

The Philippine Muslims: Our Link to Southeast Asia

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Pre-colonial Philippine culture was greatly enriched through trade relations with its neighbors in Southeast Asia. In the southern islands of Islamized Mindanao emerged sultanates which had extensive ties with the region and the Muslim world beyond. When Europe took possession of Southeast Asia and its vast natural resources, the Dutch, British and French opted to leave cultures alone, allowing future generations to retain their way of life. In the Philippines, the Spaniards did otherwise, Catholicizing whatever was within reach. The Muslims of Mindanao resisted and having survived, saved their culture from disintegration and preserved the country's only link with the rest of Southeast Asia.

It is evident that the Philippines shares many things in common with its Southeast Asian neighbors. Archaeological, linguistic, folkloric and other studies indicate that its southern parts of Mindanao and Sulu, in particular, enjoyed active trade with Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and mainland Indo-China from the beginning of the 13th century. The languages, dress, pottery, artifacts, features of *addat* or Malay-based customary law and traces of pre-Islamic religious beliefs and mythology testify abundantly to the influence brought about by many centuries of contact with both the mainland and island Southeast Asia. These are among the important manifestations that attest to the commonality between the Philippines and other countries in Southeast Asia.

This commonality, however, had ceased to be meaningful, especially to the majority of Filipinos because of the advent of western colonization which had left varying effects on the culture and outlooks of the Southeast Asian peoples.

Western colonizers had differed in their approach of dealing with the traditional cultures of Southeast Asian region. The Dutch, British and French colonizers did not interfere directly with the traditional culture of the people they colonized. They were more interested in peace and profit. What concern they had about "civilizing" their colonial subjects was distinctly secondary. This is the reason why mainland Southeast Asia and insular Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and to some extent Singapore, continue to cherish their traditional identities which linked them to their Southeast Asian root. In the Philippines, the effect of colonization was

different. The Spanish and American colonizers used Christian religion and American education, respectively, to alter radically the lifeways and outlook of the majority of Filipinos. While obviously not disinterested in profits, the Spaniards and the Americans were motivated to a considerable degree by what the French called *la mission civilisatrice* — a colonial strategy cleverly pursued.

Not all groups of people in the Philippines succumbed to western colonization. The Muslim inhabitants of the Philippines who had fought the Spanish and American colonizers for centuries had preserved for the present generation of Filipinos the heritage of Islam and *addat* or Malay-based traditional culture that provide affinity to the rest of Southeast Asian neighbors. It is through the distinct culture of the Philippine Muslims that the Philippines can identify itself with Southeast Asia. The Philippines, therefore, belongs to Southeast Asia through its southern Muslim link.

The Muslim Link

In southern and southwestern parts of the Philippines, the estimated five to six million believers of Islam live. Known generally as Muslims, or as Moros, a political designation overriding ethnic identifications such as Tausug, Maranao, Maguindanao, Samal, Yakan, etc., this group of people is distinct in many ways from their majority Christian co-citizens, with whom they are racially related as Malay, a relationship that could be traced to the time before and during Islamization of the Philippines in the 12th century. The Malay racial affinity did not have significant socio-political bearing because of lack of cohesive political construction and unifying ideology. The so-called "native state construction" cited by former President Marcos² is not significant, as there is no convincing proof of the so-called "common political culture in the Philippines" prior to the coming of Islam and Christianity. For sure, the Muslim Sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao differ from the "native state construction" in the North not only in name — one non-Muslim, the other Muslim — but in substance of political power and extent of control. These Muslim sultanates had history of dynastic, political and commercial ties with the rest of island Southeast Asia and the Islamic world beyond.

The Malay racial relationship of the inhabitants of this archipelago was disrupted and strained with the advent of Spanish and American

colonizations and the consequent developments under the centralized system of governance of the Philippine Republic which had marginalized the Muslims economically and politically - a condition that drove them to assert their Muslim-Malay identity through a political and military struggle spearheaded before by the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) and now by the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front).

In the larger context of Southeast Asia, the so-called Malay world encompassing the insular states of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and the Philippines, has one of the heaviest concentrations of Muslim peoples on earth. In 1975, it was approximated that 129 million Muslims live there. Numbers-wise, Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim nation — 90% of its 135-million population in 1975 adhere to Islam. The Moros, who inhabit mainly the southern island of the Philippines and make up about 6% to 7% of Philippine population of about 75 million, are self-consciously part of the Muslim majority in island Southeast Asia. Up to this day, a great deal of trade and communication is still carried on between the Moro inhabitants and their relatives and business partners across the international lines separating the Philippines and neighboring Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. Those lines drawn by the Western colonial powers had the effect of involuntarily incorporating into the Philippine nation a Muslim people who were, and remain to be, integral part of the Malay world or island Southeast Asia.²

Islamization and Its Effects

The Islamization of Southern Philippines was part of the general spread of Islam throughout the Malay island world. The spread of Islam in this area involves the interplay of political, economic, psychological and social factors. The local rulers from the 13th to 15th century Southeast Asia were won to Islam not only by the relevance of its teachings but also by the fact that it served their changing economic and political situation related to their international trading activities.

Islam in Southeast Asia did not introduce a totally alien type of social and political organization among its converts. Rather it reworked the existing structure and produced what could be called an "Islamic variant" of the traditional society and polity. In politics, for example, the powerful *datus* or *rajahs* of large barangays developed into the *sultans* of the Moro society. The introduction of Islam and its adoption by the pre-Islamic

people had in many ways transformed their lives, beliefs, and customs. Although there are differences in degree of Islamic acculturation among the Muslims in Southeast Asia, it is apparent that there were many commonalities developed among them by the unifying effect of Islam. As a result of Islamization, many pre-Islamic people refrained from eating pork, practiced circumcision and learned the rituals of praying, fasting, and burying the dead. The Islamized people built mosques and madrasah where they learned Islamic theology, jurisprudence and other Islamic subject matter. They became conscious of belonging to a wider community of *ummah*, where they regard their fellow Muslims, especially in Southeast Asia, as brothers.

Development in the economic, political, and social aspects of life were achieved due to the specialized, effective, and efficient functioning of the Islamic institutions that were established. In politics, Islam legitimizes the institution of the sultanate as the governmental system. This political institution united the Muslim ethnic groups and formalized its relations with the neighboring sultanates of Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia. In economics, Islam opened the way for Islamized people to participate and benefit from the international trade which was controlled by the Muslims from North Africa to Southeast Asia. In social life, Islam expanded the framework of social relationship in the context of the *ummah*.

In the arts and architecture, Islam had left many influences which made Muslim artistic traditions rich and distinct from that of the other Filipinos. Islam had modified the indigenous art by inspiring and stimulating the development of a new local style. In response to uniqueness of local conditions, Islam demonstrated flexibility and tolerance which accounted for its impressive success especially in Sulu and in Mindanao. Many pre-Islamic traits and symbols survived Islamization because they are considered by the Sulu and Mindanao people to belong to Islam. Islam has become the religion of the Tausug, Maranao, Maguindanao, Yakan, Sama, Badjao and seven other small ethnic groups found mainly in south and southwestern Mindanao including Palawan.

The Two Nationalities in the Philippines

The most important effect of Islamization of the southern Philippines was the development of the Islamic consciousness among Philippine

Muslims. This development became the important conditioning factor in the emergence of Moro nationality. Similarly, the Christianization that took place later led to the development of Filipino Christian nationality. Islam and Christianity provided the means for unifying the early inhabitants of the Philippines. To say that "before the coming of Islam and Christianity, the Philippines was inhabited by one people and that there was already some kind of indigenous nationality" is not accurate and has no meaningful socio-political sense. Evidences from Philippine pre-history and folk traditions suggest that inter-barangay and inter-island warfare were common. Rivalry and hostility existed between highland and lowland and between island and coastal groups.³ If there was anything in Philippine history that served to bring about a sense of unity which prepared the way for the formation of national consciousness, it was the adoption of Islam by the southern natives and of Christianity by the other inhabitants of the Philippines.

In Muslim-Christian relationship in the Philippines, what has often been overlooked by the Christian majority is the crucial fact that the Philippine Muslims live in a world different from theirs. Muslims and Christians in the Philippines are oriented towards two distinct communities from which they draw their religion, culture, law, values and view of history. Christian Filipinos owe much to the west — to Spain which brought the Roman Catholic faith and many influences in language, music, art, law and so on; and to America which brought the English language, "democratic" institutions and the less happily "hollywood" lifestyle.⁴ The adoption by the Filipino majority of Christianity and western ways and lifestyles had pulled the Philippines towards the pole of European and western civilization. The historical circumstance of Filipino response to Spanish and American colonial activity became embodied in the country's label as "the only Christian nation in Asia." Centuries of colonial rule made the Christian Filipinos Western-value oriented. Hence, they regard themselves as "advanced" and "modern" and "progressive." But Southeast Asians, in general, and the Muslims in particular, in the majority of Christian view have a "low grade of civilization" and are steeped in traditional culture which inhibits modernization. This view is conditioned by the spirit of crusade that the Spaniards and the Americans had imposed on their adversaries in Southeast Asia. In the particular case of Christian-Muslim relations in the Philippines, the crusading spirit in that relationship was a historically conditioned attitude which Spanish Christians carried over from the Mediterranean World into their relations

with Muslims in the Philippines. The crusading spirit of the Americans aimed not so much at propagating Christian religion as extending the so-called "blessings and benefits of American civilization" to a benighted and "wild" people. As the majority Christian Filipinos looked towards Europe and the West for their development, the Muslims of the southern Philippines have maintained their roots more firmly in the Islamized Malay world and owe much to the Islamic civilization that spread from Arabia to Africa and to Southeast Asia.

Another factor that conditioned the distinctions of the Muslims and the Christian nationalities in the Philippines was their separate historical development that proceeded along two different directions and orientations. As the Filipino Christian history took the course of European and Western line of historical development, the Muslims continued to develop their history along the Arab and Malay line. Separated by time, the Muslims and Christians met only in the battlefields of war as the latter served in many colonial expeditions organized against the Muslims. It is in this light that one should understand why until now the two peoples continue to suffer from mutual distrust, an uneasy relationship and reciprocal negative images.

Muslim-Christian relations in the Philippines have been problematic basically because of many factors including the cultural, structural, political, economic, agrarian and even psychological. In their relationship with the majority Christians and the central government this group has controlled, the Muslims feel that they are left out in development and/or they are vulnerably exposed to all forces of assimilation which put into jeopardy their Muslim-Malay identity or threatened their religion and survival as an *ummah* or community of believers.

The Muslims are sensitive to the government's program of integration which in many instances has been pursued through the philosophy of assimilation. Even in the thrust of Philippine scholarship, the Muslims lament the observation that seem to subordinate Islam and their *addat* or Malay-based cultural tradition as unimportant aspect of Philippine Muslim culture. The pursuit of Philippine nationalism highlighting commonalities and setting aside differences is to the Muslims fraught with the danger of cultural uniformity which they do not want to happen in this country. The Muslims value the difference in their relationship with the majority co-citizens because under the present centralized government

set-up and because of their disadvantaged condition, this is the only way for them to safeguard and empower their Muslim-Malay identity. This is also the strength of their bargaining in many negotiations to advance their welfare, such as the recently concluded agreement that organized the SPCPD (Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development). The kind of unity that the Muslims want for the Filipinos is one of diversity and not of uniformity. They may adjust to the requirements of being Philippine citizens but keep their national identity as Muslims. This is the reason why most of them have been clamoring for independence or for real autonomy from those working in the government.

There is indeed a need to restructure that basis of relationship of the Muslims with the Philippine government and the majority Christian citizens for them to be empowered to safeguard their Muslim identity and to pursue socio-economic development in line with the norms set by Islam.

The pursuit of nationalism in the Philippines and the search for more meaningful Philippine national identity is welcome. Efforts should, however, be exerted to understand and safeguard the essentials of one's culture. Islam and *addat* tradition to the Philippine Muslims are essential to their life. They are not just cultural overlays to decorate one's space or lavish one's dress, neither are they background dance movement or glittering effects in a national ceremony. Islam and *addat* are the life-giving support of the Muslims in the Philippines. They link these people to their Muslim brothers in other parts of the world. As inhabitants of the Philippines, the Muslims serve as bridge of this "only Christian country in Asia" to the rest of the Southeast Asian world. Islam and the *addat* of the Philippine Muslims also serve them as shields in the face of danger and opposition. ●

Notes

1. Marcos, 1976, 105-114, p. 400.
2. Gowing, 1978, p. 10.
3. Phelan, 1959, p. 15-18.
4. Gowing, 1978, p. 9-10.

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