

Clothing the Virgin. Narratives on Traditionnal Clothing: the image of *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad de Porta Vaga*, in Cavite, Philippines

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Abstract

The famed image of Nuestra Senora de la Soledad de Porta Vaga is one of the main objects of faith in the province of Cavite. Known for its wonders and miracles, this representation of the Virgin—called the Virgin of Thousands of Miracles—has been a refuge for devotees, for over three centuries. It is a painting depicting the image of a statue venerated in Spain wearing a mourning dress called ‘de luto.’ The black color of the Virgin’s clothes became an issue between the priest of the parish and the devotees, who questioned its novena, history, provenance, and setting of the image, thus leading to various interpretations. This study relies on an iconographic analysis, supplemented by literary reviews and interviews of various devotees in the parish of San Roque, where the image is celebrated. Despite issues, the devotion to Nuestra Senora de la Soledad de Porta Vaga is one of the most widespread Marian cults in the Philippines. The image was declared a National Cultural Treasure in 2017 and was canonically crowned in the name of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, in 2018. This paper will discuss the narratives surrounding the black clothing of the Virgin de la Soledad de Porta Vaga in Cavite, Philippines.

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Introduction

The venerated image of *Our Lady of Soledad de Porta Vaga* originated on a tumultuous night in Cavite in 1667. According to an account, a visionary, who was a sentinel on duty, witnessed the appearance of a woman dressed in black floating above the sea, near the North Sea Wall of Cavite, known as Porta Vaga. The sentinel allowed her to enter the port, and the woman vanished into the air (Santos y Bernal, 1904). The following morning, workers from the Cavite

Arsenal discovered a painting of the Blessed Virgin Mary dressed in black while passing through the gates of Porta Vaga. They retrieved it and brought it to the priest of the parish. Since then, the image has been called *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad de Porta Vaga*. The church Ermita de Porta Vaga was then constructed behind the gates of Porta Vaga, serving as an entrance to the port of Cavite. The earliest mention of Porta Vaga can be traced back to a map from 1659, and it is plausible that the church was erected in honor of the Virgin during the 17th century (Trotta-Jose, 1987). An inscription at the back of the painting provides insight into its possible dating and devotion. It reveals that in 1692, a certain Juan de Oliba enthroned the image of the Virgin at Ermita de Porta Vaga (Saenz-Mendoza, 2017). The image has been the subject of numerous conservation and restoration efforts, including those carried out by Susano Gonzales between 1984 and 1985 and by Professor Maria Bernardita Reyes in 2009. Devotees have bestowed various titles, jewelries, and works of art upon the image to recognise its intercession in their lives (**Fig. 1**).

The iconography of the image of *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad de Porta Vaga*

In his seminal work, art historian Erwin Panofsky introduced a simplified approach to iconographic analysis. At the initial level, one must survey and evaluate the contents of the image. In the case of *Our Lady of Soledad de Porta Vaga*, the most prominent feature is a woman wearing a *rostrillio* on her head. She is dressed in a white inner garment tied with a rosary and clad in a plain mantle. The image's atmosphere is contemplative, as the figure is depicted praying while gazing at the instruments of the Passion of Jesus. On both of her sides, candles are lit. A curtain of gold ornaments covers the upper portion of the canvas, and beneath the image, various precious gems are incorporated into pieces of jewelry.

At the second level of the analysis, interpretation follows. Devotees believe that the lady in the painting is kneeling, possibly depicting a scene from the first Good Friday in the Virgin's house after the burial of Christ. However, a deeper analysis reveals that the figure is not a human figure but a Marian statue. This theory is supported by the recent restoration done by Prof. Bernardita Reyes in 2009, which revealed that the image of the Virgin actually rests on a table covered with fine Spanish lace and adorned with two lighted candles. According to Prof. Jose Allain Austria (2023), the image of *Porta Vaga* follows the conservative canon of the 17th and 18th centuries of Castilian tradition. He also assumes that the image was either the work of a 17th-century Spanish or Mexican artist who adhered to the Castilian tradition of Soledad iconography.

Jesuit historian Rene Javellana (2017) describes the Porta Vaga icon as a *retablo fingido*, or a painted altarpiece. *The Virgin of Porta Vaga* may have been commissioned or created out of devotion to her image. The closest identical image to the *Virgin of Porta Vaga* is the *Virgin of Soledad*, venerated in Paloma Street in Madrid, Spain, but this image does not represent any instruments of Passion or candles. The inspiration for these *Soledad* images may originate from an image that was once venerated in the convent of Minims and sculpted by Gaspar Bacerra in 1564. This statue was dressed in the 16th-century Spanish widows' '*de luto*,' or mourning attire,

particularly royals or members of nobility in Spain. This statue was destroyed during the Spanish Civil War in 1936 (Merino, 2013).

In the Philippines, the black color holds sacred significance for devotees of Christological images, including those of Jesus Nazareno in Quiapo, Manila, the Santo Niño de Cebu in Central Philippines, and Marian images such as Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage in Antipolo, and the Virgin of Caysaysay in Batangas. This association with the black color explores the idea of these saints embodying relevant icons, considering the obvious and deep connection between black and the Filipino complexion. While black is often associated with magic, sacrifice, and war, as well as death in some cultures, it can also represent ordinary people and the working class. These multiple connotations of black suggest a complex and multifaceted relationship between color and religious devotion in the Philippines (Zialcita, 2022). The significance of the black color in Filipino religious practices goes beyond its aesthetic appeal or cultural associations. For many devout Filipinos, black represents a profound connection between faith, devotion, and the divine. The use of black in religious imagery and ceremonies serves as a powerful symbol of reverence, humility, and penance. The color is also associated with mourning and grief, reminding the faithful of the transitory nature of life and the importance of spiritual preparation for death. The use of black in religious contexts can be interpreted as a rejection of worldly materialism and a commitment to spiritual purity. It also embodies the complex and multifaceted relationship between faith, culture, and identity in the Philippines, reflecting the deep spirituality and devotion, inherent to Filipino society (**Fig. 2**).

Clothing in black: traditions, issues, and narratives

Veiling the image

The practice of veiling the image of Our Lady of Porta Vaga in Cavite is a traditional custom that has always been observed. This tradition adds texture, motion, and sensory elements to the two-dimensional icon, serving both practical and artistic purposes. The veil, which is divided into two main components, the *capa* or *manto*, and the *sobre-manto*, is traditionally colored in black and yellow gold to match the icon. Soledad's *manto*, which has seven panels representing the seven sorrows of the Blessed Mother, is a unique design introduced in 2008. During special occasions, the Virgin wears noteworthy pieces with gold embroidery, while modest designs and materials are used for ordinary days. The veiling of religious images is a common practice in Catholicism, and its origins can be traced back to the Byzantine Empire (Dashu, 2006). Veiling religious images was a way to protect them from damage and to prevent them from being stolen. It also served as a symbol of reverence and respect for the sacredness of the image. The practice of veiling religious images was later adopted by the Catholic Church and became a significant part of religious ceremonies and processions. On a symbolic level, the veiling of religious images is a way to emphasize their spiritual dimension and to remind the faithful of the transcendent nature of the divine. The veil, therefore, is a visual representation of the mystery and awe that surround the divine. Regarding *Our Lady of Porta Vaga* in Cavite, its veiling serves both practical and

symbolic purposes. The veil protects it from damage during processions and ceremonies and also adds texture, motion, and sensory elements to it, thus enhancing its aesthetic and spiritual values.

Challenging the 'Blackness'

During the tenure of the late Reverent Avelino Sapida, a contentious issue arose regarding the color of the veil of Our Lady of Soledad in the parish of San Roque. According to Sapida's research, Our Lady of Soledad was not an image of the sorrowful Mother but rather of the *Virgen de Alegria* or Our Lady of Joy. This discovery led to changes in traditions associated with the Soledad: the somber procession was transformed into joyful street dancing, and the 1861 novena was altered. Although these actions received criticism from certain devotees, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Imus sent an imprimatur, thus officially sealing their approval of these changes. The black veil of the Virgin was kept by devotees, hoping that someday the Virgin would wear it again. Rev. Sapida's opposition to the use of black for the *Virgin of Porta Vaga* was grounded in his belief that this color was in conflict with the Christian hope for the resurrection of the dead. He argued against the longstanding tradition and history of using black for the Virgin; however, his attempt to repaint the image in cerulean did not succeed due to powerful opposition. This period of questioning the 300-year-old devotion is considered a significant milestone in the modern history of the devotion to the *Virgen de la Soledad de Porta Vaga*. However, it is essential to first consider the icon as an object of visual interest in its historical context before considering it as an expression of artistic intention. The black color has different connotations and senses, and its interpretation may vary based on the viewer's background, ethnicity, past experiences, and philosophy. In analysing the Porta Vaga's icon, it is necessary to acknowledge that black brings awareness to the reality of sin, death, and judgment, which is a normal emotional response to sorrow or mourning.

Black Veils as Ex-voto

When Rev. Sapida left the Parish of San Roque, devotees of the *Lady of Solitude of Porta Vaga* petitioned for reinstating the traditions associated with the image, including the customary wearing of a black veil. The restoration of traditions associated with the blackness of the image opened an avenue to strengthen the research component of the devotion, the preservation of the image, as well as the spiritual well-being of its devotees.

Each year, the Virgin receives at least three veils; the first and second ones, as I observed, are usually simple and made of appliques, flat embroidery, and beads, sewn to a thicker cloth; they are usually worn on the first and second days of the first celebration. Accompanying or smaller veils are reserved for the sea procession called *Caracol*. A majestic veil is reserved for proper celebrations, made of gold embroidery weighing the equivalent of 50 kilos of rice. Veils are offered as ex-votos by devotees fulfilling a vow and answering prayers, petitions, and promises. The Church is the chief custodian of the image, however, the veils are kept by the *Cofradia de la Virgen de la Soledad de Porta Vaga*. Donors are free to look for their seamstress or dressmaker, and are also permitted to incorporate their designs. However, coordination with the church is

necessary for the approval of the design and the dimensions of the veil. The veils are kept by the devotees in their own spaces rather than in the church because of concerns about space, security of the collections, and conservation (**Figs. 3 & 4**).

Conclusion

The devotion to the *Virgin of Porta Vaga*, also known as the *Virgin of Solitude*, has a rich history and cultural significance in the Philippines, particularly in Cavite. The image is dressed in *de luto* style, and devotees have bestowed various titles, jewelries, and works of art upon it to recognise its intercession in their lives. The black color, which holds sacred significance for devotees in the Philippines, is also incorporated into the religious imagery and ceremonies associated with the *Virgin of Porta Vaga*. The veiling of the image, which serves both practical and symbolic purposes, is a traditional custom that has been observed for centuries. However, a contentious issue arose during the tenure of the late Rev. Avelino Sapida, who contended that the *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* was not an image of a sorrowful mother but rather an image of a *Virgen de Alegria or Our Lady of Joy*. This discovery led to modifications in the traditions associated with the *Soledad*. The *mantos*, which are given as ex-votos by devotees who fulfilled a vow and answered prayers, petitions, and promises, are kept by the *Cofradia de la Virgen de la Soledad de Porta Vaga*. The donors are free to incorporate their designs, but coordination with the Church is necessary for details such as approval of the design and the dimensions of the *manto*. The devotion to the *Virgin of Porta Vaga* reflects the deep faith and cultural traditions of the people of Cavite City and serves as a testament to the enduring power of religious devotion in the modern world.

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Fig. 1

The Original icon of
Nuestra Señora de la Soledad de Porta Vaga.

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Fig. 2

The Altar of the Virgin of Porta
Vaga where the image was ve-
nerated by devotees after each
mass.

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Fig. 3

The Magnificent Procession of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad de Porta Vaga.

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Fig. 4

The Coronation Manto of the Virgin of Porta Vaga that has gold threads.

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