

# A Non-nationalist National History?

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Can one write a non-nationalist, even anti-nationalist, history of the nation? In my two years as a post-doctoral fellow here at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, I will grapple with this paradox by attempting to write that history. In a book co-authored with Patricio N. Abinales, we will explore the substrates of Philippine history that have evaded the attention of historians who take the nation for granted. What would Philippine history look like if seen, for instance, from the perspective of a Sabahan smuggler with a Philippine passport? Or from the perspective of a modernist visual artist whose visions prove too abstract to represent a specific national identity?

In a way, there is a contradiction in our project, as writing about the nation affirms it and calls it into being. Merely writing about a nation is already a form of methodological nationalism.

Traditional national histories have been written for the nation, and, in telling the story of a country, historians reify its existence. Some even project the nation's history to times before it emerged, thus turning ancient histories into essential threads of a national narrative. For these historians, the Egypt of Cleopatra is the same as that of Nasser's and the people who built the Parthenon belong to the same imagined community as those who currently suffer from the European financial crisis.

Despite their contributions to national narratives, however, many historians are distinctly aware of the provenance of contemporary nations, for it takes writers aware of the past to grasp what the past constructs. This has, however, not been the case with general introductions to Philippine history.

Early textbooks, written in the wake of American colonization, may have been pro-colonial, but they affirmed the unity of the Philippines and the Filipino people. In fact, many of these accepted the racist assumptions—which can be traced to the historical work of national hero Jose Rizal—of the Philippines as being the nation of a “brown” or “Malayan” race.

In the 1960s and 1970s, historians like Teodoro Agoncillo and Renato Agoncillo began writing radical, anti-colonial histories. This new cohort of nationalist historians foregrounded the corrupting effects of colonialism of “Filipino” identity, which turned them into slaves of American “neocolonialism.”

The radical nationalism of the era was instrumental in shaping the perspectives of leftwing movements organizing against the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, in particular the Maoist Communist Party of

the Philippines and its various legal fronts. Unlike their Western counterparts, Philippine Communists have been profoundly uncritical of nationalism, many times conflating “the nation” with the poor, the downtrodden, and the proletariat. This thinking was largely a product of the historical work that informed their activism. Leftwing historians performed a magic trick in their histories by assuming that the downtrodden and the marginalized—the victims of colonialism—were the bearers of a “true” national spirit.

And since the Left—which in other countries challenges nationalism from an internationalist perspective—has a love affair with the nation, who is left to criticize it? To expose its lapses?

Contrary to the assumptions of the radical nationalists, the nation and the marginalized cannot be conflated. Take for example the Moros of Mindanao, who are by any measure one of the most downtrodden people in the Philippines. The Moros—systematic victims of the Philippine state—do not share the anti-Americanism of Manila-based leftists, for America too many of them represents a colonizer more beneficent and wealthier than Filipinos.

The case of the Muslim Moros is illustrative of a broader phenomenon within the historical profession, one that wishes to deny narratives inconvenient to the development of a unified nationalism. For while Communists and nationalist historians continue to complain about the deleterious effects of US Empire on Philippine sovereignty, the broad masses wish to seek a better life in America. A recent global poll revealed that the country that loves the US the most is the Philippines. It took the number one spot, beating out the US itself, which took second place.

Amid this, the people most wedded to the nationalist project have been elites, from corrupt politicians seeking political independence to strengthen their own domestic power to Manila-based academics who wish to impose a homogenous Tagalog culture on a diverse country.

What would happen if a national history took non-national phenomena seriously? Would introducing these stories to a national history explain contemporary problems better? Perhaps it is the myopia of previous histories to have ignored the fragmentary experiences and thoughts lying within the Philippine geobody, but outside its discursive terrain.

As yet, I have no answers to these questions. But I hope to have two productive years to figure things out.