

THE BURNT CHRIST: THE FILIPINIZATION OF A MEXICAN ICON

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From 1565 to 1821, the westernmost boundary of the Viceroyalty of New Spain began right on the China Sea, for it included the Philippines. Borne by the yearly galleons, a steady stream of cultural influences from Hispanic America, entered the Philippines and spread beyond it to the rest of the region. One of Mexico's most visible and most emotionally resonant legacies to Filipinos is the image of *Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno* in Quiapo Church, located in the very heart of Manila. The life-sized wooden image depicts Christ carrying his cross to Calvary. His right shoulder bears the weight. He wears a velvet maroon robe decorated with embossed gold threads. His cuffs and collar are in white lace, vaguely reminiscent of the costume of the Hapsburg court in the late 16th century. Over his head is a crown of thorns. Three rays of beaten silver flare out from his head to indicate that he is divine. His face is in pain; his eyes look upward as though in supplication. The color of his skin is neither white nor brown, but black.

This paper explores the embedded meanings that black images have assumed in Latin Christianity, with emphasis on Central America, and the meanings that contemporary Filipinos find in a particular Mexican image. The paper is thus about acculturation: that process whereby an artifact, when imported, acquires new interpretations in another culture. It also highlights an example of the impact of Hispanic America upon the Orient since 1565.

I. THE BLACK NAZARENE

Every Friday there is a novena in honor of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo church, which is at the very heart of Manila. It draws devotees, both male and female, rich and poor, from all over Luzon. Masses are said throughout the day and are crowded. So popular is the image, that even on other days of the week, multitudes throng the church attending one of the several masses through the day. January 9 marks the annual feast. Thousands of devotees join the procession with banners in maroon and gold proclaiming themselves either as “*Hijos del Señor Nazareno*” (Sons of the Lord Nazarene). Some of them carry their own images of the Nazarene either as miniatures or as life-sized images mounted on processional floats. But the climax of the procession is when the church's image of the Nazarene is taken out and mounted on a float pulled by long ropes. For many men, helping to pull the rope is a yearly devotion. It is a dangerous thing. The men vie with each other for the honor of pulling the rope. The street becomes a torrent of human bodies pulling the float here and there. Not content with this, many men climb over the others to wipe the foot of the image with a towel and even kiss it. Afterwards they dive into the human torrent and are brought down to safety by many helpful hands.

The year 2006 marked the fourth centenary of its arrival. Celebrations ended this April, 2007. According to popular accounts, it arrived at the port of Cavite aboard a galleon. Supposedly it must have been made by a Mexican Amerindian because of its color. The Recollects, according to Msgr. José Abriol (1991), Vicar General and Director of the Archdiocesan Museum, organized a Confraternity of *Jesús Nazareno* within the Walled City of Manila. In 1767, they presented the image to Quiapo Church when Basilio Sancho de Sta. Justa was the Archbishop of Manila. There it has remained ever since. Unfortunately Msgr. Abriol's account, as found in the Archdiocesan Archive, is just a one page outline and is not even an article. It may be based on documents that perished during the Battle of Manila in February, 1945.

Marcellan de San José (1875: 16, 77) says that the Recollects arrived in 1606 and that in 1609 they founded a *Cofradía de Nuestro Padre Jesús* in Cavite. In his overview of the history of the Recollects in the Philippines. Licinio Ruiz OAR (1925) does not state exactly when the image arrived in Manila. He (*ibid.*: 100) merely reports that a Confraternity called “*de N.P. Jesus*” (of Our Father Jesus) was founded in 1651 in honor of the well-regarded image of “*N.P. Jesús Nazareno*” that was on display at the Recollects' church in the Walled City of Manila down to the church's destruction in the Battle of 1945. The image must have been popular then, for Ruiz

writes that the confraternity was one of the most prosperous in the islands. Indeed a trust fund was established on its account in order to sustain a mission in Mindanao. The Nazarene of Quiapo may be but a replica of the original image at the Recoletos Church. However the Quiapo image proved to be the more popular of the two. Even when its Intramuros counterpart was still intact, it attracted huge crowds and from all social levels. This much I gather from my parents who loved both Intramuros and Quiapo.

II. A PUZZLING DEVOTION

An unusual feature of the image is its color. Many well-loved representations in the Philippines of Christ and His Mother show them as fair-skinned, either with Chinese or European features. This holds true for the Sto. Niño (Child Jesus), the Crucifix and the Sto. Entierro (The Dead Christ in a Coffin). But the Nazarene, and copies made of it, always show him as Dark Brown to Black. What makes this phenomenon even more unusual is that many Filipinos admire whiteness as an esthetic ideal. One hears Filipino women not wanting to be out in the sun too long, for fear of getting a dark complexion (*baka umitim*). Skin whiteners are available in drugstores and apparently are saleable. Movie actors and actresses are generally fair-skinned. So embedded is the notion that Fair is Beautiful, that at the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Makati, Metro Manila, one of the several representations at the sanctuary of the painting shows her as white. So likewise is a statue representing Juan Diego, the Aztec to whom she appeared. Thus the lesson of the Cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe, namely that the Divine can assume the color of any human race, is subverted.

The color of the Quiapo Nazarene is darker than that of ordinary city Filipinos. Perhaps, it is seen as darker even than the color of the Negrito pygmies, variously called Agta or Aeta, who were the original inhabitants of the archipelago before brown-skinned Austronesian speakers arrived around 2000 BC to become the majority population. Many Filipinos look down on the dark skin of the Negrito as “*pangit*” (ugly). Yet one of their most revered icons is the Dark-Skinned Lord. What then do they think of His color while praying to Him?

In his classic essay on Our Lady of Guadalupe, the anthropologist Eric Wolf ([1958] 1979) says that the social classes and the races of Mexico came together, despite differences between them, in their devotion to her. However, each sector found in her a symbol for its own particular interest. For those born of illicit unions between Indians and Spaniards or for those who had lost status within the Indian or Spanish groups she was a sign that they had a place, not only in heaven, but on earth - in their society. On the other hand the Indians began by identifying her with the fertility goddess Tonantzin, on whose site the church arose. Eventually they realized that they too, like the Spaniards, were worthy of Christian salvation.

Do ordinary Filipinos of today regard the blackness of the Nazarene as a sign that he is one of them? Though this has been expressed informally by observers of the Philippine scene, I have yet to hear actual devotees of the Quiapo Nazarene express this explicitly. I wanted to hear them say that they find solidarity in a Christ who is Not-White. Thus the genesis of this essay.

On a related note: Blackness is a standard feature of many Virgin and Child figures from the 11th -12th centuries in France and Spain. Black Christs also appeared in parts of Spain and Mexico during the 16th-17th centuries. Scholars today theorize, as will be discussed below, that blackness was associated with the fertility of the soil and the womb. Blackness likewise characterizes images (*bulol*) of ancestral spirits that the Ifugao of Northern Luzon carve as guardians of their village and their rice granaries. The connection with fertility seems obvious. The blood of animals offered in sacrifice is smeared on the wooden images. Inevitably the blood turns black with age. Are Christian Filipinos of today attracted to the Nazarene because they identify it with fertility? How do the meanings they experience differ from those experienced in Central America, today and in the past?

Because of its central role in the life of Manila, many essays have been written on the Quiapo Nazarene. Two of the most outstanding are the popularly-written essays of Quijano de Manila (pen-name of Nick Joaquin) (1966) and Gregorio Brillantes (1978). Their pieces narrate the history of the image and of the district of Quiapo, the devotion that sprang around it, and the role played by this devotion in transforming Quiapo into the emotional core of Manila. A more theoretical approach is taken by Celia Bonilla's study of the aesthetics involved in the devotion to

the Nazarene (2005). Basing herself on interviews, she shows how a sense of aesthetic pleasure is stirred in devotees by the icon, the church and the procession itself. Even as they contribute to the unfolding of a meaningful spectacle, they derive a sense of wholeness. In an unpublished monograph, Teresita Obusan examines the features of the spirituality of the Nazarene's devotees. Together with students, she conducted interviews with several devotees to understand how they conceive of their relationship with Christ.

Though these pieces inevitably touch on the Nazarene's dark complexion, none of them discuss the meanings devotees see in it. This paper examines the issue of skin color for this reason: In a world where skin-color has been used to oppress, we should understand those instances when a dark skin is associated with the Divine.

For my paper, I examined available studies on blackness as a feature of religious images in Europe, Mexico and the Philippines. I did key informant interviews among devotees of the Nazarene, largely in Quiapo. Some of these devotees were friends from many years and thus gave rich, detailed data. The approach I used in interpreting data from the interviews combines phenomenology and cultural ecology. On the one hand it is important to understand the reality of the Nazarene from the point of view of the devotees. On the other hand the devotees are located in specific sectors of a society driven by a particular type of economy.

The essay examines available writings on sacred black images in Catholic Europe and Mexico. Crossing over to the Philippines, it will look at blackness in indigenous religion, then at black Catholic images. The original plan had been to explore historical accounts in Manila archives of the devotion to the Nazarene during these past 400 years and then to compare these with accounts by devotees today. Unfortunately, the Archdiocesan Archives of Manila have not yielded anything about accounts of the devotion during the 17th -19th centuries. This paper thus focuses instead on accounts by devotees today.

III. BLACKNESS AND DIVINITY IN EUROPE AND MESOAMERICA

Representations of Mary and her Son as black were a widespread practice in parts of Europe during the 11th -12th centuries. Southern France has the largest number of such images, Spain follows next (Mila 2005). The Mother is depicted seated on a throne with the Child on her lap. The pose is stiff and hieratic; there is little or no attempt to suggest tenderness. The emphasis is on her majesty. The face and hands of both the Mother and Child are black. An example is the Virgin of Montserrat, a very popular pilgrimage center in Catalonia. A replica can be found at the San Beda Chapel of Montserrat Abbey, Manila.

Research has linked this phenomenon with older pagan cults. Celtic, Druidic rites took place around representations of black images. The Greek goddess Artemis is associated with fertility. One representation shows her black and with many mammary glands. With incorporation into the Roman empire, Gaul (France) became the favored site of the cult of Cybele, the mother of all the gods and goddesses (Mortis 2006). She is associated with the Earth; among her symbols are black stones (de Miguel 2004). Later on the Egyptian cult of Isis entered Gaul (Mortis 2006). One representation shows her seated on a throne, cradling her son Horus on her lap. Isis is represented as black (Mortis 2006; Balkis 2005). As is well known, Seth fought her husband Osiris, defeated him, hacked him to pieces and scattered these. Miraculously his parts were re-assembled by Isis; he came back to life. That Osiris is the god of agriculture connects both him and Isis with fertility.

But why black? Paloma de Miguel (2004) points out that both black and white are boundary colors. Black suggests the night, mystery, the interior of caves and the underground. The very absence of color and light suggests death. But it can also suggest the opposite. Black is the color of the soil from where crops spring to nourish life. White too is ambivalent in meaning. On the one hand it is associated with light and therefore life. But, because the loss of blood results in a pallor, it too is associated with death. Hence white garments are used for mourning in traditional Europe, in Chinese-influenced societies.¹ Fertility goddesses can be black in one version and white in another (de Miguel 2004).

¹ So likewise in pre-Christian Visayas (Alcina [1668] 2005 Part 1, Bk. 3, Vol. 3: 310-311).

These ancient traditions persisted in Christian France and Spain. However, why did an efflorescence of black Madonnas occur during the 11th-12th centuries? This has yet to be answered. Why not earlier – between the fall of the Roman empire (5th century) and the gradual re-emergence of prosperous urban centers (11th-12th centuries)?

From the European perspective, there may be other reasons, even contradictory reasons, to the significance of black.

By being the opposite of the white-skin most Europeans have, a black skin would have denoted the Complete Other. It would thus have influenced representations of the Sacred. As Emile Durkheim ([1912]1968: 65) notes in his classic study of religion, the “sacred” is that which a given society regards as “separate” from the ordinary and the everyday. Necessarily what a society regards as unusual will not be the same in another society. Blackness may have been considered “separate” and thus sacred in Europe before the late 16th century, when black Africans were captured by the thousands and sold into slavery in the Americas.

But the dark complexion may have been meaningful for a contradictory reason: the peasants who worked the fields got sunburned while the nobility remained fair-skinned. Garcia and Trenado (1978: 317) note that the dark-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura, which dates back to the 12th century (Garcia 1985), was primarily an agricultural and peasant devotion (*devoción... eminentemente campesina, agrícola*).

While the custom of depicting Virgins as black began to decline in the 13th century, some Spanish statues of the Suffering Christ, during the 16th-17th centuries, show him with a dark complexion bordering on blackness. An example is the famous image in Seville of “El Gran Poder”: Christ carrying the cross. This is brought out in procession during Holy Week. His skin is very dark (Subias 1943).

In New Spain, representations of the Black Christ include the Crucifixion. Examples are those of Chalma and Otatitlan in Mexico, and Esquipulas in Guatemala. The last is extremely popular in a zone extending from the U.S. Southwest to Ecuador. Carlos Navarrete, a Guatemalan archaeologist who has researched on the Christ of Esquipulas, observed that the shrines of these Black Christs are found along routes established by the Pochtecs, the famed traders of the Aztec empire (México Desconocido 2002). Near Otatitlán in Veracruz, an Aztec garrison formerly stood to protect the commercial exchanges between the Aztecs and the Mayas. Yacatecutli, the god of commerce, was venerated here. One of his attributes was blackness, “not because he was black but rather because the color was connected with the Underworld” (Roldan 2000: 2). Under Christianity, a Black Christ replaced this black deity. Similarly, the Black Christ of Esquipulas may have substituted for the Mayan god of commerce, Ek-Chuak, who was likewise black (Ibid.).

The sociologist Esparza suggests that blackness in both cases is “an attribute and has little to do with the skin” (Esparza 2004: 5). She says that indigenous Americans, just like the Chinese, saw contraries as essential in maintaining cosmic balance. Thus, in contrast with red which represented the east, the sun, the day, the earth, and drought, black represented the west, the moon, the night, water and rain. In the Maya tradition, “warriors painted themselves black, a color associated with magic, death, violence and sacrifice” (ibid). As is well known, the sacrifice of victims, especially humans, formed an important part of indigenous religion in Mesoamerica. Victims were killed and offered so that the Sun might have life. The victims offered to the god of vegetation, Xipe Totec, were tied and killed with arrows (Haberland 1955: 163-64). Blood caking any object, whether an altar or a human being, eventually turns black. The opposition Death-Life, that was associated with blackness in Europe, was likewise at work in indigenous Mesoamerica.¹

Carrillo (1999: 1) thus suggests that the Black Christ, seen within the context of Mesoamerican religion, is a Victorious Warrior. Among the ancient Mayas, warriors painted themselves black, black had associated magical qualities. It signified death violence and sacrifice.

There is another aspect of blackness that worshippers draw from these Christs and Virgins: the dignity of being dark-skinned. Gebara and Bingemer (Cunneen 1996: 224) report that Brazil’s revered icon, the Immaculate Conception, is black, for it was blackened by the waters of the river where it was retrieved. Brazilian slaves took this to signify that the Black Virgin disapproved of

¹ The Otomi are an ethnic group who live in Central Mexico. A lexical analysis by Galinier (1998) of their words for smell suggests that excrements suggest both decomposition of dead matter and regeneration of the soil.

slavery. In Mesoamerica, devotees of Black Christs, particularly in the rural areas, are largely Amerindian and mestizo. The Black Christ of Esquipulas is regarded as a symbol of Guatemala itself. Carlos Navarrete has been an advocate of the rights of Guatemalan Indians to land. He was persecuted and forced to flee to Mexico. However, when permitted to return in 1980, he went directly to the Christ of Esquipulas. Well known for being an atheist, he avers “I cried for half an hour... I wept for my family, for Guatemala, for all that was good and bad in my life” (Roldan 2004: 4).

Summing up, blackness in sacred images in America is associated with the following:

Earth and rain - Fertility of the soil – Life and death -- The dignity of being non-White.

The Black Nazarene comes from a Mesoamerican tradition where blackness symbolizes the annual regeneration of the soil, victory over death and fellowship with ordinary people. Brought to the Philippines, it generated new unexpected meanings.

IV. BLACKNESS AND DIVINITY IN INDIGENOUS FILIPINO PRACTICES

Pedro Chirino SJ, in 1605 (1969:61), reported that Filipinos in Luzon and Visayas made sacred images “of stone, others of wood, others of bone or ivory, or crocodile teeth, others of gold.” Sacrifices consisted of incense, gold, cotton, a chicken or a pig. This depended on one’s devotion. The chicken and pig were slain (ibid.: 63-64). At times when the Visayan patient was of high status, like the datu, slaves were sacrificed observed Francisco Alcina SJ in 1668 (2005 Part 1, Bk. 3, Vol. 3: 284-85).

Many of the Ifugaos of the Cordillera were able to escape Christianization until the first decades of the 20th century. They made statues of their deities in narra wood which they called *bulul*. These deities were “capable of miraculously increasing the rice before and after it is stored in the granary” (Ellis 1981: 195). The Ifugaos are famous for creating rice terraces from the mountainsides. Presumably the rich loam is black or near-black. The sacred figures assume various positions: sometimes standing though with bent knees, or seated on the ground with knees pressing towards the chest. To activate their power, they are bathed in the blood of a sacrificed pig (ibid.: 196). Over time the blood would have turned black, thus reinforcing the connection between blackness and life.

Turning back to the 16th-17th centuries, a particular type of spirit or *divata* was in fact imagined by the Visayans to be black. Alcina ([1668] Part 1, Bk 1, Vol. 1: 482-83) reports that this so-called *palibi* was “small-sized, black like the kaffirs, and misshapen (*pequeñito de cuerpo, negro como los cafres y de muy mala figura*). At times he would come down and show himself. The priestess then took a root from where he stood and brought it home so that the sick might recover. As in the rest of Southeast and South Asia, the nunuk tree (called *balete* by Tagalogs and related to the banyan) was revered because of its unusual appearance. It was huge and extended like a wall; many of its roots hung in the air like curtains; it had many crevasses. Visayan priestesses would dance themselves into a frenzy under its canopy. They believed that the small, black tree-spirit entered them as they swooned (Alcina [1668] 2005 Part 1, Bk. 3, Vol. 3: 260-61).

Visayans may have associated blackness with Otherness for another reason. It was the color of the Negritos who were wholly different. While the Visayans cultivated rice in garden plots, the Negritos lived by hunting and gathering in the fastnesses of the forest. In addition, the Negritos were pygmies who were unusual in being shorter and much darker than the brown-skinned Visayans and who seemed to disappear at will into the forest.

Black has associations with fertility in many societies of the past, whether Christian or not. It may well be that during the 17th-18th centuries, the Nazarene’s color was seen as an inherent sign of divinity. Settlements were few and small: town dwellers were surrounded by forests and fields. Blood rituals from the indigenous past had only recently been suppressed in Christian communities but were still being practiced in many parts of the islands, such as even the Visayas as reported by Alcina. Unfortunately, for now, we do not have data on what devotees of the Nazarene thought about His color. However, we can gather such data today. And so we examine 20th century accounts of the Nazarene’s blackness.

V. MESOAMERICA — MANILA: COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

My data for these interpretations come from extended interviews with several acquaintances and (in the case of some) from years of mixing with them in a variety of activities. These are initial interviews I report on. I will interview more. Half of the interviewees were women, the other half men. They had modest occupations. They had all finished high school. One had a college degree. There are several themes in the data: a) blessings from the Nazarene, b) origins and significance of His color, c) feelings of identity with Him.

Blessings attributed to the Nazarene were varied. Sam¹ lives in a small run-down apartment. He holds several jobs: He works for a city councilor, sells insurance and does marketing jobs. According to him, his father was diabetic and had kidney failure. He was supposed to have died. But thanks to his promise to join the annual Nazarene procession, his father's life was prolonged by several years. Olivia, who does laundry work for a living and lives in a tiny room with her family, recounts how her son was cured of asthma through her novena to the Nazarene. On the other hand, Orlando and Pedring, both seamen, say that, thanks to Him, their contracts have always been renewed. Their furloughs have been short. Sofia came to the city from the province. At first she and her husband were really poor. However, the tailoring business that she set up eventually grew and fetched her a modest income. This is thanks to the Nazarene.

But what do these informants make of the black color of the Nazarene? He is different from other religious images that they know. He is even darker than the Virgin of Antipolo, also from Mexico. I suggested that he is as dark as the Negrito, and even darker than the African Negro. The seamen agreed, having been to West Africa.

The answer given by several was unexpected. They claimed that originally the Nazarene's color was not black. However, on the ship that brought him to Manila, a fire broke out. He was burned, but was not consumed by the flames. This shows that the statue must be truly divine. Sam exclaimed during the interview, "*Diyos ko, naghimala kayo! Di ka man lang nasira.* (My God, you performed a miracle. You weren't even damaged)." A version given by Oliva, who knows nothing of galleons, shows how embedded the Nazarene is in her consciousness as Filipina. She says that before World War II, he was a "Filipino", meaning by that he was brown-skinned (*kayumanggi*). But because of the fires of war, he became black.

It is notable that Frieda, a college graduate, does not subscribe to any of these versions. She merely answers that if He were not black, then his statue would not seem authentic but fake. For that is how she has known him since she was a child.

Was the Nazarene actually burned? Narciso Maglaqui is the sculptor who does repairs on the church statue. Indeed he was commissioned by the parish to do a duplicate statue to be brought out in procession, for the original was starting to crack from rough handling during the processions. According to Maglaqui, if the original had been burnt, the wood would have been like carbon. But the wood remains smooth. Thus the story about the tale of fire is really a legend. It is significant, however, for what it tells us about the people's notion of the sacred.

To highlight the Nazarene's uniqueness, I asked my informants to compare Him with His other representations, notably the Sacred Heart. Jesus as the Sacred Heart is white-skinned and stands straight, peacefully showing his flaming heart of love to all. Why do they prefer the Nazarene? The seamen replied that all these are just "*imaben*" (images) of the one Christ. But they prefer the Nazarene because it shows him actively trying to do something for us by carrying the cross. In Sam's case, he prefers the Nazarene to the Sacred Heart, because he knows the story of the former, but not of the latter.

Class factors influence preference for the Nazarene. Olivia complains that when she goes to the Chapel of the Holy Face just a few meters up the road, she feels "*naasimá*" (uneasy) "There are also those wealthy people. I cannot be myself. That's why I prefer Quiapo church. I can go wearing a duster and using slippers." For indeed I noted that many of the Tuesday

¹ Like the other research consultants, save Maglaqui the sculptor, the name is fictitious to protect his privacy.

devotees of the Holy Face are well-dressed and come in cars. Frieda validates Olivia's complaint by pointing to the opposite, "I am uneasy at Quiapo church because there are so many people." She prefers San Sebastian church to Quiapo church because it is quiet and tidy. Although she grew up going to Quiapo church with her mother, it is nearby San Sebastian that she can relate to. Her own devotion is to the Sacred Heart because He seems so peaceful and kind. Frieda is a college graduate who worked as an accountant for a reputable office. She has long since been retired.

VI. AN INTERPRETATION

Comparing the cult of the Nazarene with the cult of the Black Virgins, the Black Christs and even the indigenous practices of non-Hispanized pagan Filipinos, there are significant contrasts. Of course, a problem we must be clear about in making such a contrast is that interviews were used to understand devotion to the Nazarene today. No such method is possible for the devotions of the past.

The Nazarene's blackness is associated with the following:

Sea and fire - Destruction and survival - Life and death -- The dignity of being non-White.

Not present here is the Mesoamerican association of blackness with land and rain. Nor the preoccupation with fertility of the soil. But there is a preoccupation with suffering and death, and likewise with the dignity of one's personhood, no matter how humble.

1. The color of the Quiapo Nazarene is regarded as accidental by His devotees. He had a previous color until the fire broke out. Was it white? Understandably my consultants were silent on the matter because they assume this took place on the boat bringing Him to Manila. But it would not be surprising if they think Him to have been white, for such is the color of Christ found in most Catholic images. Significantly, Sam believes the color of even Our Lady of Antipolo, another import from Mexico, to have been different before the trip to the Philippines. Today the statue is brown, not black. Sam believes, however, its brownness came about because the statue was exposed to the wind and the sun at sea. As the patroness of the galleon, it was tied to the mast and so became sun-burnt. As noted earlier, there is a dissenting view by Olivia who thinks him to have been "Filipino" before the flames of World War II blackened him. In contrast the black color of the 11th-12th century Madonnas and some of the Spanish and Mexican Christs were intended to be so from the start.

Thus perceptions of the Nazarene's color, far from signifying a liberation from prejudices against dark features, would seem to maintain the status quo. Black is regarded as an unusual color for a holy countenance. We should note that blackness once again, as in Mesoamerica, is *not identified with the skin*. It symbolizes rather a wondrous event, in this case a miraculous weathering of fire. Having said this, however, I know that others will unconsciously identify the statue's color with that of all non-Whites and theirs. Indeed why not? Olivia's account of her feelings regarding another image of Christ indicate that blackness as a symbol can accommodate differing, even contradictory ideas.

2. Traditional black images of medieval France and Spain, of Renaissance Spain and Mexico, and of the pagan Cordillera invoke the mysteries of the soil. They are linked with societies involved in the agricultural cycle. No matter how large cities in pre-19th century, pre-industrial Europe and Mexico may have been and not matter how far-removed from actual farming their inhabitants may have been, they retained some connection with the soil. The surrounding fields were visible, many were farmers by day who lived nonetheless within the city limits, the wealthy had farmlands, yearly calendar of festivities centered on the agricultural cycle. It may be that such associations with agricultural fertility figure in the flagellations done in Central Luzon during Lent. Basilides Bautista, a filmmaker with a deep interest in documenting material culture, showed me a film clip of a farmer burying in his field his clothes that were bloodied by his self-flagellation. The patron icon of these flagellants is the Black Nazarene.

But the preoccupation of the Quiapo devotees has nothing to do with the soil. Farming is too remote a preoccupation. One can live in Metro Manila without ever seeing farmers planting and reaping. The occupations of the devotees are characteristically urban. But why fire?

Although agriculture continues to play a crucial role in the Philippines, the world of machines is what is most palpable to residents in Metro Manila today. True, the Philippines has yet to become fully industrialized. However, what the devotees experience everyday is governed by industrialism: light bulbs, fluorescent lamps, buses, cars, shopping malls, movies, factories. Running through all these as a vivifying current is electricity. It may be that the fire that plays such a central role in their notion of the Ultimate Miracle of the Nazarene is a metaphor for this invisible energy that gives life to the city today.

There is another possible layer of meaning. During the January 9 procession, thousands of bodies jostle with each other to grab the ropes and to clamber on top of the float. A steamy heat is generated that can be felt even while watching from the second floor. The Nazarene passing through the streets, enveloped by this intense heat: Fire is an appropriate metaphor.

3. The Nazarene is linked in the popular mind with the proletariat. Is this because of His color? It may not be so much His blackness but rather the fact that He is *not White*. A fair skin in Manila is associated with a upper class status, for many of the elite are of mixed origins: they have a heavy dosage of Spanish and Chinese blood. Moreover, given His immense popularity, people from the different strata of Philippine society flock to His shrine everyday and at all hours. It is obvious from clothes and mannerisms alone, that many of the devotees are not rich. Many come by jeepney and bus, not by car. They frequent the bargain stores and the street vendors ringing the church. Poor devotees find reassurance in this setting. The symbolism of skin color as an indication of a humble status seems to be common to the Philippines, Mesoamerica, and even rural Europe.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Black Nazarene of Quiapo comes from a long line of representations, both within and without the Catholic Church, that conceptualize the divine as black. However, how its urban devotees today interpret the color's significance may differ from that of the previous centuries of devotion to it. While this representation continues to be regarded as miraculous, as the source of innumerable blessings, its blackness is read as unnatural rather than natural, as the result of an accidental fire. However, it was through this fire that God's power was manifest, for His representation was unscathed. Hence this representation must be special to Him. The connection with fire needs to be explored. At one level, it seems to be the product of urbanites' preoccupation with electricity which in a very real sense gives life to the city. On another level, it may refer to the intense heat generated by multitudes of bodies competing with each other during the annual procession. The element of earth, which is so important in agrarian societies, whether in Mesoamerica or rural Philippines, is absent in the urbanites' representations. But there is an important The devotees' identification with the Nazarene may be related to the skin color (He is not-White) and the ambience of His church which daily attracts ordinary people.

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