

# philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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**Hannah C. M. Bulloch's**

*In Pursuit of Progress: Narratives of Development on a Philippine Island*

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# Book Reviews

HANNAH C. M. BULLOCH

## **In Pursuit of Progress: Narratives of Development on a Philippine Island**

University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 228 pages.

Development is customarily depicted and endorsed as an antidote to backwardness, irrationality, and impoverishment. From election campaign speeches and policy debates to community projects and product endorsements, the proclivity to portray development as an indicator of advancement and hence of something to be desired and pursued remains strong. In social science research, literature inquiring into the many forms and aspects of development, though critical at times, have likewise maintained a favorable rhetoric. Left largely unexplored are local understandings of development and how these understandings reproduce, interrogate, and challenge established interpretations of progress and modernity. By the same token, how such notions inform everyday activities and aspirations of marginalized groups merits further exploration.

Anthropological studies address this inadequacy by highlighting the contentious nature of development. These works show that, although dominant narratives persist, alternative discourses are also pervasive, albeit rarely articulated. More importantly, anthropological inquiry into development contends that experiences and imaginings of progress and modernization from the peripheries warrant discussion. One such work is *In Pursuit of Progress: Narratives of Development on a Philippine Island* by

anthropologist and Australian National University research fellow Hannah Bulloch. Drawing from a wealth of ethnographic data, the book casts a critical gaze on the everyday activities and aspirations of groups at the margins of global modernity. It focuses on local understandings of development on the central Philippine island of Siquijor and describes how the Siquijodnon reread and reshape multiple notions of progress as they continue to construct “meanings, myths, performances and practices” (2). As put forth in chapter 1, the book reminds readers at the outset that “[d]evelopment is a global project,” an undertaking shared by multiple stakeholders and not simply a brainchild of North American and Western European pundits and policymakers (1).

The book deserves commendation for offering a rich account of the Siquijodnon’s appropriation, reworking, and use of development discourses in different contexts to advance personal goals—an apparent exercise of agency. Equally important is its recognition that socioeconomic status, a key indicator of difference, and the ideas and practices of development are intertwined, an explanation as to why contending discourses of progress and competing notions of how social relationships should be ordered are prevalent. Tension, adds the author, surfaces not only because of conflicting interpretations of development and the good life; it is likewise felt by Siquijor locals as personal ambivalence because living the good life and the notion of leading a simple life (*ang simpul nga kinabuhi*) intersect. Hence, “prioritiz[ing] an austere lifestyle over mass consumption . . . and making money” tempers aspirations to “get ahead” and live luxuriously (15).

Illustrating the complexity of representations of development, the author describes in chapters 2 and 3 how the Siquijodnon define prosperity and poverty through *kalamboan*, literally meaning flourishing but often translated as “development,” a metaphor of progress that distinguishes the haves from the have-nots. Incorporated into this metaphor are material symbols (e.g., type of housing and food) and intangibles (e.g., education and migration) that help local residents of the island operationalize otherwise abstract conceptualizations of affluence and scarcity. Kalamboan likewise facilitates the pinpointing of one’s own and others’ socioeconomic status in Siquijor society, a mechanism that clarifies (and reifies) distinctions based on these operational definitions. The author extends her inquiry into diverse and often conflicting conceptualizations of modernity in chapter 4. She discusses how the Siquijodnon imagine global development hierarchies

by positioning themselves as inferior to the more affluent and purportedly cosmopolitan *Amerikanos*, a conspicuous privileging and idealization of “things Western” from skin color to accent (21).

Knowledge, or “affiliation to certain ‘sets’ of beliefs,” reproduces distinctions between neighbors and kin further (115). The ability to use certain types of knowledge, notes the author in chapter 5, grants the Siquijodnon greater flexibility to negotiate their perceived position in the social hierarchy and to refashion themselves according to the context. The acquisition of cultural capital is given a high premium as it promises social mobility and facilitates assimilation into a supposedly more sophisticated and cosmopolitan ambit in contrast to those deprived of this opportunity. In a similar vein, sustained infrastructural development that connects the Siquijodnon to the “outside world,” a local reference to the “modern,” is as much an indicator of “good governance” (ch. 6) as the promotion of cooperation, which likewise is deemed a catalyst for progress (ch. 8). These attributes are juxtaposed against informal, albeit rampant, practices of corruption, opportunistic deal brokering, nepotism, and clientelist politics that undermine the implementation of projects like the Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan (roughly, “Unity against Poverty”)-Comprehensive Integrated Delivery of Social Services (KALAHI-CIDSS) Project, a World Bank-engineered initiative that the Department of Social Welfare and Development implements to encourage people’s participation in community-level governance (ch. 7). These entrenched practices are viewed more broadly as inimical to development.

Anthropologists, geographers, sociologists, and development studies scholars will, without a doubt, welcome this book. It is, after all, a rigorously researched and thought-provoking ethnography that offers fresh insight into the ideas and experiences of the Siquijodnon as practitioners and beneficiaries of development. Focusing on the everyday activities of Siquijor locals—most notably, how they “receive, interpret, rescript, and deploy discourses of development”—also affords readers a nuanced depiction of life on the island as vibrant, debunking the myopic depiction of the Siquijodnon as mere victims of supposedly barbaric customs (11).

However, the book has several weaknesses. First, because Bulloch’s work intends to showcase the diversity of development perspectives, it would have benefited further from a comparative ethnography of multiple localities. By focusing solely on how development is experienced, made sense of, and lived

in Siquijor, experiences and narratives of progress from other Philippine provinces, municipalities, or communities are left unexplored. A comparison of two or three cases, in other words, would have offered a broader nuancing of local interpretations of development and an extensive documentation of tensions borne of competing discourses and narratives.

Second, concepts like “cosmopolitanism” and “good governance” are explored yet cursorily interrogated. The book, for instance, makes no attempt to deconstruct these concepts as diligently as it does notions of development through the idea of *kalamboan*. Third, the outright vilification of practices such as clientelism and corruption as “anti-development” is understandable but problematic. Lost in the process is the opportunity to further investigate how these practices are understood and experienced on the ground, a prospect that may potentially generate a plurality of meanings that run counter to popular conceptualizations. Fourth, the state’s role in promoting a particular narrative of development begs further elucidation. For instance, how it perpetuates dominant paradigms of development through the deployment of various ideological state apparatuses and how these are challenged warrant critical consideration. Finally, and in relation to the fourth, how pursuits of progress reproduce structural inequalities and injustices (i.e., disparities in terms of income, status, power, gender, and so on) as revealed by ethnographic data deserves a more lucid theorization than what is laid out in the book.

These shortcomings do not erode the book’s significance. Bulloch’s work is a beneficial addition to the established scholarship on subaltern studies. It showcases in a clear and insightful manner the multiple ways the Siquijodnon experience and make sense of development. It sheds light on how a group whose perspectives are rarely articulated skillfully wields human agency to construct popular yet conflicting notions of progress and modernity; the book offers fresh insight into the activities and aspirations of these individuals. It succeeds in highlighting multiple discourses of development at the local level and in exploring how the peripheries understand prosperity and poverty, interrogate enduring notions of progress and modernity, and advance personal understandings of development.

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