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**Fine Description: Ethnographic and Linguistic Essays  
by Harold C. Conklin**

**Editors: Joel Kuipers and Ray McDermott**

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# Book Reviews

HAROLD C. CONKLIN

JOEL KUIPERS AND RAY MCDERMOTT, EDS.

## **Fine Description: Ethnographic and Linguistic Essays**

New Haven, CT: Monograph 56, Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 2007. 511 pages.

Harold Conklin's contribution to Philippine ethnography is well-known and highly respected. *Fine Description* draws together a selection of his academic publications, introducing to readers familiar with his *Ethnographic Atlas of Ifugao: A Study of Environment, Culture and Society in Northern Luzon* (1980) a wider appreciation of his research in the Philippines.

The opening essay, Charles Frake's "Fine Description" (first published in 1991), and the introduction written by Joel Kuipers and Ray McDermott situate Conklin's research methods within wider debates on the praxis of ethnographic fieldwork. The works selected chart Conklin's academic career: eighteen essays written between 1949 and 1998, two chapters from his dissertation (1954), and selected maps from the *Ethnographic Atlas of the Ifugao* (1980). A brief autobiography, "The Early Years," and a comprehensive bibliography of his works complete the book.

The book's format seeks to adhere to Conklin's work, identifying eight fields to which he has made a significant contribution: fieldwork, ethnographic knowledge, lexicography, color categorization, the world of plants, modes of communication, orientation, and agriculture. Brief commentaries (of somewhat uneven quality) preface each of the fields: "On Paying Attention" by Clifford Geertz, "Ethnographic Analysis" by Myrdene Anderson,

“Systematic Analysis” by Harold Scheffler, “Conklin on Color” by Charles O. Frake, “Conklin’s Ethnobiological Contribution” by Eugene Hunn, “The Ethnography of Speaking and Reading” by Dell Hymes, “The Quest for Meaning: Some Orientations” by Nicole Revel, and “Kinds of Fields” by Michael Dove.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the practices and ethics of ethnographic fieldwork were the subject of extensive critique within the discipline. Conklin’s ethnographic writings were not exempt from such critiques. Described as ahistorical and lacking political contextualization, his research was nevertheless praised by Renato Rosaldo in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (1989) for its high ethical and scientific standards. Frake directly engages with these debates. While acknowledging that Conklin’s ethnography does not lie within the trajectory of the interpretive literary approach and postmodernism, he contends that Conklin’s writings exemplify an appreciation of ethnographic research grounded on respect, rigor, and responsibility. Frake argues that ethnography seeks a truth, to discover something true about the world of human lives out there (xvi). Works such as “Maling, a Hanunóo Girl” (1960), “A Day in Parina” (1960), and “Ethnography” (1968) illustrate Conklin’s way of doing ethnography as “fine description.” It is fine “both in the sense of ‘fine detail’ and ‘fine art.’ It is meticulous in construction but it is also grand in design” (x).

Building on Frake’s commentary, Kuipers and McDermott consider that the goal for ethnography is “to be true to the phenomena under analysis,” stating that “human phenomena are more complex than any description, can deliver easily” (7). They offer five principles of ethnographic description which they found in Conklin’s work: a focus on activities as they are seen, interpreted, and represented by participants; attention to language behavior; the recognition that activities should be understood as both structured and emergent, ordered both by convention and the fleeting particulars of the moment; the deployment of an aesthetic sensibility in order to capture activities in situ; and an adherence to principled, disciplined, and responsible ways of doing ethnography, despite the political difficulties involved in representing the everyday lives of others.

This appreciation of ethnographic principles, write Kuipers and McDermott, resulted from Conklin’s “desire to recover, respect and preserve knowledge” (2). What Conklin offered was “exquisite descriptions of the world,” while giving “full attention to the ingenuity and complexity [that ways of life] demand” (3).

For Dove, Conklin’s commitment to the practice of ethnography reveals a moral commitment as well. In his commentary “Kinds of Fields,” Dove notes that Conklin’s moral commitment is demonstrated by his representing the lives of his informants as faithfully as possible. Critical of the postmodern turn, Dove comments that “Conklin’s descent into detail is . . . his way of going into it” (422). Aware of the counter critiques leveled at the apolitical nature of research within the academy and of the ways by which power may be exercised through misrepresentation, Dove suggests that Conklin’s approach may in fact “point the way toward the most truly radical ethnography of all” (422).

For specialists of Philippine studies as well as researchers interested in specific ethnographic fields, *Fine Description* offers many rewarding insights. Of note are the following articles: “Bamboo Literacy on Mindoro” (1949), “Excerpts from ‘The Relation of Hanunóo Culture to the Plant World’” (1954), “Hanunóo Color Categories” (1955), “Betel Chewing among the Hanunóo” (1958), “Maling, a Hanunóo Girl” (1960), “Ethnogenealogical Method” (1964), “Ethnographic Research in Ifugao” (1974), and “Doctrina Christiana, en lengua española y tagala, Manila, 1593” (1991).

Editorial care has ensured that the design and layout of the book as well as the illustrations and photographs reproduced are of a high standard, although I note that Prof. José Maceda’s contribution, “The Music,” is not acknowledged as being part of the *Hanunóo Music from the Philippines* (1955). The inclusion of political and geographic maps dating from 1946 onward (around the commencement of Conklin’s ethnographic research) would also have been helpful to readers not familiar with the Philippines.

Despite the comprehensiveness of the fields covered in *Fine Description* there remain a number of omissions. Firstly, while the inclusion of “The Early Years” is much appreciated, it is regretful that Conklin’s personal and professional relationships with North American-educated and disciplinary-based anthropologists who had undertaken ethnographic research during American colonial rule and/or immediately after the ending of American colonial rule were not discussed in more depth. Such insights would have contributed to a deeper understanding of the development and tensions within anthropology in the United States during this era, as well as the wider geopolitics of disciplinary knowledge-production between the Philippines and the United States.

Secondly, a paper linking the disciplinary transitions within anthropology with the production and dissemination of anthropological knowledge via

the academic institutions where Conklin worked, namely, Columbia University and Yale University, would have been instructive. Indeed, the longevity of Conklin's academic career at these institutions and the cultural memory associated with these institutions may have generated a different quality of engagement with Conklin's ethnographic approach, one marked by cooperation rather than competition. Glimpses of this possibility can be seen in Kuipers and McDermott's description of Conklin's teaching methods.

Finally, as many of the themes addressed by Conklin in this book have been the subject of continuing ethnographic and linguistic research, and given the sociocultural transitions and environmental stresses that face many communities in the Philippines today, including the Hanunóo and the Ifugao, it would have been both timely and appropriate for Conklin's work to be the subject of a contemporary critique or retrospective commentary on current challenges in undertaking ethnographic research in the Philippines.

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MARÍA DOLORES ELIZALDE PÉREZ-GRUESO, ED.

## **Repensar Filipinas: Política, Identidad y Religión en la Construcción de la Nación Filipina**

Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2009. 293 pages.

In 1898 Spain lost her last three bastions of a great empire: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. The quick capitulation of the Spanish army in the Philippines engendered a flood of opinions as to who or what was to be blamed for the defeat. Was it administrative immorality, the predominance of militarism, the implantation of the Penal Code, the Maura Law, or the behavior of the religious orders? The answer or answers depended on who was explaining the story. Whatever the root cause, the hard fact to be swallowed was that Spain had lost the Philippines in a war with the Americans. The political debate in Spain did not end in 1898. The split opened up in 1898 between Liberal and Conservative politicians was inexorably deep. In 1904 the politicians continued to insist that the Spanish had failed to implement suitable reforms to retain the archipelago. After this heated debate of that year, the Philippines started to disappear from the Spanish imaginary.

Scholars and politicians were no longer interested in the archipelago. When in the 1950s some Spanish scholars revisited the Philippines as an area of study, they started to do so from the colonizers' point of view, ignoring the Other as part and parcel of the story. Those scholars explained the history of the conquest and the evangelizing mission of the friars.

Fortunately, from the 1980s onward, some Spanish scholars, interacting with Filipino scholars, have transcended these stories and have looked at Philippine history from both sides. Actually *Repensar Filipinas: Política, Identidad y Religión en la Construcción de la Nación Filipina* (Rethinking the Philippines: Policy, Identity and Religion in the Making of the Filipino Nation) is a clear example of Spanish-Filipino interaction. This book is the result of the meeting of the Tribuna Hispano-Filipina, which took place in Madrid in 2007. This meeting gathered prestigious Filipino and Spanish scholars. They discussed the meaning of the archipelago in the Spanish context; the construction of Filipino politics; the meaning of becoming Filipino, that is, Filipino identity; and the imprint of the church and religious orders on Filipino society.

The book is divided into four parts. The first is entitled "Gobernabilidad y economía en las Filipinas españolas." This topic is discussed by María Dolores Elizalde Pérez-Grueso and Luis Alonso. The second is titled "La forja de la vida política filipina" analyzed by Josep M. Fradera and Xavier Huetz de Lemp. The third part is on "La definición de una identidad Filipina." Fernando Zialcita and Vicente L. Rafael raise this subject. The fourth part, "El papel de la Iglesia en la sociedad Filipina," is discussed by John D. Blanco and Josep M. Delgado. Fr. José S. Arcilla, S.J., writes the conclusion.

The introduction written by Elizalde, titled "Estudios para un mejor conocimiento de las relaciones entre España y Filipinas," examines the state of the question of Spanish and Filipino historiography. She provides the Spanish interpretation of the Philippines after the loss of the archipelago. For many decades, the religious orders were the only ones who wrote the history of the Philippines. Their objective was to analyze what different congregations had done in the archipelago. No doubt, the religious orders' analyses are important contributions because they provide much information, but they only raise themes related to their evangelizing campaign. However, as mentioned, in the last twenty years a group of scholars started to explore Philippine history from new approaches, which compared the Spanish