

REVIEWS – reactions and interactions

Review by Thomas Gibson of: What Place for Hunter-Gatherers in Millennium Three? Editors, Thomas N Headland and Doris E Blood, Before Farming 2002/3_4 (11)

**Reaction from Professor Thomas Headland,
SIL, Dallas**

Dear Thomas Gibson

I read your recent review of my new book (*What Place for Hunter-Gatherers in Millennium Three*) in *Before Farming 2002/3_4*. Your review of the book was decent enough, but I found it strange that you expended one-third of your review not on the book, but questioning the ethics of my home organisation, the Summer Institute of Linguistics. You make three serious allegations against SIL.

1 You assert that SIL has a 'mixed record' of 'complicity with local dictators', laying blame on SIL as being 'part of the problem' between dictator President Marcos and the Kalinga/Bontok tribal peoples over the failed dam projects.

My response: SIL members were never involved directly or indirectly in Marcos's failed effort to take over Kalinga ancestral land to build a dam; SIL was not a 'part of the problem'. SIL does not have a reputation in the Philippine nation of a 'mixed record' of being involved in 'complicity', defined as 'an accomplice in a questionable act or a crime', with any Philippine dictator.

2 You censured the book's eight authors because we did not address the problems between the Kalinga peoples, the Marxists from Manila and the national government.

My response: Six of the eight authors have never been affiliated with SIL. All eight are internationally recognised senior scholars (seven anthropologists, one botanist), all with secular university affiliations. None of the eight, including me, has ever been to the

Kalinga area. Our book addresses the human rights problems of hunter-gatherers in the Philippine low-land forests. It has nothing to do with Kalinga farmers in the non-forested highlands of northern Luzon.

3 You claim that President Marcos 'gave the SIL the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1973.'

My response: Marcos was not present at the award ceremony in 1973. Nor did he have any say in who was given the award that year or any year. The Magsaysay Foundation is an independent non-government institution with the highest prestige throughout Asia. At the 1973 award ceremony the citation to SIL was first read aloud by the widow of the late President Magsaysay, herself a trustee of the foundation. The Acting Chief Justice of the Philippine Supreme Court, Querube Makalintal, then physically handed the award plaque to SIL Pacific area director Dr Richard Pittman.

I hope this helps you, Thomas, to understand what SIL is and is not. SIL has carried out work in literacy, community development and education in 760 languages spoken by more than 70 million people; and SIL programmes around the world have taught over two million indigenous people to read in their own languages. Today, SIL is recognised as an international NGO in special consultative status with both the United Nations Economic and Social Council and with UNESCO. Recently the Republic of the Philippines issued a series of 12 postage stamps in honour of SIL's 50 years of service among the cultural communities of that nation. Javier Perez de Cuellar, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, said this about SIL International in May 1988: 'Your mission as ambassadors of literacy deserves high praise. By transcribing into writing tongues that were previously unwritten, you are facilitating the preservation of ethnic cultures and building bridges for those

cultures for the rest of humanity'.

In 1998 I gave a formal address at the Philippine Embassy in Washington DC by special invitation from the Philippine Ambassador to the United States, with ambassadors from other embassies present. (My embassy talk is posted at www.sil.org/silewp/1999/004/SILEWP1999-004.HTML) I believe that I am just as concerned as you are about tribal human rights in the Philippines.

Dr Gibson, let me close with this: Do careful research first and guard what you say. To pass judgment on another academic organization without firm credible evidence in what is supposed to be a book review brings discredit to *Before Farming* and to you. To pass on mere hearsay rumour simply is not appropriate. It is certainly beneath the dignity of our American Anthropological Association profession.

I write this, Thomas, as a friendly letter to a professional fellow anthropologist. I hope you will take it in that spirit.

Yours, for better anthropology,
Thomas N Headland

SIL international anthropology consultant and
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mers 2001-04)

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Response from Professor Thomas Gibson, University of Rochester

Dear Editor

I would like to thank Dr Headland for taking the time to comment on my review. The reason I spent so much of my short review discussing the Marcos regime and not the book itself is that many of the authors in the volume are not content to write purely academic pieces themselves. They go beyond this to suggest ways their readers might take action to defend the rights of contemporary hunter-gatherers in the Philippines. I fully approve of this approach, as I hope my review made clear. Indeed, my review was overwhelmingly favourable to all the authors included in the volume.

Once one takes the step of moving beyond schol-

arship to advocacy, one unavoidably enters the world of political controversy. Dr Headland is himself no stranger to controversy and has taken strong, highly principled positions on a number of thorny issues in anthropology over the years, including that concerning Elizalde's work among the Tasaday and Chagnon's work among the Yanomamo (cf www.sil.org/~headlandt/controv.htm). It is in the same spirit of engaging in informed debate that I raised certain questions about the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

Dr Headland takes me to task for making three allegations against the SIL. His letter gives me the opportunity to clarify what I was trying to say.

1 I do not claim that the SIL was involved in the attempt to take over Kalinga land. I was only pointing out that at the time the Marcos administration was attempting to do so, the SIL was working under contract to that administration. My information on the SIL's involvement with authoritarian regimes generally came from a book by two journalists (Gerard Colby and Charlotte Dennett, 1995. *Thy will be done: The conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and evangelism in the age of oil*. New York: Harper Collins). By Headland's definition, 'complicity' would indeed be too strong a word for many of the arrangements the SIL has made over the years with authoritarian governments, and I withdraw the term.

2 I do not censure the book's authors for failing to address the particular issue of the Kalinga dam. I introduced that issue simply as one example of why tribal peoples in the Philippines are threatened with a loss of ancestral land today, and of how some built alliances with other groups in Philippine society to resist it. My point is that when looking at issues of deforestation and loss of tribal land, it is important to examine the role of political elites creating the social conditions which lead desperately poor lowland peasants to engage in destructive forms of shifting cultivation and other environmentally destructive practices like dynamite fishing. A proper programme of land reform after the Second World War would have done far more to protect tribal land and the upland environment than humanitarian efforts to deal with the consequences of elite maladministration on a piecemeal basis. The passage of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act in 1997 is undoubtedly an important step forward,

but if it is ever to be implemented it will have to gain broad support among the Filipino people.

3 Dr Headland's clarification of the circumstances under which the Magsaysay Award was bestowed in 1973 and accepted on behalf of the SIL by Dr Richard Pittman is useful. It might be noted that according to Colby and Dennett, the ties between Pittman, the SIL and Ramon Magsaysay go back to the day Magsaysay was nominated for the presidency of the Philippines in 1952 (ibid:235-236). Magsaysay's campaign was orchestrated by a CIA agent, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Lansdale, the model for Graham Greene's Quiet American.

Part of the Lansdale-Magsaysay programme to pacify the 'Huk Rebellion' in central Luzon was to resettle rebels on land in tribal and Muslim areas on other islands. In 1955, the National Resettlement and Reconstruction Agency allotted 1716 hectares of land in Bongabon, Oriental Mindoro, to 606 families from central Luzon. Twenty five years later, I conducted fieldwork in Bongabon among a group of shifting cultivators, the Buid. The resettlement programme of the 1950s had turned out to be the thin end of a wedge

that had led to a massive loss of Buid land to lowland settlers (T Gibson, 1986. *Sacrifice and sharing in the Philippine highlands*. London: Athlone:20). My book details the role indigenous religious beliefs played in Buid resistance to the loss of their land during the 1960s and 1970s.

I urge anyone interested in pursuing these matters further to consult both the volume by Colby and Dennett and the SIL's own website. Where those affiliated with the SIL find this volume to be in error, it is important for them to set the record straight in the way Dr Headland has done in his reply to my review. In conclusion, I wish to acknowledge the fact that Dr Headland has himself been a strong advocate of human rights for the Agta, as the link to his speech at the Philippine Embassy will show to any who follow it.
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