

Culture



Melanie WIBER, *Politics, Property and Law in the Philippine Uplands*, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1993; 164 pages + tables, \$24.95 (paper)

Raul Pertierra

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coordinating political propaganda and military operations against Nicaragua's Sandinista government from Costa Rican territory. At a certain point during the 1980's the Costa Rican press lost any sense of objectivity vis-a-vis popular struggles anywhere in Central America, including El Salvador, and this poses special problems for the scholar relying on such documentary sources to substantiate arguments related to the themes of this book.

The author also develops an interesting discussion on the relative merits of such concepts as the "informal sector" versus "petty commodity production" to understand the units of production she is studying. The author's preference to rescue the concept of the "informal sector" from its critics was not entirely convincing, however, and her arguments needed to be developed further than they were. All in all, these are not overly serious criticisms of a work that brings a refreshing dash of theoretical analysis to a field that is usually typified by rather narrowly conceived empirical evaluative studies. Students of the impact of development aid in whatever context, as well as the more general readership interested in Central American affairs, can definitely benefit from this book.

Melanie WIBER, *Politics, Property and Law in the Philippine Uplands*, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1993; 164 pages + tables, \$24.95 (paper).

Raul Pertierra

University of New South Wales

This short book is a good account of property concepts and practices among the Ibaloi, a complex society in the highlands of Northern Luzon, Philippines. The area inhabited by the Ibaloi is famous for its gold mines, a fact known since early Spanish times but whose details and control the Ibaloi managed to retain until the penetration of the Americans early this century.

Because of its proximity to the Spanish-controlled lowlands and its developed trade networks, the Ibaloi evolved a complex and stratified society based on gold and supplemented by cattle herding as well as wet-rice cultivation. Despite this complexity, the Ibaloi retained many of the egalitarian features of other societies in the Cordillera region, particularly the necessity of developing strong alli-

ance networks in the absence of effective structures of the state. However, as the Spanish colonial and American regimes exerted greater control over the area, ambitious individuals managed to obtain disproportionate resources, in part because of earlier understandings of communal access, but mostly because such individuals manipulated both local and national rules for their benefit.

Wiber sets out to explore the multi-layered meanings of property relations, particularly in relation to land and water resources. Along with gold, cash-cropping and cattle herding became significant sources of wealth. The proximity of large urban markets facilitated this exploitation but it is also exerting unbearable pressures on local society. Wiber examines the response of the Ibaloi to these pressures, pointing out that earlier accounts of the region were inadequate either in their detail or in their conceptual framework. The ideology of communalism so often encountered in contemporary descriptions of the region is shown to be of much later provenance as well as being empirically inaccurate. Like other Cordilleran peoples, the Ibaloi managed to retain original features of their society despite the significant encroachment of the colonial and post-colonial state. Concepts of property are an important element of local structure and Wiber successfully indicates how scarce resources are often manipulated according to distinct rules, to say nothing of expectations and notions of justice. Both indigenous and Western jural concepts are the result of particular interpretations in the context of the exercise of power.

This book is a useful contribution to the study of legal-jural concepts in Philippine society, an area which, despite Barton's early contributions, is often neglected in present accounts. However, despite its title, the account of politics is often wanting. Instead, Wiber gives a brief outline of political structures but very little indication of the way such structures actually operate. Since religion does not occur in the title, I did not expect to find much detail on its practice but given its importance, at least in former days, for determining status, a fuller account would have been helpful. Since several comparative studies of religion in the Cordillera region have been published, Wiber's discussion could have profited by referring to such studies. Similar comments could be made in relation to the economy, particularly since vegetable farming has been a major feature of Ibaloi society and since studies of similar communities in the Cordillera are available. The text is well-edited,

with very few infelicities but the use of one quotation from Appell is rather mystifying — “that the ritual symbolization of social isolates follows their entification in the jural realm” (49-50). This comment occurs in a discussion of the importance of ancestral rituals for the Ibaloi but we are not better informed as a result of it. While Wiber makes her points succinctly, I cannot help but get the impression that further elaboration of the main argument is necessary. Since the emphasis of Wiber’s discussion is rather specific rather than providing a general ethnography of the Ibaloi, a more detailed account would have been practicable.

Fredrik BARTH, *Balinese Worlds*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993; 370 pages.

By Catherine Tihanyi

Simon Fraser University

This book couldn’t have come at a more appropriate moment in the history of anthropology. Many of the traditional tenets of the discipline have of late been put through a process of self criticism which is certainly healthy but which has, at the same time, led to a certain amount of negativity. Once the validity of the ethnographic project has been put into question by, among other things, showing that each informant sees and explains things from a differently positioned perspective, and once anthropological theorizing has been shown likewise to be determined by the position of the theorist, can there still be systematic courses of inquiry opened to further the discipline?

Barth’s book goes a long way in taking up this challenge. It is an extremely rich and complex work which, in spite of the engaging clarity of its style, is not easily amenable to a brief summary. Space does not allow for discussion of Barth’s insightful and sensitive ethnographic description (supplemented by many references to the work of Uni Wikan, his wife, with whom he did the field work) which includes several topics of general interest such as factionalism, violence, ritual, sorcery, etc. His findings are at variance with that of many of his predecessors. These differences, argues Barth, stem entirely from the theoretical and methodological approaches used and I shall thus focus on some aspects of these.

A point of entry is this very notion of position. It isn’t that Barth’s own sociocultural background is different from that of the other ethnographers of Bali, but rather that he focuses elsewhere. This elsewhere, first of all, is not made up of things such as artifacts, ideas, symbols, institutions, social roles, etc., but is made up of people in action, of processes of interaction, in other words of practice. In this sense there is a consistency with previous interactional theory but the difference, as I see it, is that the problem of the context, which had perhaps been the main weakness of this theory in the past, has been resolved. Contexts are now not only fully part of the model but in many ways provide its dynamics.

Barth writes that the aim of ethnography is to understand what’s going on from the participants’ points of view and “to build progressively a more workable facsimile of the realities they variously construct and inhabit” (p, 93). Functionalist analysis as well as “thick description” miss the point as they interpret the data according to the concerns of Western anthropologists. Instead, what is of interest is the interpretation given by the actors themselves, not an easy task as not only do different participants to the same event interpret it differently, but also one participant might interpret it differently at various times. Barth resolves this with a very interesting theory of acts where events are turned into acts, or in other words, given meaning through the interpretation of the people involved.

This determines the methods ethnographers should use. Processes of interpretation partake of the cultural context which is made up of an indeterminate number of “streams” from which people draw the interpretative “keys” they use to give meaning to events. It is these keys the ethnographer needs to uncover by focusing on the individual practice of participants instead of using keys provided by anthropological tradition. And, as I understand it, each key used by participants links practice with context. Culture, argues Barth, is only accessible through socially situated practice and not through any formal description of institutions or hermeneutic analysis of symbol systems.

But in spite of the diversity of positioning and interpreting, recognizable patterns do emerge and they reproduce as well as modify cultural streams of knowledge. These patterns emerge from practice as it involves certain reoccurring “concerns”. These concerns are not norms, neither are they “constitutive of Balinese lives” (p.349). Rather they interact in