

The Malay Moros In The Philippines: Ethnicity, Religious Identity And Globalization

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Abstract:

The article traces the evolution of Malay Moro identity in the Philippines, the globalizing effects of resisting Spanish and American colonization on transforming their Muslim religion from an ethnic religion into a global identity, and the transition of the once despised thirteen Muslim ethno-linguistic groups into a symbol of resistance. Colonialism served a globalizing function in cementing Moro identity and paved the way for a unified Muslim anti-government resistance in post independence Philippines. Globalization also increased Moro identification with the wider ummah.

Keywords:

Philippine Muslims, Malay Moros, global Islam, Philippine Moro identity, Moro resistance.

Introduction

A major aim of the Spanish colonization of the Philippines was to convert the people to Christianity. To a great extent, they were able to accomplish this goal except in the Muslim South. Spain did not anticipate that Muslims in Sulu, Lanao and Maguindanao would put up a formidable resistance to their colonizing adventure and Christianizing mission. Spanish colonial aims and engagement with southern Muslims is described by Majul as the “Moro wars” — three hundred years of

intermittent warfare in which the complex issues of religion, politics and economics¹ converged. The Spanish referred to Philippine Muslims as “Moros” — the same term they applied to Muslims who ruled Southern Spain² and whom they eventually expelled after the *reconquista*. The term “Moro” was used in a derogatory sense, with negative connotations of backwardness, being uncivilized, pernicious and indolent, among others.³

In analyzing the Moro Wars, Majul provided a larger framework for the Moro struggle in the Philippines and viewed Muslims as part of the Southeast Asian world whose lives influenced and were in turn affected by developments in the rest of the region. Majul examined the linkages among the Muslims of Sulu, Moluccas, Melaka, Aceh, Ternate, Borneo — all Malays, and demonstrated how diplomatic, political and kinship alliances operated in the area. Malay was the *lingua franca* of that world and the peoples belonged to the Malay race, therefore the term “Malay Moros” applies.

This article focuses on the Malay Moros of the Philippines. We assert that globalization, which was manifested through Spanish and American colonial policies gave rise to the construction of Malay Moro identity as an oppositional identity *vis a vis* the rest of the Philippine population. Thomas McKenna argues that this oppositional identity started only during the American period. However, references to Muslims and Islam in Spanish colonial literature always referred to Muslims and Christians in terms of “us and them” categories so we view this oppositional identity as a Spanish creation, sustained and intensified by the American colonial government. Second, this identity is linked to ethnicity. Third, it is globalization again which is bringing about a transformation of this ethnic identity of Philippine Muslims into a global identity as part of the worldwide *umma*. We assume that globalization can result in expansion or contraction of a person’s identity, depending on whether a person accepts or rejects globalization.

¹ See Cesar A. Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1973 for discussions on the Moro wars.

² Maria Menocal’s *Ornament of the World* discusses the culture of tolerance among Jews, Muslims and Christians in Spain.

³ See Vivienne SM. Angeles, “Islam and Politics: Philippine Government Policies and Muslim Responses 1946-1976,” Unpublished PhD dissertation, Temple University, 1986.

The three concepts that need clarification here are ethnicity, identity and globalization. We take ethnicity to mean “a social grouping or form of peoplehood that is marked by traits that are perceived to be culturally inherited.”⁴ What is culturally inherited is a broad category that includes physical characteristics, language and traditions. Identity refers to people’s understanding and perception of themselves in relation to others, the natural world and the spiritual world.⁵ For Philippine Muslims, this identity reflects their religion, ethnicity, culture and traditions as well as their historical experiences. We view globalization as the “massive process of social change resulting from growing interconnectedness of human social, cultural, economic and religious life that is altering human activities on a planetary wide scale.”⁶ It has two levels: objective and subjective. Objective globalization refers to what is observable like economic globalization manifested by Starbucks, McDonald’s in Kuala Lumpur, or the Lenovo computers made here in Malaysia, sent to China and end up being used by our students at La Salle University in Philadelphia. It could also be the globalization of education as indicated by the number of visiting professors and exchange programs here at the Universiti Malaya. Globalization is often understood in economic terms — in the global exchange of goods and services but just as important are the effects of these economic and other transfers — in the way they influence the mind. This brings us to subjective globalization which refers to the “social redefinition of identities and worldviews that emerge from the human confrontation and dialogue caused by objective globalization.”⁷ This aspect is difficult to measure or quantify as it has to do with human responses and changes in the way people think, act and feel.

Globalization has a long history in Southeast Asia, Arab traders plying the South China Sea, Malay traders coming into Sulu, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, British coming to Southeast Asia are all manifestations of globalization. What is new are the means and speed

⁴ See Craig M. Prentiss, ed., *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2003.

⁵ Kent B. Richter, et. al. *Understanding Religion in a Global Society*. United States: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005, p.21.

⁶ *Ibid.* 10; Also, David Held, “Democracy and Globalization,” in D. Archibugi, D. Held and M. Kohler, eds., *Re-imagining Political Community*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 13.

⁷ Here, I am using the concept as applied by R. Dean Peterson, et al in *Social Problems: Globalization in the Twenty-first Century*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999.

of globalization. Here we encounter the concepts connectivity and proximity. Tomlinson asserts that connectivity implies increasing global-spatial proximity. It involves the shrinking of distances in terms of the reduced time it takes to travel or for information to reach from one part of the world to the other.⁸ Obviously, the distance does not change but the way we negotiate the distance through electronic devices or modern modes of travel has made Marshal MacLuhan's "global village" a reality.⁹

Colonization as Globalization

The presence of Islam in the fourteenth century in a country referred to as Ma-yi in Chinese sources¹⁰ is one of the indicators that a process of globalization had been taking place in the Philippines long before the Spanish claimed the islands in the name of King Phillip 11, Sulu was already a major trading center where Chinese, Arab and Malay boats came to call and where exchange of goods and services took place. People from various parts of the country went to China for trade, and delegations of Muslims from Sulu and Butuan paid tributes to the emperor as early as the 11th century. This process of globalization also brought about the introduction of Islam in the 14th century when Arab traders brought the religion, settled in the southern islands, intermarried with the local women and introduced the Qur'an to the population. Early *silsilahs*¹¹ mention a Makhdumin, Abu Bakar and Sharif Kabungsuwan as playing major roles in the spread of Islam. The first mosque was established in Tubig Indangan, in the island of Simunul and from there, various other Muslim preachers and traders spread the religion to the larger island of Mindanao and the rest of the country.

By the time the Spanish arrived, they saw that there were already established settlements and political institutions in many parts of the country, albeit of a segmentary type without a central structure. Spanish documents, written by missionaries and administrators in the 16th century took note of the sultanates of Sulu, Lanao and Maguindanao wherein

⁸ John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p.3.

⁹ See Marshall McLuhan and Q. Fiore, *The Medium is the Message*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.

¹⁰ Majul notes the account of Chao Ju Kua, recorded in the *Zhu Fan Zi* in 1225 in *Muslims in the Philippines*.

¹¹ Genealogical accounts.

Islam took the form of a state religion with the Sultan of Sulu carrying the title "The Shadow of God on Earth." These sultanates were part of a functioning Southeast Asian network that involved negotiating treaties, agreements, or establishing alliances¹² that supplemented the economic globalization already taking place.

For the Spanish, globalization took the form of colonization and Christianization. Since Muslims resisted Spanish incursions, refused to convert and continued their economic activities in a country the latter had already claimed as part of their empire, the Moro wars then came to define Muslim-Spanish relations for over three centuries. Spanish policy towards Muslims was embodied in the instructions of Governor Sande to Esteban Rodriguez de Figueroa who led an expedition against the Muslims in 1579. Their objectives were: First, to make Muslims accept Spanish sovereignty; Second, establish trade between Spain and local people; Third, command the people to settle as peaceful agriculturists, and fourth, convert the natives to Christianity.¹³ In line with the conversion motive, Figueroa was also instructed to order the natives to refrain from admitting more Muslim preachers since the teachings of Muhammad were "evil and false and that alone of the Christians are good."¹⁴ Muslim preachers who came from Borneo and Indonesia were to be seized and the mosques destroyed. As the instructions indicate, and which the debates in the University of Salamanca in the sixteenth century reflected, Spanish policies rejected the rights of others to spread their religion but insisted on the human right of Christian missionaries to preach the gospel. They justified the recourse to violence if missionaries were not given the opportunity to preach. Figueroa was not successful in attaining the objectives, but the instructions given to him guided the Spanish in their relationship with Muslims in the next three hundred years. Spanish friars later reported burning copies of the Qur'an and other Arabic manuscripts as well as destroying tombs of Muslims because they might become pilgrimage places and "eventually become the Mecca of the east,"¹⁵ Colonial literature informs us that Spanish conquerors and missionaries came to

¹² See Barbara W. Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, London: Palgrave, 1996, p. 61

¹³ "Account of the Expedition to Borneo, Jolo and Mindanao," in E. Blair and J.A. Robertson, *The Philippines*, vol. IV, pp. 174-178.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁵ Cesar A. Majul, "The Moros of the Philippines," *Conflict* V, 8(1988) p. 170.

the country with the view that Islam was an inferior religion and the natives had to be Christianized so that they may become civilized.¹⁶ This view was reinforced by policies and practices of the colonial government which in turn helped create a mindset among the converted that they were more civilized than the highland peoples (called the *lumads*) and Muslims who refused conversion. To Comaroff, this is a colonization of consciousness¹⁷ - a situation where the person begins to think that the other's way of doing things and cultural expressions are superior to his own. This is parallel to what Syed Hossein Alatas calls the "captive mind." In this situation, the distinctions between Muslims and Christians became more pronounced since they also accepted colonial religion, culture and traditions. They accepted the Spanish notion that to be Christian is to become civilized and better humans than those who did not. In addition, the Christianized natives also became involved in the Moro wars, fighting on the side of the colonizer. After three hundred and fifty years, religious affiliation had become firmly established as a determinant of a person's identity in the Philippines and being a Muslim had become an oppositional identity. We see here, on the part of the Muslim, an identity contraction as a rejection of Spanish globalization which was highlighted by its Christianizing efforts.

Religious identity was further emphasized by the succeeding colonial power in the Philippines — the United States,¹⁸ when it created the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes for administrative purposes. Muslims and other tribal peoples were placed under this bureau. With its doctrine of separation of Church and State, the United States did not officially support any move to convert Muslims to Christianity. However, their policies like restrictions on the *hajj*, memoirs of administrators and reports of the governor of the Moro province, showed the partiality of

¹⁶ Samuel K. Tan, "Filipino Muslim Perceptions of their History and Culture as seen through Indigenous Written Sources," *UP-CIDS Chronicle* <www.up.edu.ph/cids/chronicle/articles/chron4nland2/infocus03tan_p.1.html> notes that these impressions formed the basis on Spanish historiography on Philippine Muslims.

¹⁷ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, Vol. 1, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

¹⁸ The Philippines became an American colony by virtue of the Treaty of Paris in 1898 which ceded the Philippines to the United States for 20 million dollars.

many American administrators towards Christianity and Filipino Christians.¹⁹ The Americans pursued a general policy of friendship and tolerance, but incidents like the encounter at Bud Dajo²⁰ generated resentment against the Americans. With Spanish heritage that underscored the superiority of Christianity and the continuing emphasis on religion as identity marker, negative perceptions that developed between Muslims and Christians persisted through time and were even enhanced by historical accounts, literature and even drama.²¹ When the Philippines became independent in 1946, such views between Muslims and Christians, as generated, emphasized and sustained by the global colonizing powers had become deeply entrenched in Philippine society:

Religion and Ethnicity

Since the Spanish colonial period, Islam has been linked with ethnicity in the Philippines. Although lumped together as Moros, they come from different ethnic groups distinguished by varied ethno-linguistic characteristics, geographic areas of concentration and economic activities. The thirteen Muslim ethno-linguistic groups are: Tausug, Maranao, Maguindanao, Yakan, Samal, Badjao, Sangil, Jama Mapun, Palawani, Molbog, Illanun, Kalibugan and Kalagan. The Maranao, Maguindanao and Tausug are the larger groups, with the Maranao and Maguindanao in the island of Mindanao and the Tausugs in the Sulu archipelago. They speak different languages, engage in different economic occupations and wear different forms of clothing that are distinctly recognized in terms of design, weave and color. Their

¹⁹ See Reports of the Governor of the Moro Province (1913), p.32, cited by Peter Gowing, *Mandate in Moroland: The American Government of Muslim Filipinos, 1899-1920*, Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1977, p.216; also G. Bentley, "Implicit Evangelism: American Education Among Muslim Maranaos," *Pilipinas: A Journal of Philippine Studies*, vol. 12 (Spring 1989), pp. 73-96.

²⁰ Muslims encamped in Bud Dajo but their weapons did not match American fire power thus resulting in the death of many civilians.

²¹ *Moro moro* plays became the staple of town festivities. In these plays, the conflicts between the Spanish and Muslims were staged with the Muslims ending up defeated and converting to Christianity. This was first staged under the auspices of the Jesuits after the defeat of Sultan Kud'arat in Maguindanno.

occupational differences are determined by the available resources in their areas so that the Tausugs engaged in marine industries while Maguindanaos pursue agricultural activities. The Maranaos are traditionally known for trading which in turn, has brought them to provinces outside of Mindanao. These ethnic differences notwithstanding, they share a common religion — Islam and it is this religious identity that is critical in their relationship with the government²² and with non-Muslim Filipinos. Ethnicity is correlated with religious identity so being a Muslim became synonymous with being a member of these ethnic tribes. Among Muslims, however, ethnic differences matter and was manifested not only in terms of their visual expression (through clothing and other artifacts) but also in their struggles through the years for their right to self-determination.²³ Islam, in this case, became viewed as an ethnic religion.

Religious Identity and Globalization in the Post Independence Period

In the post independence years,²⁴ the stirrings for the creation of an Islamic state became manifest with the establishment of Muslim movements. The first was the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) which did not last long but most of its members became part of the larger and more organized Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Led by Nur Misuari, the group described itself as a revolutionary movement, motivated by the desire to chart its own destiny after centuries of oppression by the colonial powers and the independent government.²⁵ With a claimed membership of 30,000 in the early 1970s they presented themselves not only as Muslims but also as nationalists. By 1974, the MNLF and government forces were engaged in a full scale war.

²² Lela Garner Noble discussed this in one of the earlier works on the Philippine Muslim situation. See Lela Garner Noble, "Ethnicity and Philippine-Malaysian Relations," *Asian Survey* (May, 1975) vol. xv, no. 5.

²³ According to several Muslims involved in the secession movement, ethnic loyalty was an issue in the split between the MNLF and the MILF.

²⁴ The United States granted independence to the Philippines in 1946 but during the term of President Macapagal, independence day was changed to June 12, 1898, date of the declaration of the Malolos Republic.

²⁵ MNLF, *Rise and Fall of Moro Statehood*, n.p., n.d., and "Manifesto on the Establishment of the Bangsa Moro Republik."

The MNLF appropriated the term “Moro” and instead of the derogatory connotations of the Spanish era, the term Moro is now seen and portrayed as the epitome of bravery, and represents the resistance against colonialism, tyranny and injustice as well as the aspirations of Muslims. The areas of the thirteen Muslim ethno-linguistic groups are now viewed as constituting the homeland of the Bangsa Moro (Moro nation) which has a long and glorious history of independence and resistance to colonial rule. This appropriation and recasting of the term Moro served to unify the otherwise distinct Muslim ethnic groups not only in terms of a shared religion, Islam, but also in terms of nationalism fueled by the aspiration to chart their own destiny. “Moro” then became the identity of Muslims in the south.

The MNLF gained global recognition when the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) accepted it as the legitimate representative of Philippine Muslims.²⁶ It received material help from various Muslim countries like Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan — which, together with the OIC, were involved in diplomatic negotiations with the Philippine government in their combined efforts to help solve the conflict. The responses of global Muslims to the war included material help, rehabilitation programs and educational opportunities to Muslims. Although Philippine Muslims have been beneficiaries of scholarships to Cairo since the 1960s²⁷ this time, more Muslims went to study at the Al Azhar University and other educational institutions in the Middle East — in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria. Saudi Arabia’s aid to the Philippines come in different forms and in recent years, they have also been involved in the promotion of livelihood projects, providing loans for construction of roads, scholarship grants and other forms of aid either directly or indirectly through the Islamic Development Bank, African Bank or OPEC Funds for International Development. Together

²⁶ See Vivienne SM. Angeles, “The State, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Islamic Resurgence in the Philippines,” in Santosh Saha and Thomas Carr, eds. *Religious Fundamentalism in Developing Countries*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001; also, “Contested Visions of an Islamic State in Southern Philippines,” in Santosh Saha and Thomas Carr, eds. and *Islamic, Hindu and Christian Fundamentalism Compared— Public Policy in Global Perspective*, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003.

²⁷ This was the result of efforts of former Senator Domocao Alonto who brought up the matter with Egyptian President Nasser during the Bandung conference of non-aligned states in the mid-1960s.

with monetary aid came copies of the Qur'an, translations of Islamic texts into Tagalog — like Muhammad Ibn Abd al Wahhab's *Kitab al Tawhid*, excerpts from Syed Qutb's *In the Shadow of the Qur'an*, and Hadith collections, among others. These developments underscored the linkages between Philippine Muslims and the rest of the Muslim World while pushing the MNLF to a negotiating position. Political developments, however, in the ensuing years have dimmed the MNLF position. Today, its splinter group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), has become prominent and is involved in peace negotiations with the government.

In the mid-1970s and with the increasing demand for workers in the Middle East in the fields of construction, medicine, health, field and service work, Filipinos started seeking employment overseas and labor became a major Philippine export. Saudi Arabia has an estimated 900,000 Filipino workers,²⁸ many of whom are Muslims although the majority are Christians. Travel to the Middle East either for hajj or for work exposed Philippine Muslims to Islam in the land of its birth and when they came home, they also brought with them some aspects of Saudi Arabian Islam including the Arab *abaya* and the *niqab* head cover. Nobody wore these in Marawi (renamed Islamic City of Marawi in 2000) in the early 1970s.

The internet has made it possible for Philippine Muslims to learn about the rest of the Muslim world, to access websites on Islam as well as bulletin boards of Filipinos in Saudi Arabia. The increasing electronic contact between Philippine and other Muslims has given them a sense of how the rest of the Muslim world live Islam. Saudi Arabia's prescription on Islamic clothing has also been adopted by many Muslim Filipinos. Many Muslim women in Marawi no longer wear the tube skirts called *malong* outside of the home and ethnic colored fabrics have given way to dark colored *abayas*. In effect, the *abaya* has been "deterritorialized,"²⁹ freed from its embeddedness in Saudi Arabia and is increasingly becoming the Islamic outfit of many Philippine Muslims especially in Marawi City (for ethnic Muslims) and in various communities where Muslim converts live. The connection of specific clothing to a particular geographic location (in this case, Saudi Arabia) or to a particular group of people is dissolved, as Philippine Muslims adapt it and display it as the "appropriate Islamic dress" which identifies

²⁸ Imigratiouinformation.org

²⁹ Note Appadurai's use of the term in his studies on globalization.

them as Muslims. The traditional ethnic clothing that used to distinguish their ethnic groups from others, and which non-Muslims identified as Muslim, is now reserved for special occasions like weddings-although even in these celebrations, there is a growing number of women wearing fashions from the Middle East. In 1971 when I first went to Marawi, hardly any woman wore the veil in their everyday lives. The only ones who did were those who had gone on the hajj to indicate that they are hajjah. In 2004, most women had a head cover and many were wearing the Arab *abaya*. The belief that what is done in Saudi Arabia is what is Islamic reverberates in my conversations with Muslims in the course of my research in the last two years. For an Imam of a mosque in Cebu, who is a Maranao, this increasing linkage with Saudi Arabia is more than welcomed because, "we are finally learning about the 'real' Islam since Saudi Arabia is the navel of the Islamic world and they must have a better understanding of Islam than Muslims from other places."

Although the majority of Philippine Muslims still come from the 13 ethno-linguistic tribes, their increasing adaptation of Middle Eastern Islamic clothing, ways of living Islam slowly disconnects them from the strong ethnic characteristics of past times Islam in the Philippines is no longer an ethnic religion and with the increasing numbers of Catholic/Christians going to Arabia to work and eventually converting, the composition of Philippine Muslims and the expression of Islam through clothing has changed. Globalization, as demonstrated by the labor export to Saudi Arabia, the training of madrasah teachers in Saudi Arabia, the funding of various Muslim groups involved in da'wah, the translation of Islamic materials from Arabic into the Philippine language, the conversion of non-ethnic minorities to Islam and the accessibility of information about Islam through the internet are major factors bringing about the phenomenon of de-ethnicization of Philippine Islam. These increasing contacts, facilitated by the improved communications and transportation systems, have brought the Philippine Muslims closer to the greater community of Muslims. These linkages are vital, because they bring about an increasing sense of identification and confidence to Philippine Muslims, since it emphasizes their membership in the world community of Muslims - the *ummah*. The ethnic identity of Philippine Muslims has now become a global identity.

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