

Icons and Rituals in the Traslación of the Black Nazarene: A National Allegory

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Abstract

This study focuses on the “Icons and Rituals in the Traslación of the Black Nazarene: A National Allegory.” It investigates how the experience of the Black Nazarene Traslación in Quiapo Church could represent a national allegory for the Filipinos and how it could help build the nation. It uses a qualitative method utilizing descriptive methodology to obtain first-hand information based on the devotees’ experiences and its significant impact on their faith-development. At present, studies are scarce about this phenomenal fiesta, primarily through the lenses of nationalist literature. When the country searches for a rallying point for collaborative development while looking back at the 500 years of Christianity, the current study aspires to crystallize issues, paradigms, and contexts of Filipino faith and religiosity as the platform for nationalism.

Keywords: Traslación, national allegory, rituals & icons,

Introduction

The *Traslación of the Black Nazarene* is a long procession held every January 9, of each year. The *Traslación* commemorates the “solemn transfer” of the replica of the Black Nazarene from San Nicolás de Tolentino in Intramuros to Quiapo Church. The procession makes its way along the streets of Quiapo, with attendees reaching millions in number. In recent years, there is the misconception that the *Traslación* being repeatedly referred to by the media as the “Feast of the Black Nazarene” (*Pistá ng Itím na Nazareno*), and sometimes the “Feast of Quiapo” (*Pistá ng Quiapo*), is a wrong notion. The Black Nazarene’s liturgical commemoration is on Good Friday (the second date of the year on which

the image is processed). The basilica’s parochial feast day, however, is on June 24 (concurrent with Manila Day) – the feast of St. John the Baptist.

As per custom, the Black Nazarene is brought to the Quirino Grandstand for the traditional *Pahalik* at the eve of the *Traslación*. Since 2016, the procession begins at around 5:30 AM after a solemn midnight mass at the Quirino Grandstand (usually presided by the Rector of the Minor Basilica, with the Archbishop of Manila preaching the sermon), followed hours later by a Morning Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours. The procession culminates in Quiapo Church in the late night of the same day or early the following morning, depending on how long the image has travelled. All devotees wear maroon

and yellow shirts or clothing like the image, and they walk barefoot as a form of penance and in emulation of Christ's walk to Golgotha.

Meanwhile, an American missionary visiting Quezon City Hall was surprised to see a life-size statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the lobby and in the different floors of the building. In his own words: *"Only in the Philippines this happens where a government office has a special place for altars."* (Fr Alan Reiger, OCD, an 86 year-old American Carmelite Missionary, 2019).

Five hundred years of Christianity, this is how faith and religion are deeply rooted in the psyche of the Filipinos. This high sense of faith has deep historical roots, said sociologist Bro. Clifford Sorita. Specifically, it can be traced to the three centuries Spain occupied the Philippines—what some have called 300 years in the convent. Sorita alluded to the quip that *"the Spaniards conquered the land with the sword but conquered the Filipinos' hearts with the cross"*.

Faith is planted in families and nurtured in weekly religious services and enriched in catechism classes and prayer assemblies. In their private lives, people live out their own understanding and interpretations of formal doctrines of the institutional church.

Such interpretation is called folk religiosity or popular religiosity. Religion refers to a system of beliefs, rites, and forms of organization, ethical norms, and feelings about the Divine which help human beings to transcend and make sense of life. Popular Religiosity is the equivalent of the religion of the common people, or popular piety, the way common people live their faith.

This is a sensitive topic that is always on the watchlist of theologians and religious leaders. As

a personal interpretation, folk religiosity had to be guided to be rooted in the very doctrine and not stray away in heresy.

The *Pasyon* that is chanted during the lenten season and holy week is an exemplary icon of folk religiosity that has inspired nationhood as explicitly explained by Prof. Reynaldo Ileto in his seminal work *"Pasyon and the Revolution."* In his pivotal work of the Jesuit priest Fr. Rene Javellana explained that it is a product of a layman's understanding of the Christian version of salvation history learned from formal teachings, Sunday sermons, and novenas. The very act and melody of singing the verses differs among the different provinces of Luzon. Over the years, the "pasyon" has been an accepted doctrinal material by the institutional church.

To realize this study, the paper aimed to demonstrate the faith-practices of the devotees by

1. extracting the deep understanding of the Black Nazarene in relation with faith
2. illustrating a brief historical development of the Black Nazarene; and
3. explicating the significance of symbols and rituals in uplifting the devotees of the Black Nazarene.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative descriptive research designed to demonstrate the religiosity of the devotees of the Black Nazarene as traditional faith-expression. The descriptive research method is considered appropriate for this study as it helped the researcher obtain first-hand information based on the experiences of the devotees and its significant impact to their faith development.

Findings and Results

Understanding the Devotion to the Black Nazarene

The passion-death-resurrection of Jesus is a central theme in the Christian faith. The suffering Christ, scourged, carrying his cross to Calvary while being taunted and despised by the same people who welcomed him in His triumphant entry to Jerusalem is the epitome of selflessness, compassion, the greatest of all- love. He, who has no sin, takes upon himself the burden of human sin and the gravity of obedience to the Father. We can just recall the unnerving movie of *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004 to have the feel of what Biblical scholars describe in our own Tagalog vocabulary as *malasakit* (the selfless act laying down of oneself for the good of the other; to suffer for the other).

This doctrine of God's immeasurable compassion, symbolized by the Suffering Christ, is the core and summation of the Christian Faith that is passed on from generation to generation. This is done through various reflections, sermons, meditations, prayers focusing on the whole story of the *pasyon* or specific symbols like the cross, the crown, the wounds, the stations of the cross. All these gave birth to the devotion to the Suffering Christ, which in the Philippines is popularly known as the **Hesus Nazareno**. The title differentiates the different stages of the Pasyon: *Santo Cristo* for the Crucified Christ, *Santo Intierro* for the Dead Christ, and *El Resurreccion* for the Risen Christ.

Millions of Filipino Catholics join the annual *Traslación* to fulfill their “panata” or religious vows to the Black Nazarene, conveying a replica of the statue of Jesus Christ risking heatstroke, trampling and sometimes death, this annual tradition dubbed as the “Traslación” is a display of intense piety for the devotees. They come with personal requests, and year after year, they

return with gratitude for their answered petitions. This deluge of devotion most visibly showcases the high place of religion for most Filipinos.

The Black Nazarene Traslación (BNT)

Historians agree that the first image of the Suffering Christ was introduced to the Philippines sometime in the 17th century through the galleon trade. It was made of hard wood that turns black through the years. The local equivalent is the *Tipolok* tree. Other versions speak of the fire that burned the church, but not the holy image. Thus, the image of the Suffering Christ in the Philippines came to be known as the Black Nazarene or *Negro Nazareno*. Across the centuries, the Black Nazarene is known for the miraculous healing of the sick and other hopeless cases. Its prominence has grown massively among the Filipinos, such that the rich and the poor learn to love more the Suffering Christ, symbolized by the image.

It was said that each time the galleon carrying it would sail back to Mexico, something happens to stall the trip. Finally, the Captain decided to leave the Holy Image to a small chapel managed by the Recoletos Friars in Bagumbayan outside Intramuros (now Luneta). Once again, current historians led by Prof. Charlston Xiao Chua who did extensive research on the topic, agree that sometime before 1767 and 1787, the Recoletos Friars transferred the Holy Image to the Parish of St John the Baptist in Quiapo.

This transfer or *traslación* is commemorated in the annual *Black Nazarene Traslación* every January 9th each year. According to Msgr. Jose Clemente Ignacio, former Parochial Vicar of Quiapo Church, “Traslación” means the transfer of the Image of Black Nazarene. In a way it is imitating the Calvary experience: the sacrifice and suffering that our Lord endured for our salvation like when Jesus was walking barefoot, carrying the cross to Mount Calvary.

The devotees also want to give back to God by participating in the suffering of our Lord and entering in the Paschal mystery of Christ. It is also commemorating the transfer of the image from Intramuros to Quiapo, where the statue was first received in 1868. Since then, because of the many answered prayers, people have been celebrating the feast on January 9.

Original settlers in Quiapo would recall that it used to be a simple parochial fiesta celebration that they do. The image is brought in a solemn procession of the holy image around the vicinity of the parish. During the rectorship of Msgr. Jose Clemente Ignacio, the procession was made to start from Luneta to the Quiapo Church. This is also the first time, according to Prof. Xiao Chua, that the *Traslación* was used to commemorate the humble history of the devotion to the Black Nazarene. On the practical side, the organizers thought of the safety of the growing number of devotees, collectively called *Hijos del Nazareno* or *mamamas-an* who could benefit from the wider roads of Central Manila.

Cognizant that more Filipinos in the provinces and abroad ardently desire to come to Quiapo Church and pay respects to the Black Nazarene, Msgr. Ignacio


during his term, introduced live streaming while the technology was in its infancy and its cost exorbitant in the Philippines. The parish priest also donated replica images of the Black Nazarene to provincial dioceses to provide opportunity to local people to have an encounter with the Black Nazarene without going through the troubles of traveling to Manila. Surprisingly, instead of distributing the devotees across the country, it popularized the devotion even more, that millions of people participate in the annual Black Nazarene *Traslación* every January 9.

This has become so prominent and has been considered as a national security event by the National Disaster Risks Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) as early as 2012. Over the last three years, the police, the media and the organizers agree on an average crowd estimate of 2-3 million people at a given hour participating in the BNT.

Symbols and Rituals in the Black Nazarene *Traslación*

The celebration of the *Traslación* is rich in symbolisms. The following are among the symbols that signify a deeper level of meanings:

Table 1. Symbols and Rituals

<p>The Black Nazarene</p>	<p>The image of the Black Nazarene depicts Jesus' before His Resurrection as He carries the Cross to Golgotha. Thus, the surrounding symbols recalled His Resurrection.</p> <p>The maroon tunic is a reference to the one given to Him by a Roman soldier after His scourging. Above His crown of thorns is a three-spoked halo or "Tres Potencias", symbolizing the Holy Trinity. The three rays also referenced Spanish iconography that symbolizes His divinity.</p> <p>The kneeling posture signifies the agony and the weight of the Cross, supplementing the pain Jesus endured during His resurrection. Through the <i>Traslación</i>, the devotees share in the passion and sufferings of Christ.</p>	
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Maroon Clothing	The color maroon of the devotees' clothing and general color motif symbolizes the Blood of Christ: His humility and passion to lay down His life for the salvation of sins of mankind. This passion is evident among the devotees who would brave the odds and other obstacles just to be able to reach the float that transports the Black Nazarene.	
Rope	Even the rope that pulls the float is believed to be miraculous. The devotees would all struggle to pull or touch the rope that pulls the float or the <i>andas</i> . There are times when the devotees cut them off into pieces after the procession and keep them as their relics or lucky charms.	
Andas	The whole <i>Traslación</i> procession is synonymous to our life's journey. The statue of the <i>Nazareno</i> is placed in a gilded carriage for the procession. As the procession starts, procession participants garbed in maroon tops grab two long ropes and pull it to make the carriage move. The <i>andas</i> that carries Jesus is symbolic of Christ's accompanying us through our life's journey.	
Towels and Handkerchiefs	These items are used to wipe the Poon or the Hari, believing that these also hold miraculous powers that can cure all ailments and body aches if placed on the ailing part of the body. The devotees throw towels to the police who guard the statue and ask them to rub the towel on the statue in hopes of carrying some of that power away with them.	





Table 1 illustrated the symbols of the Black Nazarene that depict how the devotees enlighten their faith expression by symbolizing their dedication to the patron. These symbols manifested as faith-expression of the devotees.





Practices of the Devotion

The devotion to the Black Nazarene is a long time practice of the Filipino Catholics who believe

that through their faith in Jesus Christ, there will be peace and harmony among families, long life and good health among people, deliverance from all calamities and disasters, and prosperity, joy, and love among nations. Quiapo church has been a witness to several practices of popular piety. They have become part of the devotion to the Black Nazarene. Among them are the following:

Table 2. Various Practices

<p><i>Pahalik</i> (kissing of the statues)</p>	<p>The ritual of <i>pahalik</i>, takes place at the Quirino Grandstand on the eve of the <i>Traslación</i> procession. Devotees kiss the image of the <i>Nazareno</i>, believing it could bring miracles into their lives. During this ritual, they also wipe the image with their hand towels and clothes for the same reason. As they line up for their turn to kiss the image, some devotees kneel while others walk barefoot. Devotees traditionally observe the “<i>Pahalik</i>” by touching or kissing the Black Nazarene, a life-sized statue of Jesus Christ that has been in the country for over 400 years. It is believed that the image was onboard a galleon from Mexico to Manila in the early 1600s when the ship caught fire, damaging the image and causing its dark brown color to turn even darker. Devotees of the Black Nazarene believe that the image is miraculous.</p>	
<p><i>Pasindi</i> (lighting of multi-colored candles outside the church)</p>	<p>Each color of the candles would correspond to what the devotee is asking/ praying for purity, love, peace, prosperity, wealth, harmony, and wisdom</p>	
<p><i>Padasal</i> (prayers from the Mandarasals or the Priests)</p>	<p>The <i>padasal</i> is done upon request of some devotees who want to include their personal intentions during the daily masses, recitation of the rosary and other prayer activities. The presence of <i>mandarasals</i> (usually old women) within the vicinity of Quiapo church is a common sight. They are usually commissioned to pray for other peoples’ personal intentions.</p>	
<p><i>Pabihis</i> (the changing of the garments of the Nazareno)</p>	<p>The changing of garments of the <i>Nazareno</i> is usually done by the <i>Hijos de Nazareno</i> (Sons of the Nazarene). The changing of clothes symbolizes a transformation of a person to his new self. On the traditional side, an investiture signifies a transition from one state of life to another. The garment itself is symbolic of a greater responsibility (similar as the men in uniform and the monarchy) which the wearer needs to carry. On the spiritual side, the changing of garment is not simply a regular chore; through this, the devotees are constantly being reminded to change their lives for the better.</p>	

<p><i>Pabendisyon</i> (sprinkling of Holy Water after mass or the kissing of the hands of the priests)</p>	<p>On the first day of the feast, devotees bring their own replicas of the <i>Nazareno</i> to be blessed at the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene or Quiapo Church. This happens at around noon – devotees brave the heat and congestion, anticipating the next few days of penitence. Sprinkling of holy water to the crowd and the images or replicas of the Black Nazarene is considered as a blessing.</p>	
<p><i>Pahawak</i> (touching of the statues or the garments of the Black Nazarene)</p>	<p>Catholic devotees believe that if they touch or wipe a handkerchief or small towel to the blessed wooden image of the Black Nazarene, or even just touch the rope that leads the Black Nazarene, all their prayers will be answered. The mere touching of the statues or the garments of the Black Nazarene evokes a deeper sense of devotion- the devotees' belief that they will be blessed and their wishes granted.</p>	
<p><i>Pamisa</i> (Mass Offerings?)</p>	<p>The people usually sponsor/offer masses during the 9-day novena for thanksgiving and other special intentions.</p>	
<p><i>Pagnonobena</i> (Novena prayers or masses)</p>	<p>The 9-day novena to the Black Nazarene precedes the <i>Traslación</i>. People with fervent wishes and petitions believe that their supplications will be granted upon completion of the 9-day novena.</p>	



<p><i>Pagpapasan</i> (Carrying of the wood of the caroza or the rope attached to it)</p>	<p>This role is usually assigned to the <i>mamamasans</i>. Being a <i>mamamasan</i> of the Nazareno is considered as a lifelong devotion, "one must be willing to die for the <i>Poon</i>" if he wants to be a <i>mamamasan</i>. Their role as <i>mamamasans</i> is usually hereditary. Their main task is to protect and secure the <i>Poong Nazareno</i> at all times, even at the risk of exposing their own selves to danger.</p>	
<p><i>Pagyayapak</i> (walking barefoot during processions)</p>	<p>During the feast of the Black Nazarene thousands of barefoot men join the annual procession. Walking barefoot during the procession is seen as a sign of humility. Walking barefoot is the devotees' manifestation of sacrifice, by sharing in the sufferings of Christ, they endure the scorching heat of the ground.</p>	
<p><i>Paglalakad ng Paluhod</i> (processing to the altar on bended knees)</p>	<p>Intense praying of the holy rosary coupled with their supplications are done by the devotees while processing to the altar on bended knees. This is a sign of respect and humility- an open acknowledgment of God's superiority over man. Walking barefoot is also sharing in Christ's sufferings as he carries his cross to Golgotha.</p>	
<p><i>Pa-caridad</i>- feeding the people joining the <i>Traslación</i></p>	<p>Many households in the Quiapo area are doing this as a <i>panata</i> to the Poon. Through sharing of food, the devotees give back to the <i>Nazareno</i>, a way of thanksgiving for the many graces that they have received.</p>	

Table 2 showed that those practices transformed the devotees in a commitment to uplift their faith. There are many other practices that help the devotees enrich their commitment in this religious practice:

- a. asking the priests to bless the oil or bottled water to bring home to the sick
- b. asking for dried sampaguitas (white flowers) offered in the church to bring home
- c. cutting up the vestments of the Black Nazarene as well as the rope used during the procession as a relic
- d. wiping sacred images with towels
- e. selling of crucifixes and handkerchiefs with the face of the Black Nazarene; and
- f. the bringing of the miraculous Hands of the Black Nazarene to the sick.

Traslación as a National Allegory

National Allegory is a type of literature that treats the nation state as the subject. It uses allegory as a means of expressing a dimension of existence greater than that of the lives of its individual characters. It tends to focus on the lives of ordinary people, not those of the rich and powerful, using their mundane struggles to present the state of the nation.

National Allegory was first conceived by Fredric Jameson in his monograph on Wyndham Lewis, *Fables of Aggression* (1979), and developed further in an article entitled 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' (1986), National Allegory is a highly controversial concept and has been the subject of considerable debate, particularly in Postcolonial Studies.

"...all third-world texts are necessarily allegorical, and in a specific way they are to be read as what I will call National Allegories or particularly when their forms develop out

of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. The story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society' (Jameson, 2019, pp. 545-546).

Nation is the consciousness of being one people standing up for a collective aspiration forming a common identity distinct from other nations. Nationhood transcends ethno-linguistic aggrupation, race, religion, age, gender, and political affinities.

The *Traslación* of the Black Nazarene forms a National Allegory; this event gathers the ordinary/commonplace people, who become the embodiment of a nation united in faith and love for the *Nazareno*. The icons and rituals of the *Traslación* are symbols in themselves that convey deeper levels of meanings more than what the outward images show. Since 2013, the *Traslación* is no longer just a Manila event, but a national gathering. The preparations alone take around six months; in coordination with the local government units (LGU's), the Office of the Mayor, the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), the Department of Health (DOH), the National Telecommunications Commission (cellphone signals are cut-off during the duration of the *Traslación*), the Philippine National Police and the Manila Police Department (MPD), would deploy thousands of enforcers along Quiapo, Luneta and all other areas where the procession will pass. This is to ensure the safety of the devotees against the terrorists who have plans of sabotaging this national event.

Another well-known theorist, Benedict Anderson defines nation as *an imagined political community in which a nation is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image*

of their communion (Anderson, 1991, 6). He also reiterated that the nation is a *community* because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, “the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship”. It is this fraternity that makes it possible over the past two centuries, for millions of people, “not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (Anderson, 1991, p. 7).

Anderson (1991) started by providing the primary foundation postulating that *nations* are constructs of the mind, *imagined communities*. He clearly defines the intricate dynamics of people who may not know each other by name or other affiliations but find a common bond in the objectified concepts and aspirations. Nationalism for Anderson is not the awakening of the nation to self-consciousness; rather it invents nations where it does not exist. Though different from one another, people are connected by the consciousness of their communion. Seton-Watson in his book, *Nation and States*, as quoted by Anderson, says that nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one. This is what Anderson calls *imagining*. It connects people together, establishing an affinity with one another, forming one big entity of collectiveness which we call *nation*.

The *Traslación* of the Black Nazarene is one shining example of an Imagined Community, whose participants are driven by a common purpose to unite as one. The Filipinos’ unwavering faith in the Almighty, coupled by their strong commitment to their vows or *panata* which is their source of strength, inspiration, and willpower to face life’s adversities. Moreover, the *Traslación* is a huge gathering of people from all walks of life who have not known or met one another before but are bound by their universal fraternity/comradeship as sons

and daughters of God. Through this “imagined community”, a nation is formed. Unity in diversity exists among the devotees of the Black Nazarene, who despite differences in creed, color, gender, ages, beliefs, social status, educational attainment, occupation, and affiliations share a common faith in God Almighty.

CONCLUSION

In the recent pandemic that disrupted our regular activities and has drastically changed peoples’ lives, the celebration of the next *Traslación* will be greatly affected if things will not normalize. The present Parish Priest, Msgr. Hernando Coronel and his various committees and their members are now exploring alternative ways of celebrating next year’s *Traslación* given the limitations brought about by Covid 19. *Traslación 2021*, will have a totally different way of celebration, following the protocols set by the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF). This time, a more localized celebration of the *Traslación 2021* is highly being considered. The *Traslación*, being a big national event entails six months of preparations to ensure the safety, security, solemnity, and success of the occasion.

But for us Filipinos, no virus is strong enough to challenge our faith in the Almighty. The pandemic will not dampen our indomitable spirit to express our faith and devotion to the Black Nazarene. The *Traslación* is also a clear manifestation of our nationhood, and solidarity amidst the many challenges and adversities in our lives. As history unfolds anew, we will see a new dawn as we celebrate *Traslación 2021*, in a more creative way. As the Quiapo Church clergies put it: “*Wala mang prusisyon, tuloy pa rin ang selebrasyon!*” With or without Covid 19, the *Traslación* is surely here to stay.

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