POWER AND INTIMACY
IN THE CHRISTIAN
PHILIPPINES

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Bicol Pasion, in which more old-fashioned spelling is used, especially -e for -k. However, I prefer 'Bicol' to the modernised 'Bikol', and have used this spelling throughout.

Names
Some pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of my informants.

Introduction: mountains and plains

This is a book about people who for a long period have been described in academic literature - and even at times describe themselves - as having no culture worth the name, and as being in many senses a vexing puzzle for social and political theory. Disturbingly devoid, as it was thought, of social backbone, lowland Filipinos have frequently been said to be 'merely imitative' of their two sets of Western colonisers: first Catholic Spain (between 1571 and 1896) and then, after a revolution and a single year as an independent republic, America, from 1898 to the second declaration of independence in 1946.

The area of the lowlands in which I worked has if anything a lower cultural profile than either the Tagalog-speaking provinces around Manila to its north, or the Visayas to its south. Although under the Spanish, Bicol had considerable economic and religious significance, the early Spanish reports tend to contrast Tagalog and Visayan 'types' of culture in extended accounts, and pass more briefly over the lands which lay in between. Its past remains full of puzzles which historians are only just beginning to unravel: why did Bicolanos ferociously resist the Spanish, but then become some of Catholicism's earliest mass converts? Why was the revolution against Spain less flamboyant and less easy to characterise in Bicol than elsewhere? Contemporary Bicol falls within Philippine Economic Region Five, the poorest in the nation, and unlike Manila or Cebu, Bicol's regional capital Naga City is not yet a boom-town of factories or Free Trade Zones. Once again, the things which are easiest to see seem to be happening elsewhere.

The Bicolano people I met, some of whom are quoted in the chapters which follow, will be described engaged in many different pursuits, sometimes tightly connected with each other and sometimes less so. I will pass
from women’s stories about forced marriage and a reconstruction of their historical significance, to an account of the complex and often ambiguous forms of Bicolano spirit-mediumship, from there to an exploration of the important local Catholic cult of the ‘dead Christ’, and finally to one of Naga City’s most spectacular events, the Miss Gay Naga City male transvestite beauty-contests. I do not want to suggest that these diverse activities can be forced into a tidy and hermetically sealed system of interpretation or cosmolgy, for Bicolanos themselves are comparatively uninterested in constructing and promoting a closed notion of their own ‘culture’. But I will suggest that we can see a connection between these contexts nonetheless, in the attitudes that Bicolano people take to relationships of unequal power, and the centripetal to poorer people of the notion that hierarchy can always be, if not eliminated, then at least mitigated, even by the apparently powerless. The rhetorical assertion that submission can be turned into the beginning of a position of strength is a theme which runs through every part of this book.

Mountains and plains: the construction of the lowland Philippines in colonial history

In his ethnohistory of the Buid of highland Mindoro, Tom Gibson has contrasted the Buid solution to colonial invasions with that of the lowlanders. The former refused all contact and exchange with the new rulers and settlers, retreating up into the mountains and turning inwards to create a society which denies the very possibility of hierarchy even amongst themselves, while the latter entered into intensely charged exchange relationships with the representatives of the colonial powers (Gibson, 1986: 38–49).

This view of a structuring contrast between the highland and lowland Philippines is one which will inform this book. I take it that, broadly speaking, the lowland Catholic rural people, with whom I lived, have taken the opposite historical path to the Buid; while the Buid have tried to turn their backs on the historical processes of colonisation, the lowlanders have been forced to engage with them intensively, and to find ways of negotiating with the colonisers.

This contrast is of course a simplification. In reality lowland populations have alternated between the attempt to build benevolent exchange relations with colonial power-holders, the attempt to enforce a correct or tolerable form of these relations, and at times the complete abandonment of them. Lowland Filipino society has had its own movements up and down the mountains in retreat from the more intensely governed plains, in
the various guerilla and resistance movements, or movements of fugitives from colonial taxes or other impositions and persecutions. The tradition of the remontados (Geron, 1988b:81), or ‘those who have gone back up the mountain’, embraces people on the run from Spanish friars. Spanish taxes, Japanese concentration camps, American suppressions of peasant rebellions, lowland crop failures, local vendettas and the modern Philippine Constabulary. For lowlanders, the uplands (Bicol, bkid) have always been both a wild and somewhat fearful place, and a frontier refuge, economic and political (Owen, 1984: 22–3; 1990: 424–6; Mallari, 1983).

Partly because of their indigenous religious significance, which predates the Spanish period, mountains have also been the usual site for small ‘native-syncretistic’ religious communities, which make their own attempt to turn their back on, and thus radically reinterpret, colonial history. The most famous of such mountains is probably Mount Banahaw in Laguna province, site of Rizalist 2 and other nationalist cults, as well as cults based on reworkings of ‘babayanism’ (indigenous spirit-mediumship) and other traditions (Elesterio, 1989; Marasigan, 1985; Cullumar, 1986).

It would be wrong, then, to picture lowland engagement in the colonial societies as quiescent. Between the later nineteenth century and the present day, there have been persistent if intermittent eruptions of ‘peasant rebellions’ and anti-colonial or anti-occupation movements which intersect in complex ways at different times. And recent work which takes its cue from James Scott’s notion of the ‘moral economy’ in Southeast Asia (1985) has reintroduced the notion of ‘everyday resistance’ even within apparently peaceful lowland communities (Kerkvliet, 1990).

However, the Bicolanos with whom I lived are very different from Gibson’s Buid. While the Buid emphasise their autonomy from these historical developments, the people I knew describe themselves and their culture 3 in some contexts as merely the product of successive colonial importations. In fact, to say (as was said to me innumerable times), ‘We Filipinos are very Westernised . . . the Spanish brought religion, the Americans brought democracy’, is to make a statement which indicates one’s own education, since this is the view of Philippine history through primary-school textbooks, many of which have changed little since the American period (Mulder, 1990b). Of course, this kind of statement is not to be taken too literally: it was a view likely to be emphasised in polite conversation with a white foreign visitor, and it does not mean that Bicolanos never reflect on their own particularities, or think of them with pride. Nevertheless, the view of the lowlands as a layer-cake of foreign influences is an important popular orthodoxy.

Colonialism and neo-colonialism
Clearly, the particularity of Filipino lowland experience is bound up with the colonial history of the archipelago. Spanish interest in the Philippines was somewhat perfunctory until the late nineteenth century; its main importance was in the galleon trade, in which Chinese goods passed through Manila in their way to Acapulco to be exchanged for Latin American silver (Steinberg, 1982:21–2; 35). The peninsular Spanish population in the islands was always small (less than 1 per cent of the population: Blanc-Szanton, 1990:361), although there were larger numbers of Mexican creoles and Latin-American mestizos. In Bicol, as elsewhere, ordinary people experienced Spanish rule mostly through two channels. The systems of tax-farming (encomiendas), exaction of tribute, labour corvees and forced purchase of produce (vandala) placed extremely heavy demands on the population. 5 The missions of the friars effected a rapid initial conversion of Filipinos to Christianity, and the religious orders became the main Spanish presence in most areas, with enormous influence in religion, education and a wide range of political and administrative matters. The Franciscans, who took over from the Augustinians in Bicol in 1574, claimed almost total and fervent Christianisation by 1600, and continued to be a major force in the region up to and beyond the loss of power by Spain (Geron, 1988b: 38; Schumacher, 1981:157). Spanish was never widely spoken, however, since (in contrast to Spanish policy in Mexico and elsewhere) the friars took the decision from the first to evangelise in the various local languages of the Philippines. 6

It is sometimes said that America colonised the Philippines almost absent-mindedly; certainly the invasion was an improvisation in the US hostilities with Spain. Once there, however, the Americans were ‘tempted by the white man’s burden . . . [President] McKinley eventually announced that he had no other choice but “to educate the Filipinos, uplift and civilize and Christianize them [sic], and by God’s grace to do the very best we could by them”’ (Steinberg, 1982:43). This pledge to the ‘little brown brother’ to make a country ‘in our own image’ (Karnow, 1990) was pursued through a well-known and experimental commitment to universal primary school education in English – and also through a slightly less well-known but extremely brutal repression of the Filipino nationalist revolutionary movement (Goodno, 1991:33–5).

The later American colonial period was one of frustration for Filipino leaders, who saw the promise of self-rule first delayed until 1935 and finally granted only in 1946. Moreover, many people considered that the Americans used their role in disbursing capital for economic rebuilding
after the war to create a form of neo-colonialism whose effects are still pervasive today. Certainly, the contemporary Philippine economy is driven by the need to spend 40 per cent of its GNP on servicing its debts to the World Bank and the United States, and by its need to attract international development capital. American pressures have been felt not only on economic issues of 'structural adjustment', but also in its prolonged maintenance of nuclear bases in the Philippines and its alleged continued role in 'counter-insurgency' programmes against the communist guerillas. The country's desperate need to generate foreign currency has also shaped the Philippines as the world's largest exporter of migrant labour (at least six million Filipinos work abroad), and as the US has since the later 1970s increasingly restricted Filipino immigration, closing off the 'American dream', those lucky enough to find work abroad have been diverted to other markets, especially Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and (until the Gulf War) Iraq, often in situations of considerable insecurity (Borra, 1984:16, 21).

The colonial relationship with America has therefore not produced for most ordinary Filipinos the economic opportunities and freedom to travel of which they dream. Nonetheless, America is still generally regarded in the barangays, if not within nationalist politics, as the Philippines' good patron. In the minds of many people I knew in Calamba, this idea is still vividly linked to memories of the Japanese occupation during the Pacific War (1941–46). Japanese presence was heavy in this part of Bicol, and many people I knew had family members imprisoned, tortured or killed for activities in the resistance. The US army appeared as the nation's liberators, and the possession of a US army war-widow's pension is still one of the key factors in creating relative wealth for people of this generation in Bicol.

Before describing the fieldwork setting in which these questions presented themselves to me, I shall examine the ways in which lowland culture was for many years, and often still is, depicted as broken, contentless and insubstantial, before briefly reviewing the relevance of the existing Filipino ethnography of exchange.

The era of a negative conception of the lowland Philippines

For a period which has lasted from at least the beginning of the American period until quite recently the recognition that the history of the lowland Philippines has been forcefully shaped by colonialism has been elided with something quite different; an anxious and discouraging notion in both the academic and non-academic literature, that the lowlands was perhaps nothing but the sum of its colonial parts, a culture without authenticity, or else was only to be defined in a series of negatives, by what it had failed to be.

These anxieties often took the form of a comparison between Filipinos and the American models towards which it was assumed that they should be developing. Such tropes could during the height of their fashion in the 1950s and 1960s swallow up even those who, like the ethnographer of Bicol folklore Father Frank Lynch, were deeply dedicated to the promotion of Phillipine sociolgy and of American–Filipino understanding. Thus in the exploration of 'Philippine values' Lynch quotes from the results of psychometric testing carried out by Bulatao:

...When compared with the American, the Filipino is less autonomous, more dependent. He prefers a steady way of life where things do not demand continual risk-taking. He will thus be more... oriented to authoritarian ways of thinking rather then to innovation and entrepreneurship...

(Lynch, 1984a: 56)

It was not only the Filipino's insufficient entrepreneurship that was a cause for concern, but his general cultural virility:

... compared to Americans, American men and women are higher on autonomy, affiliation, exhibition, change and heterosexuality; they are lower on deference, order, abasement, nurturance and endurance and aggression...

(Bulatao: Special Group Studies, quoted in Lynch, 1984a: 35)

Much of the literature of the period was in fact dominated by a functionalist framework which was applied in order to find out whether Philippine society was growing healthily towards 'modernity', or, as was feared, was languishing in a state of insufficiently rational economic development (Davis, 1973), and retardation of the organs of democratic politics. Even within the national universities, the themes of 'acculturation', the adaptiveness or mal-adaptiveness of the Filipino family and other institutions to social change and cultural dysfunctionality, continued to dominate (Hart, 1977; Manalong, 1982; Mataragon, 1984 and 1985; McDonald, 1982; Morais, 1981; Vengco, 1984). Jocano's detailed ethnographies of barangay life in Ilocos and Panay (1982; 1969a; 1969b) provided much useful analysis, but his hope that 'the presentation of ethnographic data on... lowland ethnic groups can assist in... strengthening national cohesion' (1982: iv) seemed written more in doubt than in confidence.

Indeed, much explicitly nationalistic literature has been overwhelmingly negative in its assessment of lowland culture; the call to 'cultural decolonization' in works of writers such as Renato Constantino (1969; 1976;
being expressed with such vehemence that once again one is left with the impression that the lowlands are dominated by a ‘colonial mentality’ and identity confusion which can only be expropriated root and branch. Constantin would perhaps not greatly disagree with Neils Mulder’s elegy for the birth of a mature Spanish-Filipino elite-led culture that, interrupted by the arrival of the Americans, was stillborn (Mulder 1991:4). ‘The Filipinos were mentally recolonized in a discourse that not only extolled American culture, . . . but that also degraded the Spanish colonial past’ (1991:6). American mass education, argues Mulder, created ‘an undeniable measure of cultural dependency and instability . . . a “colonial mentality” that denigrated the own and imitated the foreign model’ (7). Others have been more inclined to depict the lowlands as under cultural attack through foreign-oriented media, as cinema and radio have spread rapidly through the provinces since the 1950s, and as well as importing films the Philippines supports a large film industry of its own, which turns out quickly made melodramas and action films in Tagalog, the language of the national capital. Although this cinema is in fact highly distinctive, it cannot be said to fit orthodox definitions of high art, and those who claim to see its merits have often criticized its strange admixtures, its borrowings, its derivativeness and its lack of ‘images of ourselves in our own reality’ (Reyes, 1989:85).

While other writers would consider the capacity of the lowlands for ‘resistance’ an article of faith, there has nonetheless been a tendency only to measure its existence in terms external to the culture. As Comans notes, many writers with left-wing sympathies concerned to trace events in the rural areas have taken a ‘dim view of existing Filipino peasant consciousness as a means to meaningful social change’ (Comans, 1991:3). Even Kervik’s extremely valuable recent study of political consciousness in Central Luzon (1990). starts with the question of whether not people in Filipino barangays ‘have’ the concept of class, rather than simply starting by asking what lowland ‘political culture’ might be.

In fact, the only positive model of what lowlands society might be like was for a long time defined by the intelligent but theoretically limited writings of Lynch and especially of Mary Hollisteiner (1973). Hollisteiner (who, as Gibson has pointed out, basically put Mauss in the service of functionalism) proposed a society of landlord-patrons and share-cropping tenants, whose social relations were governed by the sense that the obligations which social inferiors owe their social superiors can never be completely repaid, and must therefore be endlessly acknowledged in small gestures of deference. This relation, known by the Tagalog term utang na loob (debt of the heart or, literally, the ‘inside’) was then contrasted with other obligations or contracts which were of a less permanent kind because they obtained between persons in positions of greater equality to each other (Iloeto, 1979:9).

It would be absolutely undesirable to adopt an anodyne view of lowland history which denied the violent and destructive aspects of either Spanish or American colonialism, but Mulder and many other writers underestimate the extent to which people engage with and manage the problem of dislocating historical experiences. Asking about the lowland Philippines only in terms of class or other systems of analysis primarily associated with the critique of modern Western capitalism, on the other hand, risks deepening the divide which for a long time has separated anthropological ways of looking at the Philippines from ways of looking at the rest of Southeast Asia, and therefore risks dividing the archipelago from its own pre-colonial historical context.

Potency and reciprocity

Meanwhile, the development of anthropological and political studies of other parts of Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, has proceeded along entirely different lines. In particular, since Benedict Anderson’s seminal essay on ‘The idea of power in Javanese culture’ (first published 197212 but reprinted in Anderson 1990: 17–77) it has been taken as axiomatic that contemporary anthropological accounts of people in Java, Borneo, Sulawesi etc. both must and may assume a meaningful connection between the construction of social relations and representations in the present-day world, and a distinctive Southeast-Asian notion of power which has some continuity with even the ancient past of the region, especially with the Indic kingdoms (Anderson, 1990:19).13 Southeast Asian ‘potency’ in Anderson’s account is ‘that intangible, mysterious and divine energy which animates the universe . . . there is no sharp division between organic and inorganic matter, for everything is sustained by the same invisible power’ (1990:22). Moreover, he argues, the fundamental problem for Javanese rulers has not been the legitimacy of power, but the problem of accumulating and preserving it, given that this energy always remains at a fixed quantity in the universe, and that a redistribution of power therefore always implies different persons gaining and losing power relative to each other (Anderson, 1990:23–4).14

The second key element in the re-imaging of the lowlands was the exceptional essays of the historian William Henry Scott, who put forward
an original and persuasive re-reading of the Spanish missionary accounts of
the Philippines at and just after colonial contact (Scott, 1985a and
1985b). Scott described lowland society as basically divided into social
ranks: datu or aristocrats, freemen and commoners. Lowland society was
never amalgamated into a single state before the arrival of the Spanish,
but consisted of many small, military or (since they were often coastal)
piratical chieftains, making war and trading with each other in conditions
of relative political fluidity. But the brilliance of Scott's contribution lay in
the fact that he disentangled the confusing descriptions given in the
Spanish sources for the rights and duties of commoners, to show that this
was above all a society which functioned dynamically on the basis of
infinite gradations of debt-bondage. The power of a datu consisted in the
fact that he was bonded to no one, and that he had innumerable depen
dents to whom he distributed patronage; everyone else owed some greater
or lesser part of their labour to another person, who in turn often pro
vided them with protection. Moreover, despite the existence of the three
ranks of person, all these positions were mutable; a debt-slave could rise
through gradually lightening relations of bondage to become a freeman or
even a datu, and a datu could slip from power and descend in the other
direction.

Both these analytic directions were taken up in two extremely important
works on the social history of the Tagalog regions of the Philippines,
Ileto's *Pasyon and revolution* (1979) on the 'millenarian' uprisings against
Spain which formed part of the Philippine revolution and Rafael's
*Contracting colonialism* (1988) on the nature of early Spanish
Christianisation. Both these outstanding works turned centrally on a
revision of the utang-na-loob view of lowland society, and especially on a
critique of the way in which it failed to consider the possibility of social
conflict in hierarchical relations. Thus Ileto's study explored the use of the
language of popular Tagalog religious texts, especially the sung passion
story or *Pasyon*, in 'peasant rebellions' whose leaders, wholly dependent
for their sustenance and their lives on their supporters, were identified with
the life and sufferings of Christ. In the search for kalayaan (freedom/salva
tion) all normal hierarchical relations are inverted; '... the gift is a mode
of strengthening the bonds of loob among men. Begging and the accep
tance of food, shelter and protective care create, not a subordinate–super
ordinate relationship, but a horizontal one akin to love... things are in
fact turned upside-down – the debtor is the man of power' (Ileto,

While one might perhaps expect such inversions in the context of
 millennium moments (Bloch, 1992a: 85–98), Ileto's account seems also to
be exploring a potential which is always present in lowland culture for the
meanings of hierarchy to slip sideways into something else. Rafael's
account of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century period takes up this
sense of allipage.

For Rafael, the main importance of the notion of utang na loob for six
teenth-century Tagalogs was that the loob or 'inside' of a person could only
be created and maintained through the relations of exchange which
structured all Filipino society. Thus, it is not that the 'inside' is circulated
in exchanges between superordinate and subordinate, but that participa
ion in social relationships of obligation itself makes the 'inside'
(1988:122–7). Rafael offers an account of the means by which organic
and elite Filipinos 'translated' the new demands which the Spanish church
and state imposed on its Filipino subjects, so that the meaning of subjec
tion itself was always subtly reformulated into something more reciprocal.
Lowlanders, in other words, refused to 'understand' the demand that they
should be absolutely subordinated to the colonial authorities, by inter
posing their own pre-colonial understanding of power as something which
could never be absolutely one-directional, since (as was the case for Scott's
indigenous datu) all power-holders are in a sense themselves dependent on
the deference which their followers give them (Rafael, 1988:131): power is
itself therefore caught in an endless loop, and rulers and subjects are
merely two opposite points on its circumference.

It is perhaps the centrality to Anderson's insights of the notion of rela
tive or relational power – power whose balance may be altered in any
encounter between two persons since its quantity is eternally fixed –
which provided the link by which both these historians connected a
resituation of the Philippines in the Southeast Asian theoretical world of
'potency' (explicitly discussed, for example in Ileto's account of the
amulets or anting with which the peasant leaders equipped themselves –
most famously, those which were intended to protect men from bullets
(Ileto, 1979:24–5 and 213)) with a re-reading of Hollnsteiner's functional
account of 'reciprocity'. These works raise serious questions for
anthropologists and demand a reworking of lowland power in the present
as well as in the past. It will be apparent, however, that while this book in
many ways defines its questions in conversation with both Rafael and
Ileto, I have not generally used the terms 'potency', 'utang na loob' (or its
nearest Bicol equivalents) or even 'debt' and that I do not wish to
assumee an exact equivalence between the historical and the contemporary
contexts. Instead, for much of this book, I follow the ways in which
Bicolanos construct power relationally through idioms of speech, especially those which elaborate on the varying possible positions of power of two persons in conversation with each other, and idioms of emotion, such as pity, oppression and love.

Arriving in Calabanga

Calabanga is a modest market town, defined in 1989 as a third-class municipality. Boarding the 'jeepney', the characteristic public transport of the rural Philippines, one is about forty minutes' ride away from Naga, and a couple of kilometres from the sea at San Miguel Bay. A crossroads marks the centre of the población; to the north one immediately reaches the large fishing-barangay of Sabang; there is a characteristic pungent smell from the platforms spread with fish drying in the sun. To the east, the road curves upwards through coconut plantations and then follows the curve of the bay to arrive at Tinambac, a town whose beautiful site strangely manages to be both high and coastal, since the hills here slope so sharply down to the sea. At the Calabanga crossroads is a monumental but unlovely white Spanish church, rebuilt after typhoon damage at the end of the last century. People complain that services are often disturbed by the market which flanks the church site and laps around its edges on busy days.

To European eyes, this market has a ramshackle air. Stalls are roughly roofed in galvanised iron, which rusts quickly in the heat and the rain. In this market are sold, on various stalls, fresh fish, vegetables, seasonings like garlic and vesiin (monosodium glutamate) and tiny packets of five peppercorns, meat in small quantities because of the high price, tin pots, lime and betel nut, single cigarettes, bright plastic slippers, brooms made from the midrib of coconut leaves, canned milk, little blocks of solid cocoa for making chocolate porridge, and all the other daily items of the rural Philippines. On market days, there are also cheap clothes, plastic buckets and sometimes bitter herbs brought by the Agta (the black ethnic group now reduced to a precarious existence in the uplands), and bought quietly by women desperate to induce miscarriage. The most prosperous are always those who buy and sell rice (magtungod), which requires capital, and they have small open-fronted shops rather than stalls. A Chinese-owned bakery is perhaps the grandest establishment, with a dark interior of wooden shelves, lino-topped tables, an electric fan blowing the sticky air in circles and a gaudily dressed Madonna on a small shelf; here you can eat 'Chinese' siopao, 'Spanish' pan de sal, and drink Coke. There are three tiny beauty-shops, two run by women and one by bakla (male transvestites), little eating-stalls, a pharmacy where you can buy expensive American drugs in single tablets, a popular cinema with wooden seats that shows Tagalog movies, and several photographers. Beyond the market is the town hall and the plaza, concreted in an improvement programme and thus suitable for use as a basketball court. At a distance down a quiet road, well outside the town, is the Kampusanto or cemetery, with its rows of tombs stacked up on top of each other like concrete filing cabinets, overgrown all year except in the week of All Souls' Day.

If you have come on the jeepney from Naga City, the provincial capital, west is now the only direction left to take. Bumping along in a passenger-motorcycle, you pass first through the central barangays (villages or town districts), where the houses, at least those facing the road, are usually one-story concrete 'bungalows', the homes of the town's salaried employees or substantial landowners, although just off the main route there are more modest homes, and sometimes a middle-class family still has a large old wooden house on stilts standing, not yet destroyed by the annual typhoons. Except for the very centre of the town, where there are two parallel roads, the houses are only one row deep, and behind the swept earth yards with their waterpumps, chickens, pigsty or vegetable plot, are the brilliant green ricefields of the plain. At the edge of the town is the shrine of the Amang Hinulid or 'Christ laid out in death', which is roofed but open-walled, with the carved saint visible on the altar, prone as Snow White in his glass coffin. There is almost always someone there, and on Fridays, especially the first of the month when the saint's clothes are changed, there are crowds of pilgrims, teenagers facing exams, the sick, healers, members of religious fraternities, anxious lovers and worried mothers. There are people performing devotions to the Ama and also people who work at the shrine: the sellers of amulets and religious texts and old ladies from San Ignacio who for a small payment will choose and say with you the right novena for sickness, danger or separation from those you love.

San Ignacio is the first rural barangay just beyond this shrine and over a bridge. It is the poorest barangay in the municipality, and most of the bungalows peter out here. Houses are largely wood, bamboo or nipa thatch. The little road continues westwards towards the Bicol river estuary, and houses are arranged on either side of it, sandwiched on each side by the ricefields. Each house is a small family, and there are almost always several houses on it, belonging to a number of siblings with their spouses and children. If the older parents are still alive, they usually live in the largest and oldest house, cared for by one child, probably an oldest or youngest
daughter, and her family. Houses are often still raised off the ground on poles, though they are not built so high as a generation ago. Steps lead up to one or two rooms; if there are two, both will be used for sleeping but the front room is also a living room, while the back or inner room is for sleeping and storing clothes. Floors are wood or bamboo and furniture is often limited to some home-made benches, a table, sleeping mats, a mirror and ornaments, although wealthier households have commercially made furniture. Kitchens are usually lean-tos at the back of the house, and washing is done at a pump which may be shared. Another common arrangement is for a house to have one upstream room, and then an earth-floor room downstairs which is used as a living area.

The barangay contains a chapel dedicated to the patron saint, and the primary school which serves the surrounding area, with a concrete yard where rice is dried. Looking over the ricefields to the south, one sees in the distance the old Spanish mission of Quiapyo; crossing the barangay and looking towards the north, one sees a small satellite barangay of San Ignacio, beyond which is the seaside hamlet, where men from San Ignacio often walk to fish at night, though they also fish in the paddy. There are one or two small village shops selling matches and other necessities, and there is a general air of slow village life. Little groups of women while away the afternoon playing 'Spanish' cards; children trot up and down on errands; people make their way to the several local healers (three in the barangay) with sprains and temperatures; work in the ricefields sets the pace of the day and the year. On nights when there is a full moon, everybody stays up late chatting and playing games outside to enjoy the light. Electricity reached San Ignacio in the 1970s, but not everyone can afford the supply, and it frequently shuts off as power is often diverted to Manila, and the lines blow down in storms.

Naga City is very different, although like most Filipino cities it gives the impression of being at bottom a mushroomed village, not an urban environment in the European sense. Many squatters in Naga are farmers, that is, they squat significant areas of rice land as well as house-space, and only in the railway station area is there really an urban squatter's area. Unused ground tends to sprout a hut and a vegetable patch. The centre is on a rather similar plan to Calabanga, but on a much grander and glasier scale; in the main square, a church with a concrete facade is flanked by one bank and faces another. Both banks have smoked-glass doors and the inevitable security guards in sunglasses, clutching guns of dubious vintage and safety. Several glass-fronted fast-food restaurants imitate the American chains which have outlets in Manila: one is named 'MangDonalds' ('Mang means 'old man' in Tagalog), to the rage of MacDonalds, who tried to sue the owner. These serve the local version of American food (the flour is always Filpinised) to students, office workers and courting couples out for a treat. There are several very large Chinese-owned department stores, selling all kinds of prestigious goods such as cosmetics, canned foods, toys, music cassettes and electrical items, most of them imported. These shops are glass fronted and air-conditioned; but in the large multistory city market, and elsewhere in Naga, shops are like those in Calabanga, open fronted, darker and cooled if at all by a single fan. Some of Naga's several cinemas are also Chinese-owned, while others are owned by one of the local elite families; in contrast to the small town cinema, these sometimes show films in English as well as Tagalog. There are also a number of high schools and colleges in Naga, of which the American-Jesuit foundation, the Ateneo de Naga, is the largest.

'Kami mayong-mayo' ('We who have nothing at all')
The people with whom I lived in San Ignacio, though there were certainly differences in relative income and status among them, almost all classed themselves as 'an nga pobre', the poor, or 'kami mayong-mayo', 'we who have nothing at all', and contrasted themselves to the rich, 'an nga mayaman', or 'those who have something'; occasionally, someone would admit that 'we have a little bit these days', 'garo iri-iwa na kami'.

These terms are in most instances not just modesty or affectation, although the better-off may exaggerate slightly for the sake of solidarity with their less fortunate neighbours. San Ignacio has, to a slighly worse degree than many other similar places, all the economic problems which affect the majority of people in rural Bicol. Although for centuries the plains of the Bicol river valley have been a key area for the growing of irrigated rice, they are not a region of wealthy farmers. Lynch (1973b) gave the average landholding for Camarines Sur as 0.72 hectares in 1973 (when 49 per cent of the population were sharecroppers and another 20 per cent owner-cultivators), and Barnes (in Lynch, 1974:i) comments that in the conditions of production then prevailing 79 per cent of the population had to be reckoned 'absolutely poor', meaning that their income fell short of their food requirements, and there was an average 'negative saving' (i.e. household debt) of P1,200 per year. At this rate, 7.7 per cent were unemployed, but a further 20.6 per cent were underemployed, and this probably underestimates the figures for women, despite a rising level of educational attainment (Lynch and Illo, 1975:1–11).

Economic conditions have generally worsened over the past twenty
years, and the average ricefield cultivated in 1988–89 was only 0.5 hectares (Jo Asug, personal communication) whereas local farmers say that between 1.5 and 3 hectares is needed to make a proper living for a family. Land shortage is exacerbated by population growth: between 1980 and 1990, the population of the barangay rose from 1,071 to 1,658 (Census of population and housing, 1990). Many people now only have secure access to land on alternate years, or less often, since inherited owned plots are rotated among siblings and their descendants when they are too small to be divided. Otherwise, access depends on temporary arrangements with landowners or farmers unable to farm that year, often with highly complex share-cropping arrangements. The problem is complicated by cash shortages and the need to raise loans; the arindo system is a kind of mortgaging-out of land for cash, with the land as security. This may be combined with a share-cropping arrangement in which the borrower works his own land but pays increasing proportions of the harvest over to the lender if he fails to repay the cash within a time limit, and people are thus easily caught in a spiral of accelerating debt in which they have the right to benefit from less and less of the product of their own labour. Other items which are means of livelihood, such as passenger-motorcycles, can also be lost in arindo loans. Strictly, one cannot raise arindo loans on land which one does not own, but in practice it is the farming rights which are often mortgaged out, the issue of rent to the landowner being treated as separate.21

Despite these difficulties, farming and fishing are still the main means of earning a living for people in San Ignacio. These are firstly subsistence activities, though a family will always hope to raise cash by selling fish or, in fortunate cases, a rice surplus. Buying rice used to be a rare and disdained expedient, but as access to farmland is reduced, more people are forced to buy rice regularly, which in turn sharpens the need for cash and places people at the mercy of the rice-merchants’ prices. A local widow who sells rice at 50 centavos more than the rate in the town centre is widely resented, and rice-sellers are always being pushed to extend their tolerance of credit-buying.

There is a variety of small service and retail jobs with which people try to make ends meet; driving a passenger-motorbike, running a little shop and buying and selling fish are the most capital-intensive of these, and the most likely to yield a living income. Giving manicures, making and selling afternoon snacks, travelling with a halo-halo (sweet with ice) stall to local fiestas, holding card-games in your house for a small fee, taking in laundry or letting older children go out as domestic helps or to work in Manila fac-

tories, were all tried by people I knew. Migrant work abroad was coveted by many, but the contacts and agency fees were beyond most people, and only one family in the barangay had made their money this way.

The most important source of income therefore remains wage work in the ricefields, especially during the planting, weeding and harvesting seasons, and both male and female workgroups are employed on it. However, the income from this source has fallen with the arrival of intensive farming methods. One usual arrangement now becoming less common is loto in which the same workers plant and harvest a rice crop and are paid in rice. In the 1950s, this share was one sixth of the crop, and the farmer had to make his arrangements for threshing separately. In the mid-1960s, this share fell to one seventh or one eighth, and some employers asked for threshing as well,22 but workers accepted the lower rate because the introduction of the double-cropping 'miracle rice', which at first gave better yields than it does now, meant that twice the work was available. In 1975, the mechanised thresher replaced hand-threshing, and the share fell to one tenth, as employers said the threshing was costing them too much. In 1985, the share was down to one eleventh and by 1989 it was one twelfth, except when the employer was 'someone who would feel pity for you, like your cousin'. Although the loto system spreads risk between farmer and workers, since the workers are not paid until after the

Figure 1 Women riceplanters in the barangay
harvest, it is now used less, and mostly among family members. The standard way of paying workers is by tandan or wage, and the 1989 rate was P.20 a day if a snack is provided, and P.25 if not. Full meals were always customarily provided for harvesters by farmers, but some farmers now resist even providing substantial snacks, while others (much respected by the people who work for them) regard it as shameful not to do so. The maximum number of people employed on one hectare of land would be between twenty and twenty-five.

People in San Ignacio, moreover, see themselves as poor relative to their own past. While share-cropping has been the dominant mode of wet-rice production all over Bicol for the past two centuries, the people I knew were unlike some other lowland Filipino farmers in emphasizing not only the decline of paternalistic landlord-tenant relations, but also the loss of their own independence. Many people see themselves as former smallholders, whose land has been lost to debt in the last two generations, rather than as former tenants. 23

Remarks about 'having nothing' are no doubt common in poor communities all over the world, but there is an important and specifically Filipino aspect here. Firstly, the estimation of one's poverty is always relative. 24 Secondly, the statement that one is poor and someone else is rich carries more than material implications. As Pinches notes in his article on Tondo slum dwellers, 'it is the experience of not being valued as human beings, of having to endure humiliation, disapproval and rejection, of constantly having one's dignity challenged' and of 'being shamed' (1991:177).

This experience of relative poverty is reinforced because, even for the poor, life is intermittently mobile. The generation now in their forties and upwards often did extra harvesting work elsewhere in the region when they were younger, and then as now teenagers would leave home for a few years to do domestic work, and now factory work, especially in Manila. Many people engage in small trading, bringing upland products like sweet potato and charcoal to the lowlands, or fish and shrimp to the inland barangays. Although busy married people may leave the barangay infrequently, and some have never been as far as Manila, fiestas and visits to relatives often take people travelling, and even from the most remote sitios (hamlets), people will walk into their local town to the market, the cinema or the cock-pit.

Women are especially active in small-scale trading, especially selling fish. Since the men catch the fish, this is of course a division of labour typical of the Filipino norms of marital cooperation (Illo, 1988: 13; 1992: 189; and 1995: 219; Rutten, 1982: 111-17 and 1990: 65), but both women and men say that men do not like to sell and are not good at it. Men are ashamed to haggle, and are also said not to know the right price at which to sell things. Usually, men only take an active role in selling in larger-scale operations, such as selling ice made by machine, larger-scale fish retailing involving buying from other fishermen (rigaton), or bigger business like selling rice or running handicraft businesses, though some men run market stalls, perhaps with their wives.

During the summer months, men from San Ignacio would regularly go out to catch shrimp during the night. If the catch was a kilo or more, their wives would take it in buckets and walk at four in the morning to catch the first jeepyen to Naga City, arriving while it was still dark. Their only other equipment was a piece of plastic sheeting on which to spread the catch in priced piles (atado). Naga has a concrete market building with several stories where different kinds of goods are sold, but occasional fish sellers cannot afford a licence. Instead they climb to the 'squatters' market' — that is, the open roof. As soon as the sun rises, the heat becomes unbearable, and most people leave by 7 am.

The sellers sit on their heels with the atado of shrimp on the sheet in front of them, relying on experience to calculate how many shrimp to put in each. If business is slow, they will make the atado larger to attract customers quickly, and they may end up selling at a loss. Women from the same barangay travel together and sit near each other at the market. There is no overt competition, and selling is very low-key, although people keep an eye on each other's sales and friends exchange discrete comments on how they are doing. They might end up with P.15 profit on a bad day, P.55 on a good day, or none at all after fares are paid. Most economise on breakfast, but may pay a peso for a cup of pamaghat, herbal tea that prevents 'relapse' from exhaustion and sudden changes between heat and cold. 25

The money will help to buy rice or to meet pressing school expenses, and it may be the family's only income for the day. Most women I knew reckoned that P.50.00 per day 26 was the minimum on which their families could survive: rice alone for a family of six would cost P.32.00 (4 kilos at P.8.00 per kilo in 1989), leaving a very narrow margin for other food, and nothing towards occasional expenses such as clothes, electric supply, etc.

To get to the squatters' market, the fish sellers pass through Naga's main squares, passing the cinemas, department stores and banks behind their glossy facades. However, they never go into them, but return straight to the barangay to see the children off to school. If they buy anything, it will be from the market, and if they go to Naga for a treat, they rarely venture
into such places. Gaudy cinema posters are everywhere, but they will not go to the cinema here. Nor will they eat at the fast-food outlets which serve 'American' hamburgers, hot-dogs, canned juice, ice-cream sundaes and spaghetti. Space is different for rich and poor; people from San Ignacio see the gloss of Naga City as they pass by its windows, but they do not possess it or partake of it; they do not consume its products as purchasers, and they do not eat its food. The incongruity between the world of the rich and the world of the poor, albeit superimposed on each other in the same streets, is therefore a daily, tangible experience. It is a difference particularised in a thousand material objects; canned peaches versus boiled sweet potato, plate glass versus nipa tiles, the air-conditioned chill of supermarket aisles versus the village store.

It is suggestive that most of the food in Naga's glossy restaurants is, by Filipino standards, not real food; that is, it is not usually served with rice, and therefore in whatever quantity it is eaten it can only be counted as snacks. A few office workers — from the middle classes who are most at ease in the Americanised Filipino environment — will eat lunch there with rice, but the rice portions are small, served in Western-sized amounts, not as a staple, in a style which is recognisably luxurious and suggestive of the good life of the States.39

It is 'those who have nothing', however, with whom I am mostly concerned in this book, and for them the experience of marginality is very sharp. And because being wealthy is so tied up in Filipino culture with command over the 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1977:6) associated with colonial powers, being poor also means feeling that one has only a tentative hold on the ideas, language and gestures of America. Not being able to afford America's canned goods, t-shirts and other products is therefore painful twice; once because you are not rich, and once because you cannot buy a piece of America-in-the-Philippines. Both these threats threaten a person with the shame to which Pinches refers.

The responses of people in San Ignacio to this situation are multifaceted, ironic and subtle. In all the contexts I discuss, there is an aspect of challenge to dominant interpretations of the place of the poor in the world; mediums, for instance are explicitly said to be there to help the poor who cannot afford doctors and to be able to cure when hospital medicine would kill (see chapter three). But practically every conversation in San Ignacio also deals with the problem of powerlessness, especially through the jokes and laughter which are a constant part of daily talk.

These jokes are made in a variety of ways. Although everyone in the lowlands is known by a shortened version of their name, some people also have a nickname of a different kind, a bansag which refers to some quality of theirs or episode in which they have been involved. A number of the local bansag involved specific jokes about poverty. One woman was introduced to me as Maria Mayaman (Wealthy Mary). 'It's because her house is filled with radios, fridges and electric fans', I was told. 'Yes', said Maria, 'if one of my fridges gets a little old, I throw it out, just like in the States!' Needless to say, Maria's house does not even contain an electric light bulb; it is one of the poorest houses, with an earth floor and a leaking roof. Maria has a handicapped teenage son whom she supports by selling snacks around the barangay and working in the fields. Another man is known as Pasayan, 'the shrimp', in reference to the poverty of his catches.

An incident which continued to amuse my friends for the entire length of my stay started when I was walking with another woman to visit her daughter on the coast. We passed through coconut plantations with cows grazing in the shade, and I wondered whose they were. 'Oh, they belong to your Mamay,' Mon (her husband's younger brother), remarked illariously. Since cows are valuable and I knew that Mon's family were in debt, I was very surprised, and asked why he kept them so far from the barangay. It didn't take me long to realise I was being teased, since when I dutifully asked Mon's wife about the mystery cows, she was torn between amusement and irritation, while Ilar couldn't stop giggling. In fact, Mon was notorious for having sold his own water-buffalo to pay for a mistress, to his wife's despair, since it had been a wedding-gift from her parents, and for extravagant boasting about his erstwhile land and herds when drunk, by which he had earned a bansag of 'the cow', 'Ask your Mamay Mon about his cows, Nell, and why he kept them so far from home', was a line that put things in perspective whenever my questions became too absurd.

Other jokes also play on the gap between aspiration and reality; typhoon damage to houses is ironically referred to as 'air-conditioning', feet muddy from the paddy-fields as 'my manicure', worn flip-flops and hosedresses as 'my dancing clothes', and so on. Although some of these jokes were addressed to me as a foreign visitor, people also made them all the time amongst themselves. Another kind of play and teasing involves acting out the same kind of message. I often saw groups of women break into the arm-movements of the pantomina, the wedding-dance in which money is pinned by guests onto the clothes of the bride and groom. The ideas of wealth, finery and celebration were pointed up by the contexts in which they did it; for instance, when dressed in work clothes, they were watching a barangay dance they had decided they could not afford to
attend, or to tease someone who was due to have a birthday about the grand party (blowout) that they should provide for their friends.

Conversely, joking and teasing also take place whenever someone does dress up or offer hospitality, but the joking is never only levelling; it is always more celebratory than critical. This applies especially to the offering of food and alcohol; people not only exclaim at the event on how delicious (masiram) the food is, comparing it to the products of those glossy Naga restaurants, but they do so in prospect and in retrospect. Three photographs of a birthday party of one of Gloria’s sisters-in-law, which had happened just before I came to San Ignacio, were periodically examined by all and sundry throughout the time I was there. People told me repeatedly how there had been so many bottles of beer, they had all got drunk and started singing, how there had been two sorts of dish to eat with the beer, how delicious they had been, etc.

Photographs which demonstrate the successful carrying-off of a celebration are important and much enjoyed; people like to pose literally pointing at the food they have raised the money to buy, and have prepared for a wedding, baptism or birthday, especially if it is prestigious food like meat or expensive canned goods. It is partly the unity of those who have provided the hospitality which is being celebrated, especially if they are kin, but it is also partly the joyous success of having acquired, used and shared in some of the good things in life which are usually out of reach. Looking at the photos, as people say, one can almost consume the meal again. Photographs are themselves prized consumer objects, since few people own a camera and pictures are taken by roving professional photographers and sold by the frame. But a photograph is also a kind of fetish of transformation in Bicol; it places you in a position where, in your best clothes or with the most delicious food, you have temporarily become the possessor of these things, and so escaped the threat of ‘being shamed’. This is more than just ‘status assertion’, which, in the sense that is often given to it, implies something both trivial and aggressive; this is a joy in the transformation of the self (and one’s neighbours) out of poverty.

In one house, where one of the older children had worked in the Middle East for a while, the family had put together a photographic collage made of pictures of an American-style bathroom, bedroom and fitted kitchen cut out of magazines, and pictures of the younger children placed as though playing, sleeping and eating in the shiny rooms. The pictures of the children and the pictures of the rooms were not on the same scale, so that the figures seemed much too big. ‘We put the children in, because they enjoyed seeing it so much’, they explained. ‘When, I ask you, will they ever see it otherwise?’

This aspiration was also apparent in the way people decorated their homes. Those with more money choose the bright (floor-coverings, curtains, tablecloths) and the solid (cement floors, wooden furniture), both tastes which contrast with the lightness and planniness of bamboo and nipa houses – although everyone tends to leave their walls bare, as they were when houses were all built of hardwood. People also like to display objects, especially picture calendars and plastic dolls, and anything electrical, items which are thought of as Western goods.

Over the period between my first visit to Bicol, and the completion of this work, the Southeast Asian regional boom years had to some extent reached even San Ignacio; an increased flow of national funding had resulted in the enlargement of the local primary school to include a high school in 1992, and the surfacing of the barangay road in 1997. It also appeared that barangay captains (who received an increase in allowance over this period) were better able to raise money for certain local improvement schemes, such as the rebuilding of the barangay chapel. Those farmers whose holdings were above the viable level, those with substantial fish-trading or other well-capitalised family businesses, and those families with several adult children who were away working in Manila or elsewhere, seemed to be doing better in 1997 than in 1989, and this was most readily visible in the improvements they made to their houses, especially the replacement of ‘native’ building materials with concrete blocks and galvanised iron roofs, and the building of inside (but unplumbed) WCs and kitchens. More households also had televisions in 1997 than in 1989, although these were mostly bought on hire-purchase, and some were already malfunctioning before the payments had been completed. On the other hand, the many without these advantages were still living in very modest houses and the incidence of chronic TB and other poverty-related diseases was still extremely high.

As far back as the 1950s Father Frank Lynch was arguing (Lynch, 1959; 1984b) that there may be a considerable degree of historical continuity in the tendency for Filipino, and specifically Bicolano, villagers and townspeople to think of themselves as basically belonging to one of two groups: ‘big people’ and ‘little people’, or the elite and their dependents.

Such a view has been widely criticised (e.g. Ileto (1979) and Rafael (1988)) because Lynch further assumed that the relationship between these ‘two groups’ is therefore one of harmonious patronage rather than conflict; however, analogous self-descriptions by poor people in the
lowlands seem to be widely found, see for example Ill (1985: 88). Kerkvliet, although examining the prevalence of notions of ‘class’ in the rural areas of Nueva Ecija, describes them as intersecting similarly constructed notions of ‘have’ and ‘have-nots’ based on quality of life rather than the relationship to the means of production (1990: 59–63). In the very different context of contemporary urban squatter settlements in Manila (albeit communities closely tied to their Visayan barangay origins), Pinches (1991: 176–83) notes the use of class-based language of burghers versus masa which is however still status-related and still constructed as a dualistic contrast.

Like Pinches, I would recognise that this notion of dependent and patron, and its concomitant notion of solidarity among the poor, ‘those who have nothing’ in the Bicol context, is always in tension with the more individualistic aspirations of villagers to escape from the discomforts and humiliations of poverty. Bicolano barangays are not strongly egalitarian in any generally understood sense; they do not maintain that absolute equality is a social good, or that all individual betterment is anti-social or unmerited. Yet, in the slightly improved economic conditions of 1997, it was if anything even more evident that those who benefited from increased wealth would be criticised by their kin and neighbours if they did not pursue one of two paths. Either they could share some of their wealth via hospitality, loans, the provision of work and so on, within the framework which insisted that all co-barangay members are ‘siblings’. Or (much more problematically) they could themselves start to move into the position of the ‘good patron’. To act as an individualistic entrepreneur and to refuse such social obligations, however, was to invite much more stringent criticism, and the accusation that one had ‘forgotten one’s kin’ or had become ‘an oppressor of one’s fellow men’. The fine line between the acceptable and the unacceptable in the pursuit of individual wealth was obviously subject to continuous negotiation and rival interpretations.

One might conclude, that although the ‘patron–client’ relationship does not exist as unproblematic social reality, the notion – or something like it, though not necessarily derived from landholding practices – continues to have widespread salience as one model of the socially desirable. If power is to be distributed unequally, lowlanders seem to be saying, let us at least constrain the power-holders within a relationship with their dependents which they cannot entirely ignore. Similarly, if the poor are to be poor, let it at least not be forgotten that human value is not entirely measurable by wealth, and that all unequal relationships of wealth and power are, finally, mutable.

Most Bicolano houses clearly display the gap between what people have, and what they would like to have. Radio-cassette players will be kept even if they do not work, proudly displayed on shelves as objects of beauty and value. In pointing two ways at once, towards what is there and what is not there, such objects act like the ironic jokes of which barangay people are so fond; they highlight incongruities as well as trying to resolve them. It is this ambivalent sensibility which belongs particularly to ordinary Bicolanos, and which, as I shall show, enters into all their ‘conversations’ about power.

Preview of the argument
This book will move between different contexts in which these ways of looking at power are played out, highlighting the fact that the Bicolano view of power is of a relationship in which both powerful and less powerful are liable to affect each other, and in which the hope of those ‘who have nothing’ is always that the gap between the two parties may be somewhat lessened by what they do, and what they say, even if it cannot be closed altogether. I begin with arranged marriages, stories about which appear to be important in San Ignacio partly because they emphasise a journey repeated by many couples, from distance and a profound inequality of power, towards gradually increased equality and intimacy. In chapter two, I argue that the resonance of these stories also emerges from historical transformations in which marriage has been at the centre of attempts to create fixed and predictable social rankings – attempts which, however, were never finally consolidated, so that the Bicol model of power distribution continued to be of something which is often asymmetrical, but always dynamic and capable of change and negotiation. The relative standing of two persons or social groups, however unequal, is never seen as entirely fixed, nor is it justified in relation to some internal essence (such as aristocratic blood) or divinely ordained external cosmology as is the case in many rank-ordered societies. Chapters three, four and five explore the interactions between spirit mediums of different kinds, spirits, and their patients; a series of triangular relationships at the centre of which are the healer’s melancholic recognition that, in accepting the ‘help’ of her spirits, she is simultaneously becoming consumed by them in a form of debt-bondage, and the play on the incommensurability of spirits and humans which echoes Bicol’s other ironic jokes and comparative reflections. In the following three chapters, I address the place of Catholicism in shaping the ambivalence of Filipino relationships to the spirit world, and describe the relationship of local people to a miracle-working saint, the Amang
Hinulid, whose cult itself reveals crucial ways in which Bicolanos have resisted some of the implications of Christian conversion and the economy of salvation. Chapter ten considers the range of practices which attempt to bridge the gap between ordinary Bicolanos and the powerful figures— in many ways experienced as even more distant—which are in part constructed as icons of America and the modern West, especially through women’s and male transvestite beauty contests and the logic of intimacy through imitation. Finally, in the conclusion, I return to some of the themes sketched in this introduction, including the attempt to re-situate Bicol within a reading of the broader Southeast Asian literature, and the theoretical implications of the idioms of power which are traced through the ethnography. I argue that the mis-perception of the Philippine lowlands as ‘culture-less’ has resulted from the particular view of culture—which was defined by the archipelago’s colonisers, and especially from the failure to examine the ways in which large themes, such as the nature of power, are perceptible in the fine weave of daily relationships, and the subtleties of talk about them, as much as or more than in the transmission of ‘rituals’ or other spectacular practices which construct culture as ‘tradition’.