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Review by Rebecca Tinio McKenna, University of Notre Dame

In her essay “Pocket-Sized Imperialism: U.S. Designs on Colonial Currency,” Alvita Akiboh shows the value to scholars of U.S. imperialism of what we may encounter today as antique-shop ephemera—colonial coins and paper money. Akiboh’s article, rich with images of Spanish-Philippine pesos, U.S.-Philippine pesos, and U.S. dollars and quarters, considers currency designed and circulated by the United States in Puerto Rico and the Philippines, territories acquired from Spain at the turn of the twentieth century. Akiboh treats colonial currency “as an iconographic material object” (875). She argues that the images impressed on this money, and the attempts to make colonial subjects use it, were “integral component[s] of official Americanization efforts to reshape life in the colonies,” incorporate subject peoples into “a kind of cultural nationalism,” and conduct nation-building (899, 878). How Puerto Ricans and Filipinos responded to the new mediums of exchange, however, was not always as U.S. officials intended.

In dwelling on matters of design, Akiboh departs from foregoing studies that have focused largely on currency in relation to the politics of the gold standard and U.S. efforts to exercise economic and financial control in colonies and in precincts of indirect rule.1 Several of these studies, notably, those of Emily Rosenberg and Allan Lumba, also draw important connections between currency reforms and imperial racial formations. Their work shows how perceptions of nations’ ‘civilization,’ or lack thereof, variously justified and checked the extension of the gold standard. The creation or exploitation of racial difference is less the concern of Akiboh. For her, a focus on currency design foregrounds a broader process of U.S. cultural expansion into the

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colonies. She places the production and circulation of currency alongside other methods of what she calls ‘Americanization,’ like colonial education, public health, and policing policies and practices.

Inasmuch as these were means of ‘Americanizing’ Puerto Ricans and Filipinos, they were also attempts at creating order and subjects of colonial rule. Both were elusive in the first years of the twentieth century. There was, of course, the outstanding question of the political status of these islands and peoples vis-à-vis the United States. The U.S. Supreme Court addressed this problem in the ‘Insular Cases’ of 1901 and settled on defining the colonies as ‘unincorporated’ territories. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, an anti-colonial insurgency persisted through the first decade of U.S. rule. Little more order prevailed in the money supply of either colony. In the Philippines, formerly an entrepôt in the Spanish galleon trade, a variety of Spanish-Philippine pesos, Mexican dollars, and Filipino silver and copper coins traded hands. That frustrated U.S. citizens there, who “were never sure how far their dollars would go” (880). The chaos also compromised visions of making the Philippines and Puerto Rico inviting sites for U.S. capital investment, just as the old coins and bills bearing the Spanish coat of arms stood as unwelcome traces of the prior imperial sovereign.

It was in this context that U.S. officials introduced new currencies. In Puerto Rico, Congress chose to use U.S. notes, if ones issued until 1913 by the Banco Español de Puerto Rico and its successors. Puerto Ricans were granted a brief, three-month period to exchange their pesos for dollars. The process, Akiboh writes, tended to advantage “urban dwellers—mostly bankers, merchants, and speculators” over rural peoples whose access to the exchange, or canje, was limited (883). In the end, she explains, the introduction of U.S. currency heightened class conflict and also tension between the colony and the United States.

In the Philippines, U.S. officials elected to produce a new currency, a silver coin pegged to the U.S. dollar at the rate of two to one. It was designed to evidence U.S. sovereignty while enabling the archipelago to retain its links to Asian markets where the silver standard prevailed. Drawing on reports from provincial governors, Akiboh shows that Philippine peoples in both pacified and un-pacified parts of the country were slow to adopt the new currency. “[L]ess an act of resistance to U.S. sovereignty,” this was primarily “a matter of practicality” she writes (885). In response to the laggard incorporation of the new money, colonial officials passed measures to compel the use of the currency. Their efforts met with limited success. In one province, some businesses shuttered rather than suffer the penalties imposed on those who continued using the old money. Another challenge arose in 1905, when the market price of silver surpassed the value of the U.S.-Philippine coin. This led some Filipinos to melt down their money and sell the metal. U.S. officials responded by issuing a new peso with a lower silver content.

After outlining these attempts to implement the new currency regimes, Akiboh turns to the messages communicated by the design of the coins and bills themselves. She argues that through these carefully designed objects, U.S. officials “took spaces and peoples who were not fully incorporated into the political nation and invited them into the U.S. cultural nation—a nation defined by shared history and culture, not legal status” (876). By 1900, for example, Puerto Ricans came to use a penny that bore the image of Lady Liberty donning a Native American headdress. These coins put a symbol of imperial conquest into Puerto Ricans’ hands, yet it was a troubling one as “mainland U.S. citizens often lumped Puerto Ricans and Native Americans together as federal wards” (891). Akiboh observes that “[a] distinct Puerto Rican national identity was not expressed on currency” (894). To be sure, by 1902, Puerto Ricans were using bills printed with images of U.S. Presidents William McKinley and Benjamin Harrison, and Treasury Secretary Hugh McCulloch.
In the Pacific colony, where officials introduced a new currency, Philippine peoples came to use money designed to signal both the sovereignty of the United States and the distinctiveness of the Philippines. The U.S.-Philippine peso featured “a Filipino man or woman wielding a hammer with Mount Mayon in the background. The reverse…featured a heraldic eagle atop a shield with thirteen stars” (894). On paper notes, Akiboh suggests, U.S. officials attempted to generate a “national myth” for the colony now freed of centuries-long Spanish rule (895). Five and fifty-peso notes that featured the likenesses of McKinley and Maj. Gen. Henry Lawton, respectively, advanced commanders of imperial conquest as men deserving of Filipinos’ reverence. The two-peso note, meanwhile, bore the image of José Rizal, the Filipino novelist and proponent of colonial reforms during Spanish rule. As Akiboh notes, Rizal was acceptable to Americans because he had died at the hands of the Spanish. His heroism could be recognized without undermining the plausibility of the United States as a force of anti-colonialism. George Washington appeared on the ten-peso bill; Akiboh observes that this symbolism was more ambiguous. While for U.S. officials, Washington represented “the glory of U.S. colonial rule,” for others, not least the revolutionary general Emilio Aguinaldo, he was a symbol of anti-colonial resistance (897).

Akiboh suggests that attempts at ‘Americanization’ expressed through this iconography served as compensation for the denial of incorporation into the U.S. body politic: “People who were supposedly unwelcome in the national community of citizens,” she contends, “were being brought inside in other ways, by interacting with objects like currency that suggested their national identity was linked to the United States” (876). They were, at least, “invited into the U.S. cultural nation” (876).

Akiboh’s general point is convincing. It seems clear that U.S. officials used the design and circulation of colonial money to educate their subjects on a culture of the mainland, and through this currency, officials “naturalized the very idea that these places should be tied to the United States” (899). Currency presented U.S. figures (or U.S.-approved Filipinos) over other Filipino revolutionaries or Puerto Ricans as political icons and in that way, displaced significant local histories. To this extent, ‘Americanization’ may be an apt term for the process by which U.S. officials were shaping relations with their new colonial subjects through currency design.

In other respects, however, ‘Americanization’ may be an inadequate interpretive framework for the complicated relationships that Akiboh so effectively identifies throughout the essay. To the extent that ‘Americanization’ was the objective of U.S. officials, the process was certainly uneven. That Puerto Ricans were permitted to trade U.S. dollars and not Filipinos seems to suggest that no one course of cultural (or, for that matter, political or economic) expansion and incorporation existed. Further, Akiboh’s observation of the distinct design of the U.S.-Philippine currency—the effort to craft imagery that conveyed the paradox of the colony’s position as “foreign in a domestic sense”2—seems also to suggest something shy of an unreserved welcome into the “U.S. cultural nation” (876). An invocation of ‘Americanization’ seems to gloss these asymmetries—the kinds of exceptions and distinctions that were arguably constitutive of, not incidental to,

imperial rule. Likewise, the persuasive power of ‘Americanization’ rests on bracketing the more explicitly political and economic processes referenced in the essay—processes that created or emphasized differences between mainlanders and colonial subjects. That one might substitute the word ‘colonization’ or ‘colonialism’ for ‘Americanization’ through the essay suggests that it may obscure even as it reveals.

The term ‘Americanization’ seems less common in recent writing on U.S. imperialism, which tends to focus on interchanges between empire and colony and sites beyond, and in this way, throws into question just what and where ‘America’ is (and was). Scholarship has also emphasized the construction of social difference, particularly racial difference, as a premise of imperialism and key practice of imperial powers. To this reader, elements of Akiboh’s essay that identify how U.S. officials crafted distinctions or produced ambiguities sit uneasily with the relatively blunt notion of ‘Americanization.’ Still, Akiboh makes a valuable contribution to the literature of U.S. imperialism by encouraging readers to consider how the United States projected power in U.S. territories through material objects and means. We have scholarship that considers forms of U.S. ‘cultural expansion’ around the globe—works like Emily Rosenberg’s *Spreading the American Dream* (1982) and Victoria de Grazia’s *Irresistible Empire* (2005), but historians would do well to pursue how U.S. officials used things—commodities, infrastructure projects, and architecture, for examples—to advance power in U.S. colonies specifically. At a moment when market-watchers buzz over “cryptocurrencies” like bitcoin, which are little more than virtual tokens and strings of code, Alvita Akiboh makes a good case for taking a hard look at clinking coins and crisp bills.

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