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# Introduction: mountains and plains

This is a book about people who for a long period have been described in academic literature – and even at times describe themselves – as having no culture worth the name, and as being in many senses a vexing puzzle for social and political theory. Disturbingly devoid, as it was thought, of social backbone, lowland Filipinos have frequently been said to be 'merely imitative' of their two sets of Western colonisers: first Catholic Spain (between 1571 and 1896) and then, after a revolution and a single year as an independent republic, America, from 1898 to the second declaration of independence in 1946.

The area of the lowlands in which I worked has if anything a lower cultural profile than either the Tagalog-speaking provinces around Manila to its north, or the Visayas to its south. Although under the Spanish, Bicol had considerable economic and religious signficance, the early Spanish reports tend to contrast Tagalog and Visayan 'types' of culture in extended accounts, and pass more briefly over the lands which lay in between.[1] Its past remains full of puzzles which historians are only just beginning to unravel; why did Bicolanos ferociously resist the Spanish, but then become some of Catholicism's earliest mass converts? Why was the revolution against Spain less flamboyant and less easy to characterise in Bicol than elsewhere? Contemporary Bicol falls within Philippine Economic Region Five, the poorest in the nation, and unlike Manila or Cebu, Bicol's regional capital Naga City is not yet a boom-town of factories or Free Trade Zones. Once again, the things which are easiest to see seem to be happening elsewhere.

The Bicolano people I met, some of whom are quoted in the chapters which follow, will be described engaged in many different pursuits, sometimes tightly connected with each other and sometimes less so. I will pass



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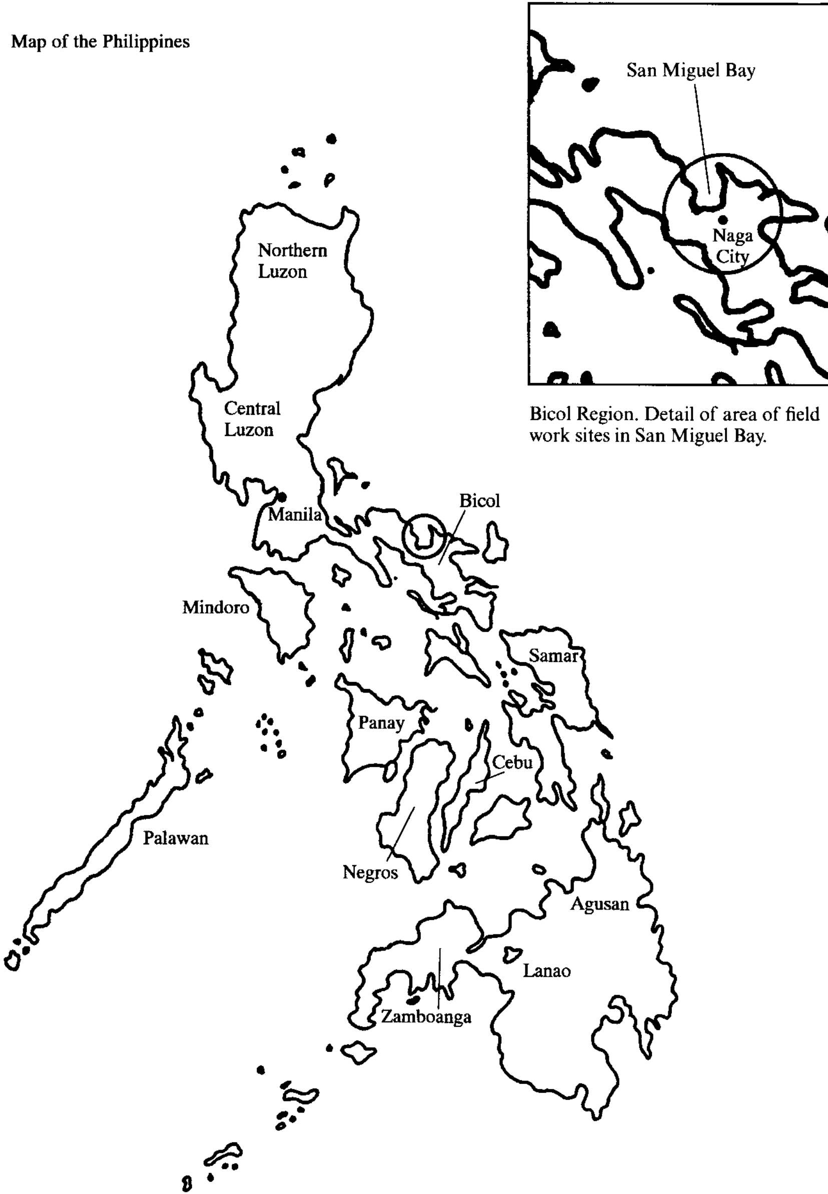


Bicol Region. Detail of area of field work sites in San Miguel Bay.

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from women's stories about forced marriage and a reconstruction of their historical significance, to an account of the complex and often ambiguous forms of Bicolano spirit-mediumship, from there to an exploration of the important local Catholic cult of the 'dead Christ', and finally to one of Naga City's most spectacular events, the Miss Gay Naga City male transvestite beauty-contests. I do not want to suggest that these diverse activities can be forced into a tidy and hermetically sealed system of interpretation or cosmology, for Bicolanos themselves are comparatively uninterested in constructing and promoting a closed notion of their own 'culture'. But I will suggest that we can see a connection between these contexts nonetheless, in the attitudes that Bicolano people take to relationships of unequal power, and the centrality to poorer people of the notion that hierarchy can always be, if not eliminated, then at least mitigated, even by the apparently powerless. The rhetorical assertion that submission can be turned into the beginning of a position of strength is a theme which runs through every part of this book.

**Mountains and plains: the construction of the lowland Philippines in colonial history**

In his ethnography of the Buid of highland Mindoro, Tom Gibson has contrasted the Buid solution to colonial invasions with that of the lowlanders. The former refused all contact and exchange with the new rulers and settlers, retreating up into the mountains and turning inwards to create a society which denies the very possibility of hierarchy even amongst themselves, while the latter entered into intensely charged exchange relationships with the representatives of the colonial powers (Gibson, 1986: 38–49).

This view of a structuring contrast between the highland and lowland Philippines is one which will inform this book. I take it that, broadly speaking, the lowland Catholic rural people, with whom I lived, have taken the opposite historical path to the Buid; while the Buid have tried to turn their backs on the historical processes of colonisation, the lowlanders have been forced to engage with them intensively, and to find ways of negotiating with the colonisers.

This contrast is of course a simplification. In reality lowland populations have alternated between the attempt to build benevolent exchange relations with colonial power-holders, the attempt to enforce a correct or tolerable form of these relations, and at times the complete abandonment of them. Lowland Filipino society has had its own movements up and down the mountains in retreat from the more intensely governed plains, in

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the various guerilla and resistance movements, or movements of fugitives from colonial taxes or other impositions and persecutions. The tradition of the **remontados** (Gerona, 1988b:81), or 'those who have gone back up the mountain', embraces people on the run from Spanish friars, Spanish taxes, Japanese concentration camps, American suppressions of peasant rebellions, lowland crop failures, local vendettas and the modern Philippine Constabulary. For lowlanders, the uplands (Bicol, **bukid**) have always been both a wild and somewhat fearful place, and a frontier refuge, economic and political (Owen, 1984: 22–3; 1990: 424–6; Mallari, 1983).

Partly because of their indigenous religious significance, which predates the Spanish period, mountains have also been the usual site for small 'native-syncretistic' religious communities, which make their own attempt to turn their back on, and thus radically reinterpret, colonial history. The most famous of such mountains is probably Mount Banahaw in Laguna province, site of Rizalist [2] and other nationalist cults, as well as cults based on reworkings of 'babaylanism' (indigenous spirit-mediumship) and other traditions (Elesterio, 1989; Marasigan, 1985; Cullemar, 1986).

It would be wrong, then, to picture lowland engagement in the colonial societies as quiescent. Between the later nineteenth century and the present day, there have been persistent if intermittent eruptions of 'peasant rebellions' and anti-colonial or anti-occupation movements which intercut in complex ways at different times. And recent work which takes its cue from James Scott's notion of the 'moral economy' in Southeast Asia (1985) has reintroduced the notion of 'everyday resistance' even within apparently peaceful lowland communities (Kerkvliet, 1990).

However, the Bicolanos with whom I lived are very different from Gibson's Buid. While the Buid emphasise their autonomy from these historical developments, the people I knew describe themselves and their culture[3] in some contexts as merely the product of successive colonial importations. In fact, to say (as was said to me innumerable times), 'We Filipinos are very Westernised . . . the Spanish brought religion, the Americans brought democracy', is to make a statement which indicates one's own education, since this is the view of Philippine history through primary-school textbooks, many of which have changed little since the American period (Mulder, 1990b). Of course, this kind of statement is not to be taken too literally; it was a view likely to be emphasised in polite conversation with a white foreign visitor, and it does not mean that Bicolanos never reflect on their own particularities, or think of them with pride. Nevertheless, the view of the lowlands as a layer-cake of foreign influences is an important popular orthodoxy.

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**Colonialism and neo-colonialism**

Clearly, the particularity of Filipino lowland experience is bound up with the colonial history of the archipelago. Spanish interest in the Philippines was somewhat perfunctory until the late nineteenth century;[4] its main importance was in the galleon trade, in which Chinese goods passed through Manila in their way to Acapulco to be exchanged for Latin American silver (Steinberg, 1982:21–2; 35). The peninsular Spanish population in the islands was always small (less than 1 per cent of the population: Blanc-Szanton, 1990:361), although there were larger numbers of Mexican creoles and Latin-American mestizos. In Bicol, as elsewhere, ordinary people experienced Spanish rule mostly through two channels. The systems of tax-farming (**encomiendas**), exaction of tribute, labour corvees and forced purchase of produce (**vandala**) placed extremely heavy demands on the population.[5] The missions of the friars effected a rapid initial conversion of Filipinos to Christianity, and the religious orders became the main Spanish presence in most areas, with enormous influence in religion, education and a wide range of political and administrative matters. The Franciscans, who took over from the Augustinians in Bicol in 1574, claimed almost total and fervent Christianisation by 1600, and continued to be a major force in the region up to and beyond the loss of power by Spain (Gerona, 1988b: 58; Schumacher, 1981:157). Spanish was never widely spoken, however, since (in contrast to Spanish policy in Mexico and elsewhere) the friars took the decision from the first to evangelise in the various local languages of the Philippines.[6]

It is sometimes said that America colonised the Philippines almost absent-mindedly; certainly the invasion was an improvisation in the US hostilities with Spain. Once there, however, the Americans were 'tempted by the white man's burden . . . [President] McKinley eventually announced that he had no other choice but "to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them [sic], and by God's grace to do the very best we could by them"' (Steinberg, 1982:43). This pledge to the 'little brown brother' to make a country 'in our own image' (Karnow, 1990) was pursued through a well-known and experimental commitment to universal primary school education in English – and also through a slightly less well-known but extremely brutal repression of the Filipino nationalist revolutionary movement (Goodno, 1991:33–5).

The later American colonial period was one of frustration for Filipino leaders, who saw the promise of self-rule first delayed until 1935 and finally granted only in 1946. Moreover, many people considered that the Americans used their role in disbursing capital for economic rebuilding

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after the war to create a form of neo-colonialism whose effects are still pervasive today. Certainly, the contemporary Philippine economy is driven by the need to spend 40 per cent of its GNP on servicing its debts to the World Bank and the United States, and by its need to attract international development capital. American pressures have been felt not only on economic issues of 'structural adjustment', but also in its prolonged maintenance of nuclear bases in the Philippines[7] and its alleged continued role in 'counter-insurgency' programmes against the communist guerillas, the New People's Army. The country's desperate need to generate foreign currency has also shaped the Philippines as the world's largest exporter of migrant labour (at least six million Filipinos work abroad), and as the US has since the later 1970s increasingly restricted Filipino immigration, closing off the 'American dream', those lucky enough to find work abroad have been diverted to other markets, especially Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and (until the Gulf War) Iraq, often in situations of considerable insecurity (Borra, 1984:16, 21).[8]

The colonial relationship with America has therefore not produced for most ordinary Filipinos the economic opportunities and freedom to travel of which they dream. Nonetheless, America is still generally regarded in the barangays, if not within nationalist politics, as the Philippines' good patron. In the minds of many people I knew in Calabanga, this idea is still vividly linked to memories of the Japanese occupation during the Pacific War (1941–46). Japanese presence was heavy in this part of Bicol, and many people I knew had family members imprisoned, tortured or killed for activities in the resistance. The US army appeared as the nation's liberators, and the possession of a US army war-widow's pension is still one of the key factors in creating relative wealth for people of this generation in Bicol.

Before describing the fieldwork setting in which these questions presented themselves to me, I shall examine the ways in which lowland culture was for many years, and often still is, depicted as broken, contentless and insubstantial, before briefly reviewing the relevance of the existing Filipino ethnography of exchange.

**The era of a negative conception of the lowland Philippines**

For a period which has lasted from at least the beginning of the American period until quite recently [9] the recognition that the history of the lowland Philippines has been forcefully shaped by colonialism has been elided with something quite different; an anxious and discouraging notion in both the academic and non-academic literature, that the lowlands was perhaps

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nothing but the sum of its colonial parts, a culture without authenticity, or else was only to be defined in a series of negatives, by what it had failed to be.

These anxieties often took the form of a comparison between Filipinos and the American models towards which it was assumed that they should be developing. Such tropes could during the height of their fashion in the 1950s and 1960s swallow up even those who, like the ethnographer of Bicol folklore Father Frank Lynch, were deeply dedicated to the promotion of Philippine sociology and of American–Filipino understanding. Thus in the exploration of 'Philippine values' Lynch quotes from the results of psychometric testing carried out by Bulatao:

> When contrasted with the American, the Filipino is less autonomous, more dependent. He prefers a stable way of life where things . . . do not demand continual risk-taking. He will thus be more . . . oriented to authoritarian ways of thinking rather then to innovation and entrepreneurship . . . *(Lynch, 1984a: 56)*

It was not only the Filipino's insufficient entrepreneurship that was a cause for concern, but his general cultural virility:

> . . . compared to Manilenos, American men and women are higher on autonomy, affiliation, exhibition, change and heterosexuality; they are lower on deference, order, abasement, nurturance and endurance and aggression . . .
> *(Bulatao Special Group Studies, quoted in Lynch, 1984a: 35)*

Much of the literature of the period was in fact dominated by a functionalist framework which was applied in order to find out whether Philippine society was growing healthily towards 'modernity', or, as was feared, was languishing in a state of insufficiently rational economic development (Davis, 1973), and retardation of the organs of democratic politics. Even within the national universities, the themes of 'acculturation', the adaptiveness or mal-adaptiveness of the Filipino family and other institutions to social change and cultural dysfunctionality, continued to dominate (Hart, 1977; Manalong, 1982; Mataragnon, 1984 and 1985; McDonald, 1982; Morais, 1981; Vengco, 1984). Jocano's detailed ethnographies of barangay life in Ilocos and Panay (1982; 1969a; 1969b) provided much useful analysis, but his hope that 'the presentation of ethnographic data on . . . lowland ethnic groups can assist in . . . strengthening national cohesion' (1982: iv) seemed written more in doubt than in confidence.

Indeed, much explicitly nationalistic literature has been overwhelmingly negative in its assessment of lowland culture; the call to 'cultural decolonization' in works of writers such as Renato Constantino (1969; 1976;

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1978a; 1978b) being expressed with such vehemence that once again one is left with the impression that the lowlands are dominated by a 'colonial mentality' and identity confusion which can only be extirpated root and branch. Constantino would perhaps not greatly disagree with Neils Mulder's elegy for the birth of a mature Spanish-Filipino elite-led culture that, interrupted by the arrival of the Americans, was stillborn (Mulder 1991:4). 'The Filipinos were mentally recolonized in a discourse that not only extolled American culture, . . . but that also degraded the Spanish colonial past' (1991:6). American mass education, argues Mulder, created 'an undeniable measure of cultural dependency and instability . . . a "colonial mentality" that denigrated the own and imitated the foreign model' (7). Others have been more inclined to depict the lowlands as under cultural attack through foreign-oriented media, as cinema and radio have spread rapidly through the provinces since the 1950s, and as well as importing films the Philippines supports a large film industry of its own, which turns out quickly made melodramas and action films in Tagalog, the language of the national capital. Although this cinema is in fact highly distinctive, it cannot be said to fit orthodox definitions of high art, and those who claim to see its merits have often criticised its strange admixtures, its borrowings, its derivativeness and its lack of 'images of ourselves in our own reality' (Reyes, 1989:85).

While other writers would consider the capacity of the lowlands for 'resistance' an article of faith, there has nonetheless been a tendency only to measure its existence in terms external to the culture. As Coumans notes, many writers with left-wing sympathies concerned to trace events in the rural areas have taken a 'dim view of existing Filipino peasant consciousness as a means to meaningful social change' (Coumans, 1991:3).[10] Even Kervkliet's extremely valuable recent study of political consciousness in Central Luzon (1990), *starts* with the question of whether or not people in Filipino barangays 'have' the concept of class, rather than simply starting by asking what lowland 'political culture'[11] might be.

In fact, the only positive model of what lowlands society might be like was for a long time defined by the intelligent but theoretically limited writings of Lynch and especially of Mary Hollnsteiner (1973). Hollnsteiner (who, as Gibson has pointed out, basically put Mauss in the service of functionalism) proposed a society of landlord-patrons and share-cropping tenants, whose social relations were governed by the sense that the obligations which social inferiors owe their social superiors can never be completely repaid, and must therefore be endlessly acknowledged in small

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gestures of deference. This relation, known by the Tagalog term **utang na loob** (debt of the heart or, literally, the 'inside') was then contrasted with other obligations or contracts which were of a less permanent kind because they obtained between persons in positions of greater equality to each other (Ileto, 1979:9).

It would be absolutely undesirable to adopt an anodyne view of lowland history which denied the violent and destructive aspects of either Spanish or American colonialism, but Mulder and many other writers underestimate the extent to which people engage with and manage the problem of dislocating historical experiences. Asking about the lowland Philippines only in terms of class or other systems of analysis primarily associated with the critique of modern Western capitalism, on the other hand, risks deepening the divide which for a long time has separated anthropological ways of looking at the Philippines from ways of looking at the rest of Southeast Asia, and therefore risks dividing the archipelago from its own pre-colonial historical context.

**Potency and reciprocity**

Meanwhile, the development of anthropological and political studies of other parts of Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, has proceeded along entirely different lines. In particular, since Benedict Anderson's seminal essay on 'The idea of power in Javanese culture' (first published 1972[12] but reprinted in Anderson 1990: 17–77) it has been taken as axiomatic that contemporary anthropological accounts of people in Java, Borneo, Sulawesi etc. both must and may assume a meaningful connection between the construction of social relations and representations in the present-day world, and a distinctive Southeast-Asian notion of power which has some continuity with even the ancient past of the region, especially with the Indic kingdoms (Anderson, 1990:19).[13] Southeast Asian 'potency' in Anderson's account is 'that intangible, mysterious and divine energy which animates the universe . . . there is no sharp division between organic and inorganic matter, for everything is sustained by the same invisible power' (1990:22). Moreover, he argues, the fundamental problem for Javanese rulers has not been the legitimacy of power, but the problem of accumulating and preserving it, given that this energy always remains at a fixed quantity in the universe, and that a redistribution of power therefore always implies different persons gaining and losing power relative to each other (Anderson, 1990:23–4).[14]

The second key element in the re-imagining of the lowlands was the exceptional essays of the historian William Henry Scott, who put forward

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an original and persuasive re-reading of the Spanish missionary accounts of the Philippines at and just after colonial contact (Scott, 1985a and 1985b). Scott described lowland society as basically divided into social ranks: **datus** or aristocrats, freemen and commoners. Lowland society was never amalgamated into a single state before the arrival of the Spanish, but consisted of many small, military or (since they were often coastal) piratical chiefdoms, making war and trading with each other in conditions of relative political fluidity. But the brilliance of Scott's contribution lay in the fact that he disentangled the confusing descriptions given in the Spanish sources for the rights and duties of commoners, to show that this was above all a society which functioned dynamically on the basis of infinite gradations of debt-bondage. The power of a **datu** consisted in the fact that he was bonded to no one, and that he had innumerable dependents to whom he distributed patronage; everyone else owed some greater or lesser part of their labour to another person, who in turn often provided them with protection. Moreover, despite the existence of the three ranks of person, all these positions were mutable; a debt-slave could rise through gradually lightening relations of bondage to become a freeman or even a **datu**, and a **datu** could slip from power and descend in the other direction.

Both these analytic directions were taken up in two extremely important works on the social history of the Tagalog regions of the Philippines, Ileto's *Pasyon and revolution* (1979) on the 'millenarian' uprisings against Spain which formed part of the Philippine revolution and Rafael's *Contracting colonialism* (1988) on the nature of early Spanish Christianisation.[15] Both these outstanding works turned centrally on a revision of the **utang-na-loob** view of lowland society, and especially on a critique of the way in which it failed to consider the possibility of social conflict in hierarchical relations. Thus Ileto's study explored the use of the language of popular Tagalog religious texts, especially the sung passion-story or **Pasyon**, in 'peasant rebellions' whose leaders, wholly dependent for their sustenance and their lives on their supporters, were identified with the life and sufferings of Christ. In the search for **kalayaan** (freedom/salvation) all normal hierarchical relations are inverted; '. . . the gift is a mode of strengthening the bonds of **loob** among men. Begging and the acceptance of food, shelter and protective care create, not a subordinate–superordinate relationship, but a horizontal one akin to love . . . things are in fact turned upside-down – the debtor is the man of power' (Ileto, 1979:230).

While one might perhaps expect such inversions in the context of

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