

## **Blame, Responsibility and Agency: “Disaster Justice” and the state in the Philippines**

**Greg Bankoff**

Since World War II, research on natural hazards has been dominated by two concepts: vulnerability, or why certain groups of people are unequally exposed to risk; and resilience, or how some people are better able to deal with that exposure. These are historical concepts born out of the intellectual debates about how to explain the new world order that emerged post 1945 and its tripartite division between First (industrialised), Second (Communist), and Third (newly emergent states) Worlds. As regards the non-Western world, these regions were generally depicted as vulnerable to natural hazards during the Cold War, and, then, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, increasingly recast as resilient (Hann et al., 2002:8; Chari and Verdery, 2009). Vulnerability expressed a profound unease with the developmental model that dominated the Cold War era and that depicted natural hazards as largely physical events for which there were mainly technical solutions. Resilience, on the other hand, fitted well with pre-established neoliberal ideas about competition and entrepreneurship that viewed disasters after the collapse of Communism as largely the result of individual choice. Natural hazard research over these decades, therefore, duly reflected the momentous political shifts in world affairs (Bankoff 2018).

The evolution of how disasters are viewed in the industrialised nations of the Western world, however, has followed a somewhat different trajectory though its path has been no less linked to political developments. Rather than being about how disasters play out on a world scale, affecting economic performance and addressing questions of corruption and state competence, the focus has been much more on hazards in the national context as regards notions of equity and state responsibility. Though the concept of vulnerability and resilience are evoked and applied to a greater or lesser extent, the central concern is more on questions

of human rights and justice especially as concerns the poor and disadvantaged in those societies, the “Third World” within the “First World”. The concern is increasingly more with whether there has been an inherent failure in the forms and practices of governance if certain groups within society are more exposed to hazards than others and do not have access to the same level of state resources both before, during and after a hazardous event.

One of the emerging concepts that have come to the fore in recent years to express these latter concerns is that of “disaster justice”. **Disaster justice or the notion that government has a moral and legal responsibility to protect all its citizens to a minimally acceptable level has its roots in a Western liberal tradition based on the Rawlsian principles of only extending basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others and on condemning inequalities that do not work to everybody’s advantage (Rawls 1971).** From this perspective, the failure of the state to protect its own is regarded not only as an injustice but as “a breach of democracy’s fundamental obligation to its citizens” (Verchick, 2012: 52). The state is regarded as having a mandatory duty to shield people from physical harm through its laws and institutions as well as to provide “a minimally sufficient level of well-being” for individuals who are systematically disadvantaged (Clarival and Hunt, 2014: 60).

**While, on the one hand, disasters render calls for justice more vocal by highlighting the inequalities in society and the structures of governance that impose or maintain them, on the other hand, any notion of justice must be tempered by what Mike Douglas and Michelle Ann Miller in this volume call “the organization of power and its normative foundations for governance”. There is no immutable concept of justice that defies both time and culture. Nor is any concept of justice upheld by the state necessarily shared by the community. Just as disaster risk reduction (DRR) practitioners have begun to explore how culture affects the way people perceive risk and behave in relation to it (IFRC, 2014), there is a need to unpack what is meant by justice and examine it in both its cultural and temporal setting.**

Although the principles upon which the foundations of disaster justice rest have been criticized by many, not least for the assumption that advantage can only be determined “purely in terms of primary goods” (Sen, 1979), little or no attention has been given to how well the concept may apply **in other cultural and temporal settings** when societies are not deemed to be democratic or free (or otherwise “free”), in which market forces operate only fitfully or not at all, and where the state is not accountable to those over whom it governs. To what extent do time, circumstance and culture absolve states from being judged by such standards and is it possible to discern a genealogy of past governance in which disaster justice constitutes the most recent phase? More particularly, does “disaster injustice” (the failure to meet such criteria) demand someone to blame, just as, in a sense, disaster justice requires someone to absolve? By looking closely at the nature of hazards and people’s expectations of the state and state actions in the Philippines, a country currently ranked as having the second most dangerous physical environment (Garschagen et al., 2014: 64), and focusing on one region of southern Luzon around Mt Mayon, one of the most active volcanoes in the archipelago, this article explores notions of disaster governance and how it has changed over time—and whether, in particular, the concept of disaster justice, here defined in terms of blame, responsibility and agency, has retrospective application in different temporal and contextual situations.

### **The local context**

An archipelago located off Indochina in the Western Pacific, the land area of the Philippines totals little more than 300,000 km<sup>2</sup> spread over more than 7000 islands. The archipelago lies on the Pacific Rim of Fire, a 48,000 km-long horseshoe rimming the Pacific Ocean from

Indonesia to Chile where over 75 percent of all volcanoes in the world are located and where nearly 90 percent of the world's earthquakes happen. Wedged between the much larger Pacific and Eurasian tectonic plates, the continuous collision and subduction of the small Philippine Sea Plate make the islands an area of extreme seismic and volcanic activity (Punongbayan, 1994: 5). An earthquake happens somewhere in the Philippines every day, there are more than 20 active volcanoes, and the densest concentration of typhoon tracks in the world lies between Manila and southern Japan, a distance of about 1600 kilometers. Disasters, therefore, are simply a fact of life for Filipinos. A socially and economically vulnerable population of more than 100 million, where over one in four families lives below the poverty line, combines with one of the world's most hazardous landmasses to make disasters a "frequent life experience" (Bankoff, 2003: 179–183; NSCB, 2013).

Albay, the second most southerly province on the main island of Luzon, is both blessed and cursed with one of the most active volcanoes in the Philippines. Mt. Mayon is an andesitic stratovolcano rising to an elevation of over 2600 m with a basal circumference of 63 km. It has erupted at least 52 times since the first recorded event in 1616, most recently in January 2018. Prior to the nineteenth century, however, there are few accounts of any eruptions. Yet there are over 30 accounts of eruptions in the nineteenth century and more than 20 in the twentieth century suggesting a frequent cycle of volcanic activity. Most historical eruptions have been minor with a Volcanic Explosivity Index (VEI) of  $\leq 2$ . However, the eruptions of 1 February 1814 that caused the death of over 1200 people and that devastated three towns and partially destroyed two others, and the eruption of 23 June 1897 that lasted seven days and killed 197 people, were much larger eruptions of VEI 4 magnitude (Espinosa, 1968: 251–252; Mirabueno, 2001: 4–7). Local inhabitants are also in danger of lahars or debris flows of water and loose-lying volcanic rock fragments set in motion during eruptions or by passing typhoons (Rantucci, 1994: 97, 100). In the 3 February 1993 eruption, lahars killed at least 77

people and devastated surrounding farmlands, crops, fisheries and wildlife (ADPC, 2002). But these flows can prove deadly even between eruptions; the lahars that left 1500 people dead on 31 October 1875 and damaged an area greater than in many previous eruptions were unleashed by the torrential rain of a typhoon (Abella y Casariego, 1882: 3). To the inhabitants of Albay as to the peoples of the archipelago as a whole, natural hazards and the disasters that they cause are just a daily event that people have come to expect and learn to live with in the islands.

### **A question of justice**

According to E. L. Quarantelli (2000), how societies think about disasters passes through three phases that are chronological in principle if often overlapping in practice. First, a culture may exhibit a fatalistic acceptance of disasters, historically ascribing what happens to “acts of God”, an attribution that is often enshrined in a society’s legal system. The implication is that disasters are random and that no one can do anything practical to avoid them. Such fatalistic attitudes, Quarantelli argues, did not encourage the development of innovative social arrangements (disaster governance) to better prepare for such events. These beliefs, however, gave way to a second perception after the destruction of Lisbon in 1755, at least in the western world, in which societies were able to take steps to modify the impact of disasters to some degree. Setting the minimum width of streets and the maximum height of buildings are examples of such measures. Russell Dynes points to the development of earthquake-resistant architecture around the mid-eighteenth century as symptomatic of such a development (Dynes, 1999). The materials used and the construction techniques employed reduced the impact on structures: while the hazard may be uncontrollable, the steps taken by governments could nevertheless decrease the risk and reduce their consequences. By the

second half of the 20th century, disasters were beginning to be seen as neither a signs of divine retribution nor as a random act of nature. Instead, they were increasingly viewed as the inevitable outcome of inappropriate human decisions that put people at risk, and were alternatively attributed to the neglect of government officials, the corporate greed of big business, or the carelessness of operatives held morally as well as legally responsible for their consequences (Furedi, 2007: 483). As such, too, they might be mitigated if not altogether prevented by taking the appropriate governance measures. Accordingly, disasters came to be perceived more as “acts of society” than of God or nature, and, as such, could be averted, or at least moderated, by changes to the structure of the social systems that gave rise to them (Quarantelli, 2000).

**Needless to say, there are several flaws** with this typology of disasters. In the first place, it evokes what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls “North Atlantic universals” in the sense that developments in European/North American societies (the West) are projected as the standards of societal transformation for all humanity and are prescriptive in the sense that they convey progress towards “a correct state of affairs” (Trouillot, 2002: 220-222). Second, and relatedly, the typology also suggests a genealogy that is rooted in historicism, of stages in historical development along the lines of “first in Europe, then elsewhere” (Chakrabarty, 2000: 6-7). Both Trouillot and Chakrabarty posit a move away from the idea that humans exist in a singular and secular historical time and propose, in its place, the idea of the “otherwise modern” to escape from the assumption that some societies should be regarded as more advanced than others. **Third, the use of the term fatalism, inherently associated in English with a state of primitivistic acceptance of what is to come, does not do justice to the active calculation of odds that is just as much a part of decision-making in many societies as any passive acceptance of fate. In the Philippines, this combined sense of calculation and acceptance is conveyed by the Tagalog expression *Bahala na* where the latter is equally about**

assessing the risks as it is to do with a sense of resignation (Jocano, 1999: 70). Nor is this decision-making without an element of faith either: faith in the efficacy of prayer and in the intercession of divine protection whether provided by a Christian deity or by spirits and ancestors.

Quite apart from the notion of modernity inherent in any typology that compares other cultures to the West, is the question of causality: what causes a disaster? Frank Furedi argues that the perception of what causes a disaster has a “cultural script” that seeks to endow extreme events with meaning. “For most people,” he contends, “the really important question is not how but why a disaster occurred” (Furedi, 2007: 484). Regardless of whether a disaster is attributed to God, nature or society, however, someone or something must be at fault for what has gone wrong. Without some sense of higher authority, one that is invested with power, authority or a duty of care, no one can be held responsible for a disaster. And, as Judith Shklar (1990) argues, there has to be some “causative or blameworthy agent” for there to be an “injustice”.

In modern Western societies, this accountability is invested in the state which has the responsibility of ensuring, on the one hand, social justice (a level of equality in the distribution of benefits and burdens across all segments of society), and, on the other hand, environmental justice (ensuring the geographical distribution of hazard and risk is not unduly concentrated at particular locations). Examples of disaster-related inequality, however, are not difficult to discern even in modern liberal democracies. Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 focused world attention on the enduring legacy of racial segregation and poverty in the American South where the storm impacted much more heavily on minorities, the poor and the elderly in low-lying suburbs (Laska and Morrow, 2006). Much the same observations have been made with regard to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant disaster in March 2011, often referred to as Japan’s “Katrina”, in which poor, blue-collar workers were

disproportionately victims, bore higher medical risks to radiation, were less adequately assisted and were not consulted in the cleanup and recovery operations (Shrader-Frechette, 2012).

This duty of care, of acting for the public good without fear or favor, may well be a feature of the modern state though just how widespread it is in practice (given the examples of New Orleans and Fukushima) is debatable. Instead, this article is concerned with the changing cultural perception of disasters, what Furedi calls the cultural script, and who is held accountable for them. In particular, it examines how disasters are explained, who is blamed for them, and how these discourses have changed over time. It focuses, as an example, on the Philippines, a nation that has only been independent for the last 60 years. Here the state's duty of care and its role in disasters is a more recent development, one that is not fully accepted by all sectors of society, and where the state's ability to act is limited by the resources at its disposal. Just as Quarantelli argues that the way societies think about disasters is diachronic, so perhaps the notion of blame has passed through sequential but overlapping phases. If we accept that the modern state has a responsibility to guarantee a minimally acceptable level of protection to every citizen, we also need to ask whether past understandings of disaster were any less modern, especially since such ideas are still prevalent today (Latour, 1993).

The history of the Philippines lends itself to just such an examination. The archipelago has endured one of the longest periods of colonial rule of any subjected peoples anywhere in the world. First colonized in 1565, the islands' inhabitants labored under Spanish rule for over three centuries before being "sold" to the United States in 1898. Filipinos have had to declare their independence at least three times: from the Spanish on 12 June 1898, under Japanese **sponsorship** on 14 October 1943, and by American fiat on 4 July 1946. They waged an unsuccessful social revolution against the Spanish and lost a war to maintain their



independence against the Americans (Agoncillo, 1956). The notion of an “unfinished revolution” subsequently dominates any discussion of the twentieth century, casting its shadow over historical interpretations of the later Commonwealth governments and the early post-war presidencies (Constantino, 1975). Under President Ferdinand Marcos, an attempt was made to reshape Filipino society in the 1970s along quasi-corporatist lines but armed dissent, largely contained in the immediate post-war years, subsequently became more widespread as both Communists and Muslim separatists waged a relentless war of attrition against the centralized state (Overholt, 1986). People Power which finally toppled the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 raised high expectations of radical reform that have gone largely unfulfilled under the restored constitutional government.

The nature of the state has changed over the years, as well, reflecting the different character of the political regimes: colonial prior to 1946 and then national after independence. The long dominance of the colonial state, however, can be further subdivided by the succession of imperial rulers, first Spanish, then Americans and finally Japanese. This article sketches out a typology of how disasters have been perceived in the Philippines in relation to the changing nature of the state. In particular, it examines: firstly, the notion of responsibility or the degree to which the state was held to blame for whatever hazard had occurred; secondly, the accepted role of the state in such circumstances, more especially its duty of care; and, lastly, the extent to which those affected by such events were perceived by or saw themselves as passive or active agents in the process and their degree of community resilience. Inevitably, these discourses reflect official attitudes, the view from the top; popular imaginings in a society like the Philippines prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century is often hard to discern given the paucity of sources in the vernacular (Ileto, 1997; Rafael, 1988).

## Divine justice

One of the most enduring legacies of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines is the evangelization and eventual Christianization of its peoples. While the notion of a supreme God may not have been completely foreign to the islands' inhabitants prior to 1565, monotheism and an institutionalized church were (Phelan, 1959). The incorporation of Christianity into the indigenous worldview cast the Christian God as a father figure reflecting the social structure of village and chiefly society. Like a parent, he had two facets to his character: on the one hand, he was an object of petition and gratitude, a kindly paternal figure that granted favours; and, on the other hand, he was a stern figure, an object of anger and *tampo* when he withholds them (Bulatao, 1992: 50–52).<sup>1</sup> In the Visayas, the central islands of the archipelago, this is often represented in terms of *grasya*, the grace of the supernatural that is manifest in the bounty of nature, and *gaba*, punishment of the same for unacceptable behaviour often conceived of as a form of retribution. In particular, disasters are typically depicted as forms of *gaba*, punishment for one's past actions or sins that fall on the innocent as well as the guilty (Garcia, 1976). Nor does *gaba* necessarily happen immediately but can come at any time, though ultimately no one "can escape the wrath of God" (Jocano, 1969: 102).

Such is the recurring motif in most pre-twentieth century accounts of disasters in the Philippines: the feeling that hazard has been brought down upon the individual or the community as a result of bad actions. Many of the early accounts of the eruption of Mayon, albeit mainly written by priests, explain events in these terms. The first detailed account of a major eruption is that of 1 February 1814 when 1200 people reportedly lost their lives. In these accounts, the eruption is made sense of in terms of punishment for some unspecified

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<sup>1</sup> *Tampo* means letting people know you are annoyed at them by ignoring them, akin to giving someone the cold-shoulder.

wrongdoing. For instance, the Vicar General of Nueva Caceres, the ecclesiastical seat of the Bikol region, sent a circular within a month of the eruption to all the affected priests in the parishes instructing them on their duties in such circumstances. He explains the event “as if Divine Justice, angry at our sins, had made us drink from the chalice of bitterness, so that, under the power of influence of these terrible circumstances, we could have a warning to be [of a] more prudent nature in our reflections” (Selga, n.d. b). In a graphic eyewitness account of the eruption by the parish priest of one of the worst affected towns, Fr. Francisco Aragonese was moved to ponder on his own survival in a similar vein, asking “Who among us thought to remain alive in the face of such clear manifestations of divine justice?” (Aragonese, 1815: 13). Again, another parish priest, Fr. de Mata, described the violent swaying and shaking of the ground “as though this indignant element wanted to shake off the weight of a sinner as great as me”. However, he still had the presence of mind to command his flock to leave the church for the safety of an open field (De Mata, 1814).

Though attitudes of what caused volcanic eruptions were undergoing re-examination at the end of the nineteenth century and being **challenged** by more “scientific” explanations, the notion of a vengeful God **remained a persistent trope**. There is only one known extant account of a historic eruption of Mayon in the indigenous language, Bikol. It is an account of the 23 June 1897 eruption written in verse form but differs little from earlier attitudes. The author informs his readers in an opening verse that “God has His way of punishing people” and that “this should serve the purpose of reminding Christians of their duties” and concludes with a supplication that “God will save us from the next glowing avalanche”. He also describes hearing the pleas of a father fleeing from the erupting volcano with his son in his arms, continually tripping over in the darkness, and yet accepting the workings of divine providence because: “we probably have disobeyed you” and that: “If you really want to take us, even if we run as fast as lightning and thunder, we will still die” (Perfecto, 1897).

Similar attitudes are still current in the contemporary Philippines (Bankoff, 2004). Several accounts of the Mount Pinatubo eruption in June 1991 evoke a sense of divine justice. Many churches in Zambales, for example, felt it expedient to organise prayer services to reassure people who regarded the eruption as punishment for their sins (Murphy, 1992: 5). Moreover, the continuing threat of lahars in its aftermath prompted Cesar Lacson, a former seminarian and then aide to Interior Secretary Rafael Alunan, to compare the fate of Pampanga in 1994 with the floods and plagues reserved for those who had incurred the wrath of the Biblical God. “Such extreme Punishment”, he writes, must be “for the damned and the cursed” (Ronquillo, 1994: 9). Cynthia Bautista, a sociologist working among the residents of Concepcion (Tarlac), one of the provinces worst affected by Pinatubo, noted the fervour with which local people resorted to both Christian prayer and the shamanistic rituals of local *espiritistas*, including a procession of holy statues along the dikes to protect themselves from lahars (Bautista, 2000). Later, faced with advancing mudflows from the volcano, some of the residents of a local *barangay* (village) refused to leave their homes and placed religious statues in their front yards “hoping that the power of prayer and faith would divert the lahar’s fury elsewhere” (Lopez, 1991: 20). The concept of divine justice, that extreme events like volcanic eruptions are a form of retribution for one’s own wrongdoing remains a prominent trope in how disasters are perceived and understood in the contemporary Philippines.

### **Nature’s justice**

The emergence of explanations that invoke science rather than the divine to account for natural phenomenon such as the eruption of Mayon precedes the annexation of the Philippines by the United States in 1898. However, the establishment of the American colonial regime clearly marks a change in official attitudes towards volcanoes at least

amongst the colonial elite. Actually, Spanish science in the archipelago was not nearly as rudimentary as it is frequently made out to be or as the Americans chose to cast it.

Derogatory assessments of Spanish science were largely based on the rejection of southern European, transformatist understandings of the natural world (Bankoff, 2011). Even before the Americans acquired the archipelago, though, modest but no less important strides had already been made in the fields of seismology and meteorology with the establishment of the Manila Observatory in 1865 (Schumacher, 1965).

It is instructive, from this perspective, to compare the indigenous account of Mayon's eruption in 1897 referred to above to a scientific treatise written on the same event by José Coronas, a Jesuit priest and a member of the Manila Observatory. In this later rendition, there is no mention of divine intervention but rather a concern with accurate, "factual" observation of phenomena that are benchmarked against past eruptions both of Mayon and overseas. Based on **prior** descriptions of eruptions, Coronas, for instance, writes that though "it is impossible to establish a constant fixed law for all cases, but we believe nevertheless, we can be sure, though it is difficult for eruptions of great importance, to not be followed or preceded by strong earthquakes" (Coronas, 1898: 10). Here, natural law has replaced divine law and the account is not concerned as much with the human dimensions of the tragedy, the plight of people and the reason for their tribulations, as it is focused on the event itself: the flow of lava and their channels, the force with which incandescent stones and lapilli were ejected, the extent of the area exposed, wind directions, and which communities were exposed to the fall of ash and volcanic sand. Where people are mentioned, they are simply reduced to a statistical statement of casualties. Rather than divine vengeance, Coronas talks about "the ire of the volcano" anthropomorphizing a Nature that "castigates" humankind (Coronas, 1898: 20).

The idea that a volcanic eruption was purely a natural phenomenon, an event of Nature rather than a manifestation of divine action in Nature, becomes more prevalent with the passing of time, though the extent to which such attitudes were widely held is debatable. Arlington U. Betts, an American officer who rose to become governor of Albay, witnessed both the March 1900 and July 1928 eruptions of Mayon. In a letter written on the evening of 20 July 1928, he evokes with wonder the power of the natural world: “Man, man, what a power there must be stored down in nature’s powerhouse. Nothing can make one realize what an atom he is on the face of this earth as to be here at the base of this great volcano when it is at work.” Yet even his account is tempered, to some extent, by theodicy. While to Betts the eruption may be a physical force governed by the rules of science, its power was still an expression of divine mastery. In the same letter, Betts notes that “If there is anything on this earth that will make any man think and believe there is a God or Supreme Master of this universe, it is to sit here and witness this terrifying demonstration of Nature’s blast furnace molding the world to fit its needs” (Selga, n.d. c: 16).

While Nature may be an expression of the divine presence, its workings were very much something that could be minutely observed and analyzed, and therefore acted upon. Accounts from the last few decades of the nineteenth century are concerned with accurate descriptions of the phenomenon. The younger Betts, for example, then a captain of infantry during the Philippine-American War, noted in March 1900 how that eruption was associated with earth tremors that initially came once an hour, then every half-hour, then every 20 minutes, then every 10 minutes, and finally every five minutes, and were accompanied by deep subterranean rumblings of a progressively higher and higher pitch. Rather than evoking the end of the world as the Spanish priests had in 1814, he compares the sound to “a gigantic old-fashioned wood pump raising water from a deep well and getting the water nearer and nearer to the top with each stroke of the handle” (Selga, n.d. c: 13). A similar mechanical allusion

was resorted to by Leopoldo Faustino, Assistant Chief of the Division of Geology and Mines in Manila and one of the rising number of indigenous intelligentsia, who likens the eruption to “a gigantic locomotive puffing on a heavy grade” (Faustino, 1929: 28). In an article published in the *Philippine Journal of Science*, Faustino went on to explain how “it is well known that the immediate cause of volcanic eruptions is the explosive force of pent-up steam and that the gases are the chief eruptive elements” (Faustino, 1929: 36).

More to the point, these changing attitudes are not only apparent among American colonial officials and the educated Filipino elite. In another unpublished manuscript, Miguel Selga, the Director of the Weather Bureau in the Philippines, describes how the adamant refusal of an 84-year-old man to leave his house prevented the authorized evacuation of his village during the 1928 eruption. The old man’s intransigence stemmed from his memories of the 1887 eruption when the village had been threatened with complete destruction but was miraculously saved through the divine intercession of Our Lady of Rosario. As a result of their deliverance, the village elders had decided to follow certain religious observances each 5 August in the Virgin’s honor. These “necessary” rituals, however, could not be carried out if all the village’s inhabitants were absent. In an interview suggesting the generational change in attitudes underway, the elder told Selga how the village had observed this ritual each year but that “with the political changes of recent years, our young people have forgotten all about such matters or have shaken off the weight of the obligation” (Selga, n.d. a).

Again, these ideas that explain disasters in natural terms, as a result solely of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, still have popular currency. During the 1991 Pinatubo eruption, the state was portrayed as being largely powerless to resist “a vengeful Nature on the warpath” and former President Ramos was appropriately depicted (given his military background) as having “surrendered” whole towns to the advancing lahars (Tamayo, 1993: B7). At other times, nature is portrayed as capricious, exhibiting uncontrollable

characteristics that, while not necessarily feminine, are often popularly associated with female or childlike behaviour. Thus an article describing the provision of emergency medical services after the 1990 Baguio earthquake was entitled “Conquering Nature’s Tantrum” (Barros et al., 1991: 14). The weather, in particular, is often anthropomorphised and credited with perceived female characteristics such as “inconstancy”, “contradictoriness” and “unpredictability”, “idiosyncrasies” to which humans had “to constantly adjust” (Bugarin, 1990). The focus on the power of physical forces, whose secrets might be discerned with careful observation but whose consequences could not be avoided, conferred on disaster a kind of disembodied justice, the unintended action of a Nature immutable to human appeal.

### **Disaster justice**

The concept of disaster justice, however—that the state has a duty to its citizens that it has somehow failed to observe—has no place in either the notion of a divine justice or in Nature’s justice. It is only subsequent to World War II and the realisation that individuals are unequally exposed to risk—not as a result of divine retribution or disinterested natural forces but because of unequal social systems—that the idea of injustice rather than punishment or misfortune can be entertained (Blaikie et al., 1994). People affected by natural hazards nowadays are identified as vulnerable. Vulnerability, however, is as much an historical concept as any of the preceding explanatory systems, and is born out of the intellectual debates about how to explain the new world order that emerged post 1945 and its tripartite division between First, Second, and Third Worlds (Bankoff, forthcoming 2019).

Vulnerability as a concept emerged as the Cold War intensified during the 1970s. Its chief proponents were motivated by a growing suspicion of the development policies pursued by Western governments and transnational corporations in the newly independent developing



countries of the so-called Third World (Hewitt, 1983; O’Keefe et al., 1976). By demonstrating that there was nothing “natural” about natural disasters and that people were put at risk as much by the political and social structures of the societies in which they lived as by any physical hazard or event, some scholars began to question the hitherto unchallenged assumption that the growing incidence of disasters was due to purely natural physical phenomena. In the process, they offered a searing critique of both the means and the intent behind Western-led development and investment policies. Rather than lifting people out of poverty, the result of such programmes was too often to make of their life a “permanent emergency” (Sen, 1981; Wisner, 1993: 131–133). Everybody is made vulnerable to some extent by a combination of variables such as class, gender, age, disability and the like that affects their entitlement to basic necessities and their empowerment to enjoy fundamental rights (Watts, 1993: 118–120). However, certain individuals were more vulnerable than others and these people lived mainly in vulnerable places that lay primarily in the developing world. The social construction of disaster was made explicit in the Pressure and Release Model (PAR) that explained how risk is directly attributable to both the physical hazard and the social order. By offering a framework for linking the impact of hazards to a series of societal factors that generate vulnerability, the PAR model exposed the historical processes that transformed colonial territories into the states of the Third World (Bankoff, 2001). The critique was unequivocal: imperial heritage, development policies, and unequal power relationships rendered some communities less able to deal with disasters and left them more at risk (Blaikie et al., 1994).

This debate, whose resolution lies at the heart of any notion of disaster justice, operates not only between states but between various sectors within a state. The usurpation of emergency management by all states over the course of the twentieth century parallels the rise and growth of centralised structures and bureaucracies in modern society so that, in a sense,

disasters have perforce been “nationalised” much as any other social service. At the same time, the emergence of organised civil society at a local and national level has given rise, especially in countries like the Philippines, to the rapid proliferation of the NGO sector. In contrast to the state, NGOs are seen as everything governments are not: unburdened by bureaucracy, flexible to innovation, effective implementers, and responsive to grass-root pressures (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Fowler, 2000). An emphasis on preparedness and stakeholder inclusion now dominates disaster policy in international circles. Its ascendancy was marked in the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action that ensured DRR as a local as well as a national priority (UN, 2005), and, more emphatically in its successor instrument, the 2015 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction that recognised the primary responsibility of the state in DRR (UNISDR, 2015).

More recent eruptions of Mayon have taken place within this very different perceptual context, one where the state has a clearly acknowledged responsibility to act, and where NGOs operate as the moral compass of civil society, passing judgement on how well the former has performed. As Cedric Daep, chief of the Albay Public Safety and Emergency Management Office (APSEMO) said, disaster risk management “must be part of the planning and the regular activity of the government” (Mier, 2015). Rather than perceiving an eruption as a form of divine retribution or as the unavoidable consequences of natural forces, the state is seen as having a duty of care to its citizens that is not just voluntary or moral but is enshrined in legal and regulatory practice. Formal involvement by the state in disaster management in the Philippines dates from the Civil Defense Act (RA 1190) of 1954 but it was not until 1978 that a nationwide community disaster preparedness programme was established. Presidential Decree 1566 created a comprehensive structure of disaster coordinating councils at the national, regional and local level with clearly defined duties and responsibilities, including the provision of emergency management planning and personnel.

Pursuant to these aims, an Albay Provincial Disaster Coordinating Council (PDCC) was created and charged with organising an effective legislative and regulatory framework for action during an eruption of Mayon. To ensure the proper level of preparedness, APSEMO, the operational agency of the PDCC (and its successor agency known as the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council or PDRRMC) maintains a round-the-clock duty roster with city and municipal emergency response intervention teams on call throughout the province. In recognition of these efforts, the Albay PDCC won both national commendation (plaque of recognition awarded by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in 2001) and international recognition (Best Model in Disaster Management awarded by the Thailand-based Asian Disaster Management Center in 1999).

Since 1955, PHIVOLCS (Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology) has also maintained monitoring stations close to the volcano and in 1969 constructed the Mayon Resthouse Observatory on its NNW slope. As part of its local preparedness and mitigation measures, PHIVOLCS has designated a six-kilometre-radius zone around the volcano as a Permanent Danger Zone (PDZ) in which farmers and residents are advised to cease all activity in the event of an eruption. This zone is further extendable to seven or eight kilometres in the high-risk area to the southeast of the volcano. Currently, eight municipalities and one city surround the volcano with more than 60 per cent of the entire population of Albay province living within a 15-kilometre radius of its crater. Since then, APSEMO has pursued a largely successful policy of “zero casualty” during an eruption through the wholesale evacuation of surrounding populations according to the level of public alert. As a result, nearly 40,000 people were evacuated from the PDZ on the southeast flank of the volcano during the 2006 eruption, over 44,000 in 2009, and 12,000 more in 2014. As

many as 84,500 people sought shelter in 79 evacuation centres during the recent eruption (2018).<sup>2</sup>

By assuming this role of care, however, the state also accepts liability for its actions or inactions. Aware, too, of its finite capabilities, especially in a country like the Philippines, the state has attempted to include civil society within its decision-making framework, or at least to give the appearance that local people have been consulted. If the state's relationship with NGOs and POs is often somewhat ambiguous at times, the emphasis in the recent Disaster Risk Reduction Management Act of 2010 on community-based disaster risk management (CBDRM) constitutes a clear public statement about the importance of civil society's inherent resilience. Key to the successful Albay approach to disasters is the membership of its PDRRMC, which consists of non-governmental advisers as well as a large number of state agencies. The aim is to bring together all relevant actors engaged in disaster response. In practice, however, a significant segment of civil society actors are not included in its deliberations and activities. NGOs that advocate too radical an approach to disaster risk reduction like Tarabang para sa Bikol (TABI), one of the oldest regional NGOs and affiliated to the left-leaning Citizens' Disaster Response Network, work outside of any formal relationship with APSEMO. TABI, like many other progressive civil society organisations in the Philippines, sees the root causes of vulnerability as lying in the social and economic inequalities of the existing political structures upheld by the state. Instead, it espouses a people-centred and development-oriented approach to disaster and maintains that the vulnerability of local people is aggravated by poverty, poor health and the environmental degradation of the region, all of which are, to a greater or lesser extent, state responsibilities (Bankoff and Hilhorst, 2009: 695–697). Disaster justice here is measured in the Filipino

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<sup>2</sup> A surprise phreatic eruption in 2013 lasting only 73 seconds killed five climbers, four of whom were European. Lahars, on the other hand, caused by passing typhoons are more difficult to anticipate; Typhoon Reming, for instance, killed approximately 2000 people in 2006.

state's failure to provide a decent standard of living to its people and therefore its inability to protect all its citizens to a minimally acceptable level during an eruption. Rather than being seen as the wages of sin or as the victims of Nature, disaster justice cast those so affected as aggrieved parties.

### **A shifting cultural script**

What is suggested in this article, therefore, is a typology of responsibility for the death and destruction wrought by disasters that is reflected in the changing discourses used by the state and its surrogates to depict such events and determine its actions. While the notion of disaster justice may be usefully applied in the contemporary Philippines now that disasters are perceived to be as much socially constructed as they are physical events and where the state has accepted prime responsibility for their management, people thought differently about disasters in the past. Using the example of Mount Mayon, where it is possible to trace the historical perceptions of blame, responsibility and agency over more than two centuries (Figure 1), the notion of disaster as a failure of the state to protect its own is shown to be very much a question of this present age and its normative value systems. Before the state assumed the primary role in DRR and had that function accepted by its citizens, the notion of disaster justice had little real applicability. As this case study has shown, the state's assumption of disaster governance in a society like the Philippines has only taken place in the last half-century or so and is still not completely uncontested.

<b>Time</b> <b>Attribution</b>	<b>Divine Justice</b> (from 1565-)	<b>Nature's Justice</b> (from 1880s-)	<b>Disaster Justice</b> (from 1970s-)
<b>State of responsibility</b> (whose to blame?)	God/Sins	Location/Natural forces	Social structure/Social forces
<b>Duty of care</b> (role of the state)	Voluntary	Moral?	Institutionalized
<b>Agency of afflicted</b> (passive victim or active agent)	Sacral Community	Civic Community	Civil Society (NGOs/POs)

**Figure 1: Typology of Blame, Responsibility and Agency in Disasters**

In the Philippines, a particular “cultural script” endowed disasters with different meanings at different times in its history. In fact, it is possible to trace a shifting locus of blame that moves through time from wrongdoer, to victim, to aggrieved party. For most of its recorded history, the archipelago has not been democratic or free but the colonial possession of a succession of foreign powers. The Spanish colonial state established in 1565 was as much a theocracy as it was a secular institution at the local level. The parish priest was often the sole external representative of authority in rural areas, responsible for the physical as well as the moral safety of his flock (Phelan, 1959). To blame any societal shortfalls that might have contributed to a disaster on the mysterious workings of the godhead only reflected back on the activities of those most affected. Since God was perfect and his judgement unquestionably just, misfortune could only be the result of divine judgement. The blame lay squarely with the victim as the logical result of their own shortcomings, an interpretation

reinforced by the spiritual leaders of communities who also happened to be representatives of that same supreme power. In this scenario, the state was held to be blameless and free from any liability. It proffered aid on a purely voluntary basis as a benevolent external agent but not from any moral or legal responsibility. In turn, those affected by the disaster constituted a sacral community bound together not only by their shared beliefs but also by their shared transgressions.

The dominance of such attitudes persisted well into the nineteenth century in the Philippines as **Western concepts of rationality based** on the Enlightenment with its emphasis on natural laws **supported by scientific fact were** slow to penetrate through the barrier imposed by geographical distance and cultural isolation. The policy of the Catholic Church's hierarchy not to use Spanish as a medium of evangelisation in the archipelago, unlike in their American colonies, largely cocooned the islands from the influence of the outside world (De la Costa, 1961). The major eruption of Mayon in 1814 is reported entirely from a pre-Enlightenment perspective: the event is perceived **in terms of** divine judgement, those most affected have only themselves to blame, and the state's role is largely confined to sanctioning the establishment of new settlements in the wake of the devastation (Mallari 1986). While such attitudes continue to persist **in official reports**, explanations that regarded volcanoes more as a natural force and those disadvantaged by it more as victims of circumstance start to appear in accounts of the 1897 eruption.

However, these sentiments, were largely confined to members of an educated Spanish and Filipino elite and personified by the policies of the new US colonial administration after 1898 (Schumacher, 1973). Those affected were increasingly regarded as hapless victims who simply happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and, as such, they were victims of elemental forces over which the state exercised no control and had no more than a moral responsibility to aid. Leopoldo Faustino's analysis of the 1928 eruption exemplifies this new

approach, commenting on the “desirability” of the state to issue warnings in advance of an event and the need to prepare “concentration camps” to receive those who might have to evacuate (Faustino, 1929: 42). The Spanish had already initiated this expansion of state responsibility into the sphere of disaster governance with the Maura Law of 1893 that laid the foundations of modern, municipal government in the islands. The Americans subsequently revised and strengthened this foundation but the purpose of both regimes remained quintessentially colonial, the efficient management of people and resources for the benefit of the administering power. To the extent that the welfare of colonial subjects benefited this intent, the state might intervene in disasters, dispensing relief to the worst affected.

If there could be no sense of injustice in the face of divine retribution or implacable Nature, matters were different in the 1970s as disasters began to be seen as socially constructed events as much as religious or physical ones. The “official” cultural script began to shift away from explaining disasters in terms of theodicy or natural agents to considerations of what rendered people unsafe, a condition, it was argued, that depended primarily on a society’s social order and the relative position of advantage or disadvantage that an individual occupied within it (Hewitt, 1997: 141). Those judged to be particularly disadvantaged were deemed to be “vulnerable”, where the latter was not only a gauge of a person’s exposure to risk but also a measure of his/her capacity to recover from loss. Those affected by Mayon’s periodic eruptions came to be regarded less as sinners or victims and more as aggrieved parties whom the state had allowed to be injured either through its actions or inactions. Since 1954, the Filipino state has increasingly assumed a duty of care to its citizens that is not just voluntary or moral but is enshrined in legal and regulatory practice, the most recent manifestation of which is the Disaster Risk Reduction Management Act of 2010. The Philippines are far from alone in this “nationalisation” of disasters; there has been a worldwide trend toward the ever-increasing centralisation of state services since World War



It that has only been partially reversed in more recent years (Daniels and Clark-Daniels, 2002). The emergency services represent an important extension of state power into the civilian sphere. However, with this increased authority comes responsibility, and more responsibility incurs liability if due care is not exercised. Unfortunately, even with the best of intentions, the Filipino state has neither the money nor the personnel to fully carry out this mandate but has just enough authority to be judged at fault. As the **official** cultural script in explaining disasters has shifted from wrongdoer to victim to aggrieved party, weak states like the Philippines that assume all the same legal liabilities as strong states but lack the same financial or administrative capabilities, are exposed to accusations of injustice.

## **Conclusion**

Looking historically at the question of blame, responsibility and agency in the archipelago, it is evident that **how volcanoes were understood and who was held responsible** for eruptions has changed over time. What is less certain, however, is how widespread such **changes in** attitudes were since there is only a single historical account of more popular beliefs published in the vernacular, **hinting at the possibility of an alternate rationality that perceives the natural world and human relations with it in other terms. Indeed, there is a growing scholarship to support the notion of an indigenous world that is not unaffected by the official cultural script but exhibits a continuum with pre-Hispanic cultures: a pre-Christian spirit world that is responsible for causing human misfortunes (Loza et al 2016); indigenous forms of kinship relations that extend well beyond the biological (Dizon 2011); and family histories that defy Western explanations (Verano Carter 2015). While this work only allows fleeting glimpses at an alternate reality, what William Henry Scott calls “cracks” in the parchment curtain (1978), its existence highlights the importance of considering culture as a factor in DRR.**

As far as the official cultural script, however, a pattern is discernible over time by which natural forces and chance gradually replace sin and retribution as the main trope in how disasters are described during the nineteenth century. Only after disasters are regarded as both the product of social structures and physical triggers can the state be held responsible for its failure to provide a minimally sufficient level of security to all its citizens. The notion of responsibility is central to the idea of disaster justice. In the Philippines, the state has historically had a role to play in disasters but its interventions were purely voluntary and/or moral prior to the mid twentieth century. Only with the establishment of the National Civil Defense Administration (RA 1190) in 1954 do the state's responsibilities become codified in law and institutionalized in practice. And only then is the state rendered liable for its actions or inactions.

The role of the state, in turn, raises questions about the agency of the community. Where divine retribution was held responsible for disasters and the duty of the state was undefined and, in any event, voluntary, agency was expressed in terms of either Christian fraternity or sacral community, a brotherhood of afflicted souls in the face of divine retribution that found solace in the many religious associations or *cofradías* still so prevalent in Filipino communities today, or, perhaps, in pre-Christian rituals and practice. The more disasters were explained in terms of the power of natural forces and where the state, at best, had only a moral duty to intervene, people came to depend on their family and neighbors, social capital expressed in a profusion of formal and informal civic community organizations that have characterized village the length and breadth of the archipelago over the centuries (Bankoff 2012). Only after the state assumed legal responsibility for the protection of its citizens and institutionalized its regulatory role did the notion of agency become more widespread, and it became possible to talk about social capital in terms of a much larger social unit, civil society (Bankoff, 2007). Just as people have been rendered vulnerable through a change in the

understanding of what causes a disaster, so the state has been held liable for its failure to provide an adequate level of protection to all its citizens. The transmutation of those affected in extreme events from wrongdoer, to victim, to aggrieved party has profound ramifications beyond the Philippines as disaster justice is set to become a much more familiar discourse in DRR everywhere.

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