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Gerald R. Gems

Sport and the American Occupation of the Philippines: Bats, Balls, and Bayonets

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Book Reviews

GERALD R. GEMS

Sport and the American Occupation of the Philippines: Bats, Balls, and Bayonets

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. 203 pages.

How did sport fulfill American colonial aims during their occupation of the Philippines? Gerald Gems offers an alternative and unexplored perspective on this period of Philippine history. A professor of health and physical education at North Central College of Illinois and a sport historian with numerous published works on sport history and its value to society, Gems's field of expertise offers a unique insight. He combines primary and secondary sources to document how various colonial officials and personnel crafted sport and recreation policies and implemented these through their programs and projects. He offers this unique view while providing a general sociocultural, economic, and political history of the Philippines, thus providing the reader with the necessary context of American activities in the colony with respect to sport.

Using Social Darwinist ideas and other notions accepted and perpetuated then as legitimate knowledge in mainstream American society, Gems explains how these norms guided the actions of individuals who eventually played leading roles in the colonization of the Philippines. These included concepts like American exceptionalism, racial and cultural superiority, as well as the belief that people could best imbibe values through play. As such, he emphasizes the narratives of those who had a hand in the colonization of

the Philippines (e.g., Theodore Roosevelt, Leonard Wood, Bishop Charles Brent, and Elwood Brown) to relate how sports served as vehicles to shape the hearts and minds of Filipinos under American tutelage. These accounts of those who were at the forefront of the American colonization and pacification of the Philippines serve to remind us of how ideas potentially could lead to consequences on societies when persons who adhere to such thinking gain the power and authority to implement their beliefs.

In this respect, seemingly benign and mundane activities like sport may serve as a form of “soft power.” It becomes an outwardly innocuous tool for colonization and the transference of American values on the colonized people. From chapters 3 to 8, the book transforms into a virtual primer on the history of American occupation in the Philippines, when the US was then only an emerging world power. Although the details provided in these six chapters may be basic, they provide the essential socioeconomic, religious, and political backdrop for the programs, activities, and motivations of various colonial interests in promoting sport. For instance, American soldiers introduced boxing and wrestling to promote masculinity and build up character as well as martial spirit among Filipino males. They also implemented sports competitions that pitted Filipinos of different religious and ethnolinguistic affiliations against each other. Politicians, aided by other interest groups, used regional sporting events and rivalries against other Asian nations to turn other peoples, rather than Americans, as the foil to the Filipinos’ pent-up nationalism. For religious groups, they believed that sports helped curb what they perceived to be the gambling excesses of the local population. Americans also capitalized on the popularity of sport and used it to create a market for their manufactured goods (130), while cultivating among Filipinos the capitalist values of competition, fair play, and teamwork, among others (5, 96, 116, 129, 137). This newfound inclination toward sport among Filipinos, in turn, ensured that their businesses would have a steady supply of strong, healthy, and controllable laborers (108, 137). Moreover, authorities developed a detailed physical education curriculum (133) and sports organizational infrastructure (138) so that young Filipinos could better imbibe American values and culture (128–29), all while stimulating greater contact and understanding (132).

Readers may initially regard Gems’s work as a nod to “big man history,” with its focus on the personal experiences of individuals that influenced their future actions. Yet one of the book’s strengths, aside from providing an

alternative lens to appreciate this particular period in Philippine history, is to highlight the reality that the relationship between a hegemonic colonizer and colonized people is not always a one-way street. Resonating with the arguments of postcolonial researchers who consider the space occupied by the colonizer and conquered people as a “contact zone,” the Americans’ then Filipino subjects embraced the sports introduced to them but attuned these to their own culture without necessarily changing their values (i.e., collectivism and continued adherence to cockfighting and games of chance). There were cases in which Filipinos used sports against their colonial minders by engaging them in what Gems calls “surrogate warfare.” Examples of such included competitions in baseball and volleyball, as well as basketball contests between the colonizers and colonized that challenged the Americans’ notions of racial superiority while buttressing the Filipinos’ suppressed nationalist feelings (118).

Interesting examples of reversals by Filipinos include accounts of how the absence of a three-hit rule in volleyball allowed Filipino employees to defeat their American employers in a game (34) and how a Filipino teacher in Rizal province used baseball as a means to beat several American teams in competitions (134). Also noteworthy is Gems’s account of how, instead of veering Filipinos away from cockfighting, American soldiers were the ones who became addicted to what the colonial authorities considered more of a vice than a sport, as reflected in their development of a new fighting cock, the Texas (90). Gems noted the persistence of cockfighting as a form of gambling and pastime among Filipinos as a reflection of local resistance against American efforts to pry the former from what they considered part of their heritage (146). Moreover, the author asserts that whatever gains American colonizers accrued through sport as a means of winning over the Filipinos, particularly in the area of religious conversion, ended up blunted by racist and segregationist attitudes of its American proponents toward the native population (91, 99, 131).

Gems’s *Bats, Balls, and Bayonets* is a unique addition to the literature on the American colonial period in the Philippines, but the work is not without its shortcomings. Despite being a sports historian, Gems did not even bother to define what sport meant and how it was different from play, games, and other types of entertainment. While teachers and students of history would find it convenient that the book’s chapters could be read independently of each other, there is a nagging tendency for particular details to be discussed

repeatedly throughout the work. Assertions of the author, such as the detailed atrocities of the American military, the cooperative white-washing of such brutalities, how the majority of Filipinos failed to benefit from the colonial educational system, and the rather conflicted manner by which some interest groups pursued colonization, are quite informative even for those already familiar with Philippine history. Unfortunately, unlike what its title suggests, details regarding how these different groups use sport are too rare and seem drowned by other information.

What could also be bothersome are some of Gems's assertions, particularly in his last two chapters on sport and the legacy of the American occupation. There are typographical errors in his work that may reflect his unfamiliarity with Philippine society. Notable institutions such as the University of Santo Tomas (UST) and the religious group Iglesia ni Cristo are misspelled (i.e., Santo Thomas, Iglessia ng Kristo) (162, 173), while former Pres. Joseph Ejercito Estrada's election as mayor of Manila was advanced by a century to 1913 instead of 2013 (172).

There is no disputing the influence of the US on nearly all aspects of Filipino life. Yet Gems tends to exaggerate his claims when the context of his analysis goes beyond the American colonial era, the actual period of his study. At times, he may be guilty of hasty generalizations or not backing up his statements. Particularly controversial is his assertion that basketball has become a source of unity for a country "always in constant threat of disintegration" (162) and that the sport has become a "second religion" among Filipinos (164). Questionable, too, is his contention that the country's current physical education system reflects the strong legacy of the American occupation (177). Also difficult to understand is his explanation that a past decision of UST's leadership to scrap its football program reflected a culture of winning that Filipinos imbibed during the American occupation (162).

Even more simplistic are his assertions that the Filipino people have a conflicted and hybridized national identity that is part American and Filipino. To emphasize American influence in the Philippines, he added the rags-to-riches story of boxer-turned-politician Manny Pacquiao in his conclusion to strengthen the claim of the American Dream on the Filipino people and how sportsmen such as Pacquiao serve to temporarily unite the country.

Despite its limitations, *Bats, Balls, and Bayonets* offers a new way of understanding our American colonial past; how soft power, by way of sport,

was employed to fulfill colonial aims; and how Filipinos were, in a way, able to accept or reject such introductions by their colonizers. As such, students, academics, and others interested in Philippine history, Philippine studies, other social science disciplines (e.g., human geography), and individuals from the public administration and sports science disciplines will find the work informative, useful, and entertaining.

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MARIA CHRISTINE MUYCO

Síbod: Ideology and Expressivity in Binanog Dance, Music, and Folkways of the Panay Bukidnon

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016. 243 pages.

Dr. Maria Christine Muyco, a faculty member in the College of Music at the University of the Philippines and highly accomplished composer, turns her scholarly attention to the Panay Bukidnon in *Síbod: Ideology and Expressivity in Binanog Dance, Music, and Folkways of the Panay Bukidnon*. Her commitment to the study of this group extends beyond this monograph to include, among other things, a CD recording, *Tayuyon Music of the Panay Bukidnon* (2009); a documentary film entitled "Ga-Sibud Dai a!": *Music, Dance, and Society in Highland Panay, Philippines*; and cultural advocacy through her nongovernment organization Balay Patawili.

Living in the highlands of Panay island, the Panay Bukidnon (also Suludnon) are commonly highlighted as the only indigenous people of that area, a result of geographical remoteness from centuries of Spanish and US colonization and a classification based on notions of culture rather than ancestry. Despite their seeming isolation, however, exposure to media, the regularity of movement to buy and sell goods with lowlanders, and migration for work have contributed to a continuing cultural vibrancy in which some traditions persist with salience and others fall into disuse. For