

Writing for the Public: Advancing a Meaningful Archaeological Practice

— Stephen Acabado¹ and Marlon Martin²

The five-month Covid-19 stay-at-home experience had me thinking about ways to engage the broader community. This was spurred by a news article on our work in the Philippines that elicited varied responses from the public. Although our archaeological investigations of the Ifugao rice terraces have been known since 2009 and well received by peers, the wider Philippine public was surprised by our arguments for a very young rice terracing tradition (Acabado et al. 2019). For the most part, responses to the news feature were positive, especially the idea that the long-history model of the terraces (which proposes an age of at least 2,000 years) is not based on any scientific data, that the model reprises colonial perspectives about the Philippines. As Eunice Novio wrote, “Acabado emphasizes that claiming that the Ifugao Rice Terraces as ancient is a caricature of the un-colonized, isolated peoples and *original Filipinos*. This colonial perspective depicts not only the Ifugao and the rest of upland Filipinos as unchanging and backward.”³ However, there were a few who actively questioned the validity of the archaeological dating.

To familiarize those new to the issue of the dating of the Ifugao rice terraces, pioneer American anthropologists argued that the terraces had to be at least 2,000 years old because the Ifugao were using basic implements (Barton 1919; Beyer 1955). This dating has become received wisdom in the Philippine historical narrative, although the model is not based on “a single shovelful of archaeological evidence,” using Robert Maher’s (1973:40) words. It entered the national consciousness when it began to be repeated in schools, and it remained an unchallenged “fact” in textbooks. Connie Bodner (1986), working in another

region in the Cordillera (Bontoc), strongly argued for the later inception (after 1600 CE) of wet-rice cultivation in the region. Her argument, as with the case of Ifugao, is also supported by archaeological datasets. Yet the long-history model persists.

The negative reactions to the dating of the terraces were mostly centered on the news article by Novio and, probably, the inaccessibility of scholarly articles. We thus decided to write for the public, with Acabado writing the first article, which calls for Indigenous history and inclusivity.⁴ This piece calls out the apparent ethnocentrism of mainstream Filipino society regarding Indigenous groups in the Philippines. It was also written in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests and the anti-Black sentiments among the Filipino diaspora (and Filipinos generally). Acabado writes, “The recent protests against injustices in the United States catalyzed by the death of George Floyd underscored anti-Blackness sentiments of some Filipino immigrants. In a sense, these echo the attitudes of many Filipinos against **our** Indigenous populations, particularly, the many Aeta groups. In this essay, I invite the readers to critically examine what we learned in the Philippine educational system and how the lessons characterize our sense of being Filipino, especially in relation to the apparent anti-Blackness sentiments or pro-white concepts of beauty and kindness.”

The first article was succeeded by several articles that we wrote together. Leveraging our productive collaboration (Acabado and Martin 2020; Martin and Acabado 2015; Martin et al. 2019), we set out to contextualize the archaeological dating of the rice terraces in terms of knowledge production. Using various Covid-19 scientific undertakings to control the pandemic as a backdrop, we stressed that scientific argumentation is only as good as the data that support it. We reasoned that scientific knowledge is thus a tentative truth.⁵ Seizing on the opportunity to share our

1. Associate professor in the Department of Anthropology and core faculty member of the Cotsen Institute.

2. Save the Ifugao Terraces Movement.

3. Eunice Novio, “UCLA Archeologist Busts Myth of ‘2,000-Year-Old Rice Terraces,’” *Inquirer*, May 28, 2020, <https://usa.inquirer.net/55341/ucla-archeologist-busts-myth-of-2000-year-old-rice-terraces> (accessed August 31, 2020).

4. Stephen Acabado, “A Call for Philippine Indigenous History, a Call for Inclusivity,” *Inquirer*, June 17, 2020, <https://usa.inquirer.net/55789/a-call-for-philippine-indigenous-history-a-call-for-inclusivity> (accessed August 31, 2020).



Figure 1. Apo Romana, an elderly weaver at the Ifugao Indigenous Peoples Education Center, demonstrates traditional weaving to local senior high school students.

work with the larger community and promote social justice, we also situated our archaeological investigations in terms of the dismantling of monuments that glorify colonialism and injustices.⁶ As the bulk of our work focuses on a UNESCO World Heritage Site, we discussed how the UNESCO designation has serious ramifications in terms of presenting the Ifugao as a static and unchanging people.⁷

Because the focus of UNESCO is on conservation for tourism purposes, the cultural and historical contexts of sites have been largely ignored. The UNESCO listing of the Ifugao rice terraces embodies the Western tradition of conservation, overlooking the cultural context of rice and rice production in the region. The concept of “universal value” applied in the UNESCO nomination process becomes problematic because it is based on Enlightenment philosophy. It emphasizes cross-cultural generalizations to establish universal laws of culture, but in practice, these have the effect of erasing variability, reducing humanity to a set of standardized themes. Thus, we argued that these types of spaces are defined by outsiders for local

communities, but that we can always respond to these impositions by involving Indigenous stakeholders. We can facilitate the creation of a venue where these communities can represent themselves. Indigenous and local communities are now their own place makers; they can now define their own identities.

To highlight the colonial foundation of Filipino identity, we wrote an essay emphasizing that Filipino identity is actually a recent development. Using “Bahay Kubo,”⁸ a song that almost all Filipino kids learn in school, we provided a window on the Philippine connection to the world. The children’s song is a great example of the Homogenocene, the widespread expansion of plants and animals brought by maritime exchanges that started when Columbus accidentally landed on the island of Hispaniola in present-day Dominican Republic. Among the plants mentioned in the song, the only ones potentially of Filipino origin are *upo* (wax gourd, which is also native to South and East Asia), garlic, and *labanos* (radish, which is possibly of Southeast Asian origin). The rest of the plants in the song originated in the Americas, Africa, or mainland Asia. So the quintessential Philippine garden is a product of global connections that started more than 1,000 years ago.

5. Stephen Acabado, “Bakit Walang Forever? The Impermanence of Scientific Knowledge,” *Rappler*, July 1, 2020, <https://rappler.com/voices/ispeak/opinion-impermanence-science-archeology> (accessed August 31, 2020).

6. Stephen Acabado and Marlon Martin, “Monuments and the Power of Memory,” *Inquirer*, July 20, 2020, <https://usa.inquirer.net/57041/monuments-and-the-power-of-memory> (accessed August 31, 2020).

7. Stephen Acabado, “Demystifying the Age of the Ifugao Rice Terraces to Decolonize History,” *Rappler*, April 14, 2019, <https://rappler.com/science/society-culture/demystifying-age-ifugao-rice-terraces> (accessed August 31, 2020).

8. Stephen Acabado, “The Bahay Kubo and the Making of the Filipino,” *Rappler*, June 26, 2020, <https://rappler.com/voices/ispeak/opinion-bahay-kubo-making-filipino> (accessed August 31, 2020).

Writing for the Public (continued)

To stress that colonial experiences help define Filipino identity, an ensuing article called for the rethinking of history to inspire the future.⁹ We wrote that race is a social construct and that the concept of race reinforces colonial structures that favor Eurocentric views. For example, the concept justified conquest and colonialism through the view that non-Western peoples needed to be civilized, articulated by the “white man’s burden” perception. In the Philippines this view proceeded through the benevolent assimilation policy of the American colonial government.

Indeed, this observation is still seen in the Philippine educational system. As a product of Americanization,¹⁰ Philippine curricula invested heavily in assimilating various ethnolinguistic groups into Filipino society. Using our work in the Philippine Cordillera, we articulated how the United States incorporated policies used to assimilate Native Americans into those that indoctrinated Cordilleran peoples. Continuing to apply what it learned in the Native American experience, the United States employed the same educational curriculum it had developed for Native Americans. William Howard Taft, the U.S. governor-general of the Philippines in 1901, said that Native Americans who received white-style education would be similar to Euro-Americans “in industry, in loyalty to the country, in law abiding character, and in morality.” Conceivably, this was the basis of the Philippine education curriculum developed by the United States. The educational system was the agent for Americanization of the Philippines. Education became the venue where Indigenous peoples were required to learn and acquire the Filipino identity. However, this approach focused mainly on the history of the dominant lowland groups; the histories of Indigenous peoples were never part of the curricula.

To address this marginalization, the Philippine Department of Education mandates that history curricula must be contextualized in local realities. However, teachers are underequipped to carry out this directive since there are yet no initiatives to properly train teachers in Indigenous history and heritage. To train teachers in Ifugao, we established the Ifugao

Community Heritage Galleries in Kiangan, which now serves as the Ifugao Indigenous Peoples Education Center, a venue where teachers can work with each other and community elders to infuse the curriculum with local knowledge and recent archaeological findings. Our recent article in *Sapiens* highlighted the success of our community engagement programs.¹¹ In this essay, we showed how the local community took control of its heritage, which was on display during the pandemic. The Ifugao Indigenous Peoples Education Center includes a weaving component (Figure 1), and the textiles produced by Ifugao weavers provide an income that helps Ifugao weaving communities and at the same time facilitates conservation of a fading tradition. These public-facing essays were meant to engage a wider public, to provide information, and to help correct misconceptions about archaeology. More importantly, the work brings archaeology to the public and enables us to advance a more meaningful practice.

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