Beauty and the idea of 'America'

Matibayan mag-arog an mga bakla
(The bakla are very good at making things resemble each other.)

Beauty, mimicry and transformation
In the previous section, I considered some of the meanings of the term 'imitation' in Bicol in the context of religious acts such as the Passion Play. In this chapter, I turn instead to imitation in secular performances. The reader will recall from the introduction how often it has been suggested that Filipino lowland culture has been eviscerated by the American colonial experience. Even sympathetic observers have sometimes argued that the ‘Filipinos were mentally recolonised in a discourse that not only extolled American culture... but that also degraded the Spanish colonial past... aborting what could have grown into a distinct Filipino civilization’ (Mulder, 1991:6). I shall examine what imitation might mean in those areas where the term has been applied most derogatively to the lowlands, that is in elements of popular culture which have the contemporary West, and especially the image of ‘America’ as viewed from the rural Philippines, as their primary referent.

If the legacy of Spanish Catholicism continues to dominate popular religiosity, it is the legacy of the American colonial period and its schooling system which has made the most obvious impression on public secular life. The Americans demanded from their colony the evidence of the growth of a ‘democratic’ civic sensibility of a certain kind, and they were extremely successful in eliciting at least its outward signs. The middle classes of each small town organise themselves into prayer-groups for the
devotion of the Sacred Heart, but also into groups of Rotarians and Lions. Seminarians training for holy orders play basketball in their spare time. Small primary schools in the barangays field teams of drummers and majorettes in all the major town celebrations, despite the difficulty parents have in raising the money for the uniforms.

Local entertainments and celebrations have also been touched by a deference to ‘American’ standards and values thus understood. People in rural Bicol still usually spend the time they have to enjoy themselves collectively rather than privately, in fiesta visiting, in dances organised by the barangay adults’ organisation or discos for the barangay youth, and in many of the neighbourhood events already described. A partial exception to this is the cinema, which people can visit for a few pesos in the local town centre or even in Naga as a special treat; but trips to the cinema would usually be undertaken with several co-godparents, relatives and children, rather then on one’s own.2

Especially popular whenever the occasion offers, in addition to these pastimes, are both talent contests (amateuran) and beauty-contests, which are held for many different categories of entrant, but especially for women and for the bakla or male transvestites. The history of beauty-contests in particular is a long one, going back to the Spanish period in which wealthy families fought to have their daughter win a title as a way of promoting her chances of an exceptional marriage;3 in fact the contest was one in competitive giving; the winner was determined according to the amount of sponsorship money she attracted from her backers, to be donated to the Church.

Although some events in contemporary Calabanga (such as the ‘Mrs Calabanga’ title to which I refer below) continue to be organised in this way, a shift in the preferences of audiences and organisers in which the bakla community was highly active took place in Bicol in the 1960s, towards contests based on American-style meritocratic principles and known as ‘brains and beauty lang’ (‘brains and beauty only’) contests. The organisation of the contests also consciously follows models such as ‘Miss World’ and ‘Miss Universe’, both in the selection of events to be staged, and in the construction of series of heats, held often in very small towns, leading to regional and even national-level finals.4

Judges at such contests, invited from among the local worthies such as male and female town councillors, doctors, wives of judges, and former contest winners (as well as visiting anthropologists), are asked to make their decision on the basis of points awarded in various categories such as Voice, Presentation, Diction, Artistic Interpretation, Charm and so on.

The official money-competition has been eliminated from such contests, although of course a contestant with a wealthy and interested sponsor willing to promote and to provide costumes and equipment will always be at a distinct advantage.

The cinemas which Bicolanos eagerly attend have a more indirect relationship with ‘American’ culture. Approximately a third of the larger movie-houses in Naga City show mainly English-language films which are often from the States, and which are attended by those whose education gives them confidence in English, from Catholic girls’ school pupils on up the age range. These cinemas are usually air-conditioned, and the ticket prices are higher. The other big Naga venues, as well as the single smaller cinema which usually stands at the centre of little towns like Calabanga, cater to what is slightly impolitely known as the bakya (‘wooden clog’) crowd; that is, the less sophisticated audience not comfortable with English. The movies which are shown here emanate from Manila, from the extremely active national industry which makes and distributes films with local stars in the language of the capital, Tagalog. Most Bicolanos are quite capable of watching their movies in a second language, even if not in the most prestigious one.

Tagalog movies are locally classified into three kinds: mapangisi (‘something to laugh at’), laban (‘fighting’) and drama, i.e. sentimental melodramas, sometimes related to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Filipino popular theatre styles. The laban movies (which are often imported from Taiwan) are popular with men, and are mostly martial-arts films involving rebellion, injustice and explosive outbursts of violent fighting. Although these are interesting from several points of view, it is with the other two (home-produced) categories that I am more concerned here. The comedies are often pastiches of Western genres, starring favourite comic actors. ‘Starzan’ for instance, which I saw with friends from San Ignacio in 1989, presents a sort of Filipino poor-man’s Tarzan who, accompanied by his ever-bungling companion, wins the hand of the lovely mestiza Jane. Drama stories centre on love (romantic and familial), the exploitation of the poor and powerless by the wealthy and corrupt, and the triumph of virtue over humiliation. A typical protagonist is the innocent country-girl gone to work as katabang to an urban family who abuse her, and in such stories the settings portray a hyperbolically luxurious (if somewhat kitsch) world of brocaded furniture, circular bath tubs and push-button phones, where the spoiled sons of the rich toy with imported foodstuffs at elaborately set tables.5 Plots however often include elements taken directly from Filipino folk-belief, including witchcraft, possession and matters relating
to kinship. In these films, the audience experiences the world of the wealthy ‘American’ outside at one remove, mediated as it were through a portrayal of the life of the national elite who have access to it.

Each of the key roles in a drama – good girl, good guy, bad guy and bad girl (or contravida) is played by a nationally famous filmstar with a following among the audience. Actresses such as Sharon Cuneta or Snooky Serna who usually play the heroine are especially important to women as models of beauty and a fashion look described as ‘just simple’ (simple lang); this is in fact highly artificial by Anglo-American standards, but contrasts in its gentle attractiveness with the deliberate sexual provocation of the contravida. While one model of beauty may be taken from the luminous images of the mestizo santos and santas (and one might dress one’s little girl to take part in a procession with this in mind), another is taken – from the world of the movies; since many of the most admired filmstars are themselves considered ‘mestizoa’ in appearance, the two ideals often overlap. In an older age-group, the actress Nora Aunor, herself born to a modest Bicolano family, reminds people of the possibility of being lifted into a different life through beauty and talent, although to most this remains at the level of a fairy-tale.

It is also possible to listen to several Tagalog radio stations and buy Tagalog as well as Bicol newspapers, but people in the barangays rarely buy newspapers and usually prefer the local Bicol-language radio, which features numerous dramas of its own, in soap-opera form. These stories are rather similar in tone to the film plots, although of course the visual element is missing.

Although the idea of becoming the next Nora Aunor may be far beyond most people’s thoughts, people in Bicol are extremely interested both in the art of giving a successful performance and in the art of making oneself (or others) beautiful. Since, even beauty-contests apart, it is very important to present oneself well in public, the two often go together, and everyone hopes to be found magayon (beautiful) or guapo/pogi (handsome) or at least to be approved of as being ‘respectably dressed’ and not to have his outfit mocked as baduy (vulgar or clashing). It is these preoccupations which frame not only the most obvious performances, but also many events in ordinary daily life.

**Beauty in the barangay**

In an article published in the *Women’s Home Companion* during my first stay in Bicol, a journalist voiced a fairly common complaint about the perverse effect on the poor of the ‘distorted sense of beauty’ fostered by America; ‘parents’ with daughters who enter beauty contests, laments the author, ‘forsake a harvest’s earnings to splurge on the gay neighbourhood beautician . . . and on a banquet for guests’ (Hatol, 1988:12).

Although I never knew anyone spend a whole harvest’s profit on the beautician, it is true that, for Bicolanos in the barangay, their own and their children’s appearance is extremely important, and sending family members well dressed into the world is a source not only of family pride, but also of care for that person and the desire to protect them from ‘shame’. 6 What the journalist didn’t note, however, was that like the many jokes of those ‘who have nothing’ which I described in the introduction, the barangay attitude to ‘beauty’ is also an ironic but genuinely funny comedy, a play on the gap between heartfelt consumer aspiration and the limits of possible achievement.

On any occasion at which dressing-up is required, a fiesta or a barangay dance, for instance, relatives and neighbours will arrange to share some resources, women passing round the powder-puff or piece of scented soap between households. Friends then greet the arrival of each of their workmates, now wearing carefully pressed clothes, and shoes instead of muddy flip-flops, with a cry of teasing but genuinely celebratory admiration, and appreciative clicking noises:

**Abaa-na ini, an gayon-gayon mo na ini! Ay, nakahigh-heels na si Manay, ay! Nakabeauty na!**

(That’s too much, you’re so beautiful! Ay, Elder Sister’s put her high heels on! She’s really put her beauty on now!)

Thus the chorus which greeted Nana Trinidad, a married lady then in her late fifties whose pleasant face and strong form showed evidence of decades of work in the ricefields. Everyone else was treated to similar congratulations, for the point is not to embarrass any particular person, but to enjoy a collective transformation of oneself and one’s peers, while at the same time gently poking fun at it.

This kind of humour surfaces all the time in relation to the question of ‘beauty’; thus while Nana Trinidad and her workmates were actually engaged a few weeks earlier in planting a muddy field full of rice, they heard the amplified Tagalog and American pop-music of the young people’s disco drifting across the fields, as the sound-system was tested in preparation for that evening’s event. The women in the fields began to joke about the dance, wiggling their hips and holding out their muddy planting-clothes as if they were dancing-clothes, but with their feet firmly stuck in the paddy. This way of dancing as a joke or parody is something women
do all the time amongst themselves, miming cheek-to-cheek romantic clinches in a way they would never put into practice with their male partners, with whom public dancing is often accomplished, but usually rather stiffly.

The air of something on the edge of parody attaches to performances which are much more seriously given. At a wedding I attended in the summer of 1989, for instance, formal toasts had been extensively exchanged between the in-laws, and people had settled into groups of men and of women and had continued passing the beer around and pouring toasts. Women always say that they cannot sing ‘until they are drunk’ and therefore it always happens that someone will eventually be declared so, and will be prevailed upon to ‘put aside their shame’ (hale an supog) and to sing. In contrast to the formal dialectic of the toasts between affines, this singing will always be a ‘solos’ affair, and the performer is thus somewhat exposed, since except for the local adepts, semi-professionals who have won many competitions, solo singing is always (understandably) felt to constitute somewhat of a risk.

On this afternoon, it was my neighbour Nana Ilar who was declared ‘drunk’ first. She therefore got up and began to sing one of her favourite party pieces, the melancholy American song which ends:

...but I miss you most of all, my darling,
When Autumn leaves start to fall.

Although she can sing all the most moving scenes of the Pasión with great calm, fortitude and accomplishment, and despite the fact that crying in public is not usual when one has not declared oneself ‘drunk’, Ilar usually ends these ‘solo’ sessions in tears, as do the other women. What seems to be at issue is not so much the literal (and generally modest) amount of alcohol that anyone has consumed, but the shift into a different register of emotional expression.

Ilar performs her song with some aplomb, and its style is very much to the local taste, its sweetness and melancholy allowing for a general sharing of feelings of ‘sentiment’ in a context where people are together with those they are close to, and where all kinds of thoughts or memories may add to the atmosphere of vague regret.

Although the specific references of the lyric are not very clear to people (I was often asked to explain the ‘Autumn leaves’, for instance), I would suggest however that it does make a difference that Ilar should choose to sing in English, something she only does when ‘drunk’. Since this is not a language she speaks (but is a language she was taught at primary school), her ability to memorise the lyric is both a more-than-averagely-impressive display of skill, and therefore an above-average risk. Bicolano audiences do not like their performers to slip up too much, and when people are not consciously joking, there is always a seriousness about the intention to get things right, and a serious sense of élan and achievement about doing so. Being ‘drunk’ helps one to take this risk, lessening one’s ‘shame’ at the thought of falling short.

Moreover, it seems possible that one element in the ‘sentimental’ and nostalgic atmosphere of the singing is built precisely out of the origins of that risk; the loss that the author signified by ‘Autumn leaves’ makes no immediate sense in the tropics, but the idea of loss itself does; in singing a song part of whose meaning escapes one, one evokes, among other losses, the sadness at not having completely understood, at being excluded in relation to a cultural register which, if one masters it, can open the doors of possibility and change one’s life.

**Overcoming shame and becoming beautiful**

The problems of ‘removing shame’ in a performance come into play even more forcefully in the more formal setting of the amateur, or singing-contest. These events, which might take place somewhere within reach of San Ignacio about once a month, and more often near fiesta, attract contestants from a wide area. They arrive carefully dressed and carrying their ‘minus-one’ tapes, on which the original vocals can be turned down, so that the performer can sing with the backing track. This is important for two reasons: firstly, it means they will have learnt the song (I have watched several people do this) by literally mimicking the performance of the singer on the tape over and over again; secondly, it is the explanation for the frequent minor disaster of Bicolano amateur in which the ropey sound equipment is not equal to the task of eliminating the vocal track, and the contestant sings a duet with the artist on tape. This is not popular with audiences, and even less so (thought sometimes defended by competitors) the attempt sometimes made to cover a weak voice by opting for ‘lip-sync’ — miming to the sound of the original artist rather than singing themselves. The amateur are enjoyable, but they are also taken very seriously, and blunders in taste, voice or dress deplored by the spectators. Young men favour an ‘amerikana’ (two-piece suit) while young women usually essay the ‘simple lang’ look of the virtuous film-heroine, and a degree of decorum is expected.

The key figure at the amateur is the master of ceremonies or ensce; there may be two male ensces or a man and a woman, but never a woman
alone. An emsee is a curious mixture of folk character and figure from media entertainment. The person chosen for the job is always someone Bicolanos describe as masuba (jokey). Being masuba often implies an ability to get away with sexual joking without causing offence; for an emsee it means an ability to play with the potential shame and embarrassment of the situation of performing. As Apolinario Mendosa, the barangay captain of Hinulid and one of the two male Emsees there put it in part of his patter to the audience:

‘Dapat sa emsee daing supog, ano?’

(An MC should never feel shame, should he ...?)

A reminder perhaps that the other situation in which Bicolanos habitually use emsees is at traditional weddings, when they have to set the pace of games in which guests are asked to give as much money as possible to the newlyweds. Since in most contexts in Bicol society shame (supog) is positively valued, and to be classed as ‘shameless’ is heavy criticism, the emsee clearly falls into a category of licensed transgressors. Demanding, giving or refusing money is perhaps the quintessential situation in which feelings of supog come into play within the barangay, and the emsee has to dispense with shame in order to increase the pressure to give, but also to mediate tensions and rivalries, as well as possible feelings of obligation and inadequacy, between the guests, so that neither donors nor recipients finally feel shamed by the amount given at the wedding. A wedding emsee is also masuba, and it would be quite possible for the same person to perform both kinds of emsee role.

Some contest emsees adopt a stylised comic manner, laughing hysterically or asking repeated stock questions. This was true of the emsee at another local amatueran, a local young married man known to be good at the role. As each contestant appeared, he would give a gasp and cry out to the audience (who were highly amused):

Garo artista! Iba na an pagkawalo kaini ... garo mas guapo sakuya, pero kun nakaparigues ako, dai ako napadaog ...

(‘He looks like a star! The handsomeness of this one is really something else ... could be he’s more handsome than me, but if I had had a chance to wash, he wouldn’t have got the better of me ...’)

This continued with each contestant, as he pointed to their shoes or suits, demanded to know whether they had fiancées and announced their availability to the young people of the barangay, and so on. Female contestants sometimes, but not always, got off more lightly than the males.

The teasing by the emsee does not stop with the introduction of each contestant, since he or she would also comment after each entrant had sung their piece, and often - whatever the standard of the singing - in terms of fulsome praise which came painfully close to sounding like mockery.

People I asked about the emsee would often casually remark that he was supposed to hale an supog - to remove the contestants' shame, by joking with them and putting them at ease. In the light of this comment, it was always striking how much supog the emsee seemed to be inflicting on the singers. In fact, I never saw a contestant attempting to match the emsee's banter with their own; instead they would stand meek and still, politely answering the emsee's questions with near-inaudible but formal sentences:

Emsee: ‘... my goodness, this one looks like si Richard Gomez [a Tagalog film-star] ...
Contestant: ‘Sir, my brother lent it to me.’

The rural teenagers thus embarrassingly compared to major Tagalog filmstars suffered it all with the same self-deprecating downcast eyes and partial smile.

The contrast is all the stronger, then, when the contestant begins to sing. They do not seem to sing as themselves. Rather, they become, as well as their (sometimes considerable) individual talents allow them, a singer, a star, the artista to which the emsee has just incongruously compared them. Gestures from Western pop performers and the Tagalog singers they influence are choreographed into the performance; careful expressions of emotional excruciation very different from the normal Filipino facial repertoire, and set-piece, conscious singers' movements, spreading the hand with a crescendo or raising and lowering the microphone.

It is no reflection on the skill of the performers (the best of whom may turn professional) to point out that the dramatic shift between normal body-language and forms of expressing emotion and those which obtain during the performances lend the whole occasion a slightly stiff and contrived air. Each performance is a personal transformation, and a shift in language - literally so, because Bicol songs are not used at amatueran, where the repertoire is always in English and Tagalog. Favourite songs performed during the summer of 1989 in Calabanga contests included (for women) a current hit called ‘Eternal Flame’, and for men, besides several sentimental Tagalog hits, the ubiquitous ‘My Way’, the anthem of middleclass male Filipino drinking sessions. One child performer with a precociously loud voice had been coached in a song in English called ‘While
We're Still Young.' The song had fairly explicit references to an adulterous affair which sounded odd to me coming from an eight-year-old, but the Filipino audiences found that the title made it appropriate enough. Two choices of song caused more of a stir: a pretty fourteen-year-old who won the contest by singing the Beatles' hit 'Yesterday' (fairly new to San Ignacio) in an enormously powerful voice, and a diffident young man who sang a famous Tagalog song from the 1950s star Victor Wood, 'Bakit Di Kita Malimot?' (Tag. 'Why Can't I Forget You').

This last caused a division of opinion among local audiences. This song, with a mournful, vaguely Latin-American, orchestral accompaniment, builds up to a chorus in which Victor Wood was famous for ending each line on a choking sob:

Why can't I forget you?
Why can't I leave you behind?
Why did you make me love you
If you only wanted to cause me pain? (my trans.)

... and so on, each aspect of the original being faithfully reproduced by the performer in Calabanga, sprung like the others out of his acute bashfulness. While some of the audience enjoyed this revival of an old favourite, a number objected that it was unfashionable. One rival contestant disapproved of the high marks the singer had got for his technical abilities and took me aside afterwards (for I was one judge at this contest) to advise me that the choice of song was baduy (vulgar and unfitting). 'He should have sung something classier, like Shirley Bassey', he reproved me.

Groups of teenagers anywhere in the world practising their favourite songs would of course expose by the small details they had not yet mastered, the artificiality of the entire language of pop. Yet there is a difference between American and Bicolano teenagers engaging in these performances. Perhaps it is because the qualities which pop fetishises (sexual love as the source of a person's most truthful experiences and the idea of youthful rebellion, to name but two) are so much less dominant in the lives of families in Bicol barangays than in the life of Western individuals. The Bicolano performance - like a performance on the gamanan given by talented music-students in England - is also an attempt to perform the cultural context of the piece, and some parts of that context remain a long way off.

**Becoming beautiful**

I have said that beauty contests are a common event in rural Bicol life, and I should stress that they take place at all sorts of different levels, and involve many different kinds of people as contestants. The town fiesta proceedings of Calabanga in 1989, for instance, offered the possibility of winning more than a dozen titles, some reserved for unmarried girls (the 'Miss' titles, as they are known) and some for married ladies. All the winners then paraded on floats in the fiesta-day procession. The runners-up each had their own title ('Mrs Health and Hygiene'; 'Miss Temperance', and so on) but the prime title for the matrons was 'Mrs Calabanga'.

I had watched the run-up to this contest with some interest, since Anita, a mother (and spirit-medium) from the neighbouring barangay, was competing for the title. Since this competition is still won by sponsorship, she had also been using her considerable (sometimes oppressive) persuasive abilities and numerous contacts to fill as many of her little donation envelopes as possible. She had hired a yellow sequinned tight-fitting dress and made ready to hire a float and balloons, and to entertain her supporters at a party.

In the event, Anita came third, having raised P11,000; she and the first two winners were allowed to keep a proportion of the money raised. The first place was taken by a woman who had married a Chinese businessman, and who raised the enormous sum of P63,000. The new 'Mrs Calabanga' was somewhat younger than Anita (who was then in her fifties) and quite pretty by local standards. Probably anticipating her win, she had dressed in a long, frilly white dress rather like a wedding-gown and accompanied herself on her triumphal walk with three pairs of little children, each in a different style of Filipino or Western formal dress. The watching crowd let out the customary admiring comments of 'Magayon!' ('Beautiful!') as she went past, and also admired the second and third prize winners in the same way. She was, of course, putting on a tremendous display of status and of the financial power of her backers in the Chinese community, and her self-presentation seemed to comment on the dual kinds of 'beauty' to which the contestants here were staking a claim: on the one hand, personal prettiness (especially 'mestiza' looks) and on the other, those aspects of 'beauty' which can be bought - grand clothes, complete make-up, the evidence of who is behind you, and the affirmative acclamation of the crowd.

'Beauty' in this sense is a protective layer, a covering of status which shelters those who have it. And although the central contests of the Bicol region both for women (the 'Miss Penafencias') and for bakla (the 'Miss Gay Naga City/ Miss Guy Penafencia') are now run without the money-competition which makes this so apparent, I will argue that this meaning
of 'beauty' continues to be part of what makes the contests compelling for performers and audience alike. Both major contests are held at the time of the regional fiesta for the Virgin of 'Peñafrancia' in Naga City, and I will describe the Miss Gay Naga City Contest 1988, at which I was a judge.8

It is not the purpose of the present chapter to attempt a comprehensive account of bakla identity in Bicol, nor to speak primarily to issues in 'gender theory', but it is of course important to understand something about the lives bakla people live, and the peculiar mixture of tolerance and potential lack of respect or even contempt with which they are treated. Like everyone else in Bicol, many bakla have parents who are poor farmers or farm labourers. Inside the barangay, bakla are in some ways very much accepted. The identity 'bakla' is offered to little boys who seem happier doing girls' chores and wearing their clothes, and the child gradually either accommodates or angrily rejects it. Such children are sometimes teased, but they are neither ignored nor persecuted. Many mothers calmly admit that one of their children is bakla, and most people agree on the identifications; 'That's just how he is', they will say, or 'that's just what's natural to him'.9 They are not especially interested in the unequivocal definition of how someone came to be that way and usually offer several explanations or none at all.10 There is a kind of non-authoritarian attitude in Bicol social life generally, which accommodates the bakla, so that they are rarely the targets of hatred or prejudiced violence as is sometimes the case for gay or transvestite men and women in the West; however at the same time bakla are not always treated as persons of equal dignity compared to other adults.

Their own self-definitions are complex, and often shift according to context. All bakla would say they are men 'with women's hearts' who therefore love men, and love to dress in women's clothing and perform female roles. Everyone I met rejected as bizarre and distasteful the dominant Anglo-American interpretation of being 'gay' - that is, being a 'gay' man who desires another similar 'gay' man - and claimed that bakla never go out together and love only 'real men' (i.e. non-bakla). Bakla may however use the imported English word 'gay' to describe themselves,11 or sometimes, in a curious adoption of another English term, they say they are a 'third sex', neither men nor women. This, at least, is part of the discourse of being bakla as people chose to present it to me; the personal realities may be more complex.

The 'real men' with whom the bakla fall in love are credited with an invulnerable male sexual identity, which is not thought to be threatened in any way by their relations with bakla (although it would be if they them-
trustworthy, bakla are more artful in altering appearances. They therefore occupy a very particular position as mediators of beauty and glamour. As all Bicolanos say: ‘Matibayon mag-arog an nga bakla’ (‘The bakla are very clever at imitating things’), implying a sense of being good not just at mimicry, but at making things look like other things. In the rural barangays as well as the towns, the bakla are the experts in transformation; they transform others into beauties in their professional lives, and transform themselves into beauties in their private – or at least their performative – lives.

The bakla in fact often seem to assimilate their identity to a language of visibility and hyper-visibility, frequently talking about their charismatic power to seduce as ‘exposing ourselves’. A common bakla greeting is to say ‘How is your beauty?’ instead of ‘How are you?’ and to substitute in ordinary conversation the phrases ‘my beauty’ for ‘myself’ and ‘your beauty’ for ‘yourself’. Non-bakla people frequently repeat bakla jokes and turns of phrase amongst themselves; little children in the barangays, for instance, are taught another bakla greeting to amuse their elders; one person claps the raised hand of a small child and exclaims, ‘Apper! because you are a bakla!’ After a while, the child learns to raise his hand himself ready for the clap. Exactly what the greeting means is slightly ambiguous; most claim that the bakla slang (‘wardspeak’) word ‘apper’ is an inversion of the Tagalog ‘pare’ – literally ‘co-godfather’, but used widely to address friends and equals – but some think that ‘apper’ is derived from the English word ‘appear’. In any case, the point of the game is clear; the adults are teasing the children by claiming to ‘reveal’ that they are in fact bakla; the trick is more amusing to everyone because it is played on very little children who cannot yet speak or understand properly, and who are too young to repudiate the label. At the same time, since this game is so widely used, it is possible to look at it in another way; the bakla, supreme experts in imitation, are themselves constantly and universally imitated by other people.

Most bakla make their livings in less sophisticated surroundings than they would like. In Calabanga, the parlour was a small, open-fronted shop near the main market next to a grain dealer’s. It had a mirror, but no basin, and was run first by Mona and then (after a little disagreement with the landlady) by Linda. Linda’s mother, a farmer’s wife in her seventies, would drop into the shop each afternoon after shopping for food, and was always treated with politeness and affection by the bakla who used the shop as a meeting-place and base for their boyfriend-hunting forays. The customers were mostly women, but with a sprinkling of men.

When Linda’s mother was not there, the shop was notable for the continuous card-playing which went on hidden under the table, for the surplus of manicurists which meant that customers had to be shared out, not always without squabbles, and especially for the continuous performance of ‘being bakla’ which Linda and her friends gave for each other. The following description, is taken from notes for a hot afternoon in July.

Linda is on form, keeping up a hysterical conversation while cutting the hair of a young woman into a fashionable bob. Apparently, Linda is paying no attention whatsoever to the haircut, casting occasional sidelong glances at the progress of the work as if it were something somebody else was doing. She pauses, on the other hand, for long periods to strike a pose in front of the mirror and exclaim to the room: ‘Magayon!’ (‘I’m beautiful!’) or ‘Gitil!’ (‘Vanity!’). Her client, though, can see that the haircut is going well. A woman friend comes in with a new boyfriend and Linda screams a greeting:

‘My Jesus, amiga, you made such a clever choice! . . . He’s so good-looking! . . . I’m falling in love . . . do you mind? Do you want a haircut? Let Tess do it – I’m going to do your boyfriend’s nails myself.’ Linda places a hand over her heart; ‘What a choice’, she repeats, ‘not like Tess, she’ll take any man as long as he’s big’, and then correcting herself with another shriek. ‘O keme! Don’t be angry now, will you?’

Of course, Linda’s conversation is an act, but it is an act which all the bakla know about; the idea that they are vain, trivial, charming, infuriating, flirtatious and hysterical; an idea represented in talking keme – the gay slang (wardspeak) for nonsense, mischief and naughtiness. This process of continuously performing an identity was something Linda personally took to extremes, but all the bakla knew could switch in and out of it according to whom they were dealing with.

The leader of the region’s bakla community is Mr Tata Flores, who runs a successful dressmaking business (and sponsors a basketball team as well as numerous beauty-contestants) in the more luxurious surroundings of Naga City. Tata belongs to one of Bicol’s leading families; he grew up speaking English and has worked abroad, and it is he and his friends (male and female) who over the past twenty-five years have turned the ‘Miss Gay’ contest from a private event held at home into a high-status show which has become a highlight of the year, and which has done much to achieve his ambition of increasing the respect in which the gay community is held in Bicol.15

Over the years, Tata has earned for his show a reputation for ‘high taste’, artistry and technical sophistication which has allowed many of Naga’s most respectable progressive citizens to support it. The status of the contest is now such that in 1988 it was officially opened by the talented
young mayor of Naga City, who made a speech (in Bicol and English) articulating the wishes of both sides when he claimed that the enormous popularity of the contest ‘... is a sign that gays are being rendered due recognition and respect in their chosen field and personality ... the “third sex” is already accepted ...’ This announcement, with its gloriously economical evocation of the quintessentially American ideology of self-improvement and self-fashioning, placed the show under an umbrella of safe and admirable qualities, a point driven home when the mayor went on to stress the contest’s contribution to the civic and business life of the city. The total confidence of the statement was, however, a little political sleight-of-hand, as some elite people are still not entirely sure of their ground with the contest.

But it is equally only because of the responsive chord which the shows themselves have struck with the public of all ages and classes – who throng Naga’s main piazza to watch – that these claims were able to carry conviction. By the time of the 1987 show just before my fieldwork, for instance, its fascination was such that a huge and heterogeneous audience sat through a tropical downpour in the unprotected square rather than miss seeing part of the contest. My argument, therefore, is that the Miss Gay contest and its preliminary heats in small towns like Calabanga (equally well attended) are now essentially a popular festival, and that the appeal of the show for a huge non-bakla audience both demands and suggests explanations.

I have said that bakla are known for their artistry in creating beauty. The crucial and extraordinary thing about the Miss Gay contest is that they create themselves as beauties. As bakla see it, the social respect they have won comes from their skill in achieving a dazzling self-transformation. A trader, Oning, explained this:

People say that if you put the Miss Bicolandia show against the Miss Gay the Miss Gay contest is altogether more beautiful than those of real women, and they say that the gays look more truly womanly in their movements when they are ... modelling on the stage ... 

And I did indeed hear people remark over and over again on the beauty of the bakla; it was a subject which fascinated most people who had seen the show; ‘The real women are defeated by them; they really look beautiful’, was a typical remark. People would speculate on how they achieved their effects, or relate stories about men who fell in love with beautiful bakla and courted them as if they were women. What is significant is that, although there was an element of disapproval of the bakla and their ‘artful’ ways, there was equally a genuine excitement and admiration evident at the transformations that they wrought. People may depreciate the bakla – but they also enjoy the effects they create.

The audience’s recognition that they are like women – or even better – is terribly important to the bakla. But when I asked them about the experience of performing in the contest, they always replied in slightly different terms. The experience was always one of happiness, they said, ‘When I am up on the stage ... my feelings are really truly happy.’ But the reason for this happiness was not that they felt like a woman, but that you felt like a star (sikat, ‘superstar’).

‘If you win’, said Pablo, ‘it’s as if you are famous (sikat) just for the evening ... you feel as if you ... will be recognised ... if you have been Miss Gay’. ‘Do you feel that you’re a woman?’ I asked. ‘I’m a woman then! And then, I’m really very happy ... because ... enough to say ... its like I’m becoming a superstar.’

Or as Oning says, ‘If you win, it means that you are deserving. That night you’re the best. You’re the most beautiful, the cleverest ... That is once in your life that you will have something to say for yourself...’. This triumph, however, is achieved only by the exercise of all the bakla’s artistry and by the long and exacting practice of walk, smile, pose and English diction in the weeks before the contest. The bakla practise with friends and learn from each other’s performances. As Oning says, ‘You have to research how to be in a beauty contest.’ The greatest shame that a bakla contestant can imagine is that ‘People would find fault with you and say you hadn’t studied it.’ Not only would one be ridiculed in front of one’s fellow-contestants, but in front of the audience whose appreciation of the serious achievement before them is so keenly sought, and the judges with their pencils hovering over the boxes for Poise, Appearance, Originality and Charm. The beauty of the bakla is artistry and its successes are hard earned.

The Miss Gay Naga City Contest, 1988
The following account is taken largely from my fieldnotes for the Miss Gay contest of September 1988.

The preparations have dominated Tata’s house for weeks. All Tata’s seamstresses are employed making the contestants’ orders. Several at once are bent over a shimmering violet and white evening-gown with white and silver flowers embroidered down the front; it has a boned bodice and a tube skirt which break into layers of frills at the knees, thus giving the bakla figure plenty of shape. The seamstresses are also fielding bakla contestants turning up to register their applications from all over the
province; these beauties, as yet dressed only in their everyday street-wear of jeans and feminine top, preen themselves in front of Tata’s long mirror. The swimsuit heats are to be held later that week, at Naga City’s municipal pool, and Tata has made the swimsuits for the contestants to model, as exact replicas of those in the Miss Bicolandia contest.

On the evening of the finals, the make-up artist Danny is rushing about between faces; I am put into one of Tata’s formal creations in cream frills and covered in Revlon in order to pass muster as a judge. I notice that Danny and I have exactly the same make-up, but he can make my fringe stick up higher in the favoured style, as I have more hair. When I join the other judges (three female dignitaries including the vice-mayor, one male councillor, and two female beauty-queens), the stage is brilliantly lit with expensive sound equipment in place, and the plaza is absolutely packed. The **bakla** who are not competing are mostly in women’s clothes, and busy with arrangements; Danny has become ‘Daniella’; Tata claims he is too old and fat to wear a dress anymore — but perhaps he is just a little too dignified these days.

In fact, the acts are highly accomplished, the dancing fantastic, the audiences’ admiration genuine. The **bakla** have chosen stage names —

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Figure 10 Jennifer de Assis’s angelic smile

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Barbra Ledesma from Ligao, Ging-Ging Padilla from Pili, Alice Robles Narvades from Naga — which recall Tagalog filmstars, and old Spanish elites. Most of them are simply dazzling. Jennifer de Assis appears looking fragile in a white, empire-line evening dress trimmed with silver; feeling the admiration of the audience, she lifts up her arms, spreading the cloth like wings, and gives an angelic smile. Claudine Louise Ferrari, with severe waxed chignon and a gown hand-painted with pastel-coloured flowers (she has a rich sponsor in Manila, a boyfriend perhaps), provokes admiring comment even from Tata, who declares her turnout ‘quality’. The close-up photos, taken by Naga’s photographers and sold in local shops for weeks after the event, reveal a little more the large hands or too-broad shoulders. But for the moment on stage, the **bakla** are beautiful and elated, and the audience is elated with them and caught up in their triumphant beauty.

As the contestants begin to enter to show their daytime outfits, I notice a group of fantastically dressed **bakla** sitting at a table to my right; one has flowing auburn hair and a peacock-coloured satin dress; another is (in a country of short people) almost six feet tall and wears a streaked blonde chignon and a black and pink satin dress with a thigh-high split. These amazing creatures are last year’s title-holders, and members of the Naga-Manila beautician elite in their daytime jobs. They sit gloriously sulking at the thought of handing over their crowns in an hour or so’s time.

Meanwhile, the other judges and I are working hard to keep track of the multiple boxes on our mark-sheets. The former female beauty-queens take a knowing professional attitude to the event, and most of the women seem at ease with the two sides of the contest, the one very serious and the other a tremendous tease or **keme**, but some of the men are flummoxed by their own reactions to the contestants’ allure (a fact of which the **bakla** are well aware), and have to take refuge in a technical approach to marking. Everyone, however, is enjoying themselves.

After the talent section, which featured a lip-sync to Judy Garland’s ‘New York, New York’, and a scene lifted from a Tagalog melodrama in which a famous star portrays a mad beggarwoman, came the questions and answers. The questions, in declamatory English, had been carefully set by Tata to be ‘beautiful, not vulgar’. Nevertheless, those on politics and ethics received only vague replies. Other questions, a little less beautiful, seemed easier to answer:

Q: What part of a man’s body most attracts you and why?
A: The part of a man’s body that most attracts me is . . . whatever part that you think it is.
Q: If you found out that your boyfriend is also gay like you, what is your reaction?
A: I would feel deteriorated [sic], but then we could get together, after all there are plenty of men and we could look for new ones together.

Q: If you were the first gay saint, what is the first miracle that you would do?
A: Well, if it was up to me, I would arrange it so that all the bakla would be made into real women!

At three o’clock in the morning, Barbra Ledesma is made Miss Gay Penafirancia and receives her crown from last year’s sulking beauties, who are in tears. The audience begins to drift away, but the atmosphere is still one of lightness and festivity. Miss Gay Naga City has her picture taken with her old mother. Someone remarks to Danny the beautician: ‘What a waste of your beauty, Danny, that there is no dance.’

**Difficult transformations**

I have argued in this chapter that the Miss Gay Naga City beauty-contest has become a popular festival because at one level it is a triumphant realisation of mastery in a performance genre in which *all* Bicolanos (bakla or not) have a common interest. The combined lure of international consumer culture, filtered through the national culture which is centred on Manila, and the legacy of American colonialism which established many new genres of secular performance as the evidence of progress and good citizenship, is one to which people respond powerfully in the Philippines and with good reason. People from all classes, moreover, have the experience of taking part in some such performance, whether in school parades, major-ettes practice, the amateuran (or in middle-class homes) sitting in the back yard with some friends, some beer and the karaoke set, singing ‘My Way’.

I do not want to imply that when people take part in such activities they are necessarily thinking consciously about the problems of “post-colonialism”; mostly, of course, they are thinking about getting the song right, and enjoying themselves in ways which have in many senses become domesticated as part of the Filipino scene, and which therefore appear banal. Nonetheless, the songs belong to a repertoire of elite education, and to codes of behaviour associated with the American colonial and post-colonial presence in the Philippines. While the elite and middle classes feel themselves to varying extents already in possession of these codes, people in barangays like San Ignacio are excluded from them to a much greater degree especially because of their restricted access to Tagalog and English higher education. Yet in relation to both classes, the bakla have been able to establish for themselves a position as purveyors of advanced taste. As Oning says:

People like to see something unusual. It is not an ordinary thing to see and so it has a more beautiful appearance ... my group [of friends] here are elite people, they have very high taste ... People are happy to see something so rare ...

This position rests partly on the very ambivalence of the reputation of the bakla as both ‘artistic’ and ‘artificial’. They are conceded a place as the most talented exponents of the widely prized skills of transformation through imitation or replication. At the same time, bakla continuously run the risk of being considered pretentious, vulgar or fake (‘ma-arte’). They enact in even more exaggerated form the Bicolano performer’s dilemma, walking the tightrope between the elan of successful performance and the exposure of failure, and part of the popularity of the contest may stem from the fact that these spectacular risks are taken vicariously for the audience, and are taken moreover by a group of people whom one can alternately applaud (thus sharing in their success) and denigrate (thus for poorer people distancing the whole issue in a way reminiscent of the defusing action of Bicol jokes on the subject of money).

The risks which Bicolano performers take, however, seem to apply as much to the moment of ‘removing one’s shame’ and daring to embark on the performance, as to the possibility of completing it imperfectly. This makes sense, if it is recalled that shame (supog) is in other contexts an emotion which results when two personages who are widely separated, especially by status differences, are brought into sudden intimacy, and that the ‘shame’ is felt most by the subordinate party. All performances in elite genres can therefore be thought of as a kind of daring attempt on intimacy with the model imitated, which may raise the status of the performer, or may result in them being considered pretentious. The bakla are constantly at risk of being labelled ‘shameless’ by some non-bakla people who consider them financially unreliable and sexually promiscuous, but it is this same ability to ‘remove their shame’ which enables them to fling themselves into almost-impossible acts of self-transformation. In this sense, one can view Bicolano performances (not despite but because of their “Westernised” themes) as taking place within a context of typically Southeast Asian ways of dealing with relations to power. Not unlike Atkinson’s Wana shamans (Atkinson, 1989), Bicolano beauty-contestants and singers at amateuran become the temporary bodily ‘lodging places for potency’ which are felt to originate from somewhere ‘outside’ one’s own culture (Errington, 1990:46). The bakla epitomise these recapturings of power, not literally through possession, but through a wrapping of the body in symbols of protective status, and a transformation of the persona by proximity to the power it imitates, which are in many ways akin to it.
While Atkinson and Errington tend to typologise whole cultures according to whether they locate potency ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ their own boundaries, however, in the Bicol context one can see that relations to power, and confidence about how far one might already ‘embody’ it without having to summon it from the ‘outside’ world are partially inflected by class. Nonetheless, the bakla performances speak to both rich and poor, educated and uneducated, with equal if not identical powers of fascination.

I have deliberately avoided centreing the argument of this chapter on the question of ‘gender’, because I would not wish to say that ‘gender’ is what the Miss Gay contest is ‘really’ all about. Despite the significant importation of Euro-American gendered and sexualised notions of identity into the Philippines, I would argue that there are good reasons to think that especially among poorer rural people, these are in no simple sense dominant, nor have they become foundational to people’s understandings of their own identity.17 I would suggest that in the rural barangays, people do not in fact think solely in terms of an inner, more authentic and sexually founded (post-Freudian) self in the way that is claimed to be central to Westerners’ constructions of their own individuality. This, however, is not to say that they do not ascribe any importance to physiologically based notions of gender identity. Thus, while it would be true to say that non-bakla audiences are interested in the fact that bakla have penises but behave like and sometimes look like ‘real women’18 (and can therefore be mocked as not-real women and not-real men), I am not convinced that this observation occupies the same space in the Philippines as a central metaphor for authenticity and inauthenticity as it might in England or America.

The contrast between the ‘real’, the ‘natural’ and the ‘artificial’ indeed at times appears to be drawn at different places in the Philippines from what a European or American might expect, with the artificial being more highly valued. Sally-Ann Ness has noted that in Cebu, ‘natural’ dancing-styles connote, not what is not cultivated and acquired, but what is not exaggerated (Ness, 1992: 114) and similar observations could be made of the Bicol simple lang dress-style. When, in a heat for the Miss Gay contest, one contestant’s costume came adrift, revealing first his chest and then his genital area, performers and audience were united in condemning the display as bastos (rude, obscene), but it was not the dropping of the mask of gender which scandalised people, so much as the display of body-parts which would be inappropriate for anyone of either gender; as the old lady in front of me remarked indignantly: ‘Your breasts are showing and your penis is showing, you child of a trollop!’19 And it is worth considering that this play on transvestites as the most talented exponents of a valued refined style (alus) and simultaneously the most likely to succumb to vulgarity (kasur) is also characteristic of various performance genres in Java and elsewhere (Peacock, 1987).

The issue of the ‘real’ and ‘pretend’ identities of the bakla performers is therefore not necessarily reducible to questions of sexual identity. Nevertheless, Garcia (1996) has recently provided a warning from within the gay and academic communities against underestimating the extent to which the lives of Filipino bakla are dominated by the painful attempt to become ‘female’. Garcia argues, rightly in my view (and see also Blanc-Szanton, 1990), that the arrival of the Spanish probably shifted the definition of male transvestites away from the categories such as asog which were centred on occupation (as spirit-mediums who were ‘somewhat like women’) and towards a category which prioritised sexual practices and orientations. He claims that one consequence of this has been the stigmatisation of bakla as sexual ‘inverts’, as opposed to their previous empowerment as persons of combined gender.20 While remaining attentive to these issues, I would suggest that (whatever may be the case in the metropolis) it appears that in Bicol bakla self-descriptions are at least not univocal in their insistence on the centrality of becoming ‘real women’, and indeed it sometimes seems as though this aspiration is presented more for public than for private consumption, as against the idea of ‘having the best of both worlds’.

If, historically, asog and women occupied important positions as mediators in relation to the spirits, it seems that present-day bakla (who are no longer mediums though they may be spirits) have been forced onto a different arena of feminised mediation (which of course they also share with female beauty-contestants). What they are mediating is an American-derived notion of glamour which suggests the power and elite cultural codes of the Philippines’ colonisers; the fact that this mediation is often routed through an approximation of the Western models of ideal femininity may indeed increase the impact of dichotomous notions of gender on the participants, and may also reflect the curious relationship between women and consumption in the West (Benson, 1996). Becoming beautiful in the Philippines has historically been seen as a protective process, emphasising a person’s humanity and right to respect, and conferring (via amulets and tattoos) a layering of power, logics which still apply to the use of anting and the practice of embalming the dead. By becoming beautiful in the manner of Miss World, one acquires the armouring of a different cultural repertoire but with unpredictable results;
even the dangers faced by mediums in intimacy with the tawo are mitigated by the personal relationship between a healer and her saro, but in imitating the feminine icons of the West, one is endlessly at risk of being directed into the capitalist task of the production of the self, in which no 'other person', human or supernatural, is involved, and no 'help' is available from an outside source. In that sense, the mediations attempted by present-day hakla could finally be seen as even more difficult and burdensome that those of their audience.

19 On the struggle for control of mediation within Christianity, see Leach's seminal essay, 'Melchisedech and the emperor' (Leach, 1972).

20 This appears to be true of most if not all Southeast Asian double-burial contexts. On the ritual treatment of decomposition, the fear of the odour of the corpse and the reclamation of the cleansed bones as ancestral objects see for instance Metcalfe (1982:esp. 83–4, 133, 177) on Borneo, Siegel (1986: 268–273) on Java, Freeman (1970: 6 and photograph 8a) on the Iban.

21 Moving saints are of course found in European Catholic miracles, (on moving Spanish crucifixes, see Christian, 1992), but to my knowledge the saint with an entire life-cycle is a specifically Filipino phenomenon.

10: Beauty and the idea of 'America'

1 The argument of many nationalistically minded Filipinos is that American influence was both more baleful and more pervasive than Spanish, especially since it came disguised as beneficence (Salazar, 1991). I would not argue with the sometimes baleful influence of American rule either colonially or post-independence, but I would argue with the entirely negative definition of all lowland culture which incorporates 'American' elements as an insecure and dependent 'colonial mentality' (Mulder, 1991:7).

2 Although a young man might invite a girl he was courting to the cinema or to have a drink in the town, generally in the daytime, not the evening.

3 Imelda Marcos famously began her career and met Marcos through becoming winner of a beauty-contest in Leyte (Pedrosa, 1987:69). Barcenas (1989:14) describes Bicol contests in their present form as dating back to the end of the Spanish period, although it is possible that they developed in part out of the many religious processions which involve Mary as the Queen of Heaven, Queen Isabella or Queen Helena in the Santacruzian (story of the finding of the True Cross) (Santos, 1982: 35–6; Fernandez, 1996:11,100). On money contests, see Lynch (c.1956:102).

4 Barcenas (1989:14) claims that national-level competitions 'started long ago ... just when America began to rule our country ...'

5 There is unfortunately no space at present to describe in any detail the films which I watched with friends in Bicol, although we bear on issues discussed in this book in various ways, especially on the representation of kinship.

6 Beauty contests apart, the importance and financial burden of clothes presses down on people in all sorts of circumstances, especially for example, for primary-school graduation ceremonies.

7 The contests are therefore integrated into the region's major religious festival, which includes a famous fluvial procession of the Penafrancia Virgin. I will not discuss the women's contests here, since it is the bakla contest which is most famous and most anticipated by a wide popular audience.

8 Such is the fascination with beauty contests and transvestitism in Bicol that in 1989 a local college in Naga staged a transvestite contest which was specifically not for bakla men. Tata was rather pleased, and took the imitation as a sincere form of flattery, though several of the bakla speculated that the contestants might not be so 'macho' as they made out.

9 Fathers may find the identity of their sons more difficult to accept, but many families take it with rather little fuss. Bakla relatives feature among people's recollections of their parents' and grandparents' generations.

10 These explanations seemed to me quite eclectic; people sometimes mentioned an aspect of heredity, but without much conviction, and sometimes baklas themselves suggested (as is sometimes said in the West) that being dressed in girls' clothes or given girls' tasks as children had changed them, although parents tend to see such behaviour as chosen by the child.

11 The people I knew in Naga City, who had much longer education and more exposure to American materials than those in the barangays, sometimes read newspapers and circulars which came directly or indirectly from gay communities in the States. Nonetheless, they also were surprised to know that 'gays' loved other 'gays' in America, and considered this either a dubious way to behave, or a discrediting. On the other hand, when Tata's sister once got out the video of Kiss of the Spider Woman for the shop-workers, thinking they would identify with the 'Latin-American' style of homosexuality they portrayed, the bakla found the film of no relevance to them at all.

12 Compare the interesting and detailed work of Mark Johnson on the buntut of the southern Philippines (Johnson, 1994 and 1997), whose identities are much more unambiguously focussed on penetrator/penetrated roles in sexual intercourse. I may be misunderstanding this factor in Bicol, but it is also clear from Johnson's work that the particularities of local Islam shape the ways in which sex is used as a metaphor for threat and defence.

13 After my departure in 1992, Tata was successful in getting elected as a city councillor (kagawad) for Naga City, during which time he was fondly known as the 'kagay-wal'.

14 Irvine (1982) notes in an appendix that Thai transvestites in the Chiang Mai area also hold beauty contests; 'In another form of acting, individual katnho can find momentary celebration', writes Irvine. 'This is when they participate in their own fashion and beauty contests which take place within the village monastery as part of the local fair. Dressed and made up like women, and moving, often convincingly, like them, they can enjoy momentary attention and often general admiration for their convincing performance' (1982:477). I find it intriguing that Irvine's description and my own seem to echo each other in references to the celebratory aspect which I here call 'the happiness of the bakla', and which is linked to the opposing possibility of public shame and private distress (Irvine, 1982:467).

15 Some of Tata's seamstresses are themselves bakla, and others are women. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Tata, Tina and his staff and friends for their time, hospitality and help while I was in Bicol, and for allowing me to be one of the judges at their superb event.

16 Rural popular performers in Thailand may claim to be literally possessed by the spirits of famous Western figures such as Michael Jackson (Coeli Barry, personal communication).

17 Blanc-Szanton (1990) takes a similar view on Iloilo. If there is no reason to typecast pre-colonial gender-relations as ideally complementary (Eviota, 1992:33–37), there is also no reason to accept that contemporary gender is totally determined by colonial and Western imperatives, and my own reading of the
Bicol situation as well as others suggests that it is not (see e.g. Ilo 1995).
Moreover, it seems likely that local concepts of internality and externality of
the person do not necessarily correspond to the (post-Freudian) model of the
internal, sexually founded and authentic 'self' versus the external self, at least
until more work has been done on the significance attached to sexuality in
specific locations. For a very interesting reading of those aspects of gender
relations which were highly determined by American-period colonial relations-
ships, however, see Rafael (1995a).
18
The ways in which dominant Western ideologies of the person create a fascina-
tion with cross-dressing as a contrast between apparent and 'real/physi-
cal/natural' gender is of course the subject of Judith Butler's influential
19
Compare Siegel (1986:114, 116) for audiences shocked into 'imitative' crude-
ess by breaches of propriety on the Surakarta stage.
20
On the notion of combined genders in shamanism, and the relative lack of
stress on issues of sexuality, compare Graham's account of the Iban: Iban
transvestite shamans could either be impotent and celibate, or become the
'wives' of men (Graham, 1987 esp. 147–51).

11: Conclusion: oppression, pity and transformation
1
This story was told to me on an afternoon when my co-godmother Irene had
just come out of hospital, following an emergency caesarian after which she
had been unable to pay for painkillers or antibiotics.
2
Albeit Rafael seems to be suggesting (in reference to Siegel, 1986 and Derrida,
1985) that these cycles of exchange of signs are themselves a kind of phantasm;
the compulsive recreation of a hierarchic distance which they both wish to
eliminate and cannot do without. I am grateful to Danilyn Rutherford for illu-
minating discussions on this point.
3
Reid is here discussing the maritime mercantile states of early modern
Southeast Asia, where debt-slaves who received manumission would often re-
indenture themselves to a different master/ creditor (Reid, 1983: 168). This
despite the fact that such cities surely represented the most innovative social
environments of the period.
4
Reid in particular classes the Philippines societies as 'transitional' (Reid,
1983:163) between 'closed' systems of slavery, linked in part with the retention
of labour for rice-agriculture which emphasised the ritual differentiation and
non-transferability of slave status and 'open' systems typical of the maritime
cities such as Malacca and Aceh, where the recruitment of population was a
priority and where the status of slaves was gradually transformed into that of
ordinary (bonded) citizens. (Reid, 1983: 166–67)
5
Scott rightly points out that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans did
not reject 'slavery' on these grounds, which have prevailed since the eighteenth
century abolitionist movement, but on the basis of a distinction between the
rightness of subjection of non-Christians and Christians (or members of the
Spanish Empire, regarded as equivalent).
6
This is I think the most useful way to read Lynch's account of Canaman, a
town almost adjoining Calabanga, as composed essentially of two social