Wolfram H. Dressler. 2025. *For the sake of forests and gods: Governing life and livelihood in the Philippine uplands.* Cornell University Press. ISBN 9781501779268. US$33.95

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1. Introduction

Among this book's wealth of anthropological themes and symbolisms, one image stands out prominently. Deep in the text, as in the forest, Wolfram Dressler describes a woman in her thatched house, sitting late at night beneath the harsh glare of a solar lamp. Its light is unforgiving, exposing everything it touches, as the woman patiently weaves a small basket, the *Tingkep* (p. 139). This is not just another ethnographic vignette, an incidental "field note" for an argument on "bio-politics" (see Foucault, 1976/1978), one without greater purpose (see Dressler, 2009). Beneath the surface lies a quiet tension: the author invites us to imagine how fragile the woman's hopes for a better life feel—woven into a basket she cannot use, already destined for sale. She can only hope that, on a lucky day, a small profit might bring those dreams a little closer. Yet, as Dressler shows, her life and the lives around her have been shaped to serve the fantasies of others—the state, para-state agents, and religious bearers of "the light of God" (Dressler, 2025, p. 129). These actors have conspired to design social and economic relations that keep her dreams forever out of reach.

This image—and the world it belongs to—has deep implications for how we think about statecraft, religion as a human project, and science, especially anthropology. Dressler reminds us that critical ethnography can both reveal hypocrisy, and trace the smallest details of oppression.

One thing is clear: Dressler places the woman's image at the center of his story, using it to illuminate the Pala'wan lifeworld, highland history, and the fantasies of Pala'wan "brokers." In doing so, he echoes a wider philosophical critique where, for example, Luce Irigaray asks why "light" has long symbolized not only visibility but patriarchal dominance (see Irigaray, 1980/1991; 1984/1993; 1977/1985; see also Alighieri, 1320/2009; Kristeva, 1980/1982). Much like in Palawan, the woman embodies the subjugated, while the state and its allies act as patriarchs, bringing "light" to the highlands and, in doing so, reducing complex Pala'wan beings to mere "body counts:" raw material for discipline and profit, all in the name of development and salvation. Dressler shows that this is not accidental but deliberate: an ideologically executed project.

2. "Scattering of the light": Discourse assemblages and anarchic fragments

The light from the solar lamp that falls on the woman, her home, and the forest around her has, both literally and metaphorically, reduced everything to shadow. Reflecting on "solar light" points to a "development artifact" that sparks the spread of "capitalist relations" (Li, 2014) in the highlands. In his work and my own fieldwork among the Tau-Buhid in Mindoro, solar lamps mark the arrival of "colonial settlers" disguised as conservationists and missionaries. They banish darkness, perceived as the realm of the "other," without seeing that this forced light harms lifeworlds that depend on the dark: nocturnal birds, river creatures, plants, mushrooms, and people whose rituals and rest take place at night. Under the glow of a solar lamp, only shadows remain. And like shadows, those beneath its light—especially people—become hollow forms, shifting with the direction of the beam.

As Dressler notes, the Pala'wan sometimes can eagerly present themselves as "children of God" or as obedient citizens—roles shaped by the brokers who seek their cooperation. Yet some view these roles as hollow, performed for opportunity and survival. He recounts how newly "converted" Pala'wan Adventists grow frustrated with certain food prohibitions such as shrimp and other shellfish, despite their local abundance. Just as artificial light disturbs rivers, the Adventist "light" leaves the Pala'wan lifescape barren. In short, the "scattering of the light" by the state through solar lamps and by Adventists through preaching combines to impose a power that enables ethnocide.

Dressler wonders whether this pliancy comes from "project fatigue"—the exhaustion of enduring endless conservation and religious campaigns—or whether it is a form of strategic resistance, similar to other Indigenous peoples who adopt lowland practices to gain advantages (Rosales, 2022). What he describes recalls Giorgio Agamben's (1998) idea of "bare life" and Michel Foucault's (1976/1978) "biopolitical subjects:" people stripped to their biological minimum, deprived of rights and protection, yet still essential to the projects of the state and church. Dressler's nuanced analysis thus engages long-standing debates about the state (Hobbes, 1651/2008; Rousseau, 1762/2004) and its reach (Clastres, 1974/1989; Scott, 2009; Wolf, 2010). He exposes how a state built on capitalism cannot truly protect those whose ways of life oppose its interests. Likewise, he asks how Adventists can claim to help when their mission depends on converting free communities into disciplined subjects. By posing these questions, Dressler reveals the contradictions at the heart of state and missionary authority; that is, the limits of their legitimacy and the coercive nature of their moral claims.

3. Hermeneutics: Interpretation and gap

This paradox runs through the book. Dressler does not resolve it but shows the complexity of Pala'wan subjugation and resistance. He often calls customary artifacts "powerful," as with the *mutja* inside the *tingkep*, revealing his effort to show the Pala'wan navigating degrees of oppression and resilience. This tension surfaces in the final lines of the book: "Such a foreboding future urgently requires that uplanders be more politically empowered to better negotiate the litany of biopolitical interventions coming their way" (p. 190). Yet what does Dressler mean by "political empowerment?" It could suggest surrender to capitalism, strategic resistance, or even a radical reimagining of Pala'wan as a site of anarchy. This line needs further clarity and elaboration, because the book itself shows that the problem lies in outsiders assuming the Pala'wan are politically incapable—an assumption that justifies state conservation and missionary intrusion. If left vague, this weakens the book's core argument.

From beginning to end, except for this ambiguity, Dressler's superb work stands as a powerful record of a people's endurance amid oppression. Yet just as Anna Tsing (2015) showed how life continues amid "capitalist ruins," Dressler might clarify what kinds of relations remain possible during and after the Pala'wan "battle against the light"—perhaps ones that do not depend on empowerment at all. Seen hermeneutically, his message becomes clear: a call to the state and its agents to stop their encroachment and heed a simple imperative—leave the Pala'wan alone.

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