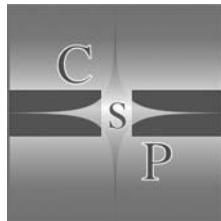


Transmission Image

Transmission Image
Visual Translation and Cultural Agency

Edited by

Birgit Mersmann and Alexandra Schneider



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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BIRGIT MERSMANN
AND ALEXANDRA SCHNEIDER

CULTURAL TRANSMISSIONS
AND THE MISSION OF IMAGES

During the Mars mission of 2001, a high-resolution stereo camera took extreme close-ups of the red planet which were then transmitted back to Earth. The German magazine *Stern* spoke of the intimacy of these strange pictures. In the process of viewing them, a “transmission image” unfolded, in which information and knowledge about the hitherto unknown, about otherness and alien worlds, are seen to be transmitted via images.

Images are the first source and primary medium for transporting alterity and making distance approachable. However, transmission means more than transportation through space and time. The word “mission” signals that the act of transference is not performed without intention; there is something behind it, a task, a calling, a manifest interest, a mandate. Like the photographs of the Mars missions, through which concrete political, economic and scientific interests and objectives are pursued, other images are also not restricted to a passive, mediating role. They are not only circulated by visual media, they also actively disseminate what they contain. The transmitting effect of images can be far-reaching: they bring something with them, they pass it on and bequeath something; they are infectious because they move us as they continue to move. In this regard, W.J. T. Mitchell’s provocative but serious question: “What do pictures want?” gets to the heart of images. Images are not produced in a no-man’s land, and they do not circulate without purpose—as is often stressed in the context of the globalization debate. Images are directional forces; image transmissions also entail a transference of power. When we speak of “migrating” images, we have to be aware that these simultaneously emigrate and immigrate. Because they are man-made, produced by cultures and societies, nations and states, they not only serve as messengers, they also transmit essential components of their cultural, social, and national identities. It is crucial that this

anthropological and cultural aspect be added to the media aspect of image transmissions.

La *médiologie*, a French movement of media studies, took both aspects into consideration. Régis Debray was the first scholar to differentiate explicitly between communication and transmission. His delineation is based on a linguistic and semiotic argument:

“In terms of its maternal ties to the mass-media, communication primarily stems from the universe of linguistic signs or related ones (as the language of music or the language of film), while transmission includes, on this side of the verbal or beyond it, many other supports of the senses: gestures and locations, as well as words and images, ceremonies and texts, the corporeal and the architectural, the intellectual and the moral.”¹

Images are, alongside other supporting media, important transmitters. Moreover, transmission presupposes bodies. This is particularly true of image transmissions, because images are produced within, and transmitted via, individual and corporate bodies. Debray continues,

“transmission is communication optimized by a body—whether an individual or collective one—in both the sense of ‘this is my body’ and of ‘these are the corporate bodies’. If communications are characterized by immediacy, directness, joy and transitivity, transmission is neither immediate nor impersonal. More likely, it is an interpersonal relation, technically equipped, but with a machine interface which is not a sufficient precondition. Consequently, we deal with communication as an act, but with transmission as a process, in the form of a procession (in Greek: *paradosis*, passed on by tradition).”²

Transmission unfolds a historical continuum through which culture is formed and defined. Within this process, images are materialized representations of the collective memory. Loaded with culture, they become cultural transmitters themselves and are automatically involved in cross-cultural encounters. Because transmission includes the dimension of symbolic and cultural transference, it is destined to play the leading role within intercultural image- and media-transfer processes. In this regard, *Transmission Image* is thought of as an attempt at and a methodological tool for grasping the migration of images not only in between cultures but specifically in between imaging cultures, tracing the paths of their transmittance, and determining moments of admission and denial.

¹ English translation by the authors. Debray (2000), p. 9.

² Ibid., p. 4.

Attention will be directed toward the points of contact, to intersections and “third spaces” which come into being when images and visual media immigrate into a representational system with a differently codified image and media culture. A number of complex questions arise in conjunction with a consideration of images as transmissions of culture: What kind of contact ensues between local image traditions and practices and imported ones, regardless of whether these have been imposed or received voluntarily? How do non-Western cultures make use of Western images and visual media? How does the relationship between image and medium shift during the transmission process? Which forms of interpictureoriality emerge? Which visual media serve as crossing points in the development of new transcultural image codes and image genres?

Processes of image-culture transmission are subject to power politics related to representational sovereignty, be it in the conflicts between centre and periphery, global and local, Western and Non-Western authority, or in the confrontation between so-called “traditional” and “modern” image culture. A certain conspiracy between cultural transmission und cultural hegemony is uncontested; transmissions run the risk of slipping away into mistranslation or, at the worst, of becoming tyrannical representations.

Although it is very difficult to get a handle on performative processes of image culture transmission and to determine the cultural displacements, distortions, transformations, overlappings and amalgamations within “iconomics,” *Transmission Image* tries to take up this challenge. In order to do justice to the enormous transformation potential that is inherent in image-cultural transfer processes, and thus not to constrain their dynamics, transmissions shall be treated as operational strategies. Transmigrating, transmogrifying, transubstantiating, transpiring, transplanting: these present participles reflect this operational approach which integrates movement, procession and transformation.

The book is divided up into three sections. The first section, *TRANSPIRING: IMAGES AS AGENTS OF POLITICS, RELIGION AND KNOWLEDGE*, opens with an essay by Peter Bräunlein, a scholar of comparative religion. His “Image Transmissions as Image Acts” traces the spread of Christianity in the Philippines via the spread of emotionally charged images of the body of Christ. While scholarship on religion has privileged the study of texts over images for a long period of time, Bräunlein shows that Christianity is as much an imaged-based as culture a text-based religion. Thus, “the processes of becoming Christian are also imagological and emotional”.

Religious imagery also constitutes the focus of the next article, “Spreading the Word with Ink and Brush”, by Sinologist Simone Griebmayer, about the emergence of a distinct tradition of Christian art in China. Having overcome the virtual extinction of Christian culture during the “Cultural Revolution”, since the 1980s Chinese Christians have sought to establish a new understanding of Chinese Christian culture. Adopting a broad historical perspective, Griebmayer traces this new “awareness of the possibilities of inculturation in Christian Art” back to the first Christian missionaries in China.

Anne von der Heiden, a scholar of media and cultural studies, raises the theoretical question as to whether the image of Ahasver in modernity could be seen as a model of pictoriality per se. The image of the Jew, especially in modernity, is marked “by the suspicion that Jews elude any clearly pronounced physiognomic determination of their image, and are capable of forever transforming and changing while staying always the same.” The image of the Jew carries a charge of potentially dangerous instability which is related precisely to this elusiveness, but which also “might give us insight into the distinctive feature of images”, i.e. their infinite oscillation between the determinate and the indeterminate.

The last contribution focuses not on religious imagery but on medical imaging. In “Cultures of Knowledge”, media scholar Markus Buschhaus treats anatomical knowledge as “knowledge gained by pictures as well as knowledge about pictures, thus pictorial knowledge” and concludes that “if to transmit means to organize, then to organize means to know”, thus highlighting the crucial role of images in the production and circulation of knowledge about the human body.

The second section, TRANSMOGRIFYING: IMAGES AS INTERCULTURAL TRANSMITTERS brings three case studies of Asian art together with a philosophical essay about the concept of cross-cultural picture theory. In “Theme Park Europe”, film scholar Alexandra Schneider explores the use of Swiss landscapes in commercial Hindi cinema, better known as Bollywood cinema. She argues that in Bollywood films, images of real locations in Switzerland are treated like painted scenery in a studio. In that sense, they are neither fully assimilated nor fully transculturized images. Rather, they are shifting surfaces for cultural projections.

Making a similar point in her essay “Transcultural Imaginology”, Birgit Mersmann, a scholar of German literature and art history, observes how integral parts of Western image cultures were absorbed into East Asian image cultures without triggering serious iconoclashes or identity crises. Mersmann bases her argument on a discussion of Modern Korean

Art. Forced by their Japanese colonizers to open toward the West in the early twentieth century, Korea vehemently rejected Western culture in order to reinvent its own national culture in relation to, but also as distinct from, both imposed cultures. Commenting on the complex image transfers involved in this process, Mersmann concludes that

“there are grounds for the assumption that the non-existence of a subject-object dualism in East Asian culture,³ the transpositive mobility of I(dentity) and the inter-flow of personal relations, all [...] act as predispositions for and promoters of inter- and transculturalism.”⁴

The last case study in this section deals with the reception of Hong Kong movie stars by Western and Asian audiences, showing how transnational Chinese cinema challenged the established binary opposition of “East” and “West”. In his essay “What Do We See When Leslie Performs?” Sinologist Martin Gieselmann tells the story of how Chinese actress Gong Li became part of the transnational Chinese film market, and how her “transnational” female characters challenged the conventional aesthetics of female screen roles in the cinema of Mainland China.

The section concludes with “Obsessive Pictures in Motion”, an essay by the philosopher Iris Därmann on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s pictorial ontology. Därmann argues that Merleau-Ponty postulates a kind of seeing “which is not due to the subject’s own power but comes from the foreign approach to the things themselves,” a “raw or rather wild perception [...]”. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, at the moment of his writing, modern European painting has found its way back to this “wild being” and “wild perception,” and as “wild being” and “wild perception” enables our own culture “to be connected to other cultures.”⁵ Drawing on these arguments, as well as on examples of primitivism in modern European art, Därmann concludes by highlighting the broad cross-cultural range of Merleau-Ponty’s pictorial ontology.

The last section of the book, *TRANSMIGRATING: MASS MEDIA IMAGES AS GLOBETROTTERS*, opens with art historian Hans Belting’s contribution on “Art in the TV Age”. Belting critically discusses a number of paradigms of art history, as well as art as a critical and social institution, in order to come to terms with recent global developments in the art world. In

³ Compare Jullien (2003).

⁴ Mersmann, in this book, p. 119.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1960), p. 151.

particular, he claims that “[f]or the Non-Western majority, Western type exhibition art does not matter at all, whereas for the Western audience, nothing matters but art.” At the same time, the recent deconstruction of modernist ideas in postmodern theory seems to have eased the pressure of having to be modern as a national mode for Non-Western cultures and to have “opened the door to new conceptions where hybridity offers an escape from national identity.”⁶

But the effects of this process are being felt in the West as well, “where homogeneity, as it was propagated, is breaking down”; the growing presence of Non-Western art in the West is a case in point. Meanwhile, “the matter of identity lingers on and now seizes the self-expression of Western artists to almost the same degree” as it previously did that of Non-Western artists.

The following contribution deals implicitly with Belting’s major question, “How Western is Western art?,” though from another vantage point. In his essay “NEWS FROM EUROTOPIA”, Beat Wyss traces a failed image transmission between pre-war Europe and the post-war USA, i.e. within the West. When Bauhaus artist Moholy Nagy’s book *Vision in Motion* was published posthumously in the USA in 1947, it failed to attract the attention of American critics. In the years leading up to the book’s publication, Moholy-Nagy had “failed to notice a growing reluctance in New York art circles to continue adhering to any European *Diktat*.” On a more general level, Wyss argues, the political persecution of the avant-garde in Europe had obscured “the fact that their visions would have failed anyway—as they did in the United States, where [people] were free to think what they wanted.” Instead, popular culture triumphed, and its importance is still growing, while “Modernist *Eurotopia* faded away, as did the old notion of Europe after the devastation of the war, when faced with the irresistible glamour of the American way of life.”

Moving beyond the realm of art, in his contribution “Travelling through ‘Damascus’”, Asko Lehmuskallio brings into focus another important institution for the cross-cultural transmission of images: that is, tourism. From the vantage point of the cultural anthropologist, Lehmuskallio examines the image of the city of Damascus as constructed and circulated in, and through, official pictures produced for tourist consumption, and addresses the conflicting relationship between picture production and actual experience along the way. The two concluding essays of the volume focus on the process of collage as a technique of

⁶ Belting, in this book, pp. 169–183.

“transculturizing” or indigenizing, if you will, transmitted images. In “The *Titanic* in Northern Nigeria” anthropologist Heike Behrend, a specialist on media in Western Africa, discusses a 2003 remake of James Cameron’s 1997 Hollywood film *Titanic* by the Nigerian director Farouk Ashu-Brown, “a cross-cultural remake in which language, cultural traditions, and narrative differ greatly from the ‘original’.” Behrend reconstructs the ways the Hollywood film is modified in order to attract local audiences and conform to “the local social, religious and cultural values that mediate the ways through which video as a technology has been accepted and shaped.”

Finally, in her essay “In Aladdin’s Cave”, cultural theorist and art critic Nancy Adajania presents a case study of digitally manipulated photographic portraits that constitute a “newly available visual reality” in urban India. In the process of digital manipulation, existing photographs are

“colorised, restored or retouched, or otherwise combined with extraneous pictorial elements—including stock landscapes, architectural details, props, costumes, body parts, deities or symbols extracted from the print media and the Net [...]”⁷

As Adajania stresses, the results of this process are hybrid or composite, “free-floating images that subsume their originals to the point of overwhelming them”. While they preserve a nominal trace of their reality, these images relocate the people portrayed “within an imaginary realm determined by conceptions of economic and cultural mobility.” Thus, they serve to remind us “that the work of the imagination can take place even in the most unpromising locations, without (in both senses) the canonical sanction of the academy and the gallery.”

This book would have never been launched without the intellectual, organisational and financial help of many people and institutions. We would like to express sincere thanks to Hans Belting, the initiator, supporter and continuous companion of the *Transmission Image* project; Martin Schulz, the coordinator of the Graduate School “Image, Body, Medium. Anthropological Perspectives” at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe, together with Peter Seel and Sven Arnold from the House of World Cultures in Berlin who—by generous organisational and financial means—strongly endorsed the international conference of the

⁷ Adajania, in this book, p. 239.

same title which took place at the House of World Cultures in Berlin in 2004; Maureen Roycroft-Sommer and Annette Spreitz who have carefully proofread and formatted the manuscript; Angelika Böck who was so freehanded to provide her artistic work *StillePost* for the book cover, as well as all other artists, collectors and persons who gave kind permission to reproduce images. We are last but not least grateful for the expert editorial assistance we have received by Cambridge Scholars Press.

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PART I:

TRANSPIRING: IMAGES AS AGENTS OF POLITICS, RELIGION AND KNOWLEDGE



Fig. 1: Angelika Böck: *StillePost*, 1999.

StillePost,¹ a work by the artist Angelika Böck, perfectly visualizes the idea of transmission as a passage and procession, especially against the background of intercultural image transfer, the movement from image to image that Bruno Latour captured with the notion of the cascade of images and *iconoclashes* between images. It demonstrates the processes of change to which images are subject on their migrations; it reveals the displacements that take place when images immigrate into a representational system with a differently codified image culture. By sequentializing the route taken by the migrating image, and by marking its stations, the artist makes the displacements of culture, space and time visually comprehensible. The installation consists of five wooden portrait sculptures and five portrait photos, each printed on textile support. Every single bust is positioned opposite the portrait of its sculptor. The sculptures were produced

¹ Literally: *Silent Mail*. The game referred to is called “telephone”: a message is whispered from one ear to the next, usually taking on new meanings as it is misunderstood.

according to a “Silent Mail” principle: Only the first bust was fashioned after the living prototype. The artist herself sat for a traditional sculptor who usually produces ritual objects for his village. The first bust served as a model for the second sculpture, which was produced in another village, and the second one served as a model for the third one, which was produced in a village even more distant from the original place, and so on. Every woodcarver was asked to produce a perfect copy of the respective prototype. This experimental configuration was conceived in order to answer the following question: How would the busts change in correspondence with the growing distance from the initial position of the original and from the original itself? The results show how the portrait of a Western woman was transformed in its migration from place to place, and from picture to picture, to eventually become an African sculpture which shows absolutely no trace of its Western origin. The passing on of the image visualizes the assimilation of a hetero-image into the auto-cultural imaging system—a process which takes place on an inter- and intra-cultural level. Not only do Western and African image cultures collide—an iconoclasm primarily inflamed by the unequal relationship of prestige between original and copy—but there is also a collision within African image culture itself between different local image traditions and practices. This double configuration not only shows the transmissive and transgressive impetus of images, but also the limits of their translatability. Images evolve in conjunction with cultural history and they are imbued with local influences. Although they are permanently migrating, they have a place which they refer back to by identifying or dissociating. Because of that, every change of place involves a change of perspective, be it inter- or intra-cultural. [BM]

PETER J. BRÄUNLEIN

IMAGE TRANSMISSIONS AS IMAGE ACTS:
CHRISTIAN IMAGES, EMOTIONS
AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION
IN THE PHILIPPINES

Christianity is basically understood as *the* scriptural religion; a religion, which presents a book, the contents of which are made known by preaching and listening. The truth of Christianity—and of every other ‘book religion’ as well—can therefore only be found by deciphering the Holy Scriptures, so the religious experts insist. The scientific approach to religions was philological for a long time, imitating the theological endeavour of biblical exegesis.

Besides holy texts, most religions, however, also offer an extremely rich visual cosmos, consisting of architectural works, sculptures, statues and paintings of saints, prophets, teachers, demons, angels, mythical animals, monsters, gods and goddesses. Most religions have various forms of performative expression at their disposal, such as theatre, festivals, pageants, processions, commemorations, liturgical rites and rituals etc. Apart from external visible images, there is also the vast space of internal imagery. It may be a truism that religion expresses itself in texts, images and actions, but the scholarly treatment of religions has exclusively (and astonishingly) privileged the study of texts over a long period of time.

If we regard Christianity not exclusively as a text-based but also as an image-based religion, it is worth asking how the visual universe was perceived and transformed wherever it was transmitted to non-Western cultures by missionaries. The set of core images—a half naked baby representing God’s incarnated son, a crucified male adult representing the odd idea of a sacrificed God—is anything but transparent or easily understandable, let alone cross-culturally acceptable.

The global spread of Christianity is usually measured by the countable success (or lack of success) in conversions to Christianity. In counting converts, however, we know nothing about the dynamics of how world-

views, the moral universe, social relations and concepts of supernatural beings changed.

In my paper I propose to consider the spread of Christianity as the spread of emotionally charged images of Christ's body. The history of religions in general was and has always been connected with the history of the human body, its senses and emotions. With this emphasis on image and body in the global history of Christianity, I would like to direct the analytical view to the fact that processes of becoming Christian (or Muslim and Buddhist alike) are mainly imagological and emotional. Growing up and learning to be religious has little to do with an ongoing scholarly dispute over enigmatic passages of holy texts. From early childhood on, becoming a believer means participating in rituals and dealing with powerful, sometimes overwhelming images. Via images, both external and internal, fierce or merciful other-worldly entities become "real" in a specific way, as do concepts such as paradise, hell, good, evil, beauty, violence, suffering, love, salvation, damnation, death and eternal life.

Religions have to be emotionally plausible, and in order to make the core messages of the textual canon plausible, they must be translated into powerful images. The intimate connection between pictorial text-interpretation, emotions and devotional practices is highly relevant for the history of Christianity in Western culture, but also in non-Western cultures.

In my paper, the Christianisation of the Philippines serves as an example by which the work of religious image-transmission can be studied in a specific cultural and historical context.

It was already during the period of first contact in the encounter between the new religion, Iberian Catholicism, and the indigenous religion of the inhabitants of a Southeast Asian island archipelago that a particular image of Christ played a key role. Interestingly, in the very moment of first encounter, it was not a suffering Christ, but Santo Niño, Christ the child as king, which became the famous object of religious negotiations.

Christ the Child King

When the Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan landed and claimed the territory for Spain and King Charles in the year 1521, he soon befriended the local ruler Raja Kulambu of Limawasa Island. With the help of Kulambu, Magellan persuaded the ruler of the island of Cebu, Raja Humabon, and his wife to become Christians. On April 14, 1521 Magellan presented the image of Christ the Child, as well an image of Mary and a

Cross to Humabon's wife in order to initiate her baptism. She was delighted and as Pigafetta wrote in his journal, "was overcome with contrition and asked for baptism amid her tears". After the Christian initiatory ritual, in which she was named Juana, "she asked to give her the little Child Jesus to keep in place of her idols, and she went away".¹ Two weeks later Magellan was killed in a battle and the Spaniards left the archipelago. For more than forty years, Juana's village and the Child-Christ, were not visited by the Spaniards.

The Santo Niño statue, the beloved new idol, which found its place among its indigenous relatives in the Raja's home, was the product of Flemish artisans: a wooden statue of an upright standing child, 30 cm tall, dressed in precious clothes, shrouded in a velvet coat, a plumed hat (a Flemish red velvet bonnet) on its head, in its left hand a globe with a little cross on top, the right hand raised in blessing. This image of the Jesus-Child with its imperial insignia, was, so the hagiographic tradition goes, a recent invention, authorised by a vision of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), one of the most eminent mystics of the Counter-Reformation era. Thus, the vision of the Jesus-Child as king reflected perfectly the ambitions of the Spanish crown in the age of European expansion.² It is therefore not surprising that the devotion to the Holy Infant image successfully developed in the process of 'refashioning Catholicism'³ in Spain, and from there across Europe and beyond.⁴

¹ Tenazas (1965), pp. 21 f.

² In his book on 'The World of Catholic Renewal 1540-1770', Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia (1998) shows that the voices of female mystics became publicly more and more audible due to their visionary capabilities. Teresa of Avila has developed a lively interest in the colonial and missionary endeavors of the Spanish crown. She felt the burning desire to bring God's message to the heathens from a young age. Conquering the world was therefore a persistent venture with both politico-military and missionary-visionary aspects.

³ Bireley (1999).

⁴ It was due to the efforts of the Carmelite order, to which Teresa of Avila belonged, that devotion to the Holy Child spread all over Europe and finally beyond. Since this piece was brought from Spain to Bohemia, Santo Niño de Praga, the miraculous child of Prague, became the center of European, and finally worldwide Santo Niño-devotion, starting in the first half of the seventeenth century. The Sto. Niño of Cebu began its career over a century earlier. Later, the Infant of Prague also arrived in the Philippines together with the Carmelite order. The Carmelites and also the Redemptorist Fathers fostered the devotion of this image there. Until today, however, the two images were and will always be distinguishable. Cf. Nemeč (1959); Tenazas (1965).

At the end of April, 1565, forty-four years after the violent death of Magellan, another Spanish expedition entered Cebu harbour upon the suggestion of the Viceroy of Mexico, King Philip II. The Cebuanos, however, were hostile and the head of the expedition, Miguel Lopez de Legazpi, and his men skirmished with them. The village was set on fire and practically all houses were burnt. The day after the skirmish, a soldier named Juan Camus, found the image of Santo Niño unburnt. According to the sources, as historian Rosa Tenazas shows, the image was found in a box, covered with a white cloth.

“The tip of its nose was somewhat rubbed off, and some of the original paint was coming off its face. Otherwise, the image was perfectly preserved. But as regards its original garments, it seems that only its red velvet bonnet (red Flemish hat) was intact. We may surmise that the image’s clothes were apportioned among devotees as relics, for when found, the Santo Niño was dressed in the native style and material. Hanging about its neck was a necklace of peculiar make with a small cross attached. Aside from the clothes, only the cross which is generally on top of the globe that the Infant holds in his left hand was missing.”⁵

The Spanish settlement, which was built later, was named ‘City of the Holy Name of Jesus’ (Villa del Santissimo Nombre de Jesus) in remembrance of the unharmed image of the Infant Jesus, who became the patron saint of the village. The Spaniards constructed the monastery of the Holy Name of Jesus and the Holy Child was entrusted to the Augustinian Fathers.⁶ Legazpi ordered the transfer of the Santo Niño to the very first church on this island. In a grand procession, the figure was transferred from a temporary chapel made of bamboo to the new church. Chronicler Juan de Medina wrote in his history of the Augustinian order (1630):

“The whole fleet took part in it and carried the ornaments that they could. The Most Holy Child was carried in this procession to our house, and placed on an altar as decently adorned as was possible in that early period. The first mass of those islands was celebrated there, with more spirit and devotion than music and splendour. At its conclusion, all took a vow to celebrate annually the feast of the finding of the relic [...]. A confraternity of the Most Holy Name of Jesus was then established with the same rules as that of St. Augustine in the city of Mexico.”⁷

⁵ Tenazas (1965), pp. 27 ff.

⁶ Noone (1986), p. 322.

⁷ Medina [1630] (1893), quoted in Tenazas (1965), p. 29.

During the seventeenth century the church was reduced to ashes twice, but each time the miraculous child was rescued from the ruins.

The career of little Señor Santo Niño as a dominant Christ image of the Philippines is astonishing. From north to south, the Holy Child can be found in thousands of variants, placed not only in churches and chapels, but also on small altars in restaurants, stores, offices and private homes. Only Christ the Victim, with whom we will deal later, has nearly the same visual presence in this country. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2: Local variants of Sto. Niño images. Left: A Niño on a house altar. Right: A street vendor with a Sto. Niño statue for sale. Malolos, province of Bulacan. Photos by the author, 1996.

The Holy Child devotion in the Philippines was officially propagated for good reasons. The history of the Child-Christ represents the triumphalist history of Christianity in the Philippines:

“[T]he first baptism of the whole archipelago, the first Christian procession and festival in the Philippines, the first Christian church erected in the

archipelago, and the first Spanish settlement established in the archipelago, all these originated in the name of the Santo Niño.”⁸

The 400th anniversary of the finding of the Holy Child in the year 1965 was celebrated as the fourth centennial of the Christianisation of the only predominantly Christian country in Asia. The image was transported from Cebu City to the capital, Manila, by Philippine Airlines. Right in the centre of the Philippine nation, the image served the purpose of reconfirming Philippine Christian identity.

Most obvious is the use of the representative capacities of Santo Niño in church policies. Does this, however, explain the enormous attraction of the image among the common Filipino people? What do they perceive when looking at the Holy Child? Are they moved with pride for belonging to the Catholic Church? Do they consider the infant with the globe as the victor over heathendom? It may be, but probably not.

A closer look at the devotional practices is revealing. The condition of the image at the moment of its rediscovery in the year 1565 gives us some hints. The rubbed nose and the peeled-off paint on the infant's face hint at the practice of touching parts of religious images, which is very common all over the Philippines even today. By rubbing the saint's head, foot or hand first and then one's own related body parts, healing power is transferred and, more importantly, a sensual, intimate contact to the image is established. The Flemish Santo Niño was, without doubt, highly appreciated due to its resemblance to the traditional idols, called *tao-tao* (manikin), *bata bata* (great-grandparent), or *larawan* (image, mould, model). Such idols, as William Henry Scott in his reconstruction of sixteenth-century Philippine culture and society states, were kept in homes and served as guardians of family welfare and as the first recourse in case of sickness and trouble.⁹ The affective devotion to the Santo Niño was even more intensified by the simple fact that it was a little child. Going into rapture by rubbing or even pinching babies is very common and culturally permitted in the Philippines. The unknown, and therefore “exotic”, naturalistic mode of the cute *tao-tao* of the foreigners increased the delight and the appreciation of the Niño.¹⁰

⁸ Ness (1992), p. 63.

⁹ Scott (1994), p. 86.

¹⁰ When I brought my two-year-old blond-haired, pale skinned son to the Philippines, the observable reactions to him by ordinary Filipino people were all too often stereotypical. In moments of inattentiveness on the part of myself or his mother, all available soft parts of his body were squeezed and rubbed, accompanied

Besides this private treatment of the Santo Niño as a member and guardian of the family, the Niño was celebrated in public by means of parades and processions, which originated in Cebu and became known as *sinulog*. Anthropologist Sally Ann Ness who studied its kinaesthetic and visual symbolism detected three forms of the *sinulog*: a healing ritual, a dance drama and a cultural exhibition dance. All the forms are visual, bodily expressions of Santo Niño veneration, which convey statements about local and national identity, past and present, commercial and spiritual power, society and the individual. Santo Niño, manipulated by parade dancers, becomes a vessel for different meanings and concepts: it is an object of public religious devotion, a tourist attraction and thereby a financial gain for the commercial community. The procession transmits a spirit of cooperation and ‘Cebuano-ness’. It facilitates physical experiences of sacrifice and prayer, and it displays and influences general concepts such as “beauty, formality, sincerity, gratitude, and mercifulness”.¹¹

Starting with the first encounter, the foreign Santo Niño was treated as an orphaned deity. The survival of the image in the indigenous setting, free of missionary control for over 44 years, favoured the unique potential of the image to be appropriated and translated into local contexts for diverse spiritual needs and purposes. New origin myths emerged. One of the most popular narrates how the image arrived in Cebu as a piece of firewood in a fisherman’s net. During the night, by the hut of the fisherman, the burnt wood was transformed into the figure of a little child.¹² In such a myth, which exists in several variants, and in so many other legends about the miraculous Niño, his Spanish origin is nearly made invisible.

Sally Ann Ness emphasises the “high degree of fluency in the translation of the Niño back and forth between foreign and local cultural terms, as well as the remarkably permanent residential status in the provincial city of Cebu”; a process in which the “Niño image emerged as an ideal symbol of Cebuano regional ethnic identity and, on certain occasions, as a symbol of Philippine national identity.”¹³ During the struggle for national independence, the members of the Katipunan

by yells of exaltation. Oftentimes they called him Niño, and it was especially the colour of his skin and the nose, which caused admiration and enthusiasm.

¹¹ Ness (1992), p. 130.

¹² Tenazas (1965), pp. 56 ff. When the image was found in Cebu, it was ebony black; the myth explains the mahogany colour. For further examples of the rich Santo Niño folklore see Tenazas (1965), pp. 54–77; Eugenio, ed. (1996), pp. 74–87.

¹³ Ness (1992), p. 78.

revolutionary movement used “Long live the Katipunan! Viva Santo Niño!” as their rallying cry to counter the “Viva España!” of the Spanish troops.

The attractiveness of the image of Santo Niño in the Philippines rests on its potential as an iconic messenger of God Almighty, but also on its capacities for emotional transformation. In the image, conflicting hierarchies and power relations are dissolved, at least for a moment.

While its royal bearing and adornment clearly conveyed messages about the hierarchies and power structures that it was frequently employed to reinforce in the society at large, the image nevertheless also represented the hope and the destiny of meek and vulnerable social figures to belong as well, during a moment of miraculous reflection, to the highest ranks of the Philippine omnipotent.¹⁴

The dwarf-like nature of the image, its smallness, was and is its weapon, not its weakness, as Ness comments:

“Its minuscule scale effected a magnification of the space around it, creating an almost tangible aura of greatness in its chapel. It was at once a tiny and an immense presence, and it was its very tininess that intensified its immensity. To approach the Santo Niño was to confirm and grasp enormity in a profoundly intimate way.”¹⁵

The Christian conversion of the archipelago was, as Ness stresses, “largely a result of (...) ‘saint-centered’ religious activities”.¹⁶ The encounter of local spirits with the saints of Iberian Catholicism resulted in an amalgamation, but could also produce a “clash of spirits”, as Filomeno Aguilar phrased it.¹⁷

We must emphasise that the transmission of the new religion was a process of image transmission. The history of the global spread of Christianity is not only the history of ideas and doctrines; it is also closely connected with the history of image transfer, visual communication and the media. This holds true especially for the era of Iberian expansion. Counter-Reformation Catholicism is characterised by its valorisation of visual media and the visual imagination in general. In his ‘global history

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 59 f. Ness refers in a footnote (p. 247) to Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *Savage Mind*, in which he “notes the capacity of miniatures to condense and simplify the quality of the objects they represent, and to facilitate the comprehension of a complex object in so doing.”

¹⁶ Ness (1992), p. 74.

¹⁷ Aguilar (1998).

of Christianity', David Chidester points to the fact that when Ignatius of Loyola declared his militant mission to the world, he "also introduced a reformation of the imagination" by inventing techniques of visualisation and working with mental imagery, emotions and the internal senses.¹⁸

The Spanish missionaries coming to the Philippines were, of course, fully aware of the power of images and they tried to control their interpretation and related devotional practices. In the case of Santo Niño, control did not work well, if at all. The indigenous take over was favoured by the fact that there is no authoritative scriptural reference to Christ as a boy of four or five years of age. From a biblical perspective, Sally Ann Ness mentions, "the Santo Niño was something of a blank slate" and was therefore "uniquely suited to being made over in such a local fashion, regardless of what ideological purposes might be served in so doing and for whom."¹⁹

Christ the Tragic Victim

The process of the translation of the Niño into the local culture occurred without reference to textual authority. It was, instead, authorised by indigenous myth and legends. The image of Christ the tragic victim, another equally important religious image in the Philippines, was adopted in a different way. While Santo Niño was a 'blank slate' icon, the image of Christ the victim arrived with a detailed narration of suffering, torture, sacrifice and murder. Since the High Middle Ages, when Christ's fleshly body became the central image promoted by theological and devotional emphasis, religious sentiment in the West has been generated, modelled and channelled through depictions of Christ's suffering. The biblical text is translated into pictures, and consequently into emotional reaction.²⁰

¹⁸ Chidester (2001), p. 355.

¹⁹ Ness (1992), p. 75.

²⁰ It was Christ the resurrected king and not the suffering human being Jesus who was the central image during the first one thousand years of the history of Western Christianity. In the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, however, a spiritual change took place. The political, oftentimes heated and bloody struggle of the church for complete independence from secular control was accompanied by a thorough moral reform of the clergy. Since that period, the story of Christ's torture and killing has become the master narrative of that religion, and the instrument of his execution, the cross, represents the core of Christianity. The fascination with the wounded body and the murder of the founder of Christian religion is intimately connected with the cultural history of the West. McGinn et al. eds. (1987); Constable (1998); Beckwith (1993); Nirenberg (1997), pp. 16–25.

In the context of non-European cultures, the image of Christ the Victim had to remain enigmatic without knowledge of the biblical passion story. The understanding of the textual narration, however, depended upon its translation into the vernacular.

The first translation of the story of Christ into Tagalog, the language spoken in Manila and the neighbouring provinces of central Luzon, was the *Doctrina Christiana* in 1593, followed by *vocabularios* and *devocionarios* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the beginning of the eighteenth century another religious text genre appeared, the *Pasyon*. The first ascertainable *Pasyon*, published in 1703, was written by the Filipino Gaspar Aquino de Belen, who worked as a printer in the Jesuit *Imprenta de la Compañia*. Belen's *Pasyon* is a 980-verse poem, which narrates the passion and death of Jesus, supplemented by the author's own exhortations to Christian virtue.²¹ The *Tagalog Pasyon* by Belen served as the model for further passion poems that have appeared in diverse languages of the archipelago like Iloko, Pangasinan, Kampampangan, Ibanag, Samareño, Bikol, Hiligaynon, and Cebuano. In 1814 the Tagalog narrative called *Pasyon Heneis* or *Pasyong Pilapil* was published. It was influenced by Belen's *Pasyon*, but widened the frame of reference. The *Pasyon* poem is not a translation of the biblical story in a philological sense, but rather a peculiar interpretation, which expands the spatial and temporal frames of a reworked passion story. The *Pasyon Heneis*, which became the most popular and influential up to the present, covers the following sequences: "(a) from Creation to the Deluge, (b) from Mary's conception to the Annunciation, (c) from the infancy of Jesus to his Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, (d) Mary's Death and Assumption, and (e) Empress Helena's discovery of Christ's Cross, and the Last Judgement."²² The narration is interrupted by *aral*, short didactic comments, which explain the moral value of a particular episode. The biblical story is therefore contextualised in the life-world of the ordinary people by the *aral*.

In the nineteenth century the *Pasyon* became the most widespread text form in the Philippines.²³ The tremendous popularity of the *Pasyon* was a result of the ritual chanting of the text, called *pabasa*. The chant is usually done *a capella* in a *bisita*, a small chapel, in homes, on street corners or in a temporary shelter. The *pabasa* is held during Holy Week, oftentimes as a

²¹ For the history of the textual tradition of the Filipino *Pasyon* see Javellana (1988) and Lumbea (1968).

²² Francisco (1993), p. 86.

²³ Tiongson (1976).