

## Manila's Black Nazarene and the Reign of Bathala

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## Manila's Black Nazarene and the Reign of *Bathala*<sup>1</sup>



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Figure 1: Santa Santita  
© 2004 Unitel Pictures

The scene unfolds in Quiapo Church, undisputed center of Folk Catholic piety in Manila, and home to *Poong Hesus Itim na Nazareno*, Lord Jesus Black Nazarene, a dark-skinned, half-kneeling statue of Jesus Christ who bears the weight of the Roman cross on his right shoulder. It is the 9th of January, a massive religious procession is in progress commemorating the feast day of the 17th-century image. Through a high, wide-angle view, we see the *carroza* (carriage)—known popularly as *andas* from the Spanish; *andar* meaning “to move forward”—bearing the life-sized Black Nazarene being ushered out of the Church vestibule, and inching its way through a sea of humanity; they are bare-footed devotees who are drawn each year to the Black Nazarene by some mystical, centripetal force. To come close, to embrace, to kiss, to touch, to wipe with a cloth ... that is the hope, that is the mission. As the haunting orchestral score, reinforced by deep baritone voices repeatedly chanting *Sanctus Dei*, or “Holy God,” rises to a crescendo, the multitude undulates as a single organism, creating oceanic waves of quasi-synchronized “chaos” that ferries the Black Nazarene to the church environs, out into the arteries of old Manila, where it will make its annual sojourn for a protracted period of twenty or so hours, before returning to the main altar of the church.

1 This article is an excerpt from my book *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), which offers the discursive space for me to explore further questions on colonial religious history, inculturation (as against syncretism), and the aesthetics of liberation. The book also includes case studies from Mexican and Pan-African post-colonial religious cultures.



Figure 2: Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene or Quiapo Church, 2014. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Persistently, the astounding Black Nazarene documentary sequence of *Santa Santita* (dir. Laurice Guillen), a 2004 religious drama feature from the Philippines, has detonated in my consciousness, its visceral power undiminished over time. While this has led me on two occasions to engage in critical analyses of *Santa Santita* and the Quiapo religious universe for previous publications, this current work does not represent a reprise of those projects<sup>2</sup> but a further step in what has become for me a meaningful academic and personal journey. The mystifying figure of Quiapo's Black Nazarene and the phenomenal religious fervor it attracts continues to draw my postcolonial imagination closer to the flame; it ignites my desire for a more critical and creative re-visiting of the sentence of Spanish colonial history on the Philippines in view of the contemporary collective retrieval of the country's cultural-religious soul and story.

2 See my previous critical essays on the film *Santa Santita*: Antonio D. Sison, "Postcolonial Religious Syncretism: Focus on the Philippines, Peru and Mexico" in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 178-193; and "Afflictive Apparitions: The Folk Catholic Imaginary in Philippine Cinema," *Material Religion* 11, no. 4 (December 2015): 422-442.

## MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

The Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene, canonically named the Parish of St. John the Baptist, and to Manila residents, simply Quiapo Church, is centrally located in a busy section of old Manila, a strategic locale for a taste of the city's colonial past, and the nerve center for folk Catholic piety.

The church building itself is of relatively modest size for a site of major religious significance, and, from an aesthetic viewpoint, unostentatious. The façade reflects baroque flourishes that bespeak its past affinity with the *virreynato de Nueva España* but the interiors are basically modern, giving the impression that the architectural scheme was guided by utilitarian considerations over aesthetic value. In fact, this current iteration represents the architectural fallout of serial destruction, rebuilding, and relocation—a tortured history of fires, earthquakes, and war—since its genesis as a Franciscan mission outpost in 1586. Poetically, the church's original site was in Bagumbayan, present-day Luneta, where national hero José Rizal was executed.

The statue of the Black Nazarene arrived from Mexico in 1606 via the Manila-Acapulco galleon and came under the stewardship of an unnamed Augustinian Recollect. In 1767, Archbishop of Manila Basilio Tomás Sancho Hernando authorized its transfer to Quiapo Church where it had since remained. Aesthetically, the statue resembles typical Mexican *santos* of the period, and rooting further down the colonial lineage, the Catholic iconography of Spain. The similarities between the Quiapo Black Nazarene and the traditional cross-bearing *Cristos* I encountered at the Iglesia de San Francisco and the Basilica de Santa Maria Guadalupe in Mexico City during the Good Friday observance of *Via Crucis* come to mind, so do the *Cristos* brought to procession by confraternities in Spain, most especially those in the Andalucía region where vestigial Catholic piety can still be found.

The Quiapo Black Nazarene is of Mexican mesquite hardwood, giving it a decidedly darker hue than the few versions I have chanced upon. It bears a resemblance to other cross-bearing *Cristos Negros* of Latin America, notably, Panama's *Cristo Negro de Portobelo* and Guatemala's *Cristo Rey de Candelaria*. It is also worth

mentioning that there are a number of popular crucified versions of Cristos Negros such as those enshrined in Chiapas, Campeche, and Esquipulas, and also in the Spanish cities of Salamanca and Cáceres.

The special devotion to a dark-skinned Nazarene among followers who are predominantly *kayumanggi* or brown-skinned suggests a special rapport along racial lines, but this does not appear to be conclusive. Another dark-skinned statue from the Manila-Acapulco galleon, the 17th-century *Nuestra Señora de la Paz y del Buen Viaje* (Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage) enshrined in the city of Antipolo, also has a following, but nowhere near the vicinity of the devotion to the Quiapo Black Nazarene.

The olive-skinned *Santo Niño de Cebu*, the statue of the child Jesus brought by the Magallanes expedition in 1565, does have a certain degree of prominence in Catholic piety, but so does the pale-skinned *Nuestra Señora del Santísimo Rosario de Manaoag* (Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary of Manaoag), another 17th-century icon, whose delicate Eurasian features are etched in ivory.

I propose that the unparalleled devotion to the Quiapo Black Nazarene is more than skin deep. It roots further down into the hidden regions of the Filipino psyche where the vanquished religious beliefs of a primal religion have beaten all odds, living-on organically in the rhythm of life of devotees. To test this assertion, a trip to Quiapo is necessary for a closer look at the unique devotional practices simultaneously occurring in the church and its immediate environs.

## THE QUIAPO RELIGIOUS UNIVERSE: A DOUBLE BELONGING

I am inside Quiapo Church one day in March. It is off-season for feasts and processions, the most significant of which falling on the first week of January leading to the feast day of the Black Nazarene on the 9th, and *Semana Santa*, particularly on Good Friday. For this first visit after years of being away as a US immigrant, I had intentionally chosen a placid period for a more attentive re-orientation and



sense of space; nonetheless, devotional fervor is in the air this morning. The Eucharistic celebration has just ended, one of ten scheduled on a Saturday beginning at 5 a.m. The devotees gathered today raise their hands in anticipation of a rite of holy water sprinkling assigned to a lay minister, and then spontaneously break out into applause, praising God in a manner not very different from “charismatic” worship. A few devotees are penitentially walking on their knees down the center aisle to the altar—a long-held Quiapo tradition—and feeling through rosary beads on their fingers along the way. The Black Nazarene statue itself is enshrined at the center altar, a few feet above the tabernacle. It is, in fact, a composite, with the original 17th-century head attached to a replica-body carved by a Filipino *santero* or

Figure 3: The Black Nazarene. Quiapo Church, 2014. Photograph courtesy of the author.



“saint-maker” by the name of Gener Maglaqui.<sup>3</sup> The Black Nazarene venerated in processions is also a composite version but in reverse, with a Maglaqui replica-head attached to the original Mexican body. The use of composite images was the strategy adopted by the Archdiocese of Manila to ensure the security and preservation of the original statue amid recurrent touching, wiping, and transporting. In my visit, I caught sight of two other life-size replicas, one located by the right side of the nave entrance, the other, under a tarpaulin tent outside the church. A few devotees had gathered around each of the replicas, touching and hanging on to the statues prayerfully. Whether in quiet devotion on a regular day, or in a procession of millions during a major feast day, veneration and prayer by means of touch are the constant gestures of piety of the Quiapo Black Nazarene devotee.

There is good reason to argue that the practice has decisively Indigenous roots. The understanding of experience in terms of *pagdama*, or “felt experience,” a sensuous perception that is naturally and firstly affective-intuitive, animates the Quiapo devotion. Filipino culture is so infused with *pagdama*, finding expression in anything from the imperative *pakiramdaman mo*, “feel what is happening,” to the perceived manifestation of a departed loved one in *pagpaparamdam*, “to make one’s presence felt,” that Filipino theologian José M. de Mesa proposes the term “worldfeel” rather than “worldview” to describe the Filipino mindset.<sup>4</sup> The importance of *pagdama* in Filipino culture meaningfully informs our understanding of the materiality and tactility of the Quiapo Black Nazarene phenomenon; immediate contact with concrete representations of the divine is the way by which the Filipino devotee feels God’s grace coming closer to home. In discussing folk Catholicism, De Mesa identifies “body language” as its main mode of communication:

This form of religiosity, while not devoid of verbal and written language to express itself, communicates to a great extent corporeally. The physical coming together, “walking” on one’s knees, lighting candles, wiping statues with one’s

3 Gener Manlaqui, who himself is a Black Nazarene devotee, was featured in a TV documentary entitled “Mukha: Panata,” aired on the Filipino channel ABS-CBN/ANC, January 18, 2017, [www.news.abs-cbn.com](http://www.news.abs-cbn.com).

4 José M. de Mesa, *Why Theology is Never Far from Home* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2003), 85-86. He is careful to point out that *pagdama* does not necessarily eschew the rational-cognitive, but harmonizes with it in an “integrated sensing,” 82.

handkerchief, joining or “watching” a procession, going on a pilgrimage, are all expressions of faith in folk Catholicism. Prayer is uttered by the body in its various movements and gestures . . . Words are powerful means of communication. But corporeal expressions may communicate more than words.<sup>5</sup>

The ancient value of pagdama and its material-tactile expression in the Quiapo Black Nazarene devotion open a virtual window into Filipino primal religion, where the dualistic curtain that separates the sacred from the profane was yet to be drawn back. History and anthropology from a western perspective have often characterized the precolonial worship life in the islands as a form of “animism;” this is a term we will bypass for its condescending connotations, its tendency to undervalue Indigenous religious practices as irrational, incoherent, and superstitious. By the dichotomizing “west and the rest” tendencies of Eurocentrism and colonialism, such Indigenous practices do not merit respect and appreciation but are dismissively judged as a problem to be solved; it is “our religion” against “their superstition.”<sup>6</sup>

In Filipino primal religion, visible objects of nature represent levels of reality that go beyond materiality; they were inhabited by spirit beings not readily seen by the naked eye, but whose presence was felt. These nature spirits controlled the shifts in natural phenomena—fluctuations in weather, the bounty or shortfall of crop

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- 5 De Mesa, *Why Theology is Never Far from Home*, 82. In Quiapo, the corporeal expressions of devotion often come in the form of personal and collective sacrifice, e.g., the devout practices detailed by De Mesa. Robert J. Schreiter equates sacrifice with communication with God, of which human words often prove impoverished. “Sacrifice tries to speak where human words do not reach far enough.” Schreiter, *In Water and in Blood: A Spirituality of Solidarity and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, 2006), 12.
- 6 Daryl Wilkinson offers an on-target description of the problematic connotations that bedevil the term, “. . . animism is an analytical operation that we do, not a type of religion that Indigenous people hold to. It involves taking a non-concurrence of Western and non-Western practices as a starting point and using that dissonance, a dissonance that we call ‘animism,’ as a way of highlighting the presence of some not-as-yet understood difference or alterity. Animism therefore is not a shorthand for what Indigenous people are really doing, but more a statement to the effect that we don’t know what they’re doing, but we know we certainly wouldn’t do it.” Wilkinson, “Is There Such a Thing as Animism?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 85 (June 2017): 306. For Wilkinson’s fuller treatment that includes a critical analysis of “new animism,” the scholarly efforts to emancipate the original term from its Eurocentric, colonialist, and evolutionist moorings, see the entire article in the same, 289-311. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator offers an incisive critical analysis of animism from an African postcolonial perspective. Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an Animist* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), xviii.

harvests, and such—and also acted upon the ebb and flow of everyday human existence. The cultural-religious schema was based on the belief in a supreme deity by the name of *Bathala*, whose divine intervention held sway in the *kapalaran* or destiny of human beings. This core belief anchored and animated the religious customs of the community so that one's plans and decisions in life rose or fell on the basis of *panalangin* or prayer that comes from *kagandahang loób*, the beauty of one's authentic inner self (as against *sama ng loob*, the debasement of one's inner self). A host of lesser nature gods and spirit beings known as *diwata* inhabited the created world alongside human beings, they lived in the celestial bodies, mountains, seas, and rain forests. For this reason, the sun, moon, and stars, as well as certain animals, trees, and rock formations, were believed to be enchanted; they were approached with reverence and wonderment. This explains why the Spaniards did not find significant built structures for worship in the archipelago as they did in their previous encounters with Mesoamerican religious culture. Neither did the island culture reflect the neighboring religious cultures of Southeast Asia such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Cambodia, with their ornate Buddhist-Hindu temple complexes. The Filipino primal godhead *Bathala* and the host of *diwata* did not require such human-made structures for their cult; the entire created world was their dwelling place, nature itself was their temple. It comes as no surprise then that the iconoclastic compulsion of the Spanish missionaries led to the wanton desecration and destruction of sacred forests and mangroves.<sup>7</sup>

The presence of the *diwata* was also mediated through images carved out of wood or stone known as *anito* (in the lowland Luzon/Tagalog region)<sup>8</sup> who served as portals between the material world and the spirit world. The precolonial Filipinos believed that their departed ancestors had joined the realm of the spirits and could

7 John Leddy Phelan notes, "In the Philippines there were no temples to demolish. But sacred groves were cut down by zealous Spanish religious who were determined to break the magic sway such groves exercised over Filipinos." Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses, 1565-1700* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1959, 2011), 54.

8 The Cebuano/Visayan term for a carved idol is *tao-tao*, while *anito* denotes "sacrifice." William Henry Scott, *Barangay: Sixteenth-Century Philippine Culture and Society* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1994), 83, 86. To avoid confusion in the part of the reader, I have decided to use the Tagalog term *anito* as a more general appellation to refer to statues and concrete images of lowland Filipino primal religion.

then be venerated as anitos. The Neolithic Manunggul Jar (711 B.C.), one of the centerpieces of the Philippine National Museum of Anthropology, offers archaeological evidence of the belief in the afterlife in primal religion. The jar's lid features two anito figures on a boat—an oarsman/spirit guide ferrying the *kaluluwa* or departed soul into the great beyond.

It is not difficult to imagine how the Spanish Christianizing campaign found convenient analogues of the Catholic cult of the Saints in the Indigenous practice of venerating anitos. The Italian scholar Antonio Pigafetta, who travelled with Fernando Magallanes<sup>9</sup> as his official chronicler, documents the near seamless transfiguration of an Iberian icon into a primal anito. In his account of the 1521 baptism of Rajah Humabon in Cebu, the statue of the Santo Niño—the child Jesus dressed in the finery of a European prince—so captivated the local chief's wife that she shed copious tears and begged to be baptized; she was christened as “Juana” in honor of the Castilian queen. Juana wanted the Catholic statue to replace her deities so Pigafetta presented it to her as a gift.

But as it turned out, an astonishing counter-phenomenon took over when the Magallanes expedition came to an end. Filipino writer-historian Nick Joaquin describes how Juana's Santo Niño found a niche in the pantheon of diwatas and assimilated with ease into primal religion so that by the time the subsequent expedition led by Miguel Lopez de Legazpi arrived 44 years later, folklore had already woven around the imported statue, essentially converting the child Jesus into a rain god:

During those 44 years, the Christian image fulfilled a pagan [sic] mission... its fame spread to the neighboring islands from where came pilgrims curious to see this strange new god of the Cebuanos. To make rain, it was borne in procession to the sea and dipped in the water. Sacrifices were offered to it; it was anointed in oil. A ritual developed among its worshippers: a wild hopping

9 Portuguese navigator Fernando de Magallanes (Fernão de Magalhães) led the first Spanish expedition to the yet unnamed archipelago in 1521. This was abruptly truncated when he lost his life in a battle against the troops of Lapu-Lapu, the *datu* or local chief of the island of Mactan. See Luis H. Francia, *A History of the Philippines: From Indios Bravos to Filipinos* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2014), 51-55.



Figure 4. Votive candles for sale. Quiapo Church, 2018. Photograph courtesy of the author.

dance to drums which, as the *Pit Señor*, survives to this day in the folk homage to the Santo Niño, as the rainmaking ritual of bathing the image survives in the fluvial procession.<sup>10</sup>

The history of the Santo Niño de Cebu is noteworthy for two reasons: first, it vividly confirms how the value of pagdama and the primacy of the tactile were conjointly operative in the cult of primal religion as it has been in the dramatic visceral character of the Quiapo Black Nazarene devotion in present times; second, it sheds light on the tensile strength inherent in Indigenous Filipino religious culture—resilience in response to the allurements of a foreign religion, and incorruptibility in upholding the primal religion of the forebears.

The ability to sustain an inclusive both/and continues to animate contemporary Filipino folk Catholicism. As I had noted in another study, the Quiapo Black Nazarene devotion is a prime example of a religious double belonging.<sup>11</sup> While the statue and the activities surrounding its cult constitute part of the didactic, poetic, and worship life of a Catholic basilica under the aegis of the Archdiocese of Manila, the

10 Nick Joaquin, *Culture and History* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 1988, 2004), 104-105.

11 Sison, "Afflictive Apparitions," 422-442.



actual cultic practice as expressed in grassroots piety is descended from Indigenous cultural and religious values. We can glean further validation for this by looking into the Quiapo Church milieu.

Figure 5. *Anting-Anting* or talismans from a vendor's stall. Quiapo Church, 2018. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Stepping out of the church, the street vendors positioned at the perimeter of Plaza Miranda, the open public area fronting the building, come to view. Nazareno replicas, rosaries of all colors and materials, scapulars, votive candles, novena booklets, the usual religious paraphernalia associated with traditional Roman Catholic devotions are the more obvious articles available for purchase.

But taking a closer look, a number of the vendors also sell para-religious articles that blur the line between officially sanctioned Catholic devotion and a piety of a different sort. Known in Tagalog as *anting-anting*, these articles come in the form of amulets, pendants, miniature humanoid figures, animal bones, and talismans, usually embossed with eclectic wordings (mostly in Latin) and symbols borrowed from Christianity; these are worn by adherents to ward off evil spirits, spells, or misfortunes.

Although there are undeniable Christian elements in such articles, the *anting-anting* has its origins in primal religion. In the Filipino creation mythos, it was believed that after Bathala created the universe, he delegated human affairs to the *diwata* who were to serve as his mediators. But not all spirits were benevolent like

the diwata; malevolent ghouls and monsters such as the horrifying aswang co-inhabited the world and were set to afflict human beings with all sorts of bodily and spiritual torments. To protect themselves from such attacks, ancient Filipinos kept anting-anting close to their persons, maintaining close physical contact with the sacred object, as a concrete means to repel real and perceived danger.

In the period of the Spanish conquest, the continued use of anting-anting was a form of native resistance, a way by which Filipinos asserted their sense of agency and empowerment in subversion of the Spanish colonial hierarchy that had forcibly relegated them to the lowest rung of the sociopolitical pyramid where they were denied access to power. Rebel leaders of the Philippine revolution, notably Andres Bonifacio and the *Katipuneros* or revolutionaries, were known to have worn anting-anting to protect them from the superior firepower of the Spanish forces.<sup>12</sup> Anting-anting made them feel connected to a higher power, emboldening them in the fight for freedom. Like the veneration of anitos that became convenient analogues of the cult of the saints, anting-anting analogously fit hand-in-glove into the traditional Catholic preoccupation with religious articles and relics, ultimately, liquefying the demarcation between Spanish Catholicism and Filipino primal religion.

Retracing my way to the Quiapo Church entrance, it is hard to miss the presence of elderly and middle-aged women seated on plastic stools at the edges of the nave; some praying the rosary, others attentively conversing with individuals. These Quiapo mainstays are known as *magdarasal* or intercessors, prayer-women who listen to the everyday concerns that burden devotees, offer prayers on their behalf, and provide practical counseling when needed.

Like any legitimate ministry, these services are free of charge, although “donations” left to the discretion of the devotees are welcome.

It is interesting to note that the work of the *magdarasal* has some points of overlap with the pastoral function of the ordained priesthood, and from a spatial

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<sup>12</sup> Dennis Santos Villegas, *You Shall be as Gods: Anting-Anting and the Filipino Quest for Mystical Power* (Quezon City: Vibal Foundation, 2017), 27-28.



Magdarasal, or prayer-women. Quiapo Church, 2014. Photograph courtesy of the author.

consideration, it is the first line of shepherding available to devotees since the magdarasal are more accessibly positioned by the church entrance and not behind the altar like the presiding priest. In effect, the Quiapo prayer-women appear to have become alternative pastors as the ordained priests take on an ever-increasing load of sacramental assignments.

I have argued elsewhere that there is reason to posit a link between the Quiapo magdarasal and the ancient *babaylan*,<sup>13</sup> the priest or shaman of Filipino primal religion, who, unlike the Catholic priests, were almost exclusively female (marginally, there were also priests who were male transvestites or *bayok*). The *babaylanes* served as the divinely chosen human mediators between the diwata and the worshipping community, who also looked up to them as wisdom figures. The priesthood of the *babaylan* had no precursor in colonial Catholicism since the ministerial role of women within the hierarchical order, that of the professed religious sisters, was subordinate to the authority of the clergy; their ministries did not and could not overlap. Notably, the venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo, an 18th-century Filipina *beata* who defied the authority of the Spanish king to form a community

13 Sison, "Afflictive Apparitions," 429-432.



that would flourish to be the first Indigenous religious order of women, had to work surreptitiously at the margins of an androcentric, patriarchal, and colonial Catholic hierarchy. Even the likes of her could not have possibly engaged in a ministry that overlapped in the slightest with the powerful ordained priesthood, let alone positioned herself at the church frontlines. After all, Ignacia bore on her shoulders the double crosses of being a woman and being an *India*. Ultimately, the Spanish friars considered the babaylanes to be prime targets for Christianization. Those who eventually acquiesced to conversion were stripped of leadership roles and given a demotion; they were made to become the assistants-at-large in the parish, assigned to perform subsidiary tasks such as flower arrangements at the altar, and administrative help for processions.<sup>14</sup> If, as previously discussed, the ingress of colonial Catholicism had not been able to completely obliterate Filipino primal religion and its expression in folk Catholicism, could the ancient *babaylan victis*, the banished Indigenous woman-priest, not have risen as well in the form of crypto-resistance in the person of the self-ordained Quiapo magdarasal and her priestly ministry? Considering our fairly consistent postcolonial thesis that Spanish Catholic culture and Indigenous Filipino religious culture co-exist in a dynamic and tense middle field, we can persuasively affirm that the Quiapo magdarasal, in her discretionary leadership and uniquely feminine priestly ministry, may well be the *babaylan rediviva*.

Finding an afterlife in grassroots piety and often undetected, primal religious expressions in the Quiapo universe are caught up in a dance of mutuality with sanctioned devotional practices. On the level of a public transcript is official Catholicism, which is framed by Church teachings and doctrines as shepherded by the Philippine Church hierarchy; on the level of a hidden transcript is folk Catholicism, an Indigenous crypto-resistance that nurtures and keeps alive its own semi-autonomous rituals within the four walls of the Catholic Church.

<sup>14</sup> Z. A. Salazar, *Ang Babaylan sa Kasaysayan ng Pilipinas* (Quezon City: Palimbagan ng Lahi, 1999), 3-4.

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