

Black Nazarene Procession: Reading the Statement of the Voiceless

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Abstract: Subscribing to Jacques Derrida's everything-is-a-text deconstruction theory, the author reads the Black-Nazarene-devotion phenomenon as a text. In doing so, he takes into account the grammar of the text whose rules are governed by its historical, cultural, and political milieu. Ignoring such rules, the reading of the text is equivalent to inserting a square peg in a round hole.

In reading the Black Nazarene devotion, the author is sensitive to historico-political and socio-cultural themes of Philippine society. As an insider looking in, the author, with background in Philippine studies and Theology, uses participant observation, journalistic interview, literary technique and discourse analysis in his Black-Nazarene-devotion interpretation whose essence is narrated into being.

Using Andres Bonifacio, the symbolic representation of the masses and Jose Rizal, the symbolic representation of the educated middle class, as main conceptual tools in the analysis of the devotion, the author delves into the psyche of the devotees who, tired of sermons and reprimands, want to be listened to, express their protest against the elite and demonstrate their victory by their devotion to the Black Nazarene in a cryptic religious manner. Suppressed by the elite, the unfinished revolt of the masses in the lineage of Bonifacio emerges in different forms. One of which is the Black Nazarene devotion.

In the process of reading the unexpressed statement of the masses using the multi-disciplinary lens of Philippine Studies, the author surfaces many other cultural features of Philippine society.

Key Words: Popular religiosity, Black Nazarene, Andres Bonifacio, Jose Rizal, Philippine Studies

1. INTRODUCTION

It was dusk which sharply contrasted with Manila City's flickering lights, when I, with my eyeglasses on, went to the Luneta Park on January 8, 2013 to make sense out of the Black Nazarene devotion phenomenon.

Coming from U.N. Avenue, I crossed Roxas Boulevard towards the Luneta Park passing by the guarded statue of Dr. Jose Rizal. There were throngs of pious and raucous devotees lining up in labyrinth, in total disarray like buzzing bees, to kiss the Black Nazarene's image at the grandstand. Facing the grandstand the Black Nazarene devotees had but one choice - turning their backs on the hero's statue. While the devotees' turning back on Dr. Jose Rizal's statue was instinctive, it

was not totally devoid of political, social and cultural meaning.

2. THE UNFINISHED REVOLT

The devotees of the Black Nazarene, perhaps at least 90 percent of them, could not really identify with the great polyglot Dr. Jose Rizal, considered by many historians as a gradualist intellectual, the symbolic representation of the *ilustrado*. I don't need any statistics for this assertion, for it is all too obvious. In fact, they could better identify themselves with the great plebeian, the bolo-wielding Andres Bonifacio for their sheer lack of intellectual sophistication.

When Andres Bonifacio, the symbolic representation of the masses, was sentenced to death in 1897 by Aguinaldo-led *ilustrado*, the have

nots, Teodoro Agoncillo's term, became orphans – helpless, powerless, and voiceless to this day.

The differences of these two opposing social classes, the proletariat symbolized by Bonifacio and the bourgeois represented by Rizal, would constitute what Rey Iletto calls the “unfinished revolution.”

Reflecting on the death of Bonifacio under the hands of the *ilustrado*, I figured out how to penetrate into the massive crowd. I noticed that at the left side of the park facing the grandstand, volunteers with MMDA (Metro Manila Development Authority) identification cards gladly offered wheelchairs to those in need. The two ladies in their early 60s who joined me to this event gladly took the offer. Amused, they enjoyed the adventure of a lifetime on the wheelchairs. Pretending to be a caregiver of one of them, I helped the volunteers push a wheelchair. Doing so was my ticket to the grandstand, eschewing the endless line of devotees wanting to touch and pray before the image.

3. BAYANIHAN SPIRIT

At the back stage, the rite of the wipings on the protruding feet of the Black Nazarene, with soul-penetrating gaze, took place. Persons With Disabilities (PWD) were treated accordingly. Volunteers and security personnel crowded near the sacred feet like boys scouts always ready to help. Handkerchiefs, face towels, shirts, rags were hurled at the volunteers who wiped them on the Black Nazarene's feet. They were thrown back to the direction of where the owners stood. Oftentimes they landed on the wrong catchers. That did not matter. If one threw a handkerchief, sometimes it was a shirt that would come back. That was bonus. But the piece of cloth was irrelevant, for it was only a vehicle for the invisible grace to come into their souls that would help them face the rest of the year's back-breaking misery. Those on the wheel chairs who could not stand were hoisted to be able to touch the sacred feet, effulgent due to the wipings. Bayanihan spirit captured by nipa-hut paintings came to life. It was a scene of the human desire to be of service to each other and to be in touch with the divine.

An old man venerated the Black Nazarene's sacred feet with closed eyes. Hypnotized by his pious intensity, I followed him, hoping to get some light that could guide me in his devotion's

interpretation. “Can I interview you?” I politely started the conversation. He raised his voice, saying, “Do not bother me.” Pointing his finger to nowhere, he said with obvious irritation: “Ask them.” He went off into the vast sea of people in crimson.

Humiliated, I went away towards the opposite direction into the crowd. Traumatized by rejection, I asked help from the ladies, squatting under the protection of tents around the park proudly bearing the names of politicians blatantly defying anti-*epal* law.

4. VARIED DEVOTEES' MOTIVES

I approached one who was adorned with a smile. She introduced herself to me as Estrella Paz, 62 years old, from Tondo. For ten years, she went to Quiapo Church every Friday for healing. She suffered from stroke some years back. She confided to me that she was addicted to Shabu for more than forty years! She attributed to the Black Nazarene her recovery from drug addiction. She advised me to stretch my arms inside Quiapo Church on a Friday in front of the Black Nazarene and assured me, “You will get what you need.”

Looking for another friendly-looking individual, I met a candle vendor, Gloria Ayite, 65 years old. The major cause of her suffering was her husband's infidelity. After his death, she became a Black Nazarene devotee. She earned Php. 500.00 to Php. 600.00 during big celebrations. Selling candles has been her job since childhood. Her family's good health was her request from the Black Nazarene. Because of her Black Nazarene devotion, three of her five children work in Italy and two in Dubai. The millions of people joining the annual procession convince her of the devotion's value. For her, selling candles is an opportunity for business and worship.

She confided to me her misery, “We are so poor that our house is full of holes. In fact, it has more holes than walls.” But they are happy at home. They don't even lock their house, for there is nothing to steal from there. The more I listened to her, her eyes glowed even more.

Another joyful devotee who spent time talking to me was Emma de los Santos, 58 years old, with seven children, from Sto. Nino Pasay. Her prayer requests were simple: food on the table three times a day, long and peaceful life, capacity to overcome the daily difficulties, and good health.

Noticing that I was jotting down notes, she seemed to feel very important.

5. DEVOTEES BEING TIRED OF LISTENING

After the interview, I rewarded my informants with a photo opportunity. My camera turned from being a symbol of subjugation and superiority into a tool to express gratitude.

Then the Master of Ceremonies, gregarious like a winner at the grandstand, introduced Bishop Ted Bacani. Bishop Bacani's festive voice covered the whole of the Luneta Park, booming from giant speakers scattered all over the place to match the giant screens visible from various angles of the Luneta Park, and reducing Dr. Jose Rizal's statue into stony insignificance. Bishop Bacani talked about creation and ecology, but the crowd did not mind him. Calling the attention of the crowd, he would sometimes raise his voice into crescendo and punctuate his message with a loud, "AMEN?" And all he could evoke was a tired and bored desultory "amen" from the crowd. When Bp. Bacani was talking, people at various corners were praying the rosary and the novenas. The vendors went on with their business transactions.

In the midst of this massive crowd without any liturgy, it seemed that the talk of the bishop was a distraction from their profound religious experience. In spite of the profundity of his message, Bp. Bacani became a nuisance to the devotees who were tired of listening to the sermons and reprimands at the workplace. Most of the Black Nazarene devotees are either being corrected or told what to do by their employers. They do not have the strength to listen anymore. Which was why they did not want to listen to another big figure in the Church. With unexpressed statement, the devotees want to be listened to for a change. If their employers do not have the ears for them, then the Black Nazarene could listen to their woes.

Was not the execution of Bonifacio by the educated middle class tantamount to the silencing of the masses? They were waiting for someone who could represent their voice. While waiting, they wage their war, albeit in a cryptic manner. In 1953, the masses in Bonifacio's lineage triumphed with the election of Ramon Magsaysay, the idol of the masses. But it was short-lived. Their voice

disappeared in Philippine governance with his death.

6. THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Searching for more sensible explanation of the Black Nazarene devotion, I chanced upon the late Fr. Vic Cajilig, O.P., former Dean of Religious Studies at the University of Sto. Tomas. With an air of intellectual sophistication, he said, "This is a manifestation of popular religiosity of the ordinary people, minus the complication of high-brow Theology. The challenge is how to translate this devotion into virtues."

Fr. Cajilig described the crowd as a temporary collapsing of boundaries between rich and poor, young and old, men and women, etc. All are focused on the person of Jesus who willingly carried the cross.

He noticed the deeper joy of the people of simple faith. He pointed out to me the various meanings of symbols such as: the suffering face of the Nazarene which identifies with the various sufferings of so many Filipinos every day; the beautiful flowers symbolize the beauty of the hearts of the Filipino masses; handkerchief has roots in tradition, for it was used by Veronica to wipe the face of Jesus, and the cross becomes the symbol of life and not death.

He explained that the atmosphere of vast crowd coming together to pray was attractive to the less cerebral in dealing with life and religion. For instance, an ordinary person who prays to overcome drug addiction during the Black Nazarene feast feels that his prayer is concrete, powerful and effective.

I asked him, "If Jesus were present, could he have expelled the vendors as he did in the temple?" Using contextual Theology, he explained that Jesus in the scriptures expelled the vendors, because they were doing business inside the temple area. This time, Jesus would not expel them, for the venue was Luneta Park where Rizal had been shot for political reason. The significance, therefore, of the devotion at Luneta Park and in the streets is more political than religious.

Could Jesus look at them with pity for they were like sheep without a shepherd? "No" because they have been guided by the Church shepherds. In fact, the route of the procession is

well defined to avoid any untoward incident. But the route of the procession prescribed by the organizers headed by the parish priest has not been followed several times leading to a lot of injuries.

The unorganized crowd at the park without any activity gave the ambience of freedom. The devotees who were oftentimes controlled by their employers all at once became free spirits, without being told what to do.

At 9:45P.M., the talk of Bishop Bacani was over. This time a group of young people in yellow and maroon swooped in multitude, rejoicing that the talk was over. Tired and sleepy, I went home.

7. UNSUNG RELIGIOUS HEROES' REVOLT

On January 9, in the afternoon the following day, I went to the procession site alone. I waited for the grand procession to pass by near Arlegui Bridge Manila. I stood beside the Rescue Center complete with ambulances and medics. In less than 20 minutes, the whistle was nervously blown six times; meaning six barefooted people needed an urgent medical attention. All of them had either deep or shallow cuts in their soles. Like wounded soldiers, they were given heroes' attention. As in a flash of light, I realized that there is a hero in each of us, and the desire to be heroic was given a shining chance on this occasion.

All the Black Nazarene devotees, to be considered as authentic, must be barefooted. While being barefooted was an obvious sign of sacrifice, was it not also at the same time a statement against the educated middle class with plenty of shoes like Imelda Marcos?

This was the occasion for the battle of the barefooted masses against the elite to be waged in the streets, paralyzing the middle class motorists. Who can deny that the presidency of Marcos, during which Imelda accumulated more than 3000 pairs of shoes, caused the increase of the barefooted New People's Army members from the masses?

EDSA I 1986 peaceful revolt against the violation of human rights by the Marcos regime, an instrument in Cory Aquino's ascent to Malacañang, was a temporary collapsing of the wall dividing the masses and the elite.

Cory Aquino's administration, regarded as the restoration of democracy, symbolized the triumph of the elite in the lineage of Rizal. The

masses remained voiceless as ever. With Fidel Ramos, another elite representative at the helm, the masses remained in the blackness of defeat.

But the voiceless masses were capable of revolt. Armed with the ballots, they fought back. In 1998, Erap Estrada, representing the masses, became a runaway president. His representation was well thought of. He was well advised. His inauguration was held in Barasoain Church in memory of the Malolos congress in 1898. During his inaugural speech, he alluded to Bonifacio to seal his identification with the masses, saying, "Bonifacio was condemned by the *ilustrados*, by the church and by the bourgeois. That's also how I was condemned, but this is the revolt of the masses." He went on to say that the only difference between Bonifacio in 1896 and himself is that he will not be executed (cited from Locsin, 1998).

The election of Erap, a landslide victory whose credibility had never been seen in Philippine politics for more than three decades since Marcos era, was the triumph of the masses. But his ouster in 2001 by the educated middle class and the Catholic Church silenced the masses once more. They were crucified, and defeated. Their hope faded away as President Erap went out of Malacañang through the back door. Their lost voice and significance in Philippine society needed to be rescued, resuscitated.

8. THE VICTORY OF THE SUBJUGATE

The Rescue Centers were scattered all over the procession route. According to radio reports, more than a thousand were rushed to each Rescue Center, either wounded or dizzy. Falling into the manhole or being squeezed between the rope and the herd of devotees could be life-threatening. In the previous years, there were unfortunate ones who either broke their limbs or lost their lives.

The hair-raising ambulance alarm, the noise of drums, shouts and revelry of devotees, disabled being pushed on wheel chairs, policemen wearing t-shirts with inscription "Manila's finest," devotees with different hair colors and all the movements of people towards various directions without a consistent message were in need of interpretation. The procession was all about movement and the conquest of the barefooted against the pavement. The procession's meaning

can only be captured in motion but not at halt. For at the moment when they needed to stop at its final destination, the devotees, being unorganized, dissipated and disappeared into their respective stations in society.

Half an hour later, the image of the Black Nazarene emerged. There was a great commotion. Handkerchiefs were raised against the heavens, a victorious sight to behold. Then the spontaneous shout of Viva, Viva, Viva like a giant beehive made my hairs stand on end. It was eerie.

The Viva Shout was so loud it could potentially blow away one's earwax and destroy one's eardrum. It was like a giant beehive that suddenly fell from a tree and all the bees are left in midair buzzing. It created an atmosphere of enchantment, like magic. There was a mysterious attraction to it, like flies to a drop of honey.

The well off can afford to go to the Enchanted Kingdom in Sta. Rosa to be enchanted. But this one was for real. It was neither organized nor orchestrated. It was a spontaneous gathering to send off a message to the powerful: the voiceless by their sheer number can make the headlines and call the attention of the social media.

Lighted candles created a religious atmosphere in the midst of wild revelry comparable to the pandemonium at the cockpit multiplied a million times. With the help of the candle light, in a moment of clarity conditioned by the drums' victorious beat, I understood all of a sudden that the Black Nazarene devotion demonstrated in a grand procession is nothing but the celebration of victory of the subjugated, suppressed and voiceless.

The drums' beating is the sound of war victory. Life for the devotees is a warfare. The Black Nazarene devotees, neither crucified nor risen, were the victors. Their victory lies in the carrying of the cross.

What dawned on me was the religious implication of what Winston Churchill said:

I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. You ask, 'What is our policy?' I will say: It is to wage war by sea, land, and air with all our might and with all the strength God can give us. That is our policy. You ask, 'What is our aim?' I can answer in one word: It is victory. Victory at all costs. Victory in spite of all terror. Victory however long and hard the

road may be, for without victory, there is no survival.

9. BLACK NAZARENE DEVOTION AS ALTERNATIVE TO IDEOLOGY

Carried away by the sea of devotees' current, I ended up at Plaza Miranda. Its monument reminded me of the nine people who died and many others who were wounded during the bombing on August 21, 1971.

All at once my memory went back to an interview with the former Dean of the Asian Center U.P. Diliman, Dr. Mario Miclat, a former member of the Communist Party of the Philippines, who claimed he had been tasked to keep the two grenades used to bomb Plaza Miranda. In Jose Maria de Nazareno's book, *From Noon to Sunset* (Makati: St. Pauls, 2013), Miclat revealed:

Our Bayanihan spirit of mutual cooperation among and between classes for the betterment of the nation has been replaced by mutual calumny and distrust. I have been away, shame to say, but I was in the midst of it all. I, too, helped create the Philippine monster. And the monster has devoured not only me.

The CPP's bombing of Plaza Miranda in August 1971 and the subsequent killings within its ranks to cover up the crime were nothing but monstrous. They were crimes against humanity. Communism not only tries, but indeed does devour its own children.

This was the theory of the Communist Party of the Philippines: if the liberal party which was against Marcos were bombed, the prime suspect would be Marcos. Then the masses would be angry with Marcos. That would be the ripe time for the Communist Party of the Philippines, with the support of the masses, to launch a fatal blow.

With the failure of communism, the promised political messiah, the masses were disillusioned. In their hearts, communist ideology

is dead. It should be buried in the crowded graveyard of ideology together with their proponents.

The Black Nazarene devotion, devoid of ideology and stripped of the Catholic Church dominance in the production of religious meaning, gives the masses the chance to be heard of and felt. Disenchanted with communism, elite supremacy and the institutional church, the masses look for alternative answers to life's mysteries and miseries in the Black Nazarene, carrying the cross.

10. PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Inside Plaza Miranda square, I chanced upon Tom Macawili, 64 years old, originally from Samar. He fought his way to be able to carry the Black Nazarene image. He stowed away at the age of 16 to look for a greener pasture in Manila. Blessed with five children, his primary request from the Poon: good health and solution to family problems. He summarized the value of the devotion of the millions of devotees joining the procession: "These millions of people would not have come back, had they not received anything from the Poon."

Moving closer to Quiapo Church, I met Deng Ildefonso from Sta. Cruz Manila. Selling t-shirts, calendars, fruits, he whispered to me that the Muslims in Quiapo tolerated the frenzy of the procession because it is a business opportunity.

He revealed to me that before he became a vendor, he was hired by policemen in Quiapo to collect Php. 2.00 from each jeepney driver who picked up passengers along prohibited areas. He had a daily collection of around Php. 500.00. Forty percent, Php. 200.00, went to the policemen's pockets. Sixty percent, Php. 300.00, was his.

A widower with four young children, Ildefonso was now living with a separated woman with three children. When he joined the Couples for Christ, he met somebody who trusted him with a capital without interest to start a small business. He left the job of being a collector of "grease money" under police protection.

He noticed that each year, there is a growing number of young girls joining the crowded procession. He surmised that they must have something important to ask from the Black Nazarene, for they don't mind being touched in their private parts by the opportunistic amorous men.

He explained that the number of devotees soared high in 2004 when Quiapo Church celebrated the 400 years anniversary of the Black Nazarene devotion at the Luneta Park. The vigil in the evening became more inviting to people which explained the yearly increase of devotees. He observed that being barefooted is a sign of respect for the Black Nazarene. And the barefooted devotees are in turn respected by their fellow devotees.

Carriers of the Black Nazarene image were not allowed to bring wallets, for there are so many pickpockets, which explained why people carry their backpacks in front of their chests.

When I finally reached the vicinity of Quiapo Church, I saw ladies scattered all over the place with placards proclaiming their expertise in palm reading: business, job, school, marriage, love life, etc. Others advertised: Psychic power, tarot card, *feng sui*, etc.

There I discovered that production of meaning or knowledge is not limited to the academic institutions. Quiapo candle vendors, with little education, produce knowledge. The candles they sell come in different colors with corresponding meanings: peach for exams and studies, pink for love life, orange for success, violet for wealth, yellow for soul, brown for travel, and black for conscience.

All of them are easily understandable except black which stands for conscience. Being trained how to form consciences in the seminary, I thought that black was for the proper formation of conscience. But I could not impose my interpretation, otherwise I would not be faithful to my informer's meaning system. So I asked her the black candle's meaning. She explained, "If you are unjustly treated by your boss, humiliated in front of others, or accused, you can light black candle for her so that, bothered by conscience, she would not be able to sleep."

Thinking of the relationship between a black candle and Black Nazarene in the devotees' system of meaning, I went to harbor square across from the Cultural Center of the Philippines just a few meters away from Luneta Park. It was evening. The devotees, silent this time like scattered bees on their way to the beehive, disappeared into the dark, into their hovels. At the harbor square, I was out of place. I was the only one wearing crimson, the signature color worn by the Black Nazarene devotees.

At the end of that long procession, the event's meanings and readings were produced. On the one hand, the participants went home to continue their daily war against misery in silence. On the other hand, politicians - always ready with their promise of giving voice to the voiceless - figure out how to successfully identify themselves with the masses who, like bees, can sting bad during elections. Their success in identifying themselves with the masses could mean winning their votes - the honey of the masses.

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