

Leadership Succession and Authority Legitimization in the Moncado Alpha and Omega, Cotabato, Philippines

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Abstract

This article examines the Moncado Alpha and Omega, a religious sect based in Cotabato Province, Mindanao, Philippines, with a focus on leadership succession. Sociological discussions of Weber's legitimation of traditional authority framed this examination, particularly highlighting the earlier emphasis on the "leader" and "individual" and the emerging sociological focus on the "followers" and "society." Thematic analysis reveals five themes that all focus on the leaders' religious, divine, and supernatural characteristics. However, a closer look at these characteristics reveals distinct leadership traits across different audiences. This finding veers away from the traditional notion of leadership and instead takes notice of the separate but binding interests of followers and leaders that hold together the faith community.

Keywords: *Leadership succession, Moncado Alpha and Omega, Traditional authority*

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Introduction

As a colony of the Spanish crown for a very long time, the Philippines was proselytized to Catholicism but continues to exhibit religious syncretism in various forms (Nadeau, 2002; Borrinaga, 2015). Defined as the blending of distinct religious and cultural elements, religious syncretism involves the mixture, union, or reconciliation of disparate, distinct beliefs and practices within a particular religion or philosophy (Levinskaya, 1993). The most ordinary of these practices is for a Christian to say *tabi tabi* or *tabi apo* (Trans: Excuse me. May I pass?) while walking into secluded areas favored by environmental spirits, such as

those with a big tree or rock, and also into tidal flats. The Ati, indigenous peoples of the central Philippines, may feel prejudiced at times because of their physical appearance and mobile lifestyle. Nevertheless, they are the major supplier of *panagang* (amulets), which Bisayans use as a shield or protection from jealous gaze, harm, sorcery, and also to attract good luck (de la Pena, 2015). Another set of literature on religious syncretism finds articulation in Iletto's *history from below*. In *Pasyon and Revolution*, Iletto (1979) argued that the timeline contained in the *pasyon* - a chanting of the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ inspired the worldview of peasant resistance against the Spanish. Furthermore, Iletto scrutinized *loob* (inner self) to both exhibit religious and mystical notions of power possessed by revolutionary leaders. This body of Philippine literature, particularly religious syncretism in millenarian movements, is significant (Nadeau, 2002) among the Dios-dios of Leyte (Marco, 2001; Borrinaga, 2006), among followers of Cofradia de San Jose in Tayabas (now Quezon Province), Laguna, and Batangas (Ikehata, 1987), Cotabato among Tad-Tad organization (Gomez and del Castillo, 2026), the Manolay cult members of northern Luzon among the Isneg (Smart, 1970), and in Panay among the followers of Yntrencherado (Alayon, 1999), to name a few.

This article examines one faith community, the Moncado Alpha and Omega, in Cotabato Province, Mindanao, Philippines, focusing on leadership succession. Sociological discussions of Weber's legitimation of traditional authority frame this examination of leadership succession within a religious sect. In this article, leadership succession encompasses the period from the religious sect's establishment in Cotabato to the present. The article mentions the founder, Hilario Camino Moncado, but the examination is about Moncado's loyal follower, Guibernas, and his daughter and successor. The resilience of the Alpha and Omega inspired interest in conducting a study with the Moncadista to examine how they continue to carve out their existence as a distinct religious sect despite the growing intensity of larger institutions' efforts to siphon so-called minorities into their folds.

Who are the Alpha and Omega? Paluga described this religious sect,

Ang grupong Alpha and Omega ay kahawig ng mga sektang tinatawag na "Rizalista" o ng ilang mga "kapatiran" sa loob ng bansa na kumikilala kay Rizal bilang isang mala-Kristong sugo kung hindi man isang Pilipinong reinkarnasyon mismo ni Hesu Kristo. Sanga ang nasabing group ng kilusang Moncadista, isang relihiyo-pulitikal na grupong nagsisimulang maging aktibo noong dekada 30 (n.d., p. 2).

Translation:

The group Alpha and Omega resembles sects called "Rizalista" or some "brotherhoods" within the country that recognize Rizal as a quasi-Christian messenger or even as a Filipino reincarnation of Jesus Christ. The said group is a branch of the Moncadista movement, a religious-political group that began to become active in the 1930s (n.d., p. 2.)

The members of the Alpha and Omega, called the Moncadista, are perched on a mountainous colony they believe was divinely promised to them. They live on a vegan diet with clear moral precepts. Their leaders are divine and supernatural (Paluga, 2000, p. 12; Paluga, n.d., p. 667; Kitaotao Mother Church Manual, n.d., p. 12), characteristics that defined and were central to studies of Philippine millenarian movements and religious sects.

Related Literature

The classic work of Weber on the ideal types of legitimate authority (traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic) offers an analytical framework for evaluating how authority (power) is legalized, legitimized, and sustained across diverse historical and cultural contexts (Gerth & Mills, 1946). Weber emphasized that groups led by a charismatic leader, though often fragile, either survive to continue their traditional existence or transform into a bureaucracy. In addition, he foregrounded the element of individual potency, mainly the leader's religious and supernatural characteristics, which messianic leaders are known to possess.

This foregrounding of individual characteristics misreads Weber's concept of charisma, according to Joosse (2014). Joosse believed that Weber did not mean for charisma to characterize individual potency or God-given personal traits. Instead, Weber was concerned with the followers' act of legitimizing the leader's charismatic traits. By doing so, Joosse interpreted Weber's work on charisma as a social construction, thereby shifting attention to followers. Joosse (2017), in another article, underlined the important roles of the followers, whom he called the *charismatic aristocracy*, in developing and sustaining a leader's charisma. He argued that charismatic authority does not rest solely on *the individual* and *personal* attributes of the leader, but also on the workings of the aristocracy.

Cannell (1999) explored the interest in power wielded by individuals who are not leaders in her ethnographic study of Bicol Province. Recognizing the Philippines' glaring social and economic disparities between groups and ethnicities, Cannell used several cases in her presentation of spaces and sites where power and identity become tangible within an environment of social inequalities. One case is the Ms. Gay beauty contest, where the stage becomes an opportunity for gay contestants to perform, assert themselves, and exhibit their identity and beauty. Cannell argued that opportunities are created and entrenched in certain spaces to exercise power.

The article by Wæras, (2018) on Weber's concept of legitimacy provided a nuanced understanding. Wæras pointed out that myths developed in an attempt to establish legitimacy are not facts. They become only when people believe in them. For a leader to be legitimate, the myth surrounding their leadership should first gain traction and influence public opinion. Wæras stressed Weber's notion of domination in traditional legitimation,

Domination will thus mean the situation in which the manifested will (command) of the ruler or rulers is meant to influence the conduct of one or more others (the ruled) and actually does influence it in such a way that their conduct ... occurs as if the ruled had made the content of the command the maxim of their conduct. (Weber, 1968, p. 94 in Wæras, 2018, p. 4).

The confluence of the leader's will and the followers' interest defines traditional legitimation. Using a scoping review methodology, Foppen and van Saane (2024) found that views on leadership effectiveness in faith communities have become more diverse. There is now a strong shift in focus from the leader to follower-, member-, and congregation-focused. The authors observed that this shift is more delayed in the study of faith and spiritual communities than in mainstream studies of leadership. The use of transformational leadership theory in many of the works considered in the scoping review points to the current changing

views on leadership effectiveness.

More recent studies on the Alpha and Omega have integrated the observations of Foppen and van Saane. For example, Balaga (2024), in her study of the contemporary Moncado colony on Samal Island, Davao, focused on intergenerational issues alongside traditional millenarian beliefs within modern and global contexts. Balaga stressed the youth's *reflexive spirituality* (2024, p. 45), with faith no longer a doctrine inherited passively but a deeply internalized and reinterpreted personal journey. This kind of reflexivity, she argued, enables the youth to find profound spiritual fulfillment and a sense of belonging in their community despite school demands and discrimination. Of great interest is Balaga's finding on the resistance of community elders to the youth's sentiment for inter-branch unity and modernization of the Moncado colonies. To counter the youth's sentiment, the elders would recount how traditional authority came about in the colony and urge everyone to take pride in maintaining it. Unfortunately, Balaga failed to examine member retention in light of this specific finding.

Foppen and van Saane (2024) also believed in the importance of membership growth. Likewise, Paluga (2000) noted the same in his study in Makilala, Cotabato, in the 1990s. He observed instances when leaders and followers did not conform to the supreme leader's views. Paluga wrote of his interest in pursuing this *potential opposition* (2000, p. 23) and its consequences to a conservative religious sect, such as the Alpha and Omega. These insights by researchers reveal the need for more studies on leadership and leadership succession in the context of a small faith community.

Methods

The study is qualitative in design. Data collection techniques included the use of visual creative tools, such as observation of church buildings, meeting places, statues, and other visually significant landmarks for the Moncadista. Also employed in data gathering was participant observation of religious activities, including worship services and the Holy Mass. The study employed the archival historical data tool, both for textual and non-textual data. Lastly, the researcher interviewed five key informants and conducted one focus group discussion with three respondents. The key informant interview lasted 1.5 hours, and the discussion was of similar duration. These interviews used different interview guides, initially written in English and then translated into Binisaya.

The five key informants were all adults, all born and raised as Moncadista. At the time of the interview, all were actively involved in the organization, holding various positions. The youngest key informant is a 33-year-old male. The oldest is an 80-year-old female. Of the five key informants, three are male, and two are female, and all agreed to participate in the study. Five intermittent data-collection visits were made in Cotabato in 2024 for rapport-building, participant observation, and interviews. Online data mining supplemented the fieldwork by identifying additional documents, visual materials, and contextual information about the Moncadista.

The researcher produced the interview transcripts. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded to identify themes using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. This variant of thematic analysis is interpretive and theoretically flexible to use for qualitative analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns, or themes, within a given dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2021). Structured around a rigorous, recursive, and nonlinear six-

phase process, the approach emphasizes the researcher's active role in constructing meaning from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2021).

Data for this article were drawn from the fieldwork in Cotabato by the first author for a larger study. The second author worked with the first author on developing the article, specifically from conceptualizing the objectives through analysis to writing the article. The first author initially visited the Alpha and Omega colony in 2018 after reading much about them during his undergraduate thesis work. This is an interest which lingered in him when he proposed a dissertation work with them. Entry into the colony was guided by values such as *pakikisama* (civility) and *pakikipaglagayang loob* (mutual trust, do no harm). The relationship with the colony continues up to now. Recently, the first author was invited to work with the colony in establishing the New Israel Iglesia ni Jehova Moncado Alpha and Omega World Peace Crusaders Mission Inc. as a top faith-based tourism hub in the Philippines. Lovely and her Board of Trustees are aiming for the Kalinaw Award.

Guibernas, the Jehovah and Grand Divine Master

The origins of Alpha and Omega and its leader, Maximino Sandot Guibernas, or Papa Guibernas to followers, can be traced to the establishment of a mutual-aid organization, the Filipino Federation of America (FFA) by Hilario Camino Moncado in 1925. The organization assisted hard-up Filipino migrant laborers in California and Hawaii working on menial tasks in cherry, apricot, and peach plantations (Flores-Tolentino, 1979; Cullinane, 1983; Paluga, 2000). At the age of 17, Guibernas was a laborer at the Aina Milla in Honolulu and, there, became a member of the FFA (Paluga, 2000). Eventually, the FFA fused esoteric beliefs and practices, which Cullinane (1983) attributed to another Moncado loyal follower, Lorenzo de los Reyes, a native of Quezon Province and also a migrant laborer.

The Alpha and Omega is a sub-sect of the Moncado mother organizations, the Filipino Crusaders World Army (FCWA) and Equifrilibricum World Religion (EFBWR). The FCWA addresses the social, organizational, and labor-advocacy needs of members, and the EFBWR is responsible for rituals, the dissemination of Moncado's teachings, as contained in Man's Moral Concept, and the study of the Kabala. The leader, Moncado, was a complex figure. Although he was born into peasant stock and recruited as a plantation laborer at age 15, he leveraged his experiences to secure broad prominence by founding the FFA. Mojares characterized him as a *modernist* leader despite the embarrassment and disdain of elite Filipinos toward the colorum church he established (1983, p. 89). Cullinane described him as a "charismatic and somewhat controversial founder and lifetime leader" and his followers as "blind followers of their Master" (1983, p. 1). His followers revered him as the Filipino *Brown Christ* (Buenaventura, 1991). Moncado died of a heart attack in 1956 while playing golf in Mexico (Cullinane, 1983).

Before he passed on, Moncado had authorized loyal followers, called *sinugo* or *sugo*, to build colonies in the Philippines. Both Binisaya words refer to an individual or individuals tasked with bringing a message or serving as representatives. Among Catholics, Jesus Christ is a *sugo*, the messenger sent on earth by God the Father to redeem the world. The Catholic bible refers to Saint John the Baptist as a *sugo*. Jesus Christ was also sent from heaven by God the Father. The apostles were also *sugo*. For the Moncadista, Moncado sent the *sugo* to create colonies where they could teach the Man's Moral Concepts. Catholic texts and prayers are replete with the phrase *sugo sa Dyos* or *sent by God*. These loyal followers reached Mindanao in search of the *Promised Land*.

These *sugo* recruited followers and built colonies. The transition of Moncado's followers from a religious cult to a religious sect (Flores-Tolentino, 1979) is a source of pride for Moncado and the *sinugo*, and current members still celebrate it. Recent works on Moncado and the religious sect have presented the apparent independence of each colony, though each retains the name Moncado, such as Moncado Alpha and Omega. Another evident practice is the growing dimming of reverence for Moncado, while reverence for every colony leader is increasing. The Alpha and Omega continues up to this day with its predominant characteristic of charismatic authority. Internally, the organization incorporated democratic and participatory principles of having a Board of Trustees to implement planned programs. In 2024, during fieldwork, the Alpha and Omega had 360 households and 1,547 residents. Followers believed that their first leader, Maximino Sandot Guibernas, or Papa Guibernas (1910-1993), came from a line of divine leaders: Hilario Camino Moncado, the founder of the religious group; the Philippine hero Jose P. Rizal; and Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity. His daughter succeeded Guibernas upon his death.

On their return to the Philippines, the *sinugo* initially established a colony on Samal Island in Davao. Samal was the place the *Moncadista* first went to coming from America. Moncado believed that Mindanao was their *Promised Land* (Cullinane, 1983) and the *Chosen Land* (Balaga, 2024). The island was fertile land and water was abundant. It fulfilled Moncado's vision of a self-sustaining community. A *sugo*, Primo Bautista, or Papa Brown stayed in Samal Island until his death. Aside from Samal Island, the first colonies were found in Dansalan and Makilala in Cotabato (Balaga, 2024; Paluga, 2000). In Dansalan, the *sugo* was Lorenzo de los Reyes or Papa Reyes, who headed the FFA Religious Division in America. In Dansalan, Moncado built a convention hall and housing facility. However, the colony did not last long. It declined following de los Reyes's death in 1937 (Kavanagh, 1956).

In the 1970s, there were 15 colonies established in Mindanao of the 21 nationwide in the 1970s (Flores-Tolentino, 1979). Currently, the mother church in Kitaotao, Bukidnon, manages 24 daughter churches with approximately 5,000 members. The one in Cotabato managed 30 daughter churches with around 3,000 members. Samal Island had 2,000 members. There were colonies in Mainit, Surigao, and Kibawe, Bukidnon. In Cebu, three other colonies were established. The Moncado church in Sudlon II, Cebu City, is a gigantic structure and the general headquarters of the FCWA. Moncado originally planned this structure to help his campaign for national office, first as a senator and then as president.

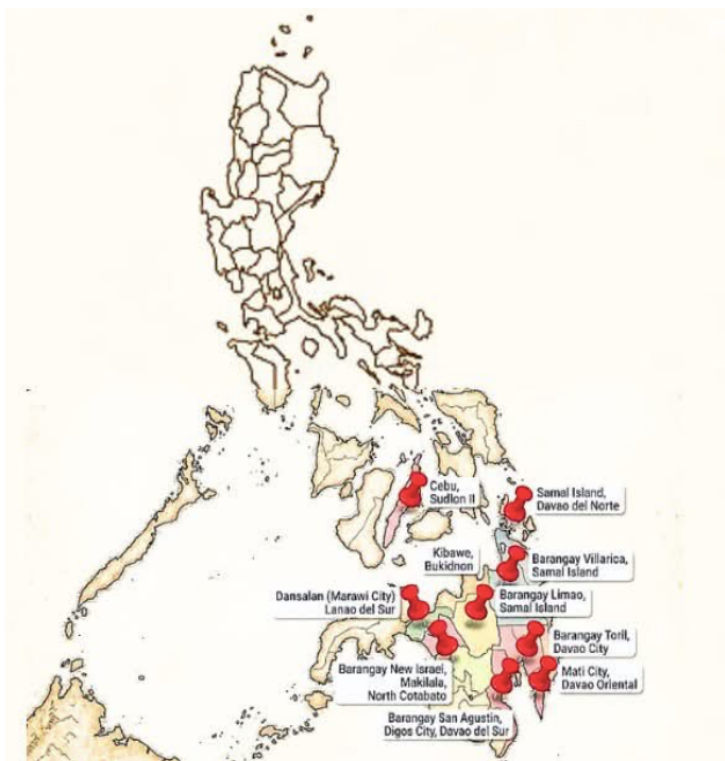


Figure 1. Map of the Philippines showing the current location of Moncado colonies

Moncado's death in 1956 signaled the independence of colonies and their leaders from the larger organizations. Moncado's wife, Diana Toy, attempted to gain a foothold of the overall leadership but failed. The establishment of colonies marked the growth of the religious sect in the Philippines.

Guibernas learned spiritual instruction from Lorenzo de los Reyes, whom he considered his mentor. It was de los Reyes who instructed him to look for the New Continent, a mountainous place between Davao and Cotabato where he would complete the mission. Guibernas reached this place right before the Second World War, accompanied by his wife, Paulina, and other Moncadista from Samal, namely, Balbino Lumangyaw, Fermin Tormis, Alfonso Cartalla, Pedro Lumangyaw, Felipe Cabanlit, Rafael Aguilar, Marcelino Warquez, and their families. Guibernas codified their narratives of pioneering and dated it 1939.

Similar to Jesus Christ, Guibernas also suffered on earth. The pioneering work in Cotabato was a tremendous amount of sacrifice for him. Together with compatriots from Samal, he cleared the forest and planted root crops and fruit-bearing trees. It was difficult at first, especially with the poor harvest. Thick fogs did not easily disappear even after the rainy season. The logging companies that came later offered a respite from their hardships. But the pioneers persevered, emboldened by Moncado's mission. As the years passed, the colony realized good production from vegetables and cut flowers. They planted rice, corn, coffee, cacao, abaca, and rubber. The planting of tobacco, while ideal in their land, was disallowed.

The Moncadista viewed growing tobacco as contrary to their moral precepts.

Iglesia ni Jehova Moncado Alpha and Omega World Peace Crusaders Missionaries, Inc. is the complete name of the colony in Cotabato. It was integrated into the Philippine political structure as Barangay New Israel in 1975 (Paluga, 2000, p. 4). Guibernas was hardworking and a respected leader who successfully led a group of pioneers to Cotabato, where they turned a forested area into a habitable one. His followers called him Papa Guibernas or Apo Gumulang. Moreover, he learned the religious and supernatural ways from his mentor, de los Reyes, the head of Moncado's Religious Division. It was from de los Reyes that Guibernas learned about the physical, visible, and tangible divine power. The Christian belief holds that God the Father sent his own son, Jesus Christ, from heaven to become man. Moncado, in the same manner, lived an earthly existence but had a mission, just like Jesus Christ. Guibernas repeatedly preached to followers that Moncado willed his own death, just like Jesus Christ, to fulfill the prophecy. Upon Moncado's death, his holy spirit entered Guibernas, now revered as the *Final Temple* (Paluga, n.d., p. 19), which had earlier taken the physical forms of Moncado, Jose Rizal, and Jesus Christ. Guibernas became *Jehovah* after completing the 90-day fast. A religious text available in the Cotabato colony for public reading describes Guibernas as the *human mechanism* of the Divine Father.

Another narrative that is crucial to legitimizing the leadership of Guibernas took place in Samal Island. While he laid down, breathless, his spirit traveled to the top of Matiglangit Caumpoan. There, he attended the Grand Assembly of Nations with world leaders and spiritual figures, including the American Carol Washington, the Chinese Mao Buddhist, and prominent figures from India and Japan. Guibernas won over them after securing 19,000 votes and thereafter called the *Grand Divine Master*. Moncado and de los Reyes crowned and entrusted him with the most powerful name - Jehovah. This name appears in the Bible's Old Testament referring to the God of Israel.

References to leadership and spiritual roles indicated reverence for both Guibernas and his wife, Paulina, or Mama Paulina to followers. This is evident across multiple data sources and has been identified as a recurring theme related to the founder's evolving role. In New Israel, Guibernas introduced new beliefs, giving himself a unique identity to followers, one that uses symbolic representations and emphasis on sacred geography that localizes spiritual destiny. Guibernas died on May 6, 1992. He is buried beside his wife, Paulina, in a mausoleum situated on an elevated mound in the Cotabato colony. This mausoleum is a central place of devotion, where members would gather to sing and pray. Community narratives depict the two as occupying a *dual throne*, emphasizing joint spiritual leadership. Moncado's absence from this throne is interesting, but followers follow the logic introduced by Guibernas that he inherited everything that was Moncado's. In the same manner that Moncado inherited everything that was Rizal, who inherited everything that was Jesus Christ.

Guibernas's wife, Paulina Guibernas, served as Directress and Supreme Leader of the women's group. Her husband bestowed upon her the title of Mother of all Mothers. Paulina's divine status was confirmed through a spiritual reincarnation on February 8, 1947, at San Agustin, Samal Island, when she was named by the spirit *Equi Tetragrammaton Jussana Lanagram*. On this occasion, a spirit entered Paulina. The spirit directed her to publicly announce that she should be revered as the Mother of all Mothers and the spiritual partner to her husband, now the Jehovah. The name holds significant eschatological importance in the movement's theology. In visions of the Last Judgment reported by Guibernas, Paulina

appeared as the King of Kings, descending on white clouds alongside the Grand Divine Master and her family to judge the world and read from the Book of Life. The term *Tetragrammaton*, following the Alpha and Omega, signifies the most sacred name of the Divinity, thus, underscoring her elevated spiritual status. The name *Equi Tetragrammaton Jussana Lanagram* can be perceived as a spiritual coronation title, similar to a monarch's new name upon ascending the throne. For the Moncadista, this spiritual moment transformed Paulina from a human follower into a central divine figure in the Alpha and Omega mission.

Moncado himself performed the marriage rite of Maximino and Paulina. He called them spiritual partners, destined together to carry out the Alpha and Omega mission. Guibernas handled the broader mission of Alpha and Omega, particularly locating and establishing the New Continent, leading the Spiritual Division, serving as President and Founder of the Moncado Alpha and Omega World Peace Crusaders Mission Inc., preaching the Good News of Salvation and Man's Moral Concept across Mindanao and the Philippines; and organizing the "12 by 12," forming the foundation of 1,728 chosen members. But most important of all, he became the human mechanism for the Divine Father on earth. Meanwhile, Paulina was granted the authority to manage special spiritual duties, such as the *dose-dose* for women. The *dose-dose* is the initiation or numerical branding of the chosen followers. Historically, only 1,728 men (the cube root of 12) received this status under Moncado. As part of their mission, Paulina was authorized to extend this practice to include 1,728 women. Her primary task was to ensure that these women received the spiritual *dose* or *twelve* necessary for salvation.

Suprema, Jehovah's Successor

Following Guibernas's death in 1992, his eldest daughter assumed leadership of the Alpha and Omega. Lovely, the daughter, now holds the title of Supreme President. She competed for the position with two other candidates in an election presided over by the Alpha and Omega Board of Trustees. Even if she was her father's chosen successor, assuming the title of Supreme President still required the Board's approval (Community Document of New Israel, n.d.). Guibernas created this Board of Trustees. Beyond her leadership role in the Alpha and Omega, Lovely was a respected figure within the town. She was elected *Punong Barangay* or head of Barangay New Israel and leader of the indigenous cultural community (Community Document of New Israel, n.d.). Lovely received the same reverence from her followers that her parents had. They called her *Suprema*, at times *Mommy*. Her leadership is a unique mix of mystical governance and participatory management. While it is true that she managed the group's branches alongside her Board of Trustees, her final decision on important matters had always involved consulting with her father and the supernatural. Lovely used a crystal ball and the principles of Kabala (numerology). In choosing members for the ministerial position, for example, she would consult her crystal ball. Aside from this, she would look up to the sky for a sign before making a decision. Lovely also adopted the formal governance practice of monitoring and requiring branch heads to submit progress reports. Also recorded was attendance during meetings. She continued Guibernas' *bayanihan practice*, requiring members to extend unpaid labor maintaining farms. Intended to secure food supply in times of disaster, Lovely saw this a good practice of community solidarity and resilience. Under her leadership, Barangay New Israel became a tourist destination and a source of pride for Lovely and her followers who attributed this to her father's successful leadership.

Lovely continued the moral discipline of her father and Moncado., being the guardian

of Man's Moral Concept. But on matters of members' behavior, she would always consult the Board. Once, she addressed a minister in Zamboanga who members reported for selling whole roasted pigs. This behavior is a violation not only of Alpha and Omega, but of Moncado's prescribed vegan diet. But it is interesting how Lovely resolved the matter. Lovely was uncomfortable reprimanding the minister. Besides, selling roasted pigs was his only source of income. Lovely consulted her father, who passed away in 1992, on what to do. She knew very well that the minister was wrong. Lovely dreamed of a swine flu outbreak that led to the pigs being quarantined. The minister, in her dream, rented a pump boat to avoid the highway police. But there were maritime police. The minister was caught and penalized for violating the ban on transporting pigs. All of this happened in Lovely's dream. However, the next day, the minister called to inform her of the large penalty he had paid the Zamboanga police for a violation. Lovely smiled acknowledging the divine intervention of her father.

Guibernas foretold Lovely's appointment as Supreme President of Alpha and Omega. The trials she endured since childhood and the *second life* she received during the El Tor cholera epidemic in 1961 - all this confirmed to followers her divine path. When she was declared dead by doctors, Lovely recounted how her spirit traveled to a heaven-like place. This spiritual journey was cut short by Guibernas who pushed the spirit back to her physical body. An interview with Lovely contained why Guibernas pushed her spirit back.

Interview transcripts

Ikaw yung namatay na.

Binuhay kita.

Para ikaw magsabi sa mga tao.

Kung ano yung nakita mo.

Kung ano yung misyon talaga ng Alpha and Omega

Hindi ikaw ordinary na tao lang.

Ikaw yung panginoon na nag-save sa buhay ko.

Kaya, sabi niya, sabihin mo sa mga tao ang misyon ng Alpha at Omega

May isang kaharian na nakalaan sa mga taong maniniwala.

Rough translation

You died already.

But I brought you to life.

So you could tell the people what you saw.

What really is the mission of Alpha and Omega.

You are not an ordinary person.

You are God who saved my life.

Then, he said, you tell people of the mission of Alpha and Omega

That there is a kingdom those For who will believe.

At first, Lovely hesitated to take over the leadership. The hesitation was brought by her observation that leading the Alpha and Omega is difficult for a woman. She saw her father's financial struggles and his travels to fulfill the mission of bringing Moncado's teachings to more people and helping them inherit the Kingdom of God. Only those who live by Man's Moral Concept will be saved from damnation. Guibernas, before he left, asked Lovely to succeed him. She is the only one who knows him best and how to complete the mission. She was told that the Board of Trustees can help her. Guibernas gave her enough courage by telling her the meanings of earlier experiences: first, at 10 years old, she jumped into the sea without hurting herself; second, the time when she walked through a forest in Bohol to reach her mother's siblings. She was only 12 years old then. Lovely learned from Guibernas that all these experiences prepared her for a life of mission.

Discussion

Three generations of leaders, Moncado, Guibernas, and Lovely, accepted the same mission of spreading Man's Moral Concept. Leaders of different historical periods and unique social conditions, they were subjected to harsh criticism by fellow Filipinos for being

a religious cult (Mojares, 1983; Paluga, no date, p.1-2). An interview with the third-generation leader, Lovely, revealed the same ridicule she received. Despite this, the FFA endured and thrived in America and the same happened for Moncado Alpha and Omega in Cotabato.

The interviews generated five themes for discussion: leader's primary role, birth and celestial signs, mystical endurance and feats, divine sanction, and tools of legitimation (Table 1).

Table 1: Five themes generated from thematic analysis on authority legitimation

Themes	Hilario Camino Moncado	Maximino Sandot Guibernas	Lovely Guibernas Paraiso
Primary Role	Instrument/ Prophet Acted as the foundational leaders for the material and early spiritual work	Jehovah Recognized as the "human mechanism" of the Divine Father and the final fulfiller of the mission	The Chosen Steward The eldest daughter and current spiritual/civil leader of the New Israel colony
Birth & Celestial Signs	Halley's Comet appeared in 1898, the birthyear; severed umbilical cord; fulfilling prophecies in Revelation and Ezekiel	Halley's Comet appeared on November 8, 1910, the birth year; his mouth was described a "sharp sword"	Legitimacy is tied to her lineage as the "trusted" daughter of Guibernas and the only child to pass his specific spiritual trials
Mystical Endurance & Feats	Moncado graduated from the College of Mystery in India at age nine Reyes completed a three-year penitence involving only Holy Water	One of three out of 72 participants who survived a 90-day dry fast (no food/water) at the College of Mystery in Hawaii in 1931	Survived the 1965 El Tor cholera epidemic after being declared dead; her spirit was reportedly "pushed" back into her body by her father to finish the mission
Divine Sanction	Moncado received the name "Equi Frili Brium" at age 11, symbolizing equality, fraternity, and liberty	Reported winning an election in the "Kingdom of God" in 1947 with 19,000 votes, defeating figures like Buddha and world leaders	Formally elected in 1992 by the Board of Trustees, winning against two other candidates after her father's death
Tools of Legitimation	Authorship of "Every Day New and Wonder" and the Man's Moral Concept	Identification as the "Everlasting Jehovah"; establishment of the "New Continent" in New Israel	Use of the crystal ball and Kaballah (numerology) to appoint ministers and solve community disputes, as guided by Guibernas

The first theme on “leadership roles” focused on why an individual becomes a leader. Guibernas turned his back on America to fulfill his mission in the Philippines. Together with fellow *sinugo*, Papa Reyes and Papa Brown, he was ready to live a life of sacrifice, just like Jesus Christ. Just before WWII broke out, he left with his wife and followers of eight families to search for the Promised Land in Cotabato. Guibernas led the pioneering work of clearing the forest and endured adjusting to the harsh temperature of the place. Food was scarce at first, while waiting for the land to be productive. The logging companies that opened after WWII provided pioneers their much-needed income at that time. All these sacrifices gained good results. After years of sacrifice, the colony came to finally harvest from their clearing and remain there until now.

Guibernas’ successor, his daughter, did not go through the same sacrifices. The colony was stable, producing and earning from high-valued vegetables and cut flowers, when Guibernas passed away in 1992. The colony is politically established now as a *barangay*, entrenched in the country’s political structure. Both leaders are *sugo*, considering their mission roles of preaching the Man’s Moral Concepts. Aside from this mission, Lovely took it as her responsibility to maintain the integrity of the colony and ensure that followers do not leave. For her father, it was the establishment of a production unit in order to sustain the colony. Under Guibernas, the colony increased in population. Prior to them, Moncado also intended the FFA as a mutual-aid organization cognizant of the hardships of Filipino migrants in America. The FFA as an organization under Moncado and Omega and Alpha as a colony under Guibernas and Lovely is the primary responsibility of these leaders. The integrity of the colony translates to attracting members and followers to the fold.

The second theme, “birth and celestial signs,” present similarities for Guibernas and Moncado, which are not shared by Lovely. Moncado’s birth saw the appearance of Halley’s Comet in 1898, also the year when the Philippines was ceded by Spain to America. Another Halley’s Comet appeared when Guibernas was born on November 8, 1910. According to Guibernas, when he was born, his mouth appeared like a sharp sword. A comet did not appear on the birth of Lovely. The third theme, “mystical endurance and feats,” is replete with narratives from the leaders. The interviews contain narratives describing the mystical endurance of Guibernas. The most repeated by key informants is how he completed the 90-day fast of no food and no water in 1931 at the College of Mystery in Hawaii. This narrative is part of the religious text available at the Cotabato colony for public reading, where he referred to himself as the “human mechanism” of the Divine Father. Moncado had a similar narrative. He presented himself as an intellectual and world scholar who studied in India.

Aside from their supernatural and divine characteristics, these religious leaders presented themselves schooled, just like Jose Rizal. A Rizalista religious sect as Paluga (no date) noted, Moncado’s Filipino Crusaders World Army (FCWA) and Equifrilibricum World Religion (EFBWR), and Guibernas’ Alpha and Omega integrated Rizal in their timeline of suffering, death, and reincarnation. Similarities are shared with the Rizalista religious sect. Cullinane (1983; see also Paluga, 2000) attributed the Rizalista element of the FFA to de los Reyes, himself a native of Quezon Province, and very near Mount Makiling, where mysticism and esoteric beliefs and practices are strong. Because Guibernas became the *final temple*, the *Jehovah*, and the *Lord of Lords* in presenting himself after winning an election over world and spiritual leaders, it would appear now that his Lord Moncado and teacher de los Reyes are relegated to the role of prophet. Like John the Baptist, they prepared the way for his coming.

Endurance and mystical feats started early for Lovely. At age 10, he jumped into the waters at the pier hoping to get into Guibernas, whose ship had already sailed. While she was growing up, Guibernas was always on a mission traveling to places and bringing Moncados' teachings to more communities. Lovely jumped into the waters, feeling loneliness that she would again be left behind. Divine intervention because she appeared unharmed out of the waters. At age 12, she travelled alone from Mindanao to Bohol in the Visayas to visit her mother's siblings. Her maternal side was in a tense situation at that time over properties in Bohol. Lovely reached Bohol at night and decided to walk for hours to reach her mother's siblings. While walking, she was unfazed by the supernatural beings who crossed her path.

The fourth theme, "divine sanction," contains narratives on leadership as authorized by God. For Guibernas, this narrative took place while he was lying down in Samal Island. This is the time of arrival by the first batch of *sinugo* where they proceeded to the island. Breathless, Guibernas recounted how his spirit traveled to the top of Matiglangit Caumpoan for the Grand Assembly of Nations. World leaders and spiritual figures were there, including the American Carol Washington, the Chinese Mao Buddhist, and prominent figures from India and Japan. Guibernas won them all when he secured 19,000 votes. Since then, he has referred to himself as the *Grand Divine Master*. For Lovely, her narrative of mystical endurance centered on her survival of the El Tor cholera infection in 1961. She was clinically declared dead until Guibernas pushed her spirit back to her physical body so that she regained consciousness. Lovely recounted a heaven-like place she was ushered into during the time she was unconscious.

The fifth theme taken out of the analysis is "tools of legitimation." Several narratives supported Guibernas' legitimacy as leader. However, the pinnacle of the idea lies in his pronouncement that he is the Jehovah. Guibernas presented Moncado's death as foretold and planned and, similar to the death of Jesus Christ, it is willed. Upon Moncado's death in 1956, his spirit transferred to Guibernas, making him now the *final temple*. Earlier, the *temple* was vested on different bodies: Moncado, Jose Rizal, and Jesus Christ. The data are conflicting in this regard because in another text, Guibernas became Jehovah after completing the 90-day fast which took place in Hawaii in 1931.

On the contrary, Lovely continually is dependent on her father. Aside from using the crystal ball to foretell the future, which became a tool of legitimation only under her leadership, Lovely's decision on many important matters as she told followers were directed by Guibernas. Moreover her leadership, while foretold by Guibernas, was authorized by a Board of Trustees that was created by Guibernas before he passed away. An election was convened by the Board, and Lovely was elected to succeed Guibernas. Referred to as the Supreme President by followers, she is the second leader of the Alpha and Omega. Even if Guibernas personally chose her to succeed him, an election with two other candidates made the leadership legitimate. Aside from this formal election, Lovely also was sensitive to signs, mostly from the stars, before making a decision. An elected barangay leader before, Lovely's preoccupied protecting the colony. Once, a neighboring barangay complained that Lovely's constituents all wear *anting-anting* (amulets), and may place them at a disadvantage.

The presence of Guibernas, whenever Lovely called out for him, stresses the belief that her father's divine spirit did not enter her. It was the form of succession before – Jesus Christ to Moncado and to Guibernas. Throughout the interview, Lovely repeatedly mentioned Guibernas' continued presence to guide and advise her. Guibernas created the Board of Trustees, with members closest to him. This has semblance to the loyal followers or *sinugo*

of Moncado before, whom he was part of. Currently, for Lovely, her decisions were discussed with the Board, whose primary function was to carry out programs and activities of material nature. Aside from the Board, Guibernas also institutionalized the ministers responsible for spiritual concerns. He replicated the earlier organizational structure of Moncado, dividing the organization into the material and spiritual divisions.

Conclusion

The five themes generated from the interviews and primary documents are all interconnected. They include the elements of how a leader presents themselves to followers. Studies on millenarian movements have long interpreted similar themes in terms of the leader's charisma, often overlooking the influence of followers in legitimating this charisma (Joosse, 2017; Wæras, 2018). By studying leadership succession within the Moncado Alpha and Omega, the article articulated how the definition of leadership changes within the evolving milieu of a faith community. The contrast in how the two leaders, Guibernas and Lovely, each presented themselves to followers, while employing the same techniques of meaning-making, signifies different sets of audiences. Guibernas, the Jehovah to his followers, chose his eldest daughter to succeed him, but the Board of Trustees he himself created authorized leadership by election. Lovely's leadership has become more rational, aside from her continuous use of supernatural paraphernalia. Her followers would call her the *Suprema* (for supreme), aware of her mission. However, distanced from the prophecy her father, Guibernas, embodied so well.

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Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors used Grammarly Pro throughout this work to improve the clarity and technical precision of the paper. Quillbot AI was used to translate some transcripts in Filipino and Visayan terms into English. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content. The authors vouch for the integrity, accuracy, and originality of their work.