

WITHER THE ROSES OF YESTERYEARS: AN EXPLORATORY LOOK INTO THE LIVES OF MORO WOMEN DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, scholars, mostly women, who have delved into history to find answers to questions regarding women's status in society and their roles, have come up with some remarkable findings. Fatima Mirnissi (1993) discovered that there have been queens who ruled in Muslim countries but their names have been conveniently relegated to the dustbin of history. Another scholar, Ruth Roded (1994), discovered the names of influential women in the biographies of men, but many of them were mentioned not because of their own merit but because of their relations to the powerful men in their families. Even a group of male Indonesian scholars (Alfian *et al.* 1994) produced a book on women rulers of Ache.

Little by little, data and information about the lives of women previously hidden for some obscure reasons are now coming to light, thanks in large part to the work of women themselves and to some men who look at history with less than the usual jaundiced eye.

This paper attempts to explore the presence of women in historical documents or writings to find out relevant information regarding the lives of the women during the colonial period. The scope of documents and writings examined were limited largely to the Sulu area since these are more accessible to the writer at this time.

II. MORO WOMEN IN HISTORY

The first mention of a woman in historical document locally known as *silsila* (or *salsila*) refers to Paramisuli, the daughter of Rajah Baguinda who became the wife of Abubakar, the first Sultan of Sulu. Since the *salsila* are simply genealogies, not much information can be gleaned from these sources regarding the lives of women. For this, other sources must be used, mainly from foreign observers to whom we now turn.

A. Physical Description

The first glimpse that we get regarding how Moro women looked like comes from a description made by William Dampier, who visited Mindanao in 1680.

The women are fairer than the men; and their hair is black and long; which they tie in a knot, that hangs back. They are more round visaged than the men and generally well-featured; only their noses are very small, and so low between their eyes, that in some of the female children the rising that should be between the eyes is scarcely discernable; neither is there any sensible rising in their foreheads (p. 24).

Dampier, another visitor, also described the Sultan's nieces, two of whom were about 18 or 19 years of age and two who were three and four years old.

They were much fairer than any women that I did ever see there, and very well featured; and their noses, tho but small, yet higher than the other women, and very well proportioned (p. 42).

In his description, Dampier appeared to have been struck by the women's noses as though he saw nothing else. He may be forgiven for this seeming obsession since he comes from a country where tall noses are the norm.

B. Costume

In 1838, Charles Wilkes, an American, visited Sulu. He found the costume of the women interesting enough to describe it for posterity:

They wore close jackets of various colors when they go abroad, and the same loose breeches as the men, but over them they generally have a large wrapper (sarong) which is put around them like a petticoat, or thrown over the shoulders. Their hair is drawn to the back of the head, and around the forehead it is shaven in the form of a regular arch to correspond with the eyebrows. They had light complexion, with very black teeth. . . (p. 163).

Wilkes' description of the Tausug costume refers to the *sawwal* and *habul* and still holds true today. The hairdo consisting of a fringe of hair around the forehead is still observable among some of the Badjao and Samal women of Sulu. The custom of blackening the teeth by chewing betel nut can still be found in the rural areas, notably among old men and women.

John Foreman, another American writer, who first visited Jolo in 1881, also gave his description of the costume of Sulu women:

The women are fond of gay colors, the predominant ones being scarlet and green. Their nether bifurcated garment is very baggy, the bodies is extremely tight, and, with equally close-fitting sleeves, exhibits every contour of the bust and arms. They also use a strip of stuff sewn together at the ends called *jabul*, which serves to protect the head from the sun-rays. The end of the *jabul* would reach nearly down to the feet but is usually held retroused under the arm. They have a passion for jewelry, and wear many finger-rings of metal and sometimes of seashells, whilst their earrings are gaudy and of large dimensions. The hair is gracefully tied in a coil on the top of the head, and their features are at least

as attractive as those of the generality of Philippine Christian women (p. 146–147).

Foreman is describing the Tausug costume called '*badju kuput*', a blouse worn on formal occasions. The "passion for jewelry" that he mentions continues unabated today except that the metal has become 24-karat gold and the seashells have turned into pearls and other gemstones.

Dampier also described the costume of the Sultan's nieces during a celebration:

These young ladies were very richly drest, with loose garments of silk, and small coronets on their heads (p. 42).

Noticeable from these observations was the fact that the Royal Houses of Mindanao and Sulu were relatively prosperous being able to afford silks and coronets for the young princesses. The common people did not appear badly off either. As Foreman pointed out, women in Mindanao and Sulu were not far behind others in the country.

C. Social Practices

One information on women's way of life refers to celebrating a special occasion. Here, Dampier described the circumcision ceremony of the Datu's son and the evening celebration which consisted of playing the drums and *Kulintangan* and dancing:

First of all there was a Pageant, and upon it the dancing women gorgeously appalled, with coronets on their heads, full of glittering spangles and pendants of the same, hanging down over their breast and shoulders. These are women bred up purposely for dancing: their feet and legs are but little employed except sometimes to turn around very gently; but their hands, arms, head and body are in continual motion, especially their arms, which they turn and twist so strangely, that you would think them to be made without bones (p. 40).

Anyone familiar with Moro dances can guess without any difficulty that Dampier is describing the *Pangalay*. His information regarding the training of women as dancers is the same as the training that some Moro women now undergo to become traditional singers.

Another custom noticed by both Dampier and Wilkes is that the women's quarters (wives or daughters) were always kept separate. Wilkes noted that the apartment of the wife of the datu was screened off (p. 148) and the same was true with the Sultan's wife and her attendants (p. 151). Young girls were usually kept away from the sight of men. According to Dampier:

The young princess is kept in a room, and never stirs out, and she did never see any man but her father and Raja Laut, her uncle, (the princess) being then 14 years old (p. 34).

This custom however did not seem to suggest a segregated society since Dampier noted that women were "allowed liberty to converse or treat with strangers, in the sight of their husbands'" (p. 25). Vic Hurley, also an American, writing in 1936, commented on the same practice by saying:

The Moro woman has one advantage over all her Eastern sister. She is not immured to the extent that other Moham-medan and Eastern women find themselves (p. 242).

The Moro maid is confined closely to her father's house, under the watchful eye of the family. But after marriage, she acquires a great deal of freedom. The Moros do not veil their women nor do they cloister them after marriage (*Ibid.*).

The striking observation that Moro women did not wear veils is in contrast to the present movement among Muslim women to cover their hair or wear 'kumbo'. That married women had more social mobility than young ones is still true today. That the young princesses participated in the public celebration of the Raja Laut by dancing, is also indicative of

the social participation of Tausug women whether of the Royal Houses or not.

D. Military Participation

Since most of the documents narrate the colonial wars between the Moros and the invaders, it is worthwhile to know whether or not women got involved in these activities. Although the reporters talked generally about the conduct of the wars and the leading male characters, mention about women appears here and there.

For instance, during the American campaign against the Moros particularly in Jolo, accounts were made about women fighting side by side with the men. This was true during the battle of Bud Datu. No less than W. Cameron Forbes, former American Governor General of the Philippine (1909–1913), commented in his book published in 1928, regarding these women warriors.

Repeated efforts to secure the removal of the women failed although some of them were persuaded to come out. They could not be distinguished from the men, as both were dressed alike, wore long hair, and fought side by side, so that it was impossible to spare the women in the bombardment and attack that followed (p. 284).

During the Spanish period, one woman warrior stood out. This is Panglima Fatima of Tandubas, an island in the Tawi-Tawi group. The report is that she accompanied her husband and his followers against their enemies and in the midst of battle, her husband was killed. She took his place and led her forces to victory. She succeeded her husband as the local dignitary and ruler. According to the writer, she was friendly and loyal to the Americans (Forbes:291). In a 1983 article, former senator Santanina Rasul wrote about a certain Panglima Hatima of Tawi-Tawi who also led her men to victory after

the death of her husband. Rasul noted that she was called Babu Balu and was the first Muslim woman leader recognized by the American administration as 'Panglima' (Rasul, 1983:34). This woman may be the same referred to by Forbes.

Hurley also wrote about women warriors stating that "as warrior, the Moro woman was no mean antagonist." Citing an incident during a Moro attack on the city of Jolo in April 1877, he noted that among the 104 bodies found dead at the door of a Spanish blockhouse, five were women, armed with axes and hammers. They died while attempting to force the door of the fortification (p. 243).

Hurley further cited a certain Spanish resident by name Señor Don Infante who had lived in the Philippines for more than thirty years. According to Don Infante:

Joloano women prepare for combat in the same manner as their husbands and brothers and are more desperate and determined than the men. With her child suspended to her breast or slung across her back, the Moro woman enters the fight with the ferocity of a panther (p. 243).

Historical accounts like these are reiterated in the *Parang Sabil* Tradition. A good example is the *Parang Sabil* of Putli Isara, which narrates the heart-rending tale of Putli Isara and her fiancé, Abdulla (Mercado 1963).

E. Education

According to the various writers already cited, Moros went to Pandita schools and were taught to memorize passages of the *Qur'an* religious history and observance, Arabic writing, rudimentary arithmetic, and a little general history and information. However, only boys attended these schools. Forbes claims that "girls, except those of the families of the sultans, datus, and other men of ranks or wealth, rarely received such instruction" (p. 174).

During the American regime, Princess Tarhata was sent to Manila and later to the University of Illinois. It was hoped that "upon her return to Sulu, her American training would be a valuable factor in her assumption of a position of leadership" (*Ibid.*:290).

In 1916, a girl's dormitory was established in Jolo and daughters of leading Tausug families like Princess Indataas, daughter of Datu Tambuyung and Princess Intan, sister of Datu Tahil, were enrolled. The girls lived in the new dormitory and attended the public schools of Jolo. In 1919, the Director of Public Education reported that "six of the highest ranking Mohammedan princesses of the Sultanate of Sulu were teaching in the public schools, one of them, a niece of the Sultan" (Gowing:306).

In spite of these examples, not all approved of sending their daughters to school. One datu said, "You can put my boy in school, but not my daughter. Women are not supposed to know anything anyway" (*Ibid.*:304).

F. Economic participation

In the field of business, women's presence was also felt. According to James Francis Warren (1981), rich aristocratic women were involved in business, primarily local marketing. For this purpose, they usually employed *banyaga* (slaves) to do the trading for them. Warren claims that by the mid-nineteenth century, some of the leading local traders were women (p. 220). Warren describes this activity:

Noble women by virtue of their station, lacked the liberty to barter produce, which entailed wandering the houses, visiting the Chinese quarter, or rowing into the Bay to a trading ship. It was common for Tausug women to send one or two Spanish-speaking slaves into the roadstead in small canoes on the arrival of a European vessel . . . Slave hawkers were an important source of wealth to their mistresses (p. 221).

G. Political Participation

Finally, the big question of whether women ever participated in politics needs to be answered. Fortunately, some information are available, although a number of the observations about the political role of women, as the one made by Wilkes, is openly biased. He insinuated that the males were 'henpecked' by their wives. Moreover, he implies that the culture of the Moros were inadequate and, therefore, women, by imitating the custom of foreigners (e.g., Europeans), became much better than the men. Thus he says:

The females of Sooloo have the reputation of ruling their lords, and possess much weight in the government by the influence they exert over their husbands (p. 163).

They were capable of governing as their husbands, and in many cases more, as they associate with the slaves, from whom they obtain some knowledge of Christendom and of the habits and customs of other nations, which they study to imitate in every way (p. 163–164).

These impressions about women's capability to lead were given substance by Forbes, who mentioned several Moro women holding high position of leadership. The list however included only women who were pro-American. One of them was Inchi Jamila, mother of Sultan Jamalul II, who was reported to have compelled the Spaniards to withdraw their candidate (Harun al-Rashid) to the sultanate and instead to recognize her son as the Sultan of Sulu. She was visited by General Bates in 1899, when the latter was negotiating a treaty with the Sultan.

In trying to explain the ascendancy of Inchi Jamila, the writer repeats a gossip he said was prevalent among the women in the Sultan's household. According to the gossip, Inchi Jamila was a descendant of a beautiful Spanish girl who was captured during a raid in Panay, brought to Jolo and became

a member of the Sultan's household. Because of her beauty and intellectual ability, the gossip maintained that she gained influence over the Sultan's household. This superior ability is believed to have reappeared in Inchi Jamila, and similarly in her granddaughter, Princess Tarhata (p. 290).

Whatever is the truth in this tale, the writer has cleverly left it hanging. What is inescapable however is the tendency of foreign observers, especially during the colonial period, to credit anything excellent as deriving from some outside sources rather than to native intelligence and culture. That Inchi Jamila was a woman of substance, however, can be seen in the letters she left behind, written to the Spanish and American Governors of Sulu. In these correspondences written in Jawi, she signed herself Paduka Pangian Inchi Jamila (Tan 1997).

Other sources (Angeles 1998:211) cited two American writers, Dean C. Worcester and Charles Hagadorn writing in 1898 and 1900, respectively, as referring to Inchi Jamila as 'The Sultana' and that "she usually controlled the affairs of the state," and that "she was a very bright woman, with a decided genius for organization and command."

Forbes also cited another distinguished woman of royal blood called the Rajah Putri, or 'Princesa' as she was known at the time of the American occupation of the Cotabato Valley. The writer claims that she gained much influence because of her ancestry and personal wealth (p. 290).

Mention is also made of a Maguindanao woman, the wife of Inok, a war leader of Datu Piang and, according to the writer, a staunch partisan of Americans in the Buluan District of upper Cotabato Valley. She became the leader of the tribe when her husband died, and was later appointed municipal president "with the overwhelming popular demand of the men of that region" (p. 291). Unfortunately, she remained nameless.

The story of Dayang Dayang Hadji Piandao, also stands out. According to Forbes:

The Sultan having no child of his own, adopted Piandao, the posthumous child of his predecessor and half-brother. A woman of strong character, entirely without Occidental education, Hadji Piandao exercised her influence in favor of American sovereignty during the negotiation in 1915 which resulted in the renunciation of temporal sovereignty by the Sultan (p. 291).

During the Spanish period, accounts were made of another remarkable woman called Tuan Baloca. According to the report of Juan de Barrios (B & R. Vol. 28:56), she was a native of Basilan, who married the Sultan of Sulu during the time of Corcuera's campaign against Jolo in 1638. The report noted that her influence over her husband was such that the government of Jolo was entirely in her hands. During the siege of Jolo, she brokered a treaty with the Spaniards to end the fighting since many of the people inside the fort were suffering from dysentery. Her meeting with Corcuera was described by Juan de Barrios as follows:

She came to the hall borne on the shoulders of her men, accompanied by some of her ladies and by her *casis*, who was coming with pale face. She alighted at the door of his Lordship's hall. He went out to receive her, and with marked indications of friendship and kindness led her to her seat, which was a cushion of purple violet. . . . She responded very courteously to the courtesies of the governor; for the Moro women is very intelligent, and of great capacity (p. 56).

One woman who was reported to have governed as sultana for about four to five years was Site (Sitti) Cabil, also known as Ampy and Sultana Nur Al Azam. Her name was included in the Dalrymple's list of Sulu sultans but it was not included in the Sulu genealogy. Majul (1974:19) found it in the Patikul Khutbah but it mentioned the name Azam

while Nur was left out. Majul believes that such omission might be due to her being a female and to a later disbelief that a woman actually ruled Sulu.

For the final glimpse of women in the past, it is perhaps fitting to look at the queen of Sultan Kudarat who flung herself together with her child down a precipice rather than be captured by the Spaniards at the time of Corcuera's attack. According to the account of Fr. Marcelo Francisco Mastrilli, she was a kind and friendly queen whom the father rector of Dapitan remembered fondly for being friendly to Christian captives, sending them food and reproaching her husband for maltreating them (B & R. Vol. 27:286).

III. CONCLUSION

Moro women during the colonial period can be said to have lived active lives, participating in some of the most important aspects of life rather than being circumscribed by their gender. It is also apparent that while male prejudice was present (e.g., education), it was not a crippling attitude that made the lives of women mean and miserable. This period also reveals that women were not secluded nor excluded from public affairs.

Instead, women participated in almost all endeavors, contributing to its welfare and not locked away from the joys and griefs of society. However, caution must be exercised in making this generalization since many of the figures named in the accounts belonged either to members of the Royal Houses, or members of the rich and influential families whose lives may well be of a different calibre than the common and ordinary women. Still it cannot be denied that these royal women acted as role models for the rest of the population and their presence and activities are signs that women were not leading silent and desperate lives.

It is also evident that the reason women were actually mentioned in the accounts is because they further the motives of the colonizers; providing a big contrast to the persistent and unyielding resistance of the men. Yet, even in this resistance, it can be said that the women held their own, giving up their lives for the cause in the same way as the men did.

More important, the data shows that the Moro society was a vibrant society where both men and women worked together hand in hand both in war and in peace.

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