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Published in:
IIAS Newsletter

Citation for published version (APA):

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‘Twice forgotten’ or even ‘Twice suppressed’ might have been an alternative title for this lavishly illustrated and beautifully designed book which tells the stories of some of the 1500 Japanese men – and their descendants – who came to work on the Benguet or Kennon Road which transformed Baguio in Northern Luzon, into the Philippines’ second ‘chartered city’.

Otto van den Muijzenberg

Japanesse Pioneers in the Northern Philippine Highlands.
Baguio City: Filipino-Japanese Foundation of Northern Luzon, Inc. maps, ill., apps, 330 pages. ISBN 971 92973 0 1

UNTIL RECENTLY, FILIPINOS OF JAPANESE descent preferred to pass for Chinese mestizos or disindented their mixed ancestry. This was particularly true in Baguio, the site of the third largest community of Japanese in the American Philippines before the Pacific War. The early American administration of the Philippine colony (from 1899 onward) was bound to make these ‘foreign orientals’ visible in public and in the presence and work of some 1500 Japanese men who came to the Philippines.

It is therefore exceptional to find documentary evidence for the presence and work of some 1500 Japanese men who came to work on the mountain highway that had to be hacked out of the mountains. Many American administrators in the Philippines, including Paul Villefange, which are important to the descendants, their friends and relatives in Japan.

The character of the book as a centenary memorial shows a revival of a sense of Japanese-Filipino identity, as well as a linking institution with relatives in Japan.

As time went by, however, a certain level of ‘Japaneseess’ was sustained and later on even reinforced in the group, with the recruitment of Japanese brides by those who could afford it. Successful and rich merchants, contractors, transport entrepreneurs and, later on, wealthy vegetable farmers in the La Trinidad valley founded (in 1924) and sustained the Japanese second ‘chartered city’ has been neglected is to be found among theFortune of the Urbanization Process of Baguio and Surroundings in the Interbellum Period

The rich content of the book, however, both in terms of migration or ethnicity theory. A considerable proportion of the Japanese men married local women. Inspection of an appendix with names of Japanese, men, their wives and children, even if this list may not be representative, yields an estimate of nearly half of the unions being mixed. This seems to be the popular myth that unlike the Chinese, the Japanese in the Philippines refused to intermarry and integrate into the local society. The women belonged to what were termed ‘mountain tribes’ by early American anthropologists, particularly those speaking Batau, Kankanay, Bontoc and related languages. These wives played important brokering roles for the Japanese men towards the local economy and society. Continuing to work their own gardens and fields and often trading too, they worked intensively as the husbands outside the house to sustain their families. Although communication between partners in many cases remained difficult, with neither of the partners having had much education, let alone training in acquiring a foreign language, the impression conveyed by their descendants is one of great marriage stability.

Top:
The ‘hill capital’ of Baguio City.

Above:
The ‘hill capital’ of Baguio City.

The character of the book as a centenary memorial shows in the many names and photographs of groups and families, which are important to the descendants, their friends and former neighbours, but less so to the general reader. Several biographies of carpenters, builders, contractors, farmers, prominent businessmen and contractors give the reader a feel both of the family life and the occupational activities. They attest to basic values which these successful migrants impressed on their children and employees, like hard work, honesty and precision. Overtures in information between the chapters might have been reduced, and the scholarly reader may have liked to read a more explicit analysis of the wealth of data provided in terms of precision. Overlaps in information between the chapters might have been reduced, and the scholarly reader may have liked to read a more explicit analysis of the wealth of data provided in terms of migration or ethnicity theory.

The reliance on mainly second and third generation female descendants as informants for this oral history book guarantees an intimate view on the internal operation of the families. A considerable proportion of the Japanese men married local women. Inspection of an appendix with names of Japanese men, their wives and children, even if this list may not be representative, yields an estimate of nearly half of the unions being mixed. This seems to be the popular myth that unlike the Chinese, the Japanese in the Philippines refused to intermarry and integrate into the local society. The women belonged to what were termed ‘mountain tribes’ by early American anthropologists, particularly those speaking Batau, Kankanay, Bontoc and related languages. These wives played important brokering roles for the Japanese men towards the local economy and society. Continuing to work their own gardens and fields and often trading too, they worked intensively as the husbands outside the house to sustain their families. Although communication between partners in many cases remained difficult, with neither of the partners having had much education, let alone training in acquiring a foreign language, the impression conveyed by their descendants is one of great marriage stability.

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