

Traslacion @ Roblox: The Pandemic and The Emergence of A Virtual Black Nazarene Sacred Space

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Abstract: The current corona pandemic left the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene with no other choice but to cancel this year’s *Traslacion*, the most prominent ritual-performance of the annual January 9 feast. In response, a group called El Cofrade RBLX created *RO Traslacion 2021*, an interactive Roblox game that simulates the mammoth January 9 procession. Designed primarily as an on-line educational tool for young Catholics, many of the participants saw *RO Traslacion 2021* as an alternative Quiapo, a digital sacred space where they can express their adrenalin-filled devotion to the Black Christ. The six-hour online game was generally well-received by religious authorities and mainstream media outlets, both praising its well-defined catechetical component, the amount of research and create work involved, and the novelty of providing an alternative sacred space for devotees.

Keywords: Black Nazarene, Roblox, corona virus pandemic, sacred spaces, popular devotion

Introduction

There are several forms of devotion to the miraculous Black Nazarene of Quiapo, but it is the annual *Traslacion* that truly captures the imagination of people. For the urban masses who form the vast majority of devotees, it is this raucous procession that is at the pinnacle, the crowning glory of the most prominent Christo-centric devotion in the Philippines. Participated in by millions of jostling, shouting and fainting devotees, the dramatic *Traslacion* is the most stupendous display of Filipino popular religiosity (Aguinaldo, 2002).

The cancellation of the *Traslacion* this year was initially met with resistance (particularly from the ranks of *Nuestro Padre*’s most fanatic devotees). The Basilica of the Black Nazarene however cannot afford to take the risk and allow the very physical *Traslacion* to become a super-spreader of the corona virus. Eventually, the majority of devotees accepted the cancellation as a necessity, a justified sacrifice of a centuries-old tradition to avoid a feared spike of Covid-19 cases in Manila.

It is said that necessity is the mother of invention. A year into this pandemic, one cannot help but marvel at the outburst of creativity despite our quarantined existence. A group of young men who call themselves the Filipino Catholics of Roblox (more popularly known as El Cofrade RBLX) saw the cancellation of the *Traslacion* as an opportunity to think outside the box. This was the genesis of *RO Traslacion*, an interactive virtual simulation of the procession hosted by Roblox (a popular online gaming platform).

This paper delves deeper into the significance of this on-line game in redefining the sacred space of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo. In particular, the study attempts to shed light on the following issues:

1. The rationale behind the creation of the game.
2. The unique elements of this virtual sacred space.
3. The challenges encountered by the creators during the live-streamed game of January 9, 2021
4. The response of devotees, church authorities and the media to this novelty.

Methodology

The author utilized a descriptive-analytical research design for this preliminary study. Because the research was done at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the researcher relied heavily on on-line modalities to gather related literature, conduct interviews, and to observe recorded videos of the *RO Traslacion 2021* simulation, two other simulated processions hosted by El Cofrade Roblox.

The researcher also utilized a transdisciplinary approach in analyzing the data. More emphasis is given on the confluence of historical, anthropological (ritual and sacred space), and socio-psychological (in this case Jungian) currents observed in both the actual Traslacion ritual and its virtual counterpart. The following section provides the reader with a short primer on the Traslacion procession through the lens of these disciplines.

Results and Discussion

Traslacion as Ritual, Manila as Sacred Space

The *Traslacion* is an annual procession commemorates the transfer of the miraculous image of the *Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno* from the Church of San Nicolas Tolentino (Intramuros) to the Parish of San Juan Bautista in Quiapo. Most historians agree that this solemn transfer happened sometime in the late 18th century during the feast of the Most Holy Name of Jesus (January 9). The exact year is still the matter of debate (Austria, 2012; Zialcita, 2018).

The focal point of this procession is a 17th century statue of the *Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno*. There were in fact two such images in the Recoletos Church in Intramuros. The first one is the older Mexican statue that was venerated in the said church until 1945 (when it was destroyed during the Battle of Manila). The second one is a younger variant (also of Mexican provenance) enshrined near the entrance of the Recoletos. Both images share the same miraculous reputation and associated oral traditions. It is with certainty however that the second statue was the one transferred to the once prosperous pueblo. Since then, Quiapo Church became the undisputed home of the cult of the

Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno in the Philippines (Austria, 2012; Zialcita, 2018).

The traditional ritual field of the *Traslacion* was once co-terminus with the geographical boundaries of Quiapo. There are sites of higher importance within this vast sacred space: the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene, Plaza Miranda, and the San Sebastian Church (for the traditional Dungaw ritual). Since 2006, the ritual-field was expanded to include parts of the Ermita (particularly Rizal Park and the old civic-center), Binondo, and Santa Cruz districts. There are two reasons behind the expansion of the procession's route. First, church authorities wanted to commence the procession near the original home of the Black Nazarene (Intramuros). Second, to allow more space for the ever-growing number of devotees to participate in the procession (Austria, 2012).

Up until the early 20th century, the *Traslacion* was very much a very solemn procession participated in by Quiapo's elite and middle class. Further research is needed to establish the exact moment in history when the procession began to acquire a predominantly working-class, masculine character. The organized chaos that defines the modern *Traslacion* seems to be the norm by the 1920'-30's. Since then, the *Traslacion* developed a complex hierarchy of brotherhoods (called *balangay*), composed mainly of men coming from the current working-class districts of Manila [particularly Quiapo, Tondo, Sampaloc and Santa Cruz] as well as those from neighboring Quezon City, Malabon, Caloocan, Navotas and Pasay (Austria, 2012; Calano 2020).

At first glance, the *Traslacion* procession seems to be more of a physical confrontation than a religious procession. Closer observation reveals that it is a "ritualized tug-of-war" between the three major performers of the ritual. On top of the hierarchy are the *Hijos del Nazareno* (or simply *hijos*) who serves as the bodyguards of the sacred image. They are also responsible for directing the conduct of the main body of the procession. Then follows the *mamamasan*, men who are also affiliated with Nazareno balangays, and are trained to pull / protect the long abaca ropes attached to the wheeled carriage of the *andas*. Both the *hijos* and the *mamamasan* represent the ordering *Xenex* archetype in the equation---the institutional church (Austria, 2012).

The majority of participants are simply known as *debotos*, mostly men (and an increasing number of women) who made private vows to the Black Nazarene but are not officially connected with any of the recognized brotherhoods. Most of these devotees are willing to risk life and limb just to be able to touch the miraculous image and the abaca ropes (which for them are extensions of the Senor's physical presence). From a Jungian perspective, they represent archetypal "Puer-spirituality": passionate, unbridled by rules, free-spirited and child-like (Carl Jung Circle Center [CJCC], 2020).

Sparks are sure to fly when these two opposite sides collide. It is interesting however that it is precisely the clash between the *Xenex* (represented by the *hijos* and *mamamasans*) and *Puer* archetypes (the zealous *deboto*) that gives birth to the defining characteristic of the *Traslacion* as a complex ritual-performance---"organized chaos". It may not be obvious at first glance, but the balance between these two forces is responsible for the dynamism that makes the procession so interesting. Without the ordering function of the *hijos* and *mamamasans*, the procession of the Black Nazarene may degenerate into a riotous, pseudo-Catholic affair. A *Traslacion* without the zealous *deboto* will strip the procession of its unique spontaneity and vitality (CJCC, 2020; D. Villazor, personal communication, January 28, 2021).

A Devotion Adjusts to the "New Normal"

When the Covid-19 pandemic reached Manila in early 2020, the operations of practically all public institutions were disrupted ---including houses of worship. As the country's most visited Christo-centric shrine, there was pressure on the part of the Basilica of the Black Nazarene to re-organize its policies to comply to the "new normal". The shrine's deliberate shift to on-line modalities is not at all unique. Other centers of popular devotion (like the Marian shrines of Manaoag, Antipolo, and Santo Domingo-QC) turned to social media within the first few days of the pandemic in the Philippines (Durbanova, 2020; Sotelo, 2020)

Since the Basilica of the Black Nazarene has a well-established new media arm years before the pandemic, the shift to on-line modalities was a relatively easy. The holy sacrifice of the mass, novenas, rosaries and other para-liturgical services are livestreamed via the basilica's Youtube and Facebook accounts. During the latter part of 2020, the Philippine IATF began to relax restrictions and

allowed public religious services. Since churches are not allowed to accommodate worshippers beyond 10 % of its sitting capacity, the vast majority of Catholics participate services livestreamed through major social media platforms. A year into the pandemic, it seems that the Basilica of the Black Nazarene has completely adjusted to live-streamed services as an intrinsic part of its "new normal".

When it became apparent to church authorities that the pandemic would be around for a much longer period, Quiapo Church had to make drastic changes for the 2021 festivities. Apart from the livestreaming of votive masses and novenas (which has become the norm), church authorities also implemented new policies to encourage devotees to stay at home on January 9, 2021. The most prominent of these measures is the "de-centralization" of the Nazareno festivities (Morales, 2020, Patinio, 2020)

For much of its history, the Basilica encouraged the faithful to go personally to Quiapo Church or the Luneta Grandstand to personally venerate the icon of the suffering Christ. This is a direct affirmation of the tactile nature of popular devotion to the Senor: one's panata is deemed incomplete unless one is physically present in the Nazareno's well-defined sacred space. The 2021 was the direct opposite: church authorities encouraged each parish in the Philippines to conduct their own Nazareno festivities. But these parishes must make it sure that their localize festivities conform to IATF restrictions (Patinio, 2020)

The Basilica also had a "reversed pilgrimage": the Nazarene's statue will be the one to visit his devotees. From January 1 to 8, the official replica of the Black Nazarene went on tour to visit selected Marian shrines in the Archdiocese of Manila, as well as those found in the neighboring suffragan dioceses of Antipolo, Malolos, San Pablo, and Imus. The de-centralization of Nazarene festivities and the reversed pilgrimage both point to one message: *at this point in history, it is not necessary to go to Quiapo physically to show one's devotion to the suffering Christ*. There were fears that the relaxing of restrictions on public gatherings during Christmas season of 2020 may cause a sudden spike in Covid cases by January 2021. The Church certainly did not want to be blamed for a second wave of infections (Patinio, 2020, Morales, 2020).

The tactile nature of the ritual-performances for the Black Nazarene feast are at odds with the current need for social distancing. To prevent the occasion from turning into a super spreader of the virus, major traditional rituals must be sacrificed for the time being. As early as February 2020, church authorities no longer allow devotees to wipe, touch, or kiss the original image or any of the replicas within the shrine premises. This ban also includes all the statues of Mary and the saints enshrined in the various side chapels of the church. The grand *pahalik* (normally held at the Quirino Grandstand on the eve of the feast) attracts thousands of devotees from all over the country. The thought of all those people waiting for hours just to kiss the feet of the beloved Senor is indeed an awe-inspiring sight. But in a time of pandemic, it can become an epidemiologist's worst nightmare.

While there was hardly any resistance to the banning of the *pahalik*, the cancellation of the *Traslacion* procession was received with mixed reactions. Some avid devotees were disappointed that church authorities are more than willing to cancel what they believe to be the main ritual of the Black Nazarene feast. From a theological perspective, the real apex of the January 9 feast is the Eucharistic Sacrifice (Holy Mass). It is understandable that not all devotees were pleased with the idea of a *Traslacion*-less fiesta. Many devotees are still very much attached to the externals of this action-filled tradition that they cannot imagine the Quiapo fiesta without it.

Most devotees however understood the necessity of sacrificing the *Traslacion* of 2021 for the good of the Covid-stricken city. They also agree with the stand of the clergy that real devotion to the *Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno* can be practiced anywhere, even at the privacy of one's home. It is certainly not the Senor's desire for his devotees to expose themselves to the danger of a raging pandemic for the sake of continuing a centuries-old pious tradition.

The Motivation Behind RO Traslacion 2021

The *Filipino Catholics of Roblox* (more popularly known as *El Cofrade RBLX*) is a group of netizens who are united by their common love for the gaming platform Roblox, and the rich religious heritage of the Philippines. *El Cofrade* is the brainchild of six young men: Martin Alix, David John Torres, Giean Paolo Lorenzo, Randolph

Bermejo, Josh Nathaniel Pablo, and Sean Patrick Cruz. The group has been active for several years now, focusing their energies on creating Roblox models of famous Philippine churches and sacred images. Until the advent of the pandemic, the group had no plans of venturing into creating interactive Roblox games. For them, the joy of reconstructing famous baroque churches and most venerable icons was enough an intrinsic reward (D.J. Torres, personal communication, January 28, 2021).

The pandemic however brought to the core one pressing issue: Filipino Catholics can no longer perform their traditional pilgrimages because of IATF restrictions. The colorful processions of Holy Week, the Antipolo pilgrimages, the whole religious pageantry of the Philippines was put to a halt by this deadly virus. Many group members are active members of parish ministries, and they reached the decision to create something more interactive. Since the pandemic made it impossible to organize major religious processions and para-liturgical rituals, why not create a virtual equivalent of these via Roblox?

Their first experiment was a live interactive simulation of the Intramuros Grand Marian Procession, the most prominent ritual-performance in honor of the Immaculate Conception (streamed online last December 8, 2020). Since most members of *El Cofrade RBLX* are Marian devotees, they worked on the project with passion and enthusiasm. The live on-line game turned out to be a solemn, interactive and experience for the participants (D.J. Torres, personal communication, January 28, 2021). The success of the Marian procession project affirmed the viability of virtual sacred spaces where young Catholics can participate in simulated rituals.

Even before the launch of their first project, the group was already working double time for a more ambitious one called *RO Traslacion 2021*. Knowing that the 2021 edition of the procession was cancelled, *El Cofrade RBLX* decided to create a game that would simulate 10 days' worth of votive masses, novenas and other para-liturgical rites associated with the feast of the Black Nazarene. The highlight of this project was a live, interactive simulation of the *Traslacion del Nazareno*. There were three major reasons why they decided to give this project a go:

First, they want to catechize younger Nazarene devotees who seem to know little about the significance the *Traslacion* and other associated

rituals. To “catechize” here means to instruct the participants in the basics of the Catholic faith, the history of the devotion to the Black Nazarene, and to deepen their prayer life.

Second, they want to introduce the participants to the rich architectural heritage of Manila. The route of the real-life *Traslacion* is lined with historical buildings, churches, and public spaces built during the Spanish and American colonial periods. While it is El Cofrade RBLX’s priority to help deepen the prayer/ spiritual life of young devotees, they also want to awaken their sense of history and deepen their appreciation for Manila’s unique cultural landscape.

Third, the group wanted to create a safe virtual space where young devotees can participate in the *Traslacion* experience in a controlled, covid-free environment. Active imagination aided by digital technology can recreate the adrenalin-filled air of the real *Traslacion* sans bruises, injuries, and corona virus (D.J. Torres, personal communication, January 28, 2021).

The Anatomy of a Virtual Procession

The effectivity of *RO Traslacion 2021*’s simulation of the Black Nazarene procession did not rely so much on visual realism. The anthropomorphic elements were as simple as Lego figures (see Appendix, Photo No. 1). There are also limits as to how far the designers can replicate the architectural features of the landmarks along the route. The strength of this simulation relied more on the presence of all the basic elements of a real-life sacred space: a functional ritual-field, a clear focal point, and well-defined roles for the participants.

RO Traslacion’s ritual field can be described as a minimalist virtual landscape punctuated by historical landmarks and sacred sites most associated with the ritual performance (e.g. Quiapo Church, Quirino Grandstand, Jones Bridge, Plaza Miranda etc.). There was no attempt to fill up the space with commercial buildings and residential structures. It is not clear whether this was deliberate or simply due to time constraints. Sans visual distractions and side attractions, the attention of the players were focused on the procession alone (see Appendix, Photo No. 2). In this case, the said omission worked in favor of the game (El Cofrade RBLX, 2021, CNN Philippines, 2021).

There was only one focal point or numinous symbol in *RO Traslacion*: the Black Nazarene of Quiapo. Placed atop a maroon-colored *andas*, the digital Nazarene’s visage (despite its Lego-like appearance) reflects the dignified, venerable character of the original (See Appendix, Photo No. 3). The designers also omitted the army of *hijos* that normally surrounds the image in the real *Traslacion*—practically shielding him from the devotee’s gaze. Sans his jealous bodyguards, the virtual Nazarene was a standout, his air was one of sacred majesty (El Cofrade RBLX, 2021).

Of particular interest are the multiple images of the Virgin Mary that were included in the virtual procession. Traditionally there are only three icons of Our Lady in Manila that figures prominently in the real *Traslacion*: Our Lady of Mount Carmel (San Sebastian Church), Our Lady of the Pillar (Santa Cruz Church) of Santa Cruz, and Our Lady of Solitude (Camba Church, Binondo). After the revival of the *Dungaw* at the turn of the century, it has become the practice of the churches along to route to bring out these ancient Marian images to pay “homage” to the Black Nazarene (El Cofrade RBLX, 2021; CNN Philippines, 2021).

In the Roblox version, several other images were added—most of which really do not have any traditional connection with the cult of the Black Christ of Manila. Some even represent Marian images coming from other provinces such as Pampanga, Bulacan and Cavite. It is a fact that the vast majority of El Cofrade RBLX’s members are staunch Marian devotees. Therefore, it is not surprising that some of these members lobbied for the inclusion of their own “virgin of predilection” in the virtual game. These Marian images also served as markers for prayer stations, necessary pauses for such a tiring procession.

The three major players in the actual *Traslacion* ritual were all represented in the virtual version: *hijos*, *mamamasans*, and the *deboto*. The first two can be distinguished by their yellow-maroon uniforms and tall *estandartes*. *Debotos* however are free to take on any appearance that they fancy. Some even joined the virtual procession dressed as superheroes or monsters. *RO Traslacion* also featured virtual diocesan priests, religious, acolytes and lay ministers as visible reminders of the authority of the institutional church (El Cofrade RBLX, 2021). Thus, all sectors of the Church from clergy to laity were present in the online game.

Organized Chaos in the Virtual Realm

Considering that motivation behind the creation of *RO Traslacion*, it comes as no surprise that the whole game was both highly structured and controlled virtual environment. The chief moderators of the on-line game served as live commentators, catechists and ultimately as discipline officers. The procession itself was scaffolded by an intense program of prayers, meditations, and history lessons. It seems that the members of El Cofrade RBLX pulled all the stops to ensure that the on-line procession would be a disciplined, orderly affair.

The 6-hour online game of January 9, 2021 (livestreamed from 300 to 900 pm) turned out to be quite different from what was originally planned. As soon as the doors were opened for the participants, the servers were overwhelmed by sheer volume of people who desired to experience this virtual *Traslacion* first-hand. To avoid further disruption of the live-streamed game, it was decided to limit the number of players to a hundred at any given time. This was a move that was not well received by some netizens who vented their anger and frustration through the comments section (D.J. Torres, personal communication, January 28, 2021).

Having lesser participants does not necessarily translate to a more orderly game. As soon as the procession starts moving, the rowdy dynamics of the real-life *Traslacion* began to emerge spontaneously. The *andas* of the Black Nazarene was swarmed by excited players eager to get close to the miraculous statue. Over-zealous prayers went on a jumping frenzy to get to the *andas*. Others tried to wrestle the ropes away from the *mamamasans*, in an apparent attempt to hijack the on-line procession. At one point, a player ran amok and hurled himself on the *andas*. He did not only knock down the guiding *hijos* and *mamamasans*, he also toppled the *andas* together with the venerable image of Christ (see Appendix, Photo No. 4). Moderators had no other choice but to expel some of the players for disruptive behavior. (El Cofrade RBLX, 2021; D.J. Torres, personal communication, January 28, 2020)

It became apparent later that many of the players are regular participants of the real-life *Traslacion*, and are thus accustomed to the rough-dynamics of the ritual-performance. For them, the *Traslacion* is not just a religious procession, but a masculine rite-of-passage. Entering into a controlled virtual environment of RO Traslacion, they yearn for

the more spontaneous, riotous energy of the real thing, a space where they can exhibit their masculinity and their strength. It seems that RO Traslacion is rather too structured, too tame for their taste. Of course, there were some who were just fooling around—devotion to Christ was far from their minds.

Expelling a few misbehaving participants did not necessarily dampen the frenzy of *RO Traslacion*. It is rather amusing to hear the voice of the moderators alternately pleading and warning the participants not to do this or that: "*Bawal pong umakyat sa andas! Gusto mo bang matanggal sa game? Huwag nyong hilahin ang lubid sabi! Nakakagulo kayo! Warning nayan!*" The vast majority of the players were simply trying to test how far can they continue their seemingly riotous frenzy (El Cofrade RBLX, 2021). While they seemed to be all over the place, they nevertheless knew when to behave "properly". Most of them were in fact quiet and cooperative during brief moments of prayer.

It is the author's hypothesis that the tension between the ordering principle of the moderators / creators of *RO Traslacion* and the spontaneous physicality of the devotees / layers is the secret behind the game's successful run. Just like its real-life counterpart, *RO Traslacion's* live premiere is the principle of orderly chaos at work. The El Cofrade group made the right decision in making it sure that the game has highly-structured and governed by clearly-defined rules. Without these, the virtual procession may have lost all sense of purpose and direction.

On the other hand, in allowing the players to express their physicality and spontaneity, RO Traslacion was infused with youthful energy and passion—making it an exciting interactive on-line event. One can imagine how boring and lifeless *RO Traslacion* would be if the organizers only allowed passive, obedience participants who are not willing to rock the boat so to speak.

Public Reception

The on-line game received praises from church authorities, pious organizations, parents, and the mainstream media. Ecclesiastical authorities in the Archdiocese of Manila and the Quiapo Basilica lauded El Cofrade RBLX's attempts to deepen Nazareno spirituality using a 21st century digital modality. Parents in turn praised *RO Traslacion* as a welcome alternative to the on-line

games with violent themes (D.J. Torres, personal communication, January 28, 2021). Mainstream media outlets were among the first to notice *RO Traslacion*. In fact, the game was already being praised as a novelty on television and radio even before its premiere run. The media did not only praise the catechetical content of the game, but more so the artistry and creativity involved in its development (CNN Philippines, 2021)

Conclusion

Popular devotion is not necessarily subject to the limits of physical geographical space. The lack of physical access to the Basilica of the Black Nazarene (or other pilgrimage centers for that matter) is not a hindrance to the devotion perse. The Covid-19 pandemic forced us to expand the concept of sacred space to include livestreaming via social media platforms. In fact, this has become the new normal for parish churches and more so for major Catholic shrines in the country. Live ritual-performances (such as the mass and other paraliturgical services) are now accessible to the public via the mediation of live-streaming. *RO Traslacion* pushed the boundaries even further to include the realm of virtual reality.

It is wrong to conclude that Filipino popular religiosity is static and archaic simply because it is associated with centuries-old traditions. On the contrary, the longevity of popular devotions in the Philippines depends more on dynamism and the ability to adapt with the changing times. The success of *RO Traslacion* is proof that devotion to the Black Nazarene is indeed dynamic and is likely to stand the test of time. Even when a deadly pandemic came to town and forced us to embrace a quarantined existence, devotions remained more relevant than ever. In fact, a tragic development like the corona virus pandemic brings out the creativity and artistry of the Filipino--- even in the realm of popular religiosity.

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Appendix

PHOTOGRAPHS (SCREENSHOTS) FROM EL COFRADE RBLX'S *RO TRASLACION 2021* LIVE VIDEO GAME (January 9, 2021)



PHOTO NO.1: A digital rendition of the processional image of the *Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno of Quiapo* that figured prominently in the live video game of January 9, 2021. (courtesy of El Cofrade RBLX / Filipino Catholics of Roblox ©)



PHOTO NO.2: The simulated procession at the foot of Jones Bridge. Inset is a screen showing the live recitation of the rosary within a virtual Basilica of the Black Nazarene (courtesy of El Cofrade RBLX / Filipino Catholics of Roblox ©)



PHOTO NO. 3: The simulated procession crossing a digital model of Jones Bridge. (courtesy of El Cofrade RBLX / Filipino Catholics of Roblox ©)



PHOTO NO. 4: Virtual *Hijos del Nazareno* and *mamamasan* struggle to maintain discipline as over-eager devotees/ players swarm the carriage of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo (courtesy of El Cofrade RBLX / Filipino Catholics of Roblox ©)