

BOOK REVIEWS

Identity and Reciprocity in 15th Century Philippines

Grace Barretto-Tesoro

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For many, the study of pottery shards would not amount to anything more other than what is evident: the typology of the pot – its composition, design, and the method of manufacture. However sometimes, the information we get from these items left behind by people who lived hundreds of years ahead of us sparks our interest and curiosity: Who were these people who made these artefacts? What was the society like back then?

These questions are probably some of the reasons why archaeologists continue to search and study material remains, to find answers that will make us understand our identity and culture before and, ultimately, at present. In Grace Barretto-Tesoro's study entitled "Identity and Reciprocity in 15th Century Philippines," she aims to do exactly this.

The research work of Barretto-Tesoro focuses on how the individuals negotiated their identity and status through routines such as pottery production and participation in social activities such as raiding, feasting, trading, and ritual performances. She goes on to prove that individuals wield different forms and measurements of power through the acquisition of certain skills and knowledge, and that social relations may be scenes of power, regardless of status.

Barretto-Tesoro also uses an agency-perspective approach in studying the social relations in a society, which are not only centred on the elites but also include other segments of the society. Another objective of her work includes attempts to offer new interpretations of mortuary goods, earthenware vessels, and identity in the Philippines.

The venue of the case study is in Calatagan, Batangas, Philippines, specifically several cemeteries along the coast found in Barangays Talisay, Punta Sunog, Karitunan, and Palapat. These burials contain a

variety of objects such as earthenware vessels, foreign-made ceramics, metal implements, glass ornaments, and spindle whorls.

The study also contains a crucial background of the ethno-history of the Tagalogs, which is the most probable group to settle in Calatagan. The reason why this part of the research is important is because it gives the readers the necessary information to understand Barretto-Tesoro's use of heterarchy instead of hierarchy and also, how identities and statuses were influenced by reciprocity. The term *utang na loob* is also extensively explained, since this is also significant in understanding how people related to each other as seen in the pottery, both in how they were made and also in how they were placed in the graves.

Interestingly, this is also the main point of the study: How to analyse societies such as ours in which identity within the community or society can change according to the way each individuals relate according to their feeling of indebt to another clansman. As Barretto-Tesoro explains in her work, imposing a hierarchical model will not appropriately describe the way the Tagalogs interact with each other, and how the power relations indeed work in this particular kind of society because hierarchy is not lenient enough to allow the fluidity of identity as depicted by the way they use pottery for reciprocity. This is important because in other sites, her model may be the key to a deeper understanding of how societies in the Philippines developed, since adapting other models from other cultures dissimilar from ours only causes us to "force" the data and information into fitting the model. This study also explains in depth the different social classes within pre-Hispanic Philippine society, which assists in understanding how *utang na loob* is used to secure and maintain power within the society, as stated in the study.

Barretto-Tesoro analysed the pottery by investigating the nature of its production, the preparation of the clay, its forming/ firing, and if the pottery were household based or mass produced. These are also examined by measuring their variation by using statistical analysis.

The analysis of the artefacts is, indeed, comprehensive and extensive, covering as many burials as possible in order to get a complete picture of the segments of society then. Part of the examination includes the location of the artefacts within the grave, the quality of each, and their quantity. Based on these, Barretto-Tesoro identified that the identities represented in the burials were cultural affiliation, personal identity

relating to age and sex, and prestige and status. Findings also include that gender was more marked rather than sex, and networks of associations were stressed more rather than personal identities. In fact, an overlapping of identities is evident, and explained well within the study, based on the analysis of the pottery and the burials.

Each chapter of the work is complete in itself, meaning that with the extensive research and information each has to offer, it can already stand on its own. Barretto-Tesoro manages to include all pertinent details needed and explain them in such a way that even the common reader will get the gist of the study, and how the data proves the author's claims. However, what is remarkable is the way Barretto-Tesoro was able to add new knowledge to Philippine archaeology, from the manner of analysis of the pottery and observations garnered from this to a refreshing new method of looking at the relationships in society, inciting the uniqueness of *utang na loob* and how these affect not only power relations but also on how individuals in Tagalog society construct their identities based on the material remains.

Our country is in dire need of more studies of this kind, as everyday we are losing crucial data from artefacts and sites that succumb to destruction and neglect. We need to fill the lack of local research, and Barretto-Tesoro, indeed, marks a niche in this arena with her valuable contribution to Philippine archaeology.