

# THE POTENCY OF *POON*: RELIGIOUS SCULPTURE, PERFORMATIVITY, AND THE *MAHAL NA SENYOR* OF LUCBAN

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This chapter is an attempt to give new directions to the study of religious sculptural images in the Philippines called *poon* that are venerated in Lucban, Quezon.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the image of the Dead Christ called *Mahal na Senyor* (“beloved lord”) will be examined in terms of how the concept of potency can be linked with the materiality of the sculpture, while its clothing and various decorations, which figure as ritualistic objects, are transformed into amulets for healing. I am interested in exploring the various ways in which people have constructed notions of “sacred” objects through the performance of rituals focused on the image of the Dead Christ. Collective community rituals (called *pag-uusong*) concerned with the fulfillment of vows, expressed through street processions by the male devotees, and rituals performed as worshippers change the clothes of the sculpture (called *pagbibihis*), are performative discourses that reveal the conflicting social relationships in the town based on social class and gender constructions. Moreover, the settings where these rituals occur also highlight the transformation of secular spaces, such as homes and town streets, into sacred spaces as liminal sites of meaning-making during the traditional Holy Week celebrations carried out by members of the Catholic faith.

While popular Catholic images that abound in the Philippine cultural landscape are dominated by the Catholic Church, this paper argues that the presence and significance of these sculptures do not just remain inside the churches. Catholic religious sculptures can be found in many private residences in almost every town and city. In many cases, community identity is built around rituals that Filipinos have practiced in caring for these private images, and, by extension, the meanings and value of these religious images, for members of the faith, have been based on these everyday experiences, rather than being influenced by the institutional Catholic Church. It is for this reason that this study seeks a better understanding of the ways Philippine religious sculptures function by considering the relevance of appropriation and performativity, thereby examining the negotiated and contested

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<sup>1</sup> Lucban is located in the southeastern part of the Luzon island in the Philippines, at the foot of the “mystical” mountain called Mt. Banahaw.

meaning of culture as it is played out in everyday life in the contemporary Philippines.

#### FROM SANTO TO POON: THE APPROPRIATION OF RELIGIOUS IMAGES

An analysis of the *Mahal na Senyor* can be situated within the larger context of cultural and religious understandings associated with the *poon*, or privately owned religious icons. Such religious sculptures were first introduced to Filipinos, and these transactions negotiated by them, during the Spanish colonization of the islands, and these images are found in most provinces throughout the archipelago that underwent Christianization, and specifically, Catholicization. Four kinds of religious sculpture may be noted here: first are the popular icon-saints brought into the country by the colonizers, which nevertheless came to be widely venerated and important in the national psyche;<sup>2</sup> second are the Western-looking icons that usually represent the patron saints of various towns, and are therefore under the control of the respective local church; third are the images that are owned by rich families in the various towns in the province, which are valued as “antique” and are usually life-size and Caucasian in iconography; and fourth are the small images, considered family heirlooms, that are treasured by both rich and poor families, images characterized by an eclectic and unclear iconography.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Spanish colonizers introduced the concept and physical images of saints upon their arrival in the sixteenth century, the mode of reception, or how the inhabitants accepted these icons, was largely undocumented and remains unclear. We can only see glimpses of the past by reading between the lines in historical documents written by Spanish chroniclers bemoaning the fact that early Filipinos were prone to idolatry, as evidenced by the way they would sing, dance, and drink large amounts of liquor in front of wooden sculptures called *licha* during various festivities, including burials for the dead. While the chroniclers variously acknowledge that the Catholic Filipinos observe the rituals of the faith, attend masses, or even confess their “sins,” the Spanish observers express bewilderment regarding the practice of Filipinos who hide or bury their traditional wooden gods in their backyards. In the lowlands, where colonial towns were built, the transition from belief in the traditional *licha* to veneration of the Catholic *santo* became inevitable as the church imposed its influence on the daily life of the settlers.

By the nineteenth century, a social class called the *mestizo*, or creole, emerged from the intermarriages between the Chinese migrants and the native population, and over time this class gained social and economic prominence. The rich *mestizo* families acquired their wealth through extensive land holdings and lucrative trading in Mexico and China. To proclaim and display their newfound wealth, they established huge ancestral houses, commissioned formal family portraits, and purchased life-size religious icons for processional purposes, as status symbols in a colonial society. Borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the field of cultural production, we can argue that these elite families accumulated prestige through their

<sup>2</sup> Examples of these icons are the Nazareno of Quiapo, Santo Niño de Cebu, the Virgin of Antipolo, and the Virgin of Manauag, among others, which are believed to possess miraculous powers and have been appropriated to represent local and national meanings through tourism and festivals.

<sup>3</sup> Esperanza Gatabonton, *A Heritage of Saints* (Manila: Editorial Associates Ltd., 1979), p. 101.

ownership of religious icons, which figured as symbolic capital, in which the habitus of Catholic colonial culture was manifested as a “system of predispositions.”<sup>4</sup> By identifying the field of cultural production as “sites of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition,” Bourdieu also maintains the role of human agency as a social force that can act to change the structured habitus and field. This notion will be useful in this study, as it invites us to consider the various roles townspeople have assigned to themselves vis-à-vis a certain religious icon and how they construct social relations through the performance of specific rituals.

The value and meaning of a religious icon did not stop inside the circumscribed world of the elite families. Land tenants and employees of the elite were conscripted to carry the families’ heavy images on shoulder-borne supports called *andas* during feast days and celebrations, such as those that take place during Holy Week. In other words, the icons achieved a public life that neither the local church nor the elite families of a town could completely control. Mythical stories about the statues abound, and it is said that healing powers, related to these rituals, pass from one person to another, from one generation to another. In one sense, Filipinos have constructed an alternative faith outside the purview of the institutional Catholic church by developing various rituals centering on religious icons, such as public processions, community prayers, acts of devotion, and the celebration of feasts for town saints. In addition to myths concerned with miracles and acts of healing attributed to particular icons, Filipinos have also evolved a system of knowledge and beliefs that link to an indigenous culture not necessarily consistent with Western thought.

Images of the suffering Christ (such as “the Crucified,” “the Nazarene,” and “the Interred”), images of the Virgin Mary from different localities, each of which identifies its own icon by baptizing it with the town’s name, and secular versions of the Santo Niño all point to different ways of making meaning in relation to the icons.<sup>5</sup> Many contemporary studies are currently being done that focus on the *relational* aspect of a person’s interactions with saints/images, examined in the context of that person’s social condition—a reciprocal order with regards to the spirit world that results in *ginhawa*, or relief, from poverty and illnesses through acts of propitiation anchored in indigenous rituals.<sup>6</sup> It might be that the doctrinal and ethical teachings of the church that guide believers to enter “heaven” might not be important to some devotees or have been redefined to fit the context of their lives. Rather, the motives behind people’s religious actions are geared toward issues concerned with everyday, earthly ambitions and struggles—occupation, recovery from illness and disease, good harvest, education, protection from natural calamities. An example of an icon that promises mundane benefits is the Virgin of Antipolo, who is considered the patron saint for travelers, especially Filipinos seeking employment abroad who frequently fly in and out of the country. In Cebu, we can

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 70–71.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of images of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child and their cooption into Filipino secular politics, see Julius Bautista, *Figuring Catholicism: An Ethnohistory of the Santo Niño de Cebu* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), chap. 6.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion on these, see Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

find the famous Santo Niño, which is worshipped through the dance of the Sinulog, performed by old women vendors as an alternative form of prayer.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, religiosity and faith are not abstract concepts in such contexts, but rather have materiality and, more importantly, transformative potential. Recent studies have also suggested that these religious icons now also play a role in the process of “imagining” a nation, as in the case of the Ati-Atihan festival in Aklan, which features the image of the Santo Niño; at this festival, one can see evidence that the government exploits the economic potential of religious street spectacles as an important drawing card for state-sponsored tourism.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from the icons that one can easily find inside churches, many more are privately owned by families, considered among the town’s elites, which, more often than not, have a long genealogical history intertwined with local history and political life. The *poon* they own have public lives and archive the family’s importance through the worship, or *panata*, they attract from the ordinary townsfolk. This social relationship between the private owners and public followers of a respected icon has functioned for centuries, and exists up to the present. A *panata* may be characterized as a private vow that is inherently secret, known only by the person making it. The potency of the vow—the performance of the actions involved, its purpose, and the duration of its performance—depends on the believer. A *panata* loses potency or power if it is revealed to anyone; the state of secrecy is of prime importance. Generally, the local church turns a blind eye to this kind of devotion to a particular saint. However, a *panata* is publicly performed, so that all members of one’s town actually know, because they observe, that one is undergoing such a process. While the content of one’s vow is private, the realization can only be achieved in the public sphere, in spaces outside the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of institutional church authority, so that rituals and myths concerning a *poon* can potentially transform secular spaces such as home interiors and street spaces into sacred spaces. This sacralization of space facilitates the patronage of amulets, or *anting-anting*, and healing practices associated with them, which involve touching the *poon* and its clothes with the amulet. This practice is believed to make it possible for a celebrant to transmit the icon’s curative power to a sick relative in another location.

The term *poon* may also be connected with the material with which it was carved and sculpted—*puno*, or tree. Almost all popular *poons* that are believed to be miraculous are linked to myths describing how they originated as mysterious pieces of wood seen to be floating on rivers, lakes, or the sea, and which would eventually be found by a fisherman, farmer, or hunter. In this characteristic myth, the wood or trunk of the tree is considered as alive and organic and displays lifelike qualities that are communicated to humans through its weight when the wood/sculpture is carried. The dynamics that join the *poon* with its devotees (called *namamanata*, literally “a religious penitent who performs a vow”) are based on the tactile relationship of touching, kissing, wiping, and carrying the sculptural icon—a phenomenon that points to the heightened awareness of the body’s sensory capacities and perceptions. For example, meanings are constructed if the *poon* is not easily carried (*mabigat*), because this would mean the image is communicating non-

<sup>7</sup> With regards to the Sinulog dance, see Sally Ness, *Body, Movement, and Culture: Kinesthetic and Visual Symbolism in a Philippine Community* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), chap. 6.

<sup>8</sup> See Bautista, *Figuring Catholicism*, chap. 7.

approval of the intended action (to be moved). On the other hand, if the *poon* were weightless (*magaan*), then it would mean that the *poon* is willing to let itself be carried to another place and is in agreement with the intention of the believer.

The common color for a miraculous *poon* is black, which we can compare to ancient images, called *licha*, of indigenous Filipinos, who deliberately blacken the wooden images of their *anito*, or ancestor spirit. Historical documents from sixteenth-century Spanish chroniclers describe the presence of *anitos* to whom daily prayers and gifts were offered. Antonio Pigafetta, Ferdinand Magellan's chronicler, who documented the fleet's 1521 arrival in the Philippine Islands, describes the painted images that the explorers found in the island of Cebu as being "made of wood, hollow, lacking back parts, arms open, and feet turned up under their legs." More significantly, Fray Juan de Plasencia wrote in 1580 that the "Tagalogs anointed their *anitos* with fragrant perfumes such as musk, civet, the gum of the storax tree [*kamanyang*], or other aromatic wood."<sup>9</sup> Returning to 1565 Cebu, the Spanish colonizers found an image of the Christ Child in a large house that had survived a fire that ravaged the settlement. The icon was clothed in native attire, and many flowers, given as offerings, were found before the image, and it had been anointed with oil, just as the natives did with their *anitos*.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore easy to relate such indigenous practices to the veneration and appropriation of the *poon* today, with the various rituals of procession, prayers, devotion, and cleaning and dressing of the icons being meaningful to Christianized Filipinos who are experiencing poverty and social inequity. Together with the network of constructed myths recognized as narratives that make claims regarding power and truth, this system of knowledge, involving ancestral and Christian icons, was created by the devotees in a way that inverts modern-day notions of "rationality" based on Western thought. The system has constructed an alternative "rationality" through the merging of indigenous practices with alien religious forms.

The devotion to a *poon* also implies the capacity of people to determine which spaces are transformed into sacred spaces, depending on the ritualistic appropriation of the icon. The usual arenas for such activities are the street and the private home, where, in both instances, the priest and doctrinal rules are absent. The ritual veneration of *poon* was also conducted during the sixteenth century in places where structures for worship were meant for individual or family affairs. Occasionally, a large gathering would be hosted in the house of the chief, where a festival, or a *magaanito* (spirit-possession ceremony), would be held—a four-day celebration, with continuous light and drums. According to Plasencia, on such occasions, "the house was referred to as a *simbahan*, a place of adoration."<sup>11</sup> These practices have been carried into the present with the traditions of Holy Week, especially the tradition of the chanting of Christ's passion, the *pabasa*, in death rituals and in festivals for the *poon*.

For the purposes of this study, a ritual may be considered as a social construct pertaining to a "special occasion" in the life of a group of people that recognizes the imperative or compulsory nature of its performance in a space and at a time agreed

<sup>9</sup> Cited by Regalado Trota Jose in *Simbahan: Church Art in Colonial Philippines, 1565–1898* (Makati: Ayala Foundation, 1991), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Bautista, *Figuring Catholicism*, pp. 65–68.

<sup>11</sup> Juan de Plasencia, "Customs of the Tagalogs," in *The Philippine Islands, 1493–1898*, ed. E. Blair and J. Robertson (Mandaluyong: Cacho Hermanos, 1973), p. 185.

upon. Although this might erroneously lead us to imagine a harmonious relationship within a particular society, it must be pointed out that rituals do not have a hegemonic nature, but rather are continuously contested and negotiated by social actors having divergent interests. In many ways, “rituals create and maintain, sometimes change, the cultural identity and social relations in society.”<sup>12</sup> It is important to determine who constructs the ritual, how this is created, and which people are meant to benefit from its efficacy. Class, gender, and even ethnic “interests” create myths, and their corresponding rituals are contested in a society because of their potential to be the sources of symbolic power. This means that social recognition is given to those who perform special rituals that would lead to the potency of the *anting-anting*, or amulets. A break in the performance of ritual would mean a failure of meaning and sacredness. Women’s role in cleaning the images, and the women’s continuous narration of the myths, help create such an atmosphere, in conjunction with the role performed by the men, who carry the image. Both these actions satisfy *panata*, or vows, that pertain to the performance of specific roles and, as such, the actors may also be considered to be in the state of “liminality,” or “in-between states,” as explained in Victor Turner’s work.<sup>13</sup> According to this theory, liminality is a state of transformation or *rites de passage*, of the kind enacted in Luchan, on Good Fridays, by barefooted male devotees, wearing identical clothing, crowded in a massive choreography of push-and-pull as they bear the glass carriage through a sea of people vying for the chance to perform their *panata*. Such a ritual may be considered a “moment in and out of time”—where a *communitas* of devotees is created, rendering all participants temporarily equal in a moment of time.<sup>14</sup> Rules of normal living are also temporarily suspended, so that unusual behavior is tolerated, extraordinary shows of strength are accepted, and civil law and legal law are meaningless.

Thus the normal rules of social relations are suspended during the *Mahal na Senyor* procession, with the rationalization that the worshippers are all governed by spiritual power that must be appeased every Good Friday. The sacredness of Good Friday in the Philippines is still recognized in many towns, and the holiday interpreted as a time to forgo comfort and ease, to display solidarity with others, and to perform sacrifices in the community. This is why we can consider Christian Filipinos to be experiencing the condition of liminality during the commemoration of Good Friday—a place out of time, when “God is dead.” It is widely believed by the poor that many things can happen when people act out their *panata* during this time—one may receive blessings for a good harvest, relief from sickness and disease, deliverance from natural calamities, and so much more. Thus, the status of Good Friday as a sacred time opens an avenue to power and potency through the veneration of the *poon* that is strongly associated with the funeral of Christ.

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel de Coppet, ed., *Understanding Rituals* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), p. i.

<sup>13</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

### THE DEAD CHRIST, OR MAHAL NA SENYOR, OF LUCBAN, QUEZON

In Lucban, Quezon, the image of the Dead Christ is called *Mahal na Senyor*, or just simply “Senyor.” Most townsfolk are not actually familiar with the term *Santo Entierro* (Interred Christ); rather, they regard this miraculous image as alive—as a friend, a child, a father figure, even as a landlord. The image is six feet long, carved in hardwood, and outfitted in the gold regalia of a funerary costume for its Good Friday procession; the costume is embroidered with forty symbols of the passion of Christ done in gold thread (Figure 1). Claimed to be made of solid wood (even its joints), the only parts of the body that will be seen by the viewer on an ordinary day are the head and the blackened feet. The image owns as many as forty sets of clothes in all imaginable shades, as well as bedclothes given to it by various patrons, most of whom are well-off and, significantly, residing and working in other countries. Stories abound of people who donated clothes to the icon because they felt compelled to do so; in some cases, the Senyor appears in people’s dreams.



Figure 1: The *Mahal na Senyor* (April 2003). Photo by Cecilia De La Paz

The Senyor is believed to have originated in the mid-nineteenth century, but its origins are a subject for debate and dependent on the narrator of the tale. Let us consider the perspective of the owner: the Rañola clan, owners of the icon, insists on the ambiguity of the statue’s origin, claiming that it came from Mexico, presumably to connect the status of the image with foreign aesthetics and market value. According to their family history, they trace the ownership of the *poon* to the year 1840 and with their prominent patriarch, Don Juan Rañola, alive at that time; the year 1840 also marked an uprising of the millenarian movement, *Cofradia de San Jose of Hermano Pule*.<sup>15</sup> Don Juan was a Chinese *mestizo* who may have owned a big

<sup>15</sup> In terms of understanding Filipino “history from below,” Reynaldo Ileto discusses the importance of millenarian movements in resisting colonial power, and how they played out in both the local and national history of the Philippines. See Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and*

rice mill during this time and eventually came to own a wide swath of agricultural lands, the basis of his wealth. While the Rañolas are connected by bloodlines to political families in the Philippines, they themselves have not achieved prestige and prominence by holding public office. Rather, their symbolic capital lies in their ownership of the image of the Dead Christ. When Don Juan died in the 1920s, he bequeathed the image and the associated duties and responsibilities (called *ako*) to his nine children, along with an endowment of two hectares of land given in the name of the icon. Through a system of rotation, the nine branches of the family sequentially take on the responsibility for overseeing the material needs of the icon and supervising the ritual performances for the image, along with administering its land. In other words, the image is literally a landowner, with its property called *lupa ng poon* (land of the *poon*), aptly enough. The income from this land is used by the branch of the family that has *ako* for the year; this income is employed (and more often, supplemented) for the icon's maintenance and Holy Week rituals, such as decorating the carriage for the procession and feeding the townspeople during the annual *pabasa*, the revered chanting of the Passion of Christ.

In Lucban, the free meals served during Holy Thursday and Good Friday are important traditions that determine the current social standing of the Rañola family according to the kinds of refreshments served, as would be true if they were hosting a wake for the dead. It must be pointed out that not all the Rañola descendants live in Lucban nowadays. Some are in Metro Manila, Bicol, Baguio, the United States, and Australia. Nine-year rotations, organized through the drawing of lots, determine who will have the *ako* for the following year. An *ako* year is usually seen as a blessing on that branch of the family, a blessing for which members can prepare. Depending on who "wins" for the year, the image moves from one house to another. It must stay within the town of Lucban, however, a condition that has effectively made it into a symbol of local identity for the townspeople, as they claim that the value of the image is solely understood by a native "Lucbanin."

On Good Friday, the male devotees, or *mag-uusong*, claim that the image is really owned by the townspeople who carried it back from Manila when it was returned during the late nineteenth century, after it was pawned off by the original owners (the Rilles family). Those referring to this history intend to make the point that the Rañolas are not the sole owners of the image. In this version of the tale, a meeting was called by the town elders in order to redeem the pawned image because catastrophe could befall the townspeople if the figure did not return to the town. They were able to raise the amount of 300 pesos out of the 700 pesos needed. Then Don Juan Rañola, described as "*pala-simba*" (which literally means "always attending mass"), provided the necessary 400 pesos,<sup>16</sup> presumably because one of his sons started dreaming about the Senyor. As the story goes, the family of the pawnbrokers in Manila started experiencing bad luck and illness, and they were happy enough to let the image go. Borne on two large wooden beams on the shoulders of the Lucban townspeople, the Senyor triumphantly crossed mountain trails to reach Lucban at last. Since Don Juan held the largest share in the statue, he became the steward of the icon. But as some devotees insist, the contributions of their forefathers, whether these involved small amounts of money or physical labor, cannot be denied. As heirs to

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*Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> One US dollar is equivalent to approximately 44 Philippine pesos.



their elders, the male devotees in contemporary times perpetuate the beliefs and actions of their fathers.

Male roles are centered on the *panata* of the *usong* (to carry), a public spectacle carried out in the streets, which are turned into testing grounds of faith. Power, strength, and endurance in both body and spirit are performed by the tens of thousands of *namamanata* in a communal show of strength and determination, coordination, and cooperation (Figure 2). Such a crowd can easily turn into a rowdy mob; it is the ultimate success if a Good Friday procession is achieved with minimal injuries. It is quite common in Lucban for disagreements to arise between the owner of the image of the Dead Christ and the devotees, centering mainly on the Good Friday ritual procession. Many people remember that, before World War II, the procession was typically solemn and quiet. Male devotees were dressed in clean shirts, trousers, and shoes. There was no shouting, and only the hair-raising sound of crystal glass bouncing off the glass of the carriage could be heard, as in a funeral. However, after the war, when Lucban suffered economic hardship, the Good Friday procession changed in character: the number of barefooted male devotees increased and they became generally more boisterous.



Figure 2: The male *mag-uusong* pull the ropes attached to the *andas* during a Good Friday procession (April 2004). Photo by Cecilia De La Paz

With this development came a change in the manner of the procession itself. It became a test of endurance, noisy and boisterous, marked by the stench of sweaty bodies and alcohol. Members of the Rañolas family disappeared from the procession. There had been times in the past that the Rañolas refused to let the *Senyor* be part of the procession, but now if they attempted to protect the statue in this way, men would storm into their house, claiming the icon. Eventually, the owners installed wheels and handbrakes onto the carriage, eliminating the traditional wooden beams. They also attached four pieces of synthetic ropes measuring twenty meters each,

which were pulled by the devotees, which results in the pushing-and-pulling motion that one sees now. This innovation gave rise to a new belief—that the rope is transformed into an *anting-anting* after every Good Friday procession.

The “rope turned amulet” is said to enhance the rice harvest if placed on the nostrils of the *carabao*, or to insure a bountiful catch if used in fishing line. Handling this rope/amulet, and wiping the carriage, are the chief performative actions through which worshippers seek to acquire the “potential power” of a Good Friday procession (Figure 3). This raises two interesting points: 1) the rope turned amulet is a recent phenomena, which started in the mid-1980s, so that even modern material, like a synthetic rope, can have potential power; and 2) the power of the *anting-anting* does not rely on the materiality of the object, but is based on people’s collective performance of faith through the *panata*. A combination of sacred time (Good Friday), sacred space (streets of the town), and action (*panata*) can create a belief that addresses contemporary concerns in an everyday life based on an agricultural economy.



Figure 3: A male devotee takes pieces of the rope that were cut after the procession in the belief that it becomes an *anting-anting* or amulet.

Photo by Cecilia De La Paz, April 2004

For such a small town, the procession lasts a long time, usually four to five hours, because of the slow pace of the men pushing and pulling the carriage—a spontaneous choreography based on directionality. For instance, devotees believe that when the procession goes into a road pointing to Manila, the carriage becomes heavy. One can explain this phenomenon through the topography of the town, in which roads predictably undulate because of the mountainous terrain. But the devotees will insist that the weight of the image is determined by the image itself, not the terrain, and they revel in the hardship that they have endured.

Finally, at close to ten o’clock in the evening, the *Senyor* is pulled into the church interior (by now, the pews have been disarranged by the people) with triumphant

shouts and clapping from the bare-chested male devotees who have taken their shirts off. Some of these men will bring their sweaty T-shirts home to wipe, and heal, sick members of the family. The Senyor will stay in the church for an hour or so, where people can view it, wipe cloth on the glass carriage, kiss and touch the glass, and pray to it, until the women take over and push the carriage to the Rañola house—a role that they have taken upon themselves as “a reenactment” of the Biblical story about the women who visited the tomb of Christ, and found it empty, after his death.



Figure 4: The women devotees perform the *pagbibihis*, which entails cleaning, perfuming, and dressing the image. Photograph by Cecilia De La Paz, April 2004

According to the *manang*, or *haripoy*, as the women devotees are called, the image emerged from a miraculous sort of wood and saved the town from Japanese snipers, sexual violence, and American bombings during World War II. The women take charge of the changing of the statue’s clothes every first Friday of each month, and on Holy Tuesday they dress it in its antique regalia, in preparation for Good Friday, when the *manang*, or old women, clean the statue. This ritual is called *pagbibihis*, or dressing the image (Figure 4). With cotton balls and rose perfume, their hands reach inside the bedclothes, and not once would the wooden figure be wholly revealed to anyone. (The used cotton balls and laundry water are also distributed to the sick.) It would be a privilege to see the wounds in the chest of the Senyor, and much care and respect is given to the *poon*. It is continuously talked to like a child, during the

process of cleaning, as each woman communicates what she is doing—applying perfume, cleaning the eyelashes, sewing the hem, and clasping the seatbelt found inside the bed clothes. Female roles are geared towards the maternal caring for the *poon*—dressing and cleaning—combined with their role as teachers, for women lead the prayers and narrate stories and myths of the *poon*, and they identify with the biblical women who sought to care for Christ when he visited the homes of believers. Such roles point to the private spaces of the home usually identified with women. As these tasks are limited to a circle of old women, secrecy is important for them, perhaps because they play the dual role of venerating the *poon* while maintaining their roles in official church activities. Most of the unwedded or widowed old women are the prayer leaders and teachers of small children in the town, members of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, an organization for religiously devout women who help in the church activities. Indeed, like the *babaylans* (priestess) in precolonial times, they are the keepers of local knowledge purveyed through healing myths and stories of the miraculous *Senyor*, and sometimes these women conflict with the other claimants eager to serve the *poon*. They presumably know the birth date of the *Senyor*, which is August 21—a secret date kept from the Rañola family and the male devotees—and celebrate it in their own way. According to their version of the figure's origin, the image of the *Senyor* appeared in Don Juan Rañola's dream. He ordered lumber to be brought to his house. During the night, a mysterious person or carver came and sculpted the image of the Dead Christ from the wood.

These women also tell the tale of the *Senyor*'s displeasure when a member of the Rañola family considered selling the land belonging to *Senyor*, or converting his rice fields through new real-estate ventures, and pointed out that there had been mud on the hem of the *Senyor*'s gown at these times, presumably picked up when the statue visited his *lupa*, or land, to inspect it. They point out the importance of the rice fields to the *Senyor*, and explain how he had forced that particular owner to withdraw his suggestion to use the land for a different purpose. The symbolical power that the women held during the festival I observed is illustrated, in part, by the stories they know and repeat, and demonstrates the continuous contestation and negotiation of meaning being played out in the reconstructed faith in Lucban, combining faith and economics. One can therefore argue that the symbolic capital, in Bourdieu's sense of the word, can be claimed by the "players in the field"—so to speak—and performed throughout the year because of the liminal power that rituals and festivals provide to various sectors of society that have "truth-claims" about the *Senyor*.

In general, the various ways the townspeople of Lucban have claimed the *Senyor* as their own anchor of their own truths have shaped and produced their particular local culture, a contested and negotiated field. While one is tempted to say that power and social hierarchy are often challenged, and even inverted, in the Good Friday ritual procession in Lucban, so that the control of the statue's owners and church is muted, we still have to acknowledge that this is not a case of subversion. Rather, social hierarchies and gender roles are still affirmed, wherein class divisions are still evident. However, the contested myths and the changing ways in which the ritual is done through the years tell us that the field of culture production and social structure are open to interpretation by social actors in Lucban.

Good Friday, as a liminal day in Philippine culture, is widely acknowledged as that one time of the year when all things are possible, such as the potencies of amulets, because, presumably, God is dead. Metaphorically, this is, of course, an insult to the Catholic Church, which actively dissuades people from believing in

magical objects. However, the phenomena of the Senyor of Lucban points to a similarity with another liminal period in one's life—that of death's presence and the concomitant funeral. Everyday normal rules are suspended in such an event. But is it not interesting that the Senyor is almost akin to a dead relative who needs to be washed, dressed, and interred? One only needs look at the Rañola family picture to know the validity of this claim, for official family photos almost always include the sculpture (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Photo of the Rañola family in the 1950s.  
Photo courtesy of the Rañola family

Taking off from studies of the notion of the “potent dead” in Southeast Asia, one can easily see the similarities of the Senyor rituals to other regional rituals that assign the importance to rites for the dead, as ritual veneration of the dead connects the present generation to its ancestors and establishes one's reciprocal relationship with them.<sup>17</sup> In the mountains of the northern Philippines, the Ifugao people have an elaborate ceremony of *sang-a-chil* that involves washing and dressing the deceased as the dead body is sung to throughout the wake, during which it sits in a chair, rather than lying down. In Tana Toraja, Indonesia, the indigenous people carve wooden sculptures to represent a deceased relative, called *tau-tau*. The sculpture is believed to represent the soul of the deceased, and thus is also integral to the funeral rites of internment in mountain caves, where the image is displayed as a reminder of the power of the ancestors to influence the living.<sup>18</sup> The Senyor, as *poon* of the people

<sup>17</sup> Henri Chambert-Loir and Anthony Reid, eds., *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints, and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia* (Crow's Nest, NSW, and Honolulu, HI: Allen and Unwin, and University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Eric Crystal, “Rape of the Ancestors: Discovery, Display, and Destruction of the Ancestral Statuary of Tana Toraja,” in *Fragile Traditions: Indonesian Art in Jeopardy*, ed. P. Taylor (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp. 29–41.

who believe and perform their *panata* to it, is a link to a Southeast Asian culture that widely acknowledges the importance of ancestors in the present life. Whether the *poon* may be employed to influence the political and economic life of the living, or to intercede for good fortune and healing, the veneration of the *poon* of Lucban reverberates with the patterns of localization that the town underwent from the Spanish colonial period until the present.

## CONCLUSION

In remapping the cultural studies of the Philippines as part of Southeast Asia, the study of *poon*, and its various appropriations, points to continuous constructions of social identities in the context of performative rituals. This study also enables us to observe how a particular town has ordered its world based on how social actors have appropriated religious icons in the struggle to claim spaces, truths, and meanings in the ever-changing social environment. Religious sculptures, as material cultural icons in the Philippines and Southeast Asia, resist being merely purely visual phenomena. Rather, sculptures *move* in various spaces of a community, thereby making them potential subjects for performance studies, integrating the aesthetics of everyday life and recognizing the impetus people ascribe to tactile sensory perceptions—touching, wiping, and kissing the *poon*.

It is interesting to note that local, historical memories are embodied in the *poon*. Centering on the town's survival and continuity up to the present, social family histories become significant when one considers the *poon* as the fulcrum of socially constructed identities. Also, gendered roles assume importance in the construction of meaning with regards to the *poon* and vice versa—the *poon* creates venues for gender to be socially constructed. One recognizes the importance of family and ancestors in the constitution of meaning of a *poon*. In the case of the *Senyor*, the image of the Dead Christ invokes a strong sense of "potency" acquired through the performance of various rituals played out by members of different classes, with different interests. Indeed, the presence of the "dead lord," interred in a home throughout the year, cared for by the townspeople, must be more than just sculpted wood; it is, rather, the embodiment of a town's *still* contested, albeit unarticulated, social history.