

Book Review

Reciprocal mobilities: Indigeneity and imperialism in an eighteenth-century Philippine Borderland

By MARK DIZON

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023. Pp. 259.
Illustrations, Maps, Index.
doi:10.1017/S0022463424000316

I wasn't sure what to expect when I agreed to review this book. For a start, I was intrigued by the fact that someone had managed to write a monograph on a relatively 'obscure' inland frontier, the upland slopes (not highlands) between the provinces of Pangasinan and Cagayan from the late seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century. Any historian of the Philippines will tell you that the farther and higher you get from Manila, and the further back in time you go, the more difficult it is to find the requisite source materials. Mark Dizon has managed to do both, to chart the changes this borderland experienced over a century or more, and uncover enough archival detail to bring all its varied peoples and their problems alive. It's quite an achievement and makes for a very interesting and thought-provoking read.

Reciprocal mobilities sits squarely within the field of Borderland Studies, an interdisciplinary perspective that originated out of the study of the US–Mexican frontier region in the 1970s. It is an approach much less well developed in Southeast Asian Studies, and, to the best of my knowledge, largely unknown in the case of the Philippines. (It is interesting, in this respect, that neither of the two endorsements on the book's back cover are written by scholars of the Philippines.) The frontier in this case, however, is not a recognised international border, but one that, at least in the past, was just as much a divide separating very different cultures, a Hispanicised Christian lowland and an independent, predominantly Ilongot and Ibalibon highland. While a border certainly existed (still exists?), the author is at pains to show just how much coming and going there was across this divide, Spanish missionaries seeking upland converts and indigenous emissaries visiting Manila and other urban settlements — hence the volume's title. It is precisely these cross-cultural encounters and where they took place that the author emphasises, stressing that 'history did not just happen in abstract spaces but more importantly in lived and socially meaningful places' (p. 2). There was necessarily 'friction' as well as mobility in this history — rugged landscapes, raids and reprisals, disease and flight — but these too are integral to telling the story of this borderland.

The structure of the book reflects this duality. Its four main chapters are divided into two pairs, the initial two dealing first with mobility and then friction from the late-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century, and the last two covering the

remainder of that century in the same sequence. Chapter One stresses how in this initial period movement was very much both ways, giving lie to the view that the direction of travel was only from the centre to the periphery. The reality of violence is the topic of the next chapter as soldiers and warriors raided each other's territories, but how, over time, a distinct Christian alliance began to form in which recent converts identified more with Spain than their highland kin. In Chapter Three, the author returns to the theme of mobility and the construction of a road linking Pangasinan to Cagayan. Yet the completion of the road was far from the absolute triumph of missionary endeavour, as indigenous communities still exercised paramount authority over who could pass along it. The final chapter examines the epidemiological consequences of greater mobility and more frequent encounters as malaria and smallpox devastated vulnerable mission populations located in challenging new environments. The author concludes by arguing that these Philippine borderlands were part of a late eighteenth-century Enlightenment project to colonise and populate frontier regions both in Spain and her colonies.

Dizon is breaking new ground here, showing how the Philippines is a fertile field of research for further studies of the borderland all along the upland spine of Luzon and the archipelago's main islands where indigenous communities long resisted incorporation into colonial society. Mindanao looms even larger in this respect with its self-evident 'frontier' between Christianity and Islam. Dizon's emphasis on the two-way nature of this mobility highlights the inappropriateness of only employing geography as an analytical framework as 'the borderland was everywhere, and people's movements and interactions created it' (p. 25). He also populates this history with a cast of memorable characters, for example Spanish priests such as the indomitable Dominican missionary, Francisco de la Maza, who would brook no argument in reaching his goal, or highland chiefs such as the implacable Ibalibon leader, Talimazon of Bayombong, who long opposed the opening of a road through his territory. These individuals bring alive an eighteenth-century hinterland that has hitherto largely gone unnoticed, overshadowed by an inordinate focus on Manila and 'key' events such as the British occupation of that city between 1762 and 1764. The book is interesting, too, in what it reveals about the author's own development as a historian, as the questions and problems he tackles in the final two chapters ineluctably draw him out of his normal framework of reference. The spatiality inherent in the making of the royal road and the discussion of animals and eco-tones in the spread of malaria are tools more fitting for a historical geographer or an environmental historian. It is to be wondered where his research will lead him next.

Certainly, no book is flawless, and *Reciprocal mobilities* is no exception — although the glitches are relatively minor. Specifically, I found myself wondering whether there was anything distinctive about these Philippine borderlands. If you're going to employ a recognized analytical framework, it might be prudent to include some comparisons, even if only with other examples from Southeast Asia. James C. Scott's *Zomia (The art of not being governed)*, Yale University Press, 2009) springs immediately to mind. The structure, too, of the book, its alternation between a chapter on mobility and a chapter on friction, seems, at times, a little forced. It is as if certain facts have been too neatly coerced into tidy categorisations when their classification might require a little more nuance. Killing people, for instance, can be seen as an

encounter, but I am not sure I would go so far as to accept violence and warfare as 'forms of cultural exchange and reciprocity' (p. 69). Finally, there are a few statements some scholars might take issue with, notably that the Spanish did not entertain the idea of a colonial hill station, as later the Americans did with the founding of Baguio. What about the sanatorium for Spanish soldiers established at La Trinidad? Again, the debate over whether an increase in livestock directly correlates with a higher incidence of malaria, as asserted by the author, or if it is the proximity of animals to humans that serves as the critical factor, remains open to discussion.

All told, though, this is a good book, offering valuable insights into a previously overlooked period of Philippine history. It also stands out for its innovative approach, drawing upon analytical approaches and methodologies from various disciplines. Given what Dizon has achieved in this book, I look forward to reading his next publication.

GREG BANKOFF

Ateneo de Manila University