

Voyage to the Philippines¹

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November 15 – At noon, we sailed around the islands of Bucutua, Tongkil, Balanguigui, Sinisa. Soon, we were sailing off Sulu Island, its high mountains covered with vast prairies of cogon surrounded by forests. Although I had a good pair of binoculars, I could only see a few houses. We passed in front of Paticol, where Spanish troops landed on February 22, 1876. At six o'clock, we anchored on the northwestern part of the island.

This little village is very new and if the illustrious Dumont d'Urville were to come back to this beach where he had anchored in 1639, he would undoubtedly be surprised not only by how the place looks but by the welcome he would be get.

Before I continue my account, a few historical notes would be in order.

Sulu is an important center of trade and political power. It is also an important religious center and is considered the Mecca of the Far East. The sultanate of Sulu, one of the oldest when Islam was spreading in the northern part of Malaya, has witnessed reversals of fortune and terrible crises from which it has always been able to recover. The political regime is still the same today: an oligarchy of *datus* (feudal lords), who are, one way or the other, subject to the sultan's supreme power. The people here are not only occupied with trade and Muslim proselytizing, but even with piracy, which has caused conflicts with the Dutch and the Spaniards. The inhabitants of Sulu, pirates at heart and good sailors, constantly ravage the coasts of the Visayan islands, sack the towns there and reduce its inhabitants to slavery. Not long ago, Professor Semper who was in Northeastern Mindanao, was almost kidnapped by *praus* which had come from Malbun, had it not been for fortuitous timing.

Spain has sent 20 expeditions to fight Sulu. They were almost always victorious, freeing the captured natives and forcing the sultan to sign official treaties. Since their villages were burned and their *praus* sunk, the *datus* who were united under Spanish authority swore to obey their conquerors' demands. But these treaties were sometimes violated. On these coral-strewn, unchartered waters, *praus* have proven their superiority over sailboats whose movements are hampered by constant monsoon rains. When the Spaniards would leave, piracy would begin again with such vigor as if it were a business endeavor eager to get back at recovering lost profit. For some time now, the sultans seem to understand Spain's superiority and the irreparable defeat which the civilized world was threatening them with. They would have wanted to sincerely uphold the

terms of the treaties, but they did not have the power. They were only good at collecting a third of the booty from their subjects, a tribute which was always religiously paid. It was impossible for them to effectively watch so many *datus* who lived on 150 islands under their authority. Moreover, this authority was vested on them by their religion and they would have lost their prestige if they tried to make their people respect the Catholic population of the Philippines. In fact, these feared sovereigns were the subjects of their vassals. They were forced to tolerate continuous exactions although they had foreseen the inevitable consequences which would result from such acts.

On February 29, 1876, the Spanish army which had landed seven days earlier at Paticol, found itself in the entrenchments of Tianggi. The squadron fled to the beach and boarded their ship. By nighttime, the town was in flames and abandoned by its defenders. Only the Spanish flag was left fluttering in the forts.

Today the old city, which had been ruined by bombings, has disappeared. Spanish civil engineers have leveled a part of the hills, which once towered over the Muslim town to cover shoals. On this leveled ground, which is almost entirely surrounded by the sea, and dominated by mountains rising up to 700-800 meters, a new city, still very small, is emerging, and which will no doubt grow.

All road works are done by native prisoners. They belong to three categories: military prisoners who are being disciplined and perform different tasks in the fort; the *deportados*, who are detained because of administrative sanctions and the *presidarios* or the convicts.

The garrison is composed of about 500 men, who are engineers or native infantrymen, under the command of officers, almost all of whom are Spaniards.

As we disembark in Sulu, we find construction in full swing: it is not easy to find accommodations. However, with the help of Colonel Lopez Ventura Nuno, interim governor and Fathers Federico Vila and Juan Carreras, military chaplains, it was not long before we found one. Half-finished streets were extraordinarily busy. Chinese-run shops were full of people looking for information. One could not go far without meeting several guards, with their loaded weapons and bayonets at the end of their rifles.

They were waiting for the *juramentados*.

The sultan of Sulu was resigned to accept life in the Spanish protectorate. I do not even know what he preferred: the tranquility and the happiness that he enjoyed or the nominal unstable power that he had. But the *datus* who were less intelligent and had suffered more under such a regime, could not tolerate these conditions. Although piracy was kept at a respectful distance, their main source of income was affected. They

found strong support among the *panditas* (Muslim priests) who were threatened by a close relationship with the Spaniards and their Catholic missions. Submission was therefore not acceptable to the *datus* and they supported all means to fight against Spanish domination. They were supported by their subjects who were adventurous and belligerent, being used to follow the caprices of an uncontrollable authority. The secular laws of Sulu moreover made it easier to recruit men who were ready to accomplish supreme resolutions. These laws allowed a creditor to enslave his bankrupt debtor, as well as his family. These Malays are so careless that their masters find no difficulty in making them contract big debts which they could really not pay back. The unfortunate debtor becomes an outcast. His family is separated from him. Often he can buy back his family at the cost of his own life by killing as many Christians as he can. The debtor accepts, then swears and thus is he called *sabil* or *juramentado*.

Juramentados know fully well that if they are able to penetrate a Spanish city, all hope of turning back is gone. Gunboats are always on the lookout and at the slightest signal, these boats will land on the beach. Inland, a tower and two forts assure protection for the town. Escape is almost impossible because its gates are closely guarded. Furthermore, along the palisade of the forts, at regular intervals, there are guard boxes which are big enough to hide four soldiers, who are always armed and ready to fire.

Death is certain to come to each *juramentado*. The yellow-bellied undergo expert training under the *pandita* to make sure there is no turning back. Once a group has been organized, a regimen of fasting, races run through deserted forests, recitation of prayers at the tombs of dead *juramentados* and long sermons which relate in detail the joys of paradise with Mohammed when the *juramentado* perishes. Only when the trainees have reached the state of fanaticism, and only then, are they sent to Spanish towns.

A plot which always involves several families and which takes a long time to prepare can never be kept secret. The god of greed which is more powerful than fanaticism loosens people's tongues. The governor of Sulu is almost always informed of an imminent attack, but not the exact time because *juramentados* themselves do not know it. We arrived in Sulu at such a time. We were on the verge of an attack. So we had to be very careful.

This was the advice of a neighbor, a brave captain who had already witnessed several *juramentados* at work. "*Never go down the street without a revolver and beware as you pass the palisade,*" he said.

One morning, I decided to go out. I did not see anyone coming and I really wanted to gather some plants. Closely behind me was Juan, my Tagalog *muchacho*, such a coward if he is left to himself but susceptible to all kinds of heroic acts in the eyes of a European. This wandering taught me something about the geological structure of

the island.

The Sulu archipelago extends from Borneo to Mindanao like a chain of islands, which are summits of underwater land masses. Several of these islands are mostly composed of layers of vegetation which grew to the surface of the sea. On other islands, this is not the case, especially in Sulu. Layers of vegetation are found only on the shores. The land mass is volcanic in origin. The very fertile soil in the mountains and in the valleys is the result of the breakdown of the first layer of lava. Numerous blocks of lava are only seen on the seashore, on riverbeds or on big open trenches dug by engineers to get filling materials to cover mangroves. Elsewhere, forests or cogon prairies are found.

I went through the sloping woods on the southeastern side of the town. The only people I saw were slaves drawing water from a stream where I saw pink *Ipomoea*. Farther down, in the middle of a small clearing was a hut of Tagalog migrants, freed *presidarios*, who barricaded themselves. They advised me to return to town as soon as possible. As I followed the gaps in the forest, where I found many insects under the vegetal detritus, I came upon a clearing. Prisoners were cutting down trees as they were being watched by a company of infantrymen. Their commandant gently admonished me of my carelessness and advised me to wait for him to go back to town. Since he felt that I was about ready to leave, the commandant was no longer insistent. Instead, he gathered his men right then and there, and returned to town with me.

23 November. – The succeeding days passed by in relative tranquility. Since I was busy with my anthropological research, I had already forgotten the famous *juramentados*. However, this morning at 8 o'clock, when I was in the marketplace, I heard some shots. These were followed by shouts, then dead silence. The marketplace was emptied in an instant. I was alone on the deserted square, several steps away from two guards who were leaning on a hut while loading their rifles. At this time, a woman, all touselled, ran out, followed by a dirty Sulueño who was as white as a sheet. The *kris* in his hand was dripping with blood. The woman shouted at me: *juramentados!* She knocked me down as if she were a cannonball. Two gunshots zipped over my head. I stood up and saw the *juramentado* fall, hit on the chest. But he quickly got up and attacked the guards, holding his *kris*. Although he had been bayoneted, he was still standing, trying to stab a guard who was holding him off by the end of their rifle. The other guard loaded his gun and finally shot down the madman.

A hail of shots burst from all sides. As I was passing the main road, I saw some men lying in a pool of blood. In the middle of the road were three *juramentados*, head high, kris raised and resolutely advancing to meet the troop of soldiers head on. The shots died down. When the smoke cleared, the three *juramentados* were on the ground, lined-up, face down. At last, we had been freed from our attackers.

In these sad instances, the doctor's role is clearly defined. So we hurried to the hospital.

On the way, we met the governor, the brave Colonel Ventura Lopez Nuno, calm and cool but with eyes burning with anger. We exchanged a quick and cordial handshake. There we were in the midst of the dead and the wounded. The *juramentados* claimed 15 victims. The wounds were atrocious! One corpse was headless, another cut into two. The first wounded victim whom I attended to was a soldier of the third regiment who was guarding the gate through which the assailants entered. His left arm was fractured in three different places, his shoulder and chest were literally axed. It would probably best just to amputate since his flesh was so lacerated. As I was setting his fractures, the soldier who was still reeling from the battle, was telling me how the attack began. The instructions given to the soldiers were explicit and strictly followed. Every Sulueño, man or woman, who passed through the gates was searched and stopped if he or she had a weapon. The *juramentados*, eleven in all, were divided into three groups separated by a few steps. They were wearing wading boots and had *cañas* (bamboo water containers), where they had hidden their weapons. As the guards bent to examine the *cañas*, all the *juramentados* drew their *kris* at the same time. One guard was killed on the spot. His comrade, even under a rain of blows, still had the strength to fire a shot. He killed one of the attackers. The others stormed the gates and entered the town.

The excruciating wounds inflicted by the *kris*, which were often immediately fatal, sometimes heal quickly when treated correctly. After some time, all the wounded of the 23 November incident recovered, thanks to the care of the hospital director-surgeon, Major Manuel Rabadan y Arjona, who is very intelligent and has a generous heart. I will write again later about my colleague's merits.

24 November – The commotion caused by the attacks of the *juramentados* began to die down. In Sulu, one gets used to these incidents. Moreover, after this same incident, tranquility will surely be restored for some time. After war, comes a time of peace. The Chinese have taken to their transactions which were doubly lucrative with the Sulueños and the Spaniards. Roadworks have begun with such frenzy that made one of my native friends, a noble *pandita*, say that the Spaniards wanted to throw the entire island into the sea. This Sulueño, who looks like a Semite, is a descendant of an Arab who had first introduced Islam here, speaks Malay well, which facilitates my conversing with him. He never tires of hearing about Constantinople and its description, of its great stone mosques and the court of Istanbul's powerful sultan. He marveled at my stories about Algeria and the three million Muslims who obeyed the president of the French people. Although he is very intelligent, I saw that these did not mean anything to him and represented only a huge multitude, which all the more increased his awe. In return, he gave me a minute description of the Koran, about his men, slyly avoiding the negative side which would hurt his *amor propio* as a Sulueño and as a *pandita*.

Our anthropological observations and our specimens increased in size each day. We owe much to this *pandita* and also to the Spaniards for their moral and logistic support. Whether we were together or apart, Mr. Rey and myself studied more and more the

scope of our expeditions in the interior of the island as well as on the coast.

I found traces of war everywhere; huts in ruins, coffee and coconut plantations eaten away by forests. Sometimes, behind an untidy fence, some natives, pirates who were forced to work in the fields, would cast angry looks at me. But I was always careful and always armed. One day at about noon, on a very hot day, I sought refuge under the shade of huge mangosteen trees at the edge of the plantation. I was very tired and discontent with my search for plants. I called two workers who were lazily working nearby and I showed them a handful of coins. I enticed them to help me look for some insects or reptiles. They smiled disdainfully. Suddenly one of them took me by the hand and gestured that I remain silent and led me near a coffee tree. After looking around, I saw a magnificent *Tropidoloemus Hombroni* on its belly, its green back almost invisible amid the foliage but its eyes as red as rubies.

“*Catch it,*” I told the Sulueño who for every reply he made, jumped backward. There was no hesitation. With a stroke of a rod, I threw the *Tropidoloemus Hombroni* to the ground. With a second stroke, I sent it high into the air. It fell back to the ground and while it tried to regain its balance, my rod was on its nape and its head was solidly fastened by my foot. It was then easy to tie it with a rope. It was just ready to be dipped in alcohol, which was indispensable to preserve its beautiful colors.

This procedure, which I knew well and which I had mastered because of necessity, earned me praises from the Sulueno. He brought me to his hut which was big and maintained in good condition. It is one of the rare properties which did not belong to a datu, and which survived the war and pirate attacks. I found many people in his house, his aging parents, children nursing from their mothers, several slaves of all ages, and most of all, many women. These people were almost all in the nude. In Sulu as well as in other Muslim places in the archipelago, the teachings of the Koran are not strictly followed. The climate would make it hard to wear the chador. When Muslim women meet a European in a Spanish town, they pretend to veil themselves with their scarves but the practice is not done at home. My host introduced me to his family and gave me reason to admire his home. His house had only one room. With a divider, it becomes two rooms of unequal sizes. Small trunks where every Sulueño, freeman or slave, places his fortune, mark the place where each one sleeps for the night. Among the furnishings are some gongs (called *agun* in Sulueño) and some Chinese porcelain, a good number of lances and kris of different shapes, a rusty old rifle.

We looked for fruits. The men and women appeared to truly enjoy coconut milk with a generous portion of rum, which I had brought in my flask. The master of the house found this drink a little too sweet and soon finished my supply of rum. The conversation became lively. While seated on the floor or stretched out on the bamboo steps, masters and slaves shared the drink. Pirates must be regarded fairly. The Sulueños, the Muslim Malays of the Philippines, the savage races of the interior of the islands

in the archipelago have never subjected their slaves to exploitation, to the refined cruel acts as told in Darwin's book. (Beagle 1839). The barbaric acts of these ignorant and fanatical Moros are seemingly mild when compared to the customs of Christian masters. In general the Sulu slave is amply fed, and his work is not excessive when he is not busy gathering mother of pearl. Punishments are rarely administered and are not as brutal, a particular characteristic about the moeurs of this nation. After some time of surveillance, the Tagalog or Visayan captive is freed. He can marry and raise a family. But woe to the family of the free Sulueño who is reduced to slavery because of debt. Woe to the families of these slaves, to the family of the runaway slave! In all these cases, the law is inflexible: women, children, regardless of age, are sold by the creditor or the wronged master and are scattered to the four corners of the archipelago. That is why there is no rush for Christian captives in the Philippines for protection by the Spaniards whose flag flies on gunboats in the waters of Sulu. Besides, escape for men is easier than for women because they can find excuses to go out of their huts.

At this time, in spite of the tranquility of this scene that I witnessed, I remembered the story of Mme Beecher-Stowe. I admire this noble woman's campaign, the success that she brought to the New World and which spreads each day to countries where slavery exists in the Far East.

Among these somnolent Malays, these women who will probably be separated the next day from their children, one feels affected by I don't know what kind of mediocre harem. I stood up and said goodbye. I mounted my horse and hurried past the cogon fields, following my host who wanted to bring me back accompanied by his favorite young Malay slave from Borneo. It was a constant descent. At great speed, we rode as fast as an avalanche coming down into the forest, passing the tall trees lying on the ground. Into a new meadow, then we found ourselves at the foot of the *Isabela* tower. The Sulueño left me. Juan, my *muchacho*, appeared on the horizon, ashamed that his horse had a sprain but proud to have brought back a *Tropidoloemus Hombroni* alive.

Time had indeed flown. After the expeditions which so tired us, we were always welcomed to the *tertulias* by the Spaniards. Almost all the government officials live alone, which does not prevent happy meetings and balls from happening, where the señoras are replaced by some poor Tagalogs who look hideous during the day in their rags, but are radiant at night in their piña camisoles and their multicolored silk sayas. No matter how poor the Tagala, she always keeps a formal attire in her *tampipi*.

Endnotes

- 1 Excerpts from translation of J. Montano's *Voyage aux Philippines et en Malaisie* (1886).