatori, 2019).

The province of Ilocos Sur have many shrines of devoted to the practice of votive offerings. Among them are the Simbaan a Bassit of Vigan City where the image of Apo Lakay is placed; San Augustine Church in Bantay where the Shrine of Our Lady of Charity is located; Minor Basilica of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino in Sinait where the Shrine of Santo Cristo Milagroso is housed; St. Lucy Parish in Santa Lucia; and San Vicente Ferrer Parish Church in San Vicente. This study's topographical and chronological only focus is the 18<sup>th</sup>-century votive offerings at Simbaan a Bassit in Vigan City, the capital of Ilocos Sur. Vigan, formerly known as Ciudad Fernandina, was colonized by the Spaniards in 1572 and lasted until the Philippine Revolution in 1898. At the southern end of the main thoroughfare of Vigan, the cemetery chapel, popularly known as the "Simbaan a Bassit," was constructed and was blessed on November 9, 1852. This church became a site for the development of votive offerings. "Simbaan a Bassit" is an Ilocano term that literary means Small Church. The church is dedicated to Santo Cristo or "Apo Lakay". A reproduction of

the Apo Lakay, the miraculous crucifix from the town of Sinait, Ilocos Sur, was placed behind the main altar. People would pin silver votives at the trouser of Apo Lakay to ask for favors especially healing of particular sickness. Campos (2013) explains how faith in miracles and the role of religion in times of crisis is a critical coping mechanism, especially for low-income earners whose lives are frequently interrupted by social and economic difficulty. The reason health-related issues are such a common feature of the ex-voto is that the majority of the populace live without access to modern healthcare professionals. For the devotees, the ex-voto reaffirms the power of the images, working as a kind of therapy that can give them the hope they need to deal with a crisis or recover from illness. The ex-votos perform yet another interesting function; by acting as records of daily life, the ailments, disturbances, domestic and social violence that would commonly be documented in social history made public, their resolutions openly celebrated.

This study is vital that these traditions and artifacts be preserved through documentation, photography, and scholarly research and exhibitions. These votive offerings are part of the magical and symbolic past common to all cultures, which continues to influence our lives today. Whether used traditionally or in modern ways, ex-votos are an ongoing part of fascinating folk culture in Vigan. After all, this patrimony encompasses many essential facets of humanity: faith, devotion, health, community, expression, and hope.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study analyzed the silver images (ex-voto) pinned at the trouser of the image of Apo Lakay at the Simbaan a Bassit. Specifically, it shall look into the following: 1) the historical devotion to Apo Lakay at the Simbaan a Bassit; 2) the physical properties of the objects in terms of mass and dimension; 3) the artistic elements and their representation, and 4) the effect of these votive offerings on coping and healing mechanism of an individual when in distress or critically ill.

### **Literature Review**

Faith Development Theory. By definition, faith is an expression of trust in the unknown. Where there is a certainty--when everything can be explained and understood in human terms--there is no need for faith. Faith is a way of knowing that God exists, that Jesus is Lord and the redeemer, and that the Holy Spirit is the direct presence of

God which infuses my life, empowers the church, and calls all humankind to a redemptive relationship. This theory served as the basis for understanding the practice of the locality of pinning their hope to the image of Apo Lakay.

Semiotic. In the theory of semiotics which is based on the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) it is empathized that our interpretations about the things we see every day is based on our personal experience of it. Under the version of Saussure, sign is composed of two basic elements, the signifier and the signified. The signifier refers to the object we see and the signified refers to the concept that it perceives in our knowledge. Peirce, on the other hand, established a more complicated semiotic interpretation framework that consists of three parts. The Sign (or representamen) is the first, and it resembles the signified or the form in which the sign was obtained. The Interpretant, on the other hand, refers to what the signifier perceives based on the form that it resembled or imitated by sharing some of its qualities. The Object, which refers to the thing to which the sign truly refers or is directly connected in some way, is the third part. (De'Alleva. 2005). These theories are further expounded by Brian Curtin. As described by Curtin (2009), semiotic is an investigation into how the meaning of visual, verbal, and symbols is formed and how meaning is conveyed. Semiotic analysis questions ideas where the belief that pictures or things may objectively portray anything and intentionality about visual imagery or visual and material culture in general. It is a broad investigation that goes beyond the study of symbols (the notion that the meaning of images or objects is produced by the person who created them). In addition, semiotics can provide a beneficial alternative to formalist analysis wherein the notion that meaning is of secondary importance to the relationships of an image or object (Curtin, 2009). In effect, semiotic analysis recognizes that we may have a variety of relationships with representation, and thus images or objects are understood as dynamic; that is, the significance of images or objects is understood as a complex inter-relationship between the individual, the image, or object, and other factors such as culture and society, rather than a one-way process from the individual to the image or object.

This theory served as the foundation for interpreting the symbolic meaning of the votive offerings at the Simbaan a Bassit as a coping mechanism when in distress. This period when there is a limited

number of medical practitioners served as the origin of how votive practices developed. The Votive offerings as a symbol of coping mechanisms as how the researcher claims in subordination to the gathered knowledge will now serve as the basis for the researcher to create his own interpretation by way of material study.

Hermeneutics. In the philosophy of Hermeneutics, interpretation is an important component to consider. Each subsequent interpretation builds on the previous one, bringing the artwork and the interpreter together in the past and present. The Hermeneutic Circle, as argued by both Heidegger and Gadamer, orders all knowledge, a continuous circular flow of interpretation in which we have all already involved. According to Dilthey, this circular flow of knowledge originates from the meanings transmitted by a cultural item and practices that do not emerge with the creator's objectives, simply because its component encompasses the entire system of meaning. The systematic circular process of meanings and interpretation that begins at the center and has no end (De'Alleva. 2005). The theory of Hermeneutics served as a primary basis in gathering knowledge about the silver ex-votos and the community in times of distress. These silver objects helped in connecting from the Hispanic history up to the present interpretation by the researcher in his observation of the contemporary culture of Filipinos. This new interpretation will serve as an extension in fulfilling a never-ending circular flow of knowledge brought together by the consciousness of people and their interest to study the Hispanic era of the Philippines.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Research Design. Research design is a descriptive qualitative method of research employing the semiotics and hermeneutics tools in analyzing data about the votive offerings at the Simbaan a Bassit and their coping effects on the devotee. Calderon & Gonzales (2011) describe descriptive research that uses the purposive process of gathering, analyzing, classifying, and tabulating data about prevailing conditions, practices, beliefs, processes, trends, and cause-effect relationships and then making an adequate and accurate interpretation about such data with or without the aid of statistical methods. Qualitative research can be constructed as a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in collecting and analyzing data (Bryman, 2012). This method relies on text and image, has distinct ways of analyzing data, and draws on

various designs (Creswell, 2014, p 232). In short, by using the qualitative method, the researcher will collect the data and analyze it by describing them.

The research is anchored along phenomenology. According to Armstrong (2005), phenomenology is a philosophy of experience. The lived experience of human beings is the ultimate source of all meaning and value in phenomenology. All philosophical systems, scientific theories, and aesthetic judgments abstract from the real world's ebb and flow. According to phenomenology, the philosopher's job is to characterize the structures of experience, such as consciousness, imagination, interpersonal relationships, and the human subject's place in society and history.

The methodological approach applied to this study relied on the visual culture model of research. Visual culture is essentially the study of images for their ability to provide information about a culture (Mirzoeff, 1999). It is a unique model of research because it privileges the image. Because images are believed to be multivalent symbols capable of different meanings dependent on many factors, visual culture studies draw attention to particular histories in the images' creation or beyond. In doing so, visual culture studies seek a broader understanding of a culture based on the dialectic relationship between the image and its historical context. Following visual culture models, this study provided details of Vigan's history that are pertinent to understanding the ex-votos discussed in this study.

Sources of Data. The main source of data are the silver votive offerings that were pinned at the trouser of the image of Apo Lakay at the Simbaan a Bassit, Vigan City. The former Director of the Commission on Church Cultural Heritage of the Archdiocese of Nueva Segovia provided a brief history and insights about the cultural practice of votive offerings. An equal number of three men and three women gave their views regarding the votive offerings for this study. M1 is an ex-seminarian, aged 23 who resides in Barangay II, Vigan City. M2 is a 32-year-old male art instructor. He is affiliated with Latter Day Saints and resides in Sinait, Ilocos Sur where the original image of Apo Lakay is enshrined. M3 is a male 62-year-old lay person who actively assist in church daily mass at Nuestra Senora de Caridad of Bantay, Ilocos Sur. F1 is a female, aged 47. She is a secondary level school teacher, and a resident of Vigan City. F2 is a 55-year-old plain

housewife of Vigan City. F3 is a female, 71 years of age, and resides in Amianance, Vigan City. She is very active in the St. Paul's Metropolitan Cathedral as lay person. Except for M2 who is from latter Day Saints, all the other informants are Roman Catholics. As we can also observe, two lay persons and an ex-seminarian have adequate exposure and knowledge to Catholic religious practices.

**Data Gathering Tools.** To achieve the objectives, the following tools and methods were applied. RO1 – Journal, Online sources, Oral histories, and interviews. Unstructured interview was used. For RO2 – weighing scale, foot rule, and magnifying glass was used. For RO3 – Interview, Documents, Online sources. RO4 – Documents and artifact collection, Oral Histories.

**Data Gathering Procedures.** The researcher wrote a letter to the Director of the Commission on Church Cultural Heritage of the Archdiocese of Nueva Segovia, Vigan City, and the Parish Priest of Saint Paul Metropolitan Cathedral, asking permission to examine the ex-voto. The researcher wore gloves in handling the artifacts. The ex-votos were counted and accounted for based on themes such as heart, hand, praying figure, etc. The silver ex-votos were also measured and weighed using the purposive sampling method. The researcher photographed each set of body parts using the cellular phone for documentary purposes. The researcher visually examined each chosen piece for possible markings, such as dates, the name of the maker, etc.

In addition to personal interpretation of the objects, a face-to-face interview with six informants was also conducted. They were shown the enlarged picture of the collection of the framed votive offerings at the Simbaan a Bassit and at the Archbishop's Museum. The researcher explained to them the purpose of those offerings. They were then showed a specific image/s of the votive offering and asked them what the image might represent. After recording their answers, they were again asked what might be the supplicant's wishes or answered prayers on why the offer was made for the particular image.

All the informants answered an open-ended question during the interview. The questions gathered information about the background of the informant in terms of age, sex, occupation, religious affiliation, and residence. The information was necessary to for determining the informant's profile in their interpretation of the different votive



offerings. The responses and information gathered were then collated, interpreted, and analyzed qualitatively.

The researcher also interviewed the former Director of the Commission on Church Cultural Heritage of the Archdiocese of Nueva Segovia. The researcher used a cellular phone to record the unstructured interview. The interview was transcribed and coded.



**Fig 1. Analyzing the ex-voto**



**Fig 2. Measuring the ex-voto**



**Fig 3. Weighing the ex-voto**

Data Analysis. Data gathered came from two sources – the silver ex-voto and the responses from informants. By using the descriptive method, the researcher collected the data at the Simbaan a Bassit and at the Archbishop's Palace Museum and used Semiotic to interpret them. On the other hand, data gathered during the interview were transcribed. The researcher used Hermeneutics to interpret the data gathered from observation and interviews conducted. Comprehensive assessment of websites and other online sources was also used to strengthen the objectives of the study.

Ethical Consideration. The researcher certifies that there is no conflict of interest between the researcher and the informants who provided relevant data to the study. Informed consent through a letter with the participants of the interview explaining the importance of the information gathered and its importance to the community. There is no known risk to the informant and the researcher. No monetary compensation was also given to the informant, but this report acknowledges their participation. The UNP Ethics Review Committee has issued Approval Number A-21-011 as proof that the research has undergone an ethics review.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 The historical devotion to Apo Lakay at the Simbaan a Bassit  
“Scholars believe that votive practices began as early as 2800 B.C. E. in Western Europe. Evidence from Greek, Roman and Iberian cultures indicate a well-developed votive tradition. Votive offerings were placed at holy shrines in attempt to implore the power of a god.” (Massey, 1995). The objects often depicted anatomical forms which likely indicate prayers for physical wellbeing. This tradition underwent few changes as it continued for centuries. These plaques were affixed to the votive object or displayed alongside the offering. Kitzinger (1990) believed that supplicants likely perceived the narrative quality of thru text to be a more immediate means of communication with the divine. Additionally, it promoted the life-like quality of the votive object, which was believed to increase its supernatural powers.

Started the construction in 1610, the Simbaan a Bassit was blessed on November 9, 1852. The church is notable for being the only church in the region with *espadaña* (a wall with holes in which bells are hung). This church became a devotion site of Apo Lakay, a reproduction to that of Santo Cristo Milagroso of Sina-it, Ilocos Sur. Oral history shows that Diego Silang, a local revolutionary hero, had a deep devotion to the Sto. Cristo. The miraculous power of Apo Lakay was experienced by the people of Vigan when it was brought to Vigan during the epidemic in 1756 and 1882.

According to King (1991), a local historian of Vigan City, thirty years after constructing the new cemetery chapel in 1852, an epidemic broke out in Vigan and its surrounding towns and afflicted much of the people. The old folk of Vigan called it ‘peste’ (pestilence) while the record of entry at the Parish of St. Dominic, Sto. Domingo, Ilocos Sur, the “Libro de Entierros,” the recorder, wrote about the epidemic as ‘cholera.’

Again, King made the following observation:

The record book of entry at the St. Paul Metropolitan Cathedral, the ‘Libro de Entierros’ (p. 50), did not specify any information about the epidemic. Still, surprisingly when the writer opened the book, the ‘Libro de Entierros’ of Vigan, he found out the significant number of deaths recorded and buried daily. Whatever it was, it must be understood that the oral history of the old folks proves again the correctness of the epidemic at the time, 1882.

The number of the interred cadavers per day due to the epidemic from November 12 to December 15, 1882 is 932.

The people of both gremios, the Naturales and the Mestizos were alarmed at the cruel epidemic that afflicted the people. They requested the parish priest of Sina-it thru Fr. Evaristo Abaya to ask permission to borrow the Santo Cristo Milagroso again and be brought to Vigan for veneration. The Bigueños brought the miraculous image to Vigan and made a nine-day Novena in honor of Santo Cristo Milagroso. During the nine-day novena, the number of deaths decreased. To show the correctness of the oral history of the old folks about the cessation of the epidemic through the intercession of Apo Santo Cristo Milagroso, the total number of deaths as reported from the Libro de Entierros from December 16 to 31 have decreased to 54 deaths.

When the novena culminated, the epidemic stopped. The people of Vigan thanked the Lord thru the solemn thanksgiving Mass, which was attended by almost the whole populace. They returned the image to Sina-it and made a copy of it. Since then, the people of Vigan did not forget the filial devotion to the Santo Cristo Milagroso known to these days as Apo Lakay. As an act of thanksgiving, the Naturales of Vigan chose the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of May to coincide with the feast of the Holy Cross and the feast of Apo Santo Cristo Milagroso of Sina-it. The Tres de Mayo fiesta is the feast of the whole Naturales section of Vigan (feast of the Natives of Vigan), which started on May 3, 1883. It has been yearly and joyously celebrated up to the present at all corners of Vigan occupied by the Naturales section. To

this day, people flock to the Simbaan a Bassit to hear mass, render devotion, pay homage and thanksgiving to Apo Lakay every Friday. Their faith rewarded with Apo Lakay's long and impressive record of miracles. Whether saving the city from a deadly epidemic in 1756 and 1882 or delivering the people from calamities, the image of Apo Lakay is intimately tied to Vigan City's history. As the world suffers another pandemic, the Covid 19, the Ilocanos use the same fervor as



*Fig 4. Replica of image of Apo Lakay*

they did many years ago, following the tradition of devotion to Apo Lakay. The faithful go around the City of Vigan with the image of Apo Lakay, chanting prayers and religious songs as they seek his mercy and forgiveness, especially their deliverance from the Covid 19.



*Fig 5. Votive offerings at the Simbaan a Bassit*

Although ex-votos are offered in anticipation of a miracle, in the classical sense, ex-votos is a traditional folk art that acts as a tribute to divine intervention in personal misfortune, or they are offered to the saint in thanks for a prayer answered. In the event of a death by the petitioner, the relatives shall continue the vow. If the deity's shrine is distant, a pilgrimage often becomes the completion of the vow. Greenfield reports that pilgrimage is often transformed into spiritual experiences shared with others during yearly processions or feasts. Famous sites receive overwhelming numbers of ex-votos during the pilgrimage, which can boost a church's 'miracle credibility,' determined by the sheer volume of successful miracles attained by the fulfillment of vows. Sites with miracle credibility may attract several pilgrims, while those that don't have miracles to speak of become obsolete. Priests may also use these miracles to enhance their sermons and promote the shrine's patron saint.

### 3.2. The physical properties of the objects in terms of mass and dimension

The ex-votos and Milagros are usually small metal religious folk charms traditionally used for healing purposes. The word "Milagro" implies a miracle which illustrates the popular belief that the outcome of votive practices is indebted to the interception of the supernatural. When prayers are answered, we are indebted for this favor granted. These small charms, often depicting eyes, arms, legs, body parts, praying people, and various other subjects, are usually pinned on the clothing on saint statues. Milagros are made from different materials and come in various shapes and dimensions. They might be nearly flat, and they can be fabricated from gold, silver, tin, lead, wood, bone, or wax. The ex-votos were often commissioned for a particular occasion. Ready-made ex-voto can also be purchased

from a vendor's stand outside the church. However, when the parish priest observes that the saint's statue is over-laden with Milagros, he sells them back to the religious vendor. The church has also recycled many Milagros. According to Msgr. R. Reyes (personal communication, February 27, 2022), when the number of votive offerings becomes numerous, it is collected and remolded as part or silver decorations for the shrine, such as candle holders or frontals.



*Fig 6. Votive offerings that are displayed at the Archbishop's Museum.*

Everyday necessities such as health, happiness, protection from plaques, and calamities are the themes usually expressed in votive offerings. At the Simbaan a Bassit, 82 votive offerings are displayed behind the altar where the statue of "Apo Lakay" is exhibited. The votive offerings are displayed in a glass case measuring 16 inches width x 20 inches length x 3 inches depth on the eastern wall inside the dome of the Simbaan a Bassit. Inside the glass-casing is a fading red velvet cloth. Adorning the velvet cloth are silver relief sculptures ranging from  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch to several inches of body parts; each is unique as the culture that

produces them.

Because the ex-votos are made from precious materials, the church has decided to move most of the votive offerings at the Simbaan a Bassit to the Archbishop's Palace. Displayed at the Archbishop's Museum is a wooden case with a glass cover measuring  $19\frac{1}{2}$  inches width x  $27\frac{1}{2}$  inches length x 2 inches depth. Inside the glass-casing is a green velvet cloth where numerous scattered silver ex-votos were pinned.

The researcher made the following description of the ex-votos he saw at the Simbaan a Bassit and at the Archbishop's Museum. It was observed that nobody wanted his votive offering to be identical to anybody else's. The ex-votos were depicted in anthropomorphic outlines. Most were in the standing and kneeling profiles as if in prayer. Anatomical features of extremities and bodily organs were also depicted. The ingenuity of the artisans' resourcefulness is remarkable. They create every imaginable type of eye, from the most naturalistic to the most abstract, even going as far as surrealistically. Minute details such as facial features, eyes, and muscles were

etched. Some pieces were enigmatic that it is difficult to ascertain what they symbolized. Upon scrutiny, almost all ex-votos were cut out from thin sheets of silver rather than molded or sculpted with designs engraved on them. The ex-votos were outlined with childlike simplicity and naiveness in folk art quality. Each ex-voto has pins attached to it.

The following data shows the number, weight, and dimension of votive offerings found at the Simbaan a Bassit and the Archbishop's Palace. The researcher counted the number of votive offerings manually. Since the elements were of different sizes, the researcher chose three (3) to five (5) different sizes from smallest to biggest. The chosen objects were then measured and weighed.

*Fig 7. Pin attached to the trouser of APO Lakay*



**Table 1: Physical properties of the Votive Offerings**

Element	Simbaan a Bassit	Archbishop's Palace	Weight (gm)	Dimension (cm)
Heart	2	6	3.40 – 4.21	13 – 22
Eyes	10	42	3.89 – 7.99	33 – 42
Breast	3	8	2.68 – 2.70	35 – 37
Face	3	9	4.59 – 8.68	20 – 25
Lungs	2	0	8.66 – 9.23	25 – 26
Kidney	1	0	4.48	34
Body / Torso	0	5	7.87 – 8.98	38 - 45
Nose	1	0	1.88	12
Arms	4	29	2.14 – 5.44	32 – 40
Legs and feet	28	62	5.53 – 7.19	33 – 46
Praying female figure	1	49	8.53	36
Praying male figure	17	47	3.71 – 5.73	39 – 46
Young boys and girls	8	27	5.59 – 19.80	41 – 49
Unidentified Body Parts	2	9	1.95 – 2.74	9 - 18
TOTAL	82	293		

### 3.3. The artistic elements and its representation of the votive offering

Several popular terms describe ex-votos as Milagros (miracles) and promessas (promises). The term miracle illustrates the popular belief that the outcome of votive practices is indebted to the interception of the supernatural, and the term promise refers to the devotee's vow to repay a deity for received request, which may be honored at all cost.

Apo Lakay at the Simbaan a Bassit became an excellent place for the development of ex-voto following during an era when the public primarily looked to religion to address their issues. A believer makes a vow to the Apo Lakay and pins the ex-voto to the trouser. There are oral histories of miracles attributed to the Apo Lakay and documented for posterity. Evidence of the images granting miraculous cures is displayed in mostly silver representations or ex-votos of bodily parts, from eyes to legs, arms, abdomen, and even internal organs – anything for posterity. The majority of the offerings are silver charms of body parts, suggesting that the primary issues for which intervention is sought in Simbaan a Bassit are physical health matters. Almost every organ of the human body, more or less formalized and abstracted, is exhibited. There was even a representation of the entire human body - a child, a man, or a woman. Anatomical ex-votos function as representations of body parts that are either in need of a saint's blessing or as reverence of thanks to a saint for a blessing given. The external parts of the body may be used more metaphorically. Internal organs tend to relate directly to a literal illness. The ex-voto was their act of thanking God and recognizing that God through the saints worked out a miracle in the devotees' person. These ex-votos are part of the Ilocano cultural folk tradition magical and symbolic past and are an ongoing part of a fascinating folk culture that continues to influence the Ilocano lives today.

The following are some typical ex-votos are displayed at the Simbaan a Bassit and at the Archbishop's Museum, and their basic potential meanings (always up for individual interpretation).

### Heart, Heart with Sword



Figure 8. Ex-Voto of heart

All the informants interpreted the image to “represent the human heart which might be connected with worries over a heart condition. It might also represent love, romance, and joy.” F1 added that the person is “agsapsapul ti ayat (longing for love).” M3 said that It is a depiction of “grief or pain as seen in the heart pierced with arrow.”

### Eyes



(Figure 9. Ex-Voto of Eyes)

The six informants viewed the image to represent the “human eye because of the presence of eye lashes.” They all agreed that the petitioner may have “problems related to the eye such as poor eyesight, astigmatism or cataract.” The eyes also represent the concept of “vision, insight, and vigilance.” F1 portrayed it as “pattapatta (intuition) as the supplicant might have done something right based on gut feeling.” M2, a member of Later Day Saint expressed it as “guidance, watching over us, or pleading our case before the saints and helping us defend from spirits from the land of the dead.”

### Breast



Figure 10. Ex-Voto of breasts



All of them described the image as a representation of a “breast, and it might be connected to ailment associated with the breast such as breast cancer.” All the female informants considered that it might also be a representation of “nourishment and strength as the breast is a life-giving organ” Again, the female informants added that the image might also represent “beauty, motherhood, and vitality.” Recognizing the importance of being a mother, F1 further explained that it is “ballaigi ti maysa nga ina nga nangipaay ti annak ti nasayaat nga sursuro nga adda nakem na, managayat, manag-dayaw, ken mannanga-asi ti pada na nga tao (fulfillment of a mother in providing her children with a deep understanding, love, self-esteem, and compassion while strengthening the importance of human values).”

#### **Body Parts (Lungs, Ears, Kidneys, etc.)**



*Figure 11. Ex-Voto of other body parts*

The informants unanimously agreed that the votive offerings of various body parts, such as lungs, ears, kidneys, intestines, etc., “are used when asking for help with a particular ailment of the identified part.” M2 also viewed that it might also represent a “healthy function of body parts as our body is the temple of God.”

#### **Arms, hands**



*Figure 12. Ex-Voto of arms and hands*

The informants expressed that the ex-voto of the arm might represent the “arm itself and some conditions such as injury or

arthritic condition.” Considering that males do the hard work or the moneymaker, the male informants suggests that “strength and one’s ability to work as a job or creativity” may represent the arm. It should be noted that during the Spanish era in the Philippines, males are expected to be strong, aggressive and should be a provider for his family. F3, a female informant countered that it might represent a “demonstration of physical affection such as an embrace or hug.” M2 gave a different opinion that the image of a hand might also represent “gratitude to God for giving a helping hand in times of distress.”

### Legs and Feet



*Figure 13. Ex-Voto of feet*

Like the arm, this ex-voto might represent the “legs or feet themselves and some conditions such as injury or arthritic condition” as viewed by all informants. F2 considered it as concept of “safe travel or journey, such as walking and even the idea of driving safely back and forth from everyday work.” Again, M2 gave a different interpretation of the ex-voto. He said that it might also represent “strength to be dependent.”

### Head & face



*Figure 14. Ex-Votos of head and face*

The informants have varied interpretation of these ex-voto of the face. M2 and F3 said that it might represent the concept of “beauty and dignity.” M2 uttered that “since the face consist of eyes, ears, nose and mouth, it may also represent correct discernment of its

functions.” F1, who is a teacher stated that “since the brain is the center of the head, it symbolizes wisdom and knowledge.” These offerings might also represent the “healing of facial deformities caused by sickness or scar” as expressed by M3.

**Body, Torso**



*Figure 15. Ex-Voto of body and torso*

All the informants said that these votive offering is a depiction of a human body. M2 added that the image also connotes “protection or restoration of lost dignity.” F3 also said that it might also represent the “healing of the entire body.”

**Praying Female Figures**



*Figure 16. Ex-Voto of female praying figures*

All the informants agreed that this ex-voto is representation of a “woman, such as one's mother or wife.” F2 suggested that this figure can also represent a “woman perceived as faithful and sincere.” F3 added that it might also represent the “prayers of a woman or a posture of prayerfulness. It can also represent any female saint, such as the Virgin Mary.”

**Praying Male Figures**



*Figure 17. Ex-Voto of male praying figures*

Again, all the informants said that this ex-voto can represent a “man, such as one’s father or husband.” F2 once again suggested that this figure can also represent a “man perceived as faithful and sincere.” F3 also added that it might also represent the “prayers of a man or a posture of prayerfulness. It can also represent any male saint, such as San Isidro, who is always shown in a praying posture.”

#### **Young Boys and Girls**



*(Figure 18. Ex-Voto of young boys and girls)*

The six informants viewed this ex-voto to represent “one’s child, a niece, a nephew, or a grandchild.” M1 an ex-seminarian interpreted it as the “childlike qualities in everyone, in the sense of nurturing one’s inner child.” M2 on the other hand considered it as a “request or thanksgiving for a successful, talented and well-mannered child.” F2 said that it might also be connected to prayer to a saint wherein one might have prayed to give birth to a healthy baby, and as a result of these prayers, a child was born. It might also represent for favor granted for specific gender of a child.” F2 further narrated that she once asked for prayers before giving birth to her first-born child five years after her marriage.

The symbols and contents depicted in Simbaan a Bassit may vary between countries. Ex-votos can include symbols or representations of miraculously healed body parts, and object related to the miracle, or texts explaining the attributed miracle and content may also vary based on cultural beliefs..

Ex-votos are not only used as religious items. They are a part of every society's mystical and symbolic past, which continues to impact our lives today. New uses and meanings of ex-votos continue to evolve. If a friend is about to have an eye operation, the gift of an eye milagro helps to say, "I wish you well." A pair of lungs can say, "I hope your cold gets better." An arm and a leg is given to a couple trying to buy a house can wish them good luck obtaining financing. An ear milagro can suggest that someone be a better listener. According to Msgr. Reyes, in spite of the numerous ex-votos that were pinned to the trouser of Apo Lakay, the supplicant remains anonymous.

The quality of these silver ex-votos are remarkable. After more than a century, it has not been darkened or heavily tarnished. Almost all the ex-votos have a uniform thickness, and proportion with designs etched on them.

#### 3.4. The effect of these votive offerings on an individual's coping and healing mechanism when in distress or critically ill.

The practice of asking for divine intervention to cure malady has existed for centuries. Healing and faith have always been essential aspects of the lives of the faithful. They are interwoven in the fabric of social history. Throughout history, our perceptions of disease and healing and how we cope with them have captured our imagination. McKenzie (2022) also explores the role of ex voto in healing. Votive may offer insights into the prevalence of sickness, illnesses, or medical conditions in different time period.

From a scientific point of view, proving whether spiritual beings exist and are capable of miraculous cures is not easily proven. Therefore, to achieve the best possible results in health-related issues, believers

must engage in active self-healing, which means that in conjunction with petitioning a deity, they must also help themselves.

The expression of our relationship with illness is wonderfully documented at the Simbaan a Bassit, a devotional silver ex-voto of bodily parts and anthropomorphic figures giving thanks to Apo Lakay for a miraculous healing or blessing. The faithful have always used prayer to invoke the aid of saints to heal the sick and end one's suffering. These devotional silver ex-votos are an individual's expression of thanks for the intercession of the divine in a crisis, a snapshot in time of illness and healing. They offer a rare opportunity to view health, healing, and illness through the hearts and minds of ordinary people.

A study has shown that those who follow a religious belief practice tend to have higher coping mechanisms than those who do not follow religious or spiritual practices (Koenig, 1997). Individuals who are suffering and place their hopes on spiritual beings rather than on themselves, their families, or their health care professionals have been found to exhibit mental wellbeing and be less stressed. Uderman (2000) also reported strong scientific evidence that individuals who regularly participate in spiritual worship services or related activities firmly believe that spirituality or the presence of a higher being in power are sources of strength and comfort to them are healthier and possess greater healing capabilities. This form of practice may not affect the result of one's condition, particularly in the case of terminal illnesses. Still, faith in divine intervention to bring treatment can influence confidence, positive attitude, and healthy behavior. Some people may experience placebo effects when they believe that something is protecting or healing them, in which they believe that a supernatural being is at work. As Msgr. R. Reyes stated that the ex-votos that were pinned at the trouser of Apo Lakay is a "living testament of an answer prayer" or an expression of gratitude for healing or restoration of health. Still, other purpose has expanded to include the commemoration of special events or addressing a concern in an individual's life. ex-voto reflects a tradition where faith and healing play a vital role in daily life.

#### **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

After several people died of cholera in Vigan in 1882, many parishioners at the Simbaan a Bassit appeared to have participated

in collaborative coping techniques by pinning their hope thru spiritual help. The premise that the ex-voto is the solemn promise of the supplicant to Apo Lakay in time of difficulty, illness, or to give thanks for granted petition is a concrete testimonial of the fulfillment of the vow. The ex-voto is the material embodiment of the miracle itself. The numerous numbers of votive medical offerings support this notion. Because there were few medical practitioners at the time, these people cling to spiritual guidance while engaging in positive self-healing activities, a coping method that aids recovery by fostering a good attitude and healthy behavior. Votive sacrifices were made by peasants, laborers, and the jobless, affluent, and impoverished people.

The ex-votos play a critical role in the cycle that allows these people to act upon their desires within the framework of their belief system, which forms a community whose shared ideology, interaction, and support allows individuals to develop the identities through which they perceive themselves and others. They reflect the belief, faith, and attitude of people before life. The ex-votos of Apo Lakay create a space and an audience for their moving and frightening descriptions of daily worries, spiritual and financial needs, risks, hopes, and goals of individuals who are often overlooked by history. They speak eloquently of lasting faith, social and economic inequities, and human endurance. They raise tough ideological and theoretical challenges to researchers on understanding them on their terms. As tradition flourished, these people of Vigan and neighboring towns continued the tradition by praying to Apo Lakay, which liberated them from that obligation and promise. They confirm the communication with superior beings, and this way, they maintain an important rite in the rich world of religion, from ancient Greece to the Heritage City of Vigan.

This study recommends that there are other aspects of such experiences that need to be studied. Does it affect a devotee's devotion to a deity if a prayer is not answered? Problems on unaccounted prayers, written accounts from those who benefitted by the "miracle," foundations, and data to study the perceived health outcomes of votive practices may affect further studies on this matter. Meanwhile, the documentation of these votive offerings can be used for historical analysis. As votive practices change and develop over a period of time, the continuation of such research and

documentation is helpful to the field of folk art, religious studies, cultural studies, theology, psychology, sociology, and history.

## REFERENCES

1. Ayala, Fernando Zobel De. "Silver Ex-Votos in Ilocos." *Philippine Studies*, 1957: 261-267. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42719317>
2. Armstrong, Paul B. "Phenomenology". *Johns Hopkins Guide for Literary Theory and Criticism* entry (2nd Edition 2005). [https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky\\_Institute/courses/architecturebodyperformance/1065.html#:~:text=Phenomenology%20is%20a%20philosophy%20of%20experience.&text=The%20task%20of%20the%20philosopher,subject%20in%20so%20ciety%20and%20history.](https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/architecturebodyperformance/1065.html#:~:text=Phenomenology%20is%20a%20philosophy%20of%20experience.&text=The%20task%20of%20the%20philosopher,subject%20in%20so%20ciety%20and%20history.)
3. Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods*. New York, London: Oxford University Press. 35-36, 416-418. <https://handoutset.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Social-Research-Methods-4th-Edition-Alan-Bryman.pdf>
4. Calderon, J. F. & Gonzales, E. C. (2011). *Methods of Research and Thesis Writing*. Mandaluyong, M.Mla: National Book Store, Inc. 61.
5. Campos, A *Narratological Investigation of the Ex-Votos of Guanajuato and Real de Catorce*. (<http://fiumefreeze.blogspot.com/2013/09a-narratological-investigation-of-ex.html>).
6. Christiano, Kevin J.; Swatos, William H.; Kivisto, Peter (2008). *Sociology of Religion: Contemporary Developments* (2nd ed.). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc. ISBN 978-0-7425-6111-3.
7. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage Publications, Inc. [https://spada.uns.ac.id/pluginfile.php/510378/mod\\_resource/content/1/creswell.pdf](https://spada.uns.ac.id/pluginfile.php/510378/mod_resource/content/1/creswell.pdf).
8. Cunningham, L.S. (2001). *Liturgy and Devotions, The Way Supplement*. <https://www.theway.org.uk/back/s100Cunningham.pdf>



9. Curtin, B. (2009). Semiotic and Visual Representation. Retrieved from <https://www.arch.chula.ac.th/journal/files/article/IjjpgMx2iiSun103202.pdf>.
10. D'Alleva, A. (2005). *Methods & Theories of Art History*. London: Laurence King Publishing.
11. Deem, Rich. Scientific Studies that Show a Positive Effect of Religion on Health. May 19, 2006. <http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/religionhealth>.
12. Egan, Martha. About Us: The Collector's Guide. September 24, 2007. <http://www.collectorsguide.com/fa/fa052.shtml> (accessed August 16, 2014).
13. Foronda, J.A (1970). "The establishment of the first missionary centers in Ilocos, 1572-1612." *Christian Beginnings in Ilocandia*. Ilocos Review. Volume 3, Numbers 1 & 2. 1970.
14. Greenfield, S M., and Cavalcante, A. M. "Pilgrimage and Patronage in Brazil." *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 2006. P. 63-89.
15. James, Paul (2018). "What Does It Mean Ontologically to Be Religious?". In Stephen Ames; Ian Barns; John Hinkson; Paul James; Gordon Preece; Geoff Sharp (eds.). *Religion in a Secular Age: The Struggle for Meaning in an Abstracted World*. Arena Publications. p. 70. [https://www.academia.edu/37278937/What\\_Does\\_It\\_Mean\\_Ontologically\\_to\\_Be\\_Religious\\_2018\\_](https://www.academia.edu/37278937/What_Does_It_Mean_Ontologically_to_Be_Religious_2018_)
16. King, Damaso Q. (1991). "Vigan Cemeteries and Simbaan A Bassit." *The Ilocos Review*, 34 - 54.
17. Kitzinger, Ernst. (1990) "The Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm". *Dumbarton Oaks*.
18. Koenig, H.G. (1977) *Is religion good for your health? The effects of religion on physical and mental health*. New York: Haworth Pastoral Press.
19. Massey, Jorge Durand and Douglas. (1995). *Miracles on the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States*. Tucson and London: The University of Arizona Press.

20. McKenzie, Louisa (2022). Votive Offerings for Healing. Wellcome Collection. 183 Euston Road. London NW1 2BE.  
<https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/YhZoYRMAAKtufDA4>
21. Mirzoeff, Nicholas. An Introduction to Visual Culture. New York: Routledge, 1999.
22. Oktavec, E., & Fontana, B.L. (1995). Answered prayers: Miracles and milagros along the border. New York: University of Arizona Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2dzzqhh>
23. Reyes, JA. (June 2021). An appraisal of the Filipino Catholic Devotion to the Black Nazarene in the light of New Evangelization.  
<https://www.preprints.org/manuscript/download>.
24. Salvatori, M. (2019). Stories of Miracle: Understanding Ex Voto. Retrieved from <http://www.mariolinasalvatori.com/understanding-ex-votos/>
25. Uderman, B.E. (2000). The Effects of spirituality on health and healing: a critical review on athletic trainees. *Journal of Athletic Training*. Apr-Jun 53(2). 194-197.  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1323417>
26. Unciano, M. J., Duquinal, M., Patubo, H., Nesperos, I., Alconis, C. (2023). Narratives of Buri Weavers in San Juan: A Phenomenology. *Journal of Namibian Studies*. Vol 33. <https://namibian-studies.com/index.php/JNS/article/view/2520/1820>.