

Article

Religion and Strategic Disaster Risk Management in the Better Normal: The Case of the Pagoda sa Wawa Fluvial Festival in Bocaue, Bulacan, Philippines

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Abstract: Religion involves expressing beliefs, performing practices, and obeying norms about what is considered sacred and worthy of worship. While some argue that religion has become irrelevant due to the widespread influence of secularism and scientific reasoning, many still find comfort in the sacred. Scientific research has shown that religion can positively impact health and safety, especially during disasters. Accordingly, religion plays a crucial role in one's wellbeing. In the Philippines, the sound of church bells calls for parishioners to gather and celebrate, and acts as a warning system for different types of danger, such as earthquakes, typhoons, floods, raids, uprisings, and fires. Filipinos are warned to leave their houses and come to the church to take shelter. Thus, churches have been considered evacuation centers and loci for disaster risk-reduction undertakings. The proponents conducted a qualitative study investigating the disaster risk management strategies developed and implemented by St. Martin of Tours Parish Church in Bocaue, Bulacan, Philippines, during the "Pagoda sa Wawa" fluvial festival, where safety measures and crowd control are essential in maintaining a prayerful and peaceful experience. The objective of the study was to investigate how festival organizers prioritize the safety of devotees after a tragedy occurred 30 years ago, which resulted in the deaths of 266 people. Furthermore, this study explores the precautionary measures taken during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, recognizing devotees' compliance and resilience for the common good. This study utilized a tripartite method, including reviewing relevant literature, participating in a pagoda fluvial parade, and conducting semi-structured interviews. The results were presented in a format that consisted of context, content, and challenges for the sake of coherence.

Keywords: health; safety; devotees; prayerful experience; St. Martin of Tours Parish Church

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1. Introduction

1.1. Vulnerable Philippines

The Philippines is one of the top three countries most vulnerable to hazards due to high population exposure and has the most significant proportion of capital investment and stock near coastlines (UNISDR 2015). Over the centuries, this country's extensive disaster experience has led to the development of vital coping mechanisms. However, there are still gaps in disaster management capacities across different regions of the Philippines, and, unfortunately, there are limited data available regarding local levels of disaster resilience and preparedness (Bollettino et al. 2018).

The Philippines, located on major tectonic plates and in the center of a typhoon belt, is frequently struck by natural disasters such as floods, typhoons, landslides, earthquakes, volcanoes, and droughts (ACAPS 2014, p. 1). An archipelago of more than 7100 islands, the Philippines ranks fourth in the world in terms of vulnerability to climate-related natural disasters, including typhoons, sea-level rise, flooding, and extreme temperatures (Guha-Sapir et al. 2015, p. 1). This study explores the Pagoda sa Wawa festival in Bocaue, Bulacan—a celebration that combines the faith and resilience of devotees.

1.2. Objectives

This article is about the unwavering faith of the followers of *Krus sa Wawa* as they demonstrate their devotion through an annual fluvial procession and their resilience in disaster preparedness over the past few decades. This is in response to a tragic event that occurred 30 years ago when a pagoda overturned, resulting in the loss of more than 266 lives. In addition, it covers the community's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in a two-year quarantine period, and the local community's capacity to implement safety measures and curb the spread of the pandemic.

1.3. Significance of the Study

As people adapt to the "better normal" post-COVID-19, organizers and supporters of Pagoda sa wawa are to review safety and security protocols to ensure their relevance in light of the study's findings. As this study recommends, organizers and supporters can improve their annual fluvial festival by reflecting on their past experiences through evaluation. This research also highlights the resilience and hope of the people of Bocaue following the 1993 tragedy, showcasing their ability to overcome adversity.

The study emphasizes the paradigm shift that has occurred in the local Church of St. Martin of Tours and the municipality of Bocaue. They are now more proactive in anticipating potential risks rather than being reactive, which means taking action only after a disaster or calamity has already happened. This involves cooperation between the Church and the State in tolerating religious beliefs while caring for the people (Eballo 2022).

Lastly, the study suggests that the Pagoda sa Wawa festival can serve as a model for other river-based and religious events in terms of minimizing risks and ensuring safety while implementing health protocols.

2. Methodology

This study utilized the triangulation method to examine different data sources, including a review of relevant literature focused on the Pagoda Sa Wawa fluvial parade, participation in an actual pagoda parade, and conducting semi-structured interviews with respondents. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources to comprehensively understand phenomena in qualitative research. The advantage of triangulation as a methodology in qualitative research is the ability to test validity by merging data from diverse sources (Patton 1999). The study results were presented coherently, discussing context, content, and challenges. For confidentiality, all the respondents' names were kept anonymous, except for the engineer who designed the pagoda. He permitted the authors to mention his name.

3. Review of Related Literature

3.1. Disaster and Catastrophe

Geologists and historians have agreed that the most catastrophic volcanic eruption in the Philippines occurred in 1754, when Taal Volcano spewed ash and lava nonstop from 15 May to 5 December of that year. The eruption and the earthquakes it caused were described as "the most terrible in the history of the Islands". All the towns surrounding Taal Lake, previously known as Bombon Lake, were destroyed. However, towns such as Tanauan, Talisay, Lipa, and Taal were later rebuilt safely from the lake. The eruption caused earthquakes that were felt across Luzon, Mindoro Island, and even northern Panay (Ranada 2015).

Father Aguirre, an Augustinian friar who survived the 1754 eruption of Taal, wrote a dramatic account of the disaster. Though he struggled to find the right words to convey the enormity of the catastrophe, his narration vividly depicted the destruction wrought upon the town. After the initial explosion, there were three months of intermittent, loud explosions and black smoke. On 24 September, a violent rain of stones and ash was accompanied by continuous tremors and enormous bangs (courtesy of The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana).

3.2. Spanish Colonial Churches as Evacuation Centers

Aguirre reported that earthquakes began immediately and were so loud that they made people feel deaf. Conversations were difficult to hear. The destruction was so severe that he had to evacuate to the Church of Caysasay. The mayor and his acolyte followed him a few days later, but their situation did not improve much in Caysasay. The mud buildup on the roofs of houses in Caysasay threatened them. The darkness was constant, there was no food to eat, and drinking water had to be transported from Bauan. To make things worse, a hurricane on 2 December destroyed the few remaining houses in the area, forcing Aguirre and his companions to seek shelter in the open. At this point, the friar admitted to having nothing but the clothes on his back, and the narrator emphasized the sincerity and truthfulness of his account. Aguirre mourned the loss of human lives and livestock and described himself as being “blacker than a coalman” due to the ash that covered him. Aguirre wrote his accounts in Spanish (courtesy of The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana). According to Aguirre, the Caysasay church had previously served as an evacuation center during Taal Volcano eruptions. The St. Martin of Tours Basilica, also known as Taal Basilica, is the largest church in Asia and has also been used as an evacuation center during natural disasters, particularly the Taal Volcano eruption. The authors later translated the accounts into English for this research undertaking.

3.3. Spanish Colonial Belfries as Watchtowers

During calamities and disasters such as typhoons, earthquakes, floods, fires, rebellions, and raids, churches in the Philippines have traditionally served as watchtowers. In Bulacan, several churches, such as Quingua (now Plaridel), Pulilan, Baliwag, Bustos, and Angat, were strategically positioned facing the Angat River. This was done as a precautionary measure since churches served as watchtowers that kept an eye out for possible floods or attacks by bandits known as *tulisanes*, who frequently traveled through the river. The church bells were also intentionally used to warn residents of impending dangers such as typhoons, volcano eruptions, and pandemics.

3.4. Typhoon Yolanda, Taal Volcano Eruption and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Therefore, in the face of natural disasters and disruptive events, churches in the Philippines have provided refuge for affected individuals and families. For instance, during the Yolanda typhoon, several churches in Leyte served as evacuation centers for those seeking shelter. Similarly, residents found solace in local parishes when the Taal Volcano erupted in Batangas. Additionally, when the government declared the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), several churches opened their doors to impoverished families needing shelter and support (Eballo 2020, p. 2).

3.5. Risk Reduction Management in the Philippines

The local government unit (LGU) plays a vital role before, during, and after disasters. This is because it has direct control over its constituents and is expected to be aware of the community’s needs. As mandated by the Local Government Code of 1991 (Republic Act No. 7160), the LGU is at the forefront of disaster risk reduction and management. The LGU must have the autonomy to act decisively and issue proactive decisions suited to its constituents’ situation, supported by higher levels of government. Decentralizing responsibilities is highlighted as important, which means doing away with the top-down approach, stakeholder participation in all phases of DRRM, and transparency of valuable information exchanges. Furthermore, The PDRRM Act or RA 10121 aims to lessen the impact of disasters and improve overall disaster resilience in the Philippines. It offers a comprehensive approach to disaster risk management, addressing different hazards through a multi-sectoral, inter-agency, and community-based framework (Col 2007). Due to the mandate of the PDRRM Act, the provincial government of Bulacan, the municipality of Bocaue, and the Barangay are now committed to ensuring a safe, peaceful, and jubilant gathering for the Pagoda sa Wawa festival.

4. Context

4.1. The Philippines as a Place of Happiness

Happiness is one of the core values of the Filipinos. It is in being happy that “the self only truly exists with the other”. In the archipelago, “through celebration and ritual is the key productive, purposeful activity that connects the individual to the communal activity that contributes to happiness in the Philippines”. It is essential to realize that pursuing happiness is not just about finding a physical location where people are happy. It is also about how happiness is embedded within the individual, particularly in the Filipino psyche and culture, where it is expressed through different forms of celebratory performances and ritualistic ceremonies such as *fiestas* (Peterson 2016, p. 4).

One of the celebrations that brings happiness and solidarity to Filipinos is the observance of fluvial festivals. These are popular in the Philippines due to its archipelagic nature and the pre-colonial influence of honoring the god of the sea with water rituals and festivities. This tradition merged with Catholic icons during the Spanish colonization and evangelization period. Now, fleets of boats honor a patron saint known as “pintakasi”. These boats are decorated with ornaments and sail in unison along the banks of a river or shoreline. Fishing communities often hold celebrations to bless the sea or river and ask for God’s favor through water rituals and festivities, like the ones in Bocaue, Apalit, Taguig, and Naga.

4.2. Fluvial Festivals in the Philippines

The *Peñafrancia* celebration is one of the oldest fluvial festivals in the Philippines, observed in Naga City. It is a time-honored ceremony that pays tribute to the patroness of Camarines Sur, Our Lady of Peñafrancia. The most anticipated part of the festivity is the ninth day of the novena. On this day, the image of Our Lady of Peñafrancia is returned to Basilica Minore through a fluvial procession along the Naga River. The image is carried on a gazebo atop a boat with Catholic clergy. The boat is followed by long canoes paddled by young men in colorful shirts, who paddle as fast as possible as if in a boat race. However, only chosen devotees known as *voyadores* (male devotees who pledged themselves to the image of Peñafrancia) can ride the boats. In contrast, the remaining devotees watch the procession on the river’s shores as they cheer “viva la Virgen” (Malabonga 2018).

Apalit, located in the Pampanga province, is famous for its three-day festival honoring St. Peter, known locally as *Ápung Irû*. The yearly festivity entails waterborne parades of a 300-year-old wondrous figure of the saint above. The figure is mounted on an embellished pagoda and transported on a boat ride along the Pampanga River. This event is held during the final days of June, denoted as the customary Kapampangan *Bayung Danum* or the commencement of the rainy period. This festival is believed to have originated from pre-colonial celebrations held to honor the river crocodile god. The deity was believed to carry the weight of the earth on its back, and the festivities aimed to appease the gods and prevent flooding, ensuring a fruitful planting season. The tradition of throwing food into the water while riding boats was Christianized by Spanish friars, who introduced St. Peter to the practice since his feast day coincided with the timing of these holidays. During the procession, devotees ride boats alongside the beautifully decorated pagoda carrying the image. Traditionally, food is thrown into the water while people sprinkle each other with river water believed to be blessed by *Ápung Irû*. Currently, food is being provided directly to the attendees (Berto 2023).

According to local folklore, Taguig faced a crisis in 1587 when farmers lost all their crops. The residents were left in despair until Saint Anne and her daughter Mary appeared miraculously to them and led them to the river, where they found an abundance of “banak”, or mullet fish. Since then, this event has been celebrated every July, culminating in a fluvial parade on 26 July. The festival, known as *Santa Anang Banak* festival or “Pagodahan”, centers around Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary and the city’s patron saint. The fluvial parade fills the Taguig River with around 200 fishing boats and features a procession with the image of Saint Anne as the highlight. Giving thanks for the harvest, boat people

toss produce and sweets to crowds on the riverbank (Mocon-Ciriaco 2017). However, fluvial festivals, while enjoyable, can also be dangerous and are, from time to time, the venues of accidents.

4.3. Incidents Related to Religious Festivities in the New Normal

The number of incidents related to religious festivities has significantly increased across the Philippines in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, tarnishing the country's image of happiness, according to reports from the Philippine National Police. On 28 June 2022, several motorized boats took part in a fluvial parade serving as the main highlight of the celebration of the town fiesta in honor of a patron saint locally known as *Apung Irû*, St. Peter. Instead, what was witnessed in the town fiesta was a disaster after a protruding metal pole in one of the boats hit the high-tension wire of the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines at the height of the parade in Barangay Sulipan. An explosion ensued, and the 13 passengers of the said boat, a fishing vessel type, were electrocuted. Unfortunately, nine of them were injured, and three were killed (Basa-Iñigo 2022).

On Tuesday, 26 July 2022, a fluvial parade was held in Taguig City as part of the Feast of Sta. Ana and Taguig River festival celebration. Unfortunately, the parade ended in tragedy when two boats collided while passing along the Tuktukan River. The 5:46 p.m. incident caused one fatality and six injuries. It has been reported that two boats not registered in the fluvial parade were involved in an accident. The Church and city officials were adamant that they had taken all necessary precautions to guarantee the safety of the participants during the event. For instance, all participants were given life vests and a safety briefing before the parade. Moreover, rescue boats were stationed throughout the fluvial parade route to provide additional safety measures (Mocon-Ciriaco 2017).

4.4. Holy Week Tragedy 2023

In the Philippines, it is a tradition to go for a communal swim at the beach or river on Black Saturday, as the water is believed to be blessed. This practice is associated with blessing water during the Easter Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday. During Holy Week of 2023, many Catholics returned to their hometowns and excitedly dipped in the river or beach after almost two years of pandemic lockdown.

According to police reports, 72 individuals drowned in the Philippines in April 2023. The unusually high number of drowning incidents is partially attributed to the throngs of people who went to the beach during Holy Week. This holiday is typically observed in the Catholic-majority nation and involves many people leaving the capital city of Manila to spend time with their families. As restrictions were lifted, people were overly excited about the opportunity to travel again. According to Philippine National Police (PNP) spokeswoman Colonel Jean Fajardo, there had been a higher-than-normal death toll at the beach. She mentioned that the victims were children who were left unattended by their guardians while swimming and people who were intoxicated while at the beach. Fajardo attributed the high number of cases in the country to "revenge travel", a phenomenon in which people longed to travel due to mobility restrictions imposed during the pandemic (Agence France-Presse 2023).

4.5. Collective Spiritual Longings

Religious ceremonies and rituals were prohibited when the government declared the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). The Holy Eucharist was only allowed in a restricted form. This caused significant anxiety and distress among the people as they were unable to carry out their personal and communal devotions. However, it is necessary to remember that these measures were implemented for everyone's safety and the common good. During the pandemic, it was essential for devotees to abide by the guidelines, even if it meant a restriction on their religious freedom. After health and safety protocols related to the COVID-19 pandemic were lifted, people could finally participate in religious rituals once again. They were overwhelmed with personal and collective spiritual longings as

they expressed their faith and reconnected with each other and God. However, there were several accidents during water-based rituals like fluvial parades. The excitement of the participants might have triggered these incidents. A boat capsized in Taguig City, Metro Manila, resulting in one casualty. As mentioned earlier, in Apalit, Pampanga, an electrocution case occurred, resulting in three deaths. According to the organizing committee of the Pagoda sa Wawa festival, the aforementioned scenarios motivated them to work hard to maintain a prayerful and safe religious celebration in the better normal.

4.6. Religious Rituals, Safety Awareness and Disaster Preparedness

Since many Catholic devotees are eager to reconnect with each other and God through religious rituals that have been allowed after almost two years of pandemic quarantine, safety consciousness, and disaster preparedness must be prioritized. This is especially important given the reported cases of untoward incidents of drowning and electrocution. The Local Churches must work with local government units (LGUs) and other sectors to properly implement health and safety protocols. This measure upholds Catholic teaching on the sanctity of life and gives it the significance it deserves.

Thus, a disaster risk management model must be established within the Catholic Church in the Philippines, which is considered prone to disasters. This model can serve as an example for other parishes. The risk-reduction management implemented during the Pagoda sa Wawa fluvial festival in Bocaue, Bulacan, Philippines, has become an inspiration and model for resilience risk management and disaster preparedness. This approach places a high value on human life and dignity.

5. Content

5.1. Sanctity of Life and Human Dignity

It is crucial to ensure the safety of everyone during religious rituals, and events such as stampedes, drownings, or electrocutions should never happen. To prevent accidents, local leaders from churches and the government should collaborate to identify hazards, develop disaster preparedness plans, and implement them effectively. The Catholic religion places immense value on human life, considering it a gratuitous gift from God. It is unacceptable for religious ceremonies to result in any incidents that endanger human life and dignity. It is a violation of human dignity to experience a stampede during any religious event.

The [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) (n.d.) emphasizes the value of life and respect for human persons. It stresses that “every human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God, and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end” (para. #2258). It adds that “human life, from the point of conception until death, is sacred because every human person is created in the image and likeness of the living and holy God (Gen. 1:27), and is therefore willed for his/her own sake” (CCC para. #2319). Accordingly, it is not acceptable for any person who is created in the image and likeness of God and in contradiction to the principles mentioned above to suffer from drowning and electrocution during religious festivities.

The Catholic Church upholds the belief that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person serves as the cornerstone of a moral vision for society. This fundamental belief underpins all the principles of our social teaching. It is essential to recognize that every individual is valuable and that human persons should always be given priority over material possessions. The genuine measure of every institution is whether it endangers or enhances the life and dignity of the human person ([Catholic Social Teaching](#) n.d., Office for Social Justice of St. Paul and Minneapolis). For example, the achievement of a Local Church during a religious celebration should be evaluated based on its effectiveness in bringing people closer to God and ensuring the safety of all participants. This is also a means of promoting the worth of human life and dignity.

“As a gift from God, every human life is sacred from conception to natural death. The life and dignity of every person must be respected and protected at every stage and in

every condition. The right to life is the first and most fundamental principle of human rights that leads Catholics to actively work for a world of greater respect for human life and greater commitment to justice and peace” ([Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church n.d.](#), para. #553). Life and physical health are precious gifts entrusted to us by God. We must take reasonable care of them, considering the needs of others and the common good (CCC para. #2288).

[Pope John Paul II \(1995\)](#) emphasizes the need to develop a deep critical sense in our present social context, where there is a dramatic struggle between the *culture of life* and the *culture of death*. It is essential to discern true values and authentic needs. There is an urgent need for a general mobilization of consciences and a united ethical effort to activate a great campaign in support of life. Together, all of us must work towards building a new culture of life. Disregarding the safety of individuals during religious celebrations can be viewed as a reflection of a culture of death. On the other hand, prioritizing safety by implementing risk-reduction management and disaster preparedness measures during such events, e.g., the Pagoda sa Wawa fluvial festival, clearly indicates promoting a culture of life.

5.2. Application of the Consistent Ethic of Life Principle

The consistent ethic of life philosophy advocates for the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death, as stated by Cardinal Bernardin. The concept of valuing human life at all stages becomes more apparent as one embraces it. This consistent ethic highlights the hypocrisy of advocating for life in one area while disregarding it in another. Each specific issue necessitates a distinctive moral analysis and may require distinct and specific responses. Moreover, different issues may engage the energies of different people or the same people at different times. However, there is a linkage among all the life issues which cannot be ignored ([Bernardin 1989](#)). It is not consistent with the ethic of life to condemn certain immoral practices, e.g., abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment while neglecting safety precautions during religious rituals like the Pagoda sa Wawa fluvial festival. If the Church advocates pro-life principles, it should implement safety protocols and disaster preparedness during religious events.

5.3. Pagoda sa Wawa Fluvial Festival in Bocaue, Bulacan

Bocaue is a municipality located in a landlocked area of Bulacan with a land area of 31.87 square kilometers or 12.31 square miles, making up only 1.14% of Bulacan’s entire area. As per the 2020 Census, Bocaue has a population of 141,412, which is around 3.81% of the total population of Bulacan province ([PhilAtlas.com n.d.](#)). The town’s name is derived from the Old Tagalog word “bukawe” (*Schizostachyum lima*), a type of long bamboo. Bocaue was first founded by Franciscan missionaries in 1582 as a barrio and *visita* (chapel) of Meycauayan and was established as a town on 11 April 1606, with San Martin of Tours as the patron saint. The town is renowned for being the firecracker capital of the Philippines. Its traditional festival, called the Bocaue River Festival, Bocaue Pagoda Festival, or the *Pista ng Mapagpalang Krus sa Wawa* (Fiesta of the Blessed Cross of Wawa), is also popular (see Figure 1). The festival features the Pagoda sa Wawa or Fluvial Procession, which is held in honor of the Holy Cross of Jesus or *Mahal na Krus sa Wawa* (Encyclopedia/Bocaue) ([Bocaue n.d.](#)).

The Holy Cross of Wawa is a unique crucifix made of wood and does not have a *corpus* or a body. The cross is adorned with intricate silver accessories, including rays at the four corners, three ornate ends of the cross, a sun, a skull, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Additionally, it is covered with a beautifully embroidered cloth ([Malabanan 2017](#)).

According to oral tradition, the devotion began with a miraculous story of the journey of the floating Holy Cross of Wawa, which was retrieved from the Bocaue River’s Wawa section during an 1850 typhoon. Legend has it that a woman was saved from drowning by clinging to the Holy Cross. Many miracles have been attributed to the religious icon now housed at St. Martin of Tours Parish Church in Bocaue. An annual fluvial procession is observed to honor the said icon ([Malabanan 2017](#)).



Figure 1. The Holy Cross of Wawa. Note: Mr. Ramon Roie De Guzman, a devotee of the Holy Cross of Wawa, permitted the authors to publish and reproduce this photograph.

The Pagoda sa Wawa fluvial festival is held in Bocaue, Bulacan, every first Sunday of July. It is a religious event where hundreds of devotees unite to pay homage to the Holy Cross of Wawa. The festival's highlight is the fluvial parade, featuring a decorated barge carrying the revered cross from the centerpiece of the balcony. A vibrant parade of small boats joins as support (Malabanan 2017).

The Pagoda sa Wawa Festivity of 2023 kicked off on 29 June with the inauguration and blessing of a stunningly decorated pagoda. This was followed by a 9-day novena mass held at the St. Martin of Tours Parish Church from 30 June to 8 July, commemorating the rescue of the said cross from the river. After the novena mass held in the church, the devotees proceeded to the wharf and boarded a pagoda on the Bocaue River. While on board, they recited prayers and sang religious songs called *lutrina*. As the pagoda reached the location where a tragedy occurred in 1993, where many lost their lives, the devotees paused to pray and pay their respects to the victims. On 9 July 2023, the Feast of the Holy Cross of Wawa was celebrated.

A concelebrated mass was held in the parish church. After the mass, a limited number of devotees proceeded to the wharf to board the pagoda for *libiran* or to navigate around the Bocaue River as the highlight of the festivity. After the *libiran*, the participants joyfully returned to the wharf while dousing each other with water in a playful tradition called *basaan*. The festivities culminated in a vibrant fireworks display held at the parish church courtyard, captivating the crowd.

The Krus sa Wawa festival has been becoming more popular with each passing year. To expand its audience, the festival has incorporated modern activities into its schedule, including civic parades, street dancing, live concerts, and more, making it a vibrant fusion of faith and culture in the town.

5.4. Navigating Lessons While Crossing the River Styx

During the Pagoda sa Wawa fluvial festival, the attendees engaged in a fun activity where they threw water at each other from the river. However, due to the huge number of participants, some people found it difficult to find space on the barge for the activity. Consequently, they had to swim alongside the pagoda instead. As the festival gained increasing popularity, the crowd grew to an overwhelming size, with everyone eager to witness the fluvial procession.

Thirty years ago, on 2 July 1993, a tragic incident occurred when the 20-foot-tall pagoda carrying over 500 devotees capsized in the middle of a river, resulting in the loss of 266 lives. Although the Local Government Code (RA 7160) has been in effect since 1991, local officials during that time mainly focused on preparing for typhoons. In the event that a typhoon hits their area, the first step they must take is to declare a state of calamity, allowing them to receive the necessary funds to address the disaster. At that time, safety measures were not a priority during religious events. The belief was that God would protect attendees due to their good intentions.

Many attendees ignored the organizers' instructions in their rush to board the pagoda, causing it to become overloaded. Additionally, many male attendees were observed to be intoxicated. It was observed that the pagoda was not designed to carry many passengers and was too structurally weak to handle them ([Women's Quill 2013](#)).

Allegedly, the pagoda capsized because the passengers on board suddenly shifted to one side to avoid a skyrocket, known as a kwitis, heading in their direction. The sudden weight shift, caused by the panicked reaction of the participants, led to the capsizing of the pagoda. After the pagoda capsized, the second and third levels collapsed, causing wooden debris to hit people in the water ([Reyes-Estrope 2023](#)).

Due to the emotional impact of this tragic incident, the grandiose fluvial festival in Bocaue was not held from 1994 to 2014. From 1999 to 2013, devotees opted for smaller boats with limited capacity to keep the tradition of the fluvial parade alive. This was done not only to honor the Holy Cross of Wawa but also to commemorate and pray for those who lost their lives during the tragic incident ([Gabriel 2014](#)).

Every tragedy has the potential to teach people a valuable lesson. In this particular case, the most important lesson to be learned is the significance of prioritizing everyone's safety. One must realize the importance of focusing one's attention on the basic value of life, as taught by the consistent life ethic mentioned earlier. The Pagoda sa Wawa tragedy challenged the faith and resilience of the people of Bocaue. They took a moment to reflect on their mistakes and humbly accepted responsibility for their negligence.

5.5. Resiliency and Resurrection

The Pagoda sa Wawa festival is a religious event and serves as the definitive identity and symbol for the people of Bocaue. The tragedy 30 years ago should not define the town's image. The pagoda tragedy impacted the town's social, political, economic, religious, cultural, and emotional aspects. Thus, the people of Bocaue should manifest their resilience and ability to move forward, e.g., by reviving the grandiose pagoda parade while prioritizing the required safety and health protocols due to the tragic incident and the COVID-19 pandemic. This will serve as a testament to their strength and determination to overcome the challenges they have been through. Suppose we consider the tragedy of the pagoda as a Good Friday or a shameful event (*nakahihiyang pangyayari*) for the people of Bocaue. In that case, their ability to move forward in expressing their faith and solidarity, equipped with hope and transformation, can be considered their Easter Sunday (*pagbabangong-dangal*). The human spirit prevailed, allowing them to overcome challenges and emerge stronger. Bankoff's observation is that Filipinos have a positive attitude towards adversity. They have cultivated the skill of tackling difficult situations without allowing these situations to dictate their lives. This quality was pointed out by the national hero Jose Rizal (1861–1896). He likened the character of Filipinos to that of bamboo—the plant that can bend in the wind but remain resilient and bounce back ([Bankoff 2007](#), p. 29).

5.6. Pagoda sa Wawa's Elements of Risk-Reduction Management and Disaster Preparedness in the New Normal

In 2014, the town of Bocaue decided to bring back its traditional pagoda fluvial festival under the guidance of Reverend Monsignor Albert Suatengco (Reyes-Estrope 2016). The successful revival was made possible through the cooperation of various sectors, including local government units, non-governmental organizations, business corporations, private organizations, academic institutions, and the Local Church. Thus, the construction of strong social support networks, cooperation, and interdependence are essential coping mechanisms in cultures facing continual environmental uncertainty (Bankoff 2007, p. 29).

This does not mean that the Local Church of Bocaue commanded or ordered the municipality of Bocaue to plan and implement the safety protocols and risk-reduction management for the pagoda fluvial festival. Local government units, including the Barangay level, must ensure participants' safety during religious activities or gatherings. It is the responsibility of the local government units (LGUs) in the Philippines to take action before, during, and after disasters to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their constituents as per the Local Government Code of 1991 (Col 2007).

In addition, the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (PDRRM) Act was created to reduce the vulnerabilities and damage caused by disasters. The act, also known as RA 10121, provides a comprehensive approach to disaster risk management. It is a multi-sectoral, inter-agency, and community-based framework that aims to address all types of hazards. This law mandates disaster and risk-reduction management from the national level to the barangay level (Col 2007).

The festival organizers emphasized the need to strictly follow health and safety protocols in line with the provincial and local disaster risk-reduction management guidelines. They constructed a 45-foot, three-story pagoda reinforced with metal braces to ensure its sturdiness and the safety of everyone (Gabriel 2014).

From 2020 to 2021, the Philippine Government enforced Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) protocols that prohibited religious activities, including fluvial festivals. The aim was to curb the rapid transmission of COVID-19, and churches were obligated to comply with these protocols. As a result, the Pagoda sa Wawa fluvial festival was not held for two consecutive years.

The government allowed religious activities in 2022. Due to the continuous pandemic threat, the Pagoda sa Wawa fluvial festival organizers implemented additional safety and health protocols. These protocols included the availability of spray alcohol and hand sanitizer, checking body temperature, wearing a facemask, and presenting a vaccination card.

In 2023, the organizers of the grandiose pagoda fluvial festival strictly implemented elements of risk reduction and disaster preparedness, which the proponents personally observed, witnessed, and experienced (see Figure 2).

An expert engineer, Rodelio Mendoza Concepcion, was commissioned to design, construct, and oversee the construction of the pagoda. The structure is reinforced with metal braces, taking into account its cylinder dimension and length (see Figures 3 and 4). The authors have been given permission to publish and reprint the schematic diagrams of Pagoda sa Wawa, which were provided to them by Engr. Rodelio Mendoza Concepcion.

Engr. Concepcion created a blueprint to calculate the vessel's capacity and determine the maximum number of passengers allowed, which was restricted to 250 (see Figures 5–7).

The estimated number of attendees for the 9-day novena and feast day was 7000, with three batches per night. The diagram was submitted to the Maritime Industry Authority, MARINA, and Coast Guard for scrutiny and approval. Representatives from the Coast Guard inspected and tested the pagoda in Bocaue River several months before the actual fluvial festival (see Figure 8).



Figure 2. On board the Pagoda sa Wawa. Note: One of the authors personally sailed on the Pagoda sa Wawa.

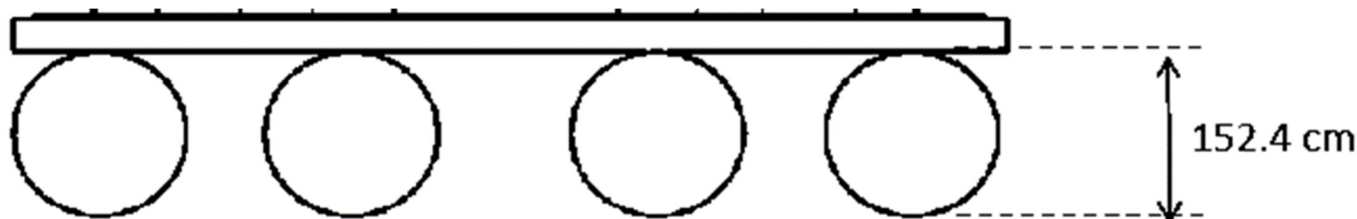


Figure 3. Cylinder dimension of the pagoda. Note: The diameter of the cylinder is 5 feet = 5 feet \times (12 inches/foot) \times (2.54 cm/in) = 152.4 cm.

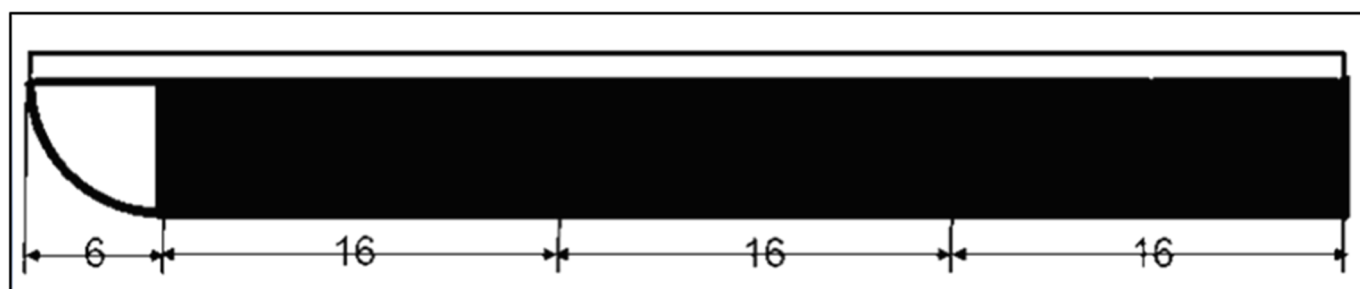


Figure 4. The Length of the pagoda = 16 feet \times (12 inches/foot) \times (2.54 cm/in) = 487.68 cm.

To allow organizers to strictly monitor the number of passengers, interested participants had to obtain a ticket from the parish center before the fluvial festival. The ticket specified the date and time of the trip. Passengers aged 18 and above were allowed onboard. A guardian had to accompany passengers aged 8 to 17. Individuals who were considered to belong to the categories of persons with disabilities (PWDs), pregnant women, elderly, sick individuals, or those who were under the influence of drugs or alcohol were not permitted to participate.

Assigned personnel had to interview the participants to confirm their address after obtaining their ticket, attending an orientation session, and signing the manifesto or official list of passengers. The emergency contact information of the participants was required to be

included in the manifesto, including family members' names and mobile phone numbers. Pamphlets containing safety measures were distributed. A large tarpaulin was erected to remind attendees of important instructions to follow before, during, and after the fluvial procession. It was the prerogative of the organizers to allow or not allow someone on board.

Catechesis on devotion to the Holy Cross and safety protocols when boarding the pagoda were discussed by a catechist before the novena's holy mass. These concerns were also part of the priest's homily during the novena mass. The Facebook page of St. Martin of Tours Parish Church and the local newspapers were other sources of information regarding the Holy Cross Fiesta activities and the safety measures that had to be followed during the festivity.

Participants were encouraged to apply hand sanitizer and spray alcohol before boarding, undergo body temperature screening, and were required to wear facemasks. Following this, the participants were instructed to maintain proper distancing while boarding the vessel and observe the seating arrangement on board to ensure even weight distribution throughout the pagoda. Upon reaching their seats, they were required to put on the life vests immediately provided for their safety. Smoking was prohibited. Sufficient fire extinguishers were strategically placed around the pagoda.

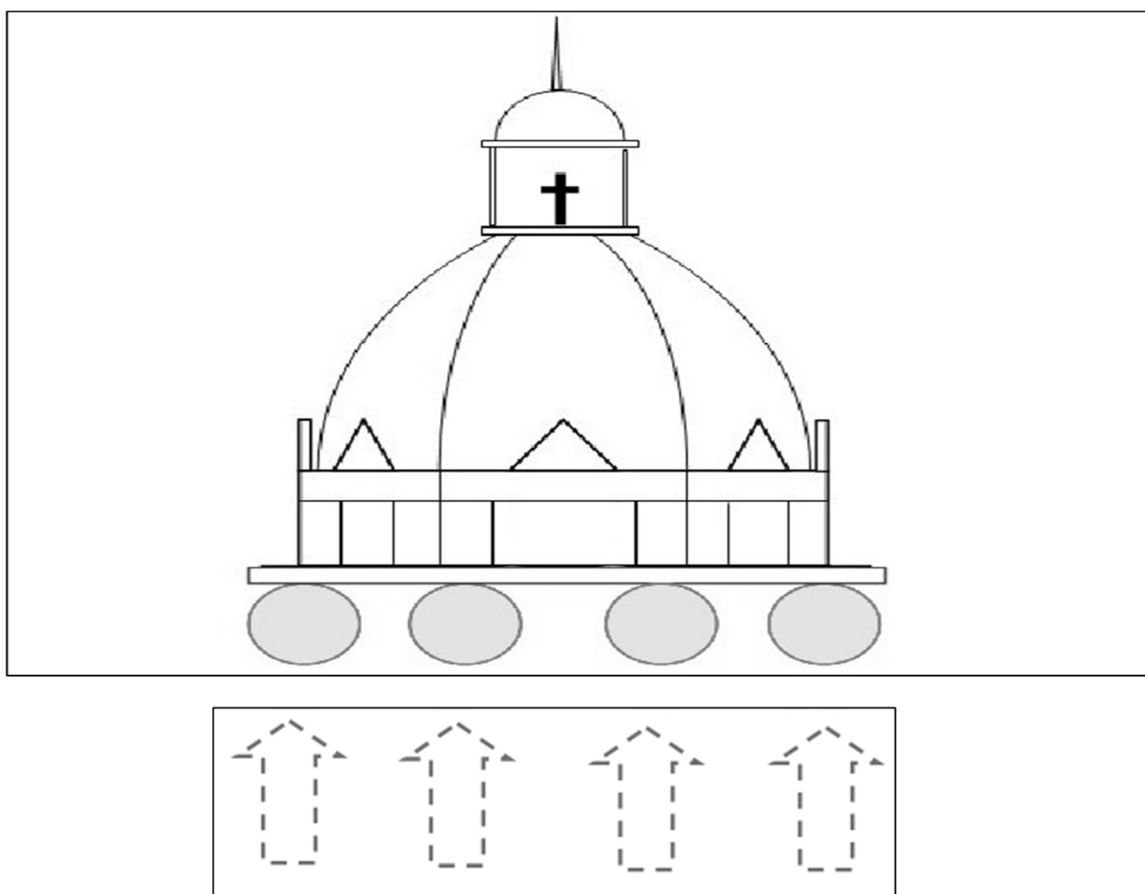


Figure 5. The total buoyant force of the pagoda = 106.7 tons. Note: Volume of cylinder = Volume (V) = $\pi (D/2)^2 L$ $V = (\pi D^2 L)/4$. Where: D = Diameter = 152.4 cm; L = Length = 487.68 cm; π = pi constant = 3.1415; $V = (3.1415 \times 5804.44 \times 487.68)/4$; Volume in liters = 8,895,737.36 cm^3 or $V = 8.9 \text{ m}^3 \times 1 \text{ L}/1000 \text{ cubic centimeters} = 8896.0 \text{ L}$. Since the density of water is 1 kg per liter, the buoyant force is 8896.00 kg or rounded off at 8896.0 kg. A total of 12 cylinders will be used as floating devices. At 100 percent efficiency, 12 cylinders \times 8896 kg = 106,752 kg $106,752 \text{ kg} \times 1 \text{ ton}/1000 \text{ kg} = 106.7 \text{ tons}$ buoyant force. A total of 106.7 tons displaced capacity at 100 percent efficiency.

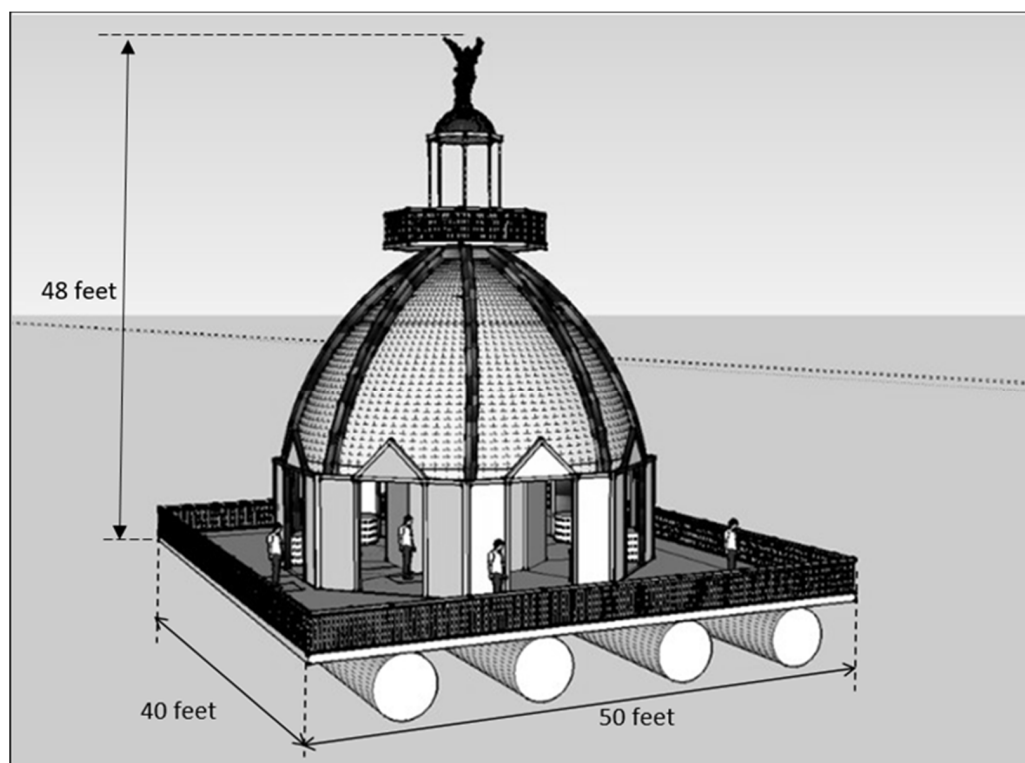


Figure 6. Load computation. Note: Each tank will use 11 sheets of 3 mm black iron. A 3 mm sheet weighs 74 kg. So, the weight of the tanks is $11 \text{ sheets/tank} \times 12 \text{ tanks} = 132 \text{ sheets} \times 74 \text{ kg/sheet} = 9768 \text{ kg}$ or 9.76 tons. Brackets and platform estimated weight = $150 (2 \times 2 \text{ angle bar}) \times 30 \text{ kg} = 4500 \text{ kg}$. The pagoda's height, measured from the flooring to the top, is 48 feet. The estimated platform is $50 \text{ feet} \times 40 \text{ feet} = 2000 \text{ square feet}$. A 3/4 plywood (or similar material with better water resistance) has to be used as flooring. An area of $2000 \text{ square feet} / 32 \text{ square feet}$ will use about 66 pieces. A total of 66 is less than 2.2 tons.

Adequate numbers of the Philippine Coast Guard, Barangay Rescue Team, Municipal Rescue Team, Provincial Rescue Team, and the Philippine National Police strictly monitored the situation. They were equipped with two-way radios and first aid supplies. They reminded participants to maintain the solemnity of the event and the prayerful experience.

The generator set was placed on a separate barge instead of the pagoda to prevent weight imbalance. Fireworks were not allowed due to safety concerns and to prevent panic. The colorful *bancas* or small vessels accompanying the pagoda needed permits to join the festival for an orderly and safe fluvial procession. Rescue groups and the Coast Guard escorted the pagoda on boats, and three trips were scheduled to accommodate more devotees. Due to limited passenger numbers and the pagoda's schedule, devotees were directed to designated viewing areas like the Bocaue Bridge, where they could catch a glimpse of the procession of the pagoda.

Passengers on board maintained a solemn and prayerful atmosphere by reciting the Holy Rosary, singing religious songs, and saying novena prayers (see Figure 9). At the exact location of the tragic incident that occurred 30 years ago, a moment of silence was observed, and prayers were offered for the deceased. After the prayer, the participants were given complimentary food.

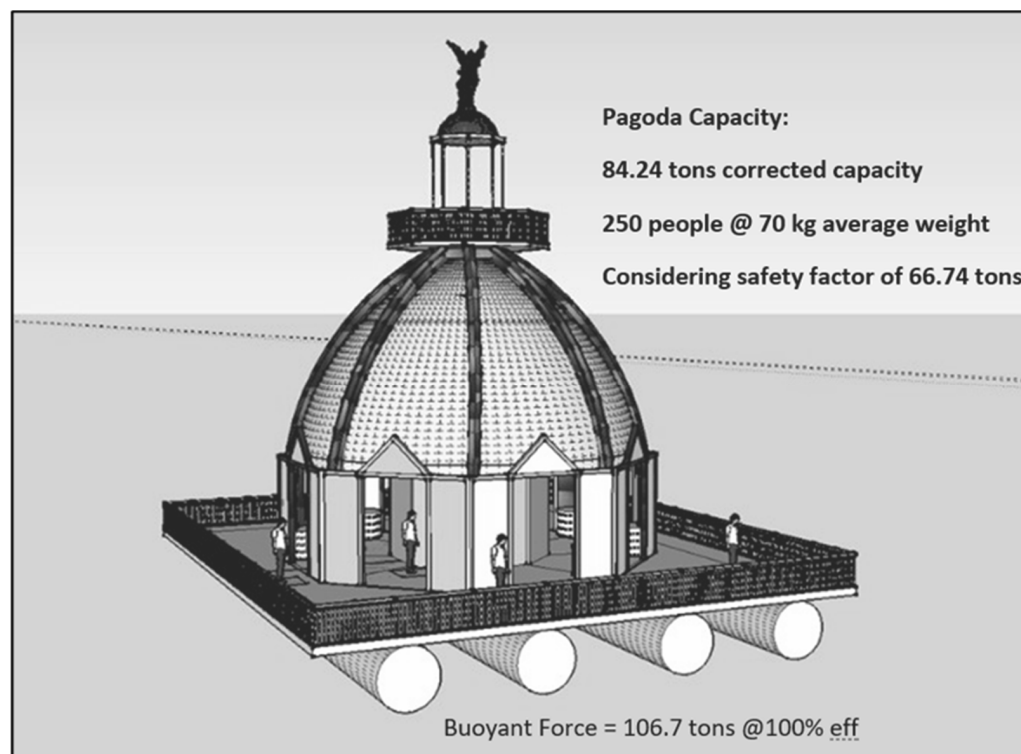


Figure 7. Pagoda capacity and safety factor. Note: The total corrected capacity of the pagoda structure is an estimated 6 tons (with angel and altar). The total computed capacity buoyant force is 106.7 tons at 100% efficiency. $W(\text{tank})$ weight of tank materials = 9.76 tons. $W(\text{platform})$ weight of platform material = 2.2 tons. $W(\text{flooring})$ weight of flooring materials = flooring materials. Total Corrected Capacity = Buoyant Force – $W(\text{tank})$ – $W(\text{platform})$ – $W(\text{flooring})$ = 106.7 tons – 9.76 tons – 4.5 tons – 2.2 tons – 6 tons = 84.24 tons. Computed load requirement for 250 pax averaging 70 kg each = 250 pax \times 70 = 17,500 kg or 17.5 tons. Safety factor = Corrected Capacity – Computed load = 84.24 tons – 17.5 tons = 66.74 tons.



Figure 8. The building process of the pagoda. Note: Courtesy of Engr. Rodelio Mendoza Concepcion; permission has been given to the authors for the publication and reprinting of this photograph.

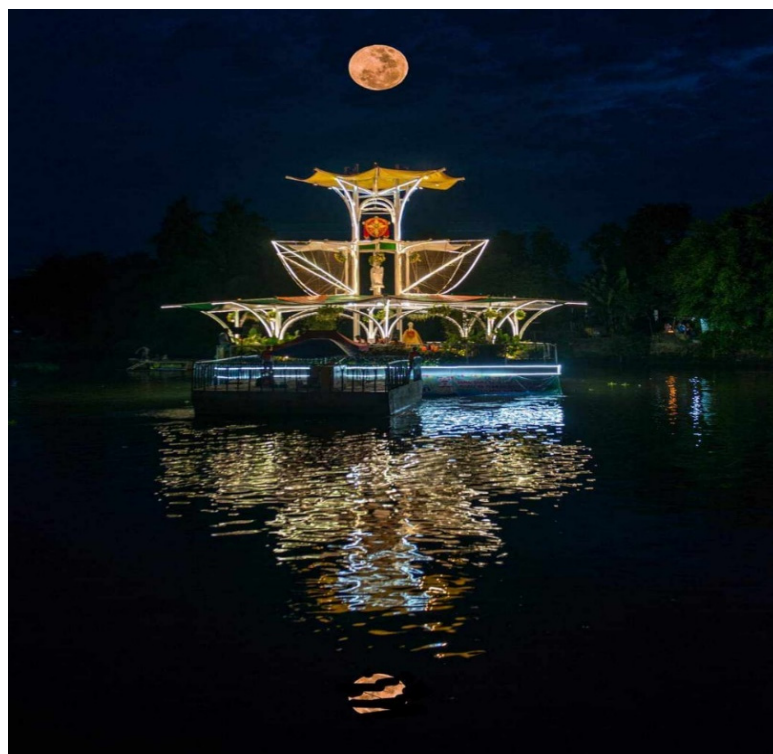


Figure 9. The solemn voyage of the Pagoda sa Wawa. Note: Courtesy of Engr. Rodelio Mendoza Concepcion; permission has been granted for the authors to publish and reprint this photograph.

When the fluvial festival was revived in 2014, the Bocaue community committed to restoring their river, which they called the “Bocaue River Wonder” program, by cleaning and protecting it from pollution (Reyes-Estropo 2019). They recognized the advantage of cooperation among various sectors, including local government units, NGOs, business corporations, people’s organizations, and academic institutions, in preserving the environment (Eballo 2018, p. 25). They also realized that a clean river can create a peaceful coexistence between fish, humans, and other living things—a true wonder and miracle of nature. Perhaps the woman who claimed to be saved by the cross was saved because the river was pristine then.

6. Challenges

6.1. Demystifying the Myth

It is illogical and unacceptable to consider drowning incidents that occur during fluvial festivals, such as Pagoda sa Wawa, as a form of offering to God. This act goes against Christian values, which prioritize the sanctity of life and the dignity of every human person. Life is a gift from God; as such, every human being is created in God’s image and likeness. It is not acceptable to tolerate tragedies that occur during religious celebrations, even if victims are considered offerings or “alay” to God. This creates a harmful cycle of accepting tragic events as an annual tribute to God. This myth needs to be demystified in the Philippine culture and psyche.

6.2. From Reactive to Proactive Church

The people of Bocaue have shown tremendous transformation by prioritizing lives above everything else. Their resilience is commendable as they recovered from the adversity they faced after the tragic incident. They have learned from their past and have risen above it. However, the Church’s attitude towards safety and life should be proactive, prioritizing safety management and disaster preparedness in anticipation of potential events rather than reacting to tragic events that have already occurred. Considering the Philippines’

vulnerability to natural disasters such as typhoons and earthquakes, it is important for different sectors to take a proactive approach in organizing both indoor and outdoor activities and cultivate a culture of safety, with the collaboration of the local government unit (LGU).

6.3. Cultivating a Culture of Safety in the Philippines

It is hoped that the journey of the people of Bocaue, particularly through their devotion to Pagoda sa Wawa, serves as a concrete example of how to prioritize the safety and health of every participant in any religious festival or event. Other local communities can adopt this risk-reduction and disaster-preparedness model to ensure their members' safety and health during similar celebrations. Organizers and participants of various religious festivals, such as the Peñafrancia fluvial festival in Naga, Ápung Irû in Apalit, Pampanga, and the Traslación of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo on January 9, can learn from and consider adopting the risk-reduction approach of Pagoda sa Wawa as a model. This approach can help them avoid any untoward incidents while fulfilling their devotions. Eventually, the experience and approach of Pagoda sa Wawa will spread like wildfire, cultivating a safety culture across the archipelago.

6.4. Continue the Save Bocaue River Program

The Bocaue River and Pagoda sa Wawa are integral to the identity of the people of Bocaue. The tragedy that happened 30 years ago showcased their ability to unite and be resilient as they learned from the incident and moved on. As part of their commitment to learning from the past, they aim to rehabilitate the Bocaue River. This is a good endeavor since Pagoda sa Wawa represents the interconnection of humans with nature and God and serves as an expression of gratitude for the natural gifts bestowed upon people by God. People are motivated to care for themselves and the environment through disaster preparedness and river rehabilitation because of their interconnectedness with one another and the river. It is crucial to protect the Bocaue River as the Pagoda sa Wawa festival celebrates unity with God and nature. The festival aims to promote sustainable and holistic transformation beyond a one-day event, which is considered a miracle in Bocaue.

7. (Re)commendations

The community of Bocaue demonstrated their unwavering faith by uniting to revive their devotion. To mark the 30th anniversary of the pagoda tragedy, a special ceremony was held at the site. The ceremony included prayers and flower offerings aimed at promoting collective healing and recovery that would provide closure to the victims' families. It is hoped that this tribute will become a regular part of the annual fluvial festival.

Evaluating the previous Pagoda festival held by the organizing committee as a part of their program to improve their annual fluvial festival is commendable as they can learn from their experiences.

The people of Bocaue worked together in a collaborative aspiration involving the local government units, business sector, private companies, people's organizations, non-governmental organizations, religious groups, and the Local Church. They successfully planned, implemented, and complied with proper disaster-preparedness measures for the annual fluvial festival. Religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, often play a central role in the processes of identity and connection that make up the social fabric of communities impacted by natural disasters or conflict (Samuels et al. 2010).

The Church, State, and other sectors collaborated to make Pagoda sa Wawa not only a religious celebration but also a civic engagement. Civic engagement, as measured by the participation of community groups, is a hallmark of social capital. Social capital refers to networks and norms that enable collective action (Woolcock and Narayan 2000, p. 226). Social capital refers to the benefits that community members receive through networking and mutual support within a community. It helps people to develop stronger social connections and assists them in achieving their goals. Communities with actively

engaged residents in civic activities tend to have higher social capital, leading to better governance (Bankoff 2012, p. 332).

The festival has evolved from being a religious occasion to an eco-friendly, admirable event. The organizers have acknowledged the significance of preserving the Bocaue River as a vital part of the community's ecosystem and identity. Along with their recovery from the tragedy, they have also rehabilitated their river through the "Bocaue River Wonder" program initiated in 2016 (Reyes-Estropo 2019).

The Pagoda sa Wawa fluvial festival is a one-of-a-kind experience where devotees come together to sail, pray, sing religious songs, and share food. It is a good example of fellowship on board. This experience is similar to that of the apostles, who always journey with Jesus on a boat for fishing and fellowship. On Earth, members of the Church journey together on a symbolic boat, praying and caring for one another. Thus, the boat or pagoda symbolizes the ever-changing nature of the Church as it continues to journey forward.

Given the Philippines' susceptibility to calamities, the Catholic Church in the country must incorporate risk-reduction management and disaster preparedness into its pastoral program, in line with the Church's teachings that all human life is valuable and should be treated with dignity.

Lastly, it is recommended that organizers of different religious festivals, such as the Peñafrancia fluvial festival in Naga, Ápung Irû in Apalit, Pampanga, and the Traslación of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo, should arrange a meeting with the organizers of the Pagoda sa Wawa. This will provide an opportunity for sharing ideas, brainstorming, and benchmarking.

8. Conclusions

The incident in 1993, when a pagoda capsized in Bocaue, Bulacan, was a tragedy that taught the devotees of Pagoda sa Wawa a valuable lesson. It has been realized that it is crucial to implement risk-reduction management, safety measures, and health protocols to uphold the teachings of the Catholic Church regarding the sanctity of life and human dignity. Likewise, the concern for safety and health has been intensified due to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the government's Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) protocols in the Philippines began to loosen, many Catholics were eager to participate in religious events. However, due to this excitement, there were many cases of unfortunate incidents, such as drowning and electrocutions during fluvial festivals in Taguig and Apalit, Pampanga. In light of these, the Pagoda sa Wawa fluvial festival in Bocaue, Bulacan, has designed and implemented safety and health protocols that can serve as a model for other religious celebrations, particularly fluvial parades.

The devotees of Pagoda sa Wawa have come to understand that their faith is not just a personal matter but also a communal celebration. As their religious practices involve communal participation, they now recognize the need to prioritize the safety and wellbeing of every community member. It is important for us to take care of one another and respect the value of human life and dignity. We are responsible for each other's wellbeing. Engaging in religious practices that compromise safety and wellbeing is not appropriate. In order to have a peaceful and prayerful experience during the pagoda fluvial procession, it is essential for the community to come together and cooperate with discipline.

The Pagoda sa Wawa devotion has its roots in the Bocaue River, where the Holy Cross was discovered. Since this discovery, people have associated miracles with the river, and it has become a symbol of the town and its inhabitants. The determination of the people to restore the river and their unwavering faith are testaments to their resilience. The rehabilitation of the Bocaue River is a commendable effort as it will help preserve their environment and cultural identity. The Pagoda sa Wawa fluvial festival is a religious practice that allows people to pray and connect with God. However, it is important to maintain a peaceful and prayerful experience by following the safety and health protocols.

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