

Book Review

Visayan Lifescape

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Ushijima, Iwao and Zayas, Cynthia Neri, eds. *Bisayan Knowledge, Movement and Identity*. Quezon City: Third World Studies Center (TWSC), 2000, 340 p.

Bisayan Knowledge, Movement and Identity, which collects the works of 16 Filipino and Japanese VMAS experts, attempts to make familiar to themselves and future readers the region of eastern Visayas and the way of life of the former and present inhabitants. The VMAS experts breathed three years of culture and sea before turning in their reports. The Japanese members of the research group are fluent in either Visayan or Tagalog languages (or both) and in some cases more fluent than their Filipino counterparts. This being the third volume of collected works in almost a decade of VMAS research, the authors are more than very familiar with the Visayan way of life.

Filipino readers should be able to relate to Takahiro Kobayashi's "Selling Fish in the Market of Capiz," seafood being a regular on the Filipino marketing list along with cooking oil, onion and garlic and lotto tickets. They should be able to agonize over the brutality of misguided law enforcers (Tetsoturo Ogawa's "Police Raids and the People") or even romanticize life under the tyrannical *haciendero* (Koki Seki's "Social Change and Migration: A Case From Palawan). For familiarization, the first requires only an awareness of the fact that the Philippines is actually an archipelago. The other two require sufficient exposure to round-the-clock network news and seemingly endless episodes of local soap operas of recycled and recurring characters and themes on the tireless television set.

However, most readers will not view the works of some VMAS authors with equal familiarity, and some even with disbelief.

In Part I (Religion and Ritual), Resil Mojares renders a lyrical "Woman in the Cave," a piece of compelling prose as well as research on the

genealogy of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Guadalupe, Cebu. Katzutoshi Seki follows with his interpretation of the world of sorcery according to the people of Siquijor, a southern Visayan island known for stories of the supernatural and of little else. In “Describing a Magic World,” Seki attempts to put into words Siquijor’s magico-religious world. He is particularly fascinated with the *mananambal* (healer) and his *tuga* (gifted) spiritual power (acquired only through a dream) and later admits wanting to become one himself.

Makito Kawada introduces his own healer, the *mereko*, in “Orasyones: The Sacred Knowledge of the Sacred Word.” The *mereko* wields the power of *orasyones* (sacred words) that are memorized, read or “eaten.” Curiously, no special skill is required of the *mereko*-to-be but it is an advantage to be of a *mereko* clan, or be fortunate enough to stumble upon a *librito* (small note book) or two of sacred words.

Nicolas Cuadra in “*Mga Tawo sa Kadagatan*” unveils the world of the coastal Visayan fisherfolk who live by the rule of the *tawo sa dagat* (inhabitants of the sea). The fisherfolk who believe that the *dili ingon* (non-human beings) look after them when they are at sea.

Surely, these are other worlds, other places where even the most primitive of technologies have not touched or have not changed the people’s way of life. But there are such places only we have read or heard little about them. The foreword perhaps expresses this concisely:

It seems incongruous to speak of folk technology when the world is taken with high performing technologies in telecommunication and other fields. Yet this book could not be more timely if only because it reminds us that this world consists of many worlds sometimes far apart from each other.¹

At the beginning, *Bisayan Knowledge, Movement and Identity* suggests to the reader that the sea and the islands hold plenty of secrets. In some secret world, the Visayan finds little use for technology save for the kind that could improve their ability to catch fish. They continue to survive on practices and beliefs that have existed for centuries.

Beginning with Part II (Folk Technology), the book leaves the realm of the unknown and supernatural and becomes a chronicle of the spirit of the Visayan. The stories are unfamiliar up to this point.

Co-editors Iwao Ushijima and Cynthia Neri Zayas completed separate studies on the pioneering blacksmiths of the region and their relatively comfortable lives despite the unpredictable demand for forged implements. In “Blacksmithing in Carigara” (co-authored with Lilian dela Peña), Ushijima focuses on the socioeconomic relationships among blacksmiths, financiers and traders and how blacksmithing flourished as a small-scale cottage industry without sufficient operational capital. In “*Panday and Pandayan*,” Zayas, describes in great detail the legendary Tabada family of smiths, the craft, the *pandayan* (shop) and the apprenticeship within the family.

In the succeeding chapters (Part III Fishery and Social Relations and Part IV Life World) we are introduced to the perennial struggle between the Visayan and the laws of man (Man is greedy) and nature (There’s always a bigger storm beyond the horizon/If Man doesn’t get you Nature will). The fisher folk have managed to adjust to the changing environment (“Continuity and Change to the *Manughudhod*” of Takao Yano and Takahiro Kobayashi), vanishing of species (“Sea Cucumbers from the Coral Sea to the World Market” of Jun Akamine) and shrinking fish catch brought about by competition from sea crafts (“Motorized *Bangkas* and Social Relations in Marinduque” by Junkichi Watari), equipment (“Innovations in *Baling sa Higad* and *Sapyaw* Fisheries in Bantayan” of Aloysius M. Cañete) and migration (“Social Change and Migration: A Case from Palawan”).

Fittingly, “Bisaya Republic,” Eufracio Abaya’s view of Visayan migrant life in Navotas, closes out VMAS III as a reminder that should one lose a home, a new one can be found through “nostalgic imagination” so that even among hostile *tubo* (native) the *dayo* (migrant) can discover a true sense of belongingness, unpleasant stereotypes and nicknames notwithstanding.

Bisayan Knowledge, Movement and Identity is a collection of stories and facts, intending mainly to describe rather than analyze. Most of the VMAS authors provided well-written accounts of Visayan life but did not develop frameworks for analysis which would aid the non-anthropologist

in understanding and appreciating certain concepts that were introduced in the book.

Akamine and Cañete, while providing welcome additions to the literature on fisheries and maritime social sciences did not elaborate on the significance of their studies by way of a theoretical framework. The same can be said of Kobayashi who presented an exhaustive (if not overly exhaustive) compilation of figures, diagrams and cases of vendor-customer interaction to describe the strategy of fish vendors.

On the other hand, Dela Peña's "Bol-anons Stories From Photographs" would have benefited greatly from an illustration of genealogies (similar to those provided by Ushijima and Zayas) and photographs which readers would come to expect upon reading the title.

This does not mean the book is not capable of immersing the reader in the narratives, translations, tables, maps, illustrations, diagrams and photographs. At the very least, anyone who has not seen uncooked *balatan* or an unmade *bolo* or *hudhod* will come away enlightened.

Taken individually, the authors succeed by way of description. Taken collectively, they succeed in documenting a people's triumph over change. ✿

Endnote

- 1 Diokno, Ma. Serena I., Foreword. *Bisayan Knowledge, Movement and Identity*. Quezon City: Third World Studies Center (TWSC), 2000, p.ix

Other recent publications by the Third World Studies Center: *Sama-Sama: Facets of Ethnic Relations in South East Asia* (Miriam Coronel Ferrer, Editor), *The Ethnographies of Japanese Maritime Communities* (Cynthia Neri Zayas), and the *Philippine Democracy Agenda Vols. 1-3* (Ma. Serena I. Diokno, Miriam Coronel Ferrer, Ma. Glenda S. Lopez and Marlon A. Wui, Editors). For more information please visit the TWSC website at <http://www.upd.edu.ph/~twsc>.