'Figuring' Catholicism: The Santo Niño and Religious Discourse in Cebu

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‘And God Was Made Man’: The Santo Niño as Symbol in Cebu

A WOODEN FIGURE STANDS in a glass shrine within an eighteenth century Basilica that bears its name. It is a figure of a boy of no more than five years of age. Though it measures barely a foot in height, its visual impact is augmented by the sheer volume of its thirty-three layers of clothing. These are adorned with a rich assortment of jewellery that hangs around the boy’s neck and along its vestments, reaching almost to its feet. Its red velvet cape drapes down to the podium on which it stands; matched in lavishness by the jewel-studded crown positioned on its head. On the boy’s gloved right hand, raised to chest level in a pontiff’s blessing, hangs a sceptre of gold, while his left bears a golden orb atop of which a small, pearl-encrusted cross is planted.

While such grand adulation to religious statues is by no means unusual in the Philippines, no other figure is lavished with as much opulence as this one, the Santo Niño de Cebu. The elaborateness of its attire, and the level of adoration that surrounds it, is testament to how the figure stands out in a land profuse with churches and saints. The experience of participating in one of its ‘viewings’ evokes the sense of “wonder” that Greenblatt (1990) ascribes to a compelling piece of art: one invested with the power “to stop the viewer in his tracks, to evoke an exulted attention” (p. 181). Indeed, as with a priceless artwork, one would need to queue for a good half-
hour before being able to ascend the marble steps of the shrine. Each visitor is then asked to stand one at a time facing it -- a gentle encouragement to conduct oneself in personal moments of penitence, prayer and reflection. (Figure 3.1)

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 3.1: “The Santo Niño’s Shrine”**

Devotees of the Santo Niño inside the Basilica Minore taking their turn in viewing the figure. *Photograph: J. Bautista, Cebu City, January 2001*

Although the public is not allowed to touch the image, the glass that enshrines it has taken on a ‘holiness’ of its own, as though sanctified by extension. Many devotees would kiss the glass and wipe it with their handkerchiefs, seeking to acquire the divine energy believed to emanate from the figure. Some will take these blessed objects back to their homes, smearing it onto their loved ones hoping to pass on the Santo Niño’s grace. This kind of tactile transmission of the figure’s holiness however, is only one manifestation of the Santo Niño’s appeal. For in the figure is a power beyond the aesthetic and the palpable – one that far exceeds the formalised constraints of its physical barriers, to evoke in its viewers a sense of the complex cultural and historical circumstances from which it emerged.

It is with the Santo Niño figure’s metaphorical and metonymical power that this chapter is concerned. What is the precise nature of this little figure’s appeal in
Cebu today? What relations of power underlie its exulted status? The concern here is with the Santo Niño as symbol – as a “figuring” that mediates and represents the religious and cultural sensibilities of Cebuanos throughout history. The temporal focus is the present, where a Spanish colonial religiosity has become compounded with that of subsequent colonial regimes. The first section is concerned not only with identifying the wooden figure’s religious significance, but with the semiotic significations of its accessories and paraphernalia. In so doing, this section describes how the figure legitimises those meanings ascribed to it by the Catholic Church and other formalised institutions designated to act as the figure’s ‘official’ custodians.

This chapter utilises as a heuristic strategy the ironic juxtaposition of the Santo Niño’s significations ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the Basilica, reflecting on the play of contradictions characteristic of Filipino Christianity today. While the ‘official’ meanings of the Santo Niño compel a widespread and majestic adulation within the Basilica’s walls, the numerous replicas of the figure ‘outside’ the Basilica reflect the extent to which that devotion has become subject to the idiosyncrasies of the Cebuano ‘folk’s’ interpretations. The second section will demonstrate the contours of a “folk religiosity” among Santo Niño devotees, manifested in practices of worship that surpass (or even contradict) the intentions of the figure’s custodians. As constructed as the everyman’s alter-ego, this section describes the Santo Niño as a symbol onto which the desires and sentiments of ‘ordinary’ Cebuanos (itself a category mediated by particular discursive processes) are inscribed.
Inside the Basilica

AS AN ENDURING SYMBOL OF “God Made Man”, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the figure of the Santo Niño is one of the most popular images any Filipino Christian has been brought up to know. A recent survey of Filipino religious beliefs and practices identifies the Santo Niño as the second most preferred image of Christ (Gerlan 1991). In a Cebuano context, there is little doubt concerning its widespread appeal. It is the subject of devout worship in an island of nearly two million people, who relate to it as not merely a religious figure but one that continually defines and reasserts a Cebuano identity. Throughout four centuries and three periods of colonial rule, the Santo Niño has been considered the Patron Saint of Cebu: an intermediary and intercessor between the human and the divine. Yet the visual impact of the figure suggests that it is unlike other Patron Saints in the Philippines in that the treatment and veneration accorded it seems more befitting a king than an object of intercession. In this sense, the devotion to the Santo Niño offers a striking counterfactual to what many consider a more prominent representation of Christ, that of his crucifixion and death.

The contrast between the Child King and the image of the ‘passion’ of the crucified Christ could not be more stark. The latter, a depiction of a man on the brink of moral and physical destruction, is compelling in its reduction of the Son of God to a near naked object of ridicule and abuse. Indeed it is the combination of moral insult and physical persecution that supplies the sheer visual force of the image of the crucified Christ. On the other hand, the image of Christ as a Child projects a paradoxical combination of grandeur and childish naiveté. Tales of the Santo Niño’s
capacity for mischief frames a playful abandon premised upon a freedom from physical constraint, contrasting sharply with the physical incarceration and torture of the adult Christ. Its multi-layered vestments are particularly compelling when seen against the physical and semantic nakedness of its adult manifestation. The designation “Jesus King of the Jews” atop the cross, a condescending mockery of the fallen Christ, contradicts the “Santo Niño de Cebu” as a designation of an entire nation’s devout admiration. Similarly, the suffering Christ’s crown of thorns stands out against the Santo Niño’s diamond encrusted one. If an adult Christ carried the burden of man’s sin as a cross during His crucifixion, in the Santo Niño is an intriguing picture of a child literally carrying the weight of the world in its hands and clothed in an entire people’s adoration and devotion.

Despite their obvious differences, these two images of Christ are also similar in that they both depict the vulnerability that frames the mortality of a God on earth. Both physical suffering and Childlike naiveté deliver the negotiated resolution of the fundamental Christian mystery: of a God made Man. Yet this does not preclude the sense in which the worship of the Crucified Christ has “taken a backseat” to the image of innocent susceptibility depicted in the Child King. In very important senses, as will be seen, the innocence and playfulness of the Santo Niño invokes a different sense of identification to that of the suffering of Christ. This identification, itself the product of a field of historical discourses as described in the first chapter, “figure” Filipino Christianity by means of its metaphorical associations to ‘salvation’ and ‘development’. As Sison observes, “...unfortunately, the Our Father that Jesus spoke of has been relegated to second billing to the Child. Our Spirituality as a people can be said to be in an ‘infantile’ stage” (Cf. Floredo 2001, 51).
The Santo Niño as Official Symbol

The task of this section is to engage upon a “thick description” of the Santo Niño figure in Cebu, involving an examination of the meanings inscribed in its garments and accessories. Seeing the figure as a model of an ‘official’ version of Cebuano religiosity, the task is to make explicit the discourses in which are inscribed those meanings ‘sanctioned’ by the Catholic Church institution. This is to look at the Santo Niño as a bearer of specific significations in a semiotic sense, containing meanings that go deeper than its aesthetic and tangible materialisations. What are the discursive formations that foreground the importance and value of its accessories and vestments? What are the motivations that contextualise the ceremonies and rituals in which they are placed and removed? How do they reveal the broader context of the Santo Niño’s metonymic function as officially designated “patron saint”?

The most prominent aspect of the Santo Niño’s ‘kingly’ status can be found in its regal effects and paraphernalia. The crown atop its head and the jewellery that adorn its vestments in themselves reflect the extent to which high levels of devotion have been expressed. On the one hand, they signify the material wealth the land of its provenance, Spain, of which the Philippines was once the furthest outpost. The Santo Niño’s jewellery include a chain of old Spanish coins, a fleece garnered with emeralds, garnets, rubies and diamonds as well as golden ram pendant which are said to be gifts from Charles III of Spain. (Tenazas 1965, 78) On another level, such lavish accessorising reflect an adoration from devotees beyond its Cebuano flock. The twenty-two carat gold crown on its head is adorned with forty-four diamonds and was donated by the then First Lady of the Philippines on the occasion of Christianity’s
quad centenary. Having had her among its devotees had imbued the Santo Niño with a kind of 'official' sanction, ensuring its elevated status as not just a local figure but something of a national icon as well. Such a lavish 'gift' delivered the message that this deity is worthy of veneration on a grand scale.

Yet while the Santo Niño is ascribed a distinctively Filipino identification, there is not much doubt among Cebuanos that its status extends beyond the national. The orb on its left hand is typically understood to represent the world, the shape of which was established in the 1522 circumnavigation. Having, as it does, a cross atop of it commemorates the subsequent missions of evangelisation embarked upon by Christian missionaries around the world. As the first chapter has demonstrated, Cebu is seen to have played a significant role in this endeavour as the site in which the Iberian empire set out to launch its campaign in the Far East. It was a figure that

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1 Nick Joachin (1983) has pointed out that there is a precarious relationship between the Santo Niño’s orb and Magellan’s world expedition. If the roundness of the earth had only been proven after the expedition had left Cebu, it follows that the ‘globe’ the Santo Niño bears is an anachronistic miscalculation. Yet none of these irregularities really carry any weight among the Santo Niño’s devotees. Instead, it is believed that it is the Santo Niño who literally carries the weight of whole of God’s creation in its hand – an enormous responsibility for both one who is still a child and for Cebuanos as his ‘caretakers’.
has a real involvement in an event that was morally significant on both a religious and secular level.

The Santo Niño’s eyes are large in relation to its face while its nose is narrow and high. Its plump and robust cheeks frame a slight grin on its pinkish lips. Upon closer scrutiny one can perceive a small chip beneath the eye on its right cheek, believed to be from when it fell from its podium during the 1944 American bombing of Cebu. The hair, long and wavy, covers the ears and seems fastidiously groomed under its crown. Carved from wood, the complexion of the figure had turned ebony black but was later restored and repainted pale yellow.

That these characteristics do not depict those of a Cebuano/Malay child seems unproblematic to most Cebuanos, since Christ was not, after all, ethnically Filipino. The official ‘discovery’ history of the Santo Niño underlies a general acceptance of its being an ‘introduced’ deity; ‘born’ elsewhere but since then making Cebu its home. In this respect the ‘foreignness’ of its face is not something that undermines its status as a locally revered deity. Among the great majority of its devotees, the Santo Niño’s belonging is considered to be a matter of choice on his part, rather than one of birthright, a conviction buttressed by numerous tales of its ‘return’ to Cebu.

The index and middle fingers of the Santo Niño’s right hand are raised to chest level forming the pontifical sign of blessing. It is a gesture that symbolises the Holy Trinity; the two raised fingers signifying the Father and Son while the bent fingers surrounding the extended fingers symbolizing the unifying spirit of the Holy Ghost. The gesture adds a kind of holy legitimation to the golden sceptre that hangs on its wrist. While the sceptre suggests its ability to dispense justice and wisdom to the many who come before it, there is strong belief in the notion that Santo Niño provides not merely moral but spiritual absolution as well.

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But if the vestments and accessories the Santo Niño wears are significant of its authority, the solemn ritual surrounding its undress is perhaps even more so. The hubo (in Cebuano literally “disrobe”) is a yearly ceremony that marks the changing of the Santo Niño’s vestments. Each of the figure’s thirty-three layers of clothing, symbolising the years of Jesus’ earthly existence, is removed and then replaced piece by piece by Cebu’s Mensenior and the few who are selected especially for the dawn ceremony. Typically, they involve outstanding members of the clergy and a participant dressed as a Visayan pintado (a sixteenth century tattooed warrior). Each of the participants follow a precise sequence of removal of each article before the statue is bathed in perfumed water and dried with a towelette.

The hubo ceremony can be seen as display of the impassioned ceremoniality of dressing up a prince, reiterating the absolute adoration of an entire people. Yet on another hand, in the hubo is a slightly morbid prophesy of the physical torture and humiliation this child would later be made to endure. Every step in the process of removing and replacing the Santo Niño’s garb is accompanied by prayers of the Passion and Death of Christ. The priest recounts the suffering of the adult Christ, effecting an almost macabre analogy between the disrobing of an innocent child and the stripping of his adult version’s clothes in his crucifixion. Again exemplifying the intriguing, if grotesque, aura that surrounds the Santo Niño, the hubo again brings into great relief the contrast between the innocence of a child and the religious magnitude of a boy and God.

Taken in both a literal and a figurative sense, the Santo Niño’s garb seem to weigh heavily on the diminutive figure they adorn. Since the figure is practically engulfed by the size and lavishness of its paraphernalia, there is a tendency for casual observers to overlook the wooden image itself. This may be so particularly for the
childlike features of its face which measures but a few centimetres in diameter. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the appeal of the Santo Niño lies solely in the opulence of its external trappings. Among many Cebuanos I spoke with, the appeal of the Santo Niño’s garb is believed to be a reflection of the intrinsic power of the wooden image they adorn, and not the other way around.

Discourses of Antiquity and Discovery

While new garments and accessories are replaced every year, the figure in the church is widely thought to be the very same image brought by Magellan and later ‘re-discovered’ by Legazpi. In The Santo Niño of Cebu (1965), regarded in Cebu as the definitive work on the image, Tenazas reflects a belief in the Santo Niño’s antiquity and prevalence which is still widely held among Catholics in the Philippines today:

The Santo Niño of Cebu is one of the greatest relics of Christianity to be handed down by the Spaniards to the Filipinos. From the start, the image was intimately bound up with the Christianisation of the Islands. First given as a gift to the wife of the Chieftain during the first mass baptism held on the island of Cebu at the time of Magellan’s voyage of discovery in 1521, the finding of the image forty-four years later set off the Christianisation of the Archipelago to a good start (1965, 2)

The official history of the Santo Niño alludes to how the statue itself is considered a tangible connection with a founding event in Philippine history. Its significance in this regard is premised on moral grounds, having been instrumental in the endeavour to take the Philippines out of the ‘dark age’ of paganism and into the light of Christianity.

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This popular perception, undoubtedly encouraged by most literature on the Santo Niño, is not perceived to be the result of indoctrination or centuries of religious proseletisation. Rather, the adoration to the Santo Niño is seen to have been immediate and persistent, even among ancient Cebuano “heathens” in the early colonial period. As a 2001 publication by Florendo narrates:

When the image was found inside a Spanish wood box, it was covered in white cloth in the manner with which the natives draped their likhas [idols]... To the native mind, the contest was on between this Catholic likha and the native icons: which one was more powerful? ...In his letter to King Philip II, Legazpi noted the presence of flowers before the image. The offerings of flowers were gestures of reverence and thanksgiving. It thus meant that the image had been the object of worship for a long time (2001, 16-17).

Considering the scale and veneration attributed to the Santo Niño today, more than four hundred years after its arrival, the question of “which one was more powerful” takes on a rhetorical tone. Despite an acceptance that Cebuanos had reverted back to their ‘pagan’ or ‘animist’ beliefs immediately after Magellan was killed, the image of Santo Niño is depicted to have been kept safe by Cebuano converts. Notwithstanding the hostility that Cebuanos had for Legazpi’s crew, the image that they had previously been ‘bequeathed’ was spared from being discarded. In this sense, its longevity is believed to be an expression of a power intrinsic in the figure itself – one that enabled it to withstand not only the test of time and loyalties, but the test of competing deities as well.

The authority accorded to the Santo Niño, then, is seen to be based on a power innate in the wooden figure itself. The appeal of the figure is not so much refracted from the sheer impact of its vestments but is a function of the perceived antiquity and resilience of a wooden figure that had withstood adversity throughout the centuries. There is a willingness to accept the image’s antiquity, believing that its capacity of

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miraculous agency enabled its survival, however unlikely. This type of sensibility is something that fuels the tendency to overlook the ‘anachronism’ of the orb that it bears; choosing instead to associate it with the image’s capacity for transcendence of space and time. This also partly explains how the Santo Niño’s appeal is premised upon a discourse that fosters a semantic and metaphorical correlation between antiquity and holiness, particularly where religious icons are concerned.

Taken in its totality, therefore, the accessories of the Santo Niño and the rituals conducted in its honour underlie an ambiguous type of power it is seen to possess. On the one hand, they demonstrate its Kingly attributes, both as a reflection of its colonial provenance and as an indication of an inherent divinity. Yet on another level, the image is unmistakably childlike, betraying an innocence and even immaturity that suggests an incapacity to wield such regal authority. One of the more interesting things about the Santo Niño is that the net effect of this seeming contradiction seems not to undermine its status in Cebu. How can one explain the extent of reverence for the Santo Niño considering that ambiguity and grotesqueness seem to be its most prominent hallmark?

Victor Turner (1978, 1967a) argues that ambiguity is one of the conditions of possibility in a figure becoming a community’s “dominant” symbol. In his study of Ndembu ritual, Turner argues that dominant symbols are characterised by its possession of two clearly distinguishable poles of meaning. At the “ideological pole” of dominant symbols are meanings associated with “the moral and social orders, the principles of social organization, to kinds of corporate grouping, and to the norms and values inherent in structured relationships” (1978, 246). In this case of the Santo Niño, the kingly/divine status reflected by its paraphernalia is associated with its ideological pole to the extent that the norms and values these depict are inherent in the
structured (i.e. ‘official’) relationships of Catholic worship. At the “sensory pole” on
the other hand, meaning is closely related to the perceivable, outward appearance of
the figure. For the Santo Niño as Child, this is a form that is, despite the royal
trappings, of endearment and comfort. A sensory pole is associated with the
emotional responses towards innocence and purity which, on a more adult incarnation
of Christ, would not otherwise be felt as strongly.

Dominant symbols are, as Turner suggests, perceived by its constituents in a
“gross” way. In other words, less attention is given to the detail and grotesqueness
of the outward form, but rather is appreciated in its totality as a unity of both poles.
This unity is portent of what Turner calls a dominant symbol’s “transformative
power” particularly when there is an interchange of its poles of meaning during a
ritual performance. In the case of the ritual devotion to the Santo Niño (in mass or in
other celebrations involving the figure) meanings associated with the structured
dynamics of the catholic worship (ideological pole) become combined with emotions
engendered by the figure’s outward form (sensory pole). At the same time, private
and basic emotions felt by its devotees become ennobled and legitimised when
experienced in the context of the social, public understandings of the symbol. The
transformative power of dominant symbols occurs when ritual “brings the ethical,
jural norms of society into close contact with strong emotional stimuli.” The effect is
that “the symbols are believed to be charged with power from unknown sources, and

2 Turner’s conception of dominant symbols is that they can be subject to a great deal of modification
particularly when personal meaning is added to its public meaning. The many types of Santo Niño
replicas in Cebu reveal the extent to which individual sentimentalities of devotees are brought to bear
on the way their figures are crafted or dressed. We shall see that the ‘official’ designation of the Santo
Niño discussed in chapter one represents its standardized mode of association that has been included in
a complex of private fantasies of Cebuanos. While some signs are almost always organised in “closed”
systems; their meanings relatively immutable, dominant symbols are themselves semantically “open”
to interpretation by those who perceive it. In the changing of the Santo Niño’s vestments can be seen
an instance where, as Turner describes, “an initially private “construction” may become part of public
hermeneutic or standardized interpretation if the exegete has sufficient power, authority, or prestige to
“make his view stick.” (ibid, 154).
to be capable of acting on persons and groups in such a way as to change them for the better” (1967a, 54). That not just Kingly but spiritual authority can emanate from a figure of such a young boy underlies an ambiguous and transformative power of the Santo Niño as symbol.

Turner’s theorization of dominant symbol however, only offers a partial explanation of the Santo Niño’s appeal in Cebu. There is a danger in ascribing the Santo Niño’s relevance and importance to processes and inherent in its aesthetic properties, which are interpreted upon certain mental structures common upon of its devotees. Turner’s conceptions of the Santo Niño’s “dominance” or its “transformative power” must be tempered with an appreciation of those intentional practices of constructing the image to reflect particular interests and normative prescriptions. For it is also upon specific discursive formations, enacted in the ‘official’ and ‘church-sanctioned’ modes of worshiping the Santo Niño, that its dominant meanings are constructed and deployed

‘Official’ Forms of Santo Niño Devotion

There is a great deal of symbolic capital in the practice of linking congregational activities to such a ‘foundational’ activity as the building of the first Church in the Philippines. There is a sense that historical depth and the continuity of that tradition gives a kind of authenticity that compels respect and admiration. In the Philippines, only Cebuanos can claim to have the capacity to be able to achieve this linkage to what is seen as the two main foundational events in Philippine history. And although the Santo Niño as it is represented in Cebu has no specific biblical tradition as such, the theme of the ambiguous divinity of a child has some resonance
in Judeo-Christian tradition. The messages of Christ themselves are infused with metaphors of childhood innocence as a premonition and precondition of heavenly ascension. Images of human littleness inevitably become associated with a general sense of good, framing the wellbeing of the community and the promotion of the common welfare over individual interests.

The establishment of more organised modes of devotion to the Santo Niño were actively premised upon such theological considerations. One formalised, structured devotion to the Santo Niño began in Cebu in October 1958 when a Novena was organised to be held every Friday of the year. Rev. Restitutio Suarez of the Monastery of San Agustin had prepared the Novena in English for the students of the Colegio del Santo Niño. But they had apparently underestimated the Novena’s popularity. Within two months, the weekly mass became so popular among the wider community that two more masses were added: one in Cebuano and the other in English (Tenazas 1965, 82-83). Soon, the three devotions were broadcast on the three popular radio stations under sponsorship from devotees. The commemoration of the Santo Niño’s second discovery was revived in 1959, again upon Augustinian initiative. Re-establishing a tradition that had been interrupted by a papal decree dating the feast of the Holy Child during the second Sunday of Epiphany, the Santo Niño was brought out of the Basilica in procession to various churches in Cebu, including San Nicolas and Mabolo. There the figure was displayed in an open air altar enabling the faithful to express their devotion in a more public and communal setting.

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3The Holy Bible makes references to a religiosity where "A little Child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6), whereupon one is instructed to “suffer these little ones to come unto me” (Matt. 10:11); and also “he who offends on of these little ones, it were better that a millstone should be hung around his neck” (Matt, 18:6).
The popularity of the devotion, however, is not limited to the island of Cebu alone. Santo Niño devotions are prevalent in other islands in the Visayas, particularly in Aklan, where devotion to the Santo Niño figure rivals that of Cebu in enthusiasm and intensity. But there is a sense in which all devotion in the region must always, at least once a year, renew itself in Cebu through pilgrimage. During the feast of the Santo Niño, the city becomes the focal point for pilgrims from neighbouring islands who transform Cebu into a “little Jerusalem”. Underlying the desire to go on this pilgrimage is the assumption that the Santo Niño figure in Cebu is “more holy”; that is, higher up in the pantheon of deities. A yearly visit to it has the capacity not only to offer personal reinvigoration but to endow their own Santo Niño replicas with a renewed aura of sanctity – a ‘recharge’ of its divine powers. The popularity of pilgrimage to Cebu adds credence to the notion of the island’s ‘centrality’, particularly where devotion to the Santo Niño is concerned.

But while the devotion and rituals to the Santo Niño is seen in Cebu as having a deep historical lineage, the Santo Niño as a figure of national devotion is a relatively recent occurrence. In 1978, the then First Lady of the Philippines, Imelda Marcos, searched from among the prominent circles of Manila for participants in a commemorative display of Santo Niño images. Answering her call was a group of fashion designers, artists and collectors with a long, personal devotion to the Santo Niño who collaborated to help organise the exhibit. The following year, the Santo Niño replicas were displayed in the Museum of Philippine Art in celebration of the United Nations International Year of the Child. Over four hundred different Santo Niños are typically exhibited in the ten-day event, many of them rare antique pieces from the personal collections of the organisers themselves.
It was from this occasion that the *Congregacion del Santisimo Nombre del Niño Jesus* was established and named after the Santo Niño’s 1565 ‘second discovery’. While by no means the first collective established in the Santo Niño’s name, the Congregacion was unprecedented in the scale and scope of its devotional activities. Its aim was to give expression to devotional activities that were seen as localised in the periphery. From its “headquarters” in Pope Pius XXII Centre in UN Avenue in Malate, it held a yearly grand parade and exhibit of various Santo Niño images in the first week of January, as a fitting end to mark the Christmas season. To an extent, the Congregacion’s activities were established as a way to “give proper organization” and institutionalisation to similar parades and pilgrimages of the Santo Niño in the provincial cities of Cebu, Kalibo and Iloilo. They sought to bring the colour and vibrancy of the provincial celebrations so that they may be made accessible to those in the National Capital.

Yet the activities of Congregacion differed to these ‘regional’ celebrations, whose focus tends to revolve around the localised significance of the Santo Niño. Being, as it was, the brainchild of the First Lady herself, there is a sense in which the Congregacion had the official mandate to propagate the Santo Niño as a legitimate object of “national” devotion. In October 1979 the Congregacion received the pastoral blessing of Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin and, under the ‘spiritual guidance’ of Bishop Teodoro Buhain, became an official organization of the Archdiocese of Manila. In 1983, the Congregacion was given Papal blessing and more recently, its activities have included pilgrimages that have extended beyond the Philippines, taking a more secular focus. A Santo Niño replica named “Viajero” (Voyager) has been flown to Rome and presented to Pope John Paul II. Every year since 1994, the Congregacion has made a pilgrimage to Holy Child shrines around the world. Among
their destinations have been to the Santo Niño del Remedio in Madrid, the Holy Child of Beaune in France, the Bambino de Arecoeli in Rome, and Holy Child of Prague in Czech Republic. Much like the visit to the Santo Niño’s shrine, the modes of devotion conducted by the Congregacion are well organised and structured. Its members are actively encouraged to maintain a personal and intimate relationship with ‘their’ respective Santo Niño replicas. From time to time, these replicas are displayed in festivals and expositions and even documented in several album-type publications.

The Congregacion as an institution derives its authoritative legitimacy from having received both the moral and spiritual sanction of the higher authorities of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, including that of the Church in Rome. The notion that the Santo Niño’s ‘holiness’ and ‘dominance’ are intrinsic qualities of its aesthetic appeal, and not features extrinsically determined in light of certain historical and scriptural considerations, frames the discursive processes that foreground the figure’s appeal. The popularity of the Santo Niño as a symbol of ‘official’ Catholicism is partly the result of a historical commitment of its caretakers to promote certain modes of devotion to that correspond to a particular view of the Santo Niño’s long historical legacy. In the practice of these modes of devotion – the structured viewing of the figure, the ritualised ceremony of its undress and the significations of its paraphernalia – ‘official’ meanings of the Santo Niño are promoted as ‘natural’ and ‘normal’.

Imbued, therefore, with their official mandate, the Congregacion engages upon a discursive delimiting the specific boundaries of what is ‘acceptable’ as far as worshipping the Santo Niño is concerned. This is an act premised upon the conscious effort to distance the Congregacion from a mode of devotion which, as we shall see in the second section, construe the Santo Niño in ways many of its members would
deem undesirable. Ben Ferrales, the President and founder of the Congregacion, sums up his notion thus:

In our propagation of the devotion, we don’t encourage so-called miraculous Santo Niños – dancing Santo Niños, crying Santo Niños, wandering Santo Niños, and such... We don’t’ want sensationalism, we want to be conservative. (Cf. Florendo 2001, 210)

“Sensationalism” in the sense understood here, is not a description of the opulence of the figure’s regal paraphernalia, nor of the ceremoniality commemorating its undress. By this, they are referring to a very specific type of devotion characterised more by the flamboyant and almost fanatic Santo Niño devotion, where the figure had seemingly broken free of the constraints of both scriptural and physical barriers. It is to the modes of devotion ‘outside’ of the Basilica that this chapter shall now turn.
Outside the Basilica

TO UNDERSTAND THE ‘SENSATIONALISM’ that Ferrales speaks of, one need not go further than immediately outside the church that houses the Santo Niño de Cebu. In 1965, during the fourth centenary of Christianity in the Philippines, this Augustinian church was elevated to the status of Basilica and renamed “Basilica Minore del Santo Niño”. It has since become one of the most highly revered places of worship among the many churches in the Philippines, regularly visited by a large number of devotees and dignitaries both locally and beyond. Yet its exterior grounds provide a sharp contrast to the orderly, if somewhat restrictive, modes of worship found within. The streets immediately outside the basilica can be characterised by unfettered movement and almost festive chaos. The profusion of private vehicles, jeepneys and tricycles share the road with horse-drawn carriages and huge wooden produce carts propelled by merchants and peddlers of all kinds. Amidst the traffic, a bustling throng of people -- most locals and workers, others tourists -- go about their business in one of Cebu’s more popular downtown areas.

Walking outside from a visit to the enshrined Santo Niño figure immediately opens up a devotion that is indeed ‘sensational’ in the sense that the Santo Niño is seemingly available to be taken up in the private and public whims of its devotees. Among those who populate the Basilica exterior are a scattered group of typically middle-aged women, who make their living selling candles to church-goers. Their clientele include jeepney drivers, merchants, security guards, sales attendants and port workers, but also tourists, students and city employees. Along with the price of the candles -- no more than a few pesos -- devotees can request these tinderas (in

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Cebuano, literally “female vendor”) to perform a dance to the Santo Niño on their behalf. The clients would inform the tindera of a specific request -- the health of a sick relative, success in a chosen endeavour or safety in a journey, to name a few -- which she would then offer up to the Santo Niño while she dances. The Sinulog dance, as it is called, is a succession of hand gestures which the tindera makes while waving the purchased candles in the direction of the Basilica. This is accompanied by the tindera’s feet, sliding and swaying in short bursts. For an unspecified period, the tinderas dance with their eyes fixed towards the Santo Niño in the basilica, specifying the name of the person who requested it (Figure 3.3).

In essence, the Sinulog is a performance of petition to the Santo Niño, with the tindera acting as intermediary for those who, for whatever reason, cannot perform the dance themselves. Yet although they perform on another’s behalf, the tinderas are by no means detached from what they see as an activity of worship and personal piety. For them, the Sinulog must be performed properly and solemnly, lest they displease the Santo Niño to whom the act is offered.
It seems, however, that the only ones displeased by the tinderas dance are proponents of ‘official’ Christianity. Dancing as a way of worshipping the Santo Niño and the notion of proxy worship goes against the Catholic Church’s conception of religious piety — one which must be ‘conservative’ and not so overtly flamboyant as a performative dance in such a sacralized place as the Basilica. By the 1980s, the tinderas were banned from performing their Sinulog dance in the Basilica interior, relegating their worship as literally an outsider’s activity (Figure 3.4). The banning, moreover, had the support the Cebuano middle class for whom there is a conception that Sinulog dancers are “among the more ignorant or fanatical” of the many devotees to the Santo Niño. Even in scholarly accounts of the Santo Niño, the tindera Sinulog is thought to reflect the “primitive attitudes” of its practitioners, harking back to a time of pagan rites and superstitious beliefs in spirits. This suggestion echoes Ferrales’ statement: dancing as a form of worship is inconsistent with a more enlightened mode which stresses the structured over the spontaneous, and the modest over the vicarious.

Figure 3.4: “Folk Sensationalism”

Tinderas compete for customers on whose behalf they would perform the Sinulog (Photograph Cf. Florendo 2001)
This is not to say, however, that people in Cebu generally look with derision upon the *tinderas* and their dancing. Relegating them outside the Basilica is in essence a statement by the Catholic Church about a preference for a conservative way of worship. The “conservatism” that is espoused by the Congregacion echoes that of the orthodox Catholic Church in the Philippines who seek to distance itself from the ‘sensational’, short of directly condemning its practitioners. It is a sensationalism that does not mean revered figures such as the Santo Niño are not subjected to extravagance or lavishness, as we saw in the first section. ‘Sensational’ in this sense refers to the ‘primitive’ or ‘superstitious’ or ‘fanatical’ acts of devotees. Dancing, the use of amulets, and belief in ‘spirits’ and the supernatural are typically thought of as practiced by the poor and ignorant masses, and must be relegated outside and peripheral to the true ‘official’ mode of Christian devotion.

The *tinderas* *Sinulog* is one expression of “folk Catholicism”, a discussion of which is a common theme in this study. In this section, I want to look into the contours of what has been described in many various publications and scholarly works as “un-organised”, “spontaneous”, “everyday”, “simple” or “omnipresent” modes of devotion to the Santo Niño. What precisely are the manifestations of the ‘sensationalism’ that the more organised devotees of the Santo Niño seek to distance themselves from?

The Santo Niño and the Sacralisation of Mundane Space

Inside the Basilica, a solitary Child figure stands as the focal point of a revered space. Outside however, there are literally hundreds of Santo Nino images of all shapes and sizes. Wrapped neat and taught in clear plastic, the images are displayed
for sale in makeshift stalls that line the street where the Basilica is located. Each standing on its own podium, the replicas are typically made of plaster and are clothed in velveteen and felt. Like their more regal counterpart, their vestments are accessorised with all sorts of studs and rhinestones, while a crown fashioned out of thin sheet metal completes the image (Figure 3.5).

![Santo Niño Replicas](image)

**Figure 3.5: “Santo Niño Replicas”**

Santo Niño replicas are displayed and sold outside the Basilica Minore

*Photograph: Oliver Núñez, 1999*

In contrast to the experience of waiting in line for a viewing of a single image, the Santo Niño stalls outside are spectacles in themselves, as though competing with one another for the attention of passers-by. The experience for one who seeks to acquire ‘their’ own Santo Niño is one of rapid mobility and impermanence. There always seems to be another type of Santo Niño displayed in the next stall which one feels compelled to investigate. The replicas are not sold exclusively in the stalls, being also available in specialty shops in shopping malls or department stores. Yet there is a particular affection for the ones bought near the basilica which are considered more ‘authentic’ due to their proximity to the original figure. Patronising the stalls is a means by which, as Mercado (1982) notes, Filipinos “touch God through symbols”, instead of experiencing Him merely through the logical or intellectual dictates of the doctrine. For the figures sold here cater to a need among the faithful
for a sense of tangible realism in the practice of worship. The replicas facilitate a kind of ‘transportability’ to the spiritual energy that was otherwise accessed only from the original figure inside the Basilica. In this sense, the replicas were not perceived as pale imitations of the revered image enshrined in the Basilica, but as objects that enabled the opportunity for a sense of ownership of one’s own personal Santo Niño which is symbolically ‘open’ to one’s idiosyncratic interpretation, as we shall see.

The sheer variety and mass of Santo Niño replicas for sale might lead one to assume that its popularity has been exploited and its sanctity trivialised. Many of the vendors derive their income directly from the sale of the replicas, while others are under the employ of entrepreneurs. Walking around browsing through the stalls and speaking with the vendors, however, one gets the feeling that it is not a sense of detached commercialism that motivates the vendors, who on a good day can hope to sell no more than a few images. Interview data suggests that the replicas are sold in the sidewalk with the expectation that they will become true objects of devotion, where its owners often develop personal, long-lasting relationships with ‘their’ Santo Niño. In other words, these figures are not sold primarily as trivial souvenirs of the place, though a great number of the vendors’ clientele, particularly foreigners, buy them for this purpose. The relationship that is encouraged by patronising the stalls is no less personal than the one inside the Basilica, since the latter affords a more immediate access to the spiritual grace the Santo Niño is thought to provide.

The wide availability of Santo Niño’s replicas only partly illustrate the extent its immense popularity in Cebu. The image has become such a great part of the experience of the landscape beyond the city limits and into the barrios and sitios of greater Cebu province. A kapilya is a kiosk of cement or wood which can typically accommodate no more than five people at a time. They are personal, ‘mini-chapels’
which serve as a focal point for the prayers of those devotees in the immediate vicinity. The main feature of the kapilya is the religious iconography placed facing its entrance, which at night is secured by a lockable gate. Many kapilyas contain replicas of the Santo Niño, though a great number also house a crucifix, the Blessed Virgin or a town’s patron saint. While its proliferation fragments the locus of devotion from the centralised Basilica to various locations around Cebu province, it would be a mistake to assume that the serve as a substitute to the Santo Niño in the Basilica, or that the power and sanctity of its replicas are inversely proportional to its distance from it. The kapilya, rather, underlines the power of religious iconography such as the Santo Niño to designate a particular place as a focal point of religious activity.

The mere presence of a religious icon however, does necessarily sacralize that place or transform it into hallowed ground. Among Cebuanos, the Santo Niño’s image (or at least its likeness) is also accepted as an immediate, almost mundane, feature of the landscape. It can be found mounted in the dashboard of public transport vehicles, displayed in personal office spaces, at the entrance to schools, at the foyer of gyms, next to the items for sale in convenience stores or in local Karaoke bars. Its likeness is painted in many streets and alleyways, adorning sites alongside advertising billboards and murals. In Cebu City most especially, virtually no place is deemed an unsuitable location for setting up an altar for Santo Niño replicas.

One is not expected, however, to make major adjustments to his or her behaviour upon encountering the figure in such locations, as is perhaps necessary when coming into the sanctified space of the Basilica or Kapilya. One of the more paradoxical characteristics of the Santo Niño “outside” is that as well as being a sanctifying presence, the figure can also be a ‘floating’ presence of which one is
aware but not compelled to acknowledge. Many Cebuanos are candid in their belief that the presence of the replica graces that particular space without the need for overt or elaborate acts of worship. Often, the Santo Niño figures displayed so ubiquitously in Cebu is more likely to be object of short but frequent devotional practices.

While the proliferation of kapilyas reveal the extent to which icons such as the Santo Niño have taken root in many various places outside the Basilica, the presence of its replicas in Jeepneys demonstrate how this is an ubiquity characterized by constant mobility.⁴ Literally hundreds of these vehicles criss-cross the streets of Cebu on a daily basis, ferrying mostly lower class citizens of the City. A fairly common observation one can make is of jeepney drivers patting a Santo Niño replica fastened on his dashboard as they set out on the day’s journey. In some cases, he might silently utter a few words – a little prayer for a safe and profitable day’s journey. While not recognized as a form of worship as such, the Santo Niño in the jeepney is indicative of the religiosity ingrained in the habitus Cebuano life. (Figure 3.6) Far from solemn or ceremonial, these modes of devotion frame an adoration intrinsic to the enactment of everyday living.

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⁴ Jeepneys were originally US Army surplus vehicles converted by Filipino entrepreneurs to accommodate more passengers. They are now the most common form of public transportation in Cebu, ferrying passengers along the main thoroughfares and side streets of the City. Their significations extend beyond the utilitarian, such that it is a metaphorical representation of Filipino capacity for creativity and improvisation. As Dequiros (2003) observes, the Jeepney represents how Filipinos “turned garbage into gold, a drab object dedicated to ferrying soldiers from Point A to Point B to a colourful one dedicated to telling his life story, like a tapestry, from past to present”. As such, the very construction of the Jeepney frame tensions between the traditional and the modern, the utilitarian and the decorative, the puritanism and the exhibitionism and indeed, between the martial and the religious.
In this connection, the utilitarian function of a particular space is not undermined by an imperative to revere the image in a conventional sense, nor is there any particular hesitation to situate its likeness in places where it may be subject to harsh conditions. The ubiquity of the Santo Niño’s presence in the most unlikely of spaces -- far from constituting a desecration of its name -- suggests an acknowledgement of its capacity for miraculous intervention. After all, the Santo Niño in the Basilica is believed to have survived over four hundred years of wars and colonial regimes. So potent, it is thought, are its powers of resilience that its purity and ‘holiness’ could never really be undermined, regardless of its environment. On the contrary, having a Santo Niño replica in one’s immediate vicinity enhances the likelihood of one being a recipient of good grace. Displaying the figure in a convenience store is thought, for example, to increase the chances of good business, or, similarly, placing it in a foyer of a bank safeguards the premises from misfortune. (Figure 3.7) While the Santo Niño’s occupying of mundane space is thought to bring even material benefit to its inhabitants, it does not sacralize it to the extent of causing a disturbance to everyday practice.
The ubiquity of the Santo Niño, then, can be seen as a disruption of a system whereby devotional energies are focused exclusively on one image in one hallowed space. Ironically, those thought by the Church as the practitioners of "primitive" or "sensational" devotion to the Santo Niño are the very agents of its popularity. The sheer volume of Santo Niño replicas -- some taking pride of place in kapilyas, others occupying the everyday quarters of Cebuanos throughout the city -- shows that there are contexts in which the Santo Niño is taken up unfettered in the sensibilities of its devotees. It must be stressed, however, that these are not counter-hegemonic spaces that are meant to replace the Basilica as the most revered location for worshipping the Santo Niño. In spite of multiple places where the Santo Niño can be encountered, they remain subsidiary spaces whose holiness will always fall short of that in the Basilica. They do, however, provide strong indication that the devotion to the Santo Niño through its replicas has permeated into all areas of mundane space -- intertwined into, and almost unrecognisable from, the activities of everyday Cebuano life. More
significantly, they are both mental and physical spaces where the Congregacion, or even the Catholic Church for that matter, can exert little, if any, control.

The Santo Niño as Clothed in New Meaning

Ness (1992) has argued that the Santo Niño is “the classic example of a Turnerian dominant symbol” inasmuch it possessed certain empirical properties: firstly, its diminutiveness effected a condensed and compacted representation of the Christian world form which it was drawn. Secondly, it facilitated a community among people brought together in its devotion, underlying its capacity of ‘unification.’ And finally, its ambiguity is demonstrated by its capacity for polarisation which, as we have seen in the first section, is the source of its ‘transformative’ power (Cf. Turner and Turner 1978: 246; Turner 1967a, 50-52).

The ‘dominance’ of the Santo Niño as symbol is underscored in circumstances where the personal interpretations of its devotees are brought to bear on the image by virtue of manipulating and altering its vestments. In many areas of Cebu can be found the Santo Niño displayed without the elaborate and opulent vestments that are said to define its holiness and divinity. In their place are those which reflect that which is common, mundane and worldly among men, somewhat subverting its Kingly incarnation inside the Basilica. As such, veneration is enacted in thinking of the Santo Niño as a kind of alter-ego, a comrade in earthly hardship instead of a divine ruler or provider. The figure outside the Basilica is one that cohabits Cebuano everyday space, adorned, as it is, such that it is a participant in daily struggle. The Santo Niño’s ‘dominance’ is a function of its suitability for modification, and the enthusiasm with which Cebuanos themselves engage in such acts.

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Among the more intriguing examples of this are those that depict the Santo Niño as an agent of law enforcement. These replicas are dressed in the uniform of a security guard or a police officer, with official badges and insignias reflecting its 'rank'. In place of the crown are officer’s hats or military berets. The figures are also accessorised with the appropriate tools for the job: handcuffs, bullets and firearms fastened on its belt, or a baton raised on its left arm. (Figure 3.8) That a most holy figure -- a child at that -- carries instruments of violence or destruction does not seem sacrilegious to its owners or to many of the faithful (though there remains a sense of irony when one perceives such a holy image dressed in Philippine National Police uniform, an organization often riddled with corruption and illicit acts). It is seen, rather, as testament to the capacity of the Santo Niño to dispense justice, its youth and diminutiveness notwithstanding. Though these instruments are not thought of specifically as a replacement of the golden sceptre or crown, it serves to suggest that the Santo Nino is well qualified to wield retribution as well as grace. That it is literally placed on a pedestal suggests that it is a legitimate source of authority that "must be respected" at all times with no exception.

Figure 3.8: “The Santo Niño as alter ego”

This photograph is not a specifically Cebuano photograph, though the figures themselves are replicas of the Santo Niño de Cebu. They are examples of how even Catholics outside of Cebu are likewise manipulating the figure’s vestments in accordance with their own respective sentiments and desires (Photograph: Cf. Florendo 2001)
Many other replicas are of the Santo Niño enacting everyday occupations. A Santo Niño dressed in a lab coat mixing chemicals, a journalist Santo Niño brandishing photographic equipment and a tailor Santo Niño working on a sewing machine are but some examples of ‘working’ Santo Niño figures. Although these replicas bear no immediate resemblance to those of the Child King, some effort is made to indicate that in spite of the modified attire, the figure maintains some sense of its ‘holiness’. Typically, the hand gesture of the pontiff’s blessing remains, or if the hands are occupied, a halo will designate that this is a divine figure. That this is so adds to the overall impact of these replicas: the message they convey is that there is “a holiness and dignity in doing one’s job” even if it is a menial or simple one (FW notes). It is upon this notion that the Santo Niño is freely manifested outside the realms of the Basilica and into the spaces of the mundane and utilitarian. It suggests that worship does not have to be a strictly liturgical affair, but can also be conducted in the process of going about one’s business no matter how menial or tedious.

The Santo Niño as alter-ego does more than symbolise a divinity that is readily accessible to its devotees. It also symbolises the humanisation of the divine, variously interpreted in line with the concept of pakikisma. Mercado (1982) expresses it thus:

Christ...is not only an intimate friend who knows how to go along (makisama) with his brothers and sisters but also a powerful friend (maykapal). In a wider aspect, he is the friend who wants to free his people from all oppression and bring about the well-being of his people. Thus Christ is both man and God. (p. 89)

The Santo Niño’s inclusion within a concept of social camaraderie (maksama) is here not seen as an erosion of its divine status and omnipotence (maykapal). While it is present in peoples’ common struggle, its devotees are still very much aware of its
capacity to free them from the hardship and toil of making a living. The Santo Niño’s alter-egoness, then, is not a desire to co-opt its labour power as such. Displaying it as one’s alter-ego, rather, is understood as a way of petitioning its intervention, inviting it to “take pity upon them” by sharing the experience of their hardship and struggle.

One must be careful, however, not to make the assumption that the Santo Niño has a kind of monopoly over Cebuanos’ religious loyalty. The images of the Birhen de Guadalupe and San Vicente Ferrer in Cebu are among the few other images in and around Cebu which possess similar properties of ubiquity in their locality. In the region immediately outside Cebu, localised Santo Niño figures also attract almost the same level of devotion (the Santo Niño de Kalibo and the Santo Niño de Tondo are such examples). Tenazas echoes a popular belief, however, in a hierarchy of “powerful images” whereupon icons are conceived to possess varying levels of grace and holiness (1965, 91). An image’s ‘rank’ within that hierarchy is determined by how “miraculous” an image is thought to be, which, in the case of Santo Niño figures at least, is function of its perceived antiquity and resilience. In this regard, it is generally accepted that the Santo Niño de Cebu occupies the highest position in the pantheon of local deities and images. While this is not to suggest that there is a scenario of conflict or competition among religious icons for the affection of Cebuano people, it is to argue that the Santo Niño de Cebu’s ‘dominance’ is not simply a function of its sheer omnipresence and ubiquity. It is, rather, a reflection of the extent to which discourses of antiquity, discovery and miraculousness underpin the level and intensity of its reverence.

To be sure, the Virgin Mary and the adult Christ have likewise been seen in modes of alter-ego. An adult Christ is similarly depicted as a close friend dressed in

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casual clothing, playing a guitar and riding a motorcycle. The Virgin Mary alter-ego is typically seen in national terms, dressed in traditional Philippine costume as a metonymy for the Inang Bayan (Motherland). But these permutations are neither widespread nor usually manifested in actual statues as in the Santo Niño’s case. Indeed, many people express the need to “keep Jesus holy” by preserving the divine image of His passion or His otherwise “heavenly” guise (as with the Sacred Heart image). In many ways, the capacity for being conceived of as an alter-ego is an exclusive domain of the Santo Niño, premised upon its innocence and childlike approachability. As Bautista (2001) articulates:

One trend was to relate the Santo Niño to the needs and properties of their daily lives. It seemed this was more permissible to do with the Holy Child than with the adult Christ. To cloak the adult Messiah as a shepherd, as a patron of winemakers, as a fisherman, would have been unthinkable (Cf. Florendo 2001, 121).

Rather than being seen as a sign of vulnerability, the child-like aspects of the Santo Niño constitute its very amenability to being related to one’s immediate experience, either through modification or localisation. After all, or so goes the popular logic, a cute and lovable child “can get anything from the Father, even more so than a bleeding and crucified Son.” At the same time, however, a sensitivity to what is “permissible” and “unthinkable” draws our attention to the operation of certain acts of regulation that underpin local interpretations of iconography. It is as though the interpretive licence taken in the conception of the Santo Niño as alter-ego is premised upon an awareness of certain powers of authentication, the nature and scope of which will be discussed in the chapters that follow.
THE ORIGINAL IMAGE of the Santo Niño de Cebu stands encased in glass ostensibly for reasons of preservation. It is placed there to prevent it from exposure to the elements, considering its age, fragility and symbolic value. Not unlike the black structure that houses the remnants of Magellan’s cross, the glass safeguards against the “fanatic” intentions of those who believe and yearn for its physicality. Ironically, this most revered image has been sheltered so that it may be protected from the very ones it supposedly keeps from harm and misfortune.

But the glass can also be seen as barrier between an original and official Santo Niño, and a Santo Niño that had been taken into the sentiments of those for whom the figure is, paradoxically, both an object of worship and a comrade in life’s struggle. In this sense, it is a barrier of interpretations, ensuring that one manifestation of the Santo Niño -- that of a Child King/Deity -- takes precedence over all the others. By the same token, the podium on which it stands does indeed serve as a kind of throne: one that maintains and reiterates the Santo Niño’s primacy over all other Saints and replicas. The physical structure that houses the figure is a manifestation of the Church’s authorizing discourse, delimiting the ‘proper’ and ‘permissible’ from the ‘sensational’ and ‘fanatical’.

An early 1920s description of the Santo Niño encapsulates what has been the thrust of this chapter:

On one side of the huge empty hall was a small alter upon which had been placed the [black] image of the Christ Child… The priest at the altar gave a signal and the huge portals swung inwards with a mighty crash. Immediately the great nave of the ancient church was filled with a mass of howling, gesticulating humanity which rushed headlong into the chapel giving vent to piercing shrieks and unnatural cries... Men and woman, many with infants in their arms, began to dance and caper, holding up the bewildered babies towards the impassive little figure, and never ceasing for a moment to utter unearthly howls.
At length, the ecstasy or frenzy... wore off through sheer fatigue. The
turbulent gathering... gradually resolved itself into a long line where it waited
patiently and quietly... As each individual passed before the Santo Niño, he or
she bent and reverently placed a kiss upon the diminutive foot (Irving 1922, 3-
4; Cf. Ness 1995, 2).

This passage, from an American visiting Cebu, is an account of the particular
conditions in which the Santo Niño is worshipped by Cebuanos. While this is an
observation made some time ago, this section has shown that the contrasts it posits
can still be seen today in some shape or form. In depicting the interaction between
devotees ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the Basilica, the passage draws attention to the
competing discourses of religiosity and devotion that has been the subject of this
chapter.

In the depiction of a mass of “gesticulating humanity” deliriously breaking
through the hallowed doors of the Basilica, Irving’s account captures the sheer
emotive and physical force of an overzealous adoration for the Santo Niño. Their
“piercing shrieks and unnatural cries” are depicted as a sheer fanaticism that is raw,
primordial and untamed. It portrays the of kind of worship that today would be the
basis of the ‘sensational’ practices of those outside the Basilica; one that contravenes
the Catholic Church’s standards of conservatism and piety. As such, the
’sensationalism’ of their devotion – a category mediated by the practice of ‘official’
rites of worship -- is viewed within discursive intimations of a sense of spiritual
ignorance, or an illicit religious fervour.

Their hysteria and frenzy eventually settles down, as though but moments of
temporary insanity. The “unearthly howls” and dances gradually descend into an
orderly system that is patient and structured, resembling the highly regulated
procedures of ‘viewing’ the Santo Niño today. But this is a condition that occurs
through fatigue and exasperation. There is a sense in which the priests and the

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clergy in the Basilica had let the hoard’s fanaticism take its course, patiently indulging their ‘sensationalism’ before the final and “proper” devotion is allowed to begin. In this way, this is a passage that suggests a sense of accommodation to the fanatical and sensational, refuting the notion that the contrast between the “inside” and the “outside” modes of Santo Niño devotion is a field of irreconcilable sensibilities. Indeed, a common theme of this thesis is the extent to which discursive formations of religiosity are often mutually constituting, illustrating the ‘flexible barriers’ that swing open or shut for those who seek passage.

An appreciation of the symbolic force of these flexible barriers entails an examination of the contours of ‘folk Catholicism’ in the Philippines. The semantic and metaphorical barriers that enclose and encase the Santo Niño are, as we shall see, ones that open and close depending upon the powers that exert discursive control over its movement. ‘Folk Catholicism’ (of which the Santo Niño can also be the most potent manifestation) is characterised by acts of accommodation, compromise and ‘tolerance’ as much as it is by lamentations over ‘sensationalism’, ‘illicitness’ and ‘fanaticism’. It is to those competing discourses, and the extent to which the Santo Niño ‘figures’ within the dynamic of “Filipino Catholicism”, that the next chapter shall be devoted.