

# philippine studies

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

---

**People of the Middle Ground: A Century of Conflict and  
Accommodation in Central Mindanao, 1880s–1980s  
by Ronald K. Edgerton**

Review Author: Patricia Irene Dacudao

*Philippine Studies* vol. 57 no. 4 (2009): 581–585

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>

rule in the islands, and the new public cultures developing at this time in the Philippines. Proceeding along these two lines, Blanco first examines social and political attempts to reconcile the emergence of a constitutional government in Spain with the conditions afforded by the Special Laws in the archipelago, in order to later examine the intersection of colonial aesthetics with such an ambiguous political culture. While at times Blanco's dense prose clouds the connections between these political and cultural productions, his overall argument is most clearly substantiated when he carries out detailed readings of primary "texts." Particularly successful is the introductory analysis of José Honorato Lozano's *Letras y figuras* that stresses the duplicity of these paintings. By noting that these artworks both suppress the agency of native ideas and entrepreneurship and give rise to it, Blanco sets the stage for a recurring theme of his study—how the oscillation between the grip of Spanish rule and threats to this very power produced widespread social and cultural instability in the nineteenth-century Philippines.

Blanco looks to all aspects of colonial Philippine society to understand how exceptional rule could have held for so many decades and yet still led to the dismantling of the modern colonial project at the end of the century. In this regard, two chapters are particularly provocative. "Special Laws and States of Exception" shows how the state attempted to absorb the power of the religious orders into the colonial bureaucracy in this era by shifting administrative roles to native secular priests. Blanco goes beyond merely demonstrating how such attempts failed; he considers how the debate surrounding the condition of religious authority in the Philippines became a foundational element of exceptional rule in the colony. The chapter "Gothic" is likewise suggestive in its discussion of how the invocation of historical discourse served to question "colonial modernity" in the late-nineteenth century. The chapter examines the ways in which artists and authors hollowed out traditional narrations of conquest to give new voice to native desires that went well beyond simple consent to colonial rule, and thus began to herald a distinct future for the Philippines.

*Frontier Constitutions* draws from an incredibly broad range of theoretical readings, from Kant to Marx, Foucault, Lucács, Fradera, and Eagleton. Blanco deftly balances the insights of these philosophers and cultural critics with his own nuanced readings of Tagalog and Spanish texts as diverse as Mas's *Informe secreto*, Casademunt's "Agapito Macapingan," and Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*. While this study offers a detailed roadmap of the political and cultural impasses

affecting the archipelago during late colonial rule, one wishes Blanco's epilogue had done more than connect the Philippines's moment of decadent colonialism to broader questions of contemporary imperialism in the U.S., Iraq, and elsewhere. Specifically, I was left wondering about the connections between this period in Philippine history and the nation's postcolonial era. Do, for example, the cultural armature that resulted from the Special Laws, the backhanded invocation of native consent, and the processes of historical disavowal and reinvention at the end of the nineteenth century continue to speak to the present condition of Philippine society?

This monograph will clearly interest scholars of Philippine culture and history, as well as those interested in the colonial era in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, Hispanists in general, and specialists in Latin America colonial studies particularly, will likewise find numerous contacts with their own fields of study. One of the greatest contributions of *Frontier Constitutions* is that it will raise questions for scholars working in the field of colonial studies, specifically those focused on the late Spanish empire. Was the struggle for interpretive control of the meaning of colonial modernity as heated in Puerto Rico and Cuba, and did it give rise in those colonies to an atomization of national interests, as was the case in the Philippines? What results from the nineteenth-century transformation of Spain from a unifying seat of Christendom to a mere nation? Blanco's study suggests that frontier sites of analysis reveal far more about the indefinable nature of colonialism in this era and the cultural processes of nation formation than the empire at its core.

**Leigh Mercer**

Division of Spanish and Portuguese Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences, University of Washington  
<lmercer@u.washington.edu>

RONALD K. EDGERTON

### **People of the Middle Ground: A Century of Conflict and Accommodation in Central Mindanao, 1880s–1980s**

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008. 439 pages.

As one colonial official almost a hundred years ago mused, "Nowhere else as here [in Bukidnon] does the Philippines seize upon one's imagination" (16). Edgerton's history of Bukidnon, with its extensive research, clear style, and

straightforward organization, manages to demystify this highland province yet still imbue it with the aura of the frontier where anything can and did happen.

A welcome addition to Mindanao research, this book is a testament to Edgerton's long-time affection for and understanding of the peoples of Bukidnon. Both sweeping and detailed, scholarly and personal, the book constantly emphasizes the Bukidnon's negotiating their middle ground over the last century.

Chapter 1 describes the landscape—both mountainous and flat—and the Bukidnon themselves (consisting of Bukidnon and Manobo peoples) through a survey of their narrative poems. Their closely related stories of acceptance and rejection sing of their varied responses to Spaniards, the Bisayan, and Muslims. But, in the end, it was fidelity to ancient beliefs that gained for their mythical hero Agyu divine vindication. Chapter 2 delves into the decentralized social structure of these peoples who moved to the highlands to escape from the Moslem and Hispanic inroads in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hierarchy consisted of regional datus holding influence over areas of settlement. Further down, on the local level, lower datus held sway over day-to-day affairs in a *tulugan* (longhouse). Any adult male could become a datu if he displayed qualities such as *pangalawat* (generosity), *paghusay* (dispute-mediation skills), and *pamuhat* (harmonious relationship with humans and the spirit world).

Chapter 3 discusses the Spanish economic and religious incursions, which the Bukidnon “neither wholeheartedly welcomed nor adamantly rejected” (52). Through creative accommodation, the adoption of new practices if these were seen to benefit their lives, they went back and forth between the hispanized *reducciones* and their old *tulugan*, and took on Christian names, Spanish titles, and Catholic sacraments, while continuing to use their old names, respect their datus, and observe tribal ceremonies. Caught in the middle of the Moro-Christian war, the Bukidnon initially tried to extricate themselves from fighting for the Jesuits, but, after experiencing terror from the “moros,” they came to rely more and more on Spanish protection and accepted the Catholic faith by the 1890s. However, when the revolution came, the people abandoned their *reducciones* and went back to the mountains.

How the externally generated revolution and the Philippine-American war wrecked havoc upon the Bukidnon is tackled in Chapter 4. The revolution brought disorder and disease, while the war drew revolutionaries from

Misamis to the rugged terrain of Bukidnon to fight the advancing American army. Again the Bukidnon were caught in a war they did not support and, as a result, they went deeper into the forested highlands.

Chapter 5 analyzes Sec. Dean Worcester's attempts to make Bukidnon an American-style frontier through direct American rule despite resistance from Filipinos in Misamis, who wanted Bukidnon to be a part of their province, and from Manila-based politicians and newspapers, who saw the secretary as profiting from the non-Christian tribes. Through Worcester, Spanish mestizo Manuel Fortich came to the plateau and left a deep mark on the province.

In Chapter 6, Fortich's tireless “governing on horseback” resulted in the Bukidnon “sometimes reluctantly, sometimes willingly” settling down in villages and accepting American systems, trade, and infrastructure developments such as roads and telephone service (124). Malaybalay was made provincial capital, the traditional datu families became elites anew along with non-datu ones through education and bureaucratic employment, and the arrival of Filipino and American migrants created new linguistic and educational layers into Malaybalay society. These bifocal elites valued both the new system of the colonials and their old ways, especially when migrants belittled their lack of colonial skills. They thus learned Tagalog and English and underwent Christian rites, some of them converting to the new Protestant religion, but they kept their indigenous beliefs.

In Chapter 7, aptly titled “Home on the Range,” Edgerton recounts how the Americans imprinted themselves into and changed the landscape with the introduction of large-scale cattle ranching and pineapple production. Edgerton, however, points out that the Bukidnon only played a supporting role in these endeavors. In contrast, Fortich gained ranches and positions in the colonial organization by fusing an American-style frontier persona and traditional datu methods, building on personal ties, dependency, and hierarchy among the Bukidnon. By the late 1930s, the American frontier dream was subsumed under the not-too-successful Commonwealth policy of opening Mindanao to migrants, culminating with the single-lane Sayre Highway in 1940.

Chapter 8 recounts the Second World War as it affected Bukidnon. Bukidnon's isolation did not prevent the Japanese and USAFFE forces or homegrown religio-military groups from violently disrupting the inhabitants' lives. The relatively humane management of the POW camp in Malaybalay made the provincial capital a safe haven away from the bandits. It provided

stability, if not prosperity, for those who relocated there during the war. Families had members participating in both local governments and resistance movements, moving back and forth between their farms in the range and their houses in Japanese-occupied Malaybalay. The province still suffered in the end—“hardly a house was left standing in Bukidnon’s central north-south highway . . . while Malaybalay’s ruins smoldered” (212)—but the migrant-native divide was replaced by an experience of communal suffering and resilience that gained for each side mutual respect and shared pride.

Chapter 9 reveals that the end of the war did not restore the old order in Bukidnon. The province came to face the nationalizing forces of a newly sovereign government. Edgerton points out that the Bukidnon continued to employ their method of the middle ground between local and national powerbrokers in an era of independence and reconstruction (215). Bukidnon, however, got stuck in factional politics, and the province was left, politically and economically, behind in the national scene.

The postwar years brought an unprecedented number of migrants to Bukidnon. Chapter 10 surveys several towns’ migration and growth patterns. Migration push factors included family and hometown connections, overflow from neighboring Misamis Oriental, war veterans, and road and inter-island infrastructure developments; settlement patterns reveal the opening up of Manobo swidden lands in the south to cash crop production. Community conditions varied. There were impoverished villages and growing barrios; a few communities burgeoned into towns. Bukidnon’s postwar migrants, like those who came before the war, pictured themselves as active participants in a frontier culture that valued “hard work, education, entrepreneurship, and social mobility” (251), but the local Manobo became socially and economically marginalized.

Chapter 11 shows a Bukidnon thrust into the national sphere in the years of the Marcos government and martial law. Large agribusiness ventures, mostly Marcos-connected, grew export crops such as sugar, pineapple, and coffee, while logging companies held concessions over several hundred hectares of forest lands. The province’s central location in a Mindanao torn by Islamist separatists, communist insurgents, and central government armies and agencies came to affect the local inhabitants’ life to the point that strife and bloodshed wore down their middle ground.

Edgerton concludes with a note of hope, however, by highlighting the Bukidnon’s ability to use external influences as tools for holding on to their

identity. The life story of Marcella Abello Cudal, woven into the various chapters, not only gives the book a cohesion that might have been lost in a purely methodical history, but also gives a face to the Bukidnon’s way of keeping to the middle ground. Engaged in continued transformation and recreation, Marcella assimilated the world of the migrants during the American colonial era, rediscovered her roots during the Japanese Occupation, and sent her children to be educated in the modern postwar system, but in her old age she adhered more and more to the tradition of pangalawat.

Edgerton further notes that the constant meetings and movements of locals and migrants in Bukidnon’s history of “inclusion in which networks and imagined identities, relationships and memories are constantly changing” (311) are also the story of the Filipino, whose mestizo culture has lived with what is native and foreign. This book, then, suggests a history of inclusion and, like a frontier located between “civilized” and “indigenous” spaces, points to a hybrid culture in which differences do not necessarily result in conflicts but in a richer and more enlightened society.

This study is a valuable contribution to the ongoing efforts of historians at unearthing beyond Manila, while acknowledging the province’s place in the national narrative. If there are topics that might enrich this history of Bukidnon, one of these would be an account of the Jewish settlements that the Commonwealth government was planning to locate there. More details could have been given about how areas outside Malaybalay, like those under the “guerrilla padres,” fared during the Second World War. Nonetheless, *People of the Middle Ground* is a groundbreaking historical work on a once peripheral yet central area of Mindanao, because of which future studies can be made.

**Patricia Irene Dacudao**

Department of History  
Ateneo de Manila University  
<pdacudao@ateneo.edu>