UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

Making Mindanao: place-making and people-making in the southern Philippines

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7hh2t9cw

Journal

South East Asia Research, 30(1)

ISSN

0967-828X

Author

Paredes, Oona

Publication Date

2022-01-02

DOI

10.1080/0967828x.2022.2027215

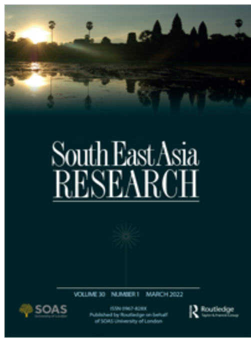
Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org

Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

South East Asia Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsou20

Making Mindanao: place-making and people-making in the southern Philippines

Oona Paredes

To cite this article: Oona Paredes (2022) Making Mindanao: place-making and people-making in the southern Philippines, South East Asia Research, 30:1, 3-8, DOI: 10.1080/0967828X.2022.2027215

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2022.2027215

Published online: 30 May 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 479

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rsou20

SOUTH EAST ASIA RESEARCH
2022, VOL. 30, NO. 1, 3–8
https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2022.2027215

INTRODUCTION

Making Mindanao: place-making and people-making in the southern Philippines

Oona Paredes

Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

When I was originally invited to give a keynote address for the two-day SOAS conference on Mindanao in July 2019 that formed the basis for this special volume, I offered a rather grandiose title for my talk as an attempt to link up to its theme of cartographies and identities: 'Becoming Mindanao, becoming Mindanawon: narratives of place-making and people-making over the centuries'. With cartography pluralized, the conference theme embodied very aptly a fundamental reality of historical, political, anthropological and other types of academic research, i.e. that there can be multiple ways of representing and interpreting something, multiple ways of making it real, multiple ways of manifesting a place and its people. I had wanted to seize on this truth and use it as a jumping off point to talk about how we could nurture meaningful scholarship on Mindanao, and talk about the ways in which we construct and deconstruct both Mindanao and Mindanawons through our research.

The wonderfully eclectic selection of papers that were presented – only a handful of which appear in this volume – provided a good cross-section of the quality, depth and diversity of scholarship possible for Mindanao, the southern Philippines more generally, and for other places like it. Places that, through the accident of modern national politics and history, have been relegated in academic research and scholarship to peripheral status at best, silence more commonly, in the face of national narratives, and total erasure at worst. This neglect of Mindanao is reinforced further by the cliquish tendencies of Philippine studies (as with any Area Studies endeavour), and its persistently 'national' optics that, to those of us who study 'provincial' places, peoples and topics, seems to bear down on our scholarship like an intellectual panopticon at times. In addition, academic research both in and on Mindanao – as represented in the annotated bibliography by the Mindanao Studies Consortium (2005) – has lagged relative to national scholarship, to the significant detriment of the field, as Patricio Abinales argues in 'What sayeth the margins? A note on the state of Mindanao scholarship in Mindanao' (this volume).

In my own experience, scholarly voices speaking of or from Mindanao also tend to be explicitly provincialized, relegated to a lone 'Mindanao' panel at a Philippines conference regardless of the actual relatedness of their research topics. Thus the tremendous value of this conference, focused on this obscure(d) place, was in its deliberate centring of Mindanao not as a subset of Philippine studies nor removed entirely from it, but read autonomously in its own right. This approach has, by fortunate design, drawn scholars who

CONTACT Oona Paredes ✉ oparedes@humnet.ucla.edu
© 2022 SOAS University of London

either have few opportunities to present their work internationally because they are considered too 'provincial', or don't think of themselves as doing 'Philippine studies' at all and thus were largely unknown to Philippines specialists. Even though I have been studying Mindanao for a quarter of a century now, much of what was presented at this conference was new to me. I know that I grew as a scholar and as a Mindanawon just from meeting so many new people and being exposed to so much exciting new work over those two summer days in London.

The conference itself explored how our perspectives on Mindanao are constructed culturally, historically and politically. Several Philippines-based scholars, including Bro. Karl Gaspar, Pamela Castrillo, Rhodora Ranalan, and Geraldine Villaluz, discussed their research on indigenous textiles, folklore and other cultural traditions. The Lumad were also well represented in accompanying exhibits and performances by Igy Castrillo, Abraham Ambo Garcia Jr., Amihan de Sosa, Maria Mari Murga, Cian Dayrit and others. Carlito Camahalan Amalla's contribution on Manobo textile art and design is represented uniquely in this volume with a graphic article entitled 'Suyam Tells a Story'. This volume also contains two substantial anthropological articles on the Lumad. In 'Botanical knowledge and indigenous textiles in the Southern Mindanao highlands: method and synthesis using ethnography and ethnobotany', Cherubim Quizon and Fe Magpayo-Bagajo draw on classic ethnobotanical methods to explore indigenous dye and textile production and understand how these traditional practices shape social relations among the Bagobo and T'boli. Meanwhile, in 'Owners and occupants: mapping the Blaan of Malbulen (Davao Occidental, Philippines)', Antoine Laugrand describes how human and non-human actors construct the Blaan landscape in ways that challenge the Philippine government's conceptual legal framework to deal with ancestral land claims by Indigenous minorities.

Indigenous Muslim 'Moro' perspectives were substantially represented in all areas at the conference, including presentations by Kawashima Midori, Elsa Clavé, Oliver Charbonneau, Franciszek Czech, and Karine Walther. I take special note of the impassioned introspective-retrospective by Rogelio Braga, and the screening of filmmaker Adjani Arumpac's documentary film about rebuilding Marawi through a key Meranaw food tradition, produced as a supplement to Assad Baunto's *Manga Tutul a Palapa* (2017). Appearing in this volume is my personal favourite from the conference, Annabel Teh Gallop's fascinating stylistic analysis of the unique artistic and codicological profile of several Qur'ans from Mindanao, 'Qur'an manuscripts from Mindanao: collecting histories, art and materiality'. These hand-made Meranaw and Maguindanao manuscripts, as beautiful as they are distinctive, also show important commonalities with others from elsewhere in the Malay world.

Not surprisingly, more traditional political topics were covered in the conference. Mindanao has no shortage of 'peace and order' issues, as presented by Miyoko Taniguchi and Georgi Engelbrecht, and, as explained by Adrian Calo, President Duterte is a product of its uniquely volatile political milieu. A special screening of Arbi Barbarona's 1997 film *Tu Pug Imatuy* (*The Right to Kill*), discussed by Patrick Campos of the University of the Philippines' Film Institute, brought some of these issues home through the true story of a Manobo Lumad family displaced by the Philippine military's brutal anti-insurgency campaign. Identity politics were also explored in Shiela Java-Guinal's study of the linguistic

peculiarities in local beauty pageants, Christina Cañones's history of Zamboanga, and Hana Qugana's discussion of *lechon* (roasted pig).

Last but not least, for history, novel perspectives and representations of Mindanao gave us a clear glimpse of an earlier, autonomous Mindanao onto which imperial Iberian and American maps would be projected, disarticulating it from the dynamic Malay political, cultural, and religious world. In this volume, Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço's article, 'Before the Philippines: textual and cartographical representations of Mindanao in sixteenth-century Portuguese sources', draws on Portuguese archival sources to explore and reposition Mindanao's geographical identity prior to 1565. His conference paper was one of several – including those by Florina Capistrano-Baker, Anna Melinda Testa-de Ocampo, and Stephanie Mawson – to show how Mindanao's and Sulu's modern inclusion in the Philippines as its South was neither organic nor inevitable.

As exemplified by the research discussed during our conference – sampled in this special volume – there are so many ways of imagining Mindanao as a place and conceptualizing it within different contexts of study, whether it is viewed through an anthropological, historical, political, geographical, or other lens. This same imagining applies to its people as well. In this case, I speak of all the peoples of Mindanao, not just its indigenous Lumad and Moro peoples, as we refer to them broadly today. As Mindanao specialists, we may have studied this particular, special place in the world over the decades, but have we ever asked the most basic questions, such as: What is Mindanao – for is it not merely an island in the Pacific but also a complex cultural construct? Who is Mindanao, and how does one become Mindanawon – 'of' Mindanao – in the first place? Where is Mindanao, and how do we map it, and from what perspective – as a part of the Philippines, South East Asia, the Pacific, or something else? And when – at what point did this spot on the planet become the place we now conceptualize as 'Mindanao'? With our scholarly gaze, we structure our particular research subjects across time and space, and thus contribute directly to both place-making and people-making.

Old spaces in new peripheries

The word Mindanao conjures any number of mental images, and conversely, our objects of study within the context of Mindanao recreate and remake the Mindanaos we think we know. For example, the Lumads, Mindanao's indigenous non-Muslims, have their own distinct ways of place-making and people-making, as do the many settlers of different ethnic backgrounds, languages and religions, as do former colonial functionaries and foreign religious missionaries, and so do legion others across time and space. Each one has their own 'Mindanao', with its own meanings and points of interest, that they would no doubt map in very different ways.

For the majority of Filipinos and the national media, this beautiful island in the south is the idealized nation's antithesis: a violent and lawless dystopia from which strongmen like Duterte emerge; a hotbed of terrorism and armed rebellion, with mysterious links to international networks; the inchoate political and civilizational frontier of Filipino national identity; and perhaps greedily, a 'land of unfulfilled promise' (Turner, May, and Turner 1992). In deeper history, it was both a trade entrepot and tributary of China in the land below the winds and the far eastern outpost of the Islamic '*umma* at

the periphery of Nusantara. The people of Mindanao formed several distinct leaves or branches in the larger tree of the Malay world, and they belonged to the broader Austronesian linguistic and cultural family that encompasses most peoples of island South East Asia.

In more recent history, Mindanao represented the curious outer limit of Spanish colonial authority and political influence – which I first conceptualized in my doctoral thesis and later discussed in my ethnohistorical study about Lumads, *A Mountain of Difference* (2013), as a 'pericolonial' space. With this term, I meant to convey how the people of Mindanao were still profoundly affected in many ways by the colonial presence, even though it was not under as much direct colonial governance – except for certain slivers of the coastline, to use Spain's own regret-tinged description of their limited political reach on the island (45). My term has since by used by others to describe spatial peripherality and anti-colonial resistance relative to Western power in the Philippines within an empowering, decolonizing frame. However, being *pericolonial*, as I originally argued for Mindanao more than a decade ago, is not actually about simple spatial peripherality or about political resistance to colonial or state power, whether overt or covert. In fact, I developed the concept of *pericoloniality* from studying Mindanao within the context of the South East Asian cultural matrix (Wolters 1999), as opposed to colonialism or national history. Instead, *pericolonial* describes spaces and communities that remain their own true centres, able to evolve relatively free of the heavy gravitational pull of other centres or political *mandalas*. As such, the pericoloniality of sixteenth to nineteenth century Mindanao – with its own cultural, political and economic trajectory – is nothing like the stark peripherality of twentieth to twenty-first century Mindanao vis-à-vis Manila or mainstream Filipino culture, politics and history. Understanding Mindanao's (and the Sulu archipelago's) pericoloniality means finding old spaces in new peripheries.

With all that being said, Mindanao was definitely peripheral to Spanish imperial imagination, which is why it was excluded so casually from serious consideration in the once-authoritative *Hispanization of the Philippines* (1959) by the Americanist, John Phelan, who concluded that nothing of note had happened there (167). We know now that Mindanao was very much enmeshed in the colonial world, and that Spain had a significant cultural and political impact on its indigenous peoples, despite the fact that its outcome was quite different from that of other islands of the archipelago that were incorporated more closely by the colonial powers. Moreover, from more nuanced studies of missionization, Mindanao becomes a bright line demarcating the Christian and Muslim worlds within the Catholic imagination of the colonial Spanish and Portuguese, as well as postcolonially in Filipino and Western imagination (Paredes 2017).

With the consistent placement of Mindanao as a periphery of so many cultural, religious and political cores, studying Mindanao often feels like studying 'marginality in an out of the way place', as Anna Tsing (1994) refers to Borneo. But how do we read a periphery? After decades of looking for resistance against hegemony in South East Asian studies, it now strikes me as rather facile to argue for the so-called centring of peripheries. What do we actually learn, or achieve beyond the play on words? How do we recognize and study something in its own right, worthy of autonomous consideration, as opposed to regarding it ever as a curious but inconsequential historical stub of a main story that will always be far more substantial, whether in meaning, detail, or consequence?

My primary concern here is how to represent Mindanao more completely, more holistically, in all its chaotic imperfection. As I am from Mindanao, I take scholarship on Mindanao personally, and I do not appreciate my homeland misrepresented, romanticized, or dystopianized, especially under the guise of serious academic scholarship. Centring Mindanao is an argument for studying it as productively as possible. We cannot break new ground if we remain caught up in the same old arguments over and over with regard to Mindanao's place within the Philippines and Philippine studies. It was therefore of great significance to me that the papers presented at this conference (and represented in this volume) illustrated so wonderfully how connected and embedded Mindanao and its people were in the past – and still are in the present – with South East Asia and the rest of the world. For a change, scholars of the Philippines and/or South East Asia were allowed to read and discuss Mindanao as a core, showing that there is much more to Mindanao than some are willing to imagine; definitely much more than the mere vagaries of national and nationalist politics, so-called 'Islamic' terrorism, the illicit and illegal movement of guns, drugs, and people, and other sensationalized topics. The hype surrounding these spectacular, often lurid topics only masks the greater complexities of Mindanao that deserve conscientious research. Our task as scholars of this 'out of the way' place should be to complicate it instead, in both the present and the past.

New moments in old histories

In recent commemorations of Philippine Independence Day, Filipinos all over the word reflected on the meaning of freedom, democracy and nationalism against the backdrop of rising authoritarianism back home, as well as around the world. On social media, especially, there was wide agreement that liberation from colonial oppression did not happen overnight, with some arguing that it was still very much a work in progress. This brought to mind how Mindanao experienced this particular moment in its history. The late Dutch scholar/priest, Dr. Peter Schreurs, wrote about this in *Angry Days in Mindanao* (1987), which he described as a strictly 'local' history, covering the areas of Surigao, Agusan and Davao in the north and east, although the accounts likely reflected broader sentiment and movement all over the island as well. Drawing on a wide range of archival records, Schreurs showed us that the response to the Katipunan's declaration of independence from Spain was decidedly mixed in Mindanao, and that local loyalties and any corresponding political mobilizations remained rather conflicted until the Americans arrived to begin their occupation.

This is in stark contrast to the national narrative of revolution and independence, centered on what was going on in southern Luzon, inspired in part by a remarkable generation of Eurocentric native intellectuals, the *ilustrados*. In *Angry Days* we get a glimpse of Mindanao as its true pericolonial self – not as a mere periphery but as a locus of political and intellectual agency, with a distinct demographic mix and a distinct experience of colonial power, and up to that moment of revolution being declared, its own decidedly local understanding of how their future – whether with Spain or without it – was supposed to go.

That moment in Mindanao deserves to be understood in its own right, and in it we can recognize that the story of the revolution and independence was never a single story

defined by 12 June 1898, and why it might be important to instead tell all the different stories, from all over the evolving 'Philippines', that comprised this supposedly singular, inevitable moment in the national formation of the 'Filipino'. In centring Mindanao, there are many more stories like this that can and should be told.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Oona Paredes http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2573-4233

References

Baunto, Assad, Nash Tysmans, and Ica Fernandez. 2017. *Manga Tutul a Palapa: Recipes and Memories from Ranao*. Metro Manila: Gantala Press.

Mindanao Studies Consortium Foundation. 2005. *Annotated Bibliography of Mindanao Studies* (4 Vols.). Davao City: Mindanao Studies Consortium Foundation.

Paredes, Oona. 2013. *A Mountain of Difference: The Lumad in Early Colonial Mindanao*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Publications.

Paredes, Oona. 2017. "Projecting Order in the Pericolonial Philippines: An Anthropology of Catholicism Beyond Catholics." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 28 (2): 225–241.

Phelan, John Leddy. 1959. *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses, 1565–1700*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Schreurs, Peter. 1987. *Angry Days in Mindanao: The Philippine Revolution and the War Against the U.S. in East and Northeast Mindanao, 1897–1901*. Cebu: University of San Carlos Press.

Tsing, Anna. 1994. *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Turner, Mark, R. J. May, and Lulu Respall Turner, eds. 1992. *Mindanao: Land of Unfulfilled Promise*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers.

Wolters, O. W. 1999. *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Publications.