

# philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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## Fetal Personhood in the Christian Philippines: The View from a Visayan Island

Hannah C. M. Bulloch

*Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*  
vol. 64 no. 2 (2016): 195–222

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HANNAH C. M. BULLOCH

# **Fetal Personhood in the Christian Philippines**

## **The View from a Visayan Island**

Issues of fetal personhood have been controversial in the Philippines in the context of reproductive health debates, but little is understood about how ordinary Filipinos construct fetal and early infant personhood in the context of their everyday lives. This article draws on ethnographic research in Siquijor, a Central Visayan island with a Catholic population. Based on conversations about pregnancy and miscarriage, I show that unlike notions promoted by elites of the Catholic Church, which fix personhood to the moment of conception, local notions of personhood are processual. Significantly, ensoulment, while thought to occur at conception, is not sufficient to produce a person.

**KEYWORDS: FETAL DEVELOPMENT · DEATH · SOULS · HAUNTINGS · RELIGION**

The unborn, associated as they are with the beginnings of the person, are the subject of varied and contested notions of personhood between and within societies. Personhood, in principle, may be conferred “all at once” by a marker such as conception or birth, or may slowly accrue over time as an individual grows, is thought of, cared about, born, fed, named, and so forth. The blurry boundaries of personhood at this early stage mean that the unborn are often the subject of fierce ethical debate and private struggle. Indeed, even an individual’s views on when personhood commences—when developing biological matter and perhaps spiritual essence can be said to constitute a person—can vary over time and according to context. Such variation exists because what it means to be a person is culturally constructed. As anthropologists Beth Conklin and Lynn Morgan (1996, 662) put it, personhood is a “social status granted—in varying degrees—to those who meet (or perform) socially sanctioned criteria for membership.” Personhood is concerned with who “counts” as a person and how persons are understood to be constituted as both mutual and mutually exclusive beings. At the same time, constructions of personhood underpin some of our most deeply held ethical principles.

In the Philippines the topic of personhood has been controversial, connected in particular to debates on the Reproductive Health (RH) Act (Republic Act 10354), which was passed into law in 2012 (see, for example, David et al. 2014; Buckley 2014; Francisco 2015). Among other things, the RH law makes contraceptives more accessible, promotes greater sex education in schools, and requires that those suffering from abortion-related complications cannot be denied medical treatment, even though abortion itself is illegal in the country. The most formidable source of opposition to the law came from the Catholic Church, which has long held substantial influence over the Philippine state in an archipelago where 81 percent of the population is Roman Catholic (as of the 2010 census). While the church’s opposition to the law is multifaceted, one key aspect relates to the church’s contention that personhood commences at the moment of human conception—the instant a sperm fertilizes an egg, a person is materialized. The president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines asserts in an open pastoral letter that “From the fusion of the basic cells of the father and the mother following the marital act, the fruit is already human” (Capalla 2005). Thus, church elites not only oppose abortion, but also equate modern

forms of contraception—including birth control pills, intrauterine devices, injectables, and even condoms—with abortion (Austria 2004; David 2003).

This perspective on birth control has been highly influential in the Philippines, where natural family planning methods have been heavily promoted by church and state entwined. Such views have been challenged by a range of civil society groups and academics concerned not only with reproductive health and rights but also with population growth and poverty. Polls indicate that a majority of Catholic Filipinos quietly approved of the RH Bill,<sup>1</sup> suggesting some degree of discordance between church doctrine and popular opinion in relation to reproductive issues (Bautista 2010). Furthermore, despite the prohibition on abortion in the Philippines (and probably as a result of the denunciation of modern contraceptives), rates of abortion in the archipelago are very high. It has been estimated that nearly 17 percent of pregnancies that occurred in the Philippines in 2008 were aborted, totaling over half a million abortions in that year alone (UPPI, Likhaan Center for Women’s Health, and Guttmacher Institute 2009, cited in Gipson et al. 2011, 262).

While in this context debates have swirled around the issue of fetal personhood, our understandings of how Filipinos actually construct personhood are poor at best. Most of the published material on fetal personhood in relation to the Philippines has been theological, philosophical, or legal in nature, presenting arguments regarding how personhood *should* be understood and how state policy and law should reflect these understandings (Tan 2004). While such works contribute to academic and public debates in important ways, the question of how people actually understand fetal and early infant personhood in the practice of their everyday lives remains almost entirely unexamined. My own ethnographic material on fetal personhood from the predominantly Catholic Central Visayan island of Siquijor reveals a popular understanding that ensoulment does occur at the moment of conception but this is not enough to produce a person. I detail these preliminary findings below, not in order to make an argument for a certain stance on reproductive rights—that would not do justice to the varied views on the issues held by my informants—but rather to show there is compelling evidence that everyday notions of personhood in the archipelago are both diverse and complex, tying into discourses that are not reflected in current public or academic debates in the country. Ethnographic material of this nature has considerable importance in shedding light on everyday

religion and cultural diversity in the Philippines today. It also has important implications for our understandings of people's moral decision making on issues of birth control, and although exploring this latter issue is beyond the scope of the present article I point to the need for further research.

In what follows I begin by briefly outlining anthropological approaches to personhood at the beginnings of life. It is worth noting that personhood is an important concept in anthropology, encompassing all stages of life and death (from before conception through to ancestorhood, and many culturally variable categories in between).<sup>2</sup> There is a vast anthropological literature dealing with different aspects of personhood in a range of cultural contexts (Appell-Warren 2014 provides a good overview of this literature), although for practical purposes here I focus on notions of personhood at the beginnings of life only. I then go on to provide a sketch of Siquijor, particularly religious cosmology, and to explain the background to the research. In the main section of the article I describe Siquijodnon constructions of fetal personhood, which were illuminated during discussions of pregnancy and miscarriage as part of my fieldwork focusing on the lives of women on the island. I show how these notions of personhood are reflected in death rites and beliefs about relations between the living and the souls of the deceased. I conclude with reflections on broader implications and avenues for future research.

### **The Anthropology of Fetal and Early Infant Personhood**

Anthropologists have shown that the criteria for personhood vary considerably across cultures. In some cultures persons are “produced” from a very early stage. For example, Morgan (1989, 93–94, quoting Devereux 1955) describes a Chippewa Amerindian woman who lost her baby at two or three months gestation: “They cleaned it just like a child that is born and wrapped it. They gave a feast for it just like for a dead person and buried it in the same way. They believe that a child is human when it is conceived.” In other societies personhood may only be ascribed well after birth and in fact full personhood may only be achieved during adulthood or even after death (Bloch 1988). For example, Andrew Canessa (1998, 233–34) describes how, for Aymara Indians of the Andes, a newborn is still considered a fetus—the “raw material out of which a person may be created.” The child's first public recognition by the community and spirits occurs at a hair-cutting ceremony (*ritucha*), but personhood is particularly defined for the Aymara through the slow process of gaining the capability to perform certain productive tasks within the community.

In the Philippine context, F. Landa Jocano (1969, 21) notes in relation to his 1960s fieldwork in a central Panay barangay that “For a man to impregnate a woman there must be repeated coitus” (this perspective is similar to that of the Wari of Brazil as described by Conklin and Morgan 1996, 670). He quotes an informant: “If it takes several weeks to complete a simple house, so, I imagine it would take several unions to form a human being.” (While Jocano refers to “humans” rather than “persons,” the Hiligaynon word for these (*tawo*) is the same, a point I will return to below.) He also observes that many parents consider the second or third month of pregnancy the most dangerous because, as another informant puts it, the fetus “is now in human form and the spirits are more determined to harm it” (Jocano 1969, 24). Yet it would seem that it has not yet reached full personhood because, before they are baptized, newborns

are considered half-human, their popular nickname being *muritu* (not yet human). Such babies are viewed as constitutionally weak and are susceptible to illness. They do not yet enjoy the protective concern of their guardian angels. Should they die, their souls cannot enter heaven; instead, they would be turned into environmental spirits, the *tomawu* (a generic term for dwellers of the trees) and sent back to haunt the living. Some Catholic informants further opined that before becoming environmental spirits, the souls of unbaptized children stay in *limbo*, a dark place located in a region between the earth and the sky adjacent to *purgatory*. The length of stay in this place depends upon the seriousness of the original sin inherited from the parents. (ibid., 15)

Marino Gatan (1981, 124), meanwhile, suggests that among the Ibanag people of northern Luzon a baby or infant is thought to continue developing even if he or she dies prematurely. The souls of dead babies and small children continue to grow to adulthood, as reflected in the fact that, at the time when they are supposed to reach marriageable age, they request a marriage celebration from their relatives. There is a similar belief in Japan, where the souls of deceased fetuses and children are sometimes married to spirit spouses embodied in the form of consecrated dolls (Schattschneider 2001).

Not surprisingly then, anthropologists have distinguished between fixed and processual notions of personhood. Fixed notions of personhood

are common in biomedical and legal contexts and often tie the formation of the person to a biological marker, such as conception, “independent viability,” or birth. In this reckoning the accrual of personhood is a relatively instantaneous, seemingly natural process that is not easily undone. In Anglo-American societies birth has traditionally been *the* quintessential marker of personhood, although this has been changing with the rise of new reproductive technologies such as ultrasound. However, anthropologists have shown that in many cultures and contexts the acquisition of personhood is a gradual process as a biological individual forms, is “made” into a social being, and gains certain competencies over the life course (Conklin and Morgan 1996; Oaks 1994; Layne 2000; Canessa 1998; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Picone 1998; Carsten 1995; Appell-Warren 2014). As Tine Gammeltoft (2002, 319–20) points out, “in many societies a process of anthropomorphization is required before a fetus or a neonate is considered a true member of human society.” From the processual perspective, personhood can exist in varying degrees and may be “lost, attenuated, withdrawn, or denied” (Conklin and Morgan 1996, 668). Processual personhood often involves an important relational element, that is, the conferral of personhood is anchored in the growth of social relationships with the unborn, neonate, or infant. Even in cultures in which fixed notions of personhood are dominant, in practice the construction of the person is often nuanced through everyday forms of relationality, such as touch and communication.

Significantly, institutional or dominant representations of personhood may not reflect the complexity of people’s subjective interpretations of personhood as they play out in practice, or they may fail to reflect the intracultural variation that exists within societies (Gammeltoft 2002, 320). For example, in the US context, independent viability and birth are the key markers of personhood from a legal standpoint (Heriot 1996). However, Linda Layne (2000) shows that everyday constructions of personhood can be quite contradictory: the personhood of an embryo, fetus, or neonate may be readily built up by friends and family when a healthy birth is expected, but quickly denied if a miscarriage or perinatal death occurs, leaving the would-be parents struggling to gain social acceptance of the “realness” of their loss. Gammeltoft (2002, 314) explains that, in Vietnam, the debates over the ethics of abortion, which are characteristic of many other parts of the world, are barely present. Induced abortion is not only “officially sanctioned . . . as a basic reproductive health service” (ibid.) but has also

become “a conventionalized and institutionalized solution to the problems that an unwanted pregnancy poses” (ibid., 317). Nonetheless, the young people she studied who had undergone an abortion were in fact often deeply troubled by the ethics of the procedure. Despite state efforts to try to displace “superstition” with science, many believe that the fetus has a soul. Meanwhile Lynn Morgan (2006, 12), who conducted fieldwork with a Catholic population in highland Ecuador, found that, despite the official doctrine of the Catholic Church holding that full personhood begins at conception, the women she spoke to “explained that babies are not full persons until they are baptized . . . fetuses, unbaptized children, Jews, and others were regarded as ambiguous, liminal quasi-persons at best.” They believed that abortion is a sin, not because it constitutes murder but because it is seen as self-mutilation. One lesson Morgan (ibid.) draws from her study is that we “should not assume that we know how religious affiliation translates into beliefs or behaviors.”

Before I continue, a word on semantics. Terms such as “embryo,” “fetus,” “baby,” and “child” are imbued with culturally specific assumptions regarding personhood. In order not to impose these assumptions on my ethnographic data, in what follows I denote the unborn using the terms fetus, baby, and child interchangeably. In each case my choice of term is not intended to imply the mapping of an external hierarchy of personhood onto the ethnographic material I describe.

### **Siquijor Island**

Siquijor is a rural, Cebuano-speaking province-island in the Central Visayas region of the Philippines. It has a population of around 91,000 according to the 2010 census and takes approximately two hours to circumnavigate by motorcycle. Ethnically Siquijodnon are *Bisaya* (Visayan in English) and as such constitute part of the most populous ethnolinguistic category in the Philippines. Siquijodnon have traditionally relied on subsistence agriculture, fishing, and small-scale entrepreneurial activities (figs. 1 and 2). Over the last few decades migration and remittances have become an increasingly important part of the economy, with many men gaining employment as seafarers and women as domestic helpers abroad. Although inequalities certainly exist, Siquijor is not characterized by the vast class disparities apparent in some neighboring areas, such as the sugar haciendas of Negros. Siquijor also receives a trickle of tourists, although not enough to



Fig. 1. Fishermen wait for calmer weather outside Siquijor's oldest house, Cang Isok

make a substantial impact on the economy or allow most locals to have even semiregular contact with foreigners.

Ninety-five percent of Siquijodnon are Roman Catholic according to the 2010 census. Small percentages belong to other Christian denominations including Aglipayan, Evangelical, Seventh-Day Adventist, and United Church of Christ in the Philippines. Siquijodnon tend to be regular churchgoers and maintain a strong sense of Catholic identity (fig. 3). But as is the case in most of the Christian Philippines they also subscribe to a range of beliefs that do not emanate from, or necessarily accord with, those preached by the Catholic Church—including the belief that the souls (*kalag*) of ancestors may continue to reside, unseen, among or near living humans. They may share the same domestic spaces with people, often continuing to occupy the home they established or where they lived much of their lives. For this reason, if an ancestral home is demolished parts of it will often be integrated into a new house so that the ancestors recognize it as their home and are not left wandering (fig. 4). Meanwhile, the terrestrial spirit beings known as *di ingon nato* (literally those “not like us”) are kalag-like,



Fig. 2. A family stops to picnic while gleaning the intertidal zone for shellfish

but they are not creatures of the realm of God, nor are they ever embodied in fleshy material form. *Di ingon nato* encompass various species of eternal spirit beings that reside in counterpart to, but usually unseen by, ordinary humans, including *engkanto*, *kapre*, *dwende*, and *kataw*. They normally live in forests, near streams, in the ocean, and underground and can be either benevolent, malevolent, or both. Both *kalag* and *di ingon nato* have some ability to influence humans, including making people ill (sometimes deliberately, sometimes inadvertently), and need to be propitiated. Lastly, a number of dangerous shape-shifting creatures (*abat*) can live undetected among human and animal populations. These creatures fall neither clearly into the physical or metaphysical realms, as Siquijodnon do not make rigid distinctions between such realms. *Mananambal* (healers) and *manghihilot* (traditional masseuses) are authorities over this “folk” domain of belief and practice, even while they are often Catholic themselves. These shamans are a source of medical and spiritual advice and treatment for many residents—for some, shamans are their first line of advice, while for others their services are sought as a form of complementary treatment. I should add that, in spite

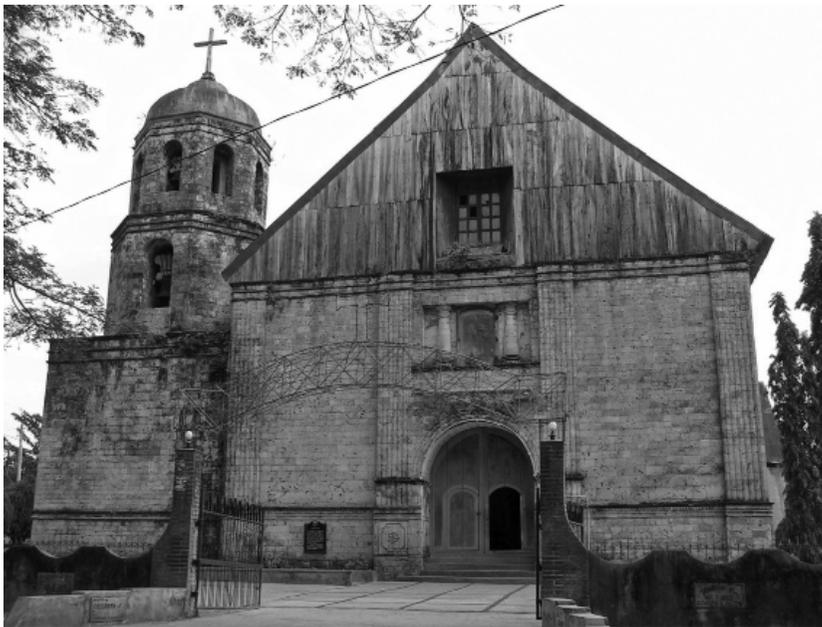


Fig. 3. San Isidro Labrador Parish Church in Lazi municipality, Siquijor

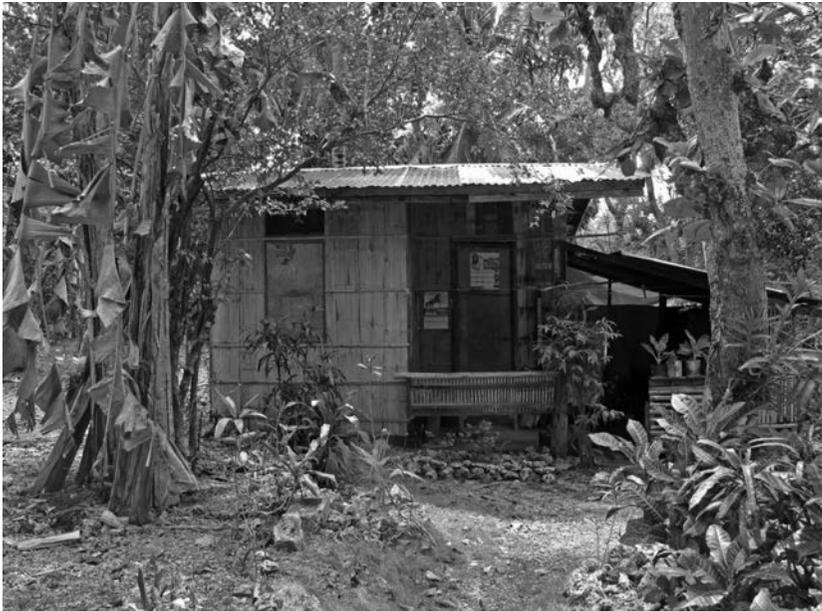


Fig. 4. This ancestral home is no longer lived in, but it is maintained so that the souls of deceased ancestors will not be left homeless and wandering

of Siquijor's reputation for so-called mysticism (Bulloch in press), similar sets of beliefs are common throughout the Philippines (see, for example, Cannell 1999, 83–87).

Such “unofficial” beliefs among Catholics in the Philippines have long been variously tolerated, disapproved, or condemned by church authorities (Lynch 1979, 229). For Siquijodnon, Christianity and animism are not seen or practiced as distinct, mutually exclusive, or oppositional, which is not quite the same as saying that people do not discriminate at all between authorized Catholic doctrine and the more diverse set of beliefs to which they subscribe. Most people understand that the church does not sanction some of their beliefs, and while this awareness contributes to a certain guardedness regarding those beliefs it does not necessarily result in their outright dismissal. As Jayeel Cornelio (2014) points out, in the past Filipinist scholars have sought to explain how supposedly incompatible “belief systems”—remnants of precolonial “superstition” and imported Christianity—fit together, through recourse to models of syncretism and split-level Christianity. These models assume that religion is a coherent set of beliefs and practices, but that the process of Christianization was incomplete in the Philippines, leaving an uneasy amalgamation of conflicting layers of religion. The goal of many such scholars, including Jaime Bulatao (1966)—the Jesuit psychologist who coined the term split-level Christianity—was how to more thoroughly achieve Christian conversion. More recent scholarship has turned toward a concern with the “everyday authenticity” of popular religion in the archipelago (Cornelio 2014). Everyday authenticity, Cornelio (*ibid.*, 481) explains, “refers to the local contexts and experiences of being Catholic in which individuals are able to express themselves in ways that do not necessarily align with institutional prescriptions of religiosity or orthodoxy.” Giving greater attention to the agency of Catholics themselves, such scholarship “underscores the reflexive character of individuals to reinterpret (and not simply receive) religion” (*ibid.*, 482). I approach the study of religion, and culture more broadly, on Siquijor from this perspective, seeing it as authentic in its own terms.

### **Background to the Research**

Over the last decade I have spent almost two years living on Siquijor island for the purposes of ethnographic fieldwork, with my most recent trip being in 2015. My initial work on the island examined local notions of

development and the good life (Bulloch 2013, 2014, 2015, in press; Bulloch and Fabinyi 2009). I was particularly interested in how metanarratives of development become implicated in people's identities and shape their life trajectories. More recently I have been undertaking a project that focuses on the lives of Siquijodnon women aged 18 to 35. The project examines their roles, obligations, and agency in the context of domestic, familial, sexual, and romantic intimacy. In doing so it sheds light on a diverse range of topics including education, employment, migration, reproduction, moral economy, and kinship. This research is principally based on in-depth interviews and participant observation. I have lived in several barangays during my time in Siquijor and visited many others, forming strong ties of friendship and "fictive" kinship.<sup>3</sup> For this most recent project, I conducted approximately sixty in-depth interviews, many of which were with women in their twenties and thirties, but some were with males and older people. Oral histories formed around half of these interviews. With a number of women I have conducted repeat interviews over the course of a decade. Where I refer to specific people in this article I use pseudonyms and have changed identifiable details about them to protect their anonymity.

While fetal personhood has not been the core focus of my research, it came into purview because pregnancy was an important topic among the many women in their twenties and thirties I interviewed and talked with in day-to-day conversation. Conversations about pregnancy loss particularly shed light on understandings of fetal personhood. My informants usually used the word *nakuhaan* when talking about pregnancy loss, which principally denotes miscarriage, although it is also a term for abortion. It derives from the root word *kuha*, to take, and implies that something was taken or extracted, but the prefix "na" makes the term passive, deemphasizing agency or intent (as if to say, "it happened to be taken" or "it was accidentally taken").

My first encounter with pregnancy loss in Siquijor was when a friend and long-time informant miscarried when she was four-months pregnant. When I visited her in the hospital—where she was confined until she could raise the funds to pay the hospital fees and be discharged—I found her quietly mourning. She recounted to me how she had held the little one in her palm, observing its tiny arms, legs, and head, and told it that she had done her best to take care of it. She recited nine days of prayer, and buried it, covered in a soft cloth, among some family plots in the Catholic cemetery. I shared with her the story of another friend of mine who recently had experienced a

miscarriage when she was two-months pregnant. She sought to comfort me in turn by gently pointing out that it would still have been only *dugo* (blood) at that stage anyway, balling her fist to signal its clotted form. "*Dili tawo*," she said softly, "not a person."

At first my conversations about pregnancy loss and fetal personhood more generally, such as with my informant and friend, were relatively limited, but as I came to understand more about local beliefs and customs around fetal development and death I was able to ask more pertinent questions when the topic arose, including about ensoulment, funeral rituals, baptism, and the spirit world. I found that, when approached through the topic of pregnancy and miscarriage, people were quite confident in describing the development of personhood. In 2013 and 2015 I spoke separately with twelve Siquijodnon in detail on the topic of fetal personhood, many in conjunction with my research assistant. They consisted of eleven women and one man, ranging in age from early twenties to late seventies, including three manghihilot who are considered particularly knowledgeable about fetal development due to their role in ensuring that the fetus is positioned correctly within the womb during pregnancy.<sup>4</sup> These discussions were complemented by many conversations I have had with Siquijodnon on related topics, such as death rituals and cosmology, over the ten years I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the island. My research on fetal personhood was not systematic in the sense that I did not conduct surveys or semistructured interviews with a large cross-section of people, asking them all the same set of questions on personhood in particular. Rather, it was caught up as a subject in my broader "ethnographic lens." As such I do not pretend to have an expansive set of data. But the stories and explanations from different people my assistant and I spoke to were often so similar as to leave us in no doubt that they reflected widely held beliefs, and thus I present this preliminary material in order to make a case for the fact that there are compelling themes here that beg further research throughout the Philippines.

### **Fetal Personhood, Souls, and Substance on Siquijor Island**

Although there was variation among those we spoke to regarding a range of issues related to fetal and early infant personhood, there were some facts that people unanimously agreed upon. One of these is that a soul (*kalag*) is imparted into a woman's womb, through God's will,

at the moment of conception. A healer from the island's interior, for instance, told us that as soon as a child starts to grow (*turok*—literally sprout or germinate) in the womb, “it already has a companion (*kauban*), our angel.”<sup>5</sup> While this idea of ensoulment at conception might seem to accord with what leaders of the Catholic Church preach on personhood, it also went without question among those we spoke to that *having a soul is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being a person*. The term Cebuano speakers use to denote the person is *tawo*, which also means “human”—importantly the concepts of human and person are not differentiated as they are in English. A *tawo* is constituted by body and soul combined. In other words, all persons have a soul—it would be impossible to be *tawo* without a *kalag*—but a soul can exist independent of a body and therefore a soul can exist without being a person.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as my conversation with my friend made apparent, she did not consider my friend to have miscarried a person at two months pregnant.

In the early stages of pregnancy, the gestating procreative matter in the uterus, to which the *kalag* is bound, is *dugo*, blood. Everyone we spoke to was quite clear on the fact that this blood does not constitute a person, souled though it may be. *Dugo* is *dugo ra*, just blood. It is the matter out of which a person may develop, but it is not in itself a person. Over time the blood clots and begins to take form (like a small version of the balled fist my friend showed me when indicating the stage at which the miscarriage occurred). For example, a healer mentioned that two months after conception tiny bones have formed in the blood. Another woman described how, by three months, a transparent sac has developed and in the middle there is a small transparent entity, like a curled-up *tiki* (lizard).<sup>7</sup> During months four and five it becomes less transparent and more person-like. A number of people described the fetus at this stage as *morag tawo pero dili tawo*—kind of a person but not really a person. There was unanimous sentiment among everyone we spoke to that following six months of gestation the unborn has become *tawo gyud*—really a person (or really human). Interestingly, two people described to us how a regression of fetal development takes place during the eighth month. For example, the fingers, which had separated from one another, temporarily rejoin. Therefore, they told us, it is popularly believed that if a woman gives birth prematurely, a baby that has had between six and seven months of gestation is more likely to survive than one that has had between seven and eight months of gestation.<sup>8</sup>

## Partial Personhood

Before I continue, as an aside it is worth making a distinction here between being a person (*tawo*) and having some degree of personhood. While *kalag* are not persons per se, they are thought of as having some measure of personhood—as we will see, they are parts of persons with emotions, agency, and the ability to communicate and even to be reasoned with. This status as partial persons can be applied to other beings in Siquijor too. I noted above that *tawo* is not only the word for “person” but also “human.” While the terms are closely associated in English, anthropologists have pointed out that they are by no means synonymous in all cultures and the difference is important when considering notions of personhood (Morgan 1989, 91–93). For example, in a 1960 classic piece, Irving Hallowell (2002) describes the existence of other-than-human persons among the Ojibwa of North America, including the sun, thunder, and some stones. So it is not the case in all cultures that one need be human to be considered a person.

Siquijodnon usually think of nonhuman animals as all flesh, devoid of *kalag*, and by definition not *tawo*. But in some cases animals are named, communicated with, and thought of as having personalities (particularly fighting cocks)—in other words, treated as partial persons.<sup>9</sup> The spirit beings known as *di ingon nato* occupy a similarly liminal status. They are not classified as *tawo*, but they are certainly attributed some degree of personhood, such as their humanlike appearance and their propensity to live in structured societies. Indeed, stories about *di ingon nato* often involve someone mistaking them for a regular human and being lured away by them. *Di ingon nato* can also have intercourse with humans, and children can be borne of such unions. Axel Borchgrevink (2014, 162) explains that such children “may grow up either in the human or in the spirit world (this apparently depending on whether or not it was the mother who was human)” and notes that several people in his fieldsite on Bohol island (neighboring Siquijor) are thought to be the offspring of such unions.<sup>10</sup> So clearly in the Visayas there are blurry boundaries between categories of human/nonhuman and person/nonperson. I mention these comparisons because they can help us to comprehend the liminal personhood of both the fetus and the soul for Siquijodnon, even in those instances when these are not strictly labeled as *tawo*.

## Mortuary Rituals

Rituals and procedures for miscarried and stillborn fetuses reflect the views of fetal personhood described above, even if there was variation

among the people we spoke to regarding what they considered appropriate or “normal” in Siquijor. These need to be understood in relation to the usual death rituals for adult Catholic Siquijodnon. After an adult Siquijodnon dies, he or she would normally be embalmed and placed in an open casket in his or her house. Family, neighbors, and friends visit the house to pay their respects and keep vigil over the body, ensuring it is never alone, before the funeral at which the body is interred in the Catholic cemetery. The *nobena* (novena; nine days of prayer) usually commences the day after death, and its conclusion is marked by the *liwas*—a gathering of kin and friends that involves a feast. Forty days after the death a similar gathering takes place, known as the *kwarentang dias*. By this point, I was told, the kalag has accepted that he or she is no longer part of the world of the living and must separate from the family (although, as noted, most Siquijodnon believe that at least some souls continue to reside near the living). A third gathering, known as the *hubkas*, marks the death anniversary and is preceded by a nobena. Some families celebrate only the first death anniversary while others also celebrate subsequent anniversaries. A *halad* (offering) is made to the soul at the family altar during the *liwas*, the *kwarentang dias*, and the *hubkas*, although it can also be made outside these times. It normally involves slaughtering a pig and offering a small piece of the pork while the attendees of the event consume the rest. However, the offering can also consist of other items, depending on the financial means of the family or the predilections of the deceased. Respects are usually also paid to the deceased during All Souls’ Day each year, when candles are lit and picnic lunches are eaten at the tombs of kin and friends (fig. 5).

My assistant and I were told that for a deceased fetus, regardless of gestational age, at the very least a prayer should be offered. There were some differences of opinion on the details here. For instance, two healers told us that a three-day nobena is usual for a deceased fetus or a baby, and that only after baptism is the full nine-day nobena required. A middle-aged woman named Else (2015) and her uncle Gary (2015), meanwhile, told us that if the fetus is less than six months gestation a single prayer is sufficient but if the fetus is more than six months nine days of prayer are needed followed by the *liwas*. They explained that the *kwarentang dias* is not necessary, as it would be for an adult, but that most people would observe the *hubkas* and pay their respects to the kalag of the deceased fetus during All Souls’ Day. It is not necessary, they said, to offer a *halad* for the death of a fetus or in fact the death

of any child under one year old, although some people choose to do so. The offering need not be pork or even chicken; because the deceased is a child, an offering of soft drinks and biscuits at the family altar is more appropriate as children like sweets. One of the healers contradicted these statements, saying that a *halad* usually would be made for a fetus or baby of any age and would typically involve slaughtering a chicken to offer some of its meat. Two people insisted that a nine-day nobena should always be conducted and a pig should be offered, regardless of the stage of development and whether or not baptism has taken place. My point here is that, while there are differences of opinion on the details, in general the older the fetus or baby, the more elaborate are the mortuary rituals.

Only living people can be baptized, but a priest or layperson often blesses later-stage-miscarried or stillborn babies with holy water. If a fetus dies before six months gestation it is usually buried in a type of soft cloth (*lampin*) which newborns are wrapped in and a small cardboard box or in a jar. A fetus that dies after six months gestation is more likely to be buried in a coffin, which will be open at the burial for people to view, as with adult deaths. The child will usually be buried in the Catholic cemetery; some people told us that if the gestation is less than six months there is no need to seek the permission of the priest. If the fetus is developed enough that his or her sex can be recognized, he or she will be given the name that the parents intended for the child. When the sex cannot be determined, miscarried fetuses are named Maria Francisco or Jose *ug* Maria (Joseph and Mary). During the *pamisa*—the “post-mass” when the Catholic priest reads out names of deceased people—these names can commonly be heard.

In reality, the extent to which these various rituals and procedures are carried out depends on a range of factors other than just the stage of fetal development, such as opinions of family members, the economic capacity of the family, and the circumstances of the parents. For example, if a young unmarried woman who has kept her pregnancy secret miscarries, it is extremely unlikely that any of the more-or-less public events, such as the nobena or *liwas*, will take place.

### Liminal Souls

My assistant and I also asked a number of people what happens to the soul of a baby that dies before being baptized. Gary (2015), like several others, told us that it remains in purgatory. Upon hearing this Else (2015) looked



Fig. 5. Candles are lit and flowers offered in remembrance of the dead at one of Siquijor's Catholic cemeteries

credulous, "Are you sure?" she asked Gary before offering in a hopeful tone that the baby is innocent, free from sin, so automatically ascends to heaven as an angel. Two others, meanwhile, independently mentioned that, while the soul stays "roaming around" the earthly world until judgment day, the baby's sin-free state would ultimately ensure an easy passage to heaven despite the fact that it had not been baptized. Such differing views on cosmological issues are not uncommon in Siquijor, and from the initial stages of my fieldwork I have always found particular uncertainty around this question of what happens to people's souls after they die (see McGuire 2008 for discussion of religious diversity within groups seemingly sharing the same religion). Several people also mentioned that in some cases the kalag of miscarried babies can reincarnate, giving them a second chance at life. One person, for example, told us of her neighbor's four-year-old niece who lives outside Siquijor. When the little girl visits the island she demonstrates an uncanny familiarity with the place, and when people ask her where she is from she replies firmly: "I'm from here. I was already here before you were."

While there are differences in understandings among my informants regarding what ultimately happens to the souls of deceased fetuses or unbaptized babies, there is a strong collective understanding that these souls form part of the unseen world from which they can pose a danger to living humans, regardless of the stage of development at which they died. A frequently recurring narrative concerns the kalag of a miscarried fetus later making its presence felt by causing the (would be) mother to fall ill or by appearing in her dreams, or both. The term usually used to describe the kalag's actions in this regard is *magsamok-samok*, which means to bother or pester, but in most cases the kalag is seeking attention and affection rather than acting maliciously.<sup>11</sup> It may pinch one of the parents to remind them of its presence, which can cause the parent to become sick, such as with unexplained fatigue or a headache. Sometimes this happens because proper rituals to acknowledge the kalag have not been followed at the time of death. Rendering a prayer, it is hoped, will remind the kalag that it is loved and thereby settle the restless soul. The kalag of a child that has died at a pre- or perinatal stage may also pinch its siblings out of jealousy and make them ill. Again, a prayer can be offered, or the parents might talk to the kalag loudly (to ensure their voices penetrate to the other-worldly realm) saying, "Please don't do that. Don't be jealous. If you were alive you would look after your siblings and you wouldn't hurt them."

Else, for example, describes how, on two occasions while she was two months pregnant, she had miscarriages, both of which she flushed down the toilet. After the second miscarriage she felt unwell and visited the mananambal, although she did not disclose what had happened. He felt the pulse in her wrist and told her she was being bothered by “that thing that was lost” (*kadtong nakuha*). He instructed her to pray and have the name of the lost one read out during pamisa. After doing so she felt well again. Meanwhile, Linda (2015) had a miscarriage when she was around four months pregnant. The fetus already had form, she said, like a lizard, and it had eyes. Linda and her husband buried the child in a cloth in the Catholic cemetery. They slaughtered a pig and made an offering of the pork; held a nine-day nobena, a liwas, a kwarantang dias, and a hubkas; and each year lit candles for the child at the cemetery. Despite these efforts, the kalag later regularly appeared in Linda’s dreams, complaining that it was hot in the ground and begging to be covered. It was not until they reburied the child in a coffin and installed a headstone that the dreams ceased.

The kalag, thus, is constructed as yearning to be treated as a more complete person. In such stories it has a longing for the relationships that continued life, growth, and full personhood would have accorded it. Erlinda, an elderly manghihilot from the island’s interior, mentioned to us that disembodied souls are prone to roam around and make trouble (*manghilabot*) for the living. She asked us if we had heard an insect-like sound outside at night, “pss, pss, pss.” “That’s the soul,” she whispered. It tries to call the attention of the living. We asked her why it behaves that way, and she replied, “Because it’s condemned (*nagkondenar*).” “Why are they condemned?” we probed.

Maybe because they are not complete as persons. For all we know they might be the souls of those who were aborted or were miscarried, because they are lacking in personhood [*kulang sa pakatawo*, denoting personhood conferred by birth]. That’s why we as the living should offer a prayer to the souls in purgatory, right? We have no idea how many souls there are. . . . We’re talking about many souls here. (Erlinda 2015)

So souls of the miscarried are condemned to a liminal status not only because they are in purgatory but also because they were never able to realize

their potential to be persons. At the same time, such stories of the haunting fetal soul speak of a moral ambivalence. While the ritual treatment of the fetus at death (which tends to be curtailed relative to what an adult would be accorded) reflects and produces a view of the fetus as only a partial person, the soul’s subsequent interventions in the world of the living typically act as declarations that not enough personhood has been accorded it. It is as if the women and their families are haunted by the question of whether they have properly judged the personhood of the unborn. If we think of personhood as forged in relationships between (potential) persons (Conklin and Morgan 1996), a deceased fetus is at first an object: in the initial minutes, days, and months after death, agency lies predominantly with the woman, the family, and the community more broadly in defining the deceased’s status as a (non) person and therefore its relationship to them, through the mortuary rituals they chose to adopt. However, in the tales of hauntings, the kalag later emerges as an active agent too, demanding a loving relationship, claiming its status as a fuller person through the act of making such demands, and prompting this greater degree of personhood to be acknowledged in turn. The haunting fetus is thus an expression of moral uncertainty, borne of (meta)physical liminality.

## Conclusion

Siquijodnon constructions of fetal personhood are distinctly recognizable as Catholic. Nonetheless, they differ in important ways from the doctrine promulgated by leaders of the Catholic Church. In particular, while the Catholic Church maintains a rigid view on fetal personhood as fixed at conception, Siquijodnon notions of personhood are processual. Through the intervention of God, ensoulment occurs at the moment of human conception, but the embryonic matter in the uterus at this stage is *dugo ra*, just blood, and together these constitute only the raw elements out of which a person may develop (to paraphrase Canessa 1998, 234). It is through a six-month-long process of growth into increasingly anthropomorphic form that a person is gradually produced: from blood to blood clot, to a lizard-like entity that becomes “kind of person but not really a person,” to a “real person.” Although my research to date reveals little about the period thereafter, it is likely that in practice relational personhood continues to develop in “fullness” such as with birth, feeding, socializing, and so forth. It is also important to keep in mind that, for Siquijodnon, a soul need not be a full person to have value and agency in the world and must always be

treated with the proper respect appropriate to its stage of development into a tawo.

Not only are my informants' processual views of personhood reflected in the way they describe fetal development, but these are also evidenced by the different death rites accorded to fetuses at different stages of development. At any stage a prayer should be offered, but what else takes place depends in large part on constructions of personhood commensurate with the stage of development. This includes: whether the (pre-)person can be simply disposed of in a toilet or requires burial; whether it should be placed in a jar, cloth, or coffin; whether the burial can be informal or a funeral is needed; whether a halad (offering) ought to be conducted and of what kind; whether the nobena (nine days of prayer) need be recited; whether any of a number of gatherings ought to be observed (the liwas, the kwarantang dias, the hubkas); whether the name should be read out in remembrance at the pamisa (post-mass); whether a candle, or perhaps even food, should be offered on All Souls' Day. Not only do these rituals reflect perceptions of personhood, but they also *produce* (partial) personhood. They are performative acts, which both acknowledge and confer social recognition—at the most fundamental level this recognition being some degree of personhood.

The discrepancy between the perspective of church elites and that of my informants can be read in the context of the “everyday authenticity” (Cornelio 2014) of Catholicism as it is practiced in the Philippines. Indeed, it is clear that the church has no monopoly on knowledge construction for the culturally diverse populations of Catholics who subscribe to that religion, and in practice people receive and interpret religious discourses in bumpy and culturally contingent ways. Nor can or should we flatten the cultural diversity inherent in varied constructions of personhood throughout the world. There is no single “answer” to when a person comes into or out of being because “people are defined by people’. There can be no absolute definition of personhood isolated from a sociocultural context” (Morgan 1989, 93, quoting Knutson 1967).

This article signals a need for nonpartisan ethnographic research into the ways in which different groups throughout the Philippines understand fetal and early infant personhood and how they negotiate varied religious and medical discourses pertaining to these different understandings in the practice of their day-to-day lives. As well as outlining the basics of fetal and early infant personhood for various groups in the Philippines, more complex

questions can be addressed, such as how priests act as intermediaries between laypeople and church elites on issues of personhood. Understanding local notions of personhood is also an important piece in the puzzle in comprehending the reproductive decisions that women and men make. The views of personhood I describe above certainly allow women more flexibility with regard to managing reproduction than do the official views of the church—a topic beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, the women I spoke to do not enter lightly into decisions around family planning, and almost all see abortion as a grave sin. At the same time, abortion rates in the Philippines are high despite its prohibition, and there is a perception among many of my informants that Siquijor is no exception. As social scientists we need to ask how understandings of fetal personhood factor into people's decision making to keep or terminate a pregnancy and what the consequences are for people's mental health. Such work has been done elsewhere (for instance, Conklin and Morgan 1996; Gammeltoft 2014), but in the Philippines it is sorely lacking. We might also ask how understandings of fetal development and personhood are negotiated in local biomedical contexts. For example, how are the fetal development “timelines” that are constructed by traditional healers and biomedical experts reinterpreted in the “friction” (Tsing 2005) with one another, as women visit both over the course of a pregnancy? These are research avenues that are likely not only to be academically rich but also have important implications for policy that is respectful of the cultural diversity in the archipelago.

## Notes

*My sincere thanks go to Lucia Cynita Rago, who assisted me in many of the interviews on which this article is based. The findings owe a lot to her sensitive and astute approach to interviewing as well as her thoughtful reflections on the narratives people related. I am also thankful to the peer reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.*

- 1 A survey by Social Weather Stations (2008) found 71 percent of Filipino Catholics favored passage of the Reproductive Health (RH) Bill, while 21 percent were undecided and 8 percent were not in favor of it. A 2010 Pulse Asia survey found 69 percent agreed with the RH Bill, 24 percent were undecided, and 7 percent opposed it (Montenegro 2010).
- 2 Chris Fowler (2004, 7) provides a good sense of the breadth of the concept: “Personhood in its broadest definition refers to the condition or state of being a person, as it is understood in any specific context. Persons are constituted, de-constituted, maintained and altered in social practices through life and after death. This process can be described as the ongoing attainment of personhood. Personhood is frequently understood as a condition that involves constant change, and key transformations to the person occur throughout life and death. People may

pass from one state or stage of personhood to another. Personhood is attained and maintained through relationships not only with other human beings but with things, places, animals and the spiritual features of the cosmos.”

- 3 I am an Aotearoa Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent), and Cebuano, the vernacular in Siquijor, is not my native language. I have been learning to speak Cebuano predominantly as I live on Siquijor Island, and I often work with a research assistant in order to facilitate Cebuano interviews. Lucia Cynita Rago, who assisted me in the research, is a native of the Cebuano-speaking city of Butuan in Mindanao.
- 4 A diverse range of women visits the *manghihilot* at prescribed intervals during pregnancy. In the recent past it was not uncommon for the manghihilot to assist with birthing, although the *mananabang* are specialist traditional midwives. The role of both in childbirth has now been severely curtailed, as women are required to undergo “facility-based” deliveries in the municipal health clinics or the hospital.
- 5 The healer’s description of the soul as a “companion” is interesting as it suggests a view of the soul as accompanying a person but not necessarily being the essence of them. Marino Gatan (1981, 123–24) describes this view among the Ibanag.
- 6 The idea that a body cannot exist without a soul differs from the view among the Ibanag mentioned in the previous note (Gatan 1981, 123–24) and many other groups in the world, who believe the soul can temporarily depart the body while it remains living.
- 7 Jocano (1969, 21) and Mendez (1974, 78–79) similarly observe that the fetus is likened to a lizard in other parts of the Philippines. Jocano (1969, 21) notes in relation to Panay that this is connected to “the local belief that a child is born with a double in the form of a gecko.”
- 8 Gammeltoft (1999, 84) describes a very similar narrative of fetal development in rural Vietnam: “In the beginning, it is only a ‘blood clot’ (*cục máu*) or a bean seed (*hạt đậu*); after two or three months it looks like a little frog; and after four months it has the form of a human being. Therefore most of the women I talked to explained that it is not until it is four months old and starts to move that a foetus is really a human being.”
- 9 In various Philippine cultures certain nonhuman entities are thought to have souls, even including some seemingly inanimate objects (Abrera n.d., 4–5). This view appears to be relatively rare, although not absent, among Catholic Siquijodnon.
- 10 Interestingly, the equivalent environmental spirits to *di ingon nato* in Bicol are called (in the Bicol language) *tawo na dai ta nahihiling*, shortened to *tawo* or *tawohan*, “people” or “the people” (Cannell 1999, 83). In Cebuano the term *tawhan* (literally, “place of people”) can refer to an area *di ingon nato* are thought to reside, and *kataw* (a type of *di ingon nato* usually translated as mermaid) is derived from the root word *tawo*.
- 11 Donn Hart (1980, 68) and Lois Maghanoy (1977, 183) also note in relation to Visayan contexts that *kalag* require acknowledgment, and when they cause illness or misfortune to befall kin it is normally because they feel they have been forgotten. Gatan (1981, 77) makes a similar observation regarding ancestor souls among the Ibanag people of northern Luzon.

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**Hannah C. M. Bulloch** is research fellow, School of Archaeology and Anthropology, Australian National University, Acton, ACT 2601, Australia. As a Visiting Research Associate of the Institute of Philippine Culture, School of Social Sciences, Ateneo de Manila University, she conducted research on intimacy and agency in the lives of Siquijodnon women. This research was supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Research Award (project ID DE120100824). Her earlier doctoral research looked at local notions of "development" on Siquijor and was awarded the Australian Anthropological Society 2010 Best Thesis Prize. <Hannah.Bulloch@anu.edu.au>