

# philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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## Editor's Introduction

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# Editor's Introduction

The conference “Disasters in History: The Philippines in Comparative Perspective” was held on 24–25 October 2014, jointly organized by this journal and the Department of History, Ateneo de Manila University, in partnership with the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University. The keynote address that Greg Bankoff delivered in that conference is the lead article in this issue. The articles of Kerby Alvarez, Francis Gealogo, Kristian Karlo Saguin, and James Francis Warren are revised versions of papers presented at that conference. The photo essay of Reynaldo Lita on central Visayan churches damaged by the 15 October 2013 earthquake is also based on his conference presentation. Other manuscript submissions on related topics have made this special double issue possible.

Arguing against the dominant historiography of the Philippines that takes the boundaries of the nation-state as defining its limits, Bankoff argues in favor of a transnational history, specifically one attuned to the natural hazards that peoples of this archipelago confront daily and share with those living in other areas of the northwest Pacific cyclonic zone, the Western rim of the Ring of Fire, and the northern fringes of the Alpine–Himalayan Orogenic Belt.

In response to natural hazards colonial science flourished. Gealogo shows how the 1863 and 1880 earthquakes stimulated documentation, cataloging, and building regulations that historical seismologists and social historians can utilize to reconstruct the past. Alvarez situates the Observatorio Meteorológico de Manila, established in 1865, in the context of the Jesuits' passion for meteorology and the invention of practical instruments. He emphasizes the observatory's relevance to maritime trade and ties with Hong Kong and the engagement of a select group of Filipinos in scientific work—a bright spot amid Rizal's lament about scientific education in the colony. In this regard, Rizal and other *ilustrados* based in Spain bracketed aside natural hazards and disasters, romanticizing instead the climate of the homeland, as I argue in my article. Their anticolonial discursive strategy sought to reverse racial-geographic prejudice and assert an identity as a civilizable tropical people, while underscoring that Spanish colonial rule was a far worse disaster than those caused by nature.

Warren makes a simple but powerful point: typhoons do not affect all peoples and all areas equally. Patterns of death and destruction reveal the

impoverished as the most severely affected, the product of the country's political economy and spiraling population growth. Similarly, for Agustin Martin G. Rodriguez, the historically determined conditions in which the marginalized find themselves compel them to assess hazards differently from disaster experts and policy makers, who do not prioritize the poor's daily subsistence and the value they put on social relationships. The dominant rationality of disaster experts further marginalizes the poor through top-down methods that nullify the poor's knowledge and resourcefulness. Rodriguez thus calls for genuine discourse between experts and the poor. In a similar vein, Loh Kah Seng argues, based on three emergency situations in Southeast Asia, that community participation in responding to disasters is important, and it is further enhanced by the poor's willingness to accommodate external expertise. Still, he cautions that communities are not homogeneous, but rather are unequal, a fact that externally directed disaster responses may unwittingly exacerbate.

Social exclusion is acute in the face of state actions founded on modernism, which Saguin and Michael Pante elucidate in relation to the Marcos state. Saguin traces the introduction of aquaculture to "develop" Laguna de Bay in the late 1960s, with typhoons and floods proving intrinsic to the scheme from the outset. In time large pen owners, using technology adjustable to typhoons, edged out ordinary fisherfolk. Analogously, as Pante argues, although flooding in Manila and nearby areas seems intrinsic to the topography, state attempts to control floods reached their apogee under Marcos. Not only did the state embark on large infrastructural projects, but it also neutralized local governments by creating the Metro Manila Commission in 1975, with Imelda Marcos as governor. Flood control became the platform for political consolidation, slum dwellers along waterways bearing the brunt of state action.

Focusing on volcanic eruptions in the twentieth century, my article makes a case for seeing disasters as contingent events, with no predetermined outcome that might otherwise have been expected based on Bankoff's thesis on "cultures of disaster." In Pinatubo's case, the Aeta were key participants in disaster mitigation, despite their traditional beliefs. A complex set of actors played their respective parts in averting what could have been a colossal disaster.

In a concluding piece, members of the editorial team highlight key themes arising from the articles in this special double issue, which require a more extended discussion than what is possible in this brief introduction.

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