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Bikol of the Philippines

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BIKOLS OF THE PHILIPPINES. By Maria Lilia F. Realubit. Naga City: A.M.S. Press, 1983. 450 pages.

The four million Bikols who populate southeastern Luzon are an ancient people possessing a uniquely beautiful culture. Fortunately, in the past few years, after centuries of neglect, this culture is finally being celebrated in print. Among the writers who have furthered this growing surge of interest and scholarship, Lilia Realubit would have to be considered an outstanding example. With this, her latest book on the area, she has made all lovers of the Bikol region and its culture her debtors because of the surprising breadth and depth of her treatment.

Bikols of the Philippines is amazing for being truly encyclopedic in scope. In its 450 pages, it treats quite substantially Bikol history, oral literature, the epic, poetry, drama, prose writings, Bikol newspapers and magazines, literary efforts in Spanish and English, and a general listing of Bikol religious and literary works of the past four hundred years. It also offers the reader a regional map, a helpful bibliography, and six clear and interesting photographs. This composite picture of an important region of the Philippines is a product of the author's dedication to her people's culture, history and language. It is, however, objective and balanced—a work of serious scholarship by an author gifted, obviously highly qualified in many fields, and possessed of a passionate and indefatigable interest in her subject. As a result, the reader has a sense of excitement as he or she plunges, chapter after chapter, into the world of a people remarkable for creativity of mind and heart, Christian goodness, courage, and love for freedom and their fellow man.

Over the centuries one of the most lamentable omissions in the education of Filipino students has been their lack of instruction in the history, language and culture of their own home regions. Sadly, they learn much more about American, Spanish, Oriental and world history than they do of their own people's greatness. Hopefully, with this book, Bikol students in the future will be spared such a serious deprivation in their personal growth. If used as a textbook in the region's many colleges and universities, and in the larger Manila universities, it would surely promote among students a growth of interest in their own culture. It could spur them to do further studies on their home provinces and towns, and to gather from the veritable ocean of oral literature, the hundreds of folktales, folksongs, proverbs, riddles, verses, and verbal jousts, still extant.

In Realubit's opening ninety-page treatise on Bikol history, one is struck by two unusual characteristics in the Bikol soul. In a region beset by unending natural calamities (frequent typhoons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, swarms of agricultural pests, etc.) the Bikols have developed an admirable resiliency of spirit. In the face of man-made disasters (invasions, Moslem raids, colonial oppression and exploitation) these peace-loving people have always shown themselves most courageous in the defense of their region and nation. It is unfortunate that this history of exceptional bravery is little known, not only to Filipinos in general, but to the Bikols themselves.

Few are aware, for example, of the uprisings over the centuries that climaxed in the April to October 1898 revolt that expelled all the Spaniards from the region; or of the battles against heavily armed American forces that continued until October 1903 (one and a half years after General Malvar surrendered); or of the many guerilla bands that plagued the Japanese during their attempts to occupy the Bikol area.

The section on Bikol history is somewhat uneven and hard to follow because to date comprehensive treatment of the subject has been impossible because of difficulty of access to, and the disorder in various important archives. Readers should not allow themselves to be overly distracted by the numerous misprints in the text. Lilia Realubit's noteworthy goal in having her work printed in Naga City rather than in Manila was to promote the printing of scholarly materials in the region. These blemishes cannot dim the value of the work. The great advantage of Realubit's method of combining history, literature and culture in the same work, is that it balances off the over-dependence on foreign, colonial historical sources that mar such other regional histories as Larkin's *The Pampangans* (1975), which in their incompleteness give a narrow picture of other important Philippine regions and peoples.

After the historical section, Realubit gives many attractive samples of Bikol oral literature. This is followed by a serious study of *Ibalon*, the Bikol folk epic fragment, which unravels many of its obscurities. The chapter on Bikol poetry is outstanding. The author's careful selection, faithful translation, and literary analysis of many fine poems whet the reader's interest. It is hoped that her next project will be a full volume presenting and discussing Bikol poems and folksongs as she has already done for the Bikol drama (*The Bikol Dramatic Tradition*, 1976).

The chapters on Bikol fiction and other prose are well done, although the reader is saddened to learn that many of these writings have already disappeared or perished. The chapter on Bikol newspapers and magazines emphasizes the region's fervid interest in local and national politics, and treats at length the old battle on Bikol orthography. Finally, the sections on literary efforts in Spanish and English and the hundred-page listing of religious and literary works, complete a satisfying treatment of Bikol authors.

It seems to this reviewer that the book is a major breakthrough, and might well come to be considered Bikol's "book of the century." We hope that it receives the warm support it deserves, and that the Filipiniana sections of every Philippine college and high school library will soon possess a copy, not only for reference but also for emulation by other scholars.

Someday perhaps, an entire encyclopedia of Bikol culture could grow from this book. This is Realubit's challenge to the young Bikolnon.

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