
This book can be considered partly as a straightforward archaeological reconstruction of the past—drawing from publications (co-)authored by Acabado—and partly as an advocacy call within the politics of indigenous peoples (signalled by the words “Indigenous” and “Decolonization” in its title). This review thus addresses both themes in turn.

The stress of the book’s empirical-archaeological sections (from chapters three to five) is on the “most reliable date for the existence of the [rice] terraces, at least in the Banaue valley ... to AD 1620–1800” (p. 55). The authors strongly emphasize the importance of this “shorter history of the terraces”—to the point of repeating almost word-for-word this same paragraph thrice: on pp. 44, 167, 185—because it contrasts sharply with the public imaginary (or as chapter two puts it, “Dominant Historical Narratives”) that prizes this UNESCO World Heritage Site as being at least 2,000 years old. Apart from the question of dating, the broader interest relates to what the discipline of archaeology can offer with regard to what story could be told about these famed terraces, why they were constructed in the first place, and what the social lives were like of the people in this part of northern Luzon at that time.

What the reader gathers from these chapters is a narrative of intense and rapid societal changes happening (or inferred to have happened) together with a shift to wet-rice cultivation: “rapid modification of the Ifugao landscape” (p. 104), “rapid population increase in the settlement” (p. 120), “rapid social differentiation” (p. 178), and “rapid political and economic transformations” (p. 126) (all emphasis mine).

The specific steps that ground these statements is open for debate. The question I would raise, though, is which exact social unit underlies such an all-
around package of changes. The book seems satisfied with the village (that is, the “Old Kiyyangan Village” or OKV) as a settlement with “continuous interaction with lowland groups and other highland groups” (p. 125). In other words: “Between 1650 and 1700, the village expanded, accompanied by the elaboration of social differentiation through rice land holdings and the ability of the elites to sponsor feasts and rituals” (p. 131, emphasis added). As to how this sampling site, now treated as a historical and anthropological unit, is societally structured at this fifty-year historical conjuncture—for example, whether or not it is linked to a broader ethnos—is not well problematized. (See Ragragio and Paluga [2023] on the notion of ethnos in a Manobo highland comparable to the Cordilleras of Luzon discussed in this book.) As a result, the shape and nature of the indigenous polis posited to have undergone such “political consolidation” (pp. 10, 17) and “social differentiation” (p. 178) is unclear, much less its ethnicity.

This is no minor question, as the book contains statements like “[V]illage growth was due to an influx of related peoples (arguably valley-dwelling Ifugao) into the mountains and not the incorporation of non-Ifugao,” (p. 80, emphasis mine, parenthesis in original). How, then, does one demarcate the “non-Ifugao” at this point in time? Invoking habitus in this regard—but without a corresponding model of a Bourdieuan “social field” (beyond its depiction of a “prestige-seeking elite” or kadangyan)—does not really “put [the concept habitus] to work”, as Bourdieu himself cautioned (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 104). Without such a model, all the comparative (mostly Meso-American) cases mentioned in the book are simply metaphorical foils and not, in the classic phrase of Marcel Mauss (2016:59), “a method of precise comparison”.

This is crucial because the book’s other main theme, of resistance, hinges on this imagined shift to a wet-rice habitus. The implications of this habitus, which now toggle between “unintended consequence” (pp. 11) and “strategic response” (p. 17) to Spanish colonization, could have been formulated more precisely. In doing so, a comment by a reviewer of the book Enduring Conquests—which explicitly tackles the “archaeology of resistance”—is salient: “how [can we] be sure that the material record of artifacts, sites, and features reflects a self-conscious resistance to conquest and the imposed strictures of colonial rule?” (Zeitlin 2012: 157, emphasis mine).

The book clearly wishes to situate itself in the growing literature on the “archaeology of resistance”. It provides an overview of relevant works that interested readers may consult further. (They may also want to check how the implied scenario favored in the book measures up to the required rigor in inferential reasonings.) Chapters six to eight restate the position of the first set of chapters, but now enwrapped in a tone reminiscent of discourses already quite prevalent in Philippine history writing. One is particularly reminded of the
Filipino decolonial and nationalist historian Renato Constantino, or even the more militant historical framings on Philippine indigenous peoples produced under the ambit of “national democratic” scholarship (which turns out to be quite varied, if these works are surveyed with care).

In this respect the book’s archaeological narrative is already a well-trodden trope applied to many histories written about various Philippine (indigenous and non-indigenous) groups, and in this sense it may be thematically classed with this major (if not dominant) body of Philippine studies. Those familiar with these historical discourses and how they have informed the overall political and ideological terrain of the indigenous peoples’ movements in the Philippines from the 1960s onward could then ask how this book’s calls for decolonizing engage with these earlier discourses. The novelty of the decolonial perspective the authors aver might be more towards addressing archaeological praxis in the Philippines, and so it dwells on details that might be less thought-provoking for indigenous peoples advocates facing more theoretical or political questions, such as the extent to which one can really talk in the singular of an indigenous “community,” of whatever scale and kind.

For example, the book’s tenth and final chapter (“Making Their Own History”) could have provided a fresher and more interesting explication of their idea of a paradigm shift (p. 163) in the coproduction of knowledge (p. 178) if it had given a finer ethnographic description of their approach, aside from this casual caveat: “[this] was written by the community, with minor editorial embellishments by the authors” (p. xvi).

To conclude: while the book opens an idea of “Indigenous Archaeology”, aligning itself with the presently much-buzzed-about term “decolonization” in epistemic matters, the ethnohistorical storyline given in the book—what happened to a particular region and its dwellers at a particular point in time—does not convince me that its pitting of Indigeneity against “nationalism” (including nationalist archaeology as “detrimental to most of the diverse ethnic groups in the Philippines,” p. 137) is a conceptually cogent approach to unpacking the grounded problems between communities and states that the book tangentially outlines. Weaving a new story to tell about Indigenous peoples and also about fellow Filipinos is a genuine conceptual challenge and one that cannot be truly addressed by simply invoking the side of “the Local” and “the Indigenous” vis-à-vis “colonial” (or even “decolonial”) signifiers.

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References


