

Moeran, Brian. 2021. *Ethnography in The Raw. Life in a Luzon Village*. London, New York: Berghahn Books. 298 pp. Hb.: \$130.00/£97.00. ISBN: 9781800730748.

Book review by

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When a Greek baker asked Moeran what he was doing, he answered that he was working on a book. The baker asked if he would be able to read it. That put Moeran to thinking about writing books that ordinary working people could read rather than abstruse, densely argued books to develop or explicate some abstract theoretical concepts that only academics could comprehend. His goal in this book is to give a flavor of what life in a Philippine village is like from the perspective of a British anthropologist married to a Philippine woman.

One of the chief exports of the Philippines is the labor of people working all over the planet, from Japan to Hong Kong to Saudi Arabia and the US. The money they send home to relatives is a significant part of the country's economic statistics.

Some of the themes that emerge are the apparent chaos of all aspects of lives ordered by reciprocal familial relations that often entail sacrifice. One sacrifice is the years of a person's life spent working abroad to garner wealth for the family. This is the only palliative to the extreme stratification of the country, something on the order of that of the UK or the US.

Reciprocity is a recurring theme not only in family life but in local, regional, and national life. Each political domain is governed by relations of hierarchical reciprocity in a system of patronage or, viewed from a slightly different perspective, what he calls "bossism," which characterizes the Mafia. So, while the country is democratic in the sense that people vote in elections, the elections are swayed to those to whom voters are obliged to support in return for government services such as road maintenance. Candidates pay voters for their support, and one villager commented that since she'd received

money from both candidates, there should be more elections. Even gambling fits this mold as the wealthy have resources they can devote to winning, such as special diets for fighting cocks, and they redistribute their winnings to their dependents.

So, far from enabling an egalitarian social order, the system of reciprocity fuels the hierarchy. The one means for people at the bottom to gain access to some resources is to engage in overseas work, and many of the people the author met had done so or had family members who were doing so. Moeran sums up the political system as “[...] an oligarchic democracy dominated by an elite who uses its access to state resources to maintain and expand its economic and political power” (p. 230)

Furthermore, there is no exit from the binding ties of family or political reciprocity. People engage in non-monetary exchanges to such an extent that they escape the freedom that is the defining feature of the market. They are trapped in relations of reciprocity. The other side of this observation is that, as the popular American song once put it, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.”

The chaos of daily life in the village seems to distance the people from the machinations of politics at all levels except when it’s time to vote. But, that structure can reach into the village as when a person in a black-shaded helmet rode into the village and shot a person dead for being on the wrong side.

While Moeran escapes the deadening hand of anthropological theory, he does lightly engage some of it along the way. For instance, he points out that Geertz’s absorption with a “thick description” of the Balinese cock fight distracted him from understanding extreme class divisions. Moeran’s marriage into a sprawling family gave him access to the interiors of this Philippine village but his tall stature and pale complexion set him unmistakably apart as a foreigner. He informally attends to the questions that anthropologists often ask of public and private rituals, religion, sacrifice, family structure, and political relations.

His aim was to give readers access to the informal musings of a foreign anthropologist on life in a Philippine village. This he has done. Whether any working person on this planet could afford to purchase the book is another question. Perhaps they might encounter it in a public library if they live in a country that supports such luxuries for workers.