

philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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Re-imagining Australia: Voices of Indigenous Australians of Filipino Descent

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Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints
vol. 65 no. 3 (2017): 411–14

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Re-imagining Australia: Voices of Indigenous Australians of Filipino Descent

Southport, Queensland: Keeaira Press, 2016. 160 pages.

That native males from the Philippines, then known in the Anglophone world as Manilamen, migrated to tropical Australia during the second half of the nineteenth century to work primarily in the pearl-shell industry is known in the literature. That some of them married indigenous women is also known. But what happened to them subsequently is largely unknown. For the first time the narratives of descendants of the Manilamen who remained there after the imposition of migration restrictions in 1901, which commenced the White Australia policy, are told in this volume.

The initiator of this oral history project is Filipina Deborah Ruiz Wall, who moved to Australia in 1974, together with her husband and first child, after a year's work in Papua New Guinea. In Sydney she joined the staff of the New South Wales Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system, teaching Communication and Social Sciences until 2004, while becoming active in assisting migrants access government services and deal with racism. In 2004 she received the Order of Australia Medal (OAM) in recognition of her contributions to social justice, reconciliation, and multiculturalism. Together with a small team of collaborators, she recorded the stories of Indigenous Australians of Filipino descent in Broome, Western Australia, in 2008 and 2015 and on Hammond Island, Thursday Island, and Horn Island in the Torres Strait in 2015. The narratives comprise the bulk of this book, which is meant for a general, rather than an academic, readership. The book is divided into three parts: Part 1, Filipino Descendants Speak; Part 2, Salient Themes; and Part 3, History of Filipino Pearl Divers in Torres Strait and Broome.

Part 1 includes nine sets of narratives from Broome and another nine from the Torres Strait. Accompanied by several photographs, some from personal collections, the narratives are rich in detail, but have a raw quality and do not follow a standard format. They pertain mainly to the informants' lives. As in the Philippines, the narrators have strong recollections of their parents and grandparents but not of their great grandparents, the generation of their Manilamen ancestors. But the narratives contain snippets of the lives of Manilamen who came from different parts of the Philippines, which offer a precious glimpse of the past.

In part 2 the author provides an abbreviated analysis of these narratives, which highlight three themes. The first theme revolves around the timing of the Manilamen's application for naturalization. Before Federation a number of Manilamen were naturalized, which settled their own legal status in later years as well as those of their descendants; after Federation legal obstacles prevented naturalization, reducing these Manilamen to the status of aliens and subjecting them and their descendants to great difficulties in obtaining citizenship rights. The book's conclusion reiterates that naturalization became "emblematic of inclusion or exclusion" within Australia as an "emerging nation state" (147). Nevertheless, Manilamen as aliens were able to remain in Australia, work, raise families, and be active in community affairs. Why they were not deported is not explained.

The second theme emphasizes that "the Filipino descendants considered that their forebears helped build the social and economic foundations of Broome, Horn Island, Hammond Island, and Thursday Island communities. There are numerous stories [in the informants' narratives] of the rich social and family life of the Filipinos, the music, song and laughter in spite of the presence of pain in their lives" (129). For instance, Filomeno Rodriguez, who arrived on Thursday Island in the 1880s, moved to Western Australia, where he became wealthy after he stumbled upon an area in Cossack that teemed with mother-of-pearl oysters and large pearl shells (30). In 1890 he married a woman of Cornish origin, the only non-indigenous wife in this collection of stories (32). He later moved to Broome, where he built a hotel in the late 1890s, and in the early 1900s became a local councilor (30–31).

The third theme focuses on what it means for the narrators to identify themselves as Indigenous Australians of part-Filipino ancestry. This awareness is best expressed by Miguel Castillon's statement, "all of us are very mixed now but we still have that connection to the Philippines" (37). As Lilian Elarde Majid recalls, "My father always spoke to us about our Filipino side of the heritage" (78). Being Filipino is recognized through "cultural markers such as Filipino food, dance, and music that were passed on to them by their elders" (131). Rice consumption is an important marker because, as Broome's Anthony Ozies puts it, "Most of the people here eat rice. They all eat rice. They'd rather eat rice than bread. 'Cause, they, the Filipinos brought it here in the early days — rice" (61–62). The Manilamen's food practices influenced the wider society such that, as Peter Sabatino says, "*dinuguan* and *adobo* had been adopted by the whole Torres Strait but they don't know that it's Filipino

in origin” (76–77). The cultural markers, as pointed out in the conclusion, also include “susceptibility to a volatile temper”—as former nun Mary-Rose Hampson says, “I was always reminded with, ‘You’re very stubborn’. And I would think, ‘That’s the Filipino in me’” (83)—as well as traits such as “industriousness and resilience, close family ties, and deep spiritual beliefs” (147). Not mentioned as a cultural marker are the Philippine surnames the informants in this study bear. In fact, for some these names strongly indicate a sense of identity. As Mary Manolis points out, “The different families who went to school—the Corpuses, Tolentinos, Ybascos, Santiagos, Puertollanos, you know—Filipinos, their fathers and grandfathers came from that country, lived here in Broome all their lives” (49).

Moreover, the conclusion points out that, although the narrators identify as Indigenous Australians, “in remote regions of Australia, the sense of belonging was likely to be localized,” such as being a “Torres Strait Islander” first before being Australian or Indigenous Australian (147–48)—an observation that resonates with the oft-mentioned regionalism in the Philippines. The combination of a local regional identity and a transnational affinity—Torres Strait Islander of Filipino ancestry—can feel more paramount than being Indigenous Australian. Although not discussed in the book, it is interesting that, although their Manilamen forebears left the Philippines in the late nineteenth century before the current meaning of “Filipino” had been well established, their descendants apparently have had no difficulty associating themselves with the identifying label “Filipino.”

Part 3, written by Christine Choo and the main author, reviews the history of “Filipino pearl divers” in Torres Strait and Broome. It synthesizes the existing literature on the migration of Manilamen to Australia, but also embellishes the historical overview with locally specific details. The segment on Broome includes a table listing thirteen Manilamen with the year of arrival (all before 1899) and their occupation in the early 1900s and 1910s (138). Of these thirteen, six are related to the narratives presented in this book. Interestingly, despite the proscription of social and sexual contact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, this overview confirms what the reader would have encountered in the narratives in part 1: that Manilamen socialized and intermarried with Aboriginal Australian women. However, not explored is the question of the extent to which the Manilamen were admitted into Aboriginal communities. Highly suggestive is Evelyn Masuda’s recollection of her childhood in Broome: “I can’t remember mixing

with any other people, only just the Filipino people, and not even the white people. We never mixed with them” (53). Indeed, the narratives suggest that the Manilamen in Broome and Torres Strait formed an intimate network of ties, which expanded as later generations arose. This network could have served as some sort of enclave, but it is not clear from the discussion. Another persistent thread in the narratives, which the historical overview in part 3 underscores, pertains to the Manilamen’s strong devotion to Catholicism, a religious affiliation to which most of their descendants have adhered. How different the Manilamen’s Catholic faith from that of other Indigenous Australians is, however, not explored.

Further analysis of the stories in part 1 of this book could have been pursued, especially given regional and familial variations, but their publication opens up multiple possibilities for future research and analysis. Thus the fact that these stories have been published is itself a milestone. This book is an important contribution to the literature on the history of Filipino global migrations as well as the literature on Aboriginal history and Australian multiculturalism. As the author states, the “little known personal stories of Manilamen descendants” found in this book illumine the historical connections between the peoples of two countries and how the Philippine migrants and their descendants “have enriched the life of our nation” (148), that is, of Australia.

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