

Book Review

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Coronel Ferrer, Miriam. (2020). *Region, Nation and Homeland: Valorization and Adaptation in the Moro and Cordillera Resistance Discourses*. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

Miriam Coronel Ferrer examines the resistance discourses of the Moro and Cordillera ethno-political mobilizations, specifically the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Cordillera People’s Democratic Front (CPDF), and Cordillera People’s Liberation Army (CPLA). The author uses critical discourse analysis to analyze movement texts, such as books, manifestos, position papers, articles, letters, speeches, messages, and interviews, focusing on how members of the armed groups under study articulated their claims to nationhood and territory.

The introductory chapter characterizes the Moro and Cordillera movements as ethno-political mobilizations, which differ from class-based and ideological struggles because their political claims are rooted in historical and cultural distinctiveness as a people. As the armed groups in question opposed the Philippine state, they espoused “narratives of difference from the Filipino majority population” (p. 2).

The next two chapters provide a historical overview of the movements under consideration. Coronel Ferrer has written extensively about the Moro and Cordillera ethnic conflicts, and apart from taking account of recent developments, her

assessment of causes, dynamics, and political negotiations here is similar to that in her previous works. What makes these essays distinct, however, is their focus on ideological and organizational cleavages within the movements, laying the groundwork for the author's analyses of the groups' discursive practices in the succeeding chapters.

In Southern Philippines, the MNLF grounded their claim to a separate and, later, autonomous Bangsamoro on the right to self-determination. The MILF built upon this argument, even after it split off from the MNLF, so both liberation fronts are ethnonationalist. However, the MILF also drew heavily on Islam, unlike its more secular mother organization, and invoked the right of indigenous peoples (IPs) to their ancestral domain, causing alarm among non-Moro IPs in the region. Ultimately, Moro resistance developed a unified Bangsamoro ethnoreligious identity, despite historical and cultural differences among Islamicized ethnolinguistic groups in Muslim Mindanao. Mobilization around the Bangsamoro identity led to the institution of an autonomous regional government, and moving forward, the movement faces concerns related to the accommodation of non-Muslims in the Bangsamoro homeland, their homogenizing claims, and their silence on gender and class inequality.

In Northern Philippines, the Communist Party of the Philippines-affiliated CPDF subordinated the Cordillera peoples' right to self-determination and ancestral domain to the national democratic struggle. This caused the CPLA to break away and, like the Moro ethnonationalists, critique majority-minority relations. Crucially, both armed groups adopted the term Cordillera, appealing to a notion of a regional identity. However, these actors are no longer influential in the mountain range, and tend to conflate Cordillera with Igorot, a supra-tribal identity marker which some tribes are ambivalent about and/or

do not use as a self-reference. Cordillera resistance thus failed to construct a pan-Cordillera identity. Local peoples adopt tribal, provincial, and supra-tribal labels instead of, or in addition to, self-identifying as Cordillerans. They also prioritize campaigns for IP rights and ancestral domain rather than regional autonomy. Therefore, a Cordillera Autonomous Region continues to not exist.

Overall, the book's major contribution lies in its comparison of the Moro and Cordillera ethno-political mobilizations, resistance discourses, identity formation, and autonomy projects. Coronel Ferrer's academic expertise and direct involvement with the Moro and Cordillera movements, including serving as the chair of the government negotiating panel that signed the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro with the MILF in 2014, behoove scholars to read her account. With respect to the Cordillera, however, some of her views challenge those of Athena Lydia Casambre, a prolific Cordillera studies scholar frequently cited by Coronel Ferrer. It would be useful to compare and contrast their analyses, as they intersect and depart in notable ways.

Coronel Ferrer was interested in "why a pan-Cordillera identity developed belatedly compared to that of the Bangsamoro," and her "tentative answer rests on the pre-eminence of *ili* (village) autonomy as the basic socio-political principle on which the different tribes and villages established peaceful coexistence" (p. 177). Unlike Muslim Mindanao, which had Islamic sultanates before the creation of the Philippine state, the mountain range had no political unit higher than the *ili* that could claim "statehood" or "nationhood" over bigger territories and ethnolinguistic groups (p. 177). This is consistent with Casambre (2006, p. 455), who writes: "The novelty of a supra-government in a pan-Cordillera region is alien to traditional peoples in the villages whose political experience

is grounded in autonomy at the village level.” Both scholars therefore support arrangements combining local autonomy with regional autonomy.

One such arrangement is the CPLA’s proposed confederation of tribal groups called the Cordillera Bodong (Nation), named after the Kalinga *bodong* or peace pact. Here, the scholars’ views differ. Casambre (2006, p. 79), on the one hand, states that it is still “alien,” as the making of peace pacts is not practiced by some ethnic groups in the mountain range. The movement leaders cited by Coronel Ferrer, on the other hand, argue that all tribes traditionally did until the American colonial period and that the multilateral *bodong* already existed. For Coronel Ferrer (pp. 169-171), however, it does not matter whether the basis for the proposal is a myth or an evolved fact: the Cordillera Bodong is a “novel idea” because it extends a tribal practice into a pan-tribal identity, providing a “frame for a diverse but incorporated identity distinct from that of the Filipino majority” .

The inclusion of Abra in a singular Cordillera region and identity is another point of contention. Casambre argues that outsiders led the autonomy project: lowlanders of the CPP and the CPLA founder Conrado Balweg, who came from Abra, a province which is part of the mountain range but not included in the more conventional territorial scope of a Cordillera region, constituted by Benguet, Ifugao, Bontoc, Apayao, and Kalinga (BIBAK). Coronel Ferrer’s analysis challenges a part of Casambre’s argument. The author cites anthropological and linguistic studies, an assertion made by the Cordillera People’s Alliance, and her interview with Kalinga leader Andres Ngao-i that point to

Abra’s historical and cultural affinity to the rest of Cordillera, justifying its inclusion in the region, despite its administrative separation until the early Martial Law period.

In my view, these variations partly result from Coronel Ferrer's choice of written movement texts as her material for discourse analysis. As the author acknowledges in the introductory chapter, "members, supporters, and communities sympathetic to the cause do not necessarily share the totalizing perspectives provided by these movement texts and their leaders" (p. 4). The extent to which the source documents have reflected and influenced the views of the public, especially the Cordillera peoples, is unclear.

Nonetheless, Coronel Ferrer's examination of Moro and Cordillera resistance discourses sheds light on identity formation and the quest for regional autonomy in Muslim Mindanao and the Cordillera. As the MILF leads the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, and a Cordillera Autonomous Region has yet to be established, this book is very much relevant to contemporary Philippine politics.

References

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