

Book review: *Incomplete Conquest*

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Stephanie Joy Mawson. (2023). *Incomplete Conquest: The Limits of the Spanish Empire in the Seventeenth-Century Philippines*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

In her book, *Incomplete Conquest*, Stephanie Mawson provides an examination that posits an alternative view of Spanish colonization. Mawson does this by assessing the limitations that hindered the complete colonization of the Philippines. She proposes different obstacles which limited internal control of the Captaincy-General of the Philippines and hindered its further expansion. She argues that while colonial institutions (i.e. military and church) portrayed an idea of full control and power in the archipelago, they simply did not possess such strength due to the limitations that the colonial state encountered in the seventeenth century. To support this argument, the author utilizes archival materials from Spain, Mexico, Rome, the United States, and the Philippines where she additionally conducted nontraditional research in Northern Luzon together with Filipino scholars and locals.

Mawson's arguments and questions were further elaborated and examined in the body of her book, consisting of seven chapters that tackled different areas of the Philippines that can be categorized into three area categories. She first discusses the "area of complete control." This is the area where Spanish control was, in the popular imagination at least, most easily and quickly acquired after their initial arrival. In the first chapter, she examined the Pampangans who were the most loyal and integrated *indios* but still revolted against Spain, specifically in 1660. Mawson concludes that such rebellions by *indios* who were already integrated into the colony showed that the colonial state did not have the sufficient military population to defend all its territories from internal and external threats. Furthermore, their reliance on indigenous soldiers was, to a degree, disadvantageous once these native soldiers led mutinies and revolts. The second chapter deals with the continuity of prehispanic slavery, a state of affairs that also exposed the lack of total Spanish control over the native *principalia* class. Mawson stated that, despite anti-slavery decrees signed by the Royal Court and sent by the Council of the Indies in 1657 and 1692, the native *indio* *principalia* threatened to revolt if the colonial state were to free all the slaves. Mawson thus shows that abolishing slavery was neither economically

beneficial nor politically expedient to the colonial state due to the great reliance on *indios* for labor and military manpower.

Beyond questions of maintaining loyalty first promised in Legazpi's time and acquiescence to the newest decrees from Spain itself, the third chapter reveals that Catholic conversion was, initially, also limited. This is contrary to John Leddy Phelan's argument (2006) that large amounts of tributes equaled rapid and complete conversion and colonization of the archipelago. Mawson argues instead that indigenous resistance towards Christianity was present among the colonized lowlands and uncolonized highlands. Resistance varied from fleeing to the mountains, to a syncretic approach where the natives rejected Christian doctrines but adopted its material culture as exemplified by appropriation of Christian medallions, to outright rebellions led by surviving or hidden babaylans. In the seventh chapter, Mawson zoomed in on the heart of Spanish Asia—Manila where Spanish power and presence were most clearly seen, heard, and felt. However, Mawson reasons that even here, the Spaniards were frustrated and threatened by the constant growth of the Chinese population in the nearby suburb of Binondo to the point of inciting violent massacres against them in 1603, 1639 and 1663. Here, the Spaniards' power and presence were perceived to be limited as the Chinese traders and artisans controlled the economy not just of Manila, but of the entire collection of Spanish-ruled territories in the archipelago. Spanish insecurity about this was so severe leading Spanish officials to conclude that Manila was more "Chinese" than "Spanish." (p. 157)

The second area category focused on is the so-called "area of exchange." This was the area where Spanish religious and military force initially turned a blind eye during the early years of conquest, only to belatedly focus on but never fully control due to stubborn native resistance in all but the easiest portions of land. Mawson spends her sixth chapter discussing how the Spanish missionaries and soldiers who began colonizing the Cagayan river valley dealt with, and had their plans and decisions changed by, the Igorots and other mountain tribes who frightened the Spanish with their headhunting ways. The majority of these indigenous peoples not only retained their ancestral faiths but also stubbornly clung to the mountains surrounding the valley and refused to live in the riverside reduction *barrios* long accepted by loyal *indios* like the Pampangans mentioned previously. Therefore, instead of merely analyzing the effects of the colonizers in areas where Spanish control was not total, Mawson engages in what has recently been coined by Stephen Acabado (2017, p. 2) as "pericolonialism."

The third category was the "area of contested space" where little to no presence of Spain was present. These were the frontiers where

Spanish-loyal missionaries and soldiers were severely outnumbered by the surrounding organized enemies of Spain. Perhaps expectedly, Mawson spends the fourth chapter examining the Moros, Spain's most intractable enemies in its three-century history of colonial rule in the archipelago. She specifically focuses on their propensity for slave raiding and how this culture limited the Spaniards from establishing any semblance of strong control in Mindanao. For the fifth chapter, the mountains of Luzon were explored (recall the Igorots mentioned previously), and Mawson ultimately contends that geographic space (i.e. sea and mountain) limited Spanish advances in the archipelago. The Spaniards saw it as impractical to maintain a Spanish armada to drive off the Moro aggression in the south. Meanwhile, minimal knowledge of northern Luzon hindered Spanish progress in the Cordillera region.

One of the book's strengths in examining the political situation in the seventeenth-century Philippines is its vast use of archival sources and the author's approach to it. Mawson did not limit this study to a particular set of archival records but visited and consulted more than ten archives located in Europe, Mexico, and the Philippines. Her use of Spanish primary sources to investigate the agency of the natives, examining it against the grain, and deconstructing the colonial archive by not treating its material with equal value of content greatly shaped the book. It sought to find the *indio* who resisted by not just by resorting to fleeing or committing acts of violent self-defense but also the *indio* who persisted by adapting and negotiating with the colonial state. Another strength of Mawson's is that she not only provided a comprehensive narrative on the challenges of the colonial state using Spanish sources whose institutions can be found in Manila (i.e. Real Audiencia, Inquisición). She also veered away from a Spanish-Manila-centric study of the seventeenth century by refocusing her book to the study of the marginal – the unconquered, the Moro, the headhunters, and the Chinese who limited the control and influence of the Spaniards in the Philippines.

Reading this work in the time of decolonization, Mawson's work is a refreshing reading of archival sources against the grain. She emphasizes the archival silence (the occurrence of historical authors deliberately not writing nor recording certain events) present in the archival materials. For the reader, Mawson's ability to reveal the quieted voices in the archives is an example of Lamana's (2008, p.1) decolonization process: actively rereading and interrogating archival sources until their alternative historical narrative emerges. Moreover, Mawson stands contrary to Phelan's work that argued for rapid and complete colonization, and Nicholas Cushner's (1971, p.5) idea of the paralyzed *indio* amidst colonization. *Incomplete Conquest* directly challenges these ideas. It puts forward an interpretation that the

indigenous people of the highlands and the *indios* of the lowlands resisted Spanish colonialism by different means, be it slave raiding by the Moros, headhunting by the Cordillerans, integration of animistic beliefs from the lowlands, or mutinies from the native soldiers – every *indio* had their ways and agencies to resist. Hence, this book greatly contributes to the discourse on native agency in the face of colonialism.

Bionote

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