

Sayo

BICOLANO, CAMARINES SUR PROVINCE, SOUTHERN LUZON ISLAND, NORTHERN PHILIPPINES. *The solemnity of a procession of veiled and crowned women in flowing black robes chanting prayers is one of the most striking images of religious fervor during the annual observance of the Lenten season in the Philippines. It is a sobering image that is also almost an invocation.*



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PROCESSIONS of religious images are among the highlights of the Holy Week observance of the Roman Catholic Church. In San Jose, Camarines Sur, among the participants of processions from Holy Wednesday up to Good Friday are ladies donned in black. Called *sayo* or sayos (plural), they walk barefoot, with black veils covering their heads. The penitents wear a long black dress that reaches down to the ankles while a rosary dangles from a white cord from the waist. The veil, locally called *manto*, is locked in place by *payawan*, a local vine with medicinal value. Also called *makabuhay* (*Tinospora glabra* [Burm. f.] Merr. Family Menispermaceae), it is coiled to look like Jesus Christ's crown of thorns.

Sayos are said to represent the women of Jerusalem whom Jesus Christ met on the eighth station going to Calvary. However, nobody can specifically say when the *sayo* became a tradition in San Jose. Even the meaning of the word "sayo" is vague. It is not used by the Bicolanos in this part of the region in day to day conversations.

The term is used only in association with Holy Week and the women in black,

and confined to the Camarines province. In Camarines Norte, *sayo* pertains to both men and women penitents. As Venida (1996) describes in his book, they are "...robed in black with black veils covering their faces and carrying instruments of the Passion □ the nails, a wooden cross, crown of thorns, and a bottle of vinegar with bile, among others."

In San Jose, however, *sayo* only pertains to women. Aside from joining processions, the ladies also go around barangays in groups of four or five to ask for alms on Maundy Thursday. Still barefoot, the groups visit houses starting from the early morning until noon. They pray The Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary and Glory Be in the vernacular from one house to another. After the short prayer, the people give them rice or money (*limos*). Whatever they collect goes directly to the Church as contribution for projects of the parish.

After this, the sayos return to the Church for afternoon prayers. On Good Friday, they join the last procession after the Seven Last Words held at the grounds of the Saint Joseph Parish. In the procession, they walk behind the image of the Mater Dolorosa.

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On Maundy Thursdays, the *sayo* women visit houses for alms for the church, only from early morning until noontime.