

Challenges in the Writing of Cordillera Local Histories

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ABSTRACT

Local history has become an arena for re-claiming a past that has been dominantly colonial in both authorship and perspective. This paper focuses on the challenges of writing local histories of indigenous peoples, specifically of the Cordillera.

Among these challenges are: the identification of events that should be included in a local history timeline; the tracing of evolving space—physical space, ethnic space, political space, and territorialization; and shifting from ethnography to ethnohistory, which means being open to opportunities of working beyond written texts; there is oral history and the use of material culture that may be considered as sources of historical evidence.

Even with all the challenges local history writing poses, local history sustains its potential for the participation of

local historians and communities in the reconstruction of a relevant past.

People of every place and time deserve a history. Only local and regional history satisfies the need to remember the most intimate matters, the things of childhood. Local history carries with it the potential to reconstruct our ancestors' everyday lives: the goods, machines, and tools with which they worked, and the groups in which they were raised, in which they matured, celebrated, had ambitions, retired and resigned themselves to their fates. It recaptures how they experienced the world through their senses: what they thought; how they felt; what they got angry and fought and cursed about; what they prayed for; what drove them insane; and finally how they died and were buried.

Local history satisfies an innate human desire to be connected to a place.

— Joseph A. Amato, *Rethinking Home* (2002)

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to national history that is intended to provide a comprehensive narrative of a common past of a people, local history is a microhistory in terms of geographic scope. But this should not give the impression that local history only deals with the basic description of a place (usually towns, communities, and other small units like the barangay in the Philippines) and uncomplicated events, thus producing unsophisticated writing. On the contrary, local history poses a range of possibilities in terms of themes, methodologies, and publics.

In addressing the challenges in the writing of Cordillera local histories, this paper has the general objective of presenting a critical analysis of the practice of local history. With reference

to the Cordillera experience of local history writing, the paper specifically aims to

- a) cultivate an appreciation for the value (role) and potential of local history in the context of national history,
- b) gain insights on the nature of local history and the possible themes that can be pursued in specific contexts,
- c) gain basic knowledge of creative methodologies that may be employed, and present issues that are commonly encountered in the writing of local histories, especially in the writing of indigenous peoples' local histories.

THE NEED TO WRITE (CORDILLERA) LOCAL HISTORY: REFLECTIONS ON THE PURPOSE OF LOCAL HISTORY

National histories are generalizing and homogenizing; they do not capture the nuances—meaning, the fine distinctions—in our culture and the economic and political developments exhibited by specific communities. As Filipinos, we are highly differentiated in terms of our environment, belief systems, cultural practices, ethnicities, institutions, and levels of economic development. Given this heterogeneous context, the writing of local history becomes a venue for enriching/enhancing our national history.

As a region, the Cordillera in Northern Luzon has distinct features. Its physical terrain defines a unique environment and particular history distinct from Manila, the political center, and

the *kapatagan* (lowland). “Cordillera” is derived from the Latin word *chorda* and the Spanish term *cord*; in geography cord refers to “a chain of mountains, usually the principal mountain system or mountain axis of a large landmass” (The American Heritage Science Dictionary 2002). The Cordillera provides the backbone to the main island of Luzon, and is home to indigenous peoples of whom the major ethnolinguistic groups are the Ibaloi, Kankanaey, Bontok, Ifugao, Kalinga, Isneg (Apayao), and Itneg (also Tingguian). The common collective reference to them is Igorot, an indigenous term combining the prefix *y* (meaning from) and the word *golot* (meaning mountain or highlands). Its physical environment made both Spanish and American colonization difficult to implement. From a geographical entity, the Cordillera evolved as a political space for what historian William Henry Scott called *tribus independientes* (Scott 1974).

For not being integrated into the colonial polity, and other distinct particularities, historical writings have not appropriately represented the Cordillera and its peoples. In national history, the Igorots are either invisible or misinterpreted, thereby marginalized. One purpose of writing Cordillera local histories is to address and redress this imbalance.

Next to the writing of the Historical Data Papers during the Quirino administration, the celebration of the centennials of the Philippine revolution and the declaration of Philippine independence in 1996 and 1998, respectively, became a watershed for local history writing not only in the Cordillera but also in the entire Philippines. The writing of local histories became attractive to non-academics, thereby allowing local history writing to move out from academia and from being identified as a preoccupation of professional historians. This means that the people who used to be the mere objects of historical writing were transformed to become the subjects of their histories. In the case of the Cordillera peoples, they have seized the moment

to reexamine their historical roots and begin writing their own histories. Since then the writing of local histories has become an empowering exercise toward generating an appropriate self-definition and interpretation for a people who have long been misrepresented in history. The result is the discovery and uncovering of events and people previously unaccounted for in general histories. Local histories being empowering may be interpreted on two levels: first, the people generate their own data and interpretation; second, the people are able to assert their role in the history of the nation and become participants in the reconstruction of national history. The Cordillera peoples have been misrepresented as backward and primitive for resisting the colonial order. Many fail to recognize that their opposition to the colonial order was a legitimate resistance to preserve their indigenous institutions and their sovereignty.

LOCATING LOCAL HISTORY EVENTS

In his assessment of the state of local history writing, Resil Mojares (1990) notes that many local histories that have been produced are simply the translations of national events to local settings. For instance, in time for the celebration of the centennial of the Philippine revolution, many historical researches focused on whether or not there were local chapters of the Katipunan, and if the revolution gained following in areas beyond Manila. In this manner, following Mojares's observation, local history is a mere extension of national history. Events in Manila become the parameters for reconstructing the past. However, in accepting that the Philippines is archipelagic and diverse, there should be greater openness to more nuanced interpretations of historical developments.

While Philippine history officially marks our colonial period to the coming of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi in 1565, it

would only be in the 1800s that the Cordillera came under direct rule. Outside the colonial polity, but within its orbit, the Cordillera settlements continued to maintain their sovereignty and were reacting to the Christianized settlements successfully placed under *reduccion* and later Spanish political consolidation. The fact that the Cordillera was not fully integrated into the colonial polity does not make the region devoid of history.

While Manila and adjacent provinces were resisting colonialism, the Igorots also had their forms of resistance no matter how fragmented. A recurrent theme in some local histories has been to explain whether or not Cordillera resistances during the colonial period were anticolonial or were simply intended to preserve tribal sovereignty. While most of the Philippine archipelago came under the *Leyes delos Indias*, the Igorots had their indigenous leaders and institutions that they did not want replaced. In the account of Fray Francisco Antolin, OP, the Igorots expressed that they were not envious of the Christianized lowlands:

The fiestas of the Christians aren't worth anything, because everything is simply making a lot of noise with bells, drums and muskets and then everybody just goes to his own house to eat what little he has. But the fiestas of our leaders are not like that because, without making such a racket, they are more tasty and satisfying. They kill animals to eat by the dozens, and everybody drinks till he passes out, and so it goes for many days. Among you, anybody is mayor or headman, but our leaders are never changed. No matter how much they spend, they always have more. (Antolin 1988, 39, 41)

PERIODIZING CORDILLERA LOCAL HISTORIES: FROM SOCIAL MEMORY TO HISTORY

One of the challenges in the writing of Cordillera local history is to determine periodization in a manner that would appropriately capture and represent the nuanced conditions in a locality or in a region. Among the different provinces, the western section (Baguio, Benguet, the current Mountain Province) may be covered by the same periodization. The Ifugao area was closely linked to developments in Nueva Vizcaya¹ while Kalinga and Apayao may be considered the last frontiers. Abra would always be referred to as an extension of the Ilocos.²

In reconstructing the events in a time line, where does a local history start? In my experience, I asked key informants what they consider as significant to their villages. It is interesting to note that it is not the national events that define historic markers but events like the building and transfer of a house, the making of a *bagabi* (a wooden bench of an Ifugao elite), disasters like epidemics, and the popular domestic political histories. Narratives regarding genealogies, sometimes with mythical beginnings and thus a mix of folklore and family data, are common among the peoples of the Cordillera.

Local history begins with a shared, collective memory, where the people, no matter how selective in remembering and forgetting, reconstruct the past. The task of the local historian is to transform collective memory to history—that is, by finding corroborative evidence employing a mix of methodologies that would involve oral history, archival and documentary evidence, and material culture. For peoples drawn to orality rather than record keeping, oral history becomes a powerful tool for the reconstruction of local histories. It is interesting to discover that many do not keep track of dates but recall community events that serve as historical markers.

One recurring question among participants of local history trainings is the handling of conflicting data and interpretations. Unless the issue is accuracy, I do not see any problem with presenting the range of data and interpretations available as long as an explanation of context is provided.

Among the peoples of the Cordillera, there is relative consensus that periodization should begin with the Japanese occupation. It is generally considered as a decisive moment since the region was confronted with a “common enemy.” It was an event that required concerted action. A harrowing experience told and retold through generations, including the living, writing about the Japanese occupation is also considered an eyewitness history in contrast to a distant or remote history, which reconstructs events beyond the lifetime of a narrator. Old informants were direct participants in the event and still could recount their experiences. Events prior to this marker is what they consider remote or distant history. In periodizing Cordillera local histories, there should be the openness to deviate from standard nodal points. It is part of the challenge to generate a locale’s periodization.

DEALING WITH BOUNDARIES

How do we determine the boundary of local history? Is the unit of analysis the state-defined formal structure of town, municipality, or barangay? Due to pragmatic considerations, local historians proceed from the formal structures and usually start with the founding of towns, the declaration of charters, and the creation of barangays. This is unmindful of the fluidity of space and time. This is one interesting challenge to the writing of local history in the Cordillera.

In the very popular town of Sagada, Mountain Province, we conducted fieldwork in Ankileng and the adjacent Suyo. We realized that prior to their partitioning, they had common roots. They had the same source for wood. The shared resources and the management of these made Ankileng and Suyo a community with a shared history. By virtue of political decrees, the two were partitioned with the river as a demarcating line. When the river course shifts, do loyalties to a community also shift? Local histories should not be confined to state-defined territorial limits, but should take into consideration the shared experiences of people. By disregarding other sources of belonging/loyalty of a people and indigenous social structures (e.g., resource management), local history becomes deficient.

It is important to identify indigenous social structures that tend to determine people's collective action. In some parts of the Cordillera, the village is called the *ili*, which may be considered as an important unit of analysis in the writing of local history. The *ili* interfaces with kinship ties, ritual practices, control of ancestral land, management of resources, and conflict resolution. There are other institutions, like the *ator* in Bontoc, its counterpart *dap-ay* among the Kankanaey, and the *tongtongan*, that are either physical spaces and/or venues that bring people together.³ These are significant starting points for doing local history in the Cordillera.

In many instances, historical sources mention place names that become references for local historians. There are some places that are renamed in the process. Do place names denote the same territory as defined in historical sources? A specific example is the Quiangan that appears in Spanish accounts and Kiangnan that is now a municipality of Ifugao. Are these two spaces synonymous? Would it be reliable to reconstruct a local history of Kiangnan from

accounts about Quiangan? Would one approximate the other? Quiangan was recurrently mentioned in Spanish chronicles because of the impact created by the Quianganes on the adjacent Christianized lowland towns of Nueva Vizcaya. They would usually attack the lowlands causing in some instances a standstill in the affairs of the towns. In other accounts there is reference to the commandancy or the district of Quiangan (Perez 1988, 245–48).

In Benguet, there is reference to the settlement of Tonglo, which until this time has not been located. But Augustinian accounts also talk of the Tonglo mission (Perez 1904). This has drawn the interest of local historians pursuing settlement history. The other historical significance of Tonglo is that it was supposedly the site of Ibaloy resistance against the Spaniards who were on a military expedition; allegedly the military encounter almost caused the decimation of the Ibaloy villagers.

The region known as Cordillera more or less approximates the many *rancherías* (non-Christian settlements) of the Spanish period that were later clustered to *comandancias político militar*. As colonization of Northern Luzon proceeded, some settlements were eventually integrated into the Ilocos, Cagayan Valley, and Pangasinan. As the Cordillera region mulls autonomy or administrative regionalization, many settlements along the foothills of the Cordillera have articulated that their sense of belonging is with the region. The Bago whose settlements straddle the boundary of Ilocos, La Union, Pangasinan, and the highland have asserted their identity along with several ethnolinguistic groups in Nueva Vizcaya. The Mountain Province of the American colonial administration consisted of Benguet, Ifugao, Bontoc, Kalinga, and Apayao. It should be noted that there has been ambivalence about Abra. Is it part of the Cordillera or the Ilocos? The Mountain Province we know now would

In determining the boundaries of local history, it is imperative to trace the roots of the collective identity of the people and use the appropriate space to mark the shared experience. From this the local historian can move to the possible expansion of boundaries as other state-sponsored political spaces are determined. As conditions push or pull people, it is logical to expect new towns to be created, while other settlements are abandoned. The case of Kayapa of Nueva Vizcaya is an example. Historically the town has been associated with the Kalanguyas, but it is now dominated by the Ibalays of Benguet who were dislocated as a result of the construction of the two hydroelectric dams of Ambuklao and Binga in 1956 and 1960, respectively. Local history should always be conscious of the dynamic evolution of space and the malleability of these spaces as a result of human activity, including political machinations.

FROM ETHNOGRAPHY TO ETHNOHISTORY

For local histories on the Cordillera there are specialized archival data collections in the Philippines, Spain, and the United States. But these are hardly accessible to local historians. But data from the use of material culture and oral history are within reach. The use of material culture, however, usually results in ethnography rather than historical studies. Ethnography usually refers to a compilation of descriptive accounts of the basic characteristics and practices of a people. Because local history is a venue for self-definition of indigenous peoples, the tendency is to engage in essentialism. What are the defining characteristics or features of each ethnolinguistic group in the Cordillera? Attempts to find the essence of a culture entails the propensity to look for the unadulterated elements of a culture. It is not surprising to find a proliferation of ethnographic studies that are often taken synonymously as local histories.⁴ These ethnographic

profiles tend to fall into the trap of timelessness or what is known as the ethnographic present. This tendency toward essentialism in presenting the ways of Cordillera peoples (e.g., the practices of indigenous institutions including headhunting, which has long ceased) is likely to be devoid of a temporal context.

Local history also captures transformation or change. So when reconstructing local histories, there should be the constant reminder that ethnography is different from ethnohistory. I view any historical study as having both space (spatial) and time (temporal) contexts. Ethnographic data becomes ethnohistorical only when presented in a historical context. For example, a ritual study becomes ethnohistorical when the historian documents not only how and when rituals are performed but also the many changes that have taken place in the practice of rituals. The history of rice terracing should document the transformations that have taken place from indigenous agricultural practices, belief systems, labor, and other aspects of it. I usually represent the temporal and spatial contexts using the diagram shown in figure 2.

SPACE/SETTING (RICE TERRACING/INSTITUTIONS/MATERIAL CULTURE IN CORDILLERA COMMUNITY)		
TIME 1 (ancient practices)	TIME 2 (period of Christianization and ubanization)	TIME 3 (introduction of new varieties of rice)

Figure 2. Space/Setting (Rice Terracing/
Institutions/Material Culture in Cordillera)

The diagram presents a diachronic local history inasmuch as it deals with several periods. However, local history may also focus on a particular period, which makes it synchronic.

USING COLONIAL SOURCES

Since many local histories intend to dislodge colonial historiography, one major challenge in the writing of Cordillera histories is the use of colonial sources, particularly documents written by chroniclers of both the Spanish and American periods. On one extreme, colonial sources are disregarded. The other extreme is overdependence, which is ironic. The use of colonial sources does not necessarily result in bad history.

A good example of a text that requires an analysis of context is the following account on early resistance among indigenous peoples in the Cordillera. Among the highlanders, women shamans known as *aniteras* led resistances. In 1605, Caquenga, an anitera, led the burning of the church in Nalfotan. Here is the account of Fray Diego Aduarte, O.P., of the incident:

Hence by the means of a sorceress, a priestess named Caquenga, he began to disturb the Indians, to whom this wicked woman said such things that many determined to follow the rites of their ancestors and not to receive the teaching of the divine law. So devilish was this cursed anitera that she kept stirring up some of them against the religious, while at the same time with those who wished to keep him she pretended to be on their side; thus she deceived them all, especially those who were influenced by their zeal for ancient superstitions. Hence they themselves killed their fowls and the swine which they had bred, tore down their houses, cut their own palm groves in which their principal wealth consisted; and crying out “Liberty!” they fled to the mountains. (Blair and Robertson 1903–1909, vol. 31, 267)

Caquenga is a female priestess, but the phrase “he disturbed the Indians” was used on the first line of the account. This is

because Caquenga, who worked against the colonial order, was equated to the devil (who was considered male). It would appear that the resistances of the indigenous peoples were irrational and founded on superstitious beliefs, but a rereading of the text would show that they had an idea of freedom. Applying historical criticism on the text, it could be surmised that the account was written from the perspective of a specific social order. Fray Diego Aduarte, the chronicler, was male and was speaking from a colonial Christian standpoint.⁵

Common labels used to refer to Igorots and other unpacified peoples in the Philippines—like *infeles*, savages, wild, uncivilized, ethnic minorities, tribes, to name a few—should be taken in their various historical contexts.

LOCAL HISTORIES AND THEIR CONNECTIONS TO REGIONAL AND NATIONAL HISTORIES

Local histories are never self-contained. For this reason, local historians should be mindful of the connections to larger histories like the region and the nation. Historian Samuel K. Tan (1977) identified ways by which local historians are able to locate local histories in their broader context. He enumerates the following linkages between the local-regional to the broader national space: (1) finding shared historical processes that make imprints on communities, (2) identifying national policies and programs that trickle into communities, and (3) determining the national dimension of local and regional aspirations.

Many state-sponsored policies that would require Cordillera local histories to be integrated into a broader context could be cited. The tobacco monopoly (De Jesus 1982) in Cagayan drew in the peoples of the Cordillera to “participate” despite their being borderlands. Smuggling of highland tobacco to the

lowlands made its imprints on production. Another significant effect would be the migration of peoples resulting from the pull factor of employment and urbanization. This impact could be extended to the interethnic relations between the Igorots and the lowland settlements. Resettlement schemes of both colonial and postcolonial administrations intended to facilitate the assimilation of the Igorots into the mainstream would create dislocations in the form of Igorot dispossession of their ancestral lands. Lowland-upland interactions also shaped the quality of interethnic relations.

THE FUTURE OF CORDILLERA LOCAL HISTORIES

There are many gaps in, as well as creative approaches to, the writing of Cordillera history that should serve as a guide to those who wish to participate in reconstructing a meaningful and relevant past. Settlement histories may serve as a modest start. With today's buzzword on climate change, environmental histories are important. Shifting resource management in the history of river/water systems would reflect social change in villages and communities in the same manner as Felix Keesing divided Northern Luzon into subregions and culture zones based on how the river systems served as nexus⁶ for interethnic relations.

I have lamented the fact that a full history of women in the Cordillera has yet to be written. Local histories should start reconstructing women's roles in Cordillera history. Women have been a significant force in the social movements in the Cordillera during the colonial period, the period of the Chico River Dam resistances, and the present. Accounts of events in August 1933 and also during the Chico Dam resistance would show how women joined protest actions, "strip their tapis and stood naked before the soldiers" (Dosser, n.d., cited in Florendo 1994, 163).

The material culture (i.e., physical objects or belongings such as artifacts, documents, and photographs) of the Cordillera remains a very rich ground for starting local histories, but as discussed earlier, material culture should be considered with close attention to the historical context. While material culture is not history per se, they can provide leads to the characteristics, situations, and experiences of communities or peoples. In more recent discussions of historical sources, the concepts of document and even texts have gone beyond written evidence. Many items that are part of material culture may also be read and interpreted as texts.

Who has the capacity or is in the best position to write local histories—the insider or the outsider? Both are capable as long as the production of local histories are undertaken to meet necessary standards of scholarship. Reconstructing the past becomes a key element of Cordillera local histories in response to the marginalization of indigenous peoples as objects of history and as invisible participants of history.

Local histories of indigenous peoples are political and in a way partisan. As noted by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a leading theorist of Maori decolonization in New Zealand, indigenous peoples need to reclaim their past; it is through reconstruction of the past that they are able to understand the present (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 33).

NOTES

- 1 See Bernardo Ustariz's accounts of events and the missions between Pangasinan and Cagayan.
- 2 See Census of the Philippine Islands conducted during the American period.
- 3 From *Ethnography of the Major Ethnolinguistic Groups in the Cordillera* (2003): An *ator* is defined as "a multipurpose ground-level structure with low stone walls where boys, young men, old bachelors, and widowers meet during the day and sleep during the night and where village ceremonies and public functions are performed." The *dap-ay* among the Kankanaey performs a similar function. The *tongtong* (Ibaloy) and *tongtongan* (Ikalahan) refer to "the village council ... in charge of discussing and settling issues affecting the community, and conference among the Ikalahan.
- 4 Examples of these works include Lourdes Dulawan, *Ifugao: Culture and History* (2001); Eulalio Amoyen Austin, *The Bago: Its Origins and Culture* (2003) [from which an undergraduate thesis was conducted: Pearl Calixto and Janice Domogan, "Lifehistories: The Bago Ethnic Identity" (UP Baguio, 2004)]; Bongui Ramos, "The Apayao" (n.d.); Leon O. Lonogan, *The Sunset at Sunrise: The Birth of the Agawa Sub-tribe* (2006); Miguel Sugguiyao, *The Kalinga Hilltribes of the Philippines* (1990).
- 5 Historical studies have been affected by theoretical perspectives—structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism. Deconstruction (from Derrida and Heidegger) has become popular among historians. In very simple explanation, deconstruction is the relativity of meanings. In dealing with text, for instance, it would be imperative to discern the text and context (Munslow 2000, 84). All these may be applied to local history writing.
- 6 The word *nexus* was used by Arnold Molina Azurin to refer to waterways as highways of interaction between lowland (Ilocos) and upland (Cordillera) communities.

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