

Dialogical Intersections of Tamil and Chinese Ethnic Identity in the Catholic Church of Peninsular Malaysia

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Abstract

The contemporary Malaysian Catholic church bears witness to the many bridges that connect ecclesial and ethnic spaces, as liturgical practices and cultural materiality of the Malaysian Catholic community often reflect the dialogic interactions between ethnic diversity and the core of traditional Roman Catholic practices. This essay presents key ethnographic data gathered from fieldwork conducted at selected churches in peninsular Malaysia as part of a research project that aimed to investigate transcultural adaptation in the intersections between Roman Catholic culture and ethnic Chinese and Tamil cultural elements. The discussion presents details of data gathered from churches that were part of the sample and especially reveal how ceremonial practices and material culture in many of these Malaysian Catholic churches revealed a high level of adaptation of ethnic identity and that these in turn are indicative of dialogue and mutual exchange between the repertoire of ethnic cultural customs and Roman Catholic religious practices.

Keywords

Malaysian Catholic Church, transcultural adaptation, heteroglossic Catholicism, dialogism, ethnic diversity, diaspora

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Introduction

In Malaysia, over half of the Christian population comprise of Roman Catholics, making it the largest denomination as well as the oldest, having been introduced by the Portuguese colonisers who conquered Malacca in 1511 (Roxborough 1). Portuguese admiral Alfonso de Albuquerque came to Malacca with eight military chaplains. Churches were built and some locals converted to the new faith. By mid-century a considerable number had become Christian. In 1641, Malacca was attacked and colonised by the Protestant Dutch who suppressed the Catholic faith. Nevertheless, the Catholic populace were resilient in keeping their belief alive (Roxborough 5); by 1712, Catholics outnumbered Protestants by six to one (Lee 44).

The arrival of the British in Penang in 1786 and extension of its authority had an impact on the Malaysian Catholic church. The British set up administrative centres in different states, which enabled churches to be established and serve the Catholic and non-Catholic population. A substantial number of Malaysian Catholic churches originated from the last two decades under British rule (Roxborough 9). The French *Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris* (MEP) priests also played a significant role in evangelising the Catholic faith, who endeavoured to learn the local languages and immersed themselves in the local community, which earned them much admiration (D'Cruz). Other religious orders and congregations also arrived in Malaysia, such as the Brothers of Christian Schools (De La Salle Brothers), Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus and Canossian Sisters (Roxborough 10-11).

In 1955, the old Malacca diocese became an Archdiocese with two suffragans: The Kuala Lumpur and Penang dioceses. In 1972, the Kuala Lumpur Diocese was elevated into an archdiocese with two suffragan dioceses, Penang and Malacca-Johore, the latter of which had simultaneously detached from the Singapore archdiocese (Metropolitan Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur). Archbishop Dominic Vendargon became the first Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur in 1972 and was succeeded by Archbishop Anthony Soter Fernandez in 1982. Most Reverend Murphy Pakiam was appointed as the third Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur in 2003 and was succeeded by Archbishop Julian Leow in 2014 (Metropolitan Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur). The ecclesial hierarchy of the Malaysian church represents a mixture of individuals of Chinese and Indian ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the predominant communities of the Catholic Churches in Peninsular Malaysia, other than the Eurasians.

Indian and Chinese Ethnic Culture in Peninsular Malaysian Catholic Church

Data from the Department of Statistics estimates that Malaysian population in 2018 stood at 32.4 million, of which 29.1 million are citizens. The Chinese community form some 23% at 6.69 million, while Indians account for 6.9% of

the population at 2.01 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia “Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2017-2018”). Islam is the religion of the majority in Malaysia at 61.3% with Christians forming a minority at 9.2% (Department of Statistics Malaysia “Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010”), of which Roman Catholics form the largest denomination.

Malaya (now known as Peninsular Malaysia) was historically populated mainly by indigenous communities and the Malays. The main wave of Chinese immigrants occurred during the latter part of the 19th century as global demand for tin grew (Lian 392). They settled down in tin-mining areas of the Kinta Valley in Perak and Kuala Lumpur, and the port cities of Penang and Malacca (Smith 175). Meanwhile, the major inflow of Indian migrants into Malaya was during the early 20th century due the growth of rubber estates in the west coast of Malaya.⁵ These waves of migration has resulted in the development of a plural Malaysian society today (Lian 393).

The establishment of British administrative centres enabled churches to be established, especially in the west coast of Malaya. The aim of the Catholic Church at that time was “to preach, instruct, baptise, and to build churches as the Catholic population increased” (Chew 103). While there were some Catholics among the Chinese and Indian communities in Malaya, evangelisation by religious orders such as the La Salle Brothers, Holy Infant Jesus Sisters and the MEP priests played a significant role in spreading the Catholic faith. Language and dialect diversity among the Malayan population meant that parishes were created based on language groups rather than provinces (Chew 104). MEP priests also learned the local language in order to preach and communicate with the local populace.

Roman Catholic Liturgical Practices in Malaysia Pre and Post Vatican Council II

The Malaysian Catholic Church follows the Roman rite of Mass in unity with all Roman Catholic Churches around the world, under the leadership of the pope as the Pontiff of the Universal Church. The liturgical developments stemming from the 21st Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church or Vatican Council II which took place between 1962-1963, opened doors to the inclusion of languages other than Latin for use in Catholic liturgy worldwide. Prior to that, the Tridentine mass (contained in the Roman Missal published between the years 1570 to 1962) was celebrated exclusively in Latin in Malaysia and across the world as promulgated by Pope Pius V in accordance to the Council of Trent.⁶

⁵ The population of the Federation of Malaya in 1954 was 5,888,578 of which 2,893,650 were Malays, 2,216,105 Chinese, 691,431 Indians and Pakistanis and 87,392 others (Lee).

⁶ According to Mediator Dei no. 60, “the use of the Latin language, customary in a considerable portion of the Church, is a manifest and beautiful sign of unity, as well as an effective antidote for

Pre-Vatican Council II, priests in Malaysia, both local and foreign were all trained in Latin and all aspects of the liturgy of the Word and Eucharist was in Latin including hymns, chants and prayers (Pakiam). However, there were exceptions in some communities in Malaysia where priests would teach catechism and deliver the homily in vernacular languages of the community such as Tamil, Cantonese, Hokkien or even Malay and in some instances, hymns were sung in local languages after the Latin version but the other parts of the mass would still be in Latin (Pakiam).⁷

Among the key reforms of the Vatican Council II (1962-1965) which gathered all the Catholic bishops of the world was liturgy. As promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963 with the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), “In their 1963 Constitution on the Liturgy, the council fathers recognized the need to encourage lay participation and to adapt the liturgy to local cultures” (Reese). Malaysia was represented at the Vatican Council II by Archbishop Reverend Dominic Vendargon (attended all sessions at Vatican Council II), Bishop Francis Chan who was the Bishop of Penang Diocese (attended 2 sessions of Vatican Council II, 1962 and 1964) and Reverend Father Peter Bretadeau (last sessions of Vatican Council II, November-December 1965). In reflecting on the Vatican Council II, the late Archbishop Vendargon said the following:

Vatican II’s greatest contribution to the church was to help the church to become more broad-minded and open to peoples of all places, religions and races. For centuries, we had been a rather defensive church.... Colonialism had ended in many of our lands. This seems to have made bishops from other parts of the world listen attentively to the views of those of us from Asia and Africa.... I felt that Vatican II would bring not only bishops closer together but also our separated brethren (other Christian leaders). (“Vatican Council II: Msgr Vendargon Remembers”)⁸

The liturgical reforms of Vatican Council II had great impact on the celebration of the mass in Malaysian Catholic Churches. Some changes following Vatican Council II were immediate such as the replacement of the Latin mass by the vernacular while other changes of increasing lay participation took a while to develop (Roxborough 24). The use of the local vernacular in liturgy post Vatican

any corruption of doctrinal truth” (Encyclical of His Holiness Pope Pius XII on the Sacred Liturgy promulgated on November 20, 1947, *Mediator Dei*, no. 60).

⁷ Where, according to old or immemorial custom, some popular hymns are sung in the language of the people after the sacred words of the liturgy have been sung in Latin during the solemn Eucharistic sacrifice, local Ordinaries can allow this to be done (Encyclical on Sacred Music by His Holiness Pope Pius XII promulgated on December 25, 1955, *Musicae Sacrae*, no. 47).

⁸ In 1965, the provisional Mass was introduced and called for translating the Mass into the vernacular and turning the altar around to face the people (Reese).

Council II went a long way towards increasing lay participation in the Eucharist in Malaysia as it allowed the faithful to meaningfully and wholly participate in mass using their own mother tongues and languages including Tamil, Mandarin, Malay and English that they fully understood.

Tamil books, hymns and bibles that were used in Malaysia were first sourced from India while Chinese language material were sourced from Taiwan (Pakiam). In the years that followed, liturgical materials began to be produced by local clergy and lay persons after obtaining approval and verification from the Vatican in Rome.⁹ The locally produced hymns, mass proper and psalters and liturgical materials are still in use in many churches in Malaysia today.¹⁰

Through the reforms on liturgy post Vatican Council II, more aspects of local culture and traditions have been incorporated over the years in the churches in Malaysia, enhancing both the religious and cultural identity of multi-ethnic Malaysians. As stated by Pope Francis in 2017, “we can affirm with certainty and, with magisterial authority, that the liturgical reform is irreversible” (Baldovin). Thus, both clergy and the lay people have over the years embraced the changes and reaped the benefits brought on by Vatican Council II, especially in the inclusion of local culture and traditions in liturgy and worship. The contemporary Malaysian Catholic church bears witness to the bridges that connect ecclesial and ethnic spaces, as liturgical practices and cultural materiality of the Malaysian Catholic community often reflect the dialogic interactions between ethnic diversity and the core of traditional Roman Catholic practices.

Intersections of Tamil and Chinese Ethnic Identity in the Catholic Church of Peninsular Malaysia

This section delves into the aspect of ethnicity and the Malaysian Catholic Church as it presents the findings of a research project that investigated the intersections between Roman Catholic culture and the cultural customs of Catholics of Tamil and Chinese Heritage in Peninsular Malaysia. The project adopted a methodology of research that progressed by first identifying the total number

⁹ Fr. P. Jenkins published a mass book and hymn in English, *Sing Your Praise to God: A Mass Book and Hymnal for Malaysia and Singapore*, and a book on Liturgy, respectively in 1971 and in 1972. Liturgist and composer, the late Rev. Fr. Anthony Thomas who composed many multilingual hymns, mass proper and psalms, travelled with Rev. Fr. Murphy Pakiam (now Archbishop Emeritus) to Rome to obtain approval for the compositions for use in the Malaysian church (Pakiam).

¹⁰ The late Fr. Anthony Thomas composed music for the liturgy starting with a Tamil version of mass orders, hymns as well as a Responsorial Psalter in English and Tamil published in 2000 with musical notes for the Church’s three-year liturgical cycle which covered all Sundays, Solemnities and Major Feasts of the Liturgical Year (Years A, B and C). According to the late Rev. Fr. Anthony Thomas, “what actually pushed me to try and find my own way of composing something was that I was motivated by Vatican Council II. In the process of Liturgical restoration, Vatican Council II has highlighted the Responsorial Psalms in the Liturgy as an ‘integral part of the Word of God’ (cf. General Instruction on the Roman Missal No 36 S.C.)” (Pereira).

of Catholic churches in Peninsular Malaysia, according to the administrative regions of the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur (comprising Kuala Lumpur and the states of Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang and Terengganu), the Diocese of Penang (covering the states of Penang, Perlis, Kedah, Perak and Kelantan) and the Diocese of Malacca and Johor.

The primary source of reference used to gather this data was the Catholic Directory and ordo (liturgical calendar) of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei for the year 2016. Our review identified a total number of 172 churches and chapels in the areas mentioned. Out of these, a combination of 32 churches and chapels were selected across the peninsula of Malaysia. The criteria for the selection of these 32 churches were based on evidence of their foundation for mainly Chinese and Tamil communities (as per evidence gathered from Church historical records), as well as the evidence of masses held in Tamil or Chinese language, based on the information gathered from the Catholic Directory. Another criteria was adequate representation of churches from across the three dioceses as well as a balance of focus on churches with Tamil and Chinese parishioners. The final list thus comprised 16 with predominantly Tamil parishioners and 16 with predominantly Chinese parishioners.

Once these sample churches were identified, a checklist was developed with the main purpose of identifying evidence of intersections of Roman Catholic culture and Chinese and Tamil elements in Catholic churches in Malaysia. The items were organised according to eight domains as follows: (i) the exterior, interior and compound of Catholic churches, (ii) Clergy Vestments/Cassock with traditional Roman Catholic/Latin characters/images, (iii) Offertory Gifts, (iv) Decoration of Altar, (v) use of vessels during mass, (vi) Sacred Sculptures and paintings, (vii) Cultural Customs and (viii) Performative Elements (Cultural music and dance). Data was subsequently gathered through field work in 32 churches that were part of the sample to ascertain types of intersections between Roman Catholic culture and Tamil and Chinese cultures. The findings were subsequently analysed for evidence of “transcultural adaptability.”

Transcultural adaptability is a term used by Eric Frykenberg to refer to what he sees as the inherent adaptable nature of Christianity as it changed with every wave of expansion. As the religion spread “from its initial cultural matrix in Jerusalem, each successive set of interactions—with cultures of the Graeco-Roman (Mediterranean) world, with Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic Europe, as also with cultures of Persia, India, and China—has led to alterations within Christian culture itself” (Frykenberg v). These interactions, Frykenberg adds, led to “distinctive nuancing of ceremonials and doctrines, institutions and ideals, qualities and style” (Frykenberg v). What then happens as a result of such transcultural adaptability is that Christian ecclesiastical meaning is transferred and dialogues with the respective cultural surroundings in which it finds itself. Yet, these nuances do not alter the central theological message. In this way,

transcultural adaptability, when used in the Christian, and specifically Catholic context, is different from the use of such a term in diasporic or transnational studies where the notion of transcultural adaptations lead to mutual change and transformation of ancestral cultures by way of creolisation, assimilation and syncretism or contestations and negotiations (Hall 234). The adaptations in the context of this discussion do not contest Catholic theological tenets, nor do they transform the inherent sacred mysteries which lie at the heart of the religion.

In this sense, the adaptability that is referred to in this discussion is more akin to Bakhtin's treatise on dialogism as "the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (Bakhtin 426). The greater whole refers to the epistemology of Christian doctrines of the sacred mysteries, specifically the Holy Trinity, the immaculate conception of Christ and the resurrection. When these emerge conditioned by an interaction with ethnic identity, a heteroglossic Catholicism becomes evident as Catholic doctrines and cultural materiality are adapted in new cultural forms and thus Roman Catholic identity is not monologic with only Latin overtones. These point to the intricate relationship between theological Christianity, the common Christian beliefs and practices of the universal Catholic Church, and cultural Christianity, which lends it different features as local cultural elements are interwoven within its fold. The ensuing discussion presents samples of such dialogic exchanges of transcultural adaptations of Christian axiological values as witnessed in selected churches from our main research sample, ranging from the diocese of Malacca-Johor, the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, and the Diocese of Penang. In each sample, ethnic Chinese and Tamil cultural material are interlaced with the core principles of Roman Catholicism, an inter-perspective relationship that even produces, at times, new forms of religious materiality.

Cultural materiality in the context of this article can be viewed in terms of what Dennis Smolarski has written of the dialogics between the sacred mysteries and their transference in a worldly context. As he notes, "whatever mirrors the presence of Christ and the power of God in our world can be considered a sacred mystery, whether it is a sacred gesture, such as the imposition of hands, a sacred object, such as an icon, or a sacred activity, such as the proclaiming of the word" (Smolarski 1). In our discussion, we show an additional level of transference as these sacred gestures, objects and activities are reimagined within various ethnic contexts, thus expanding the sense of cultural dialogism and ultimately transcultural adaptability. Especially significant will be the manifestations of transcultural adaptability in the cultural materiality of Catholic communities. Within the context of Catholicism, cultural materiality occupies a central space and refers to the material representation of the divine and holy, especially in terms of sacred objects such as liturgical vessels, sacred sculptures and artistic renditions

of the sacred mysteries. When such cultural materiality emerges in dialogue with another culture, the style of the material representation of the divine and holy is adapted to that particular culture, without altering its Roman Catholic essence, be it of the Madonna, a particular Saint or a Divine mystery.

We begin with the Chapel of St. Augustine, up in the hills of the town of Titi, Jelebu, in the southern Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan. The chapel stands as a testimony of Catholicism in its ethnic Chinese context, with Chinese characters 天主堂 etched on the front facade of the building in which it is housed. The inscriptions, when translated in English, simply mean the Catholic Church. However, the fact that it is conveyed in the Chinese rather than the English script, emphasises its dialogue with a particular ethnic community, speaking to them, as much as it also acts as a signpost of a church that caters to their religious needs as Chinese Catholics, superscribed on its front walls. It also reveals the historical connection to the expansion of Christianity to East Asia and its journey to the Malay peninsula, thus emphasising Frykenberg's conceptualisation of the transcultural adaptability of Christianity. The physical markers of the building are but a hint to the ethnic background of the parishioners. While the sample from Titi emphasises Chinese ethnic identity in dialogue with Roman Catholicism, the church of St. Anthony in Chaah, Johor, reveals a slightly different vision of such ethnic dialogism. The building that houses the church reflects clear association with traditional Roman Catholic architectural features, with its characteristic steeples and crosses. However, the name of the church, as etched on its surface, is presented in Malay (*Gereja St Anthony*) followed by its Tamil version, *Punitha Anthoniyaar Devaalayam*. Thus, in this example, we have the Bakhtinian weaving together of different kinds of texts and contexts as Tamil ethnic identity emerges in dialogue with both Malaysian and Roman Catholic contexts. The words, in Tamil, draw on specific Tamil cultural precepts as Saint Anthony is presented in a nativised Tamil context, as are the notions of holiness (*punitha*) and church (*Devaalayam*). The use of Deva in the Tamil inscription points to a dialogue with Tamil cultural contexts, as Deva is one of the quintessential references to God. The words in Malay are a literal translation of Church of St. Anthony. Such interweaving, of both Tamil and Malay texts, reveal the dialogic journeys to a Malay land in two contexts, that of the journey of Christianity as well as the diasporic journey of Tamils from South India. As such, the examples of the church buildings shown here reveal the dialogics of ethnic perspectives of Roman Catholic cultural materiality, moving in and out fluidly as they interweave their own identity in some way.

Likewise, the interior of some of these churches also reveal significant dialogical interweaving. Venture inside the Chapel of St. Augustine in Titi and signs of close integration between Roman Catholic faith and ethnic Chinese culture will be further evident. The altar significantly attests to this, adorned with a number of inscriptions in the Chinese language (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Altar surrounded by inscriptions in the Chinese language, Church of St. Augustine, Titi, Jelebu, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Photo courtesy of Catholic Research Centre of the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

These inscriptions are important signifiers of the axiological dialogue between Roman Catholic teachings and its translation in the Chinese language, presented in the form of ancient Chinese couplets. The larger inscription on the right, when translated, refers to the sacred mysteries that will be revealed to those who seek the Word of God. The inscription on the left, on the other hand, refers to the act of preaching of the word of God by Saints. The set of the smaller plaques of Chinese inscriptions nested in the middle convey Roman Catholic Eucharistic miracles of the sacred mystery of the body and blood of Christ as well as the divine mercy. While the semiotics of the presentation of the axiological matrix of Roman Catholicism emerges in its adapted Eastern form, the dialogical interchange does not alter the central message, that of the divine mysteries.

In this way, the Roman Catholic altar is presented via the Bakhtinian heteroglossic imagination, presenting the “multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)” (Bakhtin 263). In the transcultural adaptation that is presented in the entire semiotics of the altar, the social voice of the Chinese imagination interacts with the greater whole of the authorial voice of the Roman Catholic divine mysteries, through a series of interlinks and interrelationships of scriptural meanings.

The same dialogical interlinking is subsequently witnessed in the Tamil context too. The interior of the church of Our Lady of Lourdes in Ipoh, of the Diocese of Penang, shows clear superscribing of Roman Catholic Tamil identity (See Figure 2):



Figure 2:. Altar with Tamil inscription, Church of Our Lady of Lourdes, Ipoh. Photo courtesy of Catholic Research Centre of the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Visible at the top of the archway that is part of the altar is a phrase in Tamil script. This phrase, *Amalorpavam naame*, translated as “Mother of God” interlink with the divine mystery of the Immaculate Conception articulated in a Tamil voice. According to Bakhtin, “every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)” (Bakhtin 272). The centripetal force in the context of the utterance *Amalorpavam naame* is the unitary message of the divine mystery of the Immaculate Conception, whereas the centrifugal is its social heteroglossic articulation in Tamil. Additionally, the words etched onto the interior walls of the church symbolise the imprinting of ethnic identity onto Catholic ecclesial material structures.

This superscribing of ethnic identity in material culture is not only presented in linguistic aspects but sometimes in its architectural feature. The Grotto or sacred shrine, is an integral feature of most Catholic churches and is often in the form of a cave or cavern like structure. However, in the Church of St. Michael, Ipoh, of the Diocese of Penang, the grotto takes on an ethnic overtone. Instead of the usual cave, the sacred sculpture of the Madonna in her apparition as the Lady of Fatima is housed in a pagoda style grotto that significantly shows the adaptation of the Chinese architectural design (See Figure 3).



Figure 3. Pagoda style grotto dedicated to the Madonna, Church of St. Michael, Ipoh. Photo courtesy of Catholic Research Centre of the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

This grotto can be seen as an overt manifestation of Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, which as he argues, is “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed” and that these are “fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole” (Bakhtin 84). Such intrinsic connectedness of the temporal and spatial are evident as the grotto interconnects with the epistemology of ancient Chinese cultural features of the pagoda as a sacred space for relics. However, as the sacred sculpture that is housed inside this sacred space is Catholic instead of Buddhist or Taoist, the heteroglossia of Chinese vernacular Catholicism becomes evident. In this way, the pagoda style grotto becomes a chronotope of the dialogics of the diasporic Chinese Catholic imaginary, as it artistically concretises the temporal and spatial of cultural and religious elements in a unified whole.

Figure 4 shows similar artistic fusions of the chronotope, crafted in a sacred sculpture in the Tamil Catholic context, in the Church of Our Lady of Good Health, Parit Buntar in the Diocese of Penang.



Figure 4: Sacred Sculpture of the Madonna and Child in the ethnic Tamil context, Church of Our Lady of Good Health, Parit Buntar, Perak. Photo courtesy of Catholic Research Centre of the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The sacred sculpture in question is the Madonna in her Tamil vernacular appearance as *Annai Velangkanni* or Our Lady of Good Health. The conventional sculpture of Our Lady of Good Health depicts her with a golden saree already chiseled onto her form. However, as noted in Figure 4, an actual saree is draped around the sculpture of the Madonna and child, in their original Roman Catholic iconic form. Chronotopic interconnections between both Indian and Catholic temporal contexts are revealed as instead of the traditional long flowing blue garment of the Madonna as per her iconic portrayal, She is instead draped in a blue Saree, with a gold border. In this way, the fusion of blue and gold reveals the dialogics of the diasporic Tamil Catholic imaginary, as it engages with both ethnic and religious contexts that are artistically fused as one, within Malaysian spatiality.

In both instances of the pagoda styled grotto and the saree clad Madonna above, we witness the dynamics of Catholic chronotopes fused in reciprocal relationships between the ethnic and the religious. For even though the Madonna emerges housed in a structure that is not of the Catholic norm, nor is she garbed in Roman Catholic customary garments, both structures are thought out and expressed in recognisable cultural material that reflect Catholicism in a unified, concrete whole.

Conclusion

The discussion has thus shown that the dialogic interactions between Roman Catholic epistemology and ethnic Chinese and Tamil cultural elements are evident

in selected churches in peninsular Malaysia. It has argued that a heteroglossic Catholicism becomes obvious as Catholic doctrines and cultural materiality are adapted in new cultural forms through various kinds of dialogical interweaving. This takes place in a number of contexts where ethnic perspectives of Roman Catholic cultural materiality are in fluid interaction. Social voices of the ethnic imagination emerge in dialogue with the authorial voice of Roman Catholic divine mysteries through a series of the ethnic utterance of scriptural texts. Every utterance reveals the heteroglossic interaction between the centripetal and the centrifugal. Such heteroglossic articulations are also evident in chronotopic dialogues between the temporal and the spatial, crafted in artistic fusions of cultural and religious elements. Ultimately, transcultural adaptation as shown in these various contexts enables ethnic Chinese and Tamil Catholics in Peninsular Malaysia to maintain their cultural heritage and legacy. Yet, the binding threads of the universal aspects of Roman Catholic tradition remain central and pivotal to the community, revealing thus a dynamic dialogic interplay between traditional ethnic customs and Catholic liturgical practices. The examples also serve to mark the diasporic context of the Chinese and Tamil Catholic parishioners as they partake in particular ethnic celebrations of the faith in a predominantly Malay country. These are not churches in China or India. Many of the churches that made up the sample for the research were located in rural or semi-rural Malaysian towns and some of these towns have distinctly Malay names such as Titi, Muar, Cha'ah. The fact that these communities live alongside Malays in surrounding residential areas and practise Catholicism in its vernacular form point also to the fluid intersections between faith and territoriality in multi-ethnic Malaysia.

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