

REVIEW

BOOK

Civilizational Imperatives: Americans, Moros, and the Colonial World

By Oliver Charbonneau

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For a long time, the Muslim South was rather peripheral in the historiography of US imperialism in the Philippines. It is only in recent years that broader attention in scholarship has been paid to this supposed periphery.¹ Oliver Charbonneau's book *Civilizational Imperatives: Americans, Moros, and the Colonial World* joins this development and helps to counter the marginalization of the region in scholarship by placing Mindanao and Sulu at the center of his analysis. It is about the often-overlooked history of the colonization of the Islamic Philippines by the United States from the late nineteenth up until the mid-twentieth century. More importantly, it is foremost about three things: colonization, connection, and a case against the US exceptionalism discourse.

Civilizational Imperatives follows a set of three arguments. The first argument is that US rule in the Islamized parts of the Philippine archipelago was based on a "transformative vision of colonial rule" (8). At the turn of the twentieth century, many US Americans saw great commercial and settlement potential in the

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- 1 An earlier work that looks at the structures of governance under colonialism in the Muslim South is Gowing, *Mandate in Moroland: The American Government of Muslim Filipinos, 1899-1920*. However, only in the last years, the research on the region has intensified. A comprehensive work is Hawkins, *Making Moros Imperial Historicism and American Military Rule in the Philippines' Muslim South*. Other researchers have partially dealt with the region as they have written individual articles or chapters. See Gedacht, "Native Americans, the Ottoman Empire, and the Global Narratives of Islam, in the US Colonial Philippines, 1900-1914." 128-38; Bjork, *Prairie Imperialists: The Indian Country Origins of American Empire*; Winkelmann, "Rethinking the Sexual Geography of American Empire in the Philippines: Interracial Intimacies in Mindanao and the Cordilleras, 1898-1921."

Philippine Muslim South. Yet, to make use of this potential, its people and land needed to be transformed. The attempts to make these visions colonial realities is the common thread throughout the book. Charbonneau explores how official and non-official US actors experimented with social, commercial, educational, agricultural, and legal programs to transform the Muslims in the Philippines -whom they collectively called Moros - and their spaces in Mindanao and Sulu.

Secondly, the author argues that although these “civilizing” efforts occurred at the supposed periphery of the colonial Philippines, these efforts cannot be interpreted in isolation, rather, they were deeply entangled and shaped by trans-imperial connections (168). By locating the US colonial endeavors in the Islamic Philippines within a web of ideological, structural, and personnel connections across several empires, the book makes the third argument that US imperial rule was not exceptional (206). The idea of an exceptional US empire that could rule its possessions and colonial subjects in a more “benevolent” way than its European counterparts was clearly not the case, as the US empire adapted many of the governing and “civilizing” strategies from other empires such as the Spanish, British, French, Dutch, and the Ottoman empire.

The book starts with a short historical overview of the colonial powers in the region, followed by seven chapters, and ends with a conclusion. The first chapter explores the production of racial and territorial imaginations of the inhabitants of the Islamic Philippines and their environment (24). Charbonneau shows that the Moro was like an empty canvas that could be painted (over) with different imaginaries. Informed by Spanish myths of Muslim Malays or by linkages to Native Americans, the Moro could appear as a “religious fanatic” with an affinity to piracy and slavery or as a “noble savage” in need of US protection (30, 41). Also, the trope of the landscape as “empty” and its supposed underutilization by the local population, became a justification for multiple developmental avenues (42f). Moving from the fantasies of transformation to the practices, the second and third chapters reveal various civilizational measures such as the establishment of new legal systems, medical and sanitary surveillance, secular and vocational education, introduction to market capitalism and labor regimes, and permanent settlement schemes. The Philippine Muslim South became a laboratory where Americans and Filipinos “experimented” with these programs for their “civilizing mission” (93). However, when the efforts failed, military and civilian officials resorted to what Charbonneau calls “corrective violence” to enforce their transformative agendas (94f). The use of different forms of violence, from punishment and confinement to sporadic slaughter and massacres in order to consolidate rule is the topic of the fourth chapter. The discursive construction of the Moros as violent and martial furthered the belief that they could only be controlled through force (102). The fifth chapter looks at how colonial actors perceived and maintained the new spaces they lived in. Mindanao-Sulu represented, on the one hand, a hostile environment

due to the anxieties of tropical diseases or the “transgressive contact with inferior races” (140), and on the other, romantic notions of a “tropical idyll” (121). At the center of this chapter lies the management of these paradoxes through the building of segregated spheres. Chapter six moves beyond Mindanao-Sulu by following key Moro figures who travelled to continental North America to be displayed in expositions and fairs, to visit US officials in diplomatic encounters, or to study at an American college. Apart from these real encounters, the chapter also discusses how the Islamic Philippines was brought to the metropole via “fictional visits” in operas, children’s literature, and radio serials (159f). The last chapter analyzes the trans-imperial flows in more depth and discusses how Moros and US colonialists interacted with maritime Southeast Asia, and especially the wider Muslim world. The wealthy Moro kept ties with the Muslim world by taking trips to Mecca or demonstrated pan-Islamic solidarity by placing themselves under the protection of the Ottoman empire. While the Moros’ connections to the outer Islamic world seemed a great danger for some Americans, others debated about the utility of Islam in achieving the colonial mission and turned to Ottoman rulers for guidance and insights on how to “modernize” and reform Islam in the Philippines (188, 192f). The last part discusses the aftermath of the US colonial endeavor in the Islamic Philippines and how it created ideological frameworks and governance structures which persisted even after independence and the incorporation into the Philippine nation-state. Charbonneau thereby traces the roots of violence between Muslims and Christians in the colonial remains of American colonization.

Civilizational Imperatives can be situated within different historiographical developments that have to do with connections, confluences, and centering “peripheral” spaces. Transnational history, global history, postcolonial history, and new imperial history have offered methodological tools to tear down the borders of discrete entities such as the nation-state or the metropole-periphery binary and instead focus on circulations and interactions of interlinked spaces (Cooper and Stoler 1997). More recent trends in scholarship attempt to understand the histories of indigenous people and spaces not only within their relationship with the West, but also with other connections, such as South-South connections. This approach offers a multi-perspective angle by bringing together or juxtaposing the currents of various empires or offering new frameworks of reference.² Furthermore, the scholarship on Southern Philippines has tended to look at the region within a

2 A volume that follows a multi-perspective approach by juxtaposing Iberian, Chinese and Islamic frameworks is Gommans and Lopez. *Philippine Confluence Iberian, Chinese and Islamic Currents, C. 1500-1800*. In the case of the Southern Philippines, an earlier work that tries to locate the Islamic Philippines within a wider Islamic World is Kawashima, *The “White Man’s Burden” and the Islamic Movement in the Philippines: The Petition of Zamboanga Muslim Leaders to the Ottoman Empire in 1912*.

national framework of integration and separation or as zones of war and conflict.³ However, recent developments emphasize a cultural analysis approach and argue for a centering of peripheral spaces. An expression of such is, for example, the conference “Mindanao: Cartographies of History, Identity and Representation” organized by Philippine Studies at SOAS University of London which was held in July 2019. The goal of the conference was to “discuss Mindanao as a core,” (7) thereby deconstructing its place within the Philippines and Philippines Studies as peripheral and showing Mindanao’s connectedness with other parts of the world (Paredes 2022).⁴

Charbonneau’s *Civilizational Imperatives* situates itself and contributes to the mentioned historiographical trends as it puts US colonialism in the Islamic Philippines in a global context. The book is at its best when providing glimpses into the perspectives of key figures and communities of Mindanao and Sulu. Chapter six is especially illuminating when we get to know the Samal leader Datu Facundo, the Tausūg Sultan Jamalul Kiram II, or his niece Tarhata Kiram and see how they negotiated power through sartorial choices; or chapter seven, when we encounter global Islamic connections through the Maranao leader Datu Nurul Hakim who declared his loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan. However, despite Charbonneau’s trans-imperial approach, a certain imbalance of perspectives remains as it exclusively relies on US American archives—and hence, on English language sources with very few Spanish exceptions. *Civilizational Imperatives* is therefore at its heart a US colonial history.

It would have been interesting to see how and whether archival work beyond national boundaries and the analysis of Philippine Jawi documents would have given other insights on a Muslim view of the colonial experience.⁵ Some methodological reflections on the choice of archives would have been appreciated especially if the goal of the book is to take “a critical approach to official histories” (22) and to “eschew methodological nationalism” (169).

Yet despite the mainly American point of view, Charbonneau is careful and nuanced in portraying the historical actors and communities that appear in his book. One of its notable strengths is that it goes beyond the simplistic binary of the

3 A Seminal publication within this framework is Abinales, *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the Formation of the Philippine Nation State*.

4 Arising from this SOAS Annual Philippine Studies Conference is the 2022 special issue on “Mindanao: Cartographies of History, Identity and Representation” of the *South East Asia Research* 30 no. 1. For the discussion on “Mindanao as a Core,” see Paredes, “Making Mindanao: Place-Making and People-Making in the Southern Philippines.”

5 For an overview on Jawi documents (from the Spanish and early US colonial period) in Philippine archives, see, for example, Donoso, “Islamic Manuscripts in the National Archive of the Philippines.” Translations of Jawi sources from the turn of the twentieth century can be found in Tan, *Surat Sug: The Letters of the Sulu Sultanate*, Vol. I and II. and Tan, *Surat Maguindanaon*.

colonizers versus the colonized. Neither the American actors nor the Philippine Muslims are presented as a homogenous group. *Civilizational Imperatives* tells the story of US military officials, settlers, teachers, missionaries, anthropologists, investors, and bureaucrats who all had the main objective to transform the Moros by “civilizing” them. However, their methods of application were manifold and often stood in great competition with each other. On the Muslim side, we encounter key figures of Maguindanao, Maranao, Tausūg, and Samal descent. The book illustrates how some Datus opted for strategic collaboration with the Americans, how others chose to resist, and how other individuals or entire families with diverse ethnocultural identities functioned as “hybridic interlocutors” (179). In this regard, Charbonneau paints a multi-perspective picture of the pushes and pulls of the colonial enterprise.

Civilizational Imperatives is a thoroughly researched book and is one of the most comprehensive studies of the US experience in the Islamic Philippines. Charbonneau has made a vital contribution to the understanding of US imperialism in a global context, foremost, for his analysis of the practices of empire. In this regard, the book encourages us to reflect on the flexibility and adaptability of governance strategies. It illustrates how abstract ideas were often translated differently or failed to be translated into everyday practices on the ground and thereby unveiling frictions within the empire.

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REVIEWER

Tamara Ann Tinner
Linnaeus University
tamaraann.tinner@lnu.se