

## Image and Identity: A Study on the Images of the Virgin Mary Clad in a Local Dress in the Philippines

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### Introduction

This art historical and iconographical study on the images of the Virgin Mary dressed in a local or ethnic dress in the Philippines forms part of a comparative study on the images of Mary in Asia. It explores the multilayered culture and identities of individuals and societies in the Philippines through the creation and the meaning of such images found in modern and contemporary art, and in popular religious images in the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Studying images of Mary in an Asian dress could help us understand “changing identities and their social, historical and cultural contexts”, which is the API theme for the year 2011-2012, because a dress shows the wearer’s identity, and the traditional or national costume especially represents the tradition and uniqueness of a culture or a country. Also, faith and devotion expressed through religious images form part of the culture and the people’s identity. This study hopes to cast new light on Christian iconography in Asia for a multilateral understanding of localization and contextualization.

### Methodology

This research was done under the API Fellowships Program granted to the author by The Nippon Foundation. The research period spanned a total of eight months or from October 2011 to May 2012, during which the author conducted field research in the Philippines as a visiting research associate (VRA) at the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC) of the Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU) in Quezon City, Metro Manila. During the fellowship period, the author was mainly based in Manila, but went on several research trips to other regions including Palawan, Iloilo, Guimaras, Negros Occidental, Bohol, and Cebu.

The study was carried out using three methods: library research of literature on related themes, and of historical or contemporary documents on religious art and the images of Mary; observation and documentation of art works and religious images in museums and churches; and interviews of individuals such as artists, researchers, religious leaders, and devotees. These interviews were conducted in English, which is widely spoken in the country.

The objects of the research were images of Mary among Christian lowlanders of the Philippines, including art works housed in museums, and devotional images enshrined in churches.

### Backgrounds

First of all, who is Mary? The mother of Jesus Christ, she lived in Palestine 2000 years ago. Ever since the early days of Christianity she has been venerated. Many of her images were created across the history of Western visual art, among them beautiful Madonna by Renaissance masters and exquisite Byzantine icons. The Western iconography of Mary has become so familiar and universal that we no longer even think that these are the images of Mary interpreted and expressed in a particular culture and time or that they are her Europeanized images.

Now, what are the images of Mary in a local dress in Asia like? The images of Mary expressed in religious art (paintings, sculptures etc.) as a local woman in a local dress are found in many countries/regions of Asia including the Philippines, Japan, China, Korea, and Vietnam, especially in modern times. Before modern times, there had been localized images of Mary. In Japan, for example, sacred images of crypto-Christians (Christians in hiding during times of persecution) were localized due to their lack of knowledge on iconography and their need to disguise their faith. But the reason and

idea behind localization in modern times seem to be different from the pre-modern cases.

The localized features of each image of Mary have a different background. For example, Our Lady of Lavang from Vietnam, venerated since her apparition in 1798, began to be rendered as a Vietnamese lady in a local dress (*áo dài*) in 1998, to reflect the people's consciousness of their ethnic identity and the yearning of Vietnamese Catholics in the US to integrate Vietnamese ethnicity into Catholicism (Ninh 2011). On the other hand, the Japanese style paintings of the Madonna and Child dressed in kimono painted in a Carmelite monastery in Tokyo started out as a painting on thank you cards for foreigners who had helped the monastery soon after World War II (Vita Cattolica 2006). An element of self-orientalist motive can be seen in this. In both cases, the relationship between the creators of the image and the other seems to have played a certain role in the localization of the Marian image.

Why a local dress? This could be because a national or ethnic dress is considered as the representation of cultural identity in the modern nation state. The national dress is usually re-created at the time of the birth of the modern nation state, as a symbol of the authenticity of its tradition and culture. And, often, images of a woman wearing an ethnic dress function as the symbol of tradition or the metaphor of a nation. This is true in the Philippines (Roces 2008).

Still, in most cases, the identity and culture represented in an ethnic costume are not "pure" in the essentialist sense but rather, are "hybrid". This is typically true of the Philippine lowlanders' dress which has developed over time to reflect many cultural elements like pre-colonial Malay traditions, and colonial and Western influences (Capistrano-Baker 2009). The traditional women's dress of the lowland Filipinos is called *baro't saya* which consists of *baro*, a short blouse with wide sleeves made with a thin fabric and often embroidered, and *saya*, a long skirt, often accompanied with a *tapis*, a wrap-around over-skirt, and a shawl, known locally as a *pañuelo* or *alampay*. Another type of

dress in the Philippines is the *terno*, a one-piece long dress with distinctive decorative sleeves called "butterfly" sleeves. The men's national costume is the *barong tagalog*, a long-sleeved shirt made out of a thin fabric crafted from pineapple fiber called *piña*. The *barong tagalog* usually has embroidery in the front.

Various previous studies on Mary in the Philippines have been made. One is "Mary in the Philippines" (L. Santos 1982) which documents aspects of the Marian devotion in the Philippines. It features many images and stories including localized images such as the *Virgin of the Barangay*, and localized Madonna made by modern and contemporary artists. Another study is "*Ynang Maria: A Celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Philippines*" (Barcelona and Estepa 2004), which features the 36 titles of Mary venerated in the Philippines. It defines her as "*Yna*" (Mother) based on the strongly maternal orientation of Philippine culture.

On the other hand, feminist scholars like Flaudette May Datuin (2012) argue that in the Philippines, the image of the Virgin has served as a symbol of patriarchal control of the woman's body, whereby women are put in their place as mother and as virgin. Datuin (2009), a feminist art historian, specifically refers to localized Madonna painted by male artists and says "Ocampo's Brown Madonna wears a perpetual, Kodak moment smile, festooned with the signature *baro at saya* attire of the pristine virgins or dalagas of an idyllic, timeless countryside. She is the ideal Filipina—ever fragile but with a healthy, rustic tan, virginal, virtuous and confineable within a domestic, asexual space of contented motherhood". She also wrote that "the emblematically clothed Filipina Mother is permanently dressed in Culture, wearing ornaments and clothes of stereotypes that transcend history".

At the same time, of course, there are empowering elements of Mary. Sr. Mary John Mananzan (2012), a Filipino Catholic activist, said "Feminist theologians have re-interpreted the role of Mary. They take Mary as an example of a strong woman and mother who can be the model of modern Filipino women in courage and service to people. Her song 'Magnificat'

is a freedom song that can be the inspiration for women and men who struggle with the poor and against the oppression and injustice of those in power”. To her, Mary is “a simple, ordinary woman with whom ordinary women can identify in all the aspects of their lives”.

### History of Marian Images and Devotions in the Philippines

Before we look into the localized images, let us review the background and history of images of Mary and Marian devotions in the Philippines, the land known as *pueblo amante de maría* (a people in love with Mary).

Christian faith was first preached in the Philippines in 1521 when Ferdinand Magellan (1480-1521) landed on the archipelago, planted a cross, had a mass offered, and converted the local people. After Miguel Lopez de Legazpi (1505-1572) conquered Cebu and built the foundation for the colonization of the Philippines by Spain in 1565, Spanish friars converted the lowlanders to Christianity. Now, about 83% of the population is Catholic and the devotion to Mary is very popular.

The oldest image of Mary in the Philippines is believed to be that of the *Nuestra Señora de Guía* (Our Lady of Guidance) enshrined in Ermita church, Manila. Legend has it that a soldier of Legazpi found it along the shore of Ermita in 1571, soon after the conquest of Manila. The image was said to have been on a pandan tree where it was venerated by the local people, which means, it had been there, venerated by the people, even before the coming of the Spaniards (R. Santos 1994). There are several other theories about the origin of this image, with some claiming it to be of oriental origin.

Thereafter, many images of saints including Mary were brought from Europe or Latin America, or were made locally. One of the early documents narrates that the missionaries had Chinese painters paint images and “...thus almost all the churches in the islands were adorned with images, nearly all of which were of Mother of God” (Chirino 1604).

The author would like to suggest that the iconography of the images of Mary venerated in the Philippines today can be generally classified according to their origin and style, as follows. It is important to note that there are so many images of Mary under different titles that it might seem as if there were many Virgins, when, in fact, they are all the same person, though in different dresses and bearing different names.

### Images in Spanish style

Most of the images made during the colonial period are in the Spanish style, particularly the Ibero-Baroque style of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Many of them have a distinctive triangular silhouette garment (Fig. 1). Zobel (1963) classified the Philippine colonial *santos* (images of saints) into the popular, classical, and ornate styles.



Figure 1 A typical Spanish style Marian statue

The Spanish style images may have different origins.

a) Images brought from Spain during the colonial era.

For example, the image of the *Nuestra Señora de los Desamparados* (Our Lady of the Abandoned) in Sta. Ana, Manila, is a replica of the original statue in Valencia. It was blessed by contact with the original statue before being brought to the Philippines in 1717 (Laya 2008).

b) Images brought from Latin America

Some images in the Spanish style were made

in Spanish Latin America during the colonial period and then brought to the Philippines. For example, the *Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buen Viaje* (Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage) in Antipolo, Rizal, was made in Mexico. It traveled in a galleon over the Pacific Ocean between Manila and Mexico, during the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Mercado 1980).

#### c) Images made locally

Some images were made in the Philippines by local artisans who followed the instructions of friars. While these were done in the Spanish style, some local elements were evident in them. For example, the statue of Our Lady of the Rosary, popularly known as La Naval de Manila and enshrined in Sto. Domingo Church, Quezon City, was done by a Chinese Filipino ivory carver and has some oriental elements (Jose 2007).

### Images of Mary of Apparitions

Images of Mary of Apparitions which surfaced from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe are now venerated not only in Europe but also worldwide, including the Philippines. This group of images includes those of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal (France, 1830), Our Lady of Lourdes (France, 1858)



Figure 2 A statue of Our Lady of Lourdes on a street in Manila

(Fig. 2), Our Lady of Fatima (Portugal, 1917), The Lady of All Nations (Netherland, 1945), etc.

### Various images newly introduced to the Philippines

There are some images newly introduced to the Philippines though they have had a long history of veneration in their countries of origin. Typical of this is the Mother of Perpetual Help, which is the most popular Marian devotion in the Philippines today. In many places we can see reproductions of this image, which is a Byzantine style icon of Mary holding the Child Jesus. The image's wide and enthusiastic popularity continues till today, although the Redemptorist fathers are said to have first introduced it to the Philippines in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The practice of the novena (nine-day prayer) to the Mother of Perpetual Help started in the late 1940s (Hechanova 1998).

### Images originated in the Philippines

There are images of Mary that originated in the Philippines. These include the Queen of Peace of the Edsa Shrine in Metro Manila, and the Mary Mediatrix of All Grace in Lipa City, Batangas. "Queen of Peace" is one of the universal titles of Mary, but the Queen of Peace at the Edsa Shrine is closely associated with the political and historical memory of the People Power revolution of 1986. The image of Mary Mediatrix of All Grace is based on an apparition of Mary that occurred in 1947 to a Carmelite novice in Lipa. While these two images do not necessarily look Filipino, their origin is local. Images of Mary in a local dress, which we will see in the next section, also fall under this category.

### Others

#### Images of Mary in a local dress in the Philippines

Compared to images of Mary of European-origin, there are not too many localized images of Mary. For example, during the 2011 Grand Marian Procession, an annual Marian feast held in Intramuros, Manila, only one image among 89 floats, each carrying an image of Mary under a different title, was in a local dress.

The tradition of Western-origin iconography remains very strong, so much so that it is hard for most people to imagine Mary's devotional images in churches and altars to have local features. This is true even if there are more localized non-devotional Christian images such as the nativity scene in Christmas cards, or Madonna and Child themes presented as artistic expressions.

Notwithstanding this seeming scarcity, the author was able to encounter several localized images. Here we focus on and discuss five distinctive images out of those.

(i) *Virgen sa Balintawak (Virgin of Balintawak)*

The first image of the Virgin in a Philippine dress was most likely that of *Virgen sa Balintawak* of the Philippine Independent Church in 1924 (Fig. 3). It is a statue of the Virgin wearing a balintawak dress. The Philippine Independent Church is a Christian sect that became independent of the



Figure 3 Artist unknown, *Virgen sa Balintawak*, 1924, Maria Clara Church, Manila (from *Pagsisiyam sa virgen sa Balintawak* by G. Aglipay, 1925, p. 43)

Catholic Church in 1902. It was then led by Gregorio Aglipay.

According to legend, *Virgen sa Balintawak* first appeared in a dream of one of the Katipuneros (members of the revolutionary society Katipunan) staying in a place called Balintawak during the time

of the revolution against Spain in the 1890s. In the dream, the virgin was with a child *Katipunero*, who stood beside her shouting “Freedom! Freedom!” while carrying a *bolo* or a sword in his hand. The virgin supposedly gave a warning to the dreamer to the effect that they act with caution; the Katipuneros’ eventual decision of staying longer in Balintawak saved them from arrest in Manila. The title “Balintawak” here stands for both the name of the dress the virgin is wearing and the place where she appeared in a dream.

This statue was installed in Maria Clara Church in Sampaloc, Manila in 1924. Aglipay (1925) wrote that “The Virgin at Balintawak is the mother country”, while the child *Katipunero* represented the people anxious for the freedom. During that time, the Philippines was under American rule and the people were prohibited from displaying the national flag and talking about independence. They were able to do that only in churches, largely because of the separation of Church and state. The shape of the halo of the Virgin of Balintawak is reminiscent of the rays of the sun in the Philippine flag.

The devotion and novena to the *Virgen sa Balintawak* were popular from the 1920s to the 1940s but after the war, they became less popular as the Church became less nationalistic. According to a devotee, Leo Albano (2012), who is a member of the Philippine Independent Church, however, the Virgin’s message remains relevant today. For while the Philippines is no longer under foreign rule, there still are suppressions within the nation. He says that the *Virgen sa Balintawak*’s message is this: “You won’t be suppressed forever”. She supposedly promised freedom from all kinds of suppression which the Filipino people and society face until today.

(ii) *Brown Madonna by Galo B. Ocampo*

The first localized image of Mary in the Philippines by a Catholic artist is a painting titled *Brown Madonna* (Fig. 4). Done by modernist Galo B. Ocampo in 1938, it is now housed in the UST Museum of the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. In this painting, the Madonna and the Child, depicted



Figure 4 Galo B. Ocampo, *Brown Madonna*, 1938, oil on canvas, 89.0x73.4cm, UST Museum, Manila

as Filipinos clad in Philippine dress stand against a Philippine landscape. Rather than a devotional image, this is a work of modern art.

When this painting was first exhibited at the University of the Philippines Library, it drew criticism from the conservative Catholic sector. But when it was exhibited in Baguio from April to May in 1938, it attracted the favor of Monsignor Joseph Billiet, Apostolic Prefect of the Mountain Province, who was the first from the religious community to praise the painting. “Much attracted to the Brown Madonna, he [Billiet] spoke very highly of it and would encourage further artistic efforts to represent religious subjects in the mould of the native mind” (The Sunday Tribune Magazine 1938).

The work shows the artistic influence of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), a French Post-Impressionist painter who painted a Tahitian Madonna, “*La Orana Maria*” in 1891. By way of explanation of the suggestion that the Brown Madonna was following the artistic tradition of Western Christian art, Ocampo said “I painted the Brown Madonna myself, getting the idea from such classical artists like Rafael [Italian Renaissance master] who used local maidens as his models for the Madonna. So why not the Filipina for the Madonna?” (Paras-Perez et al. 1973)

Ocampo’s Brown Madonna is significant not only as one of the earliest localizations of the image of Mary, but also as one of the important pieces in Philippine modern art. After Ocampo’s painting became known, many modern artists painted their versions of local Madonnas, producing such works as *Madonna of the Well* (H. R. Ocampo 1939), *Madonna of the Slums* (Vicente Manansala 1950) and *Madonna of the Bamboos* (Carlos Francisco 1962).

(iii) *Virgen sang Barangay (Virgin of the Barangay)*

The original image of the localized Virgin called *Virgen sang Barangay* (VSB) is enshrined in the National Shrine of *Virgen sang Barangay* in Silay City, Negros Occidental. It was conceptualized by Antonio Gaston, the mayor of Silay City and the founder of the *Barangay sang Virgen* (BSV) Organization. He wanted to have an image of Mary as the patroness of the organization, but he had a hard time finding an appropriate image. Finally, in 1954, a painting done by a leprosy painter in the Sta. Barbara leprosarium in Iloilo was approved. A *barangay*, which is the Filipino term for a village or town, is the smallest administrative unit in the Philippines. The *Barangay sang Virgen* is a rosary movement whose activities are based in *barangays*. The organization seeks to spread Christian values through the rosary devotion to Mary.

In the *Virgen sang Barangay* painting, Mary is carrying the Child Jesus who is holding a rosary. The background of the painting consists of the sky at dawn, the sea, and the coastline with woods in the background. On the foreground are the seashore and nipa huts. Mary is wearing a white veil, a white blouse (*baro*) with butterfly sleeves, a long white skirt (*saya*), and a red and yellow striped overskirt (*tapis*) (Fig. 5). Each motif in the painting stands for something. For instance, the colors red and yellow in Mary’s over-skirt symbolize the Spanish flag, because it was Spain that evangelized the Philippines. The rock at the foot of the Virgin symbolizes the firm faith of the Filipino people; whereas the *sampaguïta* (jasmine), a fragrant white flower, is the national flower of the Philippines (Barangay sang Virgen 1999).



Figure 5 Crisogono Domingo, *Virgen sang Barangay*, 1954, oil on lawanit board, 95x65cm, National Shrine of the *Virgen sang Barangay*, Silay City

The devotion to the *Virgen sang Barangay* spread with the rosary movement and is popular especially in the Visayas region. Replicas of the original painting and statues based on the image are popularly venerated in many places like churches or home altars. Many stories of miracles including healing from illnesses or protection from accidents have been attributed to the Virgin's intercession (Infante 2012, Fernandez 2012). This indicates how people seek and find answers to both their physical and spiritual needs from her.

(iv) *Our Lady of the Philippines*

There are three images of Mary under the title, *Our Lady of the Philippines* (OLP).

*Our Lady of the Philippines* first appeared as the titular saint of the Trappist monastery in Guimaras. The first image was made in Spain and brought by American priests to the island, when they established the monastery in 1972. This first image was not that of a Filipina. Then in 1997, Fr. Filomeno Cinco, Filipino abbot of the monastery, conceptualized a localized version. He asked an *Ati* (indigenous people) craftsman from Guimaras to make a statue using local materials such as coconut shells and wood, and told him to visualize “what a Filipina mother should be”. The face of OLP now

depicts an *Ati* lady, but the dress is not Filipino (Fig. 6). According to Cinco (2012), the idea behind Filipinizing the Mother Mary is this: “Mary is for all. She belongs to all of us. She is the mother of us all. It is important especially in this age of globalization, the people can identify with the images of Mary”.

Another newly localized version of *Our Lady of the Philippines* came into being in 2004 in Manila (Fig. 7). The original painting of *Our Lady* was commissioned by a pious devotee, who wished to be known only as “The Pilgrim”. The 2004 work was done by artist Caloy Gabuco. The image was approved by the cardinal/archbishop of Manila, and an enlarged mural was officially installed in the Sta. Potenciana chapel at the Manila Cathedral in May 2011.

The Pilgrim's version of *Our Lady of the Philippines* shows a young Filipina mother standing, while holding her child. She wears an embroidered white blouse (*baro*) and skirt (*sayo*) with a colorful striped over-skirt (*tapis*). Unlike many of the conventional images of Mary, she does not have accessories—no crown, no veil, no golden halo. The image projects simplicity and intimacy.



Figure 6 An *Ati* craftsman, *Our Lady of the Philippines*, 1997, coconut shell and wood, *Our Lady of the Philippines* Trappist Abbey, Guimaras



Figure 7 Caloy Gabuco, *Our Lady of the Philippines*, 2004, watercolor on drawing board, 30.5x45.0cm, private collection

According to The Pilgrim, the messages of Our Lady of the Philippines focus on the regeneration of the Filipino people and the protection of the environment.

The Pilgrim is deeply concerned about social issues such as political corruption and environmental destruction, and wishes to make people conscious of these concerns through a devotion to Our Lady. That she is for the Filipino people is depicted by the colors of her over-skirt, which are those of the Philippine flag (white, red, yellow and blue). The Pilgrim and his son (2012) are promoting the devotion of Our Lady of the Philippines but it has yet to become widespread.

(v) *“Filipina Madonna” series*

A series of paintings of the Filipinized Mary has been produced by the Society of St. Paul in Makati, Metro Manila. These were painted by Fr. Armand Tangi, the society’s art director, who studied Fine Arts at the University of the Philippines. In the painting *Queen of Apostles* from the series, Mary is wearing a white translucent Filipino blouse with distinctive butterfly sleeves that make the image look Filipino (Fig. 8). But at the same time, the image itself of Mary holding the Child Jesus who has a scroll of the Good News, is based on the traditional iconography of the “Queen of the Apostles”.

The artist (2012) says that the idea behind his Filipina Madonnas is that “Mother Mary is everywhere, in all nations. “ He also said, “Filipino mothers are very caring, loving and sacrificing. Her love is without condition...” and, “In the same way, Mother Mary is here with us”.

**Conclusions**

From the findings above, we can say the following about the images of Mary in a local dress in the Philippines:

- i) They were found only after the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite the long tradition of the Marian devotion in the country, which dates back to the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. This late development is probably because of the fact that the Filipinos’ awareness of their cultural identity and Filipino cultural value gained ground only after they strove for independence at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the case of the Filipino Catholics, the Church’s favorable attitude towards localization in modern times may also have played a role in the Filipinization of images of the Virgin Mary.
- ii) The localized images of the Virgin Mary are associated with the freedom and protection of the Filipino people, from the current conditions of suppression and social difficulties. These are particularly evident in *Virgen sa Balintawak* and The Pilgrim’s version of Our Lady of the Philippines.



Figure 8 Armand A. Tangi, *Queen of Apostles*, 2002, oil on canvas, 24”x36”, artist’s collection

- iii) The localized images are associated with the maternal love and the ideal mother realities in the Filipino culture, as seen in Fr. Cinco's version of Our Lady of the Philippines and Fr. Tangi's Filipina Madonna series.
- iv) They are mostly expressions by Filipinos for the Filipinos themselves, rather than reactions to the eye of exoticism from the other, i.e. self-orientalism.
- v) They are not meant to replace other images (Western images) of Mary. The people's understanding is that the Filipinized Mary is the same person as its Western counterpart, except that it is differently clad. For example, Catholics who are devotees of the Virgin in a local dress are also often devoted to other titles of Mary such as Our Lady of Fatima, which is not a Filipinized image.

As we have seen above, this study collected information and data of images of Mary in a local dress in the Philippines, and has tried to discuss them in the context of localization and identity. It is hoped that this study lays the groundwork for further research and analysis in a broader light, to consider the localization of images of Mary not as something merely exotic and strange to the eye which is so used to Western iconography, but as expressions of a people's yearning for freedom and salvation through spontaneous expressions of identity and cultural values embodied in the Virgin Mary whom devotees regard as the mother of all nations who identifies with the people.

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