

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Archaeology and Emerging Kabikolan*

Andrea Malaya M. Ragrario

2012. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press

Contribution to Archaeology Series

Review by Reynaldo R. Avellana

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This book is the latest addition to the scant but growing publications on Bicol archaeology. It is the most comprehensive body of work to date dedicated to the study of Bicol Region's ancient past. If Beyer's *Outline Review of Philippine Archaeology* (1947), which is national in scale, were to be localised at a regional level, without a doubt, this book is its equal.

While tracing the regional identity of the Bikolnon, Ragrario provided a general survey of Bicol's antiquity by utilising mainly archaeological materials along with a number of historical and ethnographic accounts. Covering Bicol's six provinces across various times, the book contains a grand review of related literature and studies on Bicol archaeology spanning from the early European scholars' antiquarian interest of the 1800s up to the recent underwater archaeology attempts in Catanduanes.

Ragrario's *magnum opus* is the published form of her master's thesis, a result of dedicated graduate-level research at the Archaeological Studies Program of the University of the Philippines – Diliman (Ragrario 2010). Published by the nation's premier university, the book commands authoritative integrity among its readers. Colleagues in the archaeological discipline will find reading the book easy; general readers may find reading it a bit harder despite the writer's effort to simplify her discussions.

Before the main critique of its content, I will first tackle the minor technical details of this publication. A reliable *Index* is provided and arranged neatly with alphabet heading. *About the Author* is located at the last page instead of the back cover. Nevertheless, it informs the readers on the academic qualifications and professional experiences of the author.

The *References*, consuming 23 pages, contained more than 300 bibliographic entries. The *List of Illustrations* has a total of 36 plates, which are either black-and-white or greyscale. The *List of Figures/Tables* contains seven maps slated as “figure” and one table on comparative prehistoric chronologies. Aside from typical formatting and typological errors that are forgivable, no major editorial flaw is alarming.

After evaluating the trivial parts of the book, I will proceed with the major assessment of the main content. The bold declaration at the back cover posed provocative questions on the ontological significance of “Bikol archaeology.” It further challenges prospective readers to contemplate on the meaning of “Bikol” using epistemologies of archaeology on top of history and anthropology. The formulaic purpose of archaeology as seeking the past identity of the present is acknowledged for its ability to chart the future. In the *Preface*, the series editor, Dr. Victor Paz, reaffirms the same call for unraveling regional ethnic identity. The *Contents* serves as the outline of the book’s content.

The main body of the book is divided into four parts. Part I provides the background of the archaeology of Bicol Region and its reflexive relations with national archaeology. Moreover, it sets the objective of the book, which is, to find the meaning of Bicol archaeology and the Bicol social boundary it creates. My only comment for this part is that the methodology by which the concept of “identity” can be analysed must be explained with specific parameters or criteria to concretise “identity” which is an abstract concept.

Part II provides historical documentation of colonial and post-colonial accounts on “Kabikolan,” a term she prefers instead of “Bicol”, probably for a more indigenous feel. Further integrated in Part II is the praise-worthy synthesis of history of archaeological research in Bicol patterned after Paz’s (2009) history of archaeology for the Philippines. The use of terms “accidental, committed, directed, and reflective archaeology,” respectively for the history of Bicol archaeology recalls to mind the sequence proposed by either Willey and Sabloff (1993) or Trigger (2006). If there is no local alternative to this Western paradigm, then she might have made the right choice. Little emphasis was made in relating this to the development of Bicol identity. She closes Part II with discourses on culture history, time, and heritage. These are “heavy” concepts that need elaboration. The first two concepts can be the opening

for Part III as these concepts are fundamental to Bicol archaeology. The third concept should either be explained in Part I or Part IV.

Part III comes with a heading "The Archaeology of the Bicol Region" but mainly provides an inventory of archaeological sites as geographically located namely waterways, caves, open sites, as well as underwater and coastal sites. As an archaeologist, I am critical in this way of presenting the archaeological sites as this spatially distribution deprives temporality. It would be best if time control is shown alongside the spatial distribution especially that a regional chronology was made available for Bicol by herself. The occasional thematic topics incorporated in the geographical discussion of type-sites seemed out of place when in fact this can be the heart of her discourse.

Part IV concludes the book with the wrapping up of the matters culminating "towards a regional archaeology." In fact, the sole chapter here bears the same title as the book. This chapter features a table of comparative chronologies for Philippines and Bicol. The chronology on Bicol on page 206 indicates "(After Paz 2008)," however, this is not found in the *References*. This table in my humble opinion should be presented much earlier if not first similar to how Junker (2000) presented the chronology for Bais-Tanjay Area Regional Chronology. The brief parting words are played safe and sounded cliché with its open-ended statement on "Bikolness."

In closing, I provide few general points that can be improved on should a revised edition be warranted. The existence of Bicol identity in the past is Ragrario's major line of inquiry. Though the title bears "archaeology," Ragrario referred not exclusively to archaeology to prove her point; it can be a double-edged sword depending on the evaluator. Identity remained to be an elusive concept, that is, without recognisable face.

How social identity or boundary is archaeologically observed over time and space is the second line of inquiry demanding concrete explanation to fully satisfy the book's main goal. As an anthropologist, the author is well aware of the dynamic and complex character of social identity that is constantly negotiated across time and space and affected by various factors like environment, subsistence, and politics. However, this is not concretely reflected in her discourse. My impression is that a solid regionalist identity homogeneously exists since the earliest times. While it is true that convergences are observed every now and then,

specific and distinctive smaller group traits likewise exist. She could have provided input on the ethnographic diversity of groups that compose the region. One angle is the dialectal or linguistic differences that can aid in defining social boundary. She can turn to linguistic studies considering that modern day residents in Bicol show strong affinity to a specific dialect—a form of identity that has grounding in the past.

Moreover, as an archaeologist, she could have capitalised on the materially observable traits among the artifacts in asserting specific identity in the manner or format done by Solheim in his pottery studies (Solheim 2002). Limited researching time might have prevented her from accomplishing similar feat; nevertheless the complexity of her research problem demands equivalent efforts. The use of informal sources like haphazard museum collections needed sufficient disclosure and explanation to avoid painting a wrong picture to the average readers. Lastly, the real people behind the archaeological record, the subject of any prehistoric reconstruction, should receive more attention for an identity discourse that truly goes beyond the level of “culture history” (Willey and Sabloff 1993).

Defining social boundary is a daunting task Ragrario accepted. Her efforts in contributing to the definition of a regional identity deserve heartfelt commendation. Future archaeologists, researches, and scholars will find reading this reference material worthwhile.

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*The Origin of Our Species*

Chris Stringer

2011. London: Allen Lane

Review by Rob Rownd

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The Origin of Our Species by Chris Stringer is an old guy's book. But it's far from tired.

Patient in tone and deliberate in pace, the book has been mildly chastised by some scientists for allotting too much space to discussion of some 'flighty' scientific ideas (Hawks 2011). It has also been mildly chastised by some popular intellectuals for not living up to its title and summing up the history of humans in half a dozen declarative sentences (Forbes 2011). But the key word in both cases is mildly. Even people who don't accept his ideas or admire his work, respect the civility and openness Chris Stringer brings to its defense. Still, I doubt Stringer would worry much about either opinion even if they were harshly expressed. This book, like his other writing, his public lectures and video interviews is always focused on the work and the ideas behind it.

Since joining the research staff of the British Natural History Museum in 1973, Stringer has acquired over a yard's worth of credits for journal articles and written 10 books for general audiences, all while serving as the very public face of the out-of-Africa theory of Modern Human origins. This is someone who is very comfortable contextualising