

Changing Context, Changing Meaning: A Study of Processional  
Sculpture in the Corpus Christi Celebrations of Cuzco

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The Corpus Christi celebration held annually in Cuzco, Peru attracts tens of thousands of people to the heart of the city, anxious to catch a glimpse of the processions that have long defined the holiday. The celebrations centers on the procession of the host, understood to be the triumphant body of Christ, and 15 statues representing a number of saints and invocations of the Virgin Mary around the *plaza de armas*. Many of the sculptures seen in the contemporary Corpus Christi festival date back to the colonial period, as the passage of time has done little to change the most basic elements of the ritual program. The significance of these images, and processional imagery at large, remains a seriously understudied facet of the ritual experience. It was in an attempt to explore further this important aspect of the contemporary Corpus Christi that I spent July of 2006 in Cuzco, documenting the presentation of the religious imagery both before and during the festival. In this presentation I will explore further the role that these sculptures play in the socio-religious discourse surrounding the contemporary Corpus Christi celebration in Cuzco. By comparing the presentation of the sculptures within the parish church to their presentation within the processional ritual I will demonstrate the importance of context in determining the meaning of the sculptures. I will focus specifically on the presentation and reception of the image of San Cristóbal in order to identify in concrete terms the more theoretical conclusions that underlie my research. In the case of San Cristóbal we see that the non-processional presentation leads the viewer to see and understand the image as a representative of the church, while the presentation of the image during Corpus Christi elicits a very different response, as the image comes to represent the community where it is held.

The medieval festival of Corpus Christi, translated literally as the Body of Christ,

arose out of a need to defend the doctrine of transubstantiation, employed by theologians to explain the transformation of a consecrated wafer into the body of Christ.<sup>1</sup> The festival traditionally included a procession of the host in order to publicly celebrate both the Eucharist and the broader Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup> A series of papal bulls, issued in 1264 and 1311 by Pope Urban IV and Pope Clement the V respectively, made the festival of Corpus Christi both a recognized and obligatory feast of the catholic calendar.<sup>3</sup> As such, the festival became one of the most widely celebrated of the Catholic holidays, taking on a singular importance within the ritual landscape of many Iberian towns and cities.<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Dean notes that in Seville the holiday was referred to as “the Thursday that shines greater than the sun,” alluding to the brilliant nature of the processions that came to characterize the ritual.<sup>5</sup> This Iberian devotion carried over into Spanish colonial society, making Corpus Christi one of the most important religious celebrations in the Americas. Nowhere in the Viceroyalties did Corpus Christi take hold in a more permanent way than in Cuzco, Peru.

Although derivative of the European tradition, the colonial Corpus Christi developed according to a uniquely Andean worldview and functioned according to a visual grammar charged with historically specific political and religious meaning. Scholars have long debated the degree to which the celebrations reflect native pre-contact practices, focusing on the temporal proximity between the Catholic Corpus Christi and

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Dean, *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ: Corpus Christi in Colonial Cuzco, Peru* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Dean, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Dean, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Dean, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Dean, 9.

the native festival of Inti Raymi.<sup>6</sup> Although the larger festival program underwent a transformation due to the superimposition of European ritual structures onto a previously developed Andean orthopraxy, the procession of the host that served as the centerpiece of the European Corpus Christi remained at the heart of the colonial celebration. Writing in 1572, the Viceroy Francisco de Toledo asserted that Corpus Christi was the “the principle festival and procession of the year because of what it represents– the body of Our Lord Christ, the true God-Man, taken in procession.”<sup>7</sup>

The uniquely processional nature of Corpus Christi paradoxically functioned to both reinforce and undermine the centrality of the host within the ritual context. The bustle of liturgical dramas, processional images, and costumed figures that characterized the ritual would have drawn attention away from the host, resulting in a situation in which the nominal center was forced to play a marginal role within the ritual experience. By the early-sixteenth century the number of images processed during the celebration grew to around one hundred. In subsequent years the number of images steadily decreased and has now been limited to 15.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the sculpted saints have eclipsed the host in terms of popularity and although the body of Christ continues to anchor the celebrations, the procession of the saints has come to dominate the ritual landscape of Corpus Christi.

In fact, the popularity of the saints posed a serious problem for the Church in recent years as the size of the audience shrunk after the procession of the images, leaving

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Tom Zuidema, “La Fiesta del Inca.” In *Celebrando el cuerpo de Dios*. Edited by Antoinette Molinía. Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1999 or Caroyln Dean *Inka Bodies*.

<sup>7</sup> Dean, 31.

<sup>8</sup> David Cahill, “Popular Religion and Appropriation: The Example of Corpus Christi in Eighteenth-Century Cuzco,” *Latin American Research Review* 31, no. 2 (1996): 83.

far fewer people to witness the procession of the host for which the festival was held.<sup>9</sup> In an attempt to reassert the centrality of the host, and mitigate the shifting significance of the ritual, the Church reversed the traditional processional order, beginning the celebrations with the procession of the host and concluding with the 15 sculptures.<sup>10</sup> Max Harris touches upon the public preference for the part of the festival that includes religious imagery. Writing in 2003 about the procession of the host, he notes that locals find this part of the ritual boring, highlighting the public preference for the sculpted saints and the indifference to the comparatively distant and removed host.”<sup>11</sup>

I believe that this preference for the procession of the saints springs in part from a more public and consistent exposure to the religious imagery throughout the Corpus Christi festival. It bears noting that for most of the participants preparation for the festival begins months in advance and centers on the rituals surrounding the procession of the saints. For those less involved in the parish activities, the action begins in the week leading up to Corpus Christi, as the image is prepared for the ritual. The saints are then carried to the Cathedral on the day before the holiday, and returned after one last procession eight days later. These four processions, the entrance, Corpus Christi itself, the *octava*, and the return home, provide ample opportunity for the community to gain familiarity and strengthen bonds with the images themselves and the rituals associated with their presentation. This very public profile contrast sharply with the nature of the host, which is visible only on Corpus Christi day for a limited period of time.

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<sup>9</sup> Luis A Huayhuaca Villasante, *La festividad de Corpus Christi en el Cusco* (Cusco: Talleres Gráficas P.L. Villanueva, 1988), 117.

<sup>10</sup> Huayhuaca Villasante, 117.

<sup>11</sup> Max Harris, *Carnival and other Christian Festivals: Folk Theology and Folk Performance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 114.

Let us now turn to a closer investigation of these images, and the impact of the ritual context on the process of signification that ultimately assigns meaning to the images both inside and out of the Corpus Christi festival. A closer investigation of the image of San Cristóbal in the various contexts will cast some light on the significance of the images that have come to dominate the Cuzqueño Corpus Christi.

During the weeks leading up to the Corpus Christi of 2006 I was able to spend several days at the parish church of San Cristóbal observing the process undertaken to prepare the image for the celebration. I then followed the image through the various stages of procession, photographing and documenting the evolving presentation and reception of the sculpture.

(Slide 1) The image itself dates to the colonial period, and a comparison with the seventeenth-century painting entitled *San Cristóbal Parish* reveals the antiquity of the wooden image, emphasizing the formal and stylistic continuities that bond the modern celebration to its colonial predecessor. (Slide 2) Although often obscured by the layers of opulent vestments now employed by the parish community to dress the sculpture, the original *estofada* garment, a green tunic similar to the one depicted in the painting, can be seen when the image is stripped of all of its clothing.

For most of the year the statue is held in the left crossing of the parish church, removed only occasionally for the celebration of religious festivals. The movement of the image results not only in a change of its appearance but also a subtle re-contextualization of the saint that impacts the way that the image functions within the larger socio-religious discourse. In this way, the result of any spatial shift is a concurrent shift in significance. My experience with San Cristóbal provided me with a useful test-

case for examining the specific changes that can occur within this process. The overall significance of the image is comprised of a synthesis of the meaning attributed to the image in two viewing environments, the static parish church context, and the dynamic and liminal context of the ritual procession.

(Slide 3) The placement and presentation of San Cristóbal within the church allows for him to be absorbed into a niche, and thus both spatially and conceptually integrated into the Catholic Church. We can see here San Cristóbal as he is presented throughout most of the year. His niche is covered in glass, removing him from the space of the worshiper. He is made part of the church architecture and structurally consumed by the church itself. (Slide 4) This practice is common among the various parish churches in which Corpus saints are housed. We can see similar presentations in the case of San Sebastian and San Pedro in these photographs taken before the festival began.

Access to the image of San Cristóbal is limited to the morning hours when the church is open for services and private visits made throughout the day with the permission of the groundskeeper. (Slide 5) Devotees often come to pay respects to their patron saint, and at many churches you can find women selling candles and offerings of incense at the door. This photograph shows one such woman from the church of La Virgen de Belen, one of the patron virgins of Cuzco. In the case of San Cristóbal, candles can be purchased from the groundskeeper Manuel upon entry into the chapel. Within this context members of the community engage the saint as a representative of God and the church, giving offerings, and interacting in whatever fashion they feel appropriate; it is important to recognize that this is always on a one on one basis. This interaction between an individual and their patron saint is brought about by the positioning of the saint within

the very structure of the church, thus its presentation dictates its very significance to the community.

(Slide 6) When removed from the niche, dressed, and carried through the streets of Cuzco, San Cristóbal's primary affiliation changes from the institutionalized Church to the parish community, as the procession allows for a visual display of neighborhood affiliation. (Slide 7) Each saint is carried by an association of *cargadores*. The individuals charged with carrying San Cristóbal can be seen here posing as a group on the day of the entrance to the Cathedral. Their matching dress allows them to make an easily read statement about their group identity and both religious and social affiliation. By dressing alike they assert their connection not only to each other, but also to their patron saint, in this case San Cristóbal. (Slide 8) Other parishes employ similar techniques, as we can see with these *cargadores* from the parish of San Sebastian. (Slide 9) The processions include banners indicating the parish from which they hail. These banners often include depictions of the images themselves, demonstrating the degree to which the saints become emblematic of the community. The saints tower above the crowd and anchor the community members as they maneuver through the crowds of people. (Slide 10) This becomes particularly important when several communities converge along the processional route, most notably during the initial gathering of the images during the entrance, as seen here. In this context they function as a highly visible focal point for communal pride, a very different role than that usually assumed throughout the rest of the year.

In addition to impacting the meaning of the sculpture, a change in context can bring about a change in the way the nature of the image is understood. The processional

ritual plays an integral role in the creation of a personal narrative for the saints. By adorning the figure in sumptuous clothing and realistic wigs the community participates in the anthropomorphization of the sculpture. For example, the ritual process of dressing and preparing San Cristóbal involves several dozen people and extends over the period of two days, all the while members of the community interact with the image in a fashion very different from that which is called for while the saint is in his niche. Here we can see several stages of this process, as first the saint is taken down from his altar and let to sun in the church square. During this process community members gather to touch and take photos with their patron saint. When the images are taken back into the church, members of the community gather to prepare the saint for procession. (Slide 11) The sculpture is first secured to the litter, which will be used to carry the images during the processions. The clothing is then handed to the elected individual in charge of correctly securing the vestments to the image of the saint.

This process involves a surprising amount of audience feedback, calling out for twists, turns, synching, pinning as well as some less constructive comments. The figure of the Christ child, later positioned atop San Cristobal's arm, is adorned by a separate group in the same manner as the larger image, using clothing donated each year by the *mayordomo* of that years Corpus Christi. (Slide 12) During this period members of the community share drinks and laugh, children gather around the base of the image, hanging and climbing on the litter that the adults busily prepare for the upcoming events. No longer are individuals forced to visit during mass nor do they quietly engage with the saint through a series of choreographed rituals and offerings. The viewing experience is now a communal interaction that revolves around a behavior characterized by public

interaction with the image. (Slide 13) As I witnessed this occur, people came to me and shared stories concerning the “life” of their san Cristóbal. They talked about other saint’s favorite foods, and the hijinks that occur when all the saints are left in the Cathedral together, as seen here in this photograph. It became clear that during this period in which their patron came and joined them in the nave of the church, he developed a personality just like the rest of us. (Slide 14) The processional ritual itself serves to reinforce this transformation as the saint “walks” through the streets swaying back and forth with a gait mimicking that of the men who support him. The overall process of anthropomorphization relies heavily on the change in presentation and context that occur when the festival begins.

In conclusion, I believe that the contemporary significance of the images is inherently linked to both their processional and non-processional context. The historical shift towards an image-centric Corpus Christi , characterized by the growing popularity of the sculptures changed the way in which the images fit into the larger social and religious discourse. This shift created an environment in which the images became intimately associated with the celebration of Corpus Christi. Even when they are housed in the parish church, their meaning continues to be informed by the processions associated with the festival. My research has led me to believe that the change in context that occurs when the festival begins brings about an important shift in the saint’s significance within the community. I became aware of the degree to which the saint metonymically represents the community of devotees when in procession. The act of dressing and processing the images creates for them a personal narrative; they are not only a patron saint, but also a member of the community. This connection to the

community is expressed clearly in the processional context, as the saint becomes the primary signifier for the communities that gather at the Cathedral to celebrate during the various days of Corpus Christi. This relationship contrasts with the private and more individualized interaction typically associated with the saint outside of the festival context. The non-processional presentation of the image within an architectural niche leads the viewer to engage with the image as a part of the Church, both conceptually and physically. In this way, the contextualization of the sculpture dictates the role of the saint within the community as either a representative of the church as a whole or of the neighborhood from which he hails. I believe that it is only by considering both of these viewing environments, and the significance attributed to the image within them, that we can truly appreciate the complex and dynamic nature of religious imagery. I am optimistic that more work will be done on this subject in the future that will enhance not only our understanding of processional imagery, but more importantly our understanding of the social and political significance of these images.

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