THE IMITATION OF CHRIST IN BICOL, PHILIPPINES

FENELLA CANNELL

London School of Economics & Political Science

This article considers the way in which the local practice of Catholicism in Bicol, centred here on a miraculous image of a 'dead Christ', is linked to the healing of spirit-caused sickness. I argue that the relationship of people in S. Ignacio to their saint is one of identification, in which ritual and daily life echo each other, and devotional acts often take the form of 'imitations' of Christ which create intimacy with him and access power in the world. Healers also 'imitate' Christ as one of a range of ways in which they seek to manage relationships with the spirits, and the dead Christ himself also stands as a shamanic exemplar. I suggest that this approach to the mediation of hierarchy is probably one of the historical continuities in Bicolano culture, which has often been pejoratively described as 'merely' imitative of the West.

In this article, I examine religious and healing practices in one area of Bicol, a province of Southern Luzon, Philippines. Bicolanos, in common with Filipino populations in other lowland provinces, are overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, and the religious practices I discuss centre on a particular saint-cult, that of the Amang Hinulid (or Ama), a miraculous wooden figure of Christ-taken-down-from-the-cross whom I refer to in English as the 'dead Christ'. Healing seances are also an extremely important part of Filipino life in both rural and urban settings. They involve communication with spirits, and take complex forms which bridge the distinction often made in the literature between 'spirit mediumship' and 'shamanism'.

Since the publication of Ecstatic religion (Lewis 1971), if not before, writers with quite contrasting theoretical interests have tended to stress how mediumship and possession can be oppositional to 'world religions'. This partly reflects the widespread historical fact of hostility between missionaries (or other agents of conversion) and local mediums, shamans or other practitioners, which applies to the history of the Philippines as to so many other contexts. However, the ethnography of Southeast Asia has tended to focus either on mediumship and possession as a discourse of the marginalized in relation to, especially, Islam (e.g. Ong 1987) or on areas marginal to the state, where mediumship and shamanism retain a central importance in the construction of (an oppositional) identity (e.g. Atkinson 1989; Tsing 1993).

Because Christianity is the least widespread 'world religion' in Southeast Asia, its relation to mediumship has been less discussed than that of Islam. This article provides ethnography on the Philippine case, and contrasts with the existing literature in concentrating on the extent to which idioms are shared.

J. Roy. anthrop. Inst. (N.S.) 1, 377-394
between Catholicism and healing. The argument pursues similarities between
the ways in which Bicolanos think of and enact relations with a saint and with
spirits. In each case, relations with these supernaturals are created, and hierar-
chy is represented as attenuated, through notions of ‘pity’ and through
processes involving an ‘imitation of Christ’, who is locally identified with the
cult image of the Ama.

The people with whom I did my fieldwork live in a barangay (community) of
just over 200 families,3 which I call ‘S. Ignacio’. The main occupations are
rice-farming and small-scale fishing, but S. Ignacio suffers from the typical
regional problems of poverty to an even greater degree than some other baran-
gays, because of the local pressure on farmland. The appearance of the barangay
is rural and agricultural; green paddy fields stretch out beyond the family
houseplots which lie on either side of the unsurfaced village road. Under
severe economic pressures, however, men and women in S. Ignacio turn their
hand to any small retailing or service-providing venture which will improve
the family’s cash resources; selling fish, making snack foods, even turning old
car tyres into flowerpots and rubber shoes. Few such ventures provide any
permanent or significant increase in wealth. The possible routes to a different
kind of life – larger capital sums, college education and migration abroad – are
beyond the reach of almost everyone in S. Ignacio.

Like many Bicolano communities, S. Ignacio is rural, but not isolated. A
short stretch of road separates it from the outlying houses of the adjacent small
town, whose modest market, town hall, wooden-seated cinema and church are
all used by people in S. Ignacio. Many townspeople are also farmers, although
they may hold more land than villagers.

To the casual visitor, the Christian, lowland Philippines present a confusingly
‘Westernized’ appearance, particularly in contrast to some other parts of South-
east Asia. While there are many modest local homes made of wood or bamboo,
the most permanent and most striking buildings are either large Spanish-built
stone churches, or private houses and public structures built in concrete to
American-derived designs. Most people wear Western-style clothes and Ameri-
can influences on popular films and music, though often filtered through the
Filipino entertainment industries of the capital, are clearly evident.

While what it means to live with these landscapes and patterns of consump-
tion are complex issues (see Miller 1987), I am here concerned to critique a
very powerful stereotype of lowland culture, found in both academic and non-
academic accounts. This view puzzles over a lack of cultural authenticity in the
lowlands, and emphasizes its permeability to influences from the two colonial
periods: Spanish rule between 1607 and 1898, and American rule between
1899 and 1946. University staff in Bicol, for instance, felt that local healing
styles had been corrupted by American movies about ‘demonic possession’,
while in the barangay people would often explain to me that local culture was
mostly an accretion of layers: ‘The Spanish brought religion, the Americans
brought democracy’.4

A second theme of this article is therefore to oppose the idea that Bicol
culture is ‘imitative’ in this sense of being merely derivative, by exploring the
distinctiveness of the meaning of ‘imitation’ itself in the context of saint-cult
and spirit-mediumship. I argue that the 'imitations of Christ' here examined are themselves suggestive of consistent ways of representing hierarchy as accessible to a process of negotiation and reduction. It is these processes, rather than a fixed cultural content, which may constitute historical continuities between the Spanish and the post-American periods.

The 'dead Christ' and Bicolano funerals

Elsewhere, I have described the cult of the Amang Hinulid at greater length (Cannell 1991: 220-339), and it will suffice here to give a somewhat condensed version of my argument before proceeding to the material on mediums and healing.

The phrase Amang Hinulid (often abbreviated to Ama) means, literally, 'the father who is laid out in death'. This phrase provides the essential information about the local cult figure in the area where I worked. The Ama is an almost life-size, carved wooden image of Jesus after he has been taken down from the Cross, realistically painted with the wounds of the crucifixion and with drooping, half-closed eyes and a sorrowful expression. It is another of the legacies of Spanish colonialism that the Ama has 'mestizo' (European) features, which Bicolanos constantly compare to the dark complexion and 'low noses' by which they deprecatingly identify themselves.

The precise history of the image is hard to determine, but it may have been brought from Mexico at the turn of the century. The miraculous history of the Ama, however, is given much greater local priority than its physical derivation, and this account is often told and is quite clear. The image was found as a shapeless piece of wood by a childless woman who, in a significant phrase, is said to have 'adopted' it (Bicol, inampon niya si Ama.) She 'took care of' the image, which began to assume a recognizable human shape, and gradually grew from child to adult. The miracles took a new turn when the Ama began to walk about in the area, recruiting pilgrims and devotees. It was through their labour and donations that the shrine was built, and this has always been known as the Ama's place or the 'house' of the Ama. For some time, the Ama continued to appear in the region, attracting pilgrims rather as Christ travelled around teaching and gathering disciples. The Ama is now said to be 'too old' for such energetic pursuits, but he still works miracles by healing sickness and granting other kinds of 'help' (tabang).

The Ama is thus a highly personalized and humanized figure with a constantly-changing life-course of his own. He is also in a literal sense integrated into a Bicol family, although, due to the quirks of inheritance, this is no longer the immediate family of the woman who first 'adopted' him. It is a distinctive feature of Filipino Catholicism that most images of 'saints' (and I follow local usage in calling the Ama a 'saint') are not kept in churches, but are privately owned by local families and kept in family homes except during the processions of religious festivals. Families talk habitually of 'adopting' and 'bringing up' their saints, who are therefore in some ways like children of the family. In other ways, however, they are also parental figures, patrons of the family and traditionally holders of the riceland passed down according to parent-child inheritance customs.
When people speak of Christ in S. Ignacio, there is always a sense that they know who he is; he is in local reference the saint-Ama, powerful but deeply familiar. For instance, the story of the life of the Ama is explicitly identified with the life of Christ, as this is known through local, popular religious texts. Inside his ‘house’ the Ama lies in a kind of glass coffin, dressed in wigs of human hair and clothing complete down to the underwear, also donated by his devotees. His nail-marked feet are exposed at the open end of the coffin for people to kiss, and are constantly rubbed with perfumes by the visitors. Notes with petitions and thanks, ironically referred to in Bicol as ‘love-letters to the Ama’ are tucked around his draperies and under his pillow.

The shrine of the Ama marks the boundary between the town and S. Ignacio. It is an important location for both town and barangay people and is much visited by both. Some older women from S. Ignacio are in constant attendance there, and say novenas for pilgrims for a small payment. Pilgrims from further afield arrive on Fridays, especially on the first Friday of the month, but above all during the period of Lent leading up to Good Friday, which is appropriately enough the most important festival of the ‘dead Christ’. Many of the visitors have made vows to the Ama, which range from the simple promise of a visit to complex obligations to perform a Passion-play, or to sing the Bicol-language text of the Passion story (Pasión) at his shrine, each Lent for a period of many years. Large numbers of local healers are among the regular visitors to the shrine, where they often buy or are given water or objects which have been in contact with the image, and which are used therapeutically in healing seances.

The Catholic church in the Philippines has emphasized Christ’s birth and resurrection (Christmas and Easter Sunday) as the two key festivals of the calendar. However, in contemporary Bicol it is Good Friday, the day of Christ’s death, which is instead the most conspicuous and emotional day of religious activity, and one regional focus for this activity is the Ama. Although each Bicolano barangay has its own patron saint, the Ama is in many ways the most important sacred figure in the area, constantly spoken of and intimately known. This intimacy, as I will show, is not only due to the placing of saints within Bicolano families, but is also constantly enacted in three interwoven contexts: ordinary people’s funeral practices, the performance of the most popular local religious text – the Bicol Pasión – and the rituals of Holy Week, which I will argue create a Bicolano wake and funeral for the Ama.

Anyone living in a Bicolano barangay is likely to attend a dozen or more funerals per year. To walk in the funeral procession (dapit) of a relative or neighbour is an important duty and sign of respect, as is helping out at wakes. Western-style medical care is expensive, and premature deaths from chronic and acute infectious diseases or complications of childbirth are frequent. In a poor barangay such as S. Ignacio, funerals provoke people to painful and conscious reflections on their own poverty.

The pattern of activity which follows a death in Bicol is predictable. The home of the bereaved family becomes the centre of a wake, which may last up to a week. During this time, the house itself is extended with bamboo poles and a canvas canopy, and is then known as ‘the dead person’s place’ (sa gadan); the deceased is not referred to by name. Nowadays the body is almost always
commercially embalmed and then displayed in an open coffin, and neighbours join the bereaved family in keeping vigil. All funerals pass through the town church for the saying of a blessing or a Mass. However, the priest is not usually present at the most emotional episodes of the funeral. These are the moments of the manambitan, or ritual weeping. The first eerie wail of the most closely bereaved is heard at the moment of death itself. There are two other occasions for ritual weeping: one when the body is taken from the house to be closed into its coffin and carried to the church, and one when the body is about to be placed in the cemetery tomb, and the coffin lid is opened briefly for the last time.

At these moments, the chief mourners of the deceased, who are usually glazed, pale and passive after the long vigil, will suddenly fling themselves into a passion of grief, wrestling with the coffin-bearers to open the lid again, or to pull back the coffin from the mouth of the tomb. At the same time, they will cry out in a way simultaneously conventionalized and harrowing, calling on the dead person and screaming that it is too soon to let him or her go; that they remember the love and help the deceased gave to the living; that they will follow their dead mother or their dead child, or their wife dead in childbirth, and not abandon them alone in the desolate cemetery.

The manambitan always brings tears to the eyes of those who hear it, yet at every funeral I witnessed, those not most closely connected to the deceased would turn hurriedly away from the scene at the tombs, wiping away tears almost angrily. Too much contact with grief and absorption in mourning can threaten the health and well-being of the living, drawing them after the dead. This danger also threatens the bereaved on the third day after death, when the soul of the dead is likely to return to the house of its living kin. Similar post-mortem visits are said in many parts of Southeast Asia to be due to the envy of the dead for the living (see, for example, Gibson 1986; Metcalf 1982). In Bicol, however, the explanation given is that the dead person pities (herak) their relatives left behind, and tries misguidedly to comfort them. For their part, living people say that ‘pity’ is what they feel at the cemetery, and it is presumably this emotion which must be so carefully controlled by the bereaved. For the living, the ‘pity’ of the dead and your own ‘pity’ for them lead to equally dangerous kinds of proximity.

In this part of Bicol, the pivotal events of Holy Week are constructed as though the rituals surrounding the Ama were one enormous wake and funeral. Over the last period of Lent, activity at the shrine intensifies; as pilgrims gather from all over the region in the ‘house’ of the Ama to keep vigil, distribute food and pray; it is as though they were an unusually large gathering of friends, followers and relatives at the wake of some deceased dignitary. By contrast, the main church in the centre of town is almost deserted between Holy Wednesday (when there is a preliminary procession) and the Good Friday services.

By the night of Holy Thursday, the shrine is packed with people and filled with the sound of voices singing the Passion-text. Outside the shrine, the drama is made explicit at temporary altars constructed of painted board like stage-flats, which are changed at intervals to show succeeding scenes of Christ crucified and then taken down dead for burial. On Good Friday itself, the
religious activities centre on the great procession, in which the figure of the Ama is taken down from his coffin for the only time in the year. He is dressed as an honoured corpse, with a binding-cloth tying up his jaw. A sigh and a shout from the waiting crowd goes up as his body is placed inside a special decorated and glass-sided funeral bier. Local men struggle for a place pulling the bier. The pilgrims follow the Ama, who is accompanied by the town’s funeral bands playing a dirge, and by a gradually increasing cortège of other saints’ images, brought out from the houses of their owners as the procession circles the town, pausing at the church. Other images, such as the patron saints of barangays, are placed along the route as though they were spectators paying their last respects.

Just as the two manambitan of an ordinary funeral mark the removal of the body from the house and the moment when it is placed in the tomb, so cries and high emotions mark the taking of the Ama from his house, on his own dapit or funeral procession.13 People comment on the occasion as if it were a funerai, noting how many 'friends' of the Ama have joined the procession, and inspecting the face of the dead Christ. 'Pity the poor Ama, he looks so pale and wan!' remarked one of my companions. 'Of course', replied another, 'for he's dead now'.

Of course, in one sense the Ama is always dead, and in another sense dies yearly on Good Friday. His body, rather than being consigned to the cemetery, is eventually brought back in procession and reinstated in his 'house'. But despite these differences, the idea that the Ama is essentially a dead Christ - Christ at the moment after death - neither crucified nor yet buried and resurrected, is made extremely clear.14

What emphasized this for me was the ceremony called the 'bathing of the Father' (pagparigos ki Ama), which is a highly popular part of the Good Friday rituals, and is also sometimes held on the first Friday of each month, out of Lent. Although a Mass may be held on the same day, the priest again is not really involved. Instead, the family who own the image and shrine of the Ama, together with a large crowd of pious people and male and female healers, gently remove the clothing of the Ama, sponge him all over with perfumed water (keeping towels carefully placed over the groin as though to save the image's modesty) and re-dress him. The mixture of tenderness and proprietorship with which this is done is remarkable to see. It is as though the attendants were laying out the corpse of a much-loved and respected relative, and the procedures they use closely resemble those which were common in Bicol before commercial embalming became widespread. The integration of the 'saint'-Ama into the Bicol family thus extends even to the gentle and respectful treatment of his 'dead' body.

If the Bicol funeral involves the danger of 'pity' between dead and living, and the Good Friday ritual presents the funeral of the Ama, a further link between them is made by the Bicol-language Pasion. This text tells the story of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ interspersed with moral homilies, and was originally intended by the Spanish church as an aid to conversion. It was translated into Tagalog (and then other Filipino languages) very early in the Christianization of the Philippines, as part of the Church policy that evangelization
should make use of native languages in the islands. The text is now published in local languages by presses in Manila, and sold in every province.

The Passion text, its meanings and mode of performance have become highly indigenized and in various locations and historical periods have taken on significances very different from those intended by the Church (Ileto 1979; Rafael 1988). It is written in verse, and the story is hauntingly sung by relays of paired singers, to tunes which have many local variations. The correct 'reading' and harmonization are matters of skill, practice and nuanced improvisation.

In Lent, the Pasion is read in private households as a devotional act. Since the text is long, it needs an all-night vigil to complete it, a scene which in several ways resembles the co-operative neighbourliness of a wake. Pilgrims at the house of the Ama read the Pasion intensively in Holy Week, often as one of the vows for recovery from sickness as mentioned above.

In this context, it is significant that when I asked people which parts of the Pasion were most important, the episode which was most often mentioned was that of the burial of Christ. This passage comes at the low point in most people's energy during the vigil, in the early hours of the morning, and is marked by a change of tune which tends to awaken those who have dozed off, as well as those in neighbouring houses. Tune and content combine visibly to move all those who hear it. It recounts how Mary and the mourners were filled with pity (herak) and painful feelings as they looked at Christ's body; how Mary clung to the body of Christ as it was placed in the stone tomb and would hardly release it; how the angels bent down from heaven in order to join in the funeral procession of Christ (the dapit).

The passage shares, in ways difficult to convey in translation, both the vocabulary and the narrative structure of an ordinary funeral in Bicol. The emotional moment of farewell at the tomb evokes the last manambitian in any Bicolan cemetery, just as the language used in the text (dapit, herak) is exactly that of all Bicol burials and bereavements. The Pasion thus closes the circle of resemblances and identifications between the Christ of the Passion, the dead Christ, and the Bicolan dead. It is for that reason, I suggest, that everyone I asked described this passage not only as the most significant, but as pinakamakabibi, the part which makes you weep the most.

That every barangay funeral is partly identified with Christ's funeral is further supported by what we know about the nature of religious devotions in Bicol and elsewhere in the lowlands. This identification is not a simple assimilation of church teaching. Local women, for instance, often talked about the parallels between their experience of the deaths of their children, and Mary's feelings as described in the 'burial' passage. But they did not regard the Virgin Mother as the model of womanhood, as has been suggested for European Catholicism (Warner 1976). Instead of feeling that they should be like her, they remarked that she was rather like them.

A similar process of identification underlies the performances of the passion play (tanggal) in Bicol. The tanggal is performed by a group of people again in fulfilment of a vow to the Ama linked to recovery from illness. The play is not only based on the passion text, but on its familiar woodcut drawings of Christ, Mary and others, which it literally brings to life.
The passion players must endure three nights and two days with little sleep to complete a performance; several players also go without food. The physical hardship is described as a 'sacrifice' (sacrificio) — but this has little to do with sin, repentance or reparation. Instead, the players feel that by embodying the persons from the passion story, and sharing some of their sufferings, they will move closer to them and thus also share in some of their powers. The players, like the readers of the Pasion keeping vigil, or the performers of any other devotional act, always say that they feel light, well and happy after it, and exhaustion leaves no mark. As Zialcita has put it, discussing the devotees in another part of the lowlands who undergo voluntary flagellation or even nailing to a Cross: 'By becoming Christ's intimate, the flagellant believes that Christ will grant his request' (1986: 59). However, this search for an 'intimacy' with Christ by imitation is not confined, at least in Bicol, to flamboyant self-punishment, but inflects many areas of daily experience.

Healers and the imitation of Christ

I have described how the shrine of the dead Christ and the 'bathing of the Ama' are a focus not only for ordinary people in S. Ignacio, but also for healers. In fact, the Ama and the healers are connected both by the idea of pity (herak) and by the imitation of the particular dead Christ who dominates the local imagination.

Sickness in Bicol can have a number of different kinds of causes, and is treatable by different specialists. I have already mentioned the difficulty poor people have in affording Western medicine, but even when there is cash to pay for it, it is not appropriate to every case.

The spirits, or 'people we cannot see' (tawo na dai ta nahihiling, in contrast to tawo pareho ta, 'people like us') are an important source of both sickness and healing. Some detail on spirits and healers is necessary here, in order to show how people's dealings with the tawo and the Ama are connected. The tawo are said to inhabit an invisible world which overlaps with our own visible one; one is thus very likely to blunder into these 'people' accidentally when going about one's daily business. Their retaliatory actions (naigo) are the main cause of minor ailments, especially among children.16 Tawo may also become romantically attached to 'people like us', and/or feel a protective 'pity' (herak) for human trouble and poverty. Spirits approach future spirit-mediums from these motives; they offer assistance in healing as a gift which will bring the healer popularity and the gifts of patients, though healers themselves may experience the assumption of their vocation as coercion. They resist at first, only to become 'used to' their spirit-companions (saro or sanib) over time. The 'pity' of a spirit-companion, however (like the pity of the dead discussed above), is a dangerous thing, for both often threaten to carry the healer away from their troubles to live in the spirit-world.

A person 'accompanied' (made sick) by spirits may be suffering either from their anger or their troublesome 'pity', and displays symptoms of soul-loss or occasionally of possession. If the healer cannot negotiate successfully, the patient's soul too may stay in the invisible world, and the patient will die, though they are said to be lost or 'taken' rather than to be 'dead' in the normal sense.
It appears that spirits were thought of as ambivalent powers even in pre-colonial times (Rafael 1988: 190). Contemporary Bicolanos, however, also inherit a history of church disapproval of healing practices which were defined as superstitious, or worse, and the latent suspicion that possession might be demonic. This, no doubt, largely explains why many people attend healers regularly, but claim that while some spirits are good, others are un-Catholic ‘evil beings’. This ambivalence also takes the form of a historical claim that healers nowadays are ‘weaker’ than those of the recent past, who used to refuse possession by spirit-companions and heal instead ‘with their own voices’. The rhetoric, therefore, which is reminiscent of Eliade’s (1989) shamanism-spirit mediumship contrast, is that current possession-centred practice has declined from a more powerful ‘shamanic’ past, and this decline is explicitly associated by barangay people with a disapproval of possession as both weak and un-Catholic.

This chain of associations is in fact somewhat misleading. To oppose possession and Catholicism disguises the fact that many healers are possessed, and almost every one of them stresses her Catholic faith, and uses Catholic symbols and props in healing. Some may also say that their spirit-companions are good Catholic beings, although others play this down.

The actual situation is complex and extremely varied, healing techniques in Bicol being highly idiosyncratic.17 There are many healers who are always possessed in seance by their spirit-companion; the tawo then effectively runs the session and, speaking through the medium, heals the patient. There are fewer mediums who are never possessed; some of these use divination only, while others specialize in techniques of ‘calling’ the spirits and talking to them ‘in their own voices’, and are able to see them while they remain invisible to everyone else. Yet a number of these ‘shamanic’ healers may also use possession occasionally, when they judge it appropriate.

While it is quite possible that there has been a rise in the number of healers using possession (or possession only) in recent years, the shamanism-mediumship contrast is therefore not so much of a historical divide as local people claim, but rather constitutes two ends of a spectrum of styles. In fact, the evidence indicates that both forms of healing are widespread in the Bicol region. The Bicol spirit doctors are not unique in their ability to ‘see’ both in the medium’s presence and in the absence of a medium. 

While it is quite possible that there has been a rise in the number of healers using possession (or possession only) in recent years, the shamanism-mediumship contrast is therefore not so much of a historical divide as local people claim, but rather constitutes two ends of a spectrum of styles. In fact, the evidence indicates that both forms of healing are widespread in the Bicol region. The Bicol spirit doctors are not unique in their ability to ‘see’ both in the medium’s presence and in the absence of a medium.

When God created the world, they say, he decided to bless everything (with sprinkled water, as a priest does at the end of Mass). He gathered all the people and animals together, but
some of the people hid among the tree-trunks of the forests, and so they did not come within the area reached by the blessing. Hence, they remained invisible.

This story is quoted to explain why healers must be careful not to stay for the blessing when they attend Mass; for if they should happen at that moment to be possessed by one of the tavo, the spirit will be fixed within them by the blessing, and their own soul will not be able to return to their body. An invisible person would then be locked into a visible body, and vice versa. The logic here seems to be that the priest (or God) appears as an agent who fixes souls in position, while the activities of spirits involve their free passage between the visible and invisible worlds. Christian symbolism can then also make boundaries when 'copied' by the healers.

However, this too is an over-simplification for at least two reasons. First, while it is true that spirits are associated with a powerful tendency towards movement between worlds (as is evident from their threats to 'take' healers with them out of pity), Christianity is not of course the healers' only resource. What healers always combine with the use of Christian symbols is an emphasis on their ability to negotiate with and persuade the spirits who are making their patients sick. All healers will talk about these themes at length. Healers 'in their own voices' clearly demonstrate their skills in seance. Possessed healers, however, also do so at one remove; although the spirit-companion saro is the negotiator in a seance, the healer herself must cultivate her rapport with her saro, and this too requires negotiating skills. The classic form of a conversation in a seance is that the healer will first discover the identity of the disease-causing spirit and its reason for 'accompanying' the patient, whether grievance or 'pity'. She will then appeal to the spirit to show a more helpful 'pity' by healing the sufferer. The tone may be commanding, teasing or propitiatory, depending on the circumstances.

Secondly, while all healers use Catholic props and gestures, these are not the only way in which Catholicism enters into Bicolano healing practice; on the contrary, the power of Christianity, and in particular here of the Ama, is closely implicated in what one might loosely call the shamanic tradition in Bicol, in which it is not only the spirits but the healers who are associated with the power to move between worlds. Quite ordinary people will sometimes tell stories of journeys to the land of the spirits or the dead (not sharply distinguished in many contexts) from which they return unscathed and spiritually strengthened. Healers themselves may refer to such stories to illustrate their own powers to withstand and negotiate with the 'invisible people'.

The ways in which healers approach the 'dead Christ' have several aspects, but all are aimed at creating an intimacy with him through which they share in his power. When healers gather at the shrine for the bathing of the image, they often collect water, oil or other objects which have been in contact with the body of the Ama, or borrow the clothes of the image. These are used in healing, but they are not simply boundary-markers clamping down the movements of the spirits. They are also ways in which the healer draws closer to the Ama through physical proximity and contact.

One young man I knew invoked the idea of direct possession, when he suddenly assumed the posture of Christ on the cross during a rather casual
tea-time divination session. I have known other healers say that they were possessed by sacred figures and saints, but this degree of literal-mindedness is not usual; the young man was, I think, regarded as rather hubristic by most people.

It is more common for healers to tell stories of encounters with Christ and other holy figures, who give them gifts of amulets (anting) which are used in healing. These encounters may form an episode in one of the ‘shamanistic’ stories I have mentioned, part of the out-of-body voyage of the healer’s soul. Conversely, the healer may have a mysterious visitor to her house, who is understood later to be Mary or the Ama.

The clearest form of identification with Christ, however, is common to almost all the healers of whom I have any knowledge, and this too is a kind of shamanistic-voyage story. It will be recalled that people first become healers at the insistence of the spirits, who ‘pity’ their troubles, and decide to become their spirit-companions and help them to heal.22 People cannot resist the will of the spirits, though they may try ignoring their advances at first. The definitive moment comes when the spirit-companion ‘ accompanies’ the healer’s soul on an inaugural voyage to the spirit-world, leaving the healer’s body behind as though unconscious or dead. As my friend Tiang Delia described it:

> It was as if I was dead, but they tell me I cured all kinds of people ... when I had my consciousness again, the house was all full of people whom they said I had cured: they said I went walking about all over the place, but I knew nothing about it.

All these experiences, however, are phrased in a characteristic and standardized way. They always last three days, and they often begin on a Friday, or even (as Delia’s did) on Good Friday itself. Clearly, the healers are replicating a kind of death and resurrection. In that sense, they are identifying with and repeating the experience of Christ, and evoking the Ama who is locally identified as Christ. The healer’s unconscious body reproduces the state of the body of the ‘father laid out in death’ in his shrine. Anxious relatives and patients cluster round the unconscious novice healer as pilgrims do around the Ama during the ‘bathing of the father’ (or as mourners do around a real corpse).

This identification is strengthened by linguistic echoes; the same terms which link the Bicol Pasion-text to the stories of the Ama also link it to healers’ tales. The novice healer Tiang Delia ‘walking around’, for instance, recalls Christ ‘walking around’ (kalakawan), which is the term used in religious texts to describe Christ’s travels when he was performing the miracles. It is also noticeable that healers stress that their vocation is a ‘sacrifice’ (sacrificio), tiring and often thankless. Like the performers in the Passion play (which is also a sacrificio), they are becoming Christ’s intimates by a process of identification with his experiences.

One strand of local rhetoric in Bicol, presumably reflecting Church antagonism to the spirits, links possession and the tawo and opposes them to non-possession and the Ama. I have argued that this is not an accurate description of healing practice; for example, a healer may be possessed by a spirit, a saint, or neither. Moreover, although the spirits are an ambivalent power, they cannot be neglected, and have not been replaced by the Ama; for most people, the two co-exist as sources of help and healing.
Healers, like other people, sometimes define ‘proper’ Catholicism and deal-ings with the spirits as potentially contradictory. However, their multifarious healing styles represent attempts (with almost as many fine variants as there are healers) not to choose between these powers, but to effect a rapprochement between them. 23 A healer’s replication of Christ’s death and resurrection endows her with power in relation to the tawo, but is also a ‘shamanic’ journey undertaken in the company of her saro or spirit-companion.

The creation of this rapprochement is no easy task, a point to which I return below. However, it is the continued relevance of both sources of power in Bicol which seems to explain why it is to the dead Christ (and not to the risen Christ of the Church) that healers and patients in S. Ignacio turn.

The equation of death and resurrection with a shamanic voyage is only one instance of the way in which the distinction between the afterlife and the invisible world of the spirits is often elided in Bicol (the case of ‘dead’ persons who have been ‘taken’ to live with the tawo is another). 24 The Ama, or dead Christ, is from this perspective a figure who is continuously performing the shamanic journey between life and death, or the visible and invisible worlds. But while healers in Bicol are always in negotiation with a repertoire of powers, the Ama performs this feat without calling on, or succumbing to, any more overwhelming power than his own. For this reason, I suggest, he serves for Bicolano healers as their shamanic exemplar.

**Conclusion: the ‘imitation’ of ‘Christ’ in Bicol**

I have looked in this article at themes of imitation, identification and power in the connected practices of local Catholicism and Bicolano healing. I began by exploring how people relate to the ‘dead Christ’ through a series of identifica-tions with him. In Europe, the ‘imitation of Christ’ is a tradition which began in devotional mysticism and the attempt to experience Christ more closely (Koenigsberger & Mosse 1971: 102). In that sense, it stands for the long argu-ment in European Christianity and Europe’s converted colonies, between the church and local believers, about access to divine power and the power to define who shall mediate it, to the literature on which this ethnography also contributes (see Leach 1972; Bynum 1987; Christian 1989; 1992; Stirrat 1992). As incorporated in the Counter-Reformation Catholicism of Loyola, however, the ‘imitation of Christ’ became a form of mediation whose aim was the reduc-tion of the heart to a proper state of Christian conformity and oneness with Christ through knowledge of oneself as a mortal and a sinner.

In Bicol, the imitation of Christ is something different; it is (as in the Passion play) an identification with Christ which does not primarily produce repen-tance but an intimate closeness with the Ama. Bicol healers also seek intimacy with the spirits, though more cautiously.

Imitation in Bicol is thus part of the management of relations between hu-mans and supernaturals, and by humans between supernaturals of different kinds. These relations are conducted in idioms of asymmetrical reciprocity, which have most often been noted in the literature on the lowland Philippines when they refer to patronage, debt and obligation (Hollnsteiner 1970: 65-88; Szanton 1972: 126; Kerkvliet 1990: 243; Rafael 1988: 123). In this case,
however, one of the most distinctive idioms is that of pity. Both the Ama and the spirits approach people by ‘pitying’ them. The ‘pity’ of the Ama is seen as an unequivocal good; it may be solicited through prayer and promises, and adequate returns are made by the holding of Passion plays, readings and the performance of vows. The ‘pity’ of the spirits is less clearly solicited and more equivocal, carrying dangers as well as benefits for both patient and healer. This ‘pity’ must be managed by healers, through the rhetorical techniques of negotiation, through ‘shamanic’ magical prowess, or by the use of protective techniques borrowed from Catholic practice. In this repertoire, the sense in which every healer ‘imitates Christ’ is a key component. In the case of both dealings with the Ama and dealings with the spirits (especially with spirit-companions, who build up a relationship with healers over time), hierarchical relations are represented as constantly in process, with the subordinate party always drawing in (and drawing towards) the superior, although never entirely closing the gap.

At the same time, the healers’ imitation of Christ cuts both ways; it does not merely elevate the Ama to a position separate from and superior to the realm of the spirits. Instead, it identifies him as himself a ‘shamanic’ figure associated with the control over movement between human and non-human worlds which is the distinguishing feature of such practitioners in the Philippine lowlands and beyond.

Ileto (1979) and Rafael (1988) provide two elegant historical studies of the Philippines’ colonial encounters, for the end and the beginning of the Spanish periods respectively. Like Scott (1985: 96-126), both assume that Filipino culture constitutes the self through exchanges of indebtedness and gratitude with others, and vitally so with superiors, with whom one must place oneself in a debt relation in order to ensure a degree of protection. Rafael argues that an attempt to establish such relations with the Spanish determined much of the tenor of early Spanish-Filipino encounters. Filipinos re-constructed contexts such as confession, which were understood by the church as a one-way process of instruction to converts, as opportunities for the creation of (asymmetrical) two-way relations of reciprocity with social superiors.

The imperative to exchange was not only practical but also existential. The opposite of patronage and protection is not only exposure to material harm, but also the exposure of the self to predation or to effacement and total exclusion from social relationships.

The material discussed here shows some of the analogous processes in contemporary Bicol. If pity describes the initiative of saint or spirits in instituting relations with humans, then verbal negotiation and identificatory imitation describe some of the human devices for instituting and managing such relationships, and domesticating dealings with superior powers.

There are undoubtedly comparisons to be made here with more ‘egalitarian’ highland Philippine societies such as the Ilongot as described by Renato Rosaldo (1980). The Ilongot say that aggression and potential hierarchy must be managed through a gradual and careful closing of distance (for instance, between two feuding parties) and then by public oratory and negotiation. The two parties will then ‘become used to’ each other, a phrase which is also used
to describe love between men and women. Many of the same idioms are used by spirit-mediums in Bicol to describe how they gradually build relationships with their spirit-companions, which can be seen as an exercise in the reduction of hierarchy rather than, as in the Ilongot case, the avoidance of it.

Much social history of the Philippines remains to be written. It is therefore inevitable that general conclusions about the relationship between changes in these idioms over time, and shifts in political context, should remain speculative. However, it is perhaps worth noting a comparison with part of Ileto's (1979) account of the Tagalog provinces at the turn of the century. A series of 'millenarian' peasant uprisings formed part of the successful Philippine revolution against the Spanish, and the initial resistance to the new American regime. Ileto's central point is that these revolutionary activities drew on images and understandings taken from the Pasyon, the Tagalog-language counterpart of the Bicol Pasión text described above. Thus, what had begun as a Spanish text of conversion was translated into an idiom of subversion.

The point I would draw out here, however, is a different one. It is clear from Ileto's account that the peasant leaders were men whose actions made sense to themselves and others because of a highly elaborated version of what I have been calling the imitation of Christ, in this case the Christ of the Passion-text. Stories about these leaders were cast within the framework and language of the stages of the life of Christ, and resurrections of those who died or disappeared were expected. This identification was integrated with a confident command of those sources of power which broadly belong to the Filipino and wider Southeast-Asian magical and 'shamanic' tradition. All the rebels possessed anting, the magical objects which are often the gifts of spirits, and most considered themselves adepts in techniques which would make them invulnerable to bullets.

Ileto's peasant leaders incorporated a conjunction of these two kinds of power at a particular political moment. Or, to put it slightly differently, they managed almost to erase the contradictions which arose because Catholic deities and non-Catholic spirits had to co-exist in the Spanish Philippines, by embodying a Christ who was truly Christ but was also a magical hero, the best 'shaman'. It is little wonder that they expected success from this prodigious achievement. By contrast in Bicol, the most permanent embodiment of this idea remained not human practitioners but the carved figure of the 'dead Christ' himself.

The political contexts of Ileto's study and my own are very different. In 1989, the Philippines had been independent for more than forty years, though American influence on policy was still a key issue. I have barely touched here on Bicolano perceptions of America, or on the influence of American Protestant missions, despite which both saints and spirits remain figures of crucial importance in daily life. But although the relationship between political change and religious representation is never a direct one, the contrast between the degree of resolution in Filipino imitations of Christ in revolutionary and non-revolutionary periods is probably not accidental. If 'imitation' in Bicol is understood as part of the representation of power relations, rather than as a symptom of lowland permeability to Western culture, this article would argue
not only for the distinctiveness but also for the historical continuity of the ways in which that mediation has been effected in the Philippine lowlands.

NOTES

Fieldwork was conducted between March 1988 and December 1989 with the assistance of an ESRC state studentship. I revisited Bicol in August 1992 with the help of grants kindly made available by the British Academy and the Evans Fund of Cambridge University. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the ASA decennial conference in Oxford in July 1993 and at the LSE departmental seminar in January 1994, and I have benefited from the comments of the participants. I should especially like to thank William Christian, Chris Fuller and John Peel for comments on drafts of this article.

1 Eliade makes a well-known contrast between true shamanism and ‘spontaneous mediumship’ (1989: 347). In the latter, which he considers typical of Southeast Asia, communion with spirits is less controlled than in the true shamanism of north Asia. While not accepting the view that Southeast Asian practice is a deviation from a ‘true’ form, I adopt Eliade’s shamanism/possession distinction here for the purposes of clear description, since it captures one aspect of Bicolano rhetoric about different kinds of healing.

2 Space precludes my referring here to all the comparative literature on mediumship, saints’ cults, ‘syncretisms’ and so on. Further references, and a longer account of the Ama and Bicol healers, are given in Cannell (1991). Ong’s book (1987) explores spirit-possession as oppositional to capitalism as well as in tension with Malay Islam, a dimension which I do not address here. A recent Philippine ethnography of shamanship (but not Catholicism) is Magos (1986), and of ‘syncretism’ (but not healing) is Elesterio (1989). Dumont’s interesting Visayan ethnography (1992) does not address these themes.

3 A barangay is the smallest unit of local government, constituting a ‘village’ in rural areas, and a subdivision of a town in urban ones. For convenience, I pluralize the word here using a final ‘s’ as in English, but the correct Bicol plural would be mga barangay.

4 This view of the lowlands as deficient in cultural resistance and authenticity occurs in writers of very different intentions, theoretical backgrounds and political positions, and in journalism, guide-books and school text-books as well as social science writing. It has informed both sociological writing on the problems of ‘modernization’ and some Filipino nationalist critiques of over-dependency on American culture. A handful of contrasting examples are Lynch (1984), Davis (1973), Venco (1984), Mulder (1991), Mayuga & Yuson (1984), Constantino (1978).

5 This is my own supposition and that of local historian Danny Gerona (personal communication, see also Gerona 1990). The links between the Philippines and Mexico were established by the Spanish galleon trade, and a number of Filipino images came from Mexico (Zialcita, personal communication.) Alternatively, the image may have been made, as many are, by Filipino craftsmen in Manila. My estimate of the date of the image is based on the impressions of older people in S. Ignacio.

6 The chapels in which saints’ images are kept are usually referred to in this way, by a Bicol phrase equivalent to chez in French; thus no distinction is made between ki Maring (Maria’s place) and ki S. Igacio (Saint Ignacio’s place.) The word used for house is the one in normal usage, harong.

7 In Bicol, the most important popular religious text is the Bicol-language passion story or Pasion.

8 Some of the income from the shrine accrues to the family who own the Ama, and disputes may arise as to whether funds have been correctly divided.

9 Compare Father Frank Lynch, an American Jesuit and ethnographer of Bicol, who followed church teaching in seeing Easter as the climactic event of the year (Lynch c.1965: 123).

10 I discuss the full significance of embalming, and its probable historical importance in Cannell (1991: 242-50).

11 Bicolano cemeteries are arranged like some continental European Catholic cemeteries. They contain standing concrete structures much like filing cabinets, in which the dead are buried in a series of stacked ‘drawers’. These spaces are rented from the Church for a fee, and
eventually secondary burial is meant to follow. Wealthy families, however, purchase their own tomb plots.

12 Cemeteries (kampusanto) are places which people think of as lonely, neglected and frightening. They are not visited except on All Souls' Day, and are situated outside the town away from the church.

13 The parallels are followed in small particulars too. For example, a house cannot be swept out while a corpse lies within, nor can the shrine of the Ama be cleaned during Holy Week.

14 On a return visit to Bicol in summer 1992, I was told of some conflict between a new priest and the family who own the Ama. The priest had suggested that the Ama be taken to the church on Holy Wednesday, and that Good Friday be celebrated with a Mass there. Resistance to this relocation took the form of the Ama appearing in people's dreams asking 'Why do you want to bury me already (i.e. on Wednesday) when I am not yet dead? ' The Ama was not moved to the church.

15 The Bicol version of the Passion, at least as a complete text, did not appear until relatively late, and it seems that the Tagalog version was used in the province until a translation was published (Javellana 1988: 11-20; Rafael 1988: 194). The Bicol version currently in use is Hernandez (1984 [1866]).

16 For a discussion of the nature of the 'people', their resemblances to and differences from other Southeast Asian spirits, and the history of mediumship in the lowland Philippines, see Cannell (1991: 75-220).

17 For instance, one healer used eggs and other objects for divination, prayers, amulets and protective signs. Another belonged to a small group who used 'syncretic' costumes modelled on archbishops' outfits, but decorated with pink sequins, and danced while possessed.

18 These are marked in ashes from paper on which prayers and spells (using Latin and Spanish words and Christian signs) have been written before it is burnt. Patients may also drink these ashes in water.

19 Healers and spirit-companions grow to have such a close relationship over time that the spirit's negotiating skill and personality cling around the healer. Healers will deal with their spirit-companions with gradually increasing confidence as the two 'become used to' each other.


21 The deliberate seeking of these adventures seems to have been mostly a male form of prowess; however, both men and women may modestly present themselves as having had power thrust upon them by the will of the tawo.

22 Even healers who are not normally possessed usually say that the spirits approached them in the same way, but later agreed to let them heal without acting as medium to the spirit-companion.

23 An individual healer's choice of style may of course reflect the way in which she wants to be seen in relation to Catholicism by her patients (or even by the priest), as well as other factors concerning status, personal history, and so on. This level of explanation of variation is beyond the scope of the present article, but see Cannell (1991).

24 For a full explanation of this elision between the spirit-world and the afterlife, see Cannell (in preparation).

25 Iletto (1979: 230) also discusses pity (Tagalog, awa) as an idiom which draws on the language of the Passion texts and interacts with the language of indebtedness.

26 There are, of course, many others, and debt is a primary determining fact of life in contemporary rural areas.

27 I intend to explore elsewhere the relation of these idioms to the wider discussion of 'the idea of power' in Southeast Asia (Anderson 1972;Errington 1989).

REFERENCES


**Imiter le Christ à Bicol, aux Philippines**

**Résumé**

Le catholicisme pratiqué à Bicol est centré autour de l'image miraculeuse d'un 'Christ mort' qui intervient dans la guérison de maladies causées par des esprits. Les gens de San Ignacio, selon l'auteur, s'identifient à leur saint. Pour eux, le rituel et le quotidien se font écho, et les actes de dévotion consistent à 'imiter' le Christ. Ils se voient donc accéder au pouvoir dans le monde réel grâce à la relation intime que l'imitation crée entre eux et le divin. Imiter le Christ est également une stratégie employée par les guérisseurs dans le maniement de leurs rapports aux esprits. Le Christ mort est d'ailleurs tenu pour un modèle chamanique. On suggère, pour conclure, que cette approche médiate de la hiérarchie représente très probablement une des continuités historiques de la culture bicol, qui a souvent été décrite de manière péjorative comme n'étant rien de plus qu'une imitation de la culture occidentale.

*Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, U.K.*