

Niño Compadrito between the Popular Catholicism and the Heresy¹

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Introduction

In a street in Cuzco City, Peru, there is a cult object, an effigy of about 50 cm. in height called the "*Niño Compadrito* (Child Christ Little Godfather)"², which is generally believed to be the authentic skeleton of a boy. The cranium is less than 10 cm. long. We can see only the face since the rest of the body is completely attired. Despite it's being a skeleton, the 'boy' has eyes of glass, lashes, teeth and a long wig. He wears a shirt, and a crown, as a symbol of his divinity, over the wig. Decorated in this way, the *Niño Compadrito* is kept in an urn. Around it are several offerings such as flowers, candles, toys, as well as medals, photographs, visiting cards and the badges of devotees, on which are inscribed words of gratefulness, as testimony to the miracles the *Niño* has brought for his believers. The wall is decorated with framed pictures depicting biblical themes, a picture of the Pope, as well as paintings and photographs of Catholic Saints and of the Virgin Mary.

Elements of belief found here are identical to those that make up the Catholic faith in Saints in Cuzco, especially in the Christ Child. It attracts attention because of its size, the common name of *Niño*, which means 'Christ Child,' and because toys are given as offerings. The only exception is the *Niño Compadrito* is a skeleton. Because people fully believe in the *Niño Compadrito* as a part of their Catholicism, it is no wonder that most of the believers are not only Catholic, but extremely devout. In September of 1976, despite of the fervor of this cult, Monsignor Luis Vallejos Santoni suddenly declared that it was heretical, and, from that moment, the *Niño* began its underground activity phase. It reappeared six years later, however, with the dire consequence of the successive deaths of the priests who had been active in the persecution of the *Niño*. Devotees believed it had been the *Niño* who had punished the priests, and that they would no longer be persecuted. The cult of the *Niño Compadrito*, thus, has remained in oscillation between popular Catholicism on which people insist, and the heresy accusation put on it by the Church. Consequently, we can observe two conflicting forms of logic in the history of this cult: one being to adopt it into the Catholic framework, and another of expelling it from the same. Our current summation of popular Catholicism has been to consider it as something fixed, something that is

expressed in terms of *religious syncretism* or the *amalgam*. However, the cult of the *Niño Compadrito* finds its being exactly along the ambiguous fault line between popular Catholicism and heresy, and, in this sense, it is a peculiar case that might permit us to analyze the phenomenon called popular Catholicism from a dynamic point of view.

This paper aims to describe and concretely analyze the oral history of the *Niño Compadrito* in order to show a dynamic in the cult that may be divided into five stages: 1.) the appearance or origin of the cult, 2.) its rise, 3.) its persecution, 4.) the secrecy period, and 5.) its reappearance.

1) The Appearance or Origin of the *Niño Compadrito*

There are many versions of how the *Niño Compadrito* appeared. Investigating the source of the variants, we arrived at the conclusion that most of them were handed down by Mrs. Belén, the current owner's mother. Although the narrator is limited to one person, this does not mean that a single version of the child's origin exists. Mrs. Belén would avoid talking about its appearance, but she sometimes gave quite concrete explanations about the origin of the skeleton, even though these were related as fragments. In any case, in analyzing these variants, it can be proven that devotees at least believe that the origin of the *Niño Compadrito* is a human being, and therefore, that its components also must have been formed from a human skeleton.

2) The Rise of the Cult

"The *Niño Compadrito* has more than a hundred years of history," the devotees unanimously say. But there is no way, for the moment, of verifying this because Mrs. Belén, who was the only person who had more information, has already died. Even if this were true, it would be necessary to indicate that the rise of the cult is relatively recent, and that it could not exceed 50 years. Indeed, some informants still remember the early form the cult took in the first half of the decade of the 1960s. In those times, the *Niño* was almost unknown.

When Mrs. Belén got the *Niño*, she decorated it, fixed its little 'chapel', and diffused the cult by guiding the people. She is not the only person, however, who took care of the propagation. Several other devotees who were also earnest about its diffusion volunteered to help. They always talked of supernatural favors that the *Niño* had done for them, for their relatives or for their friends, disclosing that "the *Niño Compadrito* makes miracles." Additionally, they led many people to the 'chapel' that

were interested in knowing of it. Thanks to their efforts and voluntary activities, the *Niño* became more famous, and the number of believers increased rapidly.

People gathered around with candles and flowers, and they left words of gratefulness for the miracles carried out by the *Niño* in a notebook³ that Mrs. Belén had in readiness. They began to celebrate a mass in the 'chapel' of the *Niño Compadrito*, to invite in some priests, regardless of their ecclesiastical affiliations but who might be of a mind for re-education, priests who thought it possible to re-catechize and reeducate people by taking advantage of the fervent faith in the *Niño* without rejecting it.

Followers gathered every day when they had time. Devotees sometimes came from a distance, and belonged to several social classes. In fact, socially, not all were from the lower class; there were many professionals with high education such as lawyers, doctors, accountants, teachers, officials, and university students, even the former mayor of Cuzco City. It is very difficult to calculate accurately the number of believers because faith in the *Niño* for many followers was something temporary, that is to say, they were believers only when in expectation of miracles. The number of participants in the masses celebrating the name of the *Niño Compadrito* was very high in the first half of the decade of the 1970s. On some occasions, there were many people holding lighted candles in their hands because the chapel and its surrounding area had already been full of candles and there was no space to set them down. Considering all such fervent devotees as practitioners of faith in the *Niño Compadrito*, we were able to deduce that the total number of devotees rose to as high as one thousand just before the persecution of the cult in 1976.

3) Persecution

The cult's development was obliged to change drastically after September, 1976. The Ordinance proscribing the *Niño Compadrito* consisted of six articles with the signature of Monsignor Vallejos attached. The prohibition was made public mainly through verbal communication in places where the people gathered, in the Church of Santa Ana, and by means of the mass media as well.

According to the Ordinance, the *Niño Compadrito* was considered a form of superstitious belief and needed to be watched over based on canonical prescriptions contained in the Church Ordinary. It had been said that the object of the cult was a human body, but no scientific investigation had been made on this point, therefore, there was a possibility that the remains were that of an animal, a monkey, not of a human. The *Niño* has been placed in its 'chapel' without any due authorization, which goes against Catholic norms. Moreover, there was an offertory box near it, with which

dishonest lucre had been obtained. Although a doubtful object, the followers have requested that 're-education-minded' priests perform masses to it.

This Ordinance was known in detail only to a few responsible persons in the Church, and it was communicated to the cult's followers without any previous warning, which caused consternation among the devotees. Consequently, a strong reaction took place against the Church. The people didn't understand why the Church suddenly, and in such a unilateral way, had outlawed a cult that had already obtained so wide an acceptance among Catholic parishioners. Devotees didn't interpret such a proscription in the light of Catholic doctrine, but judged it only as a Church pretext. The reason for the Ordinance was explained in at least in three ways. The most popular explanation was that the Ordinance was a tactic devised to force devotees to return to a decadent mainstream Church that had lost popularity. While few went to the mass in the established Church, the 'chapel' of the *Niño* was full of fervent devotees. The second explanation arose from an interpretation of the words expressed in the Ordinance that the *Niño Compadrito* could be the "remains of an animal, a monkey." People thought the Church had prohibited it just because the *Niño Compadrito* had an ugly face, but devotees, of course, thought otherwise. The third interpretation refers to a difference of opinion inside the Catholic Church itself. According to this explanation, the prohibition was nothing more than a byproduct of the bishop's personal opinion, since in the Church there were, in fact, two positions: one to support the *Niño Compadrito*, and the other to reject it. The first esteemed the *Niño's* divinity and tried to understand the devotees' faith. The other was formulated by 'bad Fathers' who hated such popular manifestations as the *Niño* cult. The bishop, as an 'antiniñist,' was thought to be a bad priest because he ignored the divinity without attempting to investigate or to understand the matter at all. In summary, the bishop, wrongly informed, issued the Ordinance based solely on his imagination, without knowing the reality of the faith in the *Niño*. People believed that the bishop had profaned the cult. Devotees would not understand anything about the theological reason for the proscription of the cult. On the contrary, they interpreted the proscription in a way at complete odds with the Church.

Once the Ordinance was promulgated, of course, it was never revoked. An 'antiniñist' campaign was developed by the press, radio, television, handbills and posters. Priests were prohibited to say mass in the house where the 'Child' was kept. In protest against such circumstances, devotees went directly to the Church in order to talk with the bishop. They used the pretext of the freedom of faith, and of respect for the right of possession of the *Niño*, to plead their case. Many believers were convinced by the bishop's Ordinance because it threatened them with excommunication. At the same time, however, not all surrendered to the 'antiniñist' order given by the bishop, even

though they seemed outwardly obedient to his decision. This group of earnest faithfuls hid the *Niño* to maintain it.

4) Secrecy Period

There were two reasons why the *Niño* was forced into underground activities: 1.) The owner's family, as well as the devotees, were damaged by false information given in the mass media, without any evidence, of orgies and extravagant donations, and 2.) Devotees were anxious about possible physical damage to the effigy, because rumors increased that the Church was going to take it from them and burn it. The *Niño Compadrito*, therefore, was strictly protected.

Despite anger and criticism against the Church, devotees did not dare to make their feelings known. They remained as quiet as possible, preferring secrecy to taking any aggressive actions. The Church did not take further action against the cult after the promulgation of the Ordinance.

The result of the silence differs according to each of the two sides. The inactivity of the Church scared the 'proninist' group and forced them to protect their secrecy. And so, silence obtained the same effect the Ordinance had intended in the first place. Secondly, silence dealt a heavy blow to the cult because the six-year non-presence of the 'Child' weakened the faith and, as a consequence, devotees were lost because the basis of the faith was constant communication with the effigy and the realization of miracles. This effect obtained in the case of the common believers. The silence, however, produced a totally contrary effect for the more enthusiastic devotees. During this period while the 'Child' remained in a repressed situation, they received a series of revelations, one after another. Considering these revelations as miracles, they consolidated the underground religious group.

The stalemated situation or 'calm' between the two opposing sides of the issue continued up to 1982, a year of big changes caused by three abrupt and fortuitous deaths of 'antininist' priests. In May of 1982, Father Dalle died. He was a French priest, friend, and collaborator of Bishop Vallejos. Two weeks later, Monsignor Vallejos died. Then the parish priest of the *Niño Compadrito*, Father Luna, also died. All were killed in traffic accidents.

It is important to notice that people interpreted the successive deaths of the priests as being related to the supernatural power of the *Niño*. According to the popular explanation, the *Niño* rebelled against the Church, which had at first declared war on him. The accident was thus considered a divine punishment from the *Niño*. In the devotees' account, priests' bodies were found without tongues because they had insulted

the *Niño Compadrito*. According to them, it was a just sanction for liars.

The night Monsignor Vallejos died, members of the secret group gathered around the effigy and discussed measures for the future, believing that nobody would try to destroy the faith any more. In Cuzco City, rumors of retaliation against the bishop spread quickly. Common believers began to call on the owner again, so she revealed the sacred image to them again. In the summer in 1982, that is to say, after six-year silence, the Niño finally reappeared in public.

5) Reappearance

Once the *Niño* was re-opened to the public, devotees gradually returned to it. Since 1982, worshipers have increased again resulting in a reevaluation of its divine power. Despite this trend, however, the current cult is still not back to what it was before the repression. One of the most notable differences is a considerable increase in believers who offer black candles instead of the formerly white ones. White candles are used to pray for a positive favor, while the black ones are used to request damage to enemies, in other words, for purposes of sorcery.⁴ It is possible that this phenomenon is due to how far diffusion has spread by word of mouth about a miraculous punishment enacted against his enemies by the *Niño*.

The relationship of the effigy with the Church has also changed. Before the repression, devotees had to bring the priest to the house for mass, but now priests celebrate mass being requested on behalf of the *Niño Mario*, or *Niño Compadrito* in the Church on the day of the Dead or on other special occasions. In sum, the *Niño* itself, sometimes in name only, goes to the Church instead of the reverse. This contact, after six years of separation, marks a great change for the 'antiniñists' as well as for the 'proniniñists.' Devotees understand that the Church does not always need to do damage to the *Niño*. They now want to incorporate what they believe inside regular Catholic doctrine. On the other hand, the Church, since the Ordinance, no longer shows any special interest in the cult, taking what seems to be a tolerant position in regard to this popular belief.⁵ After Monsignor Vallejo's death, the voices of re-education minded priests have begun to be heard again, insisting that it is necessary, first of all, to accept Catholic parishioners' belief, without prohibiting anything one-sidedly, and, secondly, that it is necessary to catechize them by means of teaching the authentic doctrine. The most important thing to the so-called 're-education minded priests' is to turn people into good Catholics by guiding them properly. It is not bad to accept, for the present, the *Niño Compadrito* and its miracles, since a tolerant attitude is the starting point for a more effective catechization. For this reason, the 're-education minded' priests do not

reject masses related to the *Niño Compadrito*.

6) Conclusion

As we have noted above, the *Niño* has reappeared in public. From this short analysis, we can make two points. In the first place, there are two factions concerning the *Niño Compadrito* inside the Catholic Church in Cuzco: the 're-education minded' and the rejecters. The former, who gave instruction to believers in the *Niño* before the Ordinance, gradually have begun to act again since Monsignor Vallejo's death. The latter, the rejecters, are now the representatives of the priests who promulgated the Ordinance, designed to refute all doubtful and impure elements like the *Niño Compadrito*, with the purpose of purifying and regenerating Catholicism in Cuzco. Because the liberal priests, for the moment, take an attitude of acceptance toward the *Niño*, they naturally have to oppose the rejecters. In this respect, it is interesting how the cult has adapted to measures taken by both of these opposing groups. In the second place, and this connects to the first conclusion, there are two mutually exclusive phenomena that differ in accordance one or the other attitude toward the cult. What the 're-education minded' have done has enlivened the cult, allowing it to develop and winning the trust and sympathy of believers. It cannot be denied, however, that the cult constantly absorbs many autochthonous elements. What the rejecters enact on the cult elicits the following two reactions: firstly, they aim to shrink and weaken this popular cult, even though they maintain that it is genuinely Catholic and emphasize its legitimacy, and secondly, by rejecting the measures of the rejecters, devotees believe that even though the number of the believers should diminish, that they will deepen their own belief. In this case, the faith strengthens, absorbing autochthonous and new elements.

Having traced the ways of reaction against the cult in terms of measures taken by 're-education minded' priests, as well as those taken by the rejecters inside the Catholic Church in Cuzco, another new problem emerges. Up to the present, the formation of popular Catholicism has been analyzed in terms of the process of collision between European culture and the native one. However, in the light of the *Niño Compadrito* case, we should not forget that even a miniscule change in religious measures taken at the regional level can produce a big transformation. We should remember that popular Catholicism is fluid. In this sense, the case of the *Niño Compadrito* has significance beyond the context of the Cuzco region in the study of the phenomena of religious syncretism.

Notes

1. The data used in this essay were collected during the "Cuzco Project" under the auspices of the Ministry of Education of Japan from 1990-1995 (Representative: Dr. Hiroyasu Tomoeda of the National Museum of Ethnology). I want to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Hiroyasu Tomoeda, Dr. Tatsuhiko Fujii, Dr. Hideo Kimura, Dr. Nao Nobuoka, Dr. Jorge Flores Ochoa, Dr. Abraham Valencia, Dr. Washington Rozas, Mrs. Carmen Calderón, Professor Hilario Kopp, and Don Juan Letona who have helped me carry out this work. This essay is a part of previous article (Kato 1994).
2. Concerning the *Niño Compadrito*, we have a general study "*Religiosidad popular, el "Niño Compadrito,"*" by Abraham Valencia, that provides much ethnographic data, but I have always verified these through comparison with data I myself have collected.
3. Unfortunately, most parts of the notebook have been lost. Juan Letona still conserves some pages of the notebook where we can read the testimonies of the miracles that occurred from June, 1976 through November, 1987.
4. In this case, the devotees request the *Niño* to enact justice or to punish their enemies.
5. See Tovar 1982. To be more precise, the Church was tolerant before the Ordinance as well. It seemed intolerant to this popular belief only for a limited time, in which the cult of *Señor de Wimpillay* and that of the *Niño Compadrito* were prohibited. In fact, there are several articles written by Catholic priests (cf. Dalle 1969, Marzal 1971), which are in the line of "applied anthropology" for evangelization, admitting and taking advantage of the popular belief.

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