

Book review: Mina Roces: The Filipino Migration Experience: Global Agents of Change

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does not adequately address his clarification that “the Ḥaddānian paradigm complemented, but also competed with, other text-centered articulatory paradigms brought by pilgrims returning from Mecca” (p. 63) – a statement that is presumably intended to explain other existing “paradigms”, including the Shaṭṭāriyah’s role from the seventeenth century onwards, in ordering and maintaining the basic Sufi litany and cosmology throughout maritime Southeast Asia.

Finally, readers of the social sciences will also notice the absence of the concept of “civil society” in this book, and it fails to address the question of whether or not the social formation of Habib Luthfi’s religious authority, for example, blurs the identity boundaries of citizens between society and state. Or, reading between the lines, one might view this book as a contemplation of the unnecessary differentiation between state and civil society, describing instead an elastic, yet coherent movement that preserves a unitary vision of political aspiration, a prolonged version of the classical political theology of *ahl al-sunnah wa-l-jamā‘ah* (Sunnism): a state-religion-society mutual alliance to maximise social order in pluralistic, if not sectarian, milieus such as Indonesia.

Nonetheless, historians, anthropologists and readers of social sciences in general will definitely consider this highly recommended book as a valuable resource to read and ponder.

Zacky Khairul Umam

MINA ROCES, *The Filipino Migration Experience: Global Agents of Change*. Ithaca / London: Cornell University Press, 2021. 254 pages, \$49.95. ISBN 978-1-5017-6040-2

The Filipino Migration Experience was refreshing to read, especially because of the way Mina Roces uses “migrant archives” to reveal more detail about how migrants act as “global agents of change” through their consumption, activism and philanthropy. The book is a much-needed intervention in the academic literature that overwhelmingly sees migrants as victims of the global system that exploits their labour and entails high social costs for them and their families. Its historical perspective differs from the dominant narrative that positions the migrant as a “disenfranchised laborer” (p. 7). The migrants the author has chosen to focus on tell a complementary story that is replete with information about how they have transformed social norms, shaped economic activity, acted as philanthropists and curated their own histories.

The book is divided into three parts that examine different ways in which migrants are “global agents of change”. First, Mina Roces examines how migrants have impacted social norms that relate to the family as well as gender

roles and sexuality in the Philippines. The reader learns that the concept of family has been expanded so as to be more inclusive of individuals without “nuclear or extended” ties, such as fellow NGO members. Their migration and open discussion of “extramarital affairs and abandonment of wives and children” has also broken a “social taboo” that mythologises the “sanctity of the Filipino family”, whose realities should not normally be discussed in the Philippines (p. 31). Mina Roces then argues that migrant women in particular have challenged cultural constructions of the “feminine by taking in lovers ... or indulging in adultery” (p. 46). However, one is left wondering: How do these challenges play out in the Philippines more generally?

The second part offers two chapters that make a case for how migrants from the Philippines have changed various economic landscapes through their increased power to consume. Much academic literature has focused on changes in consumption behaviour by migrants and their families as well as casting the migrants themselves as “agents of development”. As Mina Roces explains, the remittances they send have transformed the “history of banking and banking services in the Philippines” (p. 85). The opening of financial services overseas that cater to migrant needs, e.g. by remaining open on Sunday for domestic workers in Singapore, are an example of that. Another development that Mina Roces carefully outlines is the impact that overseas earning power has had on investment services and the real-estate market in the Philippines. Such in-depth explorations need to be conducted in other large migrant-sending countries in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia.

The third and final part discusses how migrants advocate for change in their host country as well as at home. The chapters consistently position migrants at the forefront of efforts to curate their own history, advocate for change in their host countries and provide much-needed expert and material assistance in the Philippines. The main contribution here is that the book shifts the focus away from the well-documented marginal and peripheral roles migrants play in our global economic system to the centrality of their interventions outside the world of work. In fact, the author concludes that altogether these chapters provide a “fresh perspective on migrant influence beyond labor” (p. 173). I could not agree more.

The Filipino Migration Experience achieves its objective as stated at the outset: to tell the story of how migrants have impact. This is an important contribution that challenges the assumption that migrants are always only liminal actors. However, the dual position of so many migrants as “disenfranchised laborers” begs the question: to what extent then are these migrants also “global agents of change”? Mina Roces never suggests that they are not both, yet we do not get an idea of how she measures one against the other in her empowering narrative. Such an appreciation might have justified the absence of any discussion about the vital activism on the part of migrants to resist, for example, depor-

tation. Such omissions seemed at times glaring when the overall objective was to shed light on the dual role of migrants as “global agents of change”.

My other concern is that the methodology removed the distinction between different types of migrants (e.g. temporary vs permanent) to then “offer new categories to understand migrant experience” (p. 7). In practice, this meant that it was easier to create the narrative of “global agents of change”. But how can the experiences of temporary, employer-tied contract workers in Singapore, for example, be compared to those of ethnic minorities with permanent residence or citizenship in the United States? As a migration expert, I would have liked to know why they are comparable.

Nevertheless, *The Filipino Migration Experience* is important reading for scholars interested in migration research from a historical perspective. At the very least, it provides a much-needed corrective to dominant narratives of migrants’ experience that position them as passive victims instead of as simultaneous “global agents of change”.

Wayne Palmer