Southeast Asia

Will Smith, *Mountains of Blame: Climate and Culpability in the Philippine Uplands*

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Mountains of Blame appears as a much-needed interjection into Philippine studies and debates—and current obsessions—in anthropology regarding the role of indigenous communities in ameliorating climate change. Will Smith's ethnography describes the moral discourses that the Palawan, an indigenous community of the Palawan Islands in the Philippines, deploy to understand the violent repercussion of unpredictable climate patterns into their livelihoods and to make sense of the dominant discourse of environmental conservation enforced upon them by the Philippine state and civil-society groups. A peculiar feature undergirds this moral principle, Smith notes. Palawans blame themselves for the erratic climate patterns in which long spells of dry weather and unpredictable rain devastate their livelihood. How to make sense of this almost defeatist stance? What kind of account does it demand from an anthropologist without falling into the trap of essentializing or reifying these moral accounts of self-blame as some weak form of intervention against the environmental norms imposed into an indigenous community by external actors? These are the key questions that Smith tries to explain in this book using the experiences of the Palawans. Their practice of *kaingin*, or swidden agriculture, became the target of different efforts by the government to sedentarize and force them to abandon their traditional livelihood and embrace less destructive economic activities.

Chapter 1 unpacks the genealogy of environmental discourses that framed *kaingin* as a destructive form of economic subsistence. From the Spanish period through the American colonial experiment in the Philippines, the practice of *kaingin* came to signify that which stood opposite to the projects of colonial modernity. Swidden agriculture was perceived as a "wasteful and destructive" (32) activity that must be criminalized. The particular political-economic contours of the colonial Philippines resulted in a situation where colonial knowledge of forestry and the flotilla of bureaucrats demonized swidden agriculture while eliding the role of commercial logging and other efforts of the colonial government to profit from upland areas. These same colonial indexes of barbarity continued to inform how the postcolonial government approached *kaingin*. The Palawans became the recipient population of development norms, whose goals included conserving the environment and the sedentarization of their economic activities. Whereas the colonial government relied on punitive actions to criminalize Palawans' economic activities, the postcolonial government shifted its focus from the "problem of *kaingin* to the problem of upland development" (41).

Chapter 2 provides an ethnographic description of this morphing approach toward swidden agriculture by enacting the Palawan Tropical Forestry Protection Program (PTFPP). This project introduced new land zones that restricted the Palawans' access to vital resources and forced them to embrace "sedentary lives" (92) in designated areas. Through PTFPP, the Palawans were reconfigured to promote specific relations to indigenous spaces where borders and boundaries marked a new kind of spatial production to suit conservation projects. These borders and boundaries, in turn, became the mechanism through which an absent state made its presence known to the Palawans.

In chapter 3, Smith detects an illustrative example of the rise of a distinct kind of biopolitics in the governing of Palawan by the Philippine state. Instead of relying on punitive measures, the different conservation projects focused on delivering projects that allowed the propagation of Palawans' lives and specific forms of environmental subjectivity. With the introduction of social forestry programs, the focus shifted into making the Palawans productive subjects of environmental norms by transforming their ancestral domains into sites of economic production through agroforestry projects. However, Smith notes that these were done to further sedentarize the Palawans and integrate them into national and global capitalist production. In this way, the shift from punitive toward biopolitical governance changed how the state approached the problem of *kaingin* and pushed the Palawan closer to capitalist production.

In chapter 4, Smith describes how the ensuing processes of dispossession from capitalist integration and the decline of *kaingin* as an economic practice due to climate change were understood by the Palawans through a moral economy of self-blame. Like earlier studies on moral economy (cf. Scott 1967), the Palawans drew from their own onto-epistemologies to explain the gnawing effects of drought and floods on their livelihood. What is particularly striking is that the Palawans' moral account of their dispossession involved the recent change in climate as an epiphenomenon of moral decline. For them, the drought and floods resulted from incestuous relationships, and their deities were punishing them for committing sexual relations with their own kin.

However, this moral economy of self-blame does not excise the state from its role in violently transforming the lives of Palawans. The limits imposed by the government on their customary laws, most specifically the ritual punishment of killing persons involved in incestuous relationships, also contributed to the erratic weather patterns. Since they could no longer perform the necessary sanctions to placate the gods offended by their immoral actions, the Palawans also blamed the Philippine government for the restrictions preventing them from redeeming themselves. Hence, the Palawans find themselves in a predicament where the gods continue to destroy their livelihood by sending more rains and drought to remind them of their moral injunctions. For Smith, these emic accounts of climatic transformation where larger political and economic forces appeared outside the epistemological understanding of the Palawans should not be divorced from their "struggles over the forest lives and livelihoods" (128). They are embedded and articulated as an internal account of "cultural transformation, environmental uncertainty, and new geographies of social differentiation and state power" (ibid.).

The concluding chapter brings together the three ethnographic chapters and identifies crucial implications of Palawans' moral economy of self-blame into the study of indigenous peoples. Smith points to the now unquestioned assumption in anthropology and other forms of engagement with indigenous communities that invariably paint a homogenous and Edenic representation of indigenous communities

as saviors of the environment. He questions, for instance, the possible complications that arise when indigenous communities do not live up to this expectation and instead come up with "troubling accounts" (138) of self-blame that seem to defy the language of empowerment so prevalent in how nongovernment organizations and the government deal with indigenous minorities. These unpopular but grounded accounts, Smith adds, provide a more nuanced understanding that could counter the uncomplicated and dominant "narratives dependent on particular configurations of indigeneity" (ibid.) in the Philippines.

Specific questions are left unexplained in Smith's ethnographic account. While he succinctly illustrates the shift from punitive to biopolitical approaches to the governing of Palawan swidden agriculture, I wonder if this shift is not just a conceptual illustration of Foucault's core assumptions about the nature of power but also an indication of a critical historical transition in Philippine political history. More specifically, the post-authoritarian situation somehow engenders a condition where devolution of power came as an after-effect of Ferdinand Marcos's repressive policies. This is particularly important as a historical juncture when discussing the genealogy of state power on the Palawan Islands and the contour of the moral economy of self-blame that Palawans deploy. Is there a relationship between the ethics of self-governance promoted by the post-authoritarian state and the moralized explanation that Palawans constructed to account for their failure to adhere to moral codes as the sole culprit for the change in weather? In other words, does the moral economy of self-blame find a perfect condition of possibility to emerge when the state's authority is devolved and localized?

Despite these gaps, Smith's ethnography provides a powerful reminder to those of us who study and bring illumination to the condition of indigenous communities. Instead of simply recycling idyllic images of indigenous communities as protectors of the environment, he cautions us of the Palawans' often complicated relationships to the environment. Furthermore, instead of easily anointing the hegemonic language of rights as the only legitimate means for an indigenous community to speak and explain their dispossession, Smith's ethnography pushes us to reconsider non-rights discourses where people's emic understanding relies on morals and ontologies to describe their situation. This last intervention, I believe, is the most powerful message one can draw from Smith's *Mountains of Blame*. Instead of treating the moral ecology of self-blame as another exotic account of some foreign tribal community about their condition, the nonuse of the formal language of rights reminds us of the very limit of dominant frames (i.e., indigenous resilience) to understand and describe dispossession.

References

Scott, James. 1976. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

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