

# LUBRICATING THE ROUGH GROUNDS: THE CASE OF PANAGKALANGKANG<sup>1</sup>

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Published online: 29 August 2016

## ABSTRACT

PanagKalangkang is a small fishing community in Sta. Cruz, Marinduque. Viewed as rough ground, life there is an everyday struggle where, from their need to survive, people have to negotiate and adjust. In this paper, the author attempts to draw on the idea of “rough grounds” as *locus theologicus* and thereby contribute towards a theological methodology sourced from the praxis of the margins, where people find themselves in the midst of friction between the dominant forces of structure/system and the dearth of the ground. To better facilitate the analysis of the frictional dynamics at the ground, this paper makes use of a heuristic device that borrows fundamental ideas from the science of lubricated friction, a branch of engineering science called tribology. It has been discovered that the peculiarity of that locus has implications for theological methodology. Anecdotal narratives of the author’s field research in selected BECs in the Diocese of Boac, Marinduque are integrated to provide concrete “corporeal” structure to an otherwise theoretical abstraction.

## Introduction

I can still recall the morning when Edna<sup>2</sup> was in tears, recalling her difficult journey years ago when tasked to travel for hours to a remote community several kilometers out from Boac, Marinduque, walking over dirt roads, climbing mountainous terrain, and passing a number of rivers and streams. It was not the physical pain she was reminded of, but the agony of being away from her children and family; that for two to three nights or even a week, she would not know of their condition, her children especially. Sitting next to her, Mila’s\* recollections of her early days in community-organizing mission to far-flung areas had to do with the struggle to control the “call of nature” in places where there’s practically no toilet to go to. “*Maghihintay ka ng gabi para maka-CR... masundan ka pa ng baboy*” (You’ll wait till it gets dark at night time to pee... even pigs would follow you), she adds. Then Marlon\* shared a story: during the course of a long journey, he suddenly heard a chirping sound from his bag and when he opened it, he found a newly-hatched chick from an egg he had brought with him for lunch. “*Patunayyansahaba ng nilalakadnaminmakapuntalangsamga communities, napatiangitlognagigingsisw*” (Proof of how

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<sup>1</sup> The data and findings used in this paper come from field work that was supported by a Research Grant, Project No. 18 N 1TAY14-3TAY14, from the University Research Coordination Office (URCO) of the De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

<sup>2</sup> Real names are withheld for the sake of confidentiality.

long and hard the journey is to reach certain communities that the eggs in our bags hatched into chicks), he joked fondly.

How these narratives become a source for theologizing is crucial for the nature and design of the theological methodology. Daniel Pilario endorses local cultures/communities, even singling out the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), as a “liberating locus theologicus” in the context of the global world, but adds a caution about the appropriateness of theological methodology in articulating expressions and representations drawn from their praxis.<sup>3</sup>

The main focus of this paper is a proposal for a theological methodology that can faithfully articulate the lived experiences of the people in such base communities. Against the backdrop of a global world that continually affects the local, doing theology from the standpoint of the local has become far more nuanced and specialized, at least in terms of an appreciation of non-theological methods and lenses, as well as in terms of theology’s expanded venture into the realms of the secular and social. Added to that is the confusion and ambiguity surrounding a “suitable” method that can properly and justifiably capture and articulate the local, its culture and praxis.

In particular, Pilario’s concept of “rough grounds,” which is mainly influenced by the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu, shall be of major consideration, since this paper attempts to return to praxis as both the source and goal of any theological endeavour. The so-called “practical turn”<sup>4</sup> demands that any theological framework is (re)considered in terms of the “culture-as-lived,” as well as in terms of the researcher’s self-critical awareness of personal biases and interests, as he/she dives into the depths of the peoples’ praxis, replete with their own lifeworlds, worldviews, and cosmologies. From a desire to include a novel ideation, this paper incorporates some fundamental ideals from the engineering science of friction and lubrication, or tribology,<sup>5</sup> as a heuristic device to better facilitate analysis of the notion of “friction” at the “rough grounds,” along with implications for the future direction of any praxis-based theological methodology.

## **PanagKalangkang of the Diocese of Boac, Marinduque**

*PanagKalangkang* is a small fishing village situated on a small island off the coast of Sta. Cruz Marinduque, about thirty kilometers away from the capital city of Boac.<sup>6</sup> To get there, I and my group left Boac midmorning, rode a jeepney, and when we reached the port of Sta. Cruz, had to transfer to a small motor boat. The boat ride was a bit shaky, but in no time our group reached the small fishing village. It was almost noon. The community was very welcoming as men hurled the boat towards the shore and helped us disembark while women started to arrange the chairs and tables for us. The children were in their school uniforms and had just finished their morning daycare classes.

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<sup>3</sup> Pilario is known to refer to basic human societies as the “rough grounds” (Pilario 2011, 341; Pilario 2002, 86).

<sup>4</sup> “... the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people” (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, 93).

<sup>5</sup> The word *tribology* derives from the Greek root “trib” of the verb “tribo,” “I rub” in classic Greek; and the suffix -logy from “logia” – “study of,” “knowledge of.” It was coined by the British physicist David Tabor, and also by Peter Jost in 1964, a lubrication expert who noticed the problems with increasing friction on machines, and who started the new discipline of tribology (Field, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> The community store in *PanagKalangkang* sells various food items, household and school supplies, fishing-related supplies, and even clothing materials. It has for many years been a self-reliant BPK due to its self-sustaining status and successful profit-sharing mechanism, whereby additional income significantly augments peoples’ daily needs.

One of the outstanding features of this community as a *BatayangPamayanangKristiyanoor BPK* (Basic Ecclesial Community or BEC) is their successful management of their MASAMCO community store.<sup>7</sup> The integration of a socio-economic component into the BPK formation is one of the highlights of this fishing village. One of their female leaders said, “*Naisipkolang kung puro nalangdasalnangdasal at walanamangkabuhayan, mahiraptalagangmabuoang BPK ditosaamin*” (I realize that for BPK to be successful, prayers are never enough, without giving the people livelihood income). She further observed an increased participation and involvement by her neighbors in BPK religious activities and gatherings since the store’s establishment years ago (bible studies, community masses, among others), as compared to the sporadic attendance of the people before the store’s existence. This is a community that depends on the sea for daily sustenance. If the weather is bad, they are barely able to find a way to get by on a daily basis. But with the store, each person feels a sense of security that keeps them from worrying, as the store has become an alternative source of income.

More than that, the store has become like a “public well” for the community—a place and a reason for gathering together, exchanging stories, discussing community problems and needs, and a place where community mass takes place. It is here that their lives interact and it has become a common source of their sustenance. It is here that solidarity becomes alive and communal spirit thrives. In fact, when the store was partially burned, the members cooperatively helped put out the fire and worked together to rebuild it. For them, it was not just a store they were saving; it was their life, their community.

I came in as an outsider, armed with theoretical formulations and conciliar exhortations on BECs and their supposed culture and dynamics, from the standpoint of codified propositions, but I was not ready for what I witnessed. The “surprise of the *praxis*” (Pilario 2007, 52) made the theological categories I had learned in the laboratories hardly seem to relate to people’s everyday lives and struggles to survive. The way these people make sense of their faith in the midst of their obvious limitations is something any theologian cannot fail to see. There is so much to take from a brief encounter and interaction with people who Pilario referred to as from the “rough grounds.” This is where theology must arise—from the community and its praxis. Pilario’s insistence on going “back to the rough grounds” is a demand for theology to focus on the lived experiences, dynamics, and interactions of the people as they occur in a particular, taking-place community.

As the ground is “rough,” it can never be without friction. Anything that strikes the rough ground cannot but “negotiate, adjust, accommodate, respect, and dialogue as there is no other way out if people want to survive” (Pilario 2011, 340). *Theologies as well as theologians need therefore to be immersed in the friction of real life to be able to theologize*. The locus is rough; the people’s lives are intimately connected with a ground that is defined by poverty and death. The ground is not ahistorical, as it is always affected by the dominant structures and systems (state, capitalism, religious institution, media, and globalization), that operate not merely as a backdrop to the particular ground but as *another force* that grinds and rubs against the ground.

When the *global rubs against the local* as with the universal against the particular, it creates a friction that to a certain extent aggravates the condition of misery, helplessness, and misfortune. When the sea is uncooperative, the *PanagKalangkang* people feel miserable, as they have to spend time looking for a resource of daily food and sustenance, while the people on the mainland (Marinduque) continue on with their leisure and lives, (hardly) affected by slight weather disturbances and unpredictable sea conditions, since they have other sources of income from the farmlands and service industries. The people of *PanagKalangkang* find themselves in the middle

<sup>7</sup> It was a livelihood project by the diocesan Social Action Commission (SAC) in cooperation with the diocesan-owned Marinduque Social Action Multi-purpose Cooperative (MASAMCO) to support the members of *BatayangPamayanangKristiyano* (BPK) in their socio-economic needs by setting up a store. Initial capital was provided by the diocesan cooperative through its loan portfolio, while maintenance and management of the store was entrusted to the BPK after a series of seminars and workshops.

of these two “rubbing” surfaces of the ideology of abundance and the poverty of context—between their desire to attain affluence and the reality of the scarcity of the ground. As the people negotiate and adjust, the obvious choice, if it still qualifies as a choice, is merely to survive.

It is in this scenario of the “local-in-friction-with-the-global” that the people of *PanagKalangkang* are situated. To provide a better illustration, this paper incorporates an engineering scientific concept of lubricated friction, a component of the larger area of the “science of friction and lubrication” or tribology, into an otherwise theological endeavor.

### **The Science of Lubricated Friction as a Heuristic Device**

While the paper’s integration of a non-theological concept is expected, given the nature of theology as a “second act” (Boff 1987, 31), the bold attempt to borrow fundamental notions from the science of lubricated friction, an engineering branch of tribology, is deemed more of a heuristic device, or an artificial construct to assist in the exploration of a social phenomena.<sup>8</sup> Intended as a form of preliminary analysis, the concept of lubricated friction is to be used mainly for analytical clarity about social events.

In *PanagKalangkang*, the educational infrastructure is different from elsewhere. For children to receive schooling (at least at grade school level), they have to leave their island, board and rent a boat, and from the port of Sta.Cruz (mainland), walk about six to seven kilometers more before reaching their school. Before they even get there, the children are usually tired, a bit hungry, and covered with sweat. This same routine is repeated when they return home from school. Every morning, mothers have to prepare their children as early as 4 a.m., when they have to wake them up, help them bathe, prepare them food or *baon* (breakfast of bread and water usually eaten on the boat or on the road), and accompany them to the shore until they have boarded the rented boat. For lack of other options, the people are forced by situation to negotiate, adjust, and survive. They feel their children’s misery and they pity them, but the community has placed great importance on finishing school and earning at least a high school diploma. A child’s graduation from school is treated not only as a matter of family pride, but as an achievement of the entire community. The people believe that with education, these young members can help improve the community as well as their own lives by offering the knowledge they have learned in the service of the community, be it as teacher-volunteers in the community’s day care center, as leaders of their BPK or barangay council, or even as Overseas Foreign Workers (OFW) whose financial success will trickle down to community projects and activities. This is the double truth (following Bourdieu) of reality for people of this island: seeing the dearth both as a misery that conditions their way of living and as an opportunity to resist the structural dominance through inventive, cunning ways. They find themselves cooperating together as children from this island board the same boat and walk together to the same school. These children have forged strong friendships among themselves, just as their parents (or mothers) have also fostered kinship and affinity with one another.

To better represent the dynamics of this cultural praxis, I propose to use the science of lubricated friction. As it stands, friction is not itself a fundamental force, but arises from interatomic and intermolecular forces between two contacting surfaces. “Frictional contact is usually assumed to be either ‘lubricated’ or ‘dry.’ When bodies are in lubricated contact they are not in real contact at all, a thin layer of liquid or gas separates them” (Ruina and Pratap 2002, 713). The fundamental principle behind this science is the use of lubrication as a technique to

<sup>8</sup> “A heuristic device is, then, a form of preliminary analysis. Such devices have proved especially useful in studies of social change, by defining bench-marks, around which variation and differences can then be situated. In this context, a heuristic device is usually employed for analytical clarity, although it can also have explanatory value as a model” (Scott and Marshall, 2009).

reduce the wear of one or both surfaces in close proximity and moving against each other, by interposing a substance called a lubricant.

This paper has already identified the surfaces in contact. The rough ground comes in contact with the structure/system and the people feel the friction between these two forces. As capitalism and its utopia of abundance and power impinge upon the poverty and dearth of the ground, the people cannot but find a way to negotiate through as they are pressed in between. They are saddened by the condition of their scarcity, inasmuch as they are driven to find a way to survive by coming together in solidarity and unity—in building and taking good care of their community store.

For the people of *PanagKalangkang*, the store has become like a lubricant for these two forces as it capacitates the people to generate additional income, as well as offering a kind of “appropriated” localized model of an otherwise universal, globalizing structure of mainstream capitalism, characterized by what Adam Smith refers to as “self-interested individuals.”<sup>9</sup> Each person of the community understands his/her role in relation to the community store. Each day, assigned members of the community, usually in pairs, look after the store. Every item that is bought is listed and at the end of the day, the store audits its sales and inventory. The prices are affordable, within the people’s means, and the bright side of all this is the patronage system that is used when each family of BPK receives a certain amount of money in the form of dividend or profit-sharing after annual sales and auditing. The notion of self-interested individuals is extended to the shared interest of the community in general. Their store allows a “smooth” continuous operation without too much stress among these grinding “surfaces.” In the end, just as the science of lubricated friction states, the lubricant does not stop the metals from contacting each other, the face-off is always there; it is just that this grinding is made tolerable and “adjustable” for people who find themselves in the midst of friction.

The most important property of a lubricant is its viscosity. Loosely defined, “the viscosity is the fluid’s ability to resist motion...viscosity is not a constant property...it depends on the temperature and pressure, especially temperature....Chemistry of the fluid and conditions at the interface also determine the proper lubricant” (Society of Tribologists and Lubrication Engineers 2014). Honestly speaking, the successful narrative of *PanagKalangkang*’s community store is more of a general observation. There are times when rifts among some individuals erupt due to some misunderstanding on store management and policy, especially on the issue of credit and payment. While there are a few individuals who would pay their bill past its due date, this is not significant enough to affect the general operation of the store. It is just minor wear in an otherwise thriving existence.

From what I have seen from the ground, the case of lubricated friction in the interaction of the global with the local, of the universal and particular, is not a cross-fertilization that creates a new offspring or a hybrid. I view it more as the presence of a mediating component that lubricates the friction to attain a sense of tolerance, appreciation, or even enjoyment, given the people’s basic human desire for compassion, belonging, and sustenance. The rubbing components do not disappear, as they continue to operate in their own organic existence.

As explained further in tribology, the science of lubricated friction allows variation or a case of indeterminacy that, when seen by non-scientists or non-experts, can be construed as a violation of determinacy and the “exactness” expected of any field of exact/natural science.

For any pair of objects and any given experiment to measure the friction coefficient, the measured value will likely vary from day to day. This problem of the non-consistency of friction from day to day or sample to sample cannot be overcome by a better law of friction. Unless one

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<sup>9</sup> “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities of their advantages” (Smith 1994, 15).

understands one's materials and their chemical environments extremely well, all friction laws, however sophisticated, are doomed to inaccuracy (Ruina and Pratap 2002, 713).

This is the intricacy of praxis-based social analysis: that it is always indeterminate and never the same in any situation, at least in terms of the people involved, the degree of suffering, and the force of oppression, among others. Pilario insists on the importance of treating each local community in terms of its inherent autonomy and peculiarity.

Of course, the community hears different voices from outside brought by the media, missionaries, business, cultural trends, etc. All of these are hegemonic and universalizing. What is crucial is to uphold the autonomy of the local grassroots communities where all these forces intersect. It is these communities that need to decide what to take in and what to reject, what to keep and what to expel, what helps and what destroys. All these discourses and initiatives from outside can only be arbitrated in the rough grounds of the people's praxis (Pilario 2011, 339-340).

Geographically, *PanagKalangkang* is surrounded by sea and the people's only recourse when the sea is uncooperative is to gather together and find a way to survive. As a community, they cannot afford to be self-interested, because each member largely depends on the same source of income. This explains why the community store has become more than an alternative source of income; it has become the symbol of their survival in the midst of poverty and a tool of resistance against the hegemonic construction of affluence projected in the media and in other universalizing structures of power. The socio-economic conditions of other BPKs are not the same as that of *PanagKalangkang*. Geographically, most BPKs are on the mainland of Marinduque with easier access to commercial goods and jobs, aside from the fact that living on the mainland provides people with more options to get by, and where the nature and condition of the sea hardly matter. This explains, as in the non-constancy of dynamics of friction, why it is that when a theologian or ethnographer analyzes praxis, he/she has to take into consideration the nature of the materials in contact, the extent of pressure, as well as the length of time that the surfaces have remained in contact.

### **Analysis of the Store's Success and Implications for Religious Faith**

One thing is clear about the way tribology enriches the analysis of the community store of *PanagKalangkang*. The science of lubricated friction treats pairs-in-friction *differently* and *uniquely*. There is a certain level of indeterminacy in tribology that emphasizes the need to understand the nature and condition of the materials of each surface. The success of *PanagKalangkang's* community store is hardly replicated in other BPKs of the mainland, where people are found to have other sources of income independent of the sea and weather disturbances. Moreover, the spatial confinement of the *PanagKalangkang* people and the constraint "imposed" upon them by geographical and social controls pushes them to depend on one another, form their own structures and laws, and reinforce their shared identity and communal bonds. Repetitive and routine activities that include boat rides of children to school, communal discussions and gatherings to share stories and celebrate life events, and bible study groups and other religious activities have edified their communal identity with the community store as their focal point. The store has become like a lubricant that shields them from the abrasive nature of dearth and poverty inasmuch as it allows them flexibility and fluidity to negotiate and survive in the midst of friction. When the people's only recourse when the sea is uncooperative is to gather together and find a way to survive as a community, they cannot afford to be self-interested, because each member largely depends on the same source of income. This explains why the community store has become more than an alternative source of income; it has become their symbol of survival and resistance to the forces of domination. In the end, it is their authentic community ethos that has transformed the store, not only as a source of daily food and necessities, but as an instrument to negate/tolerate the pain of the rough grounds.

Moreover, the success of the store in providing economic aid to the people and in edifying their communal sympathy with one another has also had positive implications for their religiosity and faith. More affective than cognitive in terms of expression of religious belief (Reader and Tanabe 1998, 129), their compassionate treatment of one another as belonging to one communal family makes it easier to share faith-stories and expect a more spontaneous empathy and counseling of one's struggles and difficulties. Before the establishment of the store, the community rarely gathered together in BEC activities, due to the uncertainty of the daily source of sustenance and the priority of going to sea to fish as the only means of survival, and thus their readiness to attend to bible studies and liturgical prayers always took second place to economic needs. If and when BEC religious events did take place, people rarely shared with one another because a certain degree of emotional distance and lack of trust prevented them from opening up and empathizing. But with the community store acting like the "public well" of the community, faith-related activities have become enriching and fulfilling.

## Conclusion

When globalization pushes millions of people to move out of their settled communities, either in search of jobs or to relocate due to urban development, such displaced or dislocated individuals have to learn new sets of skills and lessons to adapt to new environments. As in the case of the BECs in the Diocese of Boac, the dynamic is peculiarly different. The whole province of Marinduque is "isolated" by its surrounding sea and this can never be more evident than in *PanagKalangkang*, an island that is relatively "cut off," but not necessarily shut off from the main island. The people here have learned to negotiate and adjust, acquiring new sets of strategies and tactics for survival and resistance. They feel the pressure forced upon them by globalization as they are as pinned down unto the rough ground of poverty and dearth.

Finding themselves in the midst of friction, they cannot move out of their settled community. Instead they have found a way to survive through inventive, cunning ways—through the establishment and maintenance of a community store. They have found a way in which the grinding pressure of friction between two contacting forces can be smooth enough to be tolerable for survival and resistance. It is when this store became a lubricant to buffer or cushion the impact of friction that people begin to actively engage and participate in BEC religio-spiritual activities. Once they had secured the socio-economic needs of their families and dependents, they decided to spend more time in the once-ignored activities of bible study, block rosary, and the like.

This paper's use of tribology as a heuristic device highlights the vibrant interconnectedness and interrelationship of the local-in-friction-with-the-global. It is with the use of tribological ideations that this paper has been able to describe the role of the community store for the people of *PanagKalangkang*, who are in the midst of friction. In the end, the author invites every theologian and researcher not to impose uniformity, generalizations, or oversimplified assumptions and findings from one context as being similar or the same as that of another, without first identifying fundamental factors in friction dynamics, such as the nature of the materials in contact, the load of pressure exerted in the friction, and the length of time that the surfaces are in contact.

In the end, a praxis-based theological methodology is an invitation to rethink the way theology is currently practised in the face of the globalizing tendencies of the world and the roughness of the ground. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to this rethinking process.

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