

PANATA AT PANANAMPALATAYA SA PANAHO NG PANDEMYA: SUSTAINABILITY OF RELIGIOUS CULTURAL PRACTICES AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

PANATA EM PANANAMPALATAYA SA PANAHO NG PANDEMYA: SUSTENTABILIDADE DAS PRÁTICAS CULTURAIS RELIGIOSAS EM MEIO À PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

Article received on: 9/3/2025

Article accepted on: 11/3/2025

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Abstract

Self-flagellation is one of the religious rituals in Central Luzon, Philippines, where penitents roam around the area of Bulacan, Nueva Ecija, and Pampanga, half-naked with a crown made of twigs and their faces are covered with a used cloth while hitting their back by a whip made of nylon string tied with bamboo strips called “bolyos” during Lenten Season and Holy Week. Every penitent who executes self-flagellation vowed to perform the ritual every year as an act of thanksgiving, supplication, and atonement continuously according to one’s personal promise. Normally, penitents vowed to perform self-flagellation for ten to fifteen consecutive years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine and hard lockdowns were imposed, and both government and church authorities banned all religious gatherings, including spiritual devotions. This paper presented several ways in which religious believers and penitents sustain their annual “panata” or personal vow to perform self-flagellation in public, notwithstanding the prohibition by the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for COVID-19 for the management of Emerging Infectious diseases and the live experiences of the flagellants.

Keywords: Panata. Pananampalataya. Sustainability. Religious Devotion. Cultural Practice.

Resumo

A autoflagelação é um dos rituais religiosos da região central de Luzon, nas Filipinas, onde penitentes percorrem as áreas de Bulacan, Nueva Ecija e Pampanga, seminus, com uma coroa feita de galhos e o rosto coberto por um pano usado, enquanto se açoitam nas costas com um chicote de corda de náilon amarrada com tiras de bambu, chamado "bolyos", durante a Quaresma e a Semana Santa. Todo penitente que pratica a autoflagelação faz um voto de realizar o ritual anualmente como um ato de gratidão, súplica e expiação, de acordo com sua promessa pessoal. Normalmente, os penitentes fazem um voto de autoflagelação por dez a quinze anos consecutivos. Durante a pandemia de COVID-19, foram impostas quarentenas e lockdowns rigorosos, e as autoridades governamentais e religiosas proibiram todas as reuniões religiosas, incluindo as devoções espirituais. Este artigo apresentou diversas maneiras pelas quais fiéis e penitentes mantêm sua “panata” anual, ou voto pessoal, de realizar autoflagelação em público, apesar da proibição imposta pela Força-Tarefa Interinstitucional (IATF) para a COVID-19, visando o controle de doenças infecciosas emergentes, e relatou as experiências vividas pelos flagelantes.

Palavras-chave: Panata. Pananampalataya. Sustentabilidade. Devoção Religiosa. Prática Cultural.



1 INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, flagellation has been a disciplinary and devotional practice in the Catholic church of beating one's body with whips of chosen materials of iron, twigs, oxtail, leather, lead, and parchment strips. By doing so, it was believed to drive out evil spirits that possess the body as purification in a form of sadistic actions where animal powers reside in a whip. Even in prehistoric human culture, ceremonial whippings were conducted in the observance of various rites for initiation, cleansing, and fertility. However, others equated self-flagellation (Hampas-dugo as popularly known in the Philippines) as a form of punishment among erring priests and presbyters. It was also performed along the streets in procession by devotees as a form of ritual when there was plague and calamities in the area (Abbott, 2023). Further, it is perceived as a means of absolution for the sins committed by the penitents (Moratilla, 2018).

One of the more widely observed traditions among Filipinos of the Catholic faith is the season of Lent. This four-and-a-half-week period begins with the observance of Ash Wednesday, a ritual where a priest puts a cross mark with the use of ash of the burnt Palmas (Palm leaves on the forehead of the faithful with the prayer *For dust you are and to dust you shall return.* (Genesis 3:19). The devout are encouraged to observe fasting and abstinence and other forms of sacrifices for the atonement of sins and renewal of faith. This is succeeded by the commemoration of the Holy Week, starting from the celebration of Palm Sunday, remembering the triumphal entry of Jesus Christ to Jerusalem to his passion, death, and resurrection. Penitential acts during the Holy week are evident, but the extent is relative to the threshold and set limitations by the faithful. However, there are some extremist Catholic devotees who practice a more physically exhausting sacrifice, the self-flagellation. It is a seeming replication of the passion of Christ. However, this observance was halted and forbidden by the Inter-Agency Task Force for Infectious Diseases, which has temporarily prohibited it due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Although the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) had been advising penitents to refrain from crucifying and flagellating themselves during the observance of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Furthermore, they were reminded to show love for others rather than harming themselves. Self-flagellation and nailing oneself to the cross cannot increase love for one's neighbors. Pictorial during self-flagellation and crucifixion is but a spiritual vanity. The way to rectitude is far more important than public

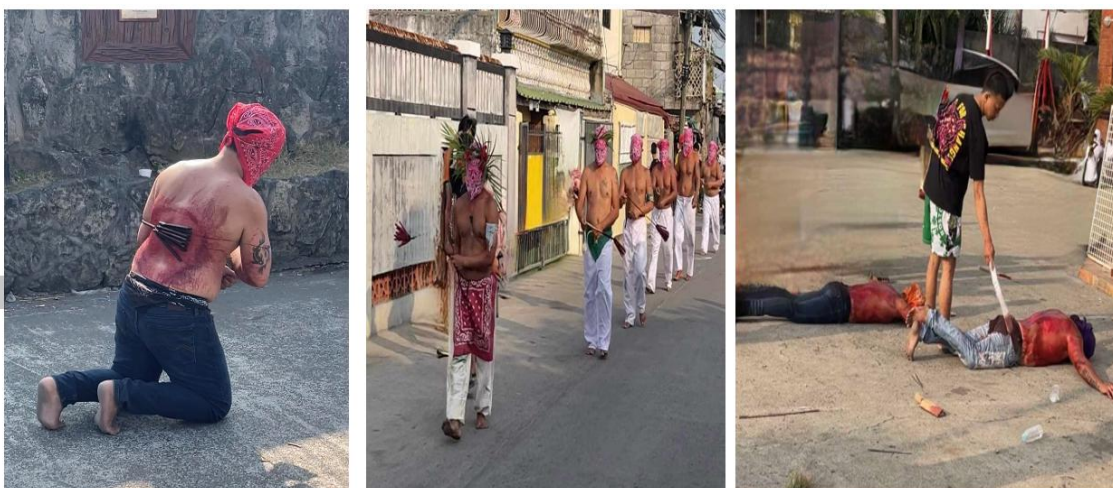
display of suffering. Instead, the bishops recommended performing the traditional “Visita Iglesia” by offering prayers in churches that they visit. Holy Week in the Philippines is regarded as one of the busiest weeks of the year for Filipinos and is observed with much color and pageantry (Bulatao, 1992; Cornelio, 2014).

Even the officials of the Department of Health advised the self-flagellants and penitents that when they perform flagellation, they expose themselves to health hazards like tetanus and blood loss because of the cuts.

Flagellation is a cultural tradition that has caught the attention not only of religious communities but also of secular guests (Wight, 2021; Iletto, 1979; Macaranas, 2021). It was therefore the primary objective of this paper, which sought to examine the intentions of penitents who practiced self-mortification at Barangay Sta. Elena, Hagonoy, Bulacan. Previous studies have disclosed its motivational characteristics, which lead to dark tourism being perceived as a pilgrimage, including personal growth, empathy, spiritual travel, and a search for unity (Collins-Kreiner, 2015; Belita, 2006; Chupungco, 2004; De Mesa, 1994). Other factors associated with flagellation include sensation seeking, voyeurism, rubbernecking, a desire for a novel experience or adventure (Podoshen, 2013), cultural, educational, and recreational enlightenment, as well as a desire for cheap thrills (Robb, 2009).

Figure 1

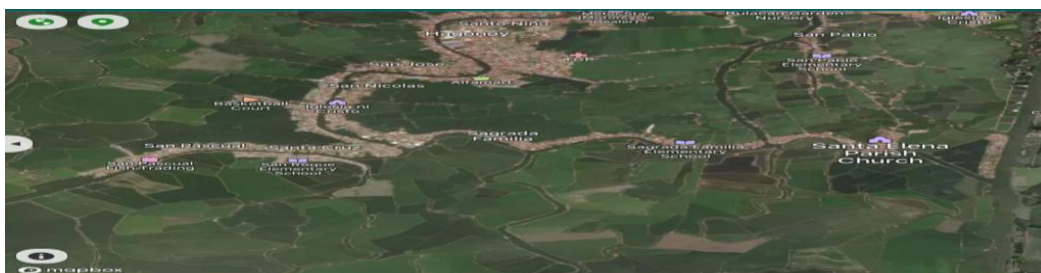
Flagellants in barangay Sta. Elena, Hagonoy Bulacan



Hampas-dugo is not a new phenomenon among Filipino Catholic rituals during the Lenten season (Fig. 1). The people who perform self-flagellation, seemingly emulating the physical sufferings borne by Christ, as reflected in scripture.

Figure 2

Satellite Map of Barangay Sta. Elena, Hagonoy, Bulacan



As early as 3:00 in the morning, the penitents from the nearby towns, barangay, and local folks of Barangay Sta. Elena (Fig. 2) flocked the chapel in Barangay Sagrada to undergo “Pagtatatak”, the procedure where their backs were struck with “Retison” (a material made of wood with spikes from shattered bottle glasses and varies depending on the body size of the flagellant). Normally, the number of blows ranged from 4 to 6 times. It did produce cuts in the epidermis, but not too deep to cause a medical emergency (Fig. 3)

Figure 3

A penitent undergoing the “pagtatatak” with “retison”



To induce bleeding in the inflicted cuts, they repeatedly whipped their backs with the use of “bolyos”. These are made up of bamboo sticks around three to four inches long

and tied with nylon strings (Fig. 4). The number of sticks refers to the number of years a penitent is willing to undergo the devotion. They walked around barefoot, resembling the passion of Jesus along the streets on the morning of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday under the scorching heat of the sun. Most flagellant' faces are covered with fabric materials in order to hide their identity from the public. They were guided by stations, and in each stop, they prostrated while saying their personal prayers, and their man-in-waiting gave them additional corporeal blows with a stick, hitting them on their buttocks and thighs. This four-kilometer stretch (that lasts for an hour or two) ended when they reached the Sta. Elena Parish church *and* was culminated by the bystanders and residents giving them eggs and sodas to recharge their swollen bodies, and before going home, they will plunge into the river to clean themselves. However, due to the quality of the water, most flagellants preferred to bathe at home instead of compromising their health, such as contracting epidermal infections or other related diseases.

Figure 4

Bolyos, used in whipping penitents' backs



Associated with self-flagellation is “mortification,” etymologically derived from the Latin words “mors” and “mortis,” meaning “death.” Spiritually, the word mortification may mean slowly putting one’s body to death, its attachment to vices, habitual sinning, and egoistic tendencies that corrupt one's being. This kind of action has been interpreted by Popes as a way of “Sequela Christi” or “following the footsteps of Christ who died via crucifixion and gave this advice: “let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Mortification differs based on the spiritual

inspiration of the penitents but the best mortifying action for many Filipino penitents is a self-flagellation during holy week along the streets because through these bloody and corporal punishment they can be forgiven from all wrongdoings that they have committed throughout the year.

As a matter of fact, when COVID-19 Pandemic hit the Philippines particular in the National Capital Regions (NCR) and nearby provinces including Bulacan and Pampanga the Lenten ritual of self-flagellation was banned temporarily by the Inter-Agency Task Force for Infectious Disease (IATFID) together with other holy week religious practices like “Cenaculo,” “procession of life-sized statues of the Christ’s passion,” “Pabasa” or the singing of the Passion of Christ, “Maytinis” or the procession of devotees at midnight time to look for the sepulcher of Jesus, and “Salubong” a procession during the Easter morning where Mary meets Christ during the resurrection. All kinds of Lenten and Easter Triduum processions were temporarily banned due to their public nature. The self-flagellation remains active in private areas where government authorities cannot apprehend the penitents who do not want to break the “panata” that they vowed for five to ten years. For them, “pamamanata” becomes useless if they break even for a single year. This is the common religious psychology of the Filipino penitents.

The period of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulacan served as a test and a challenge for the penitents’ “pananampalataya” or faith in sustaining the long-standing religious Lenten ritual and tradition from their forefathers. Nobody can hinder their faith, and they will continue with what they have started in terms of religious practices (Mercado, 2000). Further, religious leaders in the country have encouraged self-flagellation activities, stressing their conviction that penitents can show their “pamamanata” (genuine faith) and religiosity without physically punishing themselves and by being involved in charitable works, such as giving donations to the marginalized sector of society, blood donation, feeding programs, and the like. On the contrary, this mortification is a sign that the church, to a certain degree, has failed to educate the devout on the salient tenets of Christianity, allowing them to interpret Catholic doctrines from their personal perspective and lose their anchorage in the real teachings of the faith. Resulting in a subjective meaning-making and how to seek the divine intercession for all their misdeeds and maladies.

Self-flagellation was a Spanish influence dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries (Peterson, 2014). It was originally performed as a penance by the Church, but later reexamined and eventually rejected as contrary to faith. According to Tiatco et al. (2008),

the proceeding is composed of the following performances: carrying of the cross, self-flagellation, and street crawling. This activity resembles the various phases of the passion of Christ. The penitents may prefer any of these rituals as a manifestation of the deep profession of faith. Moreover, the practice of self-flagellation has a communal significance. The pain incurred is solely that of the flagellant, but it is a cultural tradition that is expected to be evident in the society (Moratilla, 2018). Thus, this Holy Week observance has gained popularity among penitents. But compared with other provinces, like Pampanga and Nueva Ecija, where tourists flock to these localities as tourism spots.

1.1 Area of study

The study was conducted in Barangay Sta. Elena in the municipality of Hagonoy, Bulacan, where devotees and penitents gather together to perform self-flagellation, observing the passion and death of Jesus Christ during Holy Week.

2 METHODOLOGY

Data was collected and gathered through the use of one-on-one interviews with eight (8) participants and observation on how they performed religious rituals, and peer-discussion among self-flagellants (Creswell, 2017). Thus, a qualitative method was employed to provide a better and deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined self-flagellation not only as a cultural practice (Moratila, 2018) but also as a manifestation of the deep spiritual conviction of the penitents. It covered the preliminaries, the preparation stage, and mind conditioning up to the culmination.

3.1 The preparation

The flagellants, before undertaking the ritual, condition themselves physically, psychologically, and spiritually. As they braced for a physically stressful activity, they filed for leave of absence from work and slept all day prior to their big event. They ate breakfast and took a shot or two of liquor for an added boost and confidence.

Thomas uttered, “nagpaalam ako sa boss ko na hindi ako papasok simula ng Miyerkules Santo at Hwubes Santo para sa Biyernes kundisyon ang katawan ko.” (I told my boss that I will be off for work to give myself time to prepare for my devotion.)

Peter added, “pagkatapos mag-almusal, nagshot ako ng Empi para lumakas ang loob at tumibay dibdib.” (After having breakfast, I took shots of brandy for an additional boost).

“Ang misis ko nagluto ng breakfast, plinantsa ang aking pantalon at panyong pangtabing at ang bolyos.” (My wife cooked breakfast, ironed my pants and handkerchief, and disinfected my *bolyos*.) Andrew remarked.

John said, “Ilan sa mga kamag-anak ko ay kasama sa pila para bantayan dahil nag-aalala rin sila na baka may mangyaring hindi maganda sa akin at panatag ako na nasa tabi ko lang sila at kasama ko. (Some of my kin are with me all along to monitor and observe and I feel such relief.

The support and love of family members was the added value that motivated them to do the “panata” (devotion). The gesture of being part of the entourage showed care and provided emotional support to the penitent.

3.2 Self-mortification is to forgiveness

These devotees performed their religious penance annually, believing that by inflicting their bodies with strikes, their sins would be forgiven and their souls would be cleansed from all sins and wrongdoings.

James said, “ginagawa ko ito bilang paraan ng paghingi ng tawad sa mga kasalanang nagawa (I am doing this to ask forgiveness for all my sins).

Peter shared the same notion, “mas ganap ang nararamdaman kong kapatawaran, sa bigat ng aking nagawang kasalanan, dapat lang na mabigat ang kaparusahan” (I feel absolute forgiveness. My penance should be proportional to the weight of my sins).

It was deemed as a means to mend their ways from the inequities committed in the past and live their lives in rectitude. Self-flagellation was viewed as the most effective manner of spiritual restoration, a renewed relationship with the Divine.

3.3 Holding on to family tradition

The penitents mortified themselves as a form to hold on to the tradition that had been observed by the family for a long time. It had been passed down from one generation to the next with the intention that the ritual must not cease, and other family members would view it as a family legacy.

Simon said: “yung bolyos na gamit ko ay pinasa sa akin ng aking ama” (the bolyos I am using is gifted to me by my father).

Peter uttered: “nung namatay ang tatay ko, nagpasya ako na ako na ang magtutuloy. At nawa ay isa sa mga anak ko ay magtuloy nito.” (I have decided to take his place when my father died and I hope one of my sons would continue this legacy).

3.4 Self-flagellation is a prayer

More than forgiveness, the flagellants offer their sacrifices for the grant of their deepest wishes and prayers. Most of them pray for the healing of their parents, kin, and loved ones who have been in the sick-bed for quite a long time.

Simon said, “para sa kanila itong ginagawa ko, gumaling sila sa kanilang karamdaman at ngayong ay mabuti na ang kanilang kalusugan. Naniniwala ako dahil ito sa pagpepenitensya ko”. (I do it for my parents for their healing. At present they are well and I attribute it to my flagellation.)

Andrew added, “Laging sakitin ang mga anak ko, madalas sa ospital. Pero nung nagpenitensya ako, hindi na sila nagkakaroon ng matinding karamdaman. (My children were always sick, so I have decided to do flagellation for their healing. Up to present, they have never had a serious illness nor been hospitalized.)

Aside from healing, one penitent asked for a child. James, who had been married for almost ten years, had not yet been blessed with an offspring. Thus he said, “kaya ako nagpepenitensya ay para humiling at manalangin na mabiyayaan ng anak. Nagpatingin na kami at wala naman daw kaming diperensyang mag-asawa. Kaya abot ang

pagpepenitensya ko para ipagkaloob na ‘yung minimithi naming anak.’ (I do flagellation, praying that we be blessed with a child. We had sought a medical professional, and we were told that I am not impotent nor is my wife sterile. That is why I am doing this sacrifice for that intention.)

3.5 Mockery in the trail

Despite observing the act with the purest of intentions, the flagellants felt ridiculed by various people, including bystanders, friends, and even relatives. They were never exempt from hearing remarks that doubted their intent and judged their character (Marticio, 2019). Their faces may be covered, but those who knew them can easily identify the bloody man behind the handkerchief with the *bolyos*.

John said, “Bakit nagpepenitensya pa ‘yan e manginginom naman. Hindi na magbabago ‘yan. Magi-inom lang din naman buong taon?” (He is a known drunkard; why self-flagellate? He will not change his ways.)

James shared. “Pakitang-tao lang ‘yan, kunwari banal.” (He is just for a show, as if holy).

Indeed, they may be mocked by others, but they just ignore it and do not allow themselves to be affected by it. In their hearts and minds, they were doing it for their families and loved ones.

3.6 Longevity of the panata

With the pain-inducing nature of flagellation, another point of concern was the longevity of the devotion. All the informants were unanimous in responding that they will continue the self-mortification until their bodies bear.

Andrew said, “kahit nasagot na ‘yung ipinagdarasal ko, ipagpapatuloy ko ito hanggang kaya ko.” (I will keep doing the vow, though my prayers were already answered, until I can still physically endure the pain.)

Peter said, “maliban sa bilang ng aking *bolyos*, hanggang nabubuhay ko.” (Apart from the number of bamboo strips in my *bolyos*, I will do it in a lifetime.)

Hence, apart from the will to do it, the number of strips in the *bolyos* corresponded to the number of years the panata will be performed. The strips of *bolyos* ranged from 18-

26, tantamount to 18-26 years, the hampas-dugo will be done. Further, it was believed that should a strip is detached from the knot, another year will be added to the length of the devotion.

3.7 The culmination

After the bloody scourging and a number of prostrations along the roads, the trail ended when the flagellants reached the Sta. Elena Parish. They offered their last prayers before the cross positioned outside the church's façade. Their supporters and relatives would immediately escort them into the shade, providing them with fluids such as water and sodas, along with fresh eggs donated by viewers and bystanders along the way.

Thomas said, “talagang nakakapagod at nakakahingal, may konting sakit at pamamanhid. Pero pagkatapos nito, parang walang nagyari.” (It is really exhausting, and I am gasping for breath. I feel pain, but after a while, as if nothing happened.)

Peter posited, “*’nung narating ko na yung krus sa Sta. Elena, lahat ng sakit at pagod, nawala lahat.* (When I reached the cross at St. Elena, all the pains, tiredness, and exhaustion were all gone).

3.8 Amidst the pandemic

The restraining order issued by the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Infectious Diseases (IATF-MID) during the community lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic suspended all religious activities. During this hiatus, the self-flagellants still continued their “panata” and “pamamanata.” As there was no actual conduct due to restrictions, the penitents resorted to other forms of sacrifice, such as fasting and prayer.

James shared, “dahil hindi ako makapaghampas, ginugol ko ang araw sa pagdarasal at pagbawas sa pagkain. Hindi man ito kasing bigat ng penitensya, basta may magawa akong pagsasakripisyo.” (Since I cannot flagellate, I spent the day in prayer and fasting. It may not be the same in terms of pain, but I made it a point to have sacrifices.)

Andrew said, “Ako naman ay nanood ng mga video clips ng mga hampas-dugo noong mga nakaraang taon.” (I also watched video clips on the internet of flagellations conducted during the previous years.)

Clearly, the flagellants continued their penance as a form of prayer and sacrifice, resembling the passion of Christ.

4 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Hampas-dugo at barangay Sta. Elena, Hagonoy, Bulacan, had been observed for decades by locals and other penitents from nearby barangays and towns during the Holy Week. It was one of the highly anticipated traditions on the morning of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Though it is commonly associated with penance and atonement. The penitents mortified their bodies as a form of sacrifice. With the purest of intentions, every whip was a prayer intended not only for liberation from sin but for their parents, family members, loved ones, and friends. More so, the panata was a tradition that must be continued from generation to generation. It is likely that the aforementioned practice will continue for decades to come. The pandemic had put the tradition on hold, but the zealous penitents had resorted to other forms of sacrifice, such as prayer and fasting, so as not to compromise the observance of their pamamanata. Thus, it never stopped. It just took a different phase, a different approach. But the moment the restriction was lifted, the flagellants flocked to the streets of Sta. Elena and the two-year hiatus had ended. However, it may be recommended that medical assistance, such as an ambulance and medical professionals, be readily available in cases of emergency, including exhaustion and dehydration, as well as the possibility of excessive blood loss among flagellants.

5 LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study was conducted a year after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. It was the period when all public activities were prohibited. The informants may have exhibited an overwhelming response, as this cultural practice was put on hold for two years. Furthermore, the number of informants and their experiences cannot yield a generalizable inference.

With the current study employing a qualitative method, future researchers may investigate other associated factors, such as the level of spiritual well-being and religious practices, using a mixed-methodology approach, specifically an explanatory research

design. Moreover, a grounded theory research design may also be employed to provide theories, as there is a dearth of theoretical underpinnings for this focus of study.

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Authors’ Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study’s findings are fully available within the article.

How to cite this article (APA)

Pariñas, S. M. PANATA AT PANANAMPALATAYA SA PANAHON NG PANDEMYA: SUSTAINABILITY OF RELIGIOUS CULTURAL PRACTICES AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC. *Veredas Do Direito*, e223729. <https://doi.org/10.18623/rvd.v22.n5.3729>