‘Figuring’ Catholicism: The Santo Niño and Religious Discourse in Cebu

Julius J. Bautista

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Locating the Santo Niño in Filipino Projects of ‘Soul-Searching’

Adiós Patria adorada, región del sol querida,
Perla del Mar de Oriente, nuestro perdido Eden!
A darte voy, alegre, la tirsie mustia vida;
Y fuera más brillante, más fresca, más florida,
También por ti la diera, la diera por tu bien.

Farewell beloved Fatherland, clime of the sun caress’d
Pearl of the Orient seas, our Eden lost!
Gladly now I go to give thee this faded life’s best,
And were it brighter, fresher, or more blest
Still would I give it thee, nor count the cost.

Excerpt from “Mi Ultimo Adiós” — José P. Rizal, 1896

THE FORMER MALAYSIAN Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, once articulated what he saw as the components of an “Asian Renaissance”. In a book published under the same title (1996), he described a flourishing of Asian art, literature, science and economy that would galvanize a sense of community among a people bound by a ‘civilisational’ belonging. The Asian Renaissance would be different from the European one in that it focused on, not turned away from, a fervent religious sensibility. At the heart of this reawakening was a “persona religiosus” for whom devotion to one of

1 Charles E. Derbyshire trans., “Mi Ultimo Adios”, by Jose P. Rizal “Selected Writings of Rizal” (Manila: Technology Supply, Inc. 1999)
Asia’s many religious traditions would be the cornerstone of an awakened and liberated sense of ‘soul’ (p.27).

While an Asian Renaissance portends the religiously-inspired propagation of a collective sense of soul, many in the Philippines evidently feel apprehensive about their involvement therein. Recent Social Weather Station (SWS) survey results (after estimating that only twenty-four per cent of Filipinos “considered themselves Asian sometimes”) characterize Filipino attitudes towards their Southeast Asian neighbors more in terms of “mistrust” and “unfamiliarity” (Mangahas 2001). Seen in this context, Anwar’s romantic (if idealistic) prediction of a harmonious fraternity among Asians seems amiss for many Filipinos. This is particularly significant when one considers the somewhat tenacious impression that Christianity itself is the basis of a discomfort with an Asian Renaissance; far from catalyzing a brazen Filipino involvement in bringing it to fruition.

The objective of this chapter is to inquire into the role of a religious icon like the Santo Niño in the literary and historiographical efforts at ‘soul-searching’ in the Philippines. If, as Anwar suggests, a civilisational soul is premised upon an acute religious awareness, there is a need to discuss the ways in which the devotion to the Santo Niño intersects with the process of “Filipino Becoming” and its associated identity politics. “Becoming”, in this sense, denotes a state of affairs in which the definition of “Filipinoness” is constantly being reworked and revoked, entailing a pragmatic selectivity in re-appropriating religious symbols and their meanings. In a nation where religious practice is an intrinsic part of private and public life (over eighty per cent of
Filipinos are practicing Roman Catholics, the ways in which Christianity mediates Filipino becoming is a relevant and significant issue to raise.

As will be seen in the sections that follow, the search for soul and the various accounts of the origins of the Santo Niño are mutually constituting, yet sometimes conflicting, literary and historiographical projects. The focus of this chapter is to pinpoint the Santo Niño’s ‘figuring’ in crosscutting discourses of identity in the Philippines: ones that seek to delineate Filipino belongings to a “region”, a “nation” or to an “ancient civilization” (the latter having been lost during the colonial interlude). The first section will examine how the Santo Niño itself had become used as the symbol of the ‘erasure’ of foreign affiliations – a project operating within the imperative to foster an indigenized, “civilisational discourse” (“diskursong pangkabihasan”). This section will inquire into how the Santo Niño as symbol had been co-opted into the nationalist project of “rescuing social science” from the mimetic tendencies of its practitioners (many of whom are Western-trained and aligned). In so doing, herein will be discussed a “pantayong pananaw” – a “for-us-from-us” perspective – that is posited as the prerequisite for a truly ‘national history’.

Yet the ‘centering’ tendencies of such scholarship is problematised by the reality of what Mojares describes as the many “unaggregated, dispersed, and competing versions of community... generated out of the differences in language, ethnicity, religion, gender and class” (2002, 301). As will be discussed in the second section, native Cebuano texts also make allegorical and metaphorical use of the Santo Niño, though upon somewhat different agendas and prejudices. The task here is to look into the ways in which two Cebuano texts, in their own enactment of soul-searching, express a specifically Cebuano
heritage that is somewhat recalcitrant to the nationalist history promoted from the politico-economic metropole. It is upon so doing that we are able to locate the Santo Niño within a discourse of identity not only in the context of post-colonialism, but in terms of ‘regional’ and ‘ethnonationalist’ assertion. In this project (to be sure, in the nationalist one too), the objective of soul-searching manifests itself in the rejuvenation of the pre-colonial “perdido Eden” (Lost Eden) that Rizal evokes. The search for soul here refers to the literary commemoration of a romanticised past dispelled by the experience of colonialism, or at least one impeded from its full consummation.

It might seem trite to begin this chapter by quoting “The First Filipino’s” final farewell: undoubtedly his most famous prose. But my doing so is neither arbitrary nor entirely sentimental. There is a great sense of irony in the fact that Anwar identifies Rizal as an exemplar of an Asian Renaissance, while many Filipinos might yet be unable (if not unwilling) to relate to its romantic idealism. Yet this is not to be understood as an indication that religiosity contradicts the fostering of a Filipino belonging. Far from being anathema to this project, we shall see that religious icons such as the Santo Niño are indelible to the desire to recover a Filipino soul; effecting a ‘figuring’ of the Lost Eden for which Rizal had yearned so nostalgically, even at the very last moments of his life.
From “Pangkami” to “Pantayong Pananaw”

THE SEARCH FOR A Filipino soul gathered strong momentum when, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, scholars and writers articulated a need to foster an “emancipative consciousness of the national culture” based upon an acute sense of indigenous tradition. Advances in cultural studies, debates about the national language, and the work of young writers in vernacular languages demonstrated the enactment of a new movement in the social sciences that would create a “Diskursong Pangkabiihasnan” [Civilisational Discourse]. Historians at the University of the Philippines, most notably Professor Zeus Salazar, sought to foster an intellectual movement that would demonstrate not only the depth and variety of Philippine traditions, but also the imperative of connecting with them on a scholarly, if not sentimental level. Known as Pantayong Pananaw sa Kasaysayan (henceforth, Pantayong Pananaw) historians encouraged scholarly works expressed in the national language, and framed upon topics aimed primarily towards a Filipino audience. The search for ‘soul’ had became attuned towards creating a diskursong pangkabiihasnan that would liberate social sciences – an act that was both a civic and patriotic responsibility.

A search for a Filipino soul had been in motion since the late nineteenth century through the agency of ladinos and ilustrados as pioneers of the Propaganda Movement against Spain. Versed in Spanish and economically empowered, these “cultured groups
of people” [“akulturadong grupo ng tao”] conducted scholarly investigations into Filipino culture of which the ‘rediscovery’ of a prehispanic civilization -- Rizal’s Lost Eden -- was the prominent objective. Imagining a Lost Eden was a project premised upon a colonial experience that had created an abrupt and “shocking” divide in the collective consciousness of the inhabitants of the archipelago. Rizal and other nineteenth century nationalists lamented the loss of an ‘ancient nationality’ and posited the long colonial period as the ‘dark age’ that saw the estrangement of a people from their roots in the past. Rizal, for example, lamented at the forgetting of Filipino’s ancient links with Sumatra; an event he portrayed as an onset of darkness. “These traditions [of links with Sumatra] were completely lost” Rizal claimed, “just like the mythology and genealogies of which the old historians speak, thanks to the seal of the religious in extirpating every remembrance of our nationality, of paganism, or of idolatry.” The Propaganda Movement in Spain then, as much as it was a call for political action, was fuelled by a need to recover the severed linkage with a Southeast Asian belonging, a need that translated into the imperative “to define, anchor, and nurture a shared ‘national soul’” (Mojares 2002, 301).

The Propaganda Movement was enacted against a backdrop of colonial condescension and racism. The actions of these propagandists were constantly infused with the imperative of “pakikipagtaas noo” [to level one’s brow with] vis-a-vis the colonizer and other foreigners. Yet this was conceived using the frameworks of a decidedly European milieu, where western concepts were ‘indigenised’ and brought to bear on the objective realities of the colony. In this sense, the prospect of colonial ‘progress’ and ‘development’ was posited as a delayed repetition of western history,

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2 Annotations to Morga’s sucesos, quoted in Ileto (1998, 34)
using social science as the means towards its enactment. A Filipino social science was an 
other-directed discourse of identity that was premised upon agendas of representation and 
activism, rather than on pure scholarly investigation.

A prominent constituency in the University of the Philippines in the late 1960s 
and early 1970s construed the agendas of the Propagandistas as such: (in Tagalog)

...nasa pankaming pananaw ang kanilang pagtingin sa sariling lipunan-at-kulura. 
Hindi ang mga kabalat at kasapi ng dati nilang mga kalinangang katutubo ang 
kanilang kinakausap, kundi ang mga nagkolonisa sa mga bayan at kalinangan sa 
apuluan. At ang mga ideya, konsepto at iba pang elementong pangkalinangan na 
kanilang gagamitín ay yaong mga natutunan nila mula sa, at naintindihan ng, 
mga kolonialista. Hindi sa kalinangang bayan hinasa ng mga Propagandista ang 
kanilang sandata laban sa kolonyalismong Kastila kundi sa tradisyong ‘liberal’ ng 
Europa. (Salazar 1991b, 55).

...their views on their own society-and-culture are mired in pangkaming 
pananaw. It is not their kin or members of indigenous civilization they are 
addressing, but those who have colonised their country and the 
civilizations in the islands. And the ideas, concepts and other cultural 
elements that they use are those that they have learned from the 
colonizers. It is not in a national culture that their swords against Spanish 
colonialism have been honed, but in the liberal tradition of Europe.

In their own acts of soul searching, the inhabitants of the archipelago were themselves 
peripheral to the Propaganda movement’s social science. Indeed, Propagandistas were 
not actually talking to or about their fellow Filipinos (their “kabalat at kasapi” [kin and 
cohorts]). A “pangkaming pananaw” -- a ‘from-us-for-others’ representational mode of 
self-understanding -- was addressed to the colonizer in articulating that Filipino 
civilization’ was worthy of inclusion among their ranks. Additionally, a ‘bipartite’ 
historicity posited the colonial age as having propelled erstwhile uncivilized inhabitants 
in the ‘dark ages’ of the archipelago towards the path of development. Against this 
background would be a third ‘postcolonial’ realm in a ‘tripartite’ view of history that
prophesised a resurrection of indigenous civilization.\(^3\) As spokespersons of ancient
regimes, therefore, the Propagandistas were perceived as advocating a social science that
was both alienated from and alienating of the masses of which it spoke. While it was
incumbent upon the Propaganda Movement to hold Spanish colonialism as responsible
for sowing the seeds of a representational pangkaming pananaw, the affliction of the
social sciences was also a legacy of an American educational system that fostered
Western methods as the ideal to be reached. The declaration of the Marshal Law-
sponsored Bagong Lipunan (New Society) likewise enacted a people's history, yet
remained a vista that was directed outwards at the expense of a true form of self-
understanding.

Upon this backdrop, some prominent historians in the late 1960s and early 1970s
sought the “liberation” of social science from being mired in these dynamics, and
appointed themselves as the arbiters of bringing this into being. The liberation of
Philippine social science was to be achieved not merely by realigning its conceptual
frameworks away from the European liberal tradition, but by redefining the audience of
social science. In the characterization of the Propaganda Movement as favouring a
“pankaming pananaw”, modern scholars prescribed a scholarly heuristic that
deligitimised the former’s necessary yet now obsolete and misdirected endeavours.
Instead, the creation and maintenance of a diskursong pangkabihasnan relied upon a
“pantayong pananaw” -- a perspective ‘from-us-for-us’ -- that was ‘national’ in
orientation and local in articulation. Pantayong pananaw sought to revive that which
had been begun in the nineteenth century, not as a mode of representation in a field of
condescending Others, but as an act of building an emancipated consciousness that has

\(^3\) For a description of the ‘Tripartite’ view of history see Salazar (1998)
the local and the ‘emic’ as its main point of reference. In such an endeavour, the search for the Filipino soul focused upon the resuscitation and bringing together ("pagbubuo") of ethno-linguistic groups under the banner of the nation. Salazar delineates Pantayong Pananaw's most significant contribution:

Ang pinakabuod ng pantayong pananaw sa agos ng ating kasaysayan ay ang pangyayaring nawała (o unting nawasak) ang kabuuan ng maraming mga grupong etnolingguistiko sa ating bansa dahil sa kolonyalismo.... Samakatuwid, kung nais nating mabuo ang bansang Pilipino, kailangang pausbungin at pagyamanin ang pantayong pananaw ng kabuuang pambansa, para sa buong bansa (Salazar 1991b, 50).

The gist of pantayong pananaw in relation to the development of our own history is the event of the disappearance (or the gradual disintegration) of the integrity of the many ethno linguistic groups in our country because of colonialism.... Therefore, if we want to bring together the Filipino nation, we need to cultivate and enrich a pantayong pananaw of the national collectivity, for the whole nation

This lamentation for the disappearance of ethnolinguistic groups due to colonialism reflects the urgent exhortation implicit in a pantayong pananaw mandate. It is set against the assumption that Filipinos had the resources for a ‘civilization’ -- a vital and defining soul based upon affinities between ethnic communities and the greater Malayo-Polynesian world. But this soul was impeded, indeed “shocked” by the experience of colonialism which had effectively stunted its development. Pantayong pananaw, therefore, presents a comprehensive, if sweeping, diagnostic of the Philippine social science as suffering from an affliction commonly known as ‘colonial mentality’. As such, a national discourse (diskursong pangkabaihasan) is projected as the end result of a project of Filipino ‘becoming’ which can only be achieved under the specific scholarly and intellectual precepts to which all Filipino historians should adhere.
The Subsumption of Ethnicity to Katagalunan

As a 'for-us-from-us' perspective, pantayong pananaw describes the mental state of awareness shared by a group of people cognizant of their identity as a discrete civilisational group. This awareness is specifically delimited by ethnic, linguistic and cultural parameters. It is also framed upon an autonomous history, articulated and conveyed in myth and oral tradition (if not in text) that attests to their genealogical lineage. In this sense, ethno-linguistic groups such as Bisayans, Ilocanos or Bicolanos are each possessors of a distinct pantayong pananaw, defined in and through their respective connection with a continuum of Austronesian and malayo-polynesian belongings. While colonialism is believed to have undermined these connections, their pantayong pananaw provides a stock from which their history can be resurrected. For indeed, a historical continuity is founded upon a conception of pantayong pananaw in a plural rather than singular sense:


The National Culture... is rooted in the cultures of those ethno-linguistic groups for whom a prehistoric basis lies in the civilisational continuum or connection with Austronesian civilization. This civilisational connection is that which binds us to Madagascar, Malaysia, Indonesia and the entire Austronesian civilization in the Pacific Ocean up to Hawaii and New Zealand (Maori)
The soul of ethno-linguistic groups, then, is measured against its trans-temporal relationship with civilizations beyond the archipelago. As such, the search for a Filipino soul does not exclude ‘regional’ pantayong pananaw. For Bisayan, Bicolano, Ilocano or Waray perspectives too constitute those voices suppressed by the colonial civilizing and evangelizing project.

The objective of fostering a diskursong pangkabíhasnan, however, requires the subsumption of the various ethno linguistic pantayong pananaw under the banner of the nation. The objective of social science should be the melting of linguistic and ethnic boundaries in favour of an integrated, national discourse. In this endeavour, a Tagalog-based national language is posited as the mode of articulation, in light of its historically significant position in the formation of a Filipino consciousness vis a vis the colonial state:

Gayumpaman, ang Tagalog lamang ang nakabuo ng isang kontra-kalinangang may katatagan. Hindi ito dahil sa ang kalinangang Tagalog ay may angking katangiang nabubukod sa kanya sa iba pang kalinangang Pilipino... Ang tanging nagging bentaha... ay ang pangyayaring namugad sa Katagalugan ang sentro ng kapangyarihang koloniyal. Ito ang nagbigay sa kalinangang Tagalog ng pangmatagalan at walang-humpay na hamon upang harapin ang mga pagbabago mula at ayon sa kaibuturan ng sariling kaluluwa’t diwa... Kung kaya’t para bagang ang kalinangang Tagalog ang siyang nagging tagapagtugyod ng pagka-Pilipino at tagapagtipon ng Kapilipnuhan vis a vis sa hamon ng banyagang kabíhasnan (Salazar 1991b, 69).

Nonetheless, only the Tagalog has been able to form an integrated counter-civilization. This is not because Tagalog civilization has an inherent characteristic that distinguishes it from other Filipino civilizations. The only distinction... is the event of the settling in the Tagalog region of the center of Colonial power. This is what has imbued Tagalog civilization with a long-lasting and unrelenting challenge in facing the changes presented from and according to the kaibuturan of their own soul and spirit... Which is why it is as though Tagalog civilization is that which has become the arbiter and custodian of Filipineness vis a vis the challenge of foreign civilizations.
While colonialism had undermined the formation of a national discourse, the elevation of Tagalog as the "official" means by which it is fostered is ironically a legacy of colonial agency. The colonial designation of Manila as the national capital had given Katagalugan the fortitude to enact the challenge of bringing together that which had been divided along ethnic and linguistic lines. The objective of a national social science emancipated from a pangkaming pananaw should be the use of Tagalog-based national language as modes of conceptualization and articulation.

Writing in Tagalog, then, is about identifying Filipinos themselves as the primary consumers of a diskursong pangkabihasan, thereby delimiting its discursive parameters. To be sure, a national discourse does not preclude the participation of those who are not versed in Tagalog. The rationale of using it, however, is based upon the desire to be, as Guillermo puts it, "from the beginning open as much as possible to the perusal, critique and intervention of their purported object (e.g., the Filipinos as a people) before translating it 'for a wider audience' is considered a priority" (2003, 4). Indeed, the positioning of Tagalog as the lingua franca of a national discourse underlies the metonymic function of pantayong pananaw. Pantayong pananaw had moved from being 'for-us-from-us' perspectives of local ethno-linguistic collectivities, to an intellectual reformation of the social sciences based on the idiom and institutions of the national capital. In line with the latter designation, primarily enacted by scholars from the main universities in Manila, pantayong pananaw as a search for the Filipino soul became conceived as the mission of the nation because, as Salazar articulates:
...ang isang lipunan-at-kultura ay may pantayong pananaw lamang kung ang lahat ay gumagamit ng mga konsepto o ugali na alam ng lahat ang kahulugan, pati ang relasyon ng mga kahulugang ito sa isa’t isa (Salazar 1991b, 48).

...a (national) society-and-culture only possesses a pantayong pananaw if all use concepts or attitudes the meanings of which are known to all, as well as the relationship of these meanings with each other.

The fostering of a common discourse which uses concepts and attitudes with which every Filipino can agree with is the main goal of pantayong pananaw. Yet this can be achieved through the creation of a melting pot of sorts, encouraging contributions from ethnolinguistic groups in the archipelago while insisting that these be conceived and articulated in the officially designated lingua franca. As Veneracion notes, the use of Tagalog “ay hindi isang makanikal na bagay lamang kundi isang paraan ng pagkasali sa isang diskurso (Sino ba ang iyong kinakausap?)” [The use of the vernacular is not merely a mechanical device but a means of entering into a particular discourse. (Who are you really talking to?)] (1998, 8).

The Santo Niño as Pantayong Pananaw: The Prodigious Child

How then does the Santo Niño – an icon conceived as a Cebuano deity by virtue of its historical connection with the island’s inhabitants -- ‘figure’ in pantayong pananaw’s search for soul? Anwar’s prescription of an Asian Renaissance, coupled with Rizal’s nostalgic idealism of a Perdido Eden, might suggest that the soul is to be found by dispelling the foreign agents of its ‘contamination’. The Philippine experience of Spanish colonialism was intrinsically linked with religiosity to the extent that Christianity was a instrument of imperialism, or at least an impelling force contributing to its
longevity. Pantayong pananaw however, does not argue for a jettisoning of Filipino Christianity and all the symbols that represent it. Rather, the search for Filipino soul demonstrates the fluidity by which icons like the Santo Niño permeate ‘nativist’ and ‘nativising’ discourses. That is, the Santo Niño from a pantayong pananaw perspective belies a politics of its inclusion and exclusion in nationalist polemics, and a pragmatic ‘erasure’ of its Western affiliations by positing the distinctly ‘local’ milieu of its provenance.

Contributing to an explicitly pantayong pananaw project, Vano (1998) inquires into the breadth of Filipino connections to Asia by drawing upon the linguistic links between the Bisayan and Sanskrit languages. He concluded that these links are sufficient to demonstrate that sixteenth century Cebu had been “more generally indianised.” “Indianisation” is understood as the sweeping influence of Hindu-based commerce, pilgrimage and linguistic diffusion in the archipelago.\(^4\) Situated, as it is, within the ‘lands beneath the winds’, Cebu itself is depicted as a participant in a thriving realm of exchange and religious interaction. As such, Indianisation is used by Vano to refute the notion that Cebuanos existed in a cultural and spiritual vacuum (as is suggested in the colonial, ‘bipartite’ version of Philippine history). The inhabitants of the island, rather, were adept at the pragmatics of acculturation and interaction with the foreigner. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the reiteration of an alternative influence of Indianisation that predates Spanish colonial interests is an attempt to deflate the impact of the colonialism, thereby diffusing its religious and historical significance.

From a pantayong pananaw perspective, Indianisation provides a conceptual framework upon which an autonomous, ‘local’ lineage of the Santo Niño can be posited.

\(^4\) For a broader discussion of Indianisation, see Wolters (1999)
In Vano’s description, the figure itself is removed from a European tradition of Carmelite worship in order to argue that “even before the Spaniards came, Cebuanos may have had already started the cult of the Prodigious Child” (p. 108) As Vano describes it:

Devotion to the Prodigious Child is both ancient and universal. Since time immemorial, it was already practiced in ancient Egypt (Horus), and ancient Mesopotamia (Tammuz) and India (Iswara). [The Santo Niño devotion in Cebu] was probably due to the Indian influence during the earlier Centuries [sic.], for there are at least 150 Philippine terms identified to have originated from Sanskrit. (pp. 108-109)

It is by virtue of Cebuano devotion to a tradition of child worship since “time immemorial” that the Spanish origins of the Santo Niño de Cebu are here rendered less plausible. The Santo Niño arrived in the archipelago through agents who were relatively more ‘local’ and more ‘Asian’ than the European purveyors of Christianity. In this sense, Cebuanos had construed the figure within an existing practice of venerating a pantheon of child figures, of which the Santo Niño was but the latest one. Indeed the very ‘acceptance’ of the Santo Niño during the Queen of Cebu’s baptism is explained as a process of recognition, rather than one of ‘conversion’. After all, argues Vano, “The Queen knew nothing of Christianity” (p. 102).

The prevailing identification of the Santo Niño as a Western icon bequeathed upon Cebuanos is, from this pantayong pananaw perspective, a relatively modern construct. The widespread belief in the European provenance of the figure was a result of deliberate attempts at suppressing its “indianised” origins, semantically and physically imposing onto the figure the Christian and Western attributes with which it is now associated. Vano cites Cebuano author Quimat (1980) in describing this event:
...sometime in 1970 when some Cebuano scholars told the Spanish Augustinian priests of the Cebuanos belief that the image of the Child Jesus was in Cebu long before Magellan came, these priests immediately painted the black image of the Child Jesus pinkish white; later on, the Spanish priests admitted to having hired a good Spanish sculptor who narrowed the base of the nose and heightened the nose bridge and made the tip very pointed to make the image look Spanish, and furthermore, the hired sculptor tried to deepen the shallow eyes, but this could not be done and so, at present, the left side of the left eye bears the mark of this attempt.

The ‘Europeanness’ of the Santo Niño is depicted here as an inauthentic, even sinister, legacy of Friar agency. Significantly, its foreignness was mediated upon the imposition onto the figure of the very physical characteristics that are believed to distinguish the Spaniard from the native: whiteness and a narrow and high nose (matangos).

The manipulation of the story of the Santo Niño’s origins evokes not only the discourse of colonial subjugation, but the physical ‘whitewash’ of the local; transforming the icon into a mirror image of the European ideal. In this vein, Vano’s agenda is clear:

I assert that the cult of the Holy Child did not come from Spain because, besides the fact there is no evidence of the existence of the belief in the miraculous child in Europe and the burden of proof lies in any one who affirms its existence, the Protestant reformation which was raging in Europe would militate against the cult of the Child separate from its Mother. In addition, I would argue that the image of the child presented to the Queen of Cebu did not come from Spain... Pigafetta did not say where it came from. Most probably, the Spaniards found it in Cebu or, knowing the popularity of the prodigious Cebuanos [Child?], they carved an image of the child (footnote 123).

In effect, the image of the child figure in the Basilica today is an Indianised Prodigious Child that was, according to Vano, “only later called the Santo Niño” (p. 102). Set against the backdrop of a rampant Protestant reformation that would “militate against the cult of the Child separate from its Mother”, the Spanish ‘ownership’ of the Santo Niño is here depicted as the result of purposeful acts of manipulation. Vano’s depiction effects
an allegorical reversal of the account of the worldwide spread of Santo Niño devotion: the figure itself was “found in Cebu” and European worship to it was but a delayed repetition of a tradition that had been in the islands long before Magellan’s landing.

In this sense, nationalist pantayong pananaw seeks to subvert an account of the Santo Niño that is based on the “discourse of discovery” (as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis). In this project, the erasure of its Western affiliations constitutes the formation of a counter-discourse that emancipates the figure from a history that is, in their estimation, alien to Filipino life worlds. Yet as has been demonstrated in Vano’s account, this does not preclude the co-option of those very same symbols of a Western colonizing and evangelizing mission for the fostering of a liberated Filipino soul (though a denial of its European provenance might be necessary). The latter is a project, moreover, that is concentrated in Metro Manila: the headquarters of economic and governmental policy making, and the very location where notions of “national history” or “Philippine history” are given canonical recognition. In some important ways, recovering and protecting the Filipino soul is largely a Tagalog project, if not in substance, then in form and articulation. As Mojares observes, this often comes at the expense of regional or “ethnic” histories that may prove recalcitrant to the national project. What ensues is a state in which “cultural productions take the privileged guise of the national, beside which all else are merely regional, provincial, or local” (Mojares 2002, 308).

Those on the non-Tagalog recesses of the Capital, surely, should also be encouraged to share in this project of the soul-searching. It is upon examining local texts in the ‘regional’ vernacular that one is able to ascertain which perspectives are rendered
peripheral, subordinate, or invisible in the formation of a national discourse. As Mojares describes it, "We need to calculate how the fullness of health of the body is diminished and imperiled by the neglect or suppression of its parts" (2002, 306). While it is important to examine how a pantayong pananaw renders the Santo Niño as a symbol of a revitalized soul, it is equally vital to ask what kind of soul-searching is produced by those on the periphery -- the province, the barrio, the country town -- where the spectre of the metropolis does not quite reach. It is to these subsumed voices that this chapter will now turn.

II

ANOTHER VERSION OF THE SANTO NIÑO'S origins is based not upon the chronicles of Pigafetta, nor upon any other documentary evidence or scholarly acrobatics. It tells the story of a fisherman who, after casting his net onto the sea on three separate occasions, kept on catching the same charred piece of wood. Frustrated yet intrigued by the phenomenon, the fisherman took the piece of wood to his home where his wife was husking rice. Throwing the piece of wood onto the drying rice, the fisherman decided to test its 'magical' properties. Will the wood keep the birds and fowl from pecking at the rice? To his astonishment, the rice remained untouched, prompting the fisherman to take the piece of wood into the house for the night. As he slept, he dreamt that the object had metamorphosed into a figure of a little child. Upon awakening, the wood had indeed begun to take the shape of a boy before his very eyes. The process continued for several
days until that black piece of wood became the image of the Santo Niño as it is known today.  

The apocryphal derivation of the legend is peripheral to what it contributes to the soul-searching that is the subject of this chapter. The account one which posits a local lineage of the Santo Niño, one that is autonomous from and resistant to the official account of the figure’s arrival and “second discovery”. In this sense, it seems amenable to the pantayong pananaw project of enacting a process of ‘erasure’ of the figure’s Spanish associations. Far from conceiving of the icon as an introduced deity -- one whose acceptance among Cebuanos framed their Divine conversion/salvation -- the Holy Child in the legend had miraculously formed from a burnt piece of wood signifying that it was ‘always already’ in Cebu, albeit in a different form. For as a piece of charred wood, the Santo Niño’s very physicality was a distinctive element of Cebu’s natural environment (Cebu’s local name, Sugbo literally means “burnt”). It is for this reason that the legend of the fisherman is often evoked as a text which inscribes the Santo Niño’s organic relationship with the island, subverting the “myth” of its European origins and legitimizing its status as a native Cebuano deity.

The legend, however, lends itself also to a different kind of interpretation – one that corresponds to a counter-discourse to the tendencies of ‘localising’ the Santo Niño through a semantic and allegorical erasure. Just as the Santo Niño is depicted as randomly and freely ‘floating’ in Cebuano waters, certain local Cebuano texts have appropriated the image for an alternative hermeneutics that demystifies the island’s tenuous connection to a Southeast Asian lineage. It is to two such texts that this section will now turn. The aim here is to demonstrate that regional renderings of histories can

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5 This version is based on that found in Tenazas (1965, 56-57). See also appendix 1 to this thesis.

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often outstrip and even contradict the project of fostering a ‘national discourse’. In such texts, the Santo Niño functions again as a conceptually ‘floating’ signifier; oscillating between competing accounts of local origins or moving across varied agendas of searching for a definitive, yet estranged sense of Bisayan (as opposed to a national) soul.

This section will deal with two texts written or transcribed by a Cebuano antiquarian, Jovito Abellana around the 1960s to the early 1990s. The first, entitled Agnid: Bayok Sa Atong Tawarik (henceforth, Aginid) is Abellana’s transcription of a Cebuano ballad supposedly of ancient provenance. It is a text that traces Bisayan lineage to a pre-Hispanic realm, describing a pattern of migration from Sumatra to the Philippine archipelago before the sixteenth century. Written in Cebuano, it can be said that the Aginid is a type of ‘regional pantayong pananaw’ insofar as it is expressed in the local vernacular and directed exclusively towards Cebuano lumads (indigenous). Yet, as we shall see, here is a ‘nativising’ text that emplots a different trajectory to the “Diskursong Pangkabihasnan” so avidly promoted by proponents of a liberated and liberating social science of the nation. In some very important ways, the Aginid can be seen to operate

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6 Jovito S. Abellana was a Cebuano coal mine operator when the second world war broke out in 1942. His cousin, Hilario Abellana, was appointed governor of Cebu and was later tried and executed by the Japanese Imperial forces for his membership with the guerrilla movement. Jovito himself, on the other hand, was accused of being a collaborator with the Japanese forces, but claimed in a later statement that he was clandestinely supplying information about Japanese troop movements to the guerrilla forces. Abellana transcribed the Bayok Aginid during a time when there was a widespread effort by the Japanese to ‘liberate’ the Philippines in the face of its ‘decline into democracy’ and Westernization. Through a propaganda movement that began in 1930s, the drive for “Pan-Asianism” reached a climax in 1942 with a three pronged attack of Cebu. The Imperial forces of Japan themselves had a project of liberating the Philippines and restoring its membership among a community of nations comprising the nan’yo. Engaging in the process of re-Asianisation, the Japanese sought to establish the Greater East Asia Co Prosperity Sphere (GEACPS) of which the Philippines would be part. The connection that Abellana saw in the Bayok Aginid, however, was a different one to that proposed through the GEACPS. It was not simply one that reasserted Filipino lineage in Asia by virtue of its location, but stressed that its Asianness is based on an historical depth that has its origins before the arrival of the Japanese, or even the Spanish (Interview with the author, Cebu 2001).
outside the set parameters of the ‘national’, choosing instead to limit its scope to specifically local and regional concerns.

The second text that will be discussed here, written in English, is entitled Bisaya Patronymesis Sri Visjaya (henceforth, Bisaya Patronymesis) and is a manuscript located in the archives of the Cebuano Studies Center at the University of San Carlos in Cebu. In drawing upon the Aginid as one of its main sources, the Bisaya Patronymesis engages in a project of depicting how Cebuanos acted towards the glorification of their land of heritage, a kingdom called “Sri Visjaya”, during the arrival of the Spanish in 1521. While the text calls for a reawakening of the glory of Sri Visjaya in the modern age, it laments at the loss of a Cebuano soul not only through the duplicitous acts of a foreign Other, but also of a Manila-based ‘internal colonialist’. In this sense, this text may well be considered a pangkaming pananaw of local Cebuano experience insofar as it is a representational mode of expressing a specifically regional perspective. As we shall see in the section that follows, however, Bisaya Patronymesis evokes a very modern discourse of ethnicity and “regionalism” targeted as much towards those who seek to subsume ‘ethnic histories’ under the overarching principle of nation-building.

The grandeur of a Bisayan civilization is defined and reiterated through a pre-colonial realm – a Lost Eden located in Sumatra whence Bisayans originated. The Aginid and Bisaya Patronymesis define a Bisayan soul not just in terms of this Lost Eden, but from an identity carved out of the colonial encounter. In the texts, the “shock” of colonialism did not immediately undermine Cebuano loyalties to Sri Visjaya. Rather, the colonial encounter was marked by events of collaboration and deceit, of co-option and subversion -- stories that featured, firstly, Spaniards who had transgressed the Christian
doctrines they themselves had brought to the islands; and secondly, by the inhabitants of Manila who had conspired with them in pursuit of their own ends. Finally, Cebuanos themselves are participants in the story, insofar as they were effectively ‘cheated’ out of their righteous connection to a Sri Visjayan soul.

The Santo Niño is depicted as a symbol that bears testament to the story of Cebuano (dis)connection, represented most prominently through an association with an entity known as “Bata nga Allah” (literally, “Allah as Child”). As demonstrated in the first section of this chapter, the Santo Niño had been appropriated as the facilitator of ‘national’ discourse informed by a pantayong pananaw. Unlike Vano’s project of discarding of the foreign/Christian provenance of the icon, however, the Cebuano texts emplot the Santo Niño within an indigenous project that was accepting of, not resistant to Christianity. The texts enact a ‘regional figuring’ of Cebuano history that is resistant to the process in which ethnicity is linguistically and sentimentally assimilated into the overarching project of fostering the national. It is upon this framework, as we shall see, that these texts are able to portray the Santo Niño the main symbol of a distinctly Cebuano type of reactive and self-affirming counter-discourse.

The Aginid as Yearning for a Golden Age

The Aginid is a Cebuano folk song performed with the use of various native instruments such as small cymbals and bells, native drums, flute and guitar. When performed, it tells the epic story of Cebuanos and the extent of their connection with the Kingdom of “Sri Visaya”, whence a splinter group had migrated into the archipelago in
the fifteenth century. According to the Aginid, a group of warriors and noblemen departed Sumatra and settled in the central islands of what is now the Philippines in the fifteenth century. Bringing with them many of their customs and traditional habits, the migrants had not lost their sense of emotional attachment to Sri Visjaya and most of their actions in the new settlement were conducted in reverence of the kingdom from where they came.

In 1999, an annotation of the Aginid by Jovito Abellana was published by Cebu Normal University. The lyrics are annotated with the ancient baybayin script written directly above the romanised Bisayan text: an rendering that framing both the authenticity of the text and its purportedly ancient provenance \(^7\) (Figure 6.1).

\(^7\) For a philological and linguistic analysis of baybayin, see Morrow (2003). Excepts from the Aginid text as well as translation can be found in appendix three to this study.
Figure 6.1 “The Aginid Text”
From the manuscript collection of the Cebuano Studies Centre, The University of San Carlos

It is unlikely that the inclusion of the baybayin was conducted to render the lyrics more readily accessible to its readers, considering that the script is rarely used, if at all, in the Philippines. It does however, serve the purpose of imbuing the Aginid with a deep sense of temporality, suggesting that like the “forgotten” baybayin, the memory of the Aginid tradition had likewise been subjected to a long process of disuse and neglect. Yet its inclusion in the transcription at the same moment highlights the elusiveness and distance of the lyrics, underscoring the significance of this particular act of transcription on a moral and ‘patriotic’ level. For the inclusion of a long lost script not only signifies the ‘authenticity’ of the Aginid, it also highlights the urgency of resuscitating those ‘lost’ Bisayan traditions that are considered intrinsic to a true Bisayan identity.

The perceived loss of this identity underlay the urgency with which it must be rescued. Such a project is hinged upon drawing a connection between the Visayas and a
‘grand’ civilization as the source of a pattern of outward migration. The genealogical link between the inhabitants of Cebu and the Sri Vijayan warriors of Sumatra is, in this sense, enacted upon negotiating the semantic and philological slippage from “Sri Vijaya” to “Sri Visjaya” (with the addition of an “s”) and finally to “Visayas”. Such slippages, as the text of the Bisayan Patronymesis would have it, was made possible, ironically, by colonial agency:

“Visaya” is the patronymic of “Sri Visjaya”. When the Spaniards came, the natives mentioned that their realm is “Visjaya” and was written down by the Spanish chronicler as “Visaya” people (p. 2).

From very early in the text, the “loss” of Visayan identity -- that is, the loss of its soul – is attributed to the inadequacies of the colonial rendering of local Cebuano experience. So profound is the supposed modern-day reliance on Spanish depictions of the past that the Spanish chronicler’s (presumably Pigafetta) inability to accurately annotate the “Vi(s)jayan” name resulted in a collective ‘forgetting’ of the Bisayan link with the ancient Kingdom. The modern day currency of “Visaya”, then, is symptomatic both of the people’s lineage with a Lost Eden, and a reminder of its dislocation from it.

In depicting a pre-Hispanic Sri Vi(s)jayan past, the Aginid is, above all, a call for urgent action in the present. Sri Visjaya is depicted in the text as a temporally distant realm of grandeur and pride imbued with an aura of nostalgic romanticism. The objective of remembering it and its lifeways is an activity that is always elusive and perpetually deferred, unless Cebuanos make a conscious effort to trace their heritage through myth, folklore and other local sources. In the Aginid itself is contained the following exhortation (in Cebuano-Bisaya):

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Kon ikaw Bisaya, ilabi na gayud kon lumad ikaw nga Sugbuanon kon gikan ba ang imong ginikahat sa Sugbu, magpakatukus ako sa pag hangyo kanimo nga basaha kining AGINID BAYOK SA ATONG TAWARIK... Kay niini ogod nga sinulata, ani a man ang igong gidagahanon sa mga pulong nga Bisaya nga nalimtan na karon. (1999, I)

If you are Visayan, especially if your ancestors originate from Sugbu (Cebu), then I take great pains to request that you read this GLIDE ON ODE OT OUR HISTORY... Herewith in these writings lie most of the Bisayan words and that in this day have all but so tragically been forgotten. (my translation)

Significantly, this exhortation is targeted specifically at indigenous inhabitants of the Visayas (Kon ikaw Bisaya...). The call to engage in indigenous renderings of history (tawarik) is based on a nostalgic depiction of an authentic connection with the provenance of the Bisayan soul. As will be seen, this was a resurrection that was entwined with an appeal to religious sentimentality, ‘figured’ in the symbol of the Santo Niño to which numerous references are made.

“Bata nga Allah”

Both the Aginid and the Bisaya Patronymesis are texts that speculate on the provenance of the Santo Niño figure, emplotting it within the project of Sri Visjaya’s resurrection (pp. 79-85). The search for an ‘authentic’ Bisayan lineage is, like the pantayong pananaw rendering of indigenous lifeworlds, fostered through the figure of the Santo Niño as a symbol of a pre-Hispanic soul. Significantly different, however, is that the Cebuano texts imagine a soul that is rooted in a realm outside the ‘national’, depicting an environment where the notion of a foreign-introduced Santo Niño remains undisputed. While ‘Indianisation’ was the framework upon which Vano had framed the Santo Niño,
Abellana’s Bisaya Patronymesis locates the figure within a context of religious pluralism, such that Cebuanos in the sixteenth century were not entirely ‘shocked and awed’ by the ‘gift’ of the Santo Niño:

To [the Cebuano ruler] Tupas and his constituents, the image was but the ‘bathoy’ for short of [sic.] ‘batang pathoy’ or child puppet in English, but there were many taguhumings [miracles] that the bathoy manifested to then [sic.] so they changed the name to “Bata nga Allah” and shortened to ‘bashala’ the infant god (p. 82).

In this text, the boundaries between Santo Niño as Christ child and as Bata nga Allah (or Child Allah) is blurred in order to associate with the figure a more indigenous tradition of Child worship. Again, much of the persuasiveness of this association is contingent upon philological slippages. In moving from “Batang Pathoy” to “Bathoy” and from “Bata nga Allah” to “Bathala” to “Santo Niño”, both the Aginid and Bisaya Patronymesis naturalise the figure’s employment within the context of a Cebuano animist past. This naturalization is a depiction of the Santo Niño as an arbiter of a lost indigenous soul, negotiating the supposed incompatibility between the Christian faith and the ‘pagan’ Bisayans of the sixteenth century.

While Vano’s account of an indigenous Santo Niño sought to deny a Spanish role in the origins of the Santo Niño, Bisaya Patronymesis does not ‘erase’ the influence of Spanish agency in its project of Sri Vijaya’s resurrection. In describing Cebuanos as familiar with the concept of child deities, the text posits a cosmological and cultural environment that was conducive to the Santo Niño’s acceptance as a foreign deity. Indeed, the Santo Niño in Bisaya Patronymesis is not fully devoid of its ‘Spanishness’, depicted, as it is, as being highly revered by Spanish colonialists as much as Bisayans.

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describing how Cebuanos reacted to the church the Spaniards erected in commemoration
of the Santo Niño's re-discovery in Cebu, it is narrated that:

The natives were highly impressed and at last believed that the Holy Child found
a home that was appropriate for the holiness of the Bathala. It was the promise of
Spaniards that the image of the Holy Child be returned to the bigger Sugbo as
soon as a new church is constructed and made ready to house the venerated image
(p. 91).

Far from engaging in a project of discarding the vestiges of colonial agency -- a project
involving the total denial of the Santo Niño's foreign affiliations -- both the Aginid and
Bisaya Patronymesis acknowledge the images' foreignness and the Cebuano acceptance
of it. Cebuanos are not depicted as agents who were hostile to the introduction of
Christianity and who struggled vehemently to oppose its acceptance. Instead, it proposes
a uniquely collaborative perspective of the colonial encounter upon which was formed an
affinity between natives and foreigners on a political and diplomatic level. To be sure,
this affinity would eventually disintegrate as the circumstances of Cebuano-Spanish
collaboration played itself out in the joint efforts to conquer regions in the immediate
vicinity of the Visayas. It is upon the endeavour to conquer Manila that the colonial
relationship would begin to unravel.

Colonial Manila and the Downfall of Sri Visjaya

In both texts, the objective of proclaiming the grandeur of Sri Visjaya is expressed
through Cebuano activities of conquest of other neighbouring islands. "Pangayaw"
described a slave-raiding sea voyage, the enactment of which posits a somewhat novel
impression of ancient Bisayans. Apart from the image of peaceful Visayans to whom
violence and killing were repugnant, who cowered when the church bells rang announcing an impending Muslim raid, the pangayaw portrays a warrior race who answered the call of excitement and adventure. It is around this scenario that both the Aginid and the Bisaya Patronymesis plays out the story of Cebu as a noble and proud race comprising of warriors and chivalrous citizens.

The arrival of the Spanish in the archipelago did not spell an immediate end to this realm. The relationship between the native and Spaniard in Bisaya Patronymesis is characterized as a contractual negotiation between two peoples who stood in mutual benefit from a cooperative, rather than a conflictual state of affairs. Cebuano warriors are depicted as having enlisted the Spanish in their goal of ‘Moorish conquest’, first against Sri Lapulapu of Mactan, and eventually towards the conquest of the Moors in the islands of Luzon (identified in the text as “Luwason”) and Brunei (pp. 96-100). It tells that during Legazpi’s time, Cebuanos were engaged in activities of liberating the inhabitants of a large island to the north from Moorish raiders known as the “Magalo”. Because these inhabitants were helpless against the Magalo, Cebuanos named this island “Luwason”: a reference to the Bisayan word meaning “to be saved”. The Cebuanos enlisted the help of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi and his men in liberating Luwason from the Magalo. Martin de Goiti was sent to head an expedition to the northern island accompanying Cebuano warriors onboard fifty bhirays [native watercraft] (pp. 2-3, 99-100).

But while the Cebuanos partook in this mission in the name of the kingdom of Sri Visjaya, the Spaniards are depicted as harboring underlying agendas. Their interest lay in establishing a new headquarters to facilitate the founding of a new outpost for the
colonial government. After having become dissatisfied with Cebu as the base of their operations in the Philippines, the Spanish are depicted as conniving opportunists who decided to seek greener pastures to the north while taking advantage of Cebuano manpower. The eventual transfer of the Spanish base of operations to Manila heralded the demise of the Cebuano economy, and effectively undermined Cebuano efforts at paying homage to Sri Visjaya. Cebu’s traditional trading partners started to overlook the port city in favour of the new capital, Manila, which by now would eventually connect the Philippines to the world via the Manila Acapulco trade.

The ironic twist that the Bisaya Patronymesis laments thus unfolds in the context of a Manila-Spaniard connivance. Where once the northern region stood as a civilization that needed “to be saved” (*Luwason*), the noble act of Cebuanos resulted in the demise of their own objectives:

The defeat of the Magalo who controlled Maynila was to redeem the lost granduer [sic.] of Sri Visjaya. For a decade of conquest, the Visayans then realized that their efforts were in vain and to conquer the Mohammedans gave no meaning to reborn Sri Visjaya because the Spaniards made manifest by uniting the whole Philippine islands to be ruled by the sovereign power of Spain (pp. 100).

The subversion of the colonial foray into Luzon not only meant the demise of Sri Visjaya, but also heralded the “uniting [of] the whole Philippine islands” of which colonial Manila stands as a metonymy. As such, the rise of colonial Manila figures as a very important symbol of the demise of Sri Visjaya’s memory. It was not so much the arrival and presence of the Spanish itself the signaled the end of the efforts to proclaim the glory of Sri Visjaya. It was, rather, premised upon their ‘treachery’ and collusion with the inhabitants of Maynila that derailed Bisayan intentions.
The tumultuous colonial regime that ensued after 1570 (when the Spanish officially relocated their headquarters to Manila) was premised upon the transgressions on the part of the Spaniards, rather than an inherent incompatibility between Cebuano and colonial points of view. Spanish colonialists are portrayed as men who abused their positions of power and authority, resulting in over four hundred years of mistreatment of indios throughout the archipelago. In the end however, it is Cebuanos who are depicted as the losers of a transaction gone awry. Not only were they subjected to the successive regimes of foreign conquerors, (the Aginid also focuses on the Japanese occupation), but the colonial encounter had been the beginning of the end of Cebuano commemoration of their connections to an ancient civilization, thus transforming it into the Lost Eden many evoke with a great deal of urgent anxiety.

Soul-Searching as “Figuring”

IT IS TRUE, as Mojares claims, that “even as we need greater understanding of a dynamic of identity-creation, or ‘soul formation’, we cannot afford to romanticize or gloss it with facile nativist claims of creativity” (2002, 302). Yet if there is an overarching value to the Bisaya Patronymesis and the Aginid, it lies not in its statement of the facts about the Santo Niño or about the colonial encounter for that matter. Rather, the significance of the texts lies in their pointing to modern remembrances of the past that are premised and articulated in discursive realms outside the ‘nation’ and the ‘national’. To be sure, claims to authenticity and connections with Lost Edens are reliant upon shaky philological slippages – from “Santo Niño” to “Bata nga Allah” to “Bathala”, from

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“Luwason” to Luzon, from “Vijaya”, to “Visjaya” to “Bisaya”. Yet in these slippages, these texts communicate some contemporary concerns of “Manila-centrism”, thereby expressive of a spirit of resistance to the Capital’s subsuming project. The texts attest to the forms of symbolic and semantic violence within affective claims to nationhood, which are often overlooked by discourses that seek to foster the ‘national’ or the ‘civilisational’ (pangkabihasnan). In such a discourse, the image of the Batang Allah/Santo Niño as a specifically Bisayan identity foregrounds a Cebuano search for its own ‘soul’ – one that is autonomous from one prescribed by colonialism, both internal and external.

These issues are reflected in the ‘sequel’ to the legend of the Santo Niño narrated at the beginning of the previous section. It tells that during the time when the Spaniards established a new settlement in Manila, it was decided that the image would be transferred to the new capital. After the figure was placed in a box and shipped from Cebu, authorities in Manila were astonished to find the crate empty. Meanwhile, the Santo Niño was found miraculously on its Cebuano altar. Determined, the Spanish friars repeatedly placed the figure in box-within-a-box to ensure the Santo Niño’s transferal. Yet though several attempts were made, the figure always made its way back to Cebu frustrating the efforts of both Friars and Manila officials. Finally, on the eighth attempt, the figure arrived in Manila whereupon one of the Friars had one of its legs cut off to prevent its further “escape”. Yet again, this proved of no avail as the Santo Niño was found back on its podium in Cebu several days later. Many believe that the current image of the Santo Niño still bears the marks of the ‘amputation’ on its hip.
This sequel is one of the more significant myths for many of the figure’s Cebuano devotees. For like the local ‘charred wood’ account of the image’s organic provenance, the Santo Niño’s perpetual acts of escape and return reiterated its loyalty to Cebu and its people. It is, further, a myth that addresses the attempts of those in the capital to appropriate the figure as its own, colluding with colonial agents to extricate it from its Cebuano ‘home’. Yet the Santo Niño’s repeated and miraculous subversion of these attempts legitimized Cebu’s status as a divinely appointed ‘spiritual capital’. Indeed, the significance of the ‘choosing’ of Cebu was framed in the context of Manila’s economic and political ascendancy, pointing to a politics of center-periphery relations that still evokes discussion and debate in the modern-day search for Filipino becoming.

To be sure, the expression of such ethnonationalistic sentiment is not the exclusive preserve of Cebuanos. The very regions which a national pantayong pananaw seeks to subsume into its conceptual orbit also lament of the ‘internal colonialism’ of the means of intellectual production, as Azurin demonstrates (in Tagalog):


How many times has it already been declared in the writings and discourses of a number of historiographers based in greater Manila mentioning ‘nationalism’ or national literature, if not the Filipino masses, that the majority of those they refer to are the experiences and creations of their own region? It is as though the dreams and thoughts of the nation are only propagated in the Tagalog regions. Other (outlying) regions are but shadows if not background settings.
An Ilocano, Azurin is a prominent critic of the problematic intellectual climate under which the search for a ‘national soul’ is enacted. For him, historiographical writings are mired in an unequal and imbalanced discursive field, commandeered as it is by a constituency who assume the sole mandate of delineating the ‘national’. As such, one of the main concerns of this chapter has been to demonstrate that fostering what is the “Filipino soul” has been conducted in a milieu where Tagalog cultural productions have taken privileged status, beside which all other renderings of ‘soul searching’ are consigned as regional, ethnic and provincial “background settings.” The Tagalog-founded crafting of a diskursong pangkabihasan is one keen to admit the validity of the voices ‘from below’ (a concept of class distinction). Implied in Azurin’s statements, further, is the call for Filipinos to give recognition to the voices from the margins, from the periphery and from the ethnic vernacular.

Reynaldo Ileto’s *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines 1840-1910* (1979) was a watershed in enhancing our understanding of how Filipinos expressed their own expectations, desires and perspectives of local experience. The chanting of the *pasyon* as a revolutionary text is compelling for its sheer irony: that Filipino lower classes expressed sentiments of *kalayaan* and brotherhood through the very technology of their colonial subjugation. In the convergence of pasyon and sentiments of revolution, Filipinos conceptualized their ‘soul’ through their own pragmatic usage of the habitus of Christian worship. Ileto’s work helps bring to light the notion that the assertion of a Filipino soul is not a mere act of outright denouncing or erasing those categories (religious or otherwise) that are thought to undermine it. Rather, these processes hint at a complex politics of use (or ‘misuse’) of familiar religious
categories that, while on the surface might suggest a state docility and subjugation, also frame desires and yearnings of revolution and uprising against the colonial status quo.

The conceptual rationale of the Bisayan Patronymesis and of the Aginid becomes clearer precisely from the perspective Ileto brings forth. Like their Tagalog counterparts, the Cebuano search for a lost soul was indeed expressive of anti-colonial sentiment, but did not necessarily involve denouncing the Christian-inspired aspects of that colonialism. Instead, this was marked by the construction of the Christian experience as a pragmatic politics of ‘figuring’. In this endeavour, the Santo Niño itself was subject to a semantic and allegorical process in which the very icons of Spanish conquest framed the retrospective rediscovery of a lost Bisayan ‘soul’. For the Christ Child was constructed as both Christian symbol and animist icon, both “Bata nga Allah” and “Santo Niño”. The Aginid and the Bisaya Patronymesis converge in the philosophy that Christianity did not constitute a shock to indigenous belief systems but was, instead, a familiar and acceptable addition to it. The link drawn between the Santo Niño and “Bata nga Allah” facilitates the conception that Christianity is not an anathema to the resurgence of a pre-Hispanic Bisayan ‘soul’. It was, at least in the tradition of child worship in the Bisayas, ‘always already’ there to be used as a means by which the memory of Sri Visjaya can (and indeed should) be resurrected.

The ideal of Rizal’s “Perdido Eden” – a realm he explicitly relates to a Southeast Asian (Sumatran) belonging – is here remembered and resurrected through the Santo Niño, and through its “figuring” in the acts of both ‘national’ and ‘regional’ soul-searching. While Anwar’s designation of the persona religiosus as the arbiter of an Asian Renaissance seems refuted by the awkwardness with which Filipinos react to it, an
examination of literary and scholarly projects in the Philippines reveal the enduring relevance of religion in relation to the people’s ‘becoming’. Yet it is important to be mindful of the friction which exists even within the nationalistic projects of fostering a ‘civilisational belonging’. The efforts at creating a ‘national history’ may well be an interpolation onto the burgeoning of a Bisayan panatyong pananaw, (if not Ilocano or Bicolano). As such, one need not dismiss texts such as the Aginid or Bisaya Patronymesis as merely facile ‘nativist’ petitions for autonomous lineage. For in the very devotion to the Santo Niño in Cebu is inscribed a resistance to the naturalizing claims of nationality or ‘national identity’ – exhortations that may well erode the inclusion of the ‘regional’ and the ‘ethnic’, even while it claims to do the very opposite.