

BOOK REVIEW

Of Counter-Hegemonic Narratives and Fragmented Identities

Abinales, P.N. (2008). *The joys of dislocation: Mindanao, nation and region*. Manila, Philippines: Anvil. ISBN: 9789712720239. 197pp. Php 260.

by **Diana Therese M. Veloso**

De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

The Joys of Dislocation: Mindanao, Nation and Region by Patricio Abinales is a collection of essays and columns published in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, *Newsbreak*, *Legmanila*, *Philippine Yearbook*, and *UP Forum*, between 1996 and 2006. Abinales proffered critical, multilayered commentaries on historical, social, economic, and political issues in Mindanao, the Philippines, and Southeast Asia. He analyzed the myriad of conflicts—and dominant narratives and representations thereof—in these three zones as “someone...who has always gone in and out of them” (p. xi), thereby debunking the insider-outsider binaries invoked by other intellectuals, who presume that only those in the Philippines can write about the affairs of the country. He used his experiences and social position of “dislocation”—a label he deemed more preferable to “diaspora,” in reference to the lived realities and identities of overseas Filipinos—as a source of insight.

The 56 essays in this book are organized into three chapters, titled “Mindanao,” “Nation,” and “Region,” in order of importance. In placing

Mindanao at the center of discussion and analysis, Abinales subverted the hegemonic gaze of Manila-centric narratives that frame the island as a perilous, peripheral territory and the source of separatism, warlordism, communism, militarism, and other problematic -isms. He then branched out to discuss salient social, economic, and political developments in the Philippine nation-state and the Southeast Asian region.

One of the strongest points of the book lies in its first chapter, which gives an informative, thought-provoking account of the history of Mindanao and persisting social issues in the island. Abinales highlighted the strategic role of Mindanao as a vibrant center of trade during the precolonial and Spanish eras, up until the mid-19th century, and the solidarity and resilience of its people in the face of repeated encroachment. He voiced his misgivings against the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims and the *lumad* (indigenous people) from dominant discourses on national(ist) history and economic development: “This is quite peculiar because both populations could be said to have occupied larger portions of Mindanao—

the *lumad* since the precolonial era... Very little is said about Mindanao's capacity to feed the rest of the Philippines or its crucial contribution to the formation of the national economy" (pp. 1-2). Abinales exposed the complexity of motives behind the initial resistance of Mindanaoan residents against the Spaniards and the Americans. In particular, he cited the desire of Muslim *datus* and *lumad* leaders to retain their economic interests in a thriving trading network connecting Southern Mindanao to other Southeast Asian territories. In one essay, Abinales explored the misguided attempts of the U.S. Army to develop a frontier town called "Little America" in Momungan, Lanao del Norte, which initially attracted diverse groups of settlers, but failed after a decade due to administrative and agricultural problems. In another essay, he revealed that the same U.S. Army, in designating Mindanao as separate terrain but incorporating it into an independent Philippines, established the very structures that galvanized the separatist cause: "Working on the rationale that Mindanao's population was backward and distinct from Filipinos, army officials built a state different from and autonomous from Manila. Muslims—despite the brutality inflicted on them by Americans—allied with the army to resist Filipinization. The alliance unraveled because of internal weaknesses. But the seed of separatism had been planted" (p. 17). Lest one question what became of the resistance to American imperialism, Abinales illuminated the ambiguous, fragmented responses of Muslims to Filipinization in later years. Despite widespread opposition to legislation conferring Commonwealth status upon the Philippines, certain Muslim leaders—like their opportunistic counterparts in the colonial center—collaborated with political elites and took on the role of Moro representatives and spokespersons in the new republic.

Abinales revisited the conditions in postwar Mindanao, specifically the influx of migrants from the north and the rise of "cacique politics" (p. 39) involving new elites. These trends continued during the Marcos regime, where land disputes between settlers and indigenous communities

became more frequent. Abinales asserted that for all the attention given to Manila-based personalities and institutions, Mindanao played a crucial role in toppling the Marcos dictatorship. He also emphasized the impact of Marcosian rule on the island—extensive militarism, human rights violations, the outrage engendered by the Jabidah Massacre of young Moro conscripts, and the secessionist war of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the 1970s. He asserted the need to document this war and its effects on those involved: "If there was a time, a place, and an event that we in Mindanao cannot forget and cannot forgive the Marcos dictatorship for, it was *that* war. After that war, Mindanao was never the same" (p. 41; italics supplied).

Abinales made a compelling case about the impact of the ongoing armed conflict in southern Mindanao on displaced families and now-unstable communities; although he clarified that the island will not become another East Timor. While he recognized the root causes of Muslim separatism, he called attention to the contradictory politics of the MNLF and its breakaway faction, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), in terms of the socio-historical contexts behind their claims. Invoking the work of other Southeast Asian scholars and historians, he boldly asserted that the homeland envisioned as part of the Bangsamoro Republic—Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago, and Palawan—consists of illusory boundaries grafted by colonialism: "There was never any 'map' of a Bangsamoro in the precolonial era because the communities then did not imagine themselves within the frame set by modern cartography... Territory was less their worry. It was only with colonialism that modern cartography would alter this view of the world... Thus, we have the anomaly of a separatist movement premising its politics on a territorial boundary that is colonially constructed" (p. 47). He uncovered the fragmentation within the Muslim separatist movement due to ethnic and class differences and identity politics. He lambasted then-MNLF Chairman and Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) Governor Nur Misuari for

threatening to wage another war and criticized his ilk for devolving into a political interest group/private army since its cooptation by the Ramos administration and subsequent regimes. He challenged the MILF to articulate its separatist ideology using indigenous concepts, not Western frameworks about citizenship, and noted how the group vacillates between separatism and autonomy; he also posed critical questions about the implications of an Islamic republic for economic development, socio-cultural modernization, ethnic diversity, and democratic politics in Mindanao. As for the Abu Sayyaf, he denounced their nonexistent political program and dismissed their rebellion as the activity of a small sect, with limited areas of operation. Abinales is very clear about his advocacy of economic autonomy in Mindanao, and does not discount the possibility of future rebellions on the island. Given the different lenses with which he analyzed the Muslim separatist rebellion, one wonders whether he viewed the Bangsamoro as an unwarranted and/or ambitious project: “What makes this imagined republic all the more surreal is the incongruity of means to attain it” (p. 41). Whose interests does he represent in making such a claim? This merits a different discussion altogether.

Not all the essays in this chapter are as grim and somber. In his other columns, Abinales tackled lighter, even comical topics. For instance, he poked fun at the debate of then-Representatives Alonto (of Lanao) and Durano (of Danao, Cebu) on the rat problem in Mindanao, which degenerated into a nonsensical exchange on the preservation of rats on account of the latter congressman’s digressive tactics. Of interest too, is his essay on *baboy sulop* (wild boar meat) in northern Mindanao, and the negotiation of religious and ethnic identities and cooperative relations among the Maranao who sell this delicacy to Christian settlers: “While Islam does not allow them to eat it, Filipino Islam is syncretic and tolerant enough so that one can actually vend the tabooed meat... No one is sure when the business relationship between Muslims and Christians developed that

earned profits for the former and well-satiated appetites for the latter. Some of the older folks think it began as far back as the early American colonial period...It shows that cordial ties did exist between the two groups in the past” (p. 29).

Meanwhile, the second chapter of this book consists of an eclectic mix of essays on Philippine society. Abinales critiqued diverse issues, ranging from the general public’s abhorrence of Imelda Marcos, to the emergence of multilingual Filipinos in an age of “dislocation” from the homeland, to projections about the “Strong Republic” envisioned by then-president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. The bulk of his essays on the nation focus on Filipino-style communism. Abinales looked back on his involvement with the “left” at the height of divisive politics in the 1970s, and recounted archaic party guidelines that policed courtship practices and the very institution of marriage. He maintained: “There is still value in analyzing societies in terms of class, in looking at states as coercive instruments of the powerful few, and in watching economic processes unfold as part of the logic of capitalism” (pp. 107-108). Yet he slammed Filipino leftist leaders for not adapting to changing realities, such as shifts in the global capitalist system in the 1980s and reconfigured core-periphery relations. He also exposed the fragmentation of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the anti-infiltration purges that led to the torture and execution of its former cadres, and the elusive peace process. Abinales did not mince words in repeatedly referring to exiled CPP Chairman Jose Ma. Sison as the “Filipino Ayatollah,” castigating him for refusing to return to the country and immerse himself among the masses, in accordance with the revolutionary tenets he invoked. He also exposed the contradictions within the movement and its silence regarding the summary execution of its leader’s political enemies.

The third chapter is more parsimonious, and covers multiple facets of Southeast Asian politics, social movements, and economic trends. Abinales highlighted the richness of Southeast Asian heritage, given its enthralling precolonial

regimes, dynasties, and empires and equally rich cultures and world religions. At the same time, he analyzed affairs in the Philippine nation-state in relation to the region in which it is embedded. He used a comparative international (regional) perspective to examine such issues as separatist rebellions and uprisings, the porosity of national borders and the fluid movements of migrants (documented and undocumented) in and out of the Philippines, and even the underground economy.

Abinales' book is as stimulating as it can get, and his frank arguments, critical analyses, and subtle, wry punchlines will keep the reader hankering for the next essay. The breadth of materials used in his work—colonial archival

documents, newspaper files, and Congressional records, among others—is impressive. *The Joys of Dislocation* is a must-read not only for academics and enthusiasts of Mindanao studies, but also for individuals seeking to broaden their knowledge of Philippine history and societal relations. The book, as a whole, is an indictment of the confines of hegemonic narratives and representations stemming from Manila, as well as comparably powerful interest groups in other nation-states in Southeast Asia. Some essays appear to be repetitive, others anecdotal and even bordering on trivial, but many others debunk parochial knowledge and beliefs about Mindanao, the Philippine nation, and the Southeast Asian region.

