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**José A. Rivera's**

**The Zanjas of Ilocos: Cooperative Irrigation Societies of the Philippines**

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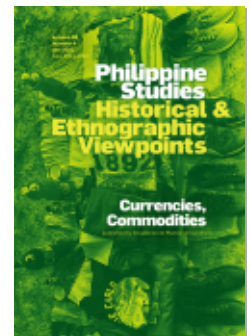
*The Zanjeras of Ilocos: Cooperative Irrigation Societies of the Philippines* ed. by José A. Rivera (review)

Erwin S. Fernández

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# Book Reviews

JOSÉ A. RIVERA

## **The Zanjas of Ilocos: Cooperative Irrigation Societies of the Philippines**

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2020. 240 pages.

Although *sociedades zanjas* or irrigation associations in Ilocos have been the subject of studies in the last hundred years, their significance and value remain obscure, if not ignored, even in the Philippines. Prof. Emer. José A. Rivera, an expert in community irrigation systems from the University of New Mexico, tries to remedy this lacuna in his concise introduction to this community-driven resource management institution in northwest Luzon with pictures and appendixes of transcribed and translated Spanish and Ilocano documents. The challenges posed by global climate changes make it more compelling to learn how persistent and resilient the zanjas are in the face of modernization and urbanization. They have been in existence for hundreds of years, yet many Filipinos still know nothing about them.

Zanja, which comes from the Spanish word *zanja*, ditch, has come to mean “irrigation society” when paired with *sociedad*. At present, we do not have a complete survey of the total number of zanjas operating in Ilocos. Rivera only focuses on particular zanjas in Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur, so any conclusions drawn about these zanjas are limited to the ones examined.

In the introduction Rivera lays out the main trajectory of his research, that is, to analyze the origins of the zanjas, whether they were modelled

out of Iberian or indigenous irrigation systems. In chapter 1 he provides the context of the creation of *zanjeras* by tracing early Spanish land policies, their role in the exploitation of the local populace, their dissolution, and how eventually the Augustinians managed to organize parish center towns in Ilocos. Without connecting his premise with a definite Spanish program on irrigation, the author arrives at the statement: “To sustain these newly created pueblos, irrigation would be necessary to support agricultural production on a year-round basis” (29). Canals and other irrigation projects were constructed by the people whom the priests supervised. In chapter 2, on the emergence of these irrigation systems, Rivera contends that *zanjeras* could be dated to circa 1730, if not earlier, to 1630, crediting the Augustinian friars for their construction. However, direct evidence for the participation of the priests, like accounts by Augustinians Fr. José Nieto and Fr. Elviro J. Pérez, was limited to a few towns and extended only to as far as the second half of the eighteenth century.

How do *zanjeras* at present operate? In chapter 3 the author illustrates how farmers, tenants, and peasants mobilize labor to build and maintain irrigation works through the *zanjeras*, which are self-governing corporate organizations with their own rules and regulations. In the subsequent chapter, Rivera discusses the innovative and groundbreaking land procurement process that was developed by the *zanjeras* whereby landless tenants would negotiate for land in exchange for water with wealthy landowners. The owners would allow a part of their land, or the *atar*, to be farmed by the *zanjeros*, or irrigators, who would in return construct and maintain the irrigation installations for the remaining part of their lands. Rivera calls this “water for land exchanges” (71).

How did the *zanjeras* come about? Since the book’s main objective is to determine the *zanjeras*’ origins, in chapter 5 Rivera compares Iberian *huertas* (fertile irrigated areas) and Ilocos *zanjeras*, based on different aspects, from their water distribution schemes to their water-sharing methods and governance. Familiar with craft guilds and Spanish *huertas*, the Augustinians brought with them this knowledge and adapted it to local conditions. The author presumes that “the friars introduced the guild-like administrative structure of officers and a general assembly to convene the membership” (120) and “that the local parish priests introduced the *sociedad*, a guild-like administrative structure with an executive board, formalized charters based on self-governance, written rules and regulations, and collective

responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of the irrigation system” (126). These statements, however, are supported by the case of only one *zanjera*, that of Sociedad *Zanjera de Ganagan* in Bacarra, founded by Fr. Vicente Pablo in 1792. Further research in the archives of the Augustinians in Valladolid or the National Archives of the Philippines could yield more information on the role of these friars in the organization of *zanjeras*.

Can *zanjeras* endure new conditions brought about by economic, social, climatic, and environmental changes? Despite the resilience in the adaptive capacity of the *zanjeras*, Rivera points out in chapter 6 the need to strengthen them by adopting measures to support and fortify their role. Instead of allowing Philippine government irrigation projects to absorb the *zanjeras*, which resulted in their loss of independence and autonomy, they should be recognized as institutions that deserve to be treated as equal stakeholders and actors in irrigation management and development. At present, as the author observes, the National Irrigation Administration does not have any program to support *zanjeras* from existential threats like demographic and economic changes. In the conclusion Rivera makes a convincing assertion that *zanjeras* should be treated as “cultural landscapes of historic significance” (157) needing heritage conservation and protection from the Philippine local and national governments.

In general the book is a good overview of the *zanjeras*, but it could have been better if it had placed them in the context of Philippine agriculture during the Spanish period. One that could provide the background would be Jaime B. Veneracion’s work on the subject. On friar lands and other landed estates in the Philippines, Rivera could have used the works of Nicholas Cushner and Dennis Roth to deepen his discussion of these issues instead of depending on a mere interview with a former administrator. He cites Fr. Pedro Chirino to claim that the *encomiendas* were producing much rice and cotton for export to New Spain (23) when this statement was only true for textiles, which were esteemed in that part of the world; there was much rice but it was not exported. Rivera also commits several errors in the use of terms. The term Ilocos Region in contemporary times covers not only the Ilocos provinces but also La Union and Pangasinan. Rivera incorrectly uses it when what he actually means is just Ilocos. Moreover, Manila is not found in Central Luzon (29). For historical accuracy, Agoo and Bauang were located in Pangasinan before they became part of La Union in 1850 (29). Navarcan (29) should be Narvacan. Although Pangasinan is

populated by Ilocanos, it should not be described as an “Ilocano province of Pangasinan” (96). Rather, it should have been simply stated that the person came from the Ilocano-dominated part of Pangasinan. Pulsiguan (118) should be Palsiguan.

After finishing the book, the reader still has several questions left unanswered. Of all the places where the Augustinians did their ministry, why were they able to organize the zanjeras in Ilocos but not in others? Was there an existing indigenous communal irrigation practice in Ilocos prior to the coming of the Spaniards? To this second question, it appears that Rivera sides with the theory that the Augustinian priests introduced Spanish irrigation models in Ilocos. In Andrés Carro’s *Vocabulario iloco-español* (Establecimiento Tipo-Litográfico de M. Pérez, Hijo, 1888), however, *paayás* is an Ilocano term that means *zanja de regadío* or irrigation ditch. There are other indigenous terms related to farming and irrigation. It would be interesting to compare zanjeras with the irrigation customs of the Ifugao and the Bontoc. More important, though, would be a comparison with the Tinguian, the nearest kin of the Ilocanos, whose rice customs were documented by Fay-Cooper Cole and whose ethnology was studied earlier by Isabelo de los Reyes.

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JASMINE NADUA TRICE

## **City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila’s Alternative Film Culture**

London: Duke University Press, 2021. 316 pages.

*City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila’s Alternative Film Culture* by Jasmine Nadua Trice, an assistant professor of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, is a snapshot of a particular time in Philippine cinema when alternative or independent movies became a beacon of hope for the local film industry and when articulations of developing an audience for these movies became a focal point of discourse.

The early 2000s is a popular time period among Filipino film scholars because of the excitement generated by independent movies that brought