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On the Personhood of Sacred Objects: Agency, Materiality and Popular Devotion in the Roman Catholic Philippines

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Abstract: This paper is an analysis of the Santo Niño de Cebu, a statue of the child Jesus that is the object of widespread popular devotion among Roman Catholics in the Philippines. The central hypothesis is that a continuing challenge of Roman Catholicism in the Philippines, at least from the perspective of the institutional Church, lies not in the extra liturgical performance of its rituals, but rather in the popular belief that sacred objects possess agency and personhood. The discussion of this theme unfolds over three analytical movements. The focus of the initial section is on the historical context in which the Santo Niño became established as the preeminent religious and cultural icon of the Philippines, going as far back as the sixteenth century. The discussion shifts to the topic of the agency of material objects, as cultivated in the performance of three embodied rituals conducted by thousands of Santo Niño devotees. A third analytical movement is the examination of how popular belief in the Santo Niño's agency intersects with the institutional reforms of the Second Vatican Council, particularly as locally contextualized and enacted in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) in 1991.

Keywords: Santo Niño; materiality; agency; popular piety; Second Plenary Council; Philippines



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1. Introduction

The oldest Christian artifact in the Philippines is a small statuette of the Child Jesus prominently displayed in a Basilica that had been consecrated by Pope Paul VI as the “mother church of Catholic churches in the Philippines” (Paul 1965). Half a millennium since that very same statue was reportedly brought to the archipelago by a pioneering Spanish fleet in 1521, the Santo Niño de Cebu (henceforth, Santo Niño) is still widely venerated by scores of Filipino Catholics, who flock in the thousands every day to visit it and gather in the millions every year for the commemoration of its feast. Replicas of the image, large and small, are displayed in practically every corner of the Christian Philippines. Many people choose to display them in private homes and vehicles, while others place them in makeshift altars within business establishments, in shopping malls, and in government buildings. Indeed, the image has become such a definitive feature of the Philippine landscape that it is not uncommon to encounter grandiose claims about its ubiquity and centrality to Filipino Catholicism itself. “If you are not devoted to the Santo Niño, you are not a true Filipino”, says Father Vicente Lina, Jr., director of the Diocesan Museum of Malolos, “Every Filipino has a Santo Niño, even those living under the bridge” (Christy 2010).

In this paper I discuss the Santo Niño as the focal point and catalyst of Roman Catholic popular piety in the Philippines. Scholars in the social sciences and humanities have studied Filipino popular piety as manifested both within and outside of formal liturgical domains (de la Cruz 2015; Bräunlein 2012; Miyawaki 2018). It had once been thought acceptable to characterize popular piety as one facet of a ‘split level’ Catholicism, one akin to an unconscious personality conflict between two incompatible modes of religiosity (Bulatao [1966] 1992). In more recent times, there has been analytical momentum away from this concept, effectively problematizing the classical dichotomy between the sacred

and the profane, the official and the vernacular, or the institutional versus the ‘folk’. Drawing from debates in anthropology and sociology, scholars of contemporary religion in the Philippines have observed and analyzed *agency* as a defining feature of ‘lived’ or ‘vernacular’ Roman Catholicism in the country (Wiegele 2005; Sapitula 2013; Tremlett 2014).

It is from this latter discourse, correlated with the discussion conducted by sociologists Emirbayer and Mische (1998), that I take as a central analytical pillar of this essay a concept of agency that can be defined as follows: agency is the capacity of sentient individuals to take independent and autonomous action in a way that draws from the constitutive elements of iteration (that is, learning from previous behaviour), projectivity (that is, imagining a certain outcome based on one’s volition and intentionality), and practical and pragmatic evaluation of prevailing circumstances. While it may be intuitive to assume that humans possess agency, can this idea be applied to non-humans, or even sacred objects?

The discussion on popular piety and agency has been enriched by a more concerted effort at examining the relationship between humans/bodies and sacred things/objects, in line with a ‘material turn’ that gained momentum among scholars in the 1980s and 1990s (Bräunlein 2016; Hazard 2013; Houtman and Meyer 2012). A central feature of this analytical framework has been to challenge the prevailing assumption that the material ‘stuff’ of religion—such as icons, objects, places, and things—are peripheral or secondary to belief as the fundamental elements of religious expression. A focus on the Santo Niño’s agency fits squarely within the central analytical concerns of a materialized study of religion, one that asks: “how religion happens materially, which . . . begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it” (Meyer et al. 2010, p. 209).

Similarly, our understanding of agency in the context of popular devotion is enhanced by a parallel discussion among anthropologists who are interested in the “new animism”. In recent decades, anthropologists have critiqued what is perceived to be an antiquated and somewhat simplistic notion of animism as “an idea of pervading life and will in nature” (Tylor 1871, p. 260). Religious studies scholar Graham Harvey has been at the forefront of the effort to renew the concept by focusing less on spiritual animation in favor of an emphasis on a relational personhood that extends beyond human beings. Harvey defines ‘animists’ as “people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others” (Harvey 2006, p. xi). In this schema, humans conduct intersubjective practices—including rituals, performances both individual and communal—with objects and non-human entities which are thought to have at least the potential for possessing agency, personhood, sovereignty, and volition.

Seen within the frame of material religion and new animism, the discussion about Roman Catholic popular piety, lived religion and agency takes an intriguing turn: does a sacred object, particularly those that depict God, act autonomously to benefit others? Or are sacred objects merely representations, symbols or conduits through which divine agents, that is, God, channel their agency? Does the belief in the agency of widely revered sacred objects contravene the Church’s proscriptions against idolatry and superstition?

In the first part, I examine the discursive context in which the Santo Niño became established as the preeminent religious and cultural icon of the Philippines. The Spanish archival record attests to the Santo Niño’s centrality in the propagation of European missionary activity in the archipelago. Emerging against the grain of this evangelizing process, however, is a counter discourse which points to the crucial role that the figure plays in underscoring the continued relevance of animism in Filipino Christianity, even in ways that usurped the intentions of its European purveyors. These two interpretations of the Santo Niño’s historicity encourage us to think about the process by which the Santo Niño may be considered a mere object that symbolizes broader intentions of those that possess it, or whether it is a ‘person’ who possess a will of its own.

I address this theme in the second section where I consider how the agency of sacred objects is central to the lived reality of Filipino Roman Catholic popular piety. The Santo Niño has inspired a host of embodied ritual practices in both the public and private sphere,

including religious festivals, processions, interaction with personal replicas, and everyday acts of piety. My main concern here is to discuss the ‘personhood’ of the Santo Niño, as it is framed in three intersubjective practices—visitation, replication, and kinesthetic movement—through which Santo Niño devotees cultivate their intimate relationship to the figure as though he were an agentive person. My analysis in this section resonates with anthropologist Amy Whitehead’s (2013) ethnography of the pagan Glastonbury Goddess in Southwestern England and the Cult of the Virgin in Andalucía in Spain. As Whitehead observes, “Objects can be ‘persons’ (to use the new animism vernacular) depending on how they are related to. This means that agency (for want of a better word) or the ‘liveliness’ of objects is co-inspired, co-created, and co-relational. Devotees and objects bring each other into unique forms of ontological being” (see Morgan et al. 2015).

A third analytical movement in the essay is to examine how popular belief in the Santo Niño’s agency intersects with the institutional reforms of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), particularly as locally contextualized and enacted in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) in 1991. As much as the Santo Niño is valued as a preeminent cultural and religious icon by the institutional Church, its ontological status as a being with agency remains contested because of the perceived dangers of idolatry and of practices that lead to superstition. I would argue that what renders popular piety problematic is not the extra liturgical nature of its expression, but rather the prevalent belief that sacred objects have the capacity for autonomous agency, which in turn forms the basis for an intersubjective personhood.

2. The Figure of Providence and Its ‘Miraculous’ Agency

A survey of about ten thousand respondents conducted by Verbité scholar Benigno Beltran found that the three images that most resonate with Filipino Catholics are the suffering Christ, the Santo Niño and the Sacred Heart (Beltran 1987, p. 38). Among these images, only the Santo Niño has the unique distinction of being the image most directly implicated in the foundational narrative of the Philippines, one that triangulates the figure with the birth of the nation and the establishment of Christianity in the region. It could be said that the colonial and missionary rationale of Spain was premised, at least in the crucial initial stage, upon a belief in the divine power channeled in and through this one sacred object.

Official statements and pronouncements from the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) commonly emphasize the accounts of Spanish chroniclers which identify the Santo Niño as an integral part of two pivotal events in the evangelization and eventual conquest of the archipelago. I discuss the significance of these two events in my ethnographic analysis of the Philippines as an “archipelago twice discovered” (Bautista 2005).

The first event of discovery draws upon the account of chronicler Antonio Pigafetta, who was a member of the Ferdinand Magellan expedition that arrived in Cebu in 1521. Pigafetta describes the reception of the crew and the subsequent baptism of the queen of Cebu, during which she had reportedly chosen an image of the Santo Niño over other objects of worship already in her possession. This moment of apparently spontaneous conversion is identified as “miraculous” or “destined” by the vast majority of Santo Niño devotees I interviewed in my own research (see Bautista 2005, p. 192; Bautista 2010, pp. 57–58). While anthropologists such as Astrid Sala-Boza have characterized the event as “Christian mysticism, manifested as the grace of conversion (a form of revelation of the living God)” (Sala-Boza 2008b, p. 282), my own hypothesis is that the Santo Niño was efficacious because it served as a material signifier of the convergence between the Spanish commercial and ethical/evangelical mandates, as codified in the Papal Bulls of Tordesillas of 1494 and the Spanish New Laws against the exploitation and mistreatment of indigenous peoples of 1542 (Bautista 2010, p. 56). Looking into the archival record, however, I would agree with Sala-Boza (2008a) in at least one respect: had it not been for the acceptance of the Santo Niño, an event that had apparently moved Magellan so profoundly, Magellan would probably not have decided to delay his departure for the Spice Islands, which was

the main objective of the expedition to begin with. This decision was to prove fateful in light of the dramatic turn of events in the immediate aftermath of the baptism. As I have argued previously (Bautista 2005, p. 193), the baptism was also tantamount to a political alliance which had embroiled Magellan in a local tribal conflict—one that would eventually cost him his life, and force the remaining crew to hastily flee from Cebu.

The second pivotal event is the arrival in Cebu of a subsequent Spanish expedition led by Miguel Lopez de Legazpi in 1565. In my own ethnohistory of the Santo Niño (Bautista 2010), I analyze the official Spanish accounts that describe how, in contrast to Magellan's landing, the second arrival was greeted by a hostile reception by the local population. It was in this context of violence and conflict that members of Legazpi's crew had reportedly 're-discovered' the same image left behind by Magellan well-kept in one of the local residences that they had ransacked. The figure's uncovering was, as the official chronicler of the Legazpi expedition described it, an "auspicious augury" that strengthened the Spanish resolve to persist in their efforts at pacification, evangelization, and conquest in spite of native resistance. The Filipino national artists for literature, Nick Joaquin and Resil Mojares, echo a view held by the contemporary Philippine Church that the recovery of the image was a divine omen that would eventually implant the seeds of Christianity in the archipelago (Mojares 2017; Joaquin 1982). The official Spanish reports (see Bautista 2010, pp. 68–72) do indeed indicate that it was the perceived miracle of the 'rediscovery' that enabled subsequent papal support and patronage of missionization in Cebu, effectively facilitating the continuance of the colonial administration that would remain in the country for the next three centuries.

These two events of Spanish arrival are significant because they underscore a providentialist interpretation of Philippine Christian history, which suggests that the archipelago was predestined for Christianization and that the pacification of any native resistance to Spanish proselytism was divinely justified. This providentialism is premised upon the Santo Niño's involvement as a catalyst for a series of meaningful firsts: the first baptism, the first religious procession, the establishment of the first Church in the Philippines and the celebration of the first Christian feast.

It is just as significant to consider, however, that this providentialism derives much of its legitimacy from the animist heritage of Christian converts, the enduring nature of which can be gleaned by considering the 44-year gap between the two events of Spanish arrival. In these years of interregnum, the inhabitants of Cebu had evidently reverted back to animist beliefs and practices in spite of their earlier baptism. Although there is little archival evidence to account for precisely what transpired during those years of interregnum, the most esteemed Filipino public intellectuals uphold the official narrative endorsed by the Santo Niño's custodians today. In that narrative, the Santo Niño is thought to have harmoniously integrated into the very process of animist revival during those unaccounted years between expeditions. According to the official account of the Santo Niño foundation, following the death of Magellan, the figure had "became part of Cebuano life. And this is probably why, when asked about the Image . . . the natives refused to relate it to the gift of Magellan . . . ". The Philippine National Artist¹ for literature Nick Joaquin (1988, p. 69) expresses this sentiment most famously:

The [Santo Niño] didn't simply come and abruptly cut us off from our past. It shared our past with us and served as the link between the past and our present, by becoming, from 1521 to 1565, the last and greatest of our pagan gods.

My argument, therefore, is that a providentialist interpretation of Philippine Christian history is premised upon both the Spanish accounts of miraculous divine intervention, and the Filipino declarations of native animist appropriation. The scholar Christina H. Lee (2017) provides some corroboration of this notion in her analysis of the archival sources that attest to the Santo Niño's centrality in the early years of Spanish colonialism. Lee's research points to a counter narrative that testifies to the dynamism in which the Santo Niño has been taken into the popular sensibilities of Filipino Catholics, citing the historical works of Pedro Chirino from the 1600s, as well as noted chroniclers such as Antonio de Morga,

who assert that the Santo Niño had been adopted into indigenous rituals, recognizing it as a miraculous icon (Lee 2017, p. 92). Other sources, such as the accounts of Medina and Gapar de San Agustin (1565–1615), would go as far as to depict Cebuano natives as insistent that the icon had already been a local deity from times immemorial (Lee 2017, p. 95). Mojares notes that “Stories of the Santo Niño’s pre-Christian origins conform to folk logic. They express the popular impulse to assimilate culture heroes into a longer history that binds them more intimately to the people’s collective life and thus claim them as our own” (Mojares 2017, p. 78).

The belief in divine providence, held in conjunction with the assumption of native localization, can be credibly identified as the basis for the widespread belief in the Santo Niño’s miraculous agency today (see de la Calzada 1965). In my own ethnohistory of the Santo Niño (Bautista 2010), I categorized the multitude of miracles attributed to the figure in terms of two main types of agency. Firstly, there are miracles that refer primarily to the Santo Niño’s capacity for movement, which generally involves its disappearance or deliberate removal from its perch, its re-appearance in mundane spaces such as in a market or town center, and its subsequent, sudden return to its niche. Secondly, there are Santo Niño stories that attest to its status of “culture hero”, a designation reaffirmed by the accounts and analyses of Philippine National Artists Joaquin and Mojares (see also Bautista 2004, pp. 195–214). In this second category of miraculous agency, the Santo Niño would enact a direct positive intervention in solving a predicament of a devotee, such as in influencing the environment (that is, during times of natural disaster, famine, or crop failure), effecting unlikely recovery from illness, or bringing about financial or material upliftment. Indeed, miracles that fall under this category depict the Santo Niño as directly facilitating the subversion of the colonial edifice itself.

That the Santo Niño is invoked by its devotees at crucial moments of crisis and upheaval has been a common theme in the discourse that propagates the belief in the agency of sacred objects. Historians such as Reynaldo Ileto (1979) and Vicente Rafael (1988) have analyzed both the surreptitious and overt ways in which Filipinos resisted Spanish colonialism, often through the native reappropriation of the semantic, discursive, and material elements of religious instruction. In my own analysis (Bautista 2006) of the “rebellion and the icon”, I discuss the indigenous reclaiming of the Santo Niño’s origins in the anti-Spanish revolution at the end of the 1800s, and in the more recent revolution against the dictatorial regime of Ferdinand Marcos in the 1980s—both events in which revolutionary agents had dedicated their victory to the inspiration and “miraculous” intervention of the Santo Niño (Bautista 2006; see also Mojares 2017, p. 98).

From the beginning of the 20th century onwards, as Mojares notes, “No religious image in Cebu was as powerful [as the Santo Niño]”. (Mojares 2017, p. 70). The growth of the Santo Niño devotion began in earnest at the beginning of the nineteenth century by which time as Mojares (2017) notes, the Santo Niño as a miraculous local icon had overtaken the devotion initiated by its Augustinian custodians. The escalation of efforts to promote and expand the devotion coincided with demographic growth and the efforts of the Spanish government to expand its economic, political, and social footprint in the archipelago (Mojares 2017, p. 53). The growth of Cebuano ethnonationalist sentiment from the latter part of the century also contributed to the solidification of the Santo Niño as a miraculous icon, foreign in origin yet simultaneously indigenous to Cebu. “It was unquestioned”, Mojares reiterates, “that the devotion to the Holy Child was the central religious devotion in Cebu” (Mojares 2017, p. 99).

What are some of the main ritual practices associated with the devotion to the Santo Niño as the preeminent cultural and religious icon in Cebu? How do these ritual practices intersect with institutionally prescribed understandings of sacred objects? These are questions that can be addressed by examining the lived reality of the devotion to Santo Niño and the Philippine Church’s attitudes towards popular piety, iconography, and worship in general. We shall attend to these two themes in the following sections.

3. *Espirituhanon* as ‘New Animism’: “Lived Personhood” and the Agency of Objects

Filipino psychologists [Lagahid and Puyo \(2016\)](#) have categorized the behavioral patterns associated with popular piety in the Philippines as ‘*espirituhanon*’ (literally: ‘spirited’ or ‘enchanted’). This local concept of religious practice coincides with the new animism in that it encompasses the belief in the individual’s coexistence with the incorporeal, supernatural beings whose volitional capacities are typically expressed in the ability to heal and protect, as well as to hurt or to cause illness ([Lagahid and Puyo 2016](#), p. 80).

Espirituhanon is a mode of religious agency that recognizes the importance of the liturgy, particularly as expressed in appealing to the saints and Christian figures to enact agentive capacities in favor of devotees ([Lagahid and Puyo 2016](#), p. 82). For example, the practice of “*dungaw*” (“to look out”, in Tagalog) involves the display of religious icons such as the Blessed Virgin and the Santo Niño in such a way that they face outwards from the window or door of people’s homes in the evenings. The householders would then sing liturgical hymns before praying the rosary or the *Oratio Imperata* (Obligatory Prayer) as a way of imploring God’s healing power, especially during times of crisis and tribulation such as the COVID-19 pandemic ([del Castillo et al. 2021](#)).

The vehemence by which the devotion to religious icons continues to thrive in this manner is predicated upon the belief that figures like the Santo Niño ‘come alive’ when its devotees actively engage with it. As Whitehead explains: humans and religious objects “bring each other into co-inspired forms of being during unique, relational encounters” ([Whitehead 2013](#), p. 125). A team of Filipino social scientists ([Brion et al. 2018](#)) who had conducted qualitative interviews and thematic analyses of Santo Niño devotees’ “testimonies of faith” found that such ontologically enabling relational encounters are predicated upon the widespread belief in the figure’s possession of volition and agency. Manifestations of this include its capacity to answer prayers, enact miracles, maintain intimate personal obligations, recognize and reward devotee sacrifices, provide assistance through adversities, and uphold cultural traditions ([Brion et al. 2018](#), p. 95). In my own research, I likewise examine material forms of relational agency, particularly as they can be observed in three ritual expressions, namely: visitation, replication, and kinesthetic piety.

Firstly, the devotion to the Santo Niño exemplifies what can be described as a ‘distributed agency’, one that is shared between humans and religious objects. Perched on its niche within the minor Basilica that bears its name, the Santo Niño is frequently visited by scores of devotees and Church-going members of the public. As I describe in my ethnography of Santo Niño devotion ([Bautista 2010](#), pp. 25–28), a common practice in this visitation is the wiping of pieces of cloth on the glass encasing the figure. This is done as a means of collecting a portion of what is perceived to be the Santo Niño’s divine power, acts that are consistent with the way relics are created in the Christian tradition. The cloth would be applied to a sick loved one, or kept on one’s person for personal protection. This materially-mediated tactile engagement with the Santo Niño attests to a core belief in Filipino popular piety that sacred objects are instrumental in the transportability and transferability of divine power (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Santo Niño de Cebu on its niche within the Basilica Minore del Santo Niño de Cebu. Source: Wikimedia Commons, photo by Puertopalomar.

The notion of the transferability and transportability of the power of religious images is discussed in David Freedberg's *The Power of Images* (Freedberg 1989). The scholar Bruno Latour extends this discussion of tactile transferability into the concept of agency by positing the notion of Actor Network Theory, central to which is the process by which agency is "distributed" by both human and nonhuman entities who channel a "networked intentionality" in the course of their interaction with one another (Latour 2005). Through the act of visitation, the Santo Niño can be seen as an agentive and efficacious participant in the relational network in which devotees and material images co-create each other's lived personhoods.

Secondly, the Santo Niño is not simply a symbolic representation of the divine but, as an anthropoid image with human features, is believed by devotees to have an autonomous

intentionality. In my own analysis of Santo Niño material images (Bautista 2010, pp. 123–50), I discuss the widespread circulation of replicas of the Santo Niño, which are also believed to store and channel divine power when they are offered for blessing during the liturgy. While many other material objects such as candles, novenas, and medallions are available for purchase in the environs of the Basilica, objects with the likeness of humans are thought of as possessing what anthropologist Alfred Gell called a reflexive ‘interiority’, one that signifies ‘the possession of mind and intentionality’ (Gell 1998, p. 136). Replicas of the Santo Niño are commonly dressed up in clothes and tokens that correspond to the life situation of the devotees who acquire them. Personalized in this way, devotees speak with it, appeal for its intercession, confide in it, expect responses from it—interactions in which statues are treated as “persons in the most relational of senses” (Whitehead 2013, p. 136). In turn, the personalized Santo Niño is credited for enacting extraordinary feats which, though inexplicable by natural or scientific laws, are beneficial to those possessing the image. By the same token, the image is also capable of unpredictable behavior that indicates its possession of an autonomous ‘mind’ and volition. There are many qualitative findings in my own ethnographic research that corroborate those of Sala-Boza’s (Sala-Boza 2006, 2008c), which indicate the belief in the Santo Niño’s agency and personhood. A particularly evocative example, however, can be found in the more recent research conducted by Daniel Pilario and Luciminda Baldicimo, who convey a devotee’s relationship with her Santo Niño image as follows (Pilario and Baldicimo 2015, p. 37):

When my husband died at an early age, I was devastated. I could not sleep so I ‘quarreled’ with the Santo Niño on our altar every night. I shouted and cried to him: ‘why did you permit my husband to die? Who is going to take care of our son now? Will you give me work?’ After these evening ‘quarrels’ with God, only then can I sleep. But one night, I noticed that the Santo Niño I was quarreling with grew bigger and bigger. I became so afraid. He seems to be speaking back to me. So, I stopped my diatribes and began to listen.

This incident of the Santo Niño’s capacity for admonition is demonstrative of how material images are treated as though they were persons in a truly agential sense. In this situation of ‘quarreling’ with the Santo Niño, anthropoid images are thought to possess a lived personhood when, to paraphrase the anthropologist Alf Hornborg, they are approached as communicative subjects instead of merely inert and passive objects (Hornborg 2006). Its capacity for supernatural acts, by extension, is believed to be indicative of sentience and intentionality—the basic elements of agency—which contribute towards the co-constitution of devotees as moral, religious subjects. In this sense, the replicas “are not depictions, not portraits, but (artefactual) bodies” (Gell 1998, p. 98). David Morgan, agreeing with Latour, put this succinctly: “We distribute our being among non-human things, which are not simply colonized by us (in the sense of anthropomorphism), but shape our behavior, tell us what to do, scold us when we don’t, stop us from doing otherwise, and plague us with unintended consequences” (Morgan et al. 2015). The point here is that the way devotees engage with the Santo Niño is not merely symbolic, as though the figure ‘stands in’ or ‘represents’ a relationship to God. These are real physical interactions that derive their power and meaningfulness in the assumption that the Santo Niño itself has a substantive personhood, which is channeled in the volitional agency and intentionality that drives miraculous acts.

A third feature of popular piety can be categorized as ritual practices that are driven by an embodied and performative intersubjectivity. A distinct mode of appealing for the Santo Niño’s positive intervention in the life struggles of devotees is by offering him a special dance called the ‘sinulog’, which can be performed by the devotee herself or by engaging a candle seller (*tindera*) to do so on her customer’s behalf. In my analysis of an expanded version of the *tindera sinulog* called the “troupe sinulog” (see Figure 2). I described the various ways in which the Santo Niño was the central motif of choreographed dances, dramatic renditions, street and fluvial parades, and other religiously themed public spectacles (Bautista 2016, 2010; see also Ness 1992).



Figure 2. The “troupe Sinulog” featuring replicas of the Santo Niño. Source: Wikimedia Commons, photo by Jescario.

Both the small scale and expanded version of the Sinulog dance constitutes an embodied devotional practice in which one makes a kinesthetic appeal for the Santo Niño’s intervention. In this respect, the Sinulog dance and festival are devotional forums that channel the figure’s potent agency. For it is during these moments of collective ‘locomotion’ that the figure’s power is, as Whitehead describes it, “at full relational capacity” since the figure is treated as an agent with full volitional capacity (Whitehead 2013, p. 139). This is a position that is characteristic of the ‘new animism,’ which emphasizes the life of an object as predicated upon relationships that are forged through embodied performance. The performance studies scholar Crispin Paine succinctly describes it as follows (Paine 2013, p. 9):

An object-person is only ‘alive’ when interacting with a human-person—the act of relating is what does the animating. This ‘relationality’ means that every encounter is different, and any attempt to define the ‘true nature’ of the non-human person involved is doomed.

Consistent with the new animism, these ritual appeals to the Santo Niño’s divine intervention are premised upon the notion that “personhood” is not exclusively relegated to humanity but is thought to inhere in objects—particularly anthropoid ones—which demonstrate sentience and communicability in a myriad of situations through time. In effecting change in the lives of its devotees, the Santo Niño is thought to manifest modes of intentionality in a way described by religious studies scholar Jeremy Stolow as “a unified, coherent, and intentional source of action and meaning-making” (see Morgan et al. 2015).

The beliefs that affirm the Santo Niño’s personhood have been part of a continuing historical and discursive process in which Spanish missionaries and indigenous Christian converts alike were complicit in demarcating the mutual exclusivity between divine action (that is, events considered miraculous or divinely inspired) and what was proscribed as pagan or animist. As historian Michael Sy has argued, Filipino indigenous agents “constructed generalizations about their religious beliefs to advance their own interests, to protect themselves from persecution, and to understand indigenous deities within

their increasingly colonial reality” (Sy 2021, p. 99). This entailed drawing an opposition between miraculous agency and its opposite, idolatry, the definition of which was itself constituted in the colonial encounter. It is to the contemporary manifestations of this process of demarcation, one that involves official pronouncements of how the figure ought to be worshipped, that we shall now turn.

4. Materiality and Institutional Conceptions of Popular Piety

The institutional Church’s approach to popular piety has been greatly inspired and influenced by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II).² In the post-conciliar period, Filipino clerics channeled their pastoral efforts towards the facilitation of a ‘tripartite dialogue’ between the Church and the indigenous culture, other religions, and the poor. The most significant endeavor in this regard was the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), which was held from 20 January to 17 February 1991.³ PCP II was an opportunity to take stock of the role of the Church as an agent of change in Philippine society, given its crucial role in the political upheaval that resulted in the EDSA revolution that toppled the Marcos dictatorship in 1986. As a national, ecclesial response to the need for New Evangelization, PCP II has been described as “the greatest twentieth century ecclesial event in the Philippines” (Achútegui 1991, p. 204; Legaspi 2014).

Two years after PCP II, a National Pastoral Plan was drawn up to orient and implement its decrees. Two formal documents emerged from the various conferences, seminars, research, and surveys that made up PCP II. Firstly, PCP II received Vatican approval for the promulgation of *The Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (CBCP 1992; hereafter, the Acts), which outlined the agenda of spiritual and sociological renewal as the responsibility of religious and members of the clergy, as well as lay faithful. Secondly, in 1997, following approval from the Holy See, the CBCP issued the new *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (CBCP 1997; hereafter, CFC), as a document that constituted “a major effort in implementing PCP II’s urgent call for a triple renewal: a renewed ‘Catechesis’ which in turn will contribute substantially to a renewed ‘Worship’ and ‘Social Apostolate’” (CFC #2).

Drawing upon the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Roman Catholic Church 1994; hereafter, CCC), PCP II acknowledged the value of popular piety as an expression of the “traditions of our forebears in the faith”, particularly as manifested in the devotion to images of Christ, Mary, and the Santo Niño. In the CFC, likewise, the devotion to the Santo Niño is described as “rich in values” (CFC#194) and is noteworthy for orienting the faithful towards “imaging the innocence, simplicity, child-like wonder of Christ” (CFC #467). As the most perfect reminder of the “traditional love for children”, the Santo Niño figure is extolled as a tangible reminder of the “exceptional importance of our Filipino family as both subject and object of evangelization” (CFC #36).

There are limitations and qualifications to this positive acknowledgement of popular piety. Pilario and Baldicimo’s (2015) analysis of the PCP II Working Papers is instructive in this regard. They observed a prevailing assumption in PCP II that popular piety—inasmuch as it “is more at home with religious images, religious practices, devotions and statues”—is presumed to be antithetical to a ‘mature’ faith based on an “intimate conversation with the Lord and a personal encounter with Christ in his sacraments” (Pilario and Baldicimo 2015, p. 35). As such, they argue, “there was a tendency [in PCP II] to look down on [popular devotions] on the grounds that they are ‘not sufficiently personal’ or focused on an ‘intimate personal relationship’ with the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit” (Pilario and Baldicimo 2015, p. 35).

There is validity in their observation. In both the Acts and the CFC, any mention of the positive aspects of popular piety is immediately qualified by a declaration of its potential excesses, particularly with respect to the devotion to material images. PCP II in general emphasized the didactic function of sacred images as a way to facilitate ‘authentic Christian prayer’, but also warned against the dangers of an unmitigated devotion that may lead to superstition and idolatry. In this regard, PCP II upholds the principle delineated

in the CCC, which identifies superstition and idolatry as closely related transgressions. Superstition is defined as:

the deviation of religious feeling and of the practices this feeling imposes. It can even affect the worship we offer the true God, e.g., when one attributes an importance in some way magical to certain practices otherwise lawful or necessary. To attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand, is to fall into superstition. (CCC #2111)

The definition of idolatry is as follows:

Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc. . . . Idolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God. (CCC #2113)

Based on these two definitions, the CCC is clear in identifying sacred images as merely ‘things,’ not to be subjected to adoration but can, nevertheless, be given a respectful veneration: “Religious worship is not directed to images in themselves, considered as mere things, but under their distinctive aspect as images leading us on to God incarnate. The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as an image, but tends toward that whose image it is” (CCC #2132). Accordingly, the CFC states: “we must recognize the ever-present temptation: from merely *reminding* us of God, the material image tends to gradually ‘become’ a god, an idol An image can either bring the reality it represents to mind, to aid devotion and attention, or it can become a substitute for the reality itself, and thus be an object of idolatry (CFC #891). The CFC warned against the “image industry”—that is to say, the widespread and unbridled cult of devotion and veneration of religious objects—which at its worse “illustrates how manipulative and deceitful human images can become, even holy images”. The danger of popular piety is in the ascription of agency and mystical power to the thing itself—as Santo Niño devotees do—which is “more like superstition and self-centered, privatized attitudes [rather] than authentic Christian prayer” (CFC #192).

On the one hand, both the Acts and the CFC documents emphasize the dangers of misdirected piety of popular devotions to the Santo Niño, which may result from a lack of spiritual and theological formation. “While responding to the Filipino’s natural love for children,” states the CFC, “the child image of Christ can sometimes foster a one-sided focus which neglects the mature, adult Christ and the demands of responsible discipleship” (CFC #467). In a similar vein, the Acts acknowledge the value of popular piety, but are more explicit about what popular piety is not rather than what is actually entailed in its practice:

For most of our people today the faith is centered on the practice of rites of popular piety. Not on the Word of God, doctrines, sacramental worship (beyond baptism and matrimony). Not on community. Not on building up our world unto the image of the Kingdom. And we say it is because the ‘unchurched,’ the vast majority of our people, greatly lack knowledge of and formation in the faith. (Acts #13)

Given the propensity towards superstition and idolatry, the Acts stipulate that the continued practice of engaging with material icons evinces a continuing evangelical mandate to confront popular piety in a way that is ‘accompanied by the spirit of truth’. The “Message of the Council to the People of God in the Philippines” emphasizes that “we can purify our popular devotions and rituals from some of the superstitions that still contaminate them” (Green and Thomas 1992, p. 139). The ‘proper use’ of such images is by “avoiding any and all appearances of making the images into idols, or treating them as endowed with some magical powers” (CFC #892). Consistent with the notion that the

liturgy is “by its very nature superior to any [expressions of popular piety]” (CCC #1675), Church personnel constantly encourage devotees of the Santo Niño to supplement their devotion to images with elements of the scripture and the liturgy. This statement by Manila Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo, made on the occasion of commemorating the Santo Niño’s feast, is a case in point. Consistent with the guidelines for harmonizing popular devotion with the official practices of the Church, especially as prescribed in the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments 2001), Pabillo recommends the ideal way to engage with the Santo Niño:

Since you have with you different images of the Sto. Niño, it means you have altars in your homes. I hope the Bible is included in the altar . . . Let us make it a habit to read the bible in front of the Sto. Niño daily even for just 10 min for us to get to know Him (Lord). It’s best if we make going to church a part of our devotion to the Sto. Niño. (Aquino 2019)

In assessing whether Pabillo’s recommendation is widely adopted by Santo Niño devotees, it is important to consider the extent of doctrinal penetration among Filipino Roman Catholics in general. Valuable insight into this issue is offered in the interviews conducted by Pilario and Baldicimo, which found that very few Filipino Roman Catholics can even recall PCP II, much less explain its nature and significance to the practice of the faith:

My first obvious discovery is this: at least among those I have asked, no one knew about PCP II! My first question was: “Have you heard about PCP II?” Most replied “no”. Those who said yes could not really explain what kind of animal it was. I was just wondering how we could evaluate a program when those who are supposed to implement it—its agents like the BEC leaders and members—do not even know what it is all about”. (Pilario and Baldicimo 2015, pp. 32–33)

To my knowledge, there has been no formal quantitative survey conducted on the depth of doctrinal understanding among Filipino Catholics. Qualitative corroboration of Pilario and Baldicimo’s observation, however, can be found in my own research (Bautista 2019) as well as in del Castillo et al.’s (2021) survey sampling, which found that family and close friends, rather than formal doctrinal instruction from religious personnel, is a much more common basis for learning about religion among Filipinos. The ethnographic research of anthropologist Peter Bräunlein (2012), moreover, is particularly demonstrative of a prevalent sentiment that while most Filipinos may not be formally versed in the documents and edicts of the Church, Filipino popular piety is “100 per cent Catholic”, since ritual practices are conducted within the realm of liturgy, or at least considered supplemental to formal sacramental participation. This sentiment underscores the belief held by devotees of the Santo Niño that their ritual practices do not constitute idolatry, since the figure itself is permanently kept within the confines of the Church, and that the practices conducted in its name enrich, rather than detract from the liturgy.

The importance that Filipino Catholics place on observing liturgical and doctrinal directives, however, does not diminish the prevalence of the notion that human personhood is manifested in the Santo Niño’s miraculous agency through history. While the widespread belief in this notion does not constitute idolatry, Santo Niño devotees—one may say Filipino Roman Catholicism in general—have long channeled the spirit of animism in revealing, responding to and propitiating an anthropoid object believed to be in possession of the sentience and consciousness necessary to exert volition and miraculous power.

5. Conclusions: A ‘Truly Filipino Church’

In 2021, Filipinos commemorate the fifth centenary of the arrival of Roman Catholicism in the country. Prominent in the commemoration has been an emphasis on the triumph of evangelization and popular piety—a triumph formally extolled in PCP II as the fostering of “a truly Filipino Church”. Commenting specifically on Filipino popular devotions as testament to “our people’s deep religiosity”, the CBCP’s *Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine*

Culture has declared that “enough integration of our faith and our culture has taken place” (Cruz 1999, p. 32).

The Santo Niño is officially endorsed by the institutional Church and Filipino Catholics alike as the symbol of the Philippine Catholicism’s new era of evangelization. Indeed, the CBCP’s *Pastoral Exhortation on the Era of New Evangelization* begins with a declaration that “Our eyes gaze on the Santo Niño de Cebu, the oldest religious icon in the Philippines . . . 2021 will be a year of great jubilee for the Church in the Philippines” (Palma 2012). The Santo Niño manifests the institutional conviction in divine providence, a belief that resonates with John XXIII’s designation of the Philippines as the “lighthouse of Catholicism in the Orient” (Quitorio 1996, p. 239). From this conviction in turn emerges an increasingly prevalent sense of theological nationalism, which clerical scholar J. Mario Francisco (2014) describes as the “conflation of the body Catholic and the body politic”—that the history of the nation is synonymous with the history of Roman Catholicism as embodied by its tangible sacred objects.

By describing a particular historicity of the Santo Niño in the first section of this essay, I have sought to emphasize the two interpretations of divine providence that had contributed to establishing the Santo Niño’s exalted position as arguably the most preeminent figure of Christ among Filipino Roman Catholics. From the formal institutional perspective of the CBCP, the Santo Niño was a material gift in the most literal sense during the first baptism, one that functioned as a tangible signifier of God’s endorsement of European missionization and colonization. The counter discourses to this divine narrative—expressed in the form of the multitude of stories that characterise the Santo Niño as both an animist and Christian icon—had likewise fueled the belief that the figure was more than an object or a gift from foreign conquerors. The Santo Niño’s agentive acts of miraculous intervention testified to the idea that he had ‘always already’ been present as the enabler of the popular devotion that flourishes up to the present day. The conviction in the Santo Niño’s agency, in this sense, was framed against a concept of an animism that was not an objective reality but one formed in the encounter with missionaries and clerics. The Santo Niño is crucial in underscoring that animism had always been, and continues to be, part of Filipino Roman Catholic piety.

In the second section, I described three ritual expressions of the devotion to the Santo Niño—namely visitation, replication, and kinesthetic piety—as a way of exemplifying the diverse ways in which religion extends beyond symbolism and propositional notions of belief and faith (Morgan et al. 2015). The point has not been to prove that the Santo Niño is alive or is a person, but rather to demonstrate how religious agency is predicated upon relational, co-inspired encounters between the human and the material. In these encounters, material icons are expected to manifest volitional acts which, in the process of responding to the needs and personal intentions of devotees, cultivates their religious subjectivities.

These religious subjectivities, however, are not considered fully formed or consummated, at least from an institutional point of view. I sought to demonstrate in the third section that in spite of an official institutional acknowledgement of the value of popular piety, its practitioners are nevertheless perceived to lack direction and proper theological formation. Seen in this way, a devotion to an object that goes beyond the symbolic or pedagogical is “more like superstition and self-centered, privatized attitudes [rather] than authentic Christian prayer” (CFC #192). The limits of a popular piety—particularly those that focus on the devotion to material objects—lie not in its extra liturgical performance, but rather in the ascription of mystical power and locomotive, personal, or kinesthetic agency to the thing itself.

What, then, is the nature of the Santo Niño’s agency? From the perspective of *espirituhanon*, it lies in the belief that it possesses the capacity to voluntarily and intentionally manifest its divine, supernatural power that, more often than not, benefits those devoted to it.

The anthropological discussion of agency and personhood that I have conducted in this paper has benefitted from a consideration of the documents that have emerged from PCP II, namely the Acts and the CFC. One area in which we can advance our understanding of this topic is through the deliberate cultivation of an interdisciplinary approach that channels the rapprochement between theology and the social sciences. Although these two approaches have been described as “awkward” (Robbins 2006) or “ambivalent” (Ballano 2020, p. 2), there has been a host of works that have extolled the benefits of a theologically informed anthropology, and an anthropologically informed theology towards a better understanding of popular piety (Fountain and Lau 2013; Milbank 2011; Ryan 2012). One example of a common theme in which this convergence may occur is by connecting the anthropological discourse on new animism with the vibrant discussion of *divine action* in theology, which draws upon the Thomistic tradition of understanding how God guides the created universe by acting through the natural world and other secondary causes (Silva 2016). The contribution of this paper is a demonstration of the heuristic prospects of merging these conversations.

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- ¹ The Order of National Artists of the Philippines is the highest state honor conferred on individuals who are deemed to have made the most significant contributions towards to the advancement of Filipino arts and letters. The order is subject to recommendation by both the Cultural Center of the Philippines and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. Those inducted into the order are designated, as per Presidential Proclamation, National Artist.
- ² The Roman Catholic historian Eamon Duffy called the Second Vatican Council the “most significant event in Christian history since the Reformation” (Duffy 2012), one that had heralded the emergence of a Church that declared a more open and receptive attitude towards ideologies once thought incompatible or even antithetical to its own. Momentous as the council’s decrees were, however, many priests in Latin America, Africa, and Asia felt that the council did not fully address the specific predicaments and interests of the faithful in the Global South. Poverty, structural and political oppression, ethnic and religious conflict, and indigenous religious practices were some facets of a non-Western reality that did not receive adequate coverage in spite of the gains achieved in the council (Tanner 2001, pp. 110–12; Phan 2013). This perceived eurocentricity of the council encouraged churches outside of Europe to pursue post-conciliar paths specific to their own situations. In the Philippines, this was manifested in the establishment of the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI) in 1966 and the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) in 1970—institutions that demonstrated the active role Asian clerics played in cultivating a reinvigorated Asian Catholicism.
- ³ The Jesuit scholar Joseph L. Roche notes that the CFC was issued as the most basic element of Christian renewal that encouraged every Filipino Catholic “to reflect critically and prayerfully on the total present catechetical situation, both ‘lights and shadows’, and sketch in broad strokes the path toward renewal ahead” (Roche 1992, p. 58; see also Miyawaki 2016). Following three years of intense preparation, PCP II was a gathering of some 300 Church personnel, 35 leaders of Catholic religious institutions, and about 150 lay faithful selected from various dioceses around the country.

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