

Spatial Diffusion of Worship to the *Black Christ of Esquipulas* in California, United States of America

Difusión espacial de la devoción al Cristo Negro de Esquipulas en el Estado de California, Estados Unidos

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Resumen. Los cristos negros son figuras devocionales que catalizan distintos significados a través de su color. En el contexto centroamericano, su tez rescata elementos del pasado prehispánico y rememora, en gran medida, al vínculo que tenían los pueblos originarios con la tierra. De todos ellos, uno de los más representativos, por su magnetismo espiritual, es el Señor de Esquipulas, Guatemala, cuya devoción está distribuida en amplias zonas de Centroamérica y Estados Unidos, producto de distintos periodos en los que su imagen se expandió, ancló y resignificó en estos territorios.

Desde el punto de vista de las teorías de difusión espacial, el presente trabajo expone los procesos de que han llevado a la devoción al Señor de Esquipulas a estar presente de manera diferenciada en California, Estados Unidos. Para ello, el artículo aplica un diseño de investigación cualitativo de corte descriptivo-explicativo para evidenciar el proceso de expansión de esta devoción cuya estrategia metodológica se nutrió de un análisis hemerográfico para reconstruir escenarios geohistóricos de difusión y de un trabajo de campo en el estado de California durante julio de 2022 que, guiado por los principios de la etnografía multisituada, permitió reconstruir la ruta de difusión contemporánea. Finalmente, se revela que el proceso de difusión en California ocurre primordialmente a partir de un modelo de relocalización policentralizado debido a las distintas trayectorias seguidas por los devotos en su proceso migratorio y de integración en el país.

Palabras clave: difusión espacial, Cristo Negro, Señor de Esquipulas, California, análisis geohistórico.

Abstract. Black Christs are devotional figures that catalyze different meanings through their color. In the Central American context, their color rescue elements of the pre-Hispanic past and recalls, to a large extent, the link of natives with the land. One of the most representative Black Christs for his spiritual magnetism is the Lord of Esquipulas, Guatemala, revered in large parts of Central America and the United States, as a result of different periods during which his image expanded, anchored, and resignified in these territories.

The present work describes the processes that have favored the presence of the devotion to the Lord of Esquipulas in a differentiated way in California, United States, from the perspective of the spatial diffusion theories. To this end, the article applies a descriptive-explanatory qualitative research design to illustrate the expansion of this veneration. The methodological strategy included a hemerographic analysis to reconstruct geohistorical expansion scenarios and fieldwork in the state of California during July 2022 that allowed reconstructing the contemporary expansion route based on principles of multi-location ethnography. Our findings show that the diffusion process in California occurs primarily from a multicentric relocation model due to

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the different trajectories of worshipers over their migration and integration in the country.

Keywords: spatial diffusion, Black Christ, Lord of Esquipulas, California, geohistorical analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Black Christs are present throughout the American continent, although their territorial distribution and extent of worship follow different patterns. They can be found mainly in places that underwent important processes of colonization and evangelization of native groups by the Spanish crown. The different mendicant orders played key roles in supporting this process, as is the case of the Black Christ of Esquipulas, Guatemala (Horst *et al.*, 2010; Davidson, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2014; Baracich and Blum, 2021).

Since its origin in 1595, devotion to the Lord of Esquipulas has grown considerably. Today, it is widespread in the countries of Mexico's northern and southern triangle, although it has also reached the United States. In this country, there are records of its presence since the Spanish colonial era in localities near the former Royal Inland Road (*Ruta Real de Tierra Adentro*) (Pacheco, 2005) and, more recently, in cities and states that are home to large communities migrating from Central America that settled in California, Florida, Texas, and New York since the 1980s (Navarrete, 1999).

This study aims to document how the devotion to this image spread in California. It is divided into three sections. The first addresses both the contributions of theoretical-cognitive postulates that delve into spatial diffusion and its link with religious phenomena such as the origin and distribution of Black Christs in the central part of the continent; the second outlines the methodology used; and the third reveals the type of expansion of worship and the unique characteristics of its territorial expressions.

Spatial diffusion of religious phenomena

Spatial diffusion is a process of communication, propagation, or spread of a phenomenon across

the territory through time (Brown, 1968) and is part of the theories of spread and spatial interaction (Morrill, Gaile and Thrall, 1998). The supporting principles have been studied from different approaches throughout history, leading to theories such as diffusionism in the anthropological sciences (Winthrop, 1991), the theory of diffusion of innovations in sociology (Kumar, 2015), and the theory of spatial diffusion in geography (Hägerstrand, 1953).

The theoretical-methodological approach adopted in this work assumes at least three variables to demonstrate a diffusion process: innovation, a temporal dimension, and a spatial dimension. Research scenarios such as the purpose, field, and study subject may introduce additional variables, such as communication channels, adopters, triggers, and barriers. To a lesser or greater degree, all of them are part of the process and affect how innovation expands in the territory (Brown, 1968; Gould, 1969; Barra and Maturana, 2015; Valdez, 2018).

In this sense, authors usually resort to categorization to identify the diffusion form of a phenomenon and the role of the elements involved in the process. The first is diffusion by expansion, which classifies phenomena that spread through direct contact of actors; the second, diffusion by relocation, refers to phenomena transmitted mainly by the directed displacement of agents to other areas. Likewise, diffusion by expansion is split into two subcategories: diffusion by contagion, where expansion results from direct contact within a population, and hierarchical diffusion, whose transmission route is vertical, starting at the top of society down to increasingly smaller and distant sectors (Gould, 1969; Haggett, 1991; Vilalta and Banda, 2008; Barra and Maturana, 2015).

Barriers play a leading role in determining the theoretical-methodological frameworks to identify dissemination strategies and categories. In this sense, Abler *et al.* (1972) and Caloz and Collet (2011) explain that the spatial diffusion of a phenomenon occurs following differentiated patterns due to the existence of barriers that influence the direction, speed, and intensity of diffusion processes. These can be classified based on two different criteria. According to their de-

gree of porosity, into 1) absorbing barriers, which completely block diffusion; 2) reflective barriers, which redirect diffusion in various directions; and 3) permeable barriers, which absorb part of the diffusion, thus slowing down the process and decreasing its reach. According to the type of barrier, into 1) physical barriers, which block or slow down diffusion, linked to the physical attributes of space, such as topography or land cover; 2) cultural barriers, which are related to factors such as language, religion, politics, or economics; and 3) psychological barriers, which are relevant in the individual acceptance of innovations since people act as carriers.

Studies on religion consider different aspects that show the relevance, importance, and validity of the above theories in this field. As Park (2004, p. 10) points out, religion is "... a set of ideas or values that can be spread among groups of people, often separated by considerable distances." This consideration allows for elucidating the impact of religion in different fields, especially in the intersection between religion, politics, and space.

Theoretical reflection has sought to demonstrate the intentionality of religious institutions to expand territorially through multi-scale power relations. In this sense, research has allowed comparing the religious diffusion between two historical moments: the colonialist era and postmodern times (Oliveira and Rosendahl, 2014).

In both cases, the most common types of dissemination are related to hierarchy and contagion, mainly associated with the physical displacement of people who spread innovation (a religion, belief, or ideological manifestation of human spirituality) and the elements or objects associated with them, driven through a structure of power networks (Park, 2004). This is reflected especially in the spread of Islam and Catholicism worldwide. In the latter, dissemination relied heavily on mendicant missions strategically established to promote the spread of the Catholic faith. Thus, it could be seen as a network with different nuclei ranked according to the power levels granted to them (Johnson, 2010, Rosendahl, 2012; Rodrigues and Rosendahl, 2014).

More recently, the hierarchical attenuation of power networks has become apparent from prog-

ress in telecommunications and cyberspace. In this sense, cyberculture, cyber theology, virtual religion, and social networks have emerged as expressions and ways to bring faith closer to more people over a shorter period. As a result, various niches have been explored, which allowed resignifying the ways of expressing faith, as in the emergence of a new type of pilgrims who do not have to travel to sacred places: media pilgrims and virtual pilgrims (Rodrigues, 2019).

Park (2004) exemplifies the above by pointing out the opportunity evangelical groups took to spread their religious message through television broadcasts and the Internet, contributing to their growth and expansion. An aspect worth mentioning is the efforts of some Catholic religious communities to make good use of these niches, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing the liturgical activities broadcasted through social networks (Díaz, 2021).

Methodologically, in addition to the descriptive, theoretical-modelistic, stochastic, and deterministic models that prevail in this theory (Morrill, Gaile and Thrall, 1998), other proposals employ qualitative strategies to explore and visualize these processes. These generally result in isoline or network maps that show the above (Oliveira *et al.*, 1978; Silva, 1995; Alderman, 2012).

Rosendahl and Lobato (2006) used a model to highlight the expansion of Catholic dioceses in Brazil based on the historical identification of routes, periods, agents involved, power relations, diffusion spaces, hierarchies, and anchors. On the other hand, c(2003) illustrated the evolution of the expansion of Christianity over the world in a series of maps, using isolines that correspond to different periods of time. In both cases, geohistorical analyses are needed to identify spatio-temporal patterns to explain the speed, direction, and actors that define the extent of the process.

The Origin and Distribution of Black Christs in Central America

Since ancient times, the black color is associated with different meanings, especially in a dichotomous relationship with the white color. Black represents the absence of light, which symbolizes

death, night, sacrifice, and mystery, although it also refers to other attributes such as life, fertility, fecundity, and earth (Huynen, 1974; Zialcita, 2016).

Catholic worship figures show representations of Mary and Christ using dark shades in France and Spain, at least since the 11th and 12th centuries (Zialcita, 2016; Valtierra, 2021). The darkening of these images responds to various causes, such as 1) the relationship with older pagan symbols or deities, 2) the use of dark materials, 3) the passing of time, 4) miraculous explanations, 5) fashion, 6) the geographic origin of the images, and 7) the artist's will (Esquivel, 2002; Navarrete, 2007; González, 2017; González, 2017; Valtierra, 2021). In most figures, this tonality has nothing to do with the skin itself but with some of the characteristics mentioned above (Esparza, 2004).

In America, the dark skin that characterizes some images —especially virgins and Christs— resulted from four main elements that emerged during the conquest process (Navarrete, 2007; Villalobos, 2015; Escoto, 2017; Hipólito, 2021):

- The veneration of pre-Hispanic idols, racial fusion, and religious syncretism with deities of this tonality.
- The manufacturing material used to elaborate these images — usually corn cane paste and dark wood.
- Social claims that demanded representations evoking a sense of belonging.
- The black community brought to America from Africa.

Although the existence of common patterns is remarkable, the origin of black Christs¹ in the Americas does not follow a single path of appearance and diffusion (Pacheco, 2005). Records in South America have shed no light on the diffusion of these images or their quantity. Some of them,

¹ In this sense, black Christs are understood as those representations of Christ that, in the popular imagination, have a coloration that confers a “darker” appearance than their Europeanized representations, including almost black images of some images represented with “dark-skinned, brownish” shades.

especially those images located in what were the Spanish territories of New Granada and Peru, share similarities in their name, dates of spiritual importance in the liturgical calendar, and relationship with the slave, native and afro-descendant populations; in the latter, reference is made to the image of the Lord of Miracles (Figure 1).

The opposite is true in Mexico and Central America since several academic works contribute revealing information. Davidson (2012) points out 418 houses of worship where black Christs are revered in the Americas, of which 373 are located in Central America, and 80% are directly related to the Christ of Esquipulas. Separately, Horts *et al.* (2010) indicate that at least 272 temples are devoted to the Black Christ of Esquipulas in Central America, this being the most recognized image.

Most images are housed in small temples displaying images that directly refer to the Christ of



Figure 1. Territorial distribution of black Christs in South America. Source: Own elaboration based on Ramos (s/f), Costilla (2016), Cesio (2021), Baracich and Blum (2021), Tovar (2022).

Esquipulas (Fitzpatrick, 2014). Under this premise, it is impossible to establish exactly the number of black Christs existing in this region because of the differences in records throughout the continent and other facts, such as the number of particular altars devoted to such images.

Black Christs are spatially predominant from central Mexico to southwestern Central America in central Panama. They are scarce to the north, and their distribution follows a parallel line to the colonial trade routes that connected the provinces of New Spain (Figure 2).

The time scale of the figure begins in 1537, which corresponds to the dating of the image of the Lord of Chalma. This is the oldest in the records and ended in 2003, when the devotion to the Mojado Christ begins in Los Angeles, California,

one of the most recent Christs (Rosas and Propin, 2022). This revealed that, together with the Lord of Esquipulas, the images of Chalma, Tila, Otatitlan, and the Lord of the Poison, located in Mexico, are the triggers of the diffusion of black Christs; all of them are contemporary and date back to the late 16th century. Regarding spatial patterns, Figure 2 shows three diffusion zones: central Mexico, the Pacific coast, and eastern Guatemala; the latter is where the original image of the Lord of Esquipulas is located.

Throughout the Americas, especially in Mexico and Central America, there are many sites where the Lord of Esquipulas is venerated. Martinez (2020) points out that it is the patron saint in some of these sites, but there are other records where its image has adopted different names and

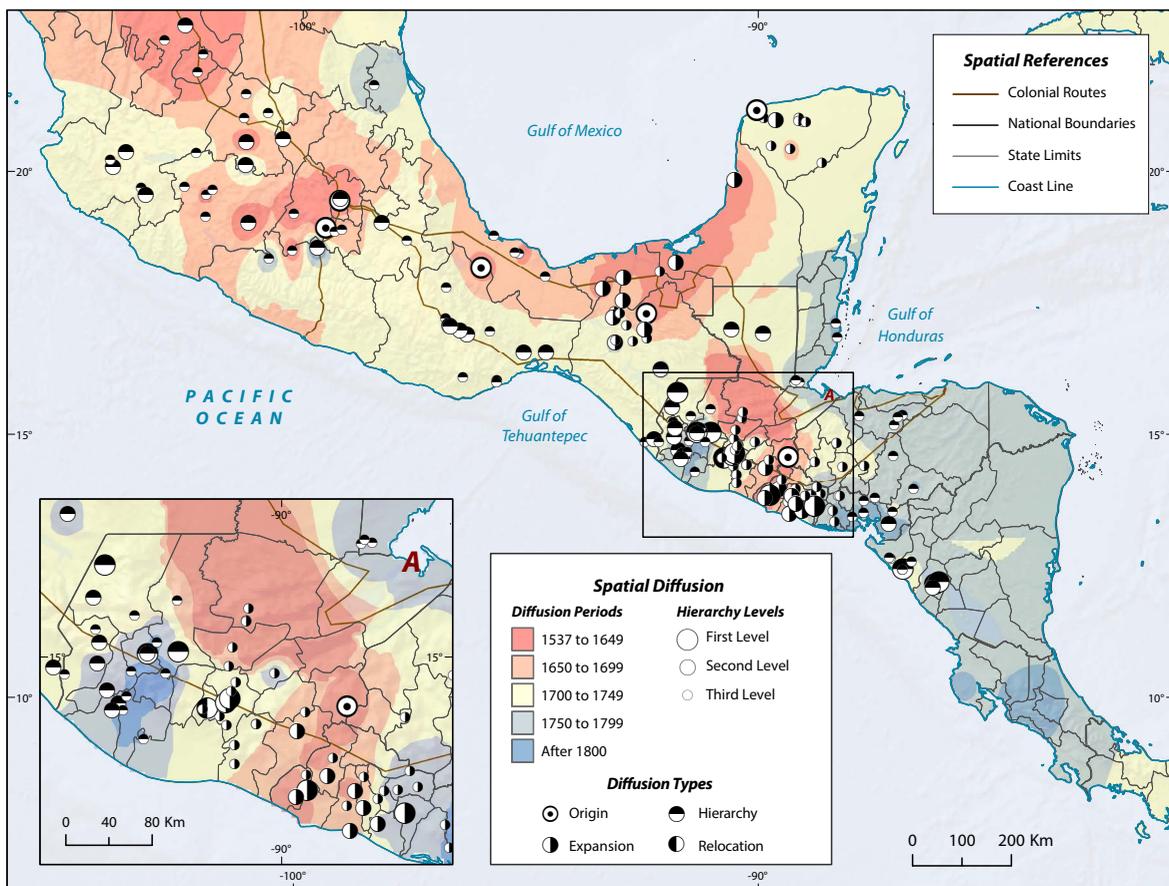


Figure 2. Spatial diffusion of black Christs in Mexico and Central America. Source: Own elaboration based on Pacheco (2005), Horst *et al.* (2010), Davidson (2014), Fitzpatrick (2014), Hipólito (2021).

its worship has been reinterpreted, as can be noted recently with the Mojado Christ of the Church of St. Cecilia in Los Angeles, California (Rosas and Propin, 2022).

The diffusion of devotion to the Lord of Esquipulas started in 1595 with the arrival of the image to the homonymous town. Devotion gradually expanded to the north and south in a process that combines the types of diffusion by contagion and hierarchy, derived from two causes: the progressive expansion from subsidiary centers that allowed expanding the influence zone of worship and the route followed, particularly through commercial routes (Pacheco, 2005; Horst *et al.*, 2010; Fitzpatrick, 2014).

In the first centuries, the difficulty of moving through the territory toward the Esquipulas sanctuary prompted the diffusion of cults through local replicates that became hugely popular as the distance from the site increased, peaking in the eighteenth century. This inevitably increased the regional reach of Esquipulas and promoting the construction of the basilica that currently houses it.

In this way, worship expanded steadily and was resignified in some cases. Worship of the Black Christ of Juayua arrived in El Salvador in 1670; in Honduras, it arrived on similar dates to those for the Lord of the Good End of Quezailica; in Nicaragua, worship arrived in 1723 with the veneration of the Lord of Miracles of Esquipulas de El Sauce, León; and in Costa Rica, it arrived in 1804 with the Black Christ of Esquipulas, Santa Cruz and, later, in 1884, with the Christ of Esquipulas of Alajuelita, San José (Horst *et al.*, 2010; Davidson, 2014; Martínez, 2020).

Towards the north, the diffusion process was similar, although slower, at least in the area of influence of the Spanish crown. The diffusion route can be inferred from accounts and historical records (Horst *et al.*, 2010; Fitzpatrick, 2014). It arrived in Antigua in 1701, more than a hundred years after worship of this image started. Towards the late 18th century and mid-18th century, worship expanded to Mexico; first, to Oaxaca and Chiapas, and later, to Nueva Galicia, in the present states of Jalisco and Guanajuato (the latter arriving at the Church of Moroleon in 1804). Then, the

diffusion process continued through the *Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when devotion reached New Spain's northern provinces. In the second half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, driven by migratory movements, devotion spread to different cities in the United States.

Horst *et al.* (2010) explain that the importance of secondary and tertiary sanctuaries lies in that they allow expanding the expansion of spiritual magnetism and the area of influence of devotion to the Lord of Esquipulas, so it is understandable that these attract people from nearby localities to avoid the investment of time and distance traveled that represents going to Esquipulas. However, on holidays of spiritual importance, worshippers continue traveling from different localities to this region, boosting the regional reach of the image (Rosas y Propin, 2016).

As devotion mobilized and expanded, the image of the Lord of Esquipulas evolved and acquired local characteristics of the places where it arrived. Because of the distances, it was more practical for people to establish a local festivity instead of a pilgrimage to Esquipulas, given the complications involved in the trip (Martínez, 2020). Pompejano (2015) adds that, given the polycentric model followed by diffusion, it was unfeasible to think that devotion to the Black Christ followed a homogeneous and hegemonic spatial model. As the images of Christ and devotion expanded in the territory, they were reinterpreted to adapt to new circumstances, bleaching in some cases and modifying their size or raw material (Fitzpatrick, 2014). Depending on the diversity of cultures in the territory and the common events experienced by societies, multiple elements contributed to the diffusion, resignification, and assimilation over time, as evidenced by the arrival of the Black Christ in the United States.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For being present in each devotee, worship of the Lord of Esquipulas is an itinerant study subject with multiple locations. Therefore, to explain

its dissemination process in California since the 1970s, a methodology based on multi-sited ethnography principles was proposed (Marcus, 1995), which allows examining how identities, practices, and meanings are constructed and transmitted across multiple sites and interactions in different social and cultural contexts.

Based on a qualitative research design, this methodology combines three strategies from the research of Hirai (2012) and Mazariegos (2019) to follow the study subject through time and space. The first strategy consisted of fieldwork carried out in July 2022 in Los Angeles, California, because it is the territory with the largest population size of Hispanic (Census Reporter, 2021) and Central American origin (Migration Policy Institute, 2020) in the state and the country. There, we applied the strategy of “object tracking”, consisting of identifying material objects that serve as anchors for the study; in this case, physical replicates of the Black Christ of Esquipulas located in religious precincts sustained by a solid community of devotees around it. To this end, participating observation in the precincts and informal interviews with its visitors were conducted to identify other sites in the city and in the state where there are communities devoted to the Lord of Esquipulas and their manifestations of faith, in turn applying the “snowball” technique to identify key players in the diffusion process.

Given the nature of the data and the mobility restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic, the second strategy consisted of a review of interactions on social networks (e.g., Facebook) around the Lord of Esquipulas with georeference in California. This strategy was particularly useful in identifying both organized and non-organized devotees in communities elsewhere in the state and the country. This information was useful for identifying interaction networks, and dissemination was reconstructed over time.

The third strategy was built from the triangulation of the previous strategies, which provided information about the various characteristics of devotion. With the data obtained, a map was constructed through cartographic methods of qualitative points and lines of movement to specify the spatial analysis and demonstrate the community

networks, the diffusion types and periods, and the interconnections between devotion sites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Except for the black Christs that emerged in the United States during the nineteenth century, the bulk of images in this part of the continent responds to a diffusion model that differs from what happened in Central America. It shows multiple centralities where there is no clear interconnection in the dissemination process due to the different trajectories of the migratory processes of devotees from Central America produced since 1970, especially to the city of Los Angeles, California (Figure 3).

Although the communities share similar ritual acts due to the traditions inherited from the countries of origin — especially the celebration of the patron saint's feast on January 15, where they provide food, craft carpets, take the Christ out in procession on a wooden walk, and promote Guatemalan traditions through music and food — these are not necessarily directly linked between them and, sometimes, tend to display a separate development despite the geographic proximity.

Figure 3 shows three historical moments of the devotion diffusion process in the state and highlights the importance of Los Angeles as the main dissemination center. The field testimonies indicate that the first devotion center for the Christ of Esquipulas in California, and one of the first in the United States, is located in the Church of Our Lady Queen of Angels (*Placita Olvera*). Yanira Romero, a member of the board of directors of the Fraternity of *Placita Olvera*, explained that the Lord of Esquipulas image arrived at the site in October 1986 from Chiquimula, Guatemala, thanks to the support of Franciscan priests and the growing Guatemalan community that gathered in the Church, who had requested a replicate for the city (fieldwork, 2022). This arrival of the image through a network of contacts ranging from Guatemala to the United States was a key element for the beginning of the diffusion of the worship of the Christ of Esquipulas in California. From this

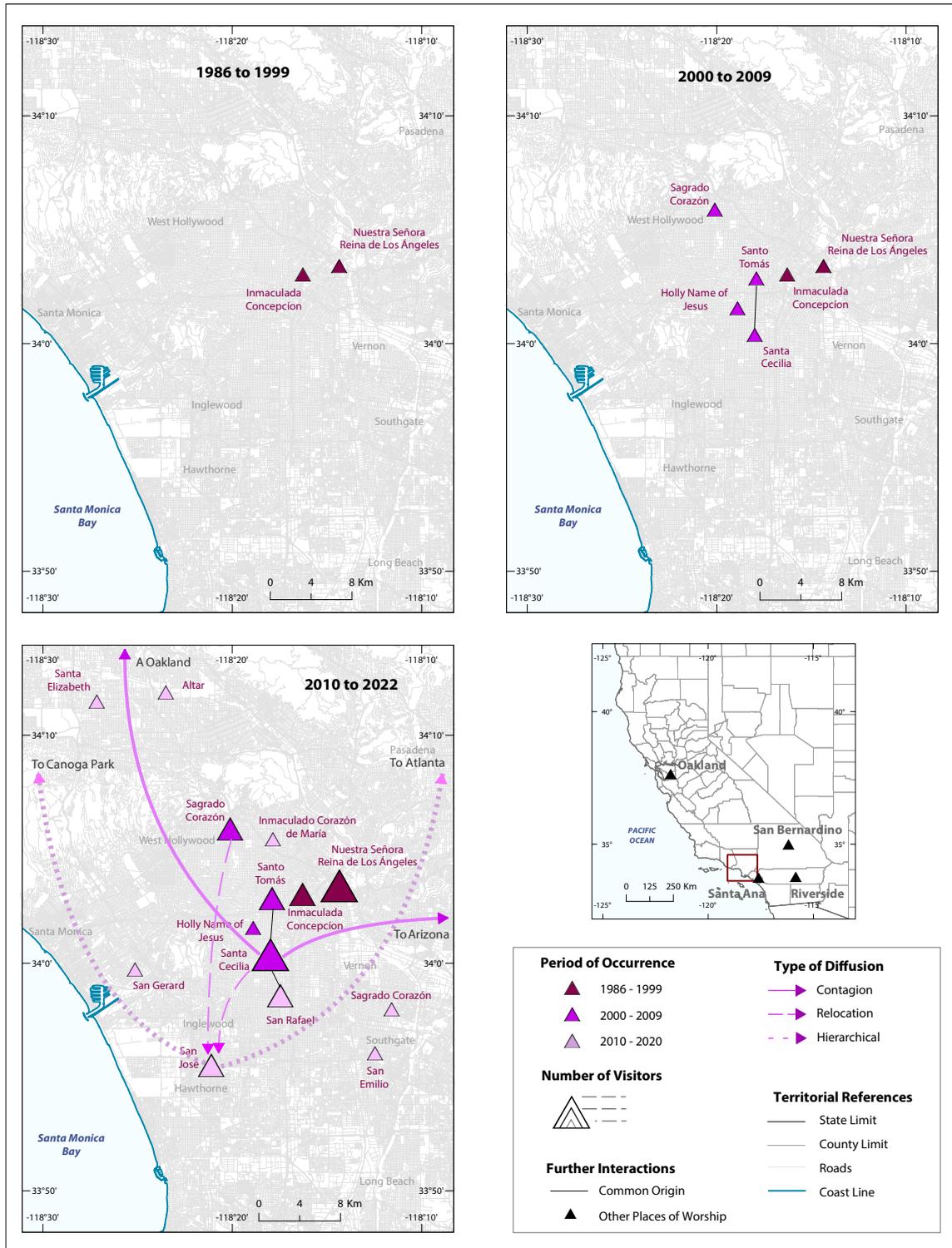


Figure 3. Spatial diffusion of the Christ of Esquipulas in California, 2022. Source: Own elaboration based on fieldwork, 2022.

point on, the worship of Christ gradually spread throughout the state.

Years later, the Church of the Immaculate Conception, near McArthur Park, became another of the main worship centers for the Black Christ in the city (interview with Byron Vazquez, 2022). These sites were spiritual magnetism centers to worship the Lord of Esquipulas during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Guatemalans gathered in these places as part of their religious culture, which allowed the spread of the devotion to Christ of Esquipulas in the area.

Years later, devotion to the Christ of Esquipulas began to spread gradually in some areas of central-eastern Los Angeles, driven by the consolidation of Guatemalan communities. An example of this re-signification is the Church of Santa Cecilia, where, according to the accounts gathered, a replicate of the Christ was brought from Guatemala in 2003 with no documents, which is why it was baptized as “*Mojado*”. This interpretation has raised conflicting views among the community: while some see it as a form of opportunism (interview with Byron Vazquez, 2022), for others, it is an opportunity to empathize with the circumstances of migrants and expand their faith.

By those years, the devotion began to decentralize. In 2004, in the Church of St. Elizabeth of Hungary in Oakland, in the north of the state, a Guatemalan community devoted to the Christ of Esquipulas was formed. This promoted the arrival of a replicate to that religious site in 2004, supported by Monsignor Alvaro Ramazinni (Martinez, 2020). However, other sources date this event a few years later, on January 15, 2006 (Aguirre, 2010).

Between 2000 and 2010, the first signs of direct relations were observed between the devotees of the Black Christ, specifically between the Churches of St. Cecilia and the Church of St. Thomas. Both were carved by the same sculptor and sent to Los Angeles almost simultaneously. Despite this, the devotional development of each place followed different patterns and developed its own ways of expressing devotion.

In the 2010s, there was a considerable boost in the number and scope of the worship places of the Lord of Esquipulas, some of which were

promoted by devotees already linked with other religious groups. One of the most prominent cases is St. Joseph’s Church in Hawthorne, southwest of Los Angeles, where some of its members were previously linked to the Fraternity of the Church of St. Cecilia.

In San Jose, there is evidence that the cult expanded to this religious precinct through a relocation process fostered by devotees looking for a place close to their homes. Also, the religious authorities of the Church provided assistance, as they had experience in the creation of a fraternity to worship the Black Christ in the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in North Hollywood (interview Alvarez couple, 2022).

In the past decade, worship of the Christ of Esquipulas has experienced a remarkable spatial diffusion in California. The identification of 19 worship sites in the Los Angeles metropolitan area and six in the San Francisco-Oakland metropolitan area (Figure 3) reflect the impact of this worship on the state. These brotherhoods of the Christ of Esquipulas represent one of the multiple ministries of the Churches in the region, so they must coordinate their activities with other groups to promote proper development of the various liturgical events and avoid frictions within the community of the respective religious precinct.

The parish of Santa Cecilia, known for its foundational myth associated with the “undocumented” arrival of a replicate of the Christ of Esquipulas, is the largest worship center in terms of number of visitors and scope of their spatial interactions. Other historically important churches in the consolidation of worship, such as the Church of Our Lady Queen of Los Angeles and the Church of the Immaculate Conception, have seen their number of devotees reduced for several reasons, such as the increase of alternatives in other parts of the city, wrong decisions by the parish, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These problems have led the devotees to go to other sanctuaries and indicate some of the barriers that have influenced the spatial dissemination of the cult.

Except for a few cases, most of the worship places originated following a model of diffusion by relocation, explained by the immigration of

devotees mainly from Guatemala. Upon arriving in places like Los Angeles, they approach precincts where they begin to weave a sense of community with other devout migrants. These communities anchored to precincts have developed links that expand worshipping to other sites, although their individual contributions are differentiated.

Once migrants arrive in California, the spread of the devotion to the Christ of Esquipulas has involved mainly personal contact among devotees. This indicates the diffusion of devotion by contagion and an increase in flows to the precincts where this Christ is worshipped (Figure 3). The communities have developed their own strategies to strengthen ties and expand devotion, such as the acquisition of pilgrim images by fraternities such as La Placita Olvera and Santa Cecilia. Particularly, the Pilgrim Christ of St. Cecilia has fostered links with devotees from the Metropolitan Area of the City of Los Angeles and from places further away, such as Concord, San Francisco-Oakland, Arizona, Mexico, and Guatemala. This reflects the mechanisms of spatial diffusion of religious phenomena, where the network of contacts and flows of devotion play a fundamental role.

Yolanda Valdez, one of the persons in charge of accompanying the Christ during its pilgrimages, points out that the link between Santa Cecilia and the city of Concord has been maintained through several visits to the area, allowing the cult to become assimilated and spread in a sustained way. This has been observed over time, with testimonies of devotees who have approached the Pilgrim Christ and contributed to the expansion of worship in Concord.

In addition to the diffusion by contagion promoted by previous fraternities, there are indications of hierarchical diffusion by communities such as San José (Figure 3). Its members fostered faith through interpersonal ties in other communities and maintained networks of relationships between them. This has resulted in the formation of fraternities in the Church of Our Lady of the Valley in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, as well as outside of California, in the city of Atlanta. This diffusion strategy has contributed to the expansion of the worship of the Christ of Esquipulas, not only in

California but throughout the United States.

The traditional mechanisms of spatial diffusion of worship have been successfully reinforced by the communities of Santa Cecilia and San José with the use of social networks and other digital tools. This has allowed them to partially overcome the ravages caused by the pandemic by digitally approaching members of their fraternities. In this way, these communities have broadened their regional reach by effectively broadcasting masses, patron saint celebrations, and other liturgical events, adapting to a changing situation and taking advantage of the new potential for disseminating knowledge of the digital age.

Based on fieldwork and our Internet search, we found signs of communities of devotees in some parishes in San Francisco and Oakland in northern California and in southern California cities such as Santa Ana, San Bernardino, and Riverside, although their date of origin and their links are not specified. On a national level, communities of devotees of the Lord of Esquipulas were identified in cities like Atlanta, Chicago, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, and New York. This finding allows us to affirm that today's cult is not limited to the Californian territory only, as in its beginnings, but has expanded throughout the United States. Future research may specify its characteristics and spatial diffusion process.

CONCLUSIONS

The geohistorical analysis and the methodology based on multi-sited ethnography principles have shown that the existence of black Christs in America derives not only from the various expansion strategies of the Catholic religion but is also a form of social resistance and vindication that assigns different meanings to its dark appearance: materials obtained from the ground, pre-Hispanic beliefs, and the inhabitants' skin.

Under this premise, the territorial extension of the devotion to these images in Mexico and Central America is remarkable, where the Christ of Esquipulas stands out for the distance covered from the homonymous locality and the importance it has

acquired in localities of these countries that have adopted it gradually from diffusion by expansion and hierarchy, giving it meanings that reaffirm devotion in different places despite distance and time.

In this sense, the dynamic experienced in the region, encouraging its inhabitants to migrate to the United States, favors a different diffusion of devotion, enhanced by the effect of nostalgia and the need to transcend distances. For this reason, it is possible to observe a polycentric diffusion by relocation, sometimes with no links, like the one in California.

Considering the latest findings of the theory of spatial diffusion of religious phenomena, it can be said that devotion in California, as in the rest of the United States, will experience an increase and rapid spraying, supported by poly centralities, including the increasing use of social networks and the demographic change in the devoted population. This could lead to a resignification of devotion, similar to what has happened with the *Mojado* Christ. However, further research is needed to improve our understanding of the mechanisms behind these processes.

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