

IN CONVERSATION: PATRICIA IRENE DACUDAO ON *ABACA FRONTIER: THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF DAVAO, 1898-1941*

Patricia Irene Dacudao
Ateneo de Manila University

ABSTRACT

In this interview, Patricia Irene Dacudao discusses her book *Abaca Frontier: The Socioeconomic and Cultural Transformation of Davao, 1898-1941*, which was published by Ateneo de Manila Press in 2023.¹

Philip Gooding (PG): How did you come to this topic? Why abaca, why Davao, and why the period 1898-1841? What was it about this theme, region, and time-period that drew you to research and write your book?

Patricia Irene Dacuado (PD): I am from Davao, and my grandparents were among those who migrated to Davao during the first half of the twentieth century, drawn by the possibilities of export crop production. I grew up with stories of those times, told over the dining table during extended family gatherings. I had always loved history as a child and liked listening to these stories of the past. This interest in history was further stoked by one of my older cousins who took his PhD in Tokyo University, and during his visits home, would tell us about the former abaca plantation workers he met in Japan. I was in college during those times, and I started to compare what I have been taught in the history books and what my family stories were, and I concluded that I could do more research on this topic. One major absence in the historiography was an acknowledgement of the existence of Japanese migrants in Davao before the Second World War. Following the war, all the Japanese were repatriated from the region, but since then, it appears as if there was a collective amnesia – perhaps intentional – of their having been there in the first place. I wanted to unpack their history, as well as the history of other groups and interactions in Davao.

¹ Patricia Irene Dacudao, *Abaca Frontier: The Socioeconomic and cultural transformation of Davao, 1898-1941* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2023).

PG: What is abaca? What was it used for in the early twentieth century? Is it still in demand today?

PD: Abaca is the fibre used for cordage (the ropes used in ships, oil rigs, and wheat ties). Its scientific name is *musa textilis*. Although it was often referred to as ‘Manila hemp’ when it started to be exported from the Philippines to the US and Britain in the nineteenth century, it does not come from the hemp family. Rather, it comes from the banana family (*musa*). It was highly valued in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because it did not need to be tarred to stay strong when wet. In fact, its tensile strength works best underwater. Because it did not need to be tarred, it was lighter and more flexible than other ropes made from hemp. Before it was a global export, it was used primarily as a textile by the indigenous peoples in the Philippines, where it grew wild in the highlands. From the 1950s, meanwhile, its demand on the global trade market plummeted, as it was replaced by synthetic fibres. Meanwhile, crop diseases that affected the Philippines around the same time undermined production and competition with the new materials. Subsequently, by the 1970s, the abaca plantations in Davao had been replaced by banana plantations. Nevertheless, abaca may be having a comeback in the region. In the last ten-fifteen years, it has been used in automobiles because it is regarded as more sustainable.

PG: You draw heavily on the concept of the frontier in the way you frame your book, referring especially to Turner’s frontier thesis for North America.² What drew you to the frontier as a framing device, and how did you modify or build on Turner’s thesis as you adapted it for early twentieth-century Davao?

PD: Growing up in 1980s Davao, the imaginary of the frontier was still palpable. There were the out-of-town trips for picnics in the forests where the roads were almost non-existent, or along the coast, where fireflies roamed aplenty. In the city, my uncle would serve wild boar (caught in the jungle) marinated in beer when we visit his house, and stores and streets would have the words ‘Pioneer’ or ‘Frontier.’ One recreational facility even had a big “Land of Promise” emblazoned on its hill. Today, when one travels through the Mindanao highlands, and on to Bukidnon, one can still evoke the frontier in the landscape of a wide-open country with endless possibilities.

I had a difficult time finding Mindanao in my graduate courses in history, only later to realize that the nationalist orientation of Philippine historiography caused this difficulty. Thus, when Patricio Abinales’ book *Making Mindanao* came out in 2000, and had a subsection on Mindanao as a frontier, the idea of Davao as an American Frontier caught on in my mind.³ The more I looked into the sources of twentieth-century Davao, the more

² Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921).

³ Patricio N. Abinales, *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the formation of the Philippine nation-state* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000).

it became clear that this frontier spirit was extended and was felt in Davao, the southeastern part of Mindanao. Reading the accounts of the American pioneers in Davao published in newspapers of the period, in a sense sealed the deal of framing Davao as an American frontier for me. Building on the data I gathered for my MA thesis, I started researching and presenting in conferences this concept of Davao as an American frontier. The comments I received from those conferences informed the research proposal I submitted for my PhD studies in Murdoch University under Prof. James Warren, who supervised another scholar I had much respect for, and who did one of the earliest studies on Davao frontier history, Shinzo Hayase.⁴

I started reading up on the literature of the New West and Borderlands history of the United States and wider North America in preparation for my PhD. And during my PhD archival work, I found so many documents referring to Davao as the frontier, an extension of America's continental West. The West of the Imagination was alive and well on the wilderness of the Philippines in Davao. Those early twentieth century American pioneers who went to Davao grew up with this frontier identity that Turner made famous in the late nineteenth-century United States. It was a natural progression. And the Filipinos who were the majority in the fast-growing Davao region imbibed this frontier spirit in their interactions with the Americans in personal and structural settings.

PG: Your book points to two key turning points in the history of abaca in Davao. Firstly, the advent of American colonialism from 1898. What was it about the imposition of American colonial rule that facilitated the development of abaca plantations in Davao during the first two decades of the twentieth century?

PD: 1898 for the Philippines was an eventful year. It severed colonial ties with Spain through a Philippine Revolution and began America's contacts with the Philippines. 1898 was also a significant year for the United States. It became a formal empire like other European powers, when it signed the Treaty of Paris to end the Spanish-American War, wherein Spain ceded the Philippines and other territories to the United States. From the perspective of the history of empires, 1898 was a high point of 'High Imperialism.'

Plantations came to be in Davao mainly because of two American concepts brought to the frontier: mechanization and specific land laws. American imperialism delighted in its fascination for machines and invention. The United States came late to empire but benefited from being at the forefront of innovation brought about by the Second Industrial Revolution. Thus, the Americans, those self-conscious pioneers, brought this love affair with mechanization and technological innovation to their new frontier in the Philippines. Discharged American soldiers, familiar with the homestead system back in the United

⁴ Shinzo Hayase, "Tribes on the Davao frontier, 1899-1941," *Philippine Studies*, 33, 2 (1985), 139-50.

States, were the first to seize the opportunities of the vast raw land they saw in Davao, and they established plantations even before the land laws were formalized in the Philippines.

Mechanized plantations (because labourers were scarce on the frontier) and the land laws (such as the homestead system that settled the American West) enabled pioneers to establish their abaca plantations in Davao that had different operations systems to other similar largescale ventures in the Philippines, such as in Central Luzon or the Western Visayas. When the Americans arrived, Central Luzon already had largescale rice *haciendas* and the Western Visayas had sugarcane *haciendas*. These kinds of largescale productive operations were not yet in Mindanao.

Thus, why did the first Davao planters focus on abaca, and not sugar or rice? Perhaps, we can put this down to the first to establish such plantation, Captain Burchfield, who came from Kentucky, which was the largest grower of hemp in the United States. Also, abaca was already cultivated in Davao when the Americans came, albeit in smaller quantities. Further, abaca was a popular export crop in the Philippines, grown mostly in southeastern Luzon, in the Bicol area.⁵ Many other discharged soldiers, volunteers in the army after their tour of duty was over decided to follow Burchfield's example and became planters, growing tropical crops such as abaca and coconuts for export.

These were Americans who grew up in the American West themselves, where pioneer homesteads were aplenty. In the popular imagination, the pioneers were romanticized, and this imagination perhaps reached fever-pitch after 1890, when the US Census declared that there was no longer a frontier line in the United States. Many believed it was the frontier that made the United States into a land of the free and of plenty, and there was some sentimentality about recreating or continuing this experience.

For example, one of the most popular politicians at that time, Theodore Roosevelt (who later became President), fed into the discourse, suggesting that the gilded age might turn Americans soft, and that they needed the frontier to keep them strong. Meanwhile, from the Davao Planters' Association minutes and their newspaper articles, they idolized Roosevelt, as a roughrider and frontiersman in the badlands. I think they imagined themselves as frontiersmen like him as well as they established themselves in Davao.

PG: The second turning point is the end of WWI and the early 1920s. Here you point to new labour regimes, increased mechanisation, territorial expansion of plantations, public transport, cultural developments (including radios and theatres), and more. What was it about the post WWI moment and the early 1920s that facilitated these changes, which included an expansion of abaca production, in Davao?

⁵ Norman Owen, *Prosperity without Progress Manila hemp and material life in the colonial Philippines* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

PD: The immediate post WWI period saw the Philippine abaca market in depression. Demand slackened after furious hoarding during the war, which precipitated a downward spiral in abaca prices. Other abaca producing regions shifted to other farm crops or abandoned abaca fields altogether, while Davao plantations survived just barely because of its cost-efficient labour arrangement and their use of mechanized stripping to extract the fibre. When demand picked up once again by 1922, as the roaring twenties in the North American and European markets picked up pace, the cordage industry and its related raw materials experienced an upsurge. With the traditional abaca growing areas of the north beset with problems of production, Davao was well positioned as an alternative and reliable source of supply. Davao's labour arrangement ensured that supply would be steady, and mechanized stripping achieved reliable uniform quality of the medium grade that the US market preferred. Mechanization and contented labourers were as important because the traditional way of extracting fibre, manually, was prone to produce uneven quality, and lower quantity.

The three years it took to plant from seedlings to maturity meant Davao had a three-year head start from the traditional areas growing abaca, and Davao was able to meet the American demand when the markets normalized. The traditional abaca growing regions to the north tried to solve production and economic problems with politics, and only came out worse during the 1920s. Davao, however continued to grow and go its own way in achieving cost-efficient plantations to meet the demand. New plantations were established further inland, and they were connected to ports through a network of private plantation roads that could generate extra income for owners through road tolls, and which provided incentives for owners to agree to connect their road networks to neighboring inland plantations. The cooperative nature of businessmen on the frontier made the introduction of a well-managed auction system to facilitate sale to foreign buyers easy for everyone to partake in. Creating a name for itself among international buyers of abaca, especially the biggest market by supplying more than 70 percent of exports to the United States, closely linked the American cordage industry to Davao abaca production as never before.

The success of the plantations drew more migrants to the Davao frontier, most of them labourers, but also professionals, such as doctors, nurses, lawyers, clerks, and shopkeepers, and many service providers in laundries, boarding houses, movie theaters, post offices, telegraph offices, and machine shops. Included in the service providers were the operators of buses and public utility vehicles for hire. Some of these well-compensated migrants also engaged in the plantation business by applying for public lands themselves, whether through leasehold or purchase. In this context, the bustling frontier town had, by the 1920s and 1930s, a middle-class, cosmopolitan vibe to it.

PG: Thinking about turning points, you place less emphasis on the global depression of the early 1930s. Instead, abaca production and economic and cultural life in Davao appears to have been remarkably resilient to this economic shock, notwithstanding a

decline in global prices for abaca. Much greater shocks, which contributed to the collapse of abaca production in Davao, occurred later – namely the ends of WWII and American colonialism. What about abaca production and cultural life in Davao made it resilient to the 1930s global depression, especially compared to other abaca producing regions of the Philippines, which were devastated and did not recover?

PD: That is a very good question that allows me to venture out of my book in response. It is correct that the global depression was not as widely felt in the Philippines, much less in Davao. For one, the folks in Davao were very much working class and not prone to ostentatious spending. Saving for the future was very much in their mindset and applied in everyday life. The regular entrepreneurs were wary of banks and their tendencies to call on high interest loans and confiscate the collateralized properties. Davao entrepreneurs often started business not on credit, therefore, but on savings, making them more insulated from the harsher effects of the financial depression.

Moreover, abaca as a cordage material for navies was chiefly a government expenditure, and so the volume of demand and the ability of the buyer to pay for it was not as affected by the depression as other products, even if there was a general price decline. If we look at the total abaca production during the early 1930s, it was still relatively large in volume to the extent that, save for 1932, it was comparable to the good years of the 1920s. Thus, high export volume offset some of the major challenges of declining prices, especially in Davao, where productions was especially cost-effective.

Further, because the workers took the majority share of the harvest, they had a stake in the survival of the plantations on which they worked. This minimised the possibility of strikes. A frontier ethic bound abaca planters and labourers. Helping each other was a way to survive, even in the cost-challenging period of the depression. This is evident from the collective and cooperative nature of the labour arrangement that came to be known as the *pakyaw*, the private road networks, and the development and wide use of the auction system.

This cooperative nature also extended to its cultural life. The mishmash of ethnicities, the openness to appropriate and innovate, the embrace of the modern was very much the fashion. Life on a far-flung frontier was not ostentatious, and people were used to the fact that they could not have what most of the imported advertisements hawked at them. As migrants, people there saved a lot, and even would recycle or upcycle materials so they could be repurposed for other uses. Materially, there was a certain simplicity, which perhaps helped tied them over during the depression. Their lifestyle hardly changed during the depression because they lived simply.

This migration to the frontier coincided with the new technologies of film and sound machines that brought a shared experience among the inhabitants of the frontier, no matter what the nationality, race, or station in life. Everyone could go to the movies and watch

the same film, everyone could listen to the same music, and everyone could participate in the parades. Many people lived a new life on a new land with new friends.

PG: In the final chapters, you position Davao as a highly cosmopolitan place and as a cultural contact zone. To what extent was this unique to the region in the early twentieth century, compared to – for example – the rest of the Philippines and other parts of Southeast Asia? And how did people in Davao foster and nurture these kinds of cosmopolitan relationships?

PD: Contact zones, where East met West, in early twentieth-century Southeast Asian cities were common. Su Lin Lewis has done an excellent study on the cosmopolitanism of Penang, Rangoon and Bangkok at the same time period.⁶ The history of imperialism is replete with these contact zones. For all its ilk, imperialism also connected the world, and in my experience and observation, the agency of the colonized will always be there, whether strongly or weakly. Rather than discussing the relationship of the local and foreign from the perspective of power, I focused more on cultural encounters, which has always fascinated me. In American colonial Davao, there was a lot of the meeting and mixing on this multicultural frontier, where peoples of different nationalities co-existed in this defined, yet porous space.

While being a contact zone *per se* was not unique, what can be unique to Davao was its Philippine experience. We are from the east, but we are also situated in the Philippines, our positionality, if we may call it that, makes us unique. Davao had the largest Japanese settlement in Southeast Asia at that time, and the Philippines was made unique by the crop that it grew – abaca – since it was the only country in the world that produced this crop in plantations, by virtue of its soil, topography, and climate. Only the Philippines was colonized by Spain and the United States in this part of the globe. In the Philippines, Davao was arguably the only city where the American frontier concept was uniquely positioned in terms of the scale of the settler migration to the region. Its settlement had that uniquely American early twentieth-century flavor.

The 1939 Census shows us that, among the provinces in the Philippines, Davao had the widest linguistic variety, and the highest number of foreign residents. Thus, by sheer volume alone, Davao was unique among all other Philippine provinces, excepting the city of Manila, the capital. It was a cosmopolitan frontier, away from the center, and so had its own decidedly ‘borderlands’ take on culture creation. The development and settlement of Davao also happened at the time that modern technology and transportation enabled mass or popular culture, such as movies and phonographs, to reach so many people almost at the same time. The spread of popular culture was borne out of social economic forces,

⁶ Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban life and cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

more than political will. These historical incidents would make Davao history unique, compared to other historical periods or places.