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

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Buot, Gahum and the Santo Niño: The Contractual ‘Healing’ of the Cebuano Body Politic

HUMABAR: Manglingkod kita ug magsultianay bahin sa gingharian. Unsay gingharian, kondili ang hinugpong nga katawhan nga may gahum, kay nagkasabot; may bahandi, kay makugihon, may dungog, kay may ka-buot; may kaugalingnan, kay may kagawasan, may katahom, kay may kalipay; may kaangayan, kay makahukom. Mga sakop, gilaraw mga tumpagon sa mga Kastila ang atong gingharian. Ang tanan – gahum, bahandi, dungog, uban pa... Kamatayon maoy bugtong pahamtang niining sala.

HUMABAR: Let us sit and discuss the affairs of the kingdom. What is a kingdom, if not the sum of the people who have power, because they agree with one another, who have wealth, because they work for it, who have honour, because they have will; who have self-reliance, because they are free; where there is beauty, for there is happiness; there is equality, for there is justice. My men, the Spaniards are planning to destroy our kingdom. Everything in it – power, wealth, honour, others... Only death is fit punishment for their deed.

“Rajah Humabar” by Potenciano Cañiazares, 1960 (translated from the Bisaya by Don Pagusara)

THE PASSAGE ABOVE is taken from a play dramatising the events in Cebu after the battle of Mactan in 1521. Rajah Humabon gathers together his ‘entourage’ and discusses how Spanish crewmen are to be treated following the defeat and death of their leader. Waxing eloquent about the components of the Cebuano gingharian (kingdom), Humabon stresses the urgency with which the Spanish must be punished and put to death. In a stark subversion of a relationship of magnanimity and mutual respect, Spaniards are now seen as a clear and present threat to the very foundations of the
gingharian, justifying their dramatic and brutal massacre just days after Magellan’s violent demise (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: “Rajah Humabon, Saviour of Cebu”
“Sugbo sa Karraang Panahon”
A Painting Exhibition by Manuel Pañares, Cebu City, January 1997

Spanish soldiers are massacred by Cebuano warriors during a dinner banquet after Magellan’s death. Rajah Humabon, who planned the massacre, points to the Spanish ships moored in the horizon, as though indicating his intentions. In the background, the cross erected to commemorate Cebuano ‘conversion to Christianity’ is taken down, symbolizing the disintegration of Cebuano-Spanish relations.

The significance of this passage lies in what it projects about sixteenth-century Cebuano social and political life. It evokes images of a courtly, even opulent, body politic engaged in pragmatic and patient deliberation, and unified in a common consensus of honour, ethics and free will. Humabon himself is depicted as an inspiring orator who motivates his court by the sheer force of his poetic rationalising. It implies that the sudden and fatal shift in Cebuano attitudes was based not on a raw, vengeful rage but on a strong sense of kingdom and the desire to defend the integrity of the principles on which it stood. In this sense, the text is an attempt to break the silence of Spanish documents about Cebuano motives during the final days of Magellan’s sojourn. It reiterates that Cebuanos too were ardent crafters of the colonial interaction and were
constantly adjusting their decisions in accordance with their own estimations of the situation at hand.¹

This chapter is about how Cebuanos ‘figured’ the early colonial encounter by interpreting the composition of their social and religious life, and by describing some critical concepts on which the body politic might have been based. “Body politic” refers here to something beyond the structural and hierarchical constitution of the gingharian. These terms encapsulate how Cebuano notions of the social order were intertwined with their ideas about the individual body, and the customary strategies employed towards its physical and spiritual upkeep. In Cebu, conceptions of a person’s spiritual health provided a kind of template that guided the maintenance of the gingharian as a whole, such that notions of corporeal illness and wellbeing influenced how the social world was generally conceived.² The post-Mactan colonial encounter became understood in terms of the “sickness” of the relationship between Cebuanos and Spaniards, and the subsequent transactions between them became aligned towards the metaphorical “healing” of the ailing body politic. What “healing” meant and what it involved on a personal and societal context is, as such, a recurring theme in the three sections that follow.

Understanding the early colonial encounter through the condition of the Cebuano body has both heuristic and hermeneutic import. It places primacy on interpreting how

¹ Cañizares’s script, while not actually enacted on stage, is included here because it encapsulates the broader theme of a re-appropriation of Cebuano historical events. A more modern play based loosely on the Cañizares plotline entitled “Lapulapu” was performed at the SM Theatre during the Sinulog festival in 2001. Though the script for that play was not made available, interviews conducted with the director confirm that this re-appropriation of history was a motivating factor in the 2001 rendition.
² This chapter does not set out to examine the specific or technical workings of the 16th century Cebuano polity. “Body politic” is a concept I use here to signify the interconnectedness of Cebuano concepts of the body to their views on social and political organization. In this sense, gingharian is not evoked as a description of Cebuano political structure, but rather as a nostalgic depiction by modern day Cebuanos of how Cebuano life was destabilized by the arrival of Spanish colonialists
locals maintained harmonious social relations through concepts of local religiosity and cosmology. To be sure, Spanish documentary sources are important in gaining glimpses into the events of 1521 and 1565. But the thrust of this chapter is that these must be tempered with a philological examination of native cosmological concepts as well as an examination of folklore. In this vein, the first section engages a discussion of sixteenth century Cebuano notions of power, “gahum”, and ideas of ethical behaviour, “buot”. The argument here is that not only were these notions critical components of the Cebuano body politic (as suggested in the text of Cenizares’ play), but they may also help us understand the sentiments behind Cebuanos’ active engagement with Spanish arrivals.

What were Cebuano expectations upon agreeing to be baptized so solemnly? What were their interpretations of the violent deterioration of their relations with the Spanish after the battle of Mactan? To what can be attributed their eventual reconciliation shortly after the arrival of Legazpi forty-four years later? In the first section, I discuss how a deeper understanding of Cebuano cosmology -- through a depiction a world “full of souls”, and the concepts that operated within it -- can contribute towards making sense of how and why the colonial encounter was pervaded by stark contrasts of harmony and discord.

As the “sickness” of the body came to epitomize the deterioration of the Cebuano body politic after the events of 1521, the transition into “healing” was made possible by the “contracting” of their relationship (Rafael 1988). The second arrival of the Spanish, while initially greeted with violence and hostility, was literally and metaphorically negotiated through the icon of the Santo Niño. As will be described in the second section, it was a “figuring” of colonialism that was facilitated by what was commonly perceived as the healing powers of the Santo Niño, particularly upon the event of its
“second discovery.” As such, the Santo Niño had become meaningful for sixteenth century Cebuanos, not because of its inherent divinity as a Christian icon (as depicted in the Spanish sources discussed in the first chapter), but through its metaphorical and allegorical capacity to cure an ailing physical and social body. Again, it is through an examination of folklore and cosmology that we can gain access to the extent to which this was so. The second section examines how the Santo Niño itself corresponded with the idioms of sickness and healing though which a new colonial ‘contract’ had become formed (and, indeed, eventually broken).

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, Spanish colonialism involved the alteration of the Cebuano gingharian in the imposition of a new pattern of geographical organization. In the establishment of a pueblo-style settlement, the Spanish had effectively realigned Cebuano conceptions of power and re-inscribed local sensibilities in accordance to a Judeo-Christian mode of morality. Though the physical transformation of the island’s geography might suggest native reticence to the colonial project, in some critical ways locals exhibited modes of recalcitrance and creative resistance to missionary and colonial design. The focus of the final section is on how Cebuanos were able to maintain an indigenous conception of religious power (gahum) in the face of radical changes to their environment. These strategies of recalcitrance were framed by acts of appropriation of the figure of the Santo Niño in ways that circumvented friar monopoly over spiritual power. It was in the ways in which the Santo Niño had become conceived as a source and wielder of gahum that Cebuanos negotiated the forced re-inscription of their physical and spiritual life, symbolizing not so much their ‘conversion’ to
Christianity but their ability to creatively ‘figure’ the tumultuous experience of colonialism and the events of religious upheaval with which it was indelibly associated.

I

Wherever you turned, you collided with a soul. You found them indwelling, animating, not only humans but animals and objects (trees, rivers, spears, betel nut boxes). They were everywhere, not only safely ensconced in what contained them but with the propensity to restlessly wander about. (Mojares 1997, 45-46)

MOJARES DESCRIBES A CEBUANO WORLD bustling with physical and spiritual vivacity. The Cebu Spanish colonialists encountered was a politico-territorial body inhabited by a people well attuned to the interrelationship between the physical world of humans, and a cosmological realm inhabited by souls and spirits. For Cebuanos, a ‘soul’ was the élán vital, the animating force in all living things. Although they existed largely in the unseen world, their existence was by no means peripheral or unimportant to humans. Rather, people were vastly outnumbered by souls to the point where their lives were mostly conducted in perpetual acknowledgement of their presence and intervention.

Cebuanos had an elaborate array of concepts for distinguishing between living and dead ancestor spirits. Having, as Fox (1987) observes in Sulawesi, a “celebration of spiritual differentiation” (p. 526), the living soul in Cebu was called kalag — a fire or flame — while the soul of the dead was known as umalagad, meaning a guardian or cohort. Kalag and umalagad were conceived of hierarchically and categorically, at times depicting them as anthropomorphic manifestations. Nature and celestial bodies were personified, as were animals to which offering was frequently made as the situation
required. Spiritual notions in Cebu were intimately linked with the impulse to protect and maintain the personal body, such that the physical and supernatural existed in a constant state of interaction. Passage through a waterway for example likely meant an encounter with the crocodile spirit whose presence was felt in light of the obvious dangers it posed.

So intimate was the connection between souls and one’s body that Cebuanos speak of kalag in terms of *ginhawa*, the ‘life breath’ which infuses the body and gives it form. Correspondingly, physical sickness and ailments became conceived of as a spiritual infirmity, denoting the inherent disconnection between the physical and spiritual realm of which humans were intimately a part. As Mojares describes:

When something is not quite right with the body, Bisayans say ‘*Nagalain ang akong ginhawa*’. Literally, ‘my breathing is different’, it is another way of saying ‘there’s a difference in my soul’ (ginhawa, like the Subanon ginawa, comes from the Malay nyawa and Proto-Austronesian nayah, ‘soul’). It is the condition of being out-of-sorts portentous of a lack or loss (but also, we must add, the stirrings of a coming vision, the onset of something dangerous, strange and new). (2002, 299)

Cebuanos believed that their welfare was often affected by the intervention of kalag, who were believed to frequently intrude into their world by causing sickness and misfortune, but also by bringing good luck and grace. Spiritual activity could be deciphered through signs and portents observable through the behaviour of animals, or could otherwise be elicited by omen-seeking ceremonies conducted by spirit mediums called *babaylanes*. While kalag were thought of as natural parts of the landscape, they could be angered if humans were negligent of corresponding spiritual omens. For example, a monitor lizard found beneath one’s house foretold of impending death, though

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if the householder were to capture and bury the lizard in a cloth, the animal’s life may be accepted as a substitute. Once one has achieved the objective of eluding immediate danger or obtaining what one wants, kalag are not anymore invoked until such a time that their intercession is again required, say when one falls ill or must journey through dangerous terrain or “any other way confronts a situation unknown or uncertain.” (Rafael 1988, 113)

Because kalag were so vital to human wellbeing, Cebuanos seemed to be constantly preoccupied with appeasing, propitiating, or engaging in dialogue with them. The Bisayan notion of gaba denotes a state that befalls someone who has angered a particular spirit through negligence or misconduct. Retribution from the associated kalag was the expected outcome, though the link between the transgression and gaba is usually made retrospectively. In this sense, the avoidance of gaba informs people’s actions in their everyday life even today. There is a focus on maintaining cosmological balance which is both societal as well as individual. This balance is maintained through acts of appeasing kalag or fine tuning one’s own good standing with others in the community. When this is achieved, one is thought to be “buotan” or, literally, filled with buot – a concept with which we shall now deal. An understanding of buot is vital towards making sense of Cebuano perspectives of the colonial encounter, and subsequently, how the Santo Niño had figured in their experience of it.

Buot

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In the context of a world sensitive to the intervention of spirits and souls, one might define *buot* as an ethничal mode of behaviour which simultaneously incorporates human acts of thinking, willing and feeling. It denotes the enactment of one’s desires towards what is outside on the realm of the physical (for example, “*Buot ko mogawas...*” or “*Buot siya mo kaon*”... I want to go outside, He/She wants to eat). The closest counterpart of buot, the Tagalog notion of “*loob*”, has received a great deal of scholarly attention (See Ileto 1979, Rafael 1988 and Alejo 1990 among others). Like loob, buot denotes a dynamic of inwardness that is always oriented towards an external process of interaction, reciprocity and debt (whether it be with mortals or the supernatural). In this sense, to be “*buotan*” signifies the extent of a person’s integrity and trustworthiness in the specific circumstances of social and spiritual interaction.

More significantly for the context of the colonial encounter, to be “*walay buot*” (literally, without buot) describes a person’s acts of deceit, treachery and duplicitiousness. A lack of buot implied not only a person’s moral deficiency, but an inability to effectively manage their own ethical and spiritual affairs, suggesting an infirmity and corruption of his own soul. Just as the Tagalog expression “*Walang utang na loob*” denotes an absence or lack of virtue, the Bisaya “*walay utang kabutbut-on*” (literally, having no debt of buot) describes a person who has transgressed a covenant made between individuals in deference to a societal code of reciprocity and exchange. Inasmuch as the state of a person’s wellbeing in Cebu is measured against the degree to which a person maintains healthy social relations, what Rafael observed for *loob* likewise holds true for *buot*:

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Where [Tagalog] notions of indebtedness are concerned, loob does not exist apart from the mechanism of debt transactions; it can be known and realized only in the process of indebtedness. To reduce loob, as the Spaniards did, to a question of intentionality and the locus of guilt and repentance is to assume that it stands behind and above the terms of reciprocity. But as the various definitions of loob suggest, utang na loob transactions imply neither an originary source of gifts nor a privileged interiority accountable for its debts. (1988, 126, my emphasis)

As Alburó (2001) argues, “walay buot” must not be understood according to a Judeo-Christian sense of morality, or conflated with the notion of “sala” (sin) which refers to acts of transgressing the prescriptions of Christian piety. Rather, buot is conceptualized in terms of societal intersubjectivity, or more specifically, with the a person’s actions towards the preservation of an agreed upon pact of exchange. As such, I follow Ileto (1979) and Rafael (1988) in assuming that buot “is always predicated upon the possibility of conflict and disruption.” (Rafael 1988, 123-124) For to be “walay buot”, in the specific context of analyzing Cebuano perceptions of the early colonial encounter, means to break a contract or be otherwise negligent of its terms.

With this in mind, it becomes possible to dispel the impression that sixteenth century Cebuanos were constantly at the mercy of cosmological forces over which they had no control. Through the constant maintenance of buot, humans had a great degree of agency over the general health of the body politic as well as over their own. The reciprocal nature of buot meant that personal health and social health operated under the same dynamic of ensuring one’s good standing vis a vis the world of kalag and umalagad. Like Rafael’s use of loob, therefore, buot must be understood as the capacity of people to exert an active and effective control over their spiritual wellbeing, as well as of their social affairs. Buot, in this sense, is both a testament to human agency as well as a sign of harmonious relations with the spirit world over which they remained subservient.
Insofar as humans had the capacity to interact with the world of kalag, their concept for power, “gahum” was a measure of a person’s arcane knowledge and skill at manipulating spirits to their advantage. While buot denoted a person’s temperament and willingness to maintain a good standing within the dynamic of exchange and intersubjectivity, gahum measured the effectiveness with which this was achieved. A person was considered gamhanan (“powerful”) according to their skill at reading omens and invoking cosmological and spiritual forces. While minor acts of propitiation could be conducted by anyone in the form of the sacrifice (pagobo) of an animal, more elaborate séances were left to the shaman whose gahum was said to be handed down through generations. These offerings are not sacrifices in the Christian sense in that there is no body of sacred texts from which ritual experts draw. Gahum is, rather, an intrinsic attribute of its practitioner and is the spiritual force of which humans are constantly trying to increase their ‘stock’.

In the sixteenth century, the island of Cebu was a single political unit composed of fragmented, decentralized settlements (barangay, balanghais) held together by the centripetal force of a leader’s gahum. In this sense, Cebu exhibited characteristics of what Wolters (1999) identified as the Southeast Asian “mandala”. Such settlements were ruled and held together by “men of prowess” whose authority and charisma were a

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2 For an elaboration on the concept of gahum, see Alburo (2001).

4 A mandala was “a geographical area without fixed boundaries and where smaller centers tended to look in all directions for security. Mandala would expand and contract in concertina-like fashion. Each one contained several tributary rulers, some of whom would repudiate their vassal status when the opportunity arose and try to build up their own networks of vassals. Only the mandala overlord had the prerogative of receiving tribute-bearing envoys, he himself would dispatch officials who represented his superior status” (Wolters 1999, 27-28).
function of the amount of spiritual substance he was believed to possess. “Soul stuff” referred to the degree by which humans had access to and control of spiritual forces. Wolters, however, points out the conceptual relativism of ‘soul stuff’, indicating that:

In the Southeast Asian languages, the terms for “soul stuff” vary from society to society, and the belief is always associated with other beliefs. The distinctions between ‘soul stuff’ and the associated beliefs are so precise and essential that they can be defined only in the language of each society. (p.19)

The ways in which gahum operated indicates it to be the local counterpart of “soul stuff” in Cebu. Like “soul stuff”, gahum was a measure of ‘prowess’ that indicated a person’s capacity for reading omens, communicating with spirits and manipulating the forces of the supernatural.

Gahum is similar to how Ileto (1998) conceptualized the Tagalog “kapangyarihan” (lit. power) as the spiritual force that “animates the universe and is often concentrated in certain power-full beings and objects.” (p.39) Gahum finds resonance also in how personal potency is conceived in Java which, according to Anderson (1972), is “that intangible, mysterious, and divine energy which animates the universe. It is manifested in every aspect of the natural world, in stones, trees, clouds, and fire, but is expressed quintessentially in the central mystery of life, the process of generation and regeneration.” (p. 7, 72 Cf. McAndrew 2001, 8)

While gahum suffuses the cosmos as an ethereal, creative energy, individuals also deploy and articulate it in distinct circumstances. Gahum is understood as the ability of a leader to influence and persuade others towards the elicitation of their loyalty and service. A settlement group would be held together not only by the chance of acquiring material
benefit but by the belief that one’s own spiritual substance would be enhanced by a leader who was full of gahum ("gamhanan"). The relative integrity of a settlement also depended upon a leader’s pragmatism and ability to expand his own (and by extension, others’) spiritual power. Indeed, as with Wolters’ mandala, gahum as power and prowess was indicated by the size of a leader’s entourage (his ‘manpower’) and was typically increased by the forced raiding and subjugation of neighboring kingdoms (in Cebuano, called “pangayaw”). As a territorial arrangement which both produced and was produced by a belief in an “abundance of souls”, the Cebu encountered by Spanish colonialists was a settlement in which person, nature and supernature were organically linked by a leader’s spiritual prowess, and populated by individuals who sought to acquire it by way of association.

Not unlike many other of their Southeast Asian neighbours, then, Cebuano perceptions of personal power was thoroughly spiritual, relating almost entirely to their ideas of cosmic agency. As Reid observes:

...since power was seen as driving from spiritual sources, it was generally believed that rulers and warriors achieved their success through ascetic and ritual preparation, mediation, magical charms, and their own God-given sanctity, as much as through the strength of their armies (1993, 125).

As such, one’s success as a military leader – a chieftain or a datu, in Cebu’s case -- was directly measured according to his gahum. Magellan arrived in Cebu and involved himself in the affairs of two leaders who had been, long before his arrival, engaged in the constant struggle to increase their respective stock of gahum at the expense of the other. Humabon and Lapulapu, the two main Cebuano protagonists during the colonial encounter, derived and expressed their prowess according to both their physical and
spiritual fortitude. These were interactions characterized by acts of subversion and open conflict, but also of reciprocity and negotiation between Cebuano polities long before the sixteenth century.

Pigafetta’s text is remarkable for the extent to which it annotated native religious customs and beliefs. His descriptions were of the immediately apparent, describing the sounds of words he heard, the flora and fauna he beheld, and the myriad of native paraphernalia of which he was, almost like a child, impressed. Yet in their short though eventful sojourn in Cebu, Spaniards had few ways to fully appreciate the implications of a Cebuano world “full of souls.” Constrained by barriers of language and cautious apprehension, it seems unlikely that they were fully cognisant of the operations of an unseen world that exerted its influence so decisively and absolutely on Cebuano decisions and actions. How were Europeans to know the extent to which Cebuano notions of spirituality were intimately intertwined with their conceptions of the personal and social body? In the context of commerce and exchange, what were the practical and spiritual consequences of conceiving of a person as “walay buof”? What was there to suggest that behind Cebuano enthusiasm for conversion and baptism were local tenets of spiritual authority -- of the desire to increase their stock of gahum?

Nevertheless, perhaps because of the sheer ‘miraculous’ circumstances of their arrival in Cebu, Magellan found enough encouragement in native friendliness, particularly in their amenability to baptism. This was an acquiescence, however, that was driven by agendas that far exceeded the dumbfounded silences and awed responses that framed them. In this sense, like so many other instances in the engagement between Europeans and the New World, the early colonial encounter in Cebu was marked
by gaps in mutual understandings masked under the exigencies of the desire for trade and peaceful transaction. Yet such gaps, as the circumstances unfolded, would eventually prove fatal for both parties as the events of the battle at Mactan reached its catastrophic climax.
II

The Battle of Mactan and Legazpi's Arrival: A Contract Broken, A Relationship 'Healed'

IT WAS A FIRM BELIEF in the superiority of their military prowess -- one encouraged, no doubt, by the 'divine' circumstances of their landing -- that underlay the Spanish decision to lay siege on Mactan in spite of overwhelming odds. In this campaign against Lapulapu, Magellan had overtly refused an offer of reinforcements from Humabon, preferring instead to have them as passive spectators. In a way, the Capitan had committed himself to a fatal form of arithmetic in earlier suggesting that one armoured Spaniard was the equivalent of a hundred Bisayan warriors. Accordingly, he led a mere sixty or so of his men onto Mactan with the haughty presumption of victory: one that would not only affirm Spanish military might, but legitimise Cebuano subservience to it. Outnumbered, as they were, by around one thousand men and being unfamiliar with the terrain, the Spanish defeat was not surprising on a practical level. The battle is typically remembered as a Spanish defeat, having resulted in the demise of a charismatic leader and along with him any sense of Spanish invulnerability.

Yet the consequences of the defeat were no less significant for Cebuanos in light of their own motivations and expectations regarding the Spaniards. Earlier, Magellan himself had exerted much effort in demonstrating the military prowess of the Empire he represented. His time in Cebu was marked with blatant demonstrations of Spanish military skill and the arsenal that complemented it. Pigafetta narrates how Magellan "had a man armed as a soldier, and placed him in the midst of three men armed with swords..."
and daggers, who struck him on all parts of the body.” (Primo Vaggio, p 48). Similarly, acts of baptism were often punctuated with artillery fire, as though signifying the enormous military might which Humabon would now be able to marshal in his favour. Accordingly, Spanish enthusiasm to engage in battle at Mactan would have been construed by Cebuanos according to the spiritual dynamics of *buot* and *gahum*, as was likewise the case in other instances around Southeast Asia. As Reid suggests:

> The existing religious system would undoubtedly have led Southeast Asians to believe that the victors in any battle had supernatural forces on their side. In principle neither Muslim nor Iberian Christian proselytises disagreed. Both believed that God had commanded them to fight for the faith, and would give them the victory if they proved worthy. (1993, 153)

For Humabon, there was a strong bond between baptism and the promise of enhancing his *gahum* through the co-option of Spanish agency. Indeed, in being baptised, the Chieftain stood to gain not only from the acquisition of European technology, but from intimations of increasing his ‘manpower’ when Magellan promised to “bring so many men, that they would completely subjugate his enemies.” (Primo Vaggio, p. 61) His conception of being anointed as a European “vassal” had exceeded the meanings for which the Spanish had intended. It was understood as an opportunity for political and military empowerment, rather than a designation as a subsidiary minion to an Empire literally half a world away.

> It is upon this context that one can make better sense of the events following the defeat at Mactan. For what explains the seemingly ‘dramatic’ shift in Cebuano attitudes in slaughtering the survivors of Magellan’s ill-fated battle? What modes of thought underlay Cebuano conceptions of Europeans from trusted cohorts, to antagonists who

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were to be ambushed and put to death? It is from being sensitive to sixteenth century Cebuano conceptions of power, reciprocity and cosmology, that can be gleaned the more pragmatic concerns that foregrounded the momentous events after Mactan — events depicted in many documentary texts as instances of Cebuano treachery, if not blind, indiscriminate rage.

Could it be, rather, that the post-Mactan ambush was the enactment of Cebuano desire to recover their losses from a transaction gone awry? It was not long after the Spanish defeat that Cebuano attitudes to baptism became obvious: it was not their sacrosanct departure from paganism into Christianity, but a broken ‘contract’ by which the Spanish proved themselves to be people who were “walay buot”. In this sense, any further interaction with them became conceived of in the context of what was dangerous and threatening to the state of the Cebuano gingharian. Insofar as Cebuanos were unsuccessful in bartering for Magellan’s remains, the battle of Mactan was as much a Cebuano defeat that placed them in a deeper predicament of loss, humiliation and subordination to their enemies. Europeans had become conceived as purveyors of promises they could not deliver: an interpretation possible only if one takes into account how gahum was perceived as the end result of the contractual transaction of baptism, and the defeat at Mactan as significant of the Spanish lack of buot. The Spanish defeat had signalled not just one man’s demise, but the disintegration of the covenant upon which Cebuanos had been christened forty years before.

This process of contracting and recontracting buot and gahum characterised many other instances during the early colonial relationship. In Pigafetta’s text, “blame” for the demise of the Spanish-Cebuano alliance is deferred to the interpreter Enrique who,
presuming himself free from Spanish servitude, had been berated severely by Barbarossa. (Primo Vaggio p. 71) Yet even this ‘betrayal’ of Enrique was set against the context of negotiation and contract. He is depicted as having struck a new deal with Cebuanos and helped orchestrate the massacre of the remaining crew. Additionally, Barbarossa, after being taken captive by Cebuanos, is depicted by Pigafetta as having implored his crewmates to barter goods for his release, indicating that even his own existence depended solely on the subsequent ‘contracting’ of the colonial encounter. In the seeking of European armoury and artillery in exchange for Barbarossa, Cebuanos had sought to forge a new contract to compensate for the one that ‘failed’ at Mactan. But Magellan’s survivors, by virtue of the cumulative magnitude of their plight, were either unwilling or unable. In their hasty retreat from Cebu, Magellan’s survivors had provided the final instalment to the disintegration of Spanish-Cebuano transactions. Consequently, these events did much to make a considerable impact on subsequent Visayan conceptions of Europeans for the next few of decades until the second arrival of the Spanish empire in the person of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi in 1565.5

The forty-four years that separates the two moments of Philippine ‘discovery’ comes to life in the context of buot, gahum and the contract of baptism that was ‘broken’ at Mactan. The 1565 arrival of Christianity in Cebu was as an event understood in these terms, and was subsequently characterised by violence, hostility and misunderstanding.

5 Portuguese presence in the archipelago during this time was prominent, and they would often attack or interact with Bisyans making themselves known as “Castilians”. Portuguese raids in surrounding islands from 1543-1564, particularly in Bohol in 1562, were often ferocious and resulted in many native casualties. Such raids contributed greatly to the enmity (or at least cautiousness) Cebuanos felt against Europeans (Portuguese or Spanish). As Scott (1992) notes, “If the Portuguese presence in the archipelago was not news, the fact that they had a natural enemy in the Spanish was.” (p. 47) Further, the “wrongs inflicted upon the natives in certain Parts of the Philippines, under cover of friendship and under pretexts of a desire to trade” by Portuguese from Malacca, and the subsequent tarnishing of the Spanish reputation is recorded in Coleccion Documentos Ineditos Ultramar, tomo iii, pp. 284-305
In his relación, Legazpi himself, upon arriving in Cebu, attests to the hostility of locals claiming that “por toda esta tierra no tenían ningún buen credito el nombre de Castilla,” [no one in these lands holds any esteem for the Spanish name] (Cf. Valdepeñas 1996, 182). Legazpi’s landing (like Magellan’s) eventually became conducted through an attempt at negotiation with the ruler of Cebu, Rajah Tupas. But unlike Humabon forty years before, Tupas was unwilling to relent on the terms, choosing instead to resist any further acts of negotiation with these people who were “walay buot.” Tupas failed to fulfil his promise of meeting with Legazpi to discuss terms of engagement. As such, Legazpi characterises Cebuanos by their belligerence and deceitfulness, relating that Cebuanos “mostravan estar de Guerra e no querer paz ny amystad” (Cf. Valdepeñas 1996, 169). It is in the context of hostility and mutual distrust, in the ‘sickness’ of Cebuano-Spanish relations, that the Santo Niño’s finding became construed according to its capacity to “cure” the body politic.

*Gamhanan Nga Niño*: The Healing of the Colonial Encounter

The Spaniards had made their second landing in a Cebu that was deserted and burning. In a sense, the arrival of Legazpi’s crew was not an altogether unexpected event from a Cebuano point of view. The events of Magellan’s expedition had made a significant enough impact on local sensibilities such that these new arrivals were perceived within the context of their predecessor’s demise. As Scott (1982) reminds us, the hostility waged against Legazpi’s crew was borne partly out of a suspicion that they were on a mission of vengeance and retribution (pp. 48-49). In their resistance, more
than two thousand Cebuanos were killed by Spanish mortar fire and the settlement was set ablaze as the island’s inhabitants retreated inland.

Experiences of the fragility of human life often provided the logic by which Cebuanos assessed their past and prevailing relationships with Spaniards. When the body was at the threshold of death, a shaman was typically called upon to perform a healing that begins with an act of divination. This process involves reading the symptoms of the disease in order to determine the precise cause, (or more specifically the deed) that had brought it upon the patient. In the ‘spirit-filled’ world of Cebu, a shaman’s task was to identify those forces which have invaded the body, or “enticed the self away, resulting in a slippage, a flight or a momentary loss of soul” (Mojares 1997, 56). As such, it is upon the framework of infirmity, upon the misalignment of the cosmological balance, that the event of the Spanish arrival into the besieged settlement became construed. As Mojares notes, personal sickness became a framework upon which social vicissitudes became interpreted:

In the distinctly socio-centric drift of native thought, what ails persons quickly translates into afflictions of communities… When disease or misfortune blights a village, where there is a lack in the body politic… something, the shaman will say, is not quite right with the soul (2002, 299-300).

“Native thought”, in the sense used here, denotes not a restrictive mode of rationalization by which the Cebuano mind was bounded, but a capacity to see things metaphorically in order to domesticate the impact of critical situations. In this sense, the ‘broken contract’ that had characterized the colonial encounter was deemed according to the framework of infirmity, and called for an act of healing that would restore it to a healthy, ‘balanced’ condition.

BUOT, GAHUM AND THE SANTO NIÑO
The Cebuano word for healing, "bulong", denotes not only the therapeutic and medicinal, but a kind of realignment through which the patient and healer go through a process of 'finding'. Curing rituals consist of chants and prayers: acts that address not only the physical ailment itself but its spiritual and cosmological foundations as well. A healing is an act of "negotiating" with spirits to leave or return to the body, in the hope that this would subdue a threat, redefine one's buot, and restore a stable state of affairs. As such, for reconciliation between civilizations, just like the healing of the body, "bulong" denoted the act of finding, so that the soul that had become distracted would be restored to its original state (Mojares 1997, 56).

The arrival of Christianity in the Philippines is indeed characterised, as seen in the first chapter, by an event of the figure's 'finding' that strengthened the resolve of the demoralized Spanish crew. Spanish missionaries were urged by their superiors to acquaint themselves with native superstitions, particularly those pertaining to sickness, healing and death for this was the best way they would be better able to guard Christian rituals from the threat of animist 'contamination' (Rafael 1988, 187). The fact that clerics were vastly outnumbered did little to quell an enthusiasm bolstered by the realization that the Santo Niño’s second discovery in the islands gave divine legitimacy to their cause. The account of the Santo Niño’s finding provided the Spaniards with a metaphor for their mandate in the Philippines, as well as an indication of the overwhelming odds against which they were pitted.

The finding of the Santo Niño had specific and equally critical significations for Cebuanos -- a notion reflected upon the examination of Cebuano folklore. It is in the context of the allegorical narrations of sickness and healing, of the accounts of losing and
finding, that the Santo Niño’s figuring became meaningfully construed. For a most prevalent myth structure often invoked to characterize relationships between Cebuano and European contains an underlying allegory of healing through the intercession of the Santo Niño. Though there are many variations on the elements of this myth, it typically depicts a sick Cebuano man who is convulsing and on the brink of death. His plight was thought to be a sign of gaba, where a malignant spirit had taken possession of his body. Almost immediately after an encounter with the Santo Niño however (either by accident or by design), the boy is miraculously healed and lives the rest of his life in gratitude to the newly found “Spanish Diwata” (“Spanish Deity”). In this act of healing, the Santo Niño is depicted to have mended the hostile relationship between Cebuano and European. From this point on, the figure is taken by both sides as the facilitator of the harmonious existence between colonizer and colonizer who, after such incidents of finding/healing, became more inclined to seek interdependence rather than engage in open conflict.

Cebuanos today see such myths not as an historical account of the circumstances of the colonial encounter, but as the metaphorical framing of how the figure’s “finding” coincided with its capacity for “healing”. This allegory is seen as a charter that posited the transcendental powers of the Santo Niño, highlighting once again that the figure was not constrained by the stark cultural disparities between the Spanish and Cebuano. As the force that had unified the decentred spirit (both on a personal and collective sense), the Santo Niño is depicted as a source and wielder of gahum which served to address the crisis of the colonial encounter. Gahum, in this sense, became compacted in the symbol of the Santo Niño, and became manifested towards mutually benefiting ends. The message that the myths convey is that far from unraveling and exacerbating an already
tense and violent encounter, the intercession of the Santo Niño was the condition for the life of the cured Indio, and for the life of the colonial encounter writ large.⁶

   The harmonious fraternity engendered by the event of the Santo Niño’s healing and finding however, did not characterise the whole of the colonial relationship in Cebu. The Cebuano experience of Spanish colonialism is defined also by events of more contracts broken and subverted, and by instances of Cebuano subjugation to Spanish designs in the archipelago. The intervention of the Santo Niño is no less critical in the context of how colonialism had disrupted Cebuano notions of power and territorial organization. It is important to examine the ways in which the Santo Niño, as a source and wielder of gahum, is thought to have intervened in the efforts to control and totally redefine Cebuano ways of physical and spiritual existence. In other words, how did Cebuanos ‘figure’ the Spanish attempts at redefining the Cebuano body as part of a totalising ideology of colonialism? It is to this that we shall now turn.

⁶ For a varied account of this Santo Niño myth, see Dela Calzada, (1965) and appendix 1 to this study. I do not claim that healing is a dominant function of the Santo Niño. In other chapters of this thesis I discuss the other ‘functions’ of the Santo Niño, such as its role in anti-colonial revolt (pp. 181-187). The Santo Niño’s perceived capacity for ‘healing’ is here used as a metaphor for the desire to revitalize a national ‘spirit’ aborted by the brute and abrupt experience of colonialism.
THE SPANISH COLONIAL REGIME in the Philippines officially began in Cebu with the creation of a new contract. In 4 June 1565, hostilities between Cebuanos (led by Humabon's successor, Rajah Tupas) and Spanish colonialists were concluded with the drafting of a seven-point document that dictated the terms of their interaction. Legazpi's 1565 Relación (Document XVII) details these conditions. Most notably, it specified that Cebuanos and Spaniards would conduct trade on a reciprocal basis and that Cebuanos would sell to the Spaniards food supplies at reasonable rates of exchange (article 6). Cebuanos were obliged to produce and sell to the Spaniards those goods which they required for the running of the settlement. Further, they would aid each other against their enemies and divide equally all booty acquired from joint ventures (article 2). While the seven articles of the contract refer to the imposition of the Spanish judicial and economic terms of its authority, no mention is made of religious considerations. "It is clear," observes Valdepeñas (1996) "that in spite of Spanish pretensions that the conversion of all native groups encountered was of primary concern, the foundation of the Legazpi-Tupas negotiations was temporal in nature." (p. 169)

The contract was an agreement between two groups who needed to be in a position of mutual interdependence for the sake of their very survival. Despite their position of relative strength in the immediate term, Legazpi's crew would have to be reliant on Cebuano materials and labour over the long term. On the other hand, Cebuanos were no match for Spanish military strength and their resistance to their occupation could

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7 This is a condensed version of the 1565 treaty found in Sanz y Díaz (1971) The full version of the treaty can be found in Document XVII of Legazpi's 1565 Relacion (Cf. Valedpeñas 1996, 169)
hardly be sustained. More than an agreement that established the terms of engagement, the 4 June contract rehabilitated relations that had deteriorated after Magellan’s death, and was enacted upon the exigencies of pragmatism as much as necessity.

In the years that would follow however, the terms of the original contract would not be sustained. For their part, the Spaniards disrupted local trading patterns, monopolised foreign trade, exacted tributes from those outside the settlement and established conglomerates. Cebuanos, on the other hand, their labour power their last commodity, raised a “blockade” against the Spanish by refusing to plant crops and other such forms of passive resistance. As a result, Cebu eventually declined as a regional trade centre and stagnated into the backwaters of the Spanish colony (Fenner 1985).

Contracts broken and contracts made characterized the colonial relationship from both sides of the equation from 1565 onwards. It was in the context of inequality, domination and subversion that the Santo Niño (in the name of whom the settlement was now designated) would again “figure” in the colonial encounter. Specifically, the Santo Niño became viewed as intervening in a regime that was concerned with civic reform and with the complete transformation of Cebuano conceptions of power and morality. It was a colonial form of administration, in other words, that attempted the re-inscription of the relevance of gahum and buot: concepts which, as we have seen, profoundly underpinned Cebuano actions and behaviour.

How did the Spanish engage in the reorganisation Cebuano patterns of settlement? What was the effect of this geographic reinscription of Cebuano notions of agency (i.e. their buot), and the source of spiritual power and authority (i.e. their gahum)?
How was the image of the Santo Niño eventually co-opted in Cebuano technologies of negotiation to ‘heal’ the colonial relationship?

Reducción: Revoking Gahum, Reformating Buot.

Where the Cebuano gingharian had been based upon notions of gahum and buot (as depicted in Cañizares' quote at the beginning of this chapter), Spanish rule sought to bring about a significant reformation of the physical structure of Cebuano territory. Rafael (1988) provides an account of how, through a program of reducción (“reduction”), people of various discreet settlements were rounded up into larger cabeceras (“population centers”). The centripetal force of the cabecera consisted of the staging of festivals in the name of a patron saint in order to ‘entice’ Cebuanos into settling within it. Having the Church and government house at its center, the new territorial order sought to impose a mode of living where all gifts, favours and punishments (and hence, all authority) originated from a single clearly identifiable source. The cabecera had at its apex God and the Spanish King to whom all those living within its boundaries were devoted. This entailed a profound transformation of Cebuano sensibilities whereupon their immediate and past loyalties to animist spirits were discouraged and actively dispelled. Natives were, as Mojares observes:

...taught to be turned steadfastly towards God, to avoid the present, to regard the things of the world as ‘dream’, ‘smoke’ or ‘wind’ as, in the political sphere, they were to be bound to the Spanish realm in acts of civic disobedience, casing away the brute instincts of their former state (Mojares 2000, 10).
The transformation of physical geography was extended towards arresting the Cebuano’s “brute instincts” to comply with a Judeo-Christian sense of piety. It was an explicit attempt at reformatting internalized norms of Cebuano behaviour, in order to ‘re-discipline’ their bodies according to the doctrine of the Catholic Church. The cabecera was the framework by which “urbanism” had become closely identified with “humanity”, “civilization” and “progress”. Correspondingly, those ‘unreduced’ bodies living outside the scope of the newly defined political centers were labeled and treated accordingly: as “savages”, “pagan”, “bandits” who were “wild” and not quite human.

Not unlike other missionary efforts in Southeast Asia, Catholic missions in Cebu identified aspects of local animism and used them as entry points in converting natives who had settled into the cabecera. This meant that Christianity was not immediately reproduced in its ‘pure’ form but had to be accommodated to local beliefs. As a matter of conscious missionary policy, Spaniards attempted to associate Cebuano beliefs in spirits and souls — kalag and umalagad — with European notions of genios, lares and penates, so that Cebuanos could be domesticated according to European historical and theological categories. As discussed in the first chapter of this study, this employment was necessary in order to dialectically oppose Cebuano animism to Christian notions of salvation and paradise. While kalag and umalagad had traditionally been freely invoked in association with parts of one’s body or with discrete elements of the natural environment, Cebuanos in the cabecera were taught that the sacraments were the sole mechanisms by which humans could have access to the spiritual and otherworldly. As such, newly imposed Christian signs derived their potency in and through their articulation in church-officiated rites of baptism, confession and other forms of religious
piety. In this way, the reduccion was not merely a reduction and domestication of physical geography, but a profound reinscription of Cebuano notions of behaviour and piety -- a forced redefinition of one's buot and the central tenets of the body politic.

Furthermore, while the old territorial settlement featured various avenues towards the personal acquisition of "soul stuff"/gahum, in contrast the new geographic-religious order meant that Cebuano interaction with all things 'spiritual' was totally mediated by friar agency. As Rafael observes, "...the sacred and secret nature of the sacraments meant that their efficacy hinged on their proper administration by the priest." In practice, as the former president of the Philippine National Historical Society observed, this meant that Cebuanos within the cabecera were indoctrinated in a particularly simplistic form of Christian theology:

The friars did not explain the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Nor did the friars explain the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, because even today, they are quite sophisticated concepts which can only be discussed in a meaningful manner in theology classes... The friars did not want to confuse the Filipino. Had they explained that there were three persons in one God, the Filipino mind could not have perhaps grasped it when you say three equals one. And so therefore, the preachings of the friars were rather simplistic: "Love-your-fellowmen" sort of thing. But this thing was reinforced by processions, masses and novenas which were very good because the Filipino then was quite fond of very picturesque rituals. (Foronda 1980, 6)

Reduccion as missionary policy, then, had usurped the centripetal force of the Cebuano body politic such that a chieftain's gahum was no longer its main operating principle. Instead, Christian rites and "picturesque rituals" brought and kept people in the cabecera, whereupon they were taught to "love your fellowmen" and turn away from the 'self-serving' and 'individualistic' concerns of increasing one's own 'soul stuff'.
Contrasting sharply with a landscape crowded with multiple sources of gahum (manifested, as it was, in ubiquitous spirits or otherwise invested in objects and amulets), the cabecera corresponded with an ideology where power emanated from a single, distinct source -- downward from God, to the Spanish King, to the Parish priest in the colony and finally to the lowest ‘unit’ of the Empire. Direct access to this power, furthermore, was restricted exclusively to a certain group, the Spanish clergy, and those designated to administer the sacraments. It was a mode of settlement that effectively sequestered traditional claims to gahum, deferring it instead to friars and colonial administrators who ensured that spiritual grace came only upon the fulfillment of stringent sacramental and catechetical conditions. As Ileto (1998) observes: “The Spanish priest was the equivalent of the god-king elsewhere in Southeast Asia. He maintained his position of dominance in a manner that was supposed to transcend the competition for power among the major families of the town.” (p. 81-82)

Former chieftains themselves, to be sure, had become designated by colonial administrators as gobernadorcillos, exacting taxes on behalf of the colonial government. Yet this was an articulation of power that was significantly different to their traditional role of engaging upon acts that increased the spiritual stock of his entourage. Moreover, indios were not allowed to take up the priesthood, nor were they commissioned to hold office beyond minor administrative levels. By 1700, a mere four hundred or so clerics were ministering around six hundred thousand natives. The development of a native clergy might have addressed this imbalance, but legislation premised upon a perceived indio inferiority (as well as a lack of institutions to train natives for the priesthood) worked against this. And while a considerable number of natives were eventually
ordained as priests by the eighteenth century, they were accorded only very limited parish responsibilities, meaning that there were no real Cebuano agents of spiritual power to whom locals could go aside from the Spanish priest. Ileto again observes:

The priest who occupied the center was in a privileged position vis-à-vis the source of all power and authority. Not only that, Catholic priests were believed to have access to supernatural powers; only they could read the Latin inscriptions which could activate the powers of amulets. (Ileto 1998, 80)

The colonial sequestering of immediate access to spiritual power – a revocation of gahum and a redefinition buot -- manifested the total transformation of the Cebuano gingharian (and of the bodies that resided in it). A body politic filled with people petitioning and manipulating kalag had become transformed into a settlement populated by a different type of “soul” – the kind that were treated as units to be converted and administered. In this arrangement, natives were made subservient to the almost absolute power of the Spanish priest who, in being the only one who could decipher Latin inscriptions (in a way, a capacity for divination), was able to appropriate the power of sacred objects (anting anting) to great effect. The power of healing and divination; roles which had been the traditional preserve of shamans and spirit mediums, consequently fell under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Catholic clergy under whom Cebuanos became administered and subjugated.

This is not to suggest, however, that Cebuanos were totally acquiescent to the newly inscribed notions of power, or that they did not deploy strategies of recalcitrance to the colonial attempts at re-inscribing buot. Traditional Cebuano understandings of the supernatural had little in common with the abstract Christian categories in which the missionary sought to situate them. As Rafael notes, there was a gap between native
responses to and understandings of Christianity which had to do with the way the indios “were constrained to negotiate with and around the totalitarian economy of divine mercy.” (1988: 109)

How did these negotiations take place within the context of reduccion? Not unlike other parts of the archipelago, towns and barrios in rural Cebu were characterized by its inhabitants’ movement in and out of the cabecera’s physical and spiritual boundaries. This movement was often dictated by the exigencies of challenging the Church’s hegemony through less than overt (indeed often clandestine) acts of passive resistance. The notion of “town center” as a fixed and clearly bounded unit of domination is problematised by the secret practice of native agency, particularly in places where Spanish civic jurisdiction did not extend. As Ileto (1998) reminds us:

In describing the town, it is not enough to talk about the loob or “inside” part of it – meaning the bayan, the población – where the Spanish priest and the indio mayor exerted influence. The loob, or center, of the town can only be understood in relation to its labas, its ‘outside’. Avoidance of the center or withdrawal to the periphery was a typical response of indios not wishing to submit to the center’s power or control. (p. 83)

In speaking of the “labas” (in Cebuano, “gawas”), Ileto is referring to a “third realm” in the dynamic of Reduccion. This is a sphere from where natives could find an alternative access to supernatural power in addition to that provided by the Spanish priest. It is in these places where, particularly from the 1870s, the Spanish authorities attempted to stamp out those “associaciones ilícitas” [“illicit associations”] which, in their practicing of banned acts of animism, became labeled fanaticos or banditos.

The Santo Niño figure was itself a iconographic manifestation of the “third realm” through which Cebuanos circumscribed Friar spiritual authority. In colonial Cebu, there
there were slippages in the dynamic of reduccion through which Cebuano notions of
gahum and buot continued to be manifested. Christian icons themselves, as we shall see,
were the loci upon which natives negotiated the colonial management of native territory,
and the re-inscription of the native personal and social body.

The Santo Niño as an Alternative Source of Gahum

For centuries [Filipinos] related to a Catholic church-center which brought
meaning and order to their lives, yet they simultaneously refused to be totally
controlled by it. They moved in and out of this center as the situation warranted
it. And this center had an anticenter, the third realm, that subverted while
mimicking it. (Ileto 1998, 97)

In describing rural life in Tagalog provinces, Ileto describes a situation in which natives
were able to counteract the centripetal force of the town center through an anticenter. In
this process, native technologies of resistance and recalcitrance bore resemblances to
those Christian rituals and objects that were meant to compel their civic and spiritual
docility. The anticenter was the context in which the Santo Niño figure manifested
itself as an alternative agent of gahum from whom Cebuanos could find recourse from the
restrictive confines of the cabecera.

From the first moments of the colonial encounter, Magellan had insisted that
Cebuanos burn their four-tusked wooden images, called larawan, which was to be
replaced by Christian icons (most notably the Santo Niño). The process of reduccion, as
such, included the forcible destruction of native idols, in order to discredit the
foundations upon which the old animist system rested. Yet this was not always a
straightforward process. As Spanish sources implicitly acknowledge (most especially in
the relevant accounts of Placensia, Chirino and the Boxer Codex, see Jocano 1975), the basis of Cebuano religious practice was not invested solely in a specific physical location (such as a temple or pagoda), but was indwelling everywhere and in many objects. Hence, in spite of being constantly given Christian icons of worship, Cebuano loyalties and cosmological concepts could not be invalidated at a stroke. This was particularly the case in instances of healing and infirmity whereupon the gap between conversion and the tenacity of Cebuano cosmology was brought into great relief, even shortly after Cebuanos had pledged in baptism to discard them. Pigafetta narrates, shortly after the baptism of Cebuanos:

One day the Captain general asked the king and the other people why they had not burned their idols as they had promised when they became Christians and why they sacrificed so much flesh to them. They replied that what they were doing was not for themselves, but for a sick man who had not spoken now for four days, so that the idols might give him health... The captain told them to burn their idols and to believe in Christ, and that if the sick man were baptized, he would quickly recover, and if that did not so happen they could behead him [i.e. the captain] then and there. (Primo Vaggio, 64)

Reiterating the critical theme of sickness and infirmity, this episode attests to the tenacity of idols and the veneration accorded them in Cebu. Visayans, like other Southeast Asians, continued throughout the colonial regime to keep small idols in their homes called tao-tao (tau-tau in sulawesi, meaning little human being) or bata-bata (“child”). Hernando de la Torre reported that Visayans continued to worship idols of wood “and they paint them as well as they can, as we do Santos.” (Cf. Navarette 1528, 5: 241-313) The continued proximity of these objects meant that they were the first recourse in the case of sickness or trouble in spite of Christian rites. Aduarte’s account observes how Christian rites such as baptism were regarded by Filipinos “as something medicinal, and

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they wished to be baptized whenever they were sick, in order to be cured; but the fathers 
undeceived them. They made the same mistake about the sign of the cross, and in regard 
to the cross itself.” (Aduarte 1640, 186-187, cf. Phelan 1959, 55) The persistence of 
‘idols’, and the acts of continued propitiation of them was so intertwined with the ideas of 
sickness and healing that native worshipping of them proved frustratingly hard to 
eradicate. A sixteenth century account by Oliver among Pampangueños laments thus:

Christians, you who have been baptized, why do you despise God? Why do you 
consult the anito when you get sick? Or when you are suffering?... Can the anito 
relieve you? Can the lifeless give life? Why do you make an offering when you 
work in the fields? (Oliver 1586, 32-35)

It was in this context that the Santo Niño had become construed in sixteenth 
century Cebuano society. In spite (or perhaps because) of the forcible destruction of 
native icons and idols, the Santo Niño became co-opted into fulfilling a function 
traditionally performed by local deities and idols. If the physical destruction of Cebuano 
icons was enacted within the confines of the cabecera, the conceptual principle of 
worshipping anitos could not as easily be eradicated. Evidently, Cebuano conceptions of 
spiritual power, gahum, continued to operate and infused the Cebuano acceptance of the 
Santo Niño as an icon to be propitiated and petitioned. As Alburow corroborates, “gahum 
is both physical and non-physical, and as physical it is dependent on a certain 
supernatural object.” (2001, 5) As such, the Santo Niño became incorporated into the 
local dynamics of spiritual power – as an alternative source and wielder of gahum.

Often, Cebuano esteem for the Santo Niño went beyond the realm of sickness and 
healing. On a more practical level, the figure itself is portrayed as having become 
construed as an object of petition and propitiation. Southeast Asian religion was
concerned with the commissioning of spirits for immediate and practical human ends. In the Bisaya context, "panganito" was a term that denoted acts of worship and propitiation through séances in which humans could communicate and invoke them. Jocano describes how the Santo Niño was regarded as though it were a kalag which must be manipulated for desired ends:

When there is a desperate need for water, and the fields were dry, the people asked for rain and were instantly given it, so that accounts went. Some other times when the rain was not prompt in arriving, the natives brought the [Santo Niño] in a procession to the sea and dipped it, often telling the image that if it did not give them rain immediately, they would leave it there. (1981: 26)

In being the subject of panganito, the Santo Niño had been conceived such that it found a way around Spanish orthodoxy in its co-option in animist Cebuano orthopraxy. Despite the fact that the Spanish had restricted Cebuano access to spiritual power, Cebuanos did not feel totally alienated from their traditional matrices of supernatural gahum. Ironically, just as the Santo Niño is seen to have eased hostilities between colonizer and colonised, so too did it form the basis for Cebuanos spiritual recalcitrance. For conceiving of the Santo Niño as a form and source of panganito was a way in which Cebuanos could regain a direct, personal access to gahum even under the restrictive context of the cabecera.

The persistence of indigenous forms of religious devotion was, to some extent, a result of deficiencies in missionary agency, outnumbered as they were by the ‘souls’ they sought to administer (Schumacher 1968, 536). And yet it is readily claimed that by the end of the sixteenth century, most of the Philippines had been generally ‘converted’, framing the overall success of the missionary effort in the islands. The seeming ease and
rapidity of ‘conversion’, however, may have meant that Cebuanos had their own way of appropriating Christian symbols such as the Santo Niño. For there were slippages in translation and interpretation in the colonial encounter through which Cebuano notions of buot and gahum continued to maintain a degree of currency. Through such slippages, the orthopraxy of Visayan religion -- of petitioning spirits for the health of the personal and the societal body --- subsisted even within the jurisdiction (what Ileto (1998) called the “first realm”) of the cabecera. As such, Christian symbols such as the Santo Niño became co-opted into the dynamic of ‘pre-modern’ religion, abetting the process in which colonialism was ‘contracted’ and negotiated.

THE CONTRACTING OF THE COLONIAL RELATIONSHIP is framed, amidst the context of antagonism and hostility, by a mutual desire to find common ground. Both Spanish and Visayans had, as Inga Clendinnen observed for colonial encounters in Latin America, “a common desire to make a meaningful story out of the disorienting, almost incomprehensibly violent events in which they were plunged” (Cf. Greenblatt 1993, viii). In Cebu, a situation of conflict gradually became one of interdependence as both parties came to realize their mutual need for some form of cooperation if they were to survive. This cooperation came in the contracting of their relationship, the terms of which meant different things for each side. It is in this space between apprehension and necessity, in the need to find a literal and symbolic common ground in the charred ruins of the settlement, that the Santo Niño had become construed. Its timely ‘finding’ had provided,
for both sides, a tangible object upon which the "meaningful story" of the colonial encounter could be fostered and propagated.

The Santo Niño’s ‘healing’ of the colonial relationship corresponded well with a Cebuano world that viewed the sickness of the body politic in terms of what ailed the personal body. Though the Spaniards, through missionary and administrative policy, had attempted to re-inscribe the basic tenets of Cebuano sociality, buot and gahum, the Santo Niño had offered an alternative through which Spanish authority could be circumvented. The Santo Niño as both an object and a source of gahum – a manifestation of the ‘third realm’ that resisted the totalizing jurisdiction of the town center -- ensured that slippages in translation and interpretation characterized the ‘figuring’ of Christianity, even towards the end of the Spanish colonial regime in the late nineteenth century (as we shall see in the chapters to follow).

Subsequent generations of Filipinos look back onto their pre-colonial past and, as Cañizares does in his play, remember with nostalgia how Cebu was once a realm ‘full of soul’ on a personal and collective level. Looking into that world from the point of view of Cebuano animism and folklore, however, also teaches us that the soul is in a constant state of ‘restlessness’, perpetually, as Mojares observes, “focusing and expanding, centering and decentering, in a constant dialectic of past and present, actuality and possibility, between what is in us and what lies outside and beyond” (2002, 306). Colonialism had a profound impact not only on the Cebuano landscape but on the religious sensibilities of the people, such that more than four hundred years after Legazpi’s ‘finding’, there would again be reason to seek redress from a situation “haunted” by an unbalanced ‘national’ soul. It is to the Santo Niño’s role in these
contemporary acts of ‘figuring’; to the icon’s capacity to heal the souls that are constantly ‘disturbed’, that the following chapters of this study shall devote its attention.