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Before the Secessionist Storm:

Muslim-Christian Politics in Jolo, Sulu, Philippines, 1961-62

Wilfredo F. Arce

MARUZEN ASIA

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Preface

This monograph reports an intensive empirical study of the politics of Jolo, the capital town of the province of Sulu in southern Philippines, from June 1961 through all of 1962.

In the context of Sulu's more recent history, those years may well be regarded as part of a hiatus characterized by relative peace. In the early 1950s Datu Hadji Kamlon was able to unite some of the armed bands operating in the Luuk area of Jolo island and fought with the Philippine military for a number of years. But when the 1960s began, the campaign against Kamlon was history. The threshold for renewed and heightened violence was not to come until later in the decade. The Mindanao-based Muslim Independence Movement would be founded in the late 1960s, and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) chaired by Jolo native Nur Misuari would emerge in the early 1970s.[1] Attempts by some Muslims and Christians to work through the Constitutional Convention of 1970 for a form of government that would recognize cultural diversity in the country and allow ethnic minorities greater freedom to govern themselves would be made, and would fail in the Convention itself. That same year the term *Ilaga* would emerge in the national press to identify bands of Christian settlers in Mindanao who had armed themselves against Muslims. Similarly armed Muslim protagonists would become known as *Blackshirts* and *Barracudas*. The armed clashes would increase and intensify significantly, with the major ones taking place in Mindanao. The imposition of martial law in the country in September 1972 would exacerbate the situation as the Republic's Armed Forces — largely Christian in composition and understandably identified by Muslims as partial to their Christian adversaries — would begin enforcing the order to collect all loose firearms. Jolo town itself would come under the guns of Muslim combatants in February 1974. The battle with defending government troops would devastate at least half of the town, the human casualties would be high, and half the population would disperse. In December 1976, an agreement for a ceasefire between the government and the MNLF would be signed in Tripoli, Libya. By September 1977, the peace negotiations would break down, the tenuous ceasefire would give way; and the war which the news media reported to have cost an estimated 60,000 lives by mid-1981 and strained relationships between the Philippines and the Middle East oil suppliers, would resume.

But to me in Jolo in 1961–62, all these events still lay hidden in a future that I had not set out to calculate or divine. At that time, I could report that Sulu had significant peace and order problems but it was nonetheless more peaceful than the national newspapers pictured it to be. I could write that Muslims and Christians continued to hold negative stereotypes of each other even as individualized interactions between them could produce experiences contrary to these stereotypes. Finally, I could cite the only secessionist move that I was aware of — namely, a bill that was filed in Congress proposing the separation of Sulu from the rest of the Philippines — and comment that this was meant more to draw government attention to Sulu's problems than a genuine desire on the part of the population to break away from the Republic.[2] I believe that these observations were valid at the time that they were made; the events that have unfolded in later years have not made them any less so.

In September 1963, I began my studies for the Ph.D. degree in anthropology in Cornell University. After completing the program of courses, I wrote the Jolo data for my dissertation. This work, interrupted somewhat by teaching duties at the Ateneo de Manila University, was completed and accepted by Cornell in mid-1968. It would have been logical for me then to move on to preparing the dissertation for publication.

However, writers who publish their dissertations formally usually undertake revisions of their work in order, among others, to take advantage of further insights gained after writing it and of suggestions from formal advisers, if not to act at the behest of a potential publisher. In my case, I did get the benefit of added insights and took note of them, but I simply did not feel motivated to invest further energy immediately in the endeavor towards publication. During my training in Cornell and certainly by the time I would have been ready to prepare the dissertation for publication, both my substantive and methodological interests had shifted. I might have been willing to undertake further work on the manuscript if I could have expanded and improved the data base along some definite directions that occurred to me during the analysis phase. However, given the time lag, this step would have been questionable at various points. At the same time, the demands of my position in the Ateneo de Manila University and the opportunity to engage in other types of research activity proved to be sufficiently distracting.

But the events that have profoundly affected Jolo in the past dozen years or so have changed my view towards the study. I feel that I have had the opportunity to observe and record in some depth the social institutions and, in particular, the political institutions of the town with its significant mix of Muslim and Christian populations. The phenomena recorded are now separated from the present by the tragic events that will surely have transformed the place and its people far more than the passage of years

alone might have done. I feel that that record should be made more accessible to interested persons. Perhaps the 1961–62 data and analysis could be of some use as a benchmark for someone studying similar facets of Jolo town at a future date.

The usual editorial and stylistic changes have been made in the original manuscript. To conserve space the chapter on historical background has been omitted. Some substantive changes in the rest of the manuscript have also been made in accordance with my notes on post-dissertation ideas. But I have deliberately resisted the temptation to update the contents of the original presentation and the interpretation of the data.

Just as the place and time of the study are identified, the actual names of leaders are used. Further, these individuals are public men and women, and much of what I have written about their roles in the political system of the town was common knowledge. Where my objectivity in presenting and interpreting the data about them may have lapsed I plead the limitations of a human being acting in good faith.

The reader who is looking for a serious analysis of contemporary events in the troubled Philippine South will have to look elsewhere. A number of such analyses are available;[3] the purpose of writing this preface and of publishing this monograph does not include adding to these materials.

By the same token, those who are looking for recommendations for solving the conflict in Sulu or Mindanao will not find them here. What I have to offer in this regard is more an expression of hope than anything else. The local political system that I observed during my eighteen months in Jolo had many grievous faults. But for a while it did show that Muslims and Christians could engage in political competition *and* cooperation in the same political arena, with rules that were understood if not thoroughly adhered to by at least the major players and where armed conflict was not inevitable. It is not necessary to argue for the restoration of the same system that made these processes possible. But the fact that it existed does hold out the hope that men and women of goodwill, both Muslim and Christian, could again create the conditions where at least fratricidal strife could cease and where perhaps the processes of accommodation, mutual and according to terms satisfactory to both sides, could begin.

Quezon City, Metro Manila W.F.A.
1 May 1982

The Author

W. F. ARCE obtained the Bachelor of Arts degree at the Ateneo de Naga in his home country, Philippines; and the Ph.D. degree in social anthropology at Cornell University, U.S.A. After completing his studies he joined the Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Ateneo de Manila University, where he currently holds the rank of full professor. During 1977–81, while on leave from his university, he affiliated with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, as coordinator of two grant programmes. His teaching and research interests are in development, urbanization, and complex organizations. He has published regularly, mainly in Philippine journals.

Acknowledgement

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the assistance and cooperation that many individuals and institutions extended in the completion of this study and publication of the monograph.

The late Frank Lynch, S.J. and Mary R. Hollnsteiner made substantive contributions to the study, part of which are cited in the analysis itself. I should like to acknowledge my debt to these two esteemed friends and senior colleagues.

The field research in Jolo was supported by the Notre Dame of Jolo College; I am grateful especially to the late Bishop Frank McSorley, OMI, and to Fr. Francis J. Crump, OMI of the College. Many individuals — both Muslim and Christian — were patient and generous informants. It is not possible to mention all of them. Attorney Jose E. Fernandez and Mr. Jawali Laja, to whom I feel especially indebted, will have to stand for all the rest.

I am grateful to my faculty advisers in Cornell University, in particular, to Professors Robert J. Smith and Lauriston Sharp of the Department of Anthropology, and Professor Robert A. Polson of the Department of Rural Sociology.

The write-up of the dissertation was done mostly in Cornell and completed at the Ateneo de Manila under an Agricultural Development Council Fellowship. Figures 1 and 2 were reproduced from maps provided by the Institute of Philippine Culture.

I decided to publish the study, and made part of the preparations, while serving as Program Coordinator for the Southeast Asian Studies Program and the Southeast Asia Population Research Awards Program at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. The preparation of the manuscript for publication was completed while I was serving as Research Associate in the Ateneo de Manila's Institute of Philippine Culture. I should like to express my gratitude to the IPC as well.

While the individuals and institutions mentioned above provided valuable assistance, it should be clear that none of them is responsible for the data, interpretations and conclusions presented in the monograph. That responsibility is solely mine.

W.F.A.

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I Introduction: The Research Objectives

Muslim and Christian Filipinos differ from each other not in religion alone; they differ in diverse cultural, social and political traits as well.[4] Throughout history, these differences have been highlighted by hostilities between the two groups. In recent times, the American colonial government in the Philippines recognized the difficulty that problems of this type presented for nation-building and initiated policies whose objectives may be summed up as the promotion of total participation of cultural minorities in the larger Philippine society. The present Philippine Republic has indicated its own commitment to similar objectives.

With these considerations in mind, I initially selected integration as the general problem area for the research that I would undertake in the town of Jolo; the population is predominantly Muslim (close to 70 percent in 1960) with a significant Christian minority (about 22 percent). The initial inquiry was guided by the general question: What are the patterns of integration between the two groups in this community? Some data were collected and preparations for more systematic research were made. But, as I began to think more concretely in terms of the specific individuals to observe and to talk to, I realized that many of them appeared to be among the most influential in the town. They included, for instance, some of the leading politicians, businessmen, and religious leaders. For many, though not all, of these men and women, meaningful participation in some of the community's institutional activities — for instance, government, business, recreation — with individuals belonging to a different group seemed to be an ordinary occurrence if not a source of genuine pleasure. Gradually, then, the focus of the research narrowed down to the leaders in the community, even though social and cultural differences, reflected by the differences in religious affiliation among them, remained an important consideration. The general question became: Who are the leaders in this community? Answering the question eventually led to a study of politics in the town, although the entry points, so to speak, were always the individual leaders.

The theoretical considerations that influenced the data-gathering process are summarized in the Appendix. While these considerations provided direction for the study, the specific approach was nonetheless

basically eclectic. Four general objectives guided the research. Simply stated, these were the following:

1. to identify the important leaders in the community;
2. to identify important characteristics of these leaders;
3. to describe the manner in which the leaders have performed as leaders;
4. to describe the influence of religious group differences in the community on leadership.

A description of the methodological steps that were followed to delineate the group of leaders that were studied is also found in the Appendix. The procedure, called the reputational evaluation technique, resulted in 69 leaders being selected for more intensive study; of this total, 43 were Muslims, 24 Christians, and two could not be easily classified under either group.

A standardized interview schedule/questionnaire was used to gather basic sociodemographic characteristics of leaders. Since participant observation indicated that key roles in the community's social institutions formed the basic prerequisite for high leadership standing, research efforts were directed at collecting as complete a set of data on institutions as possible. The inquiry on the performance of leaders was carried out mainly through participant observation and the interviewing of key informants who were also leaders. Throughout the investigation of leadership the Muslim-Christian dichotomy was treated as the single most important variable.

II The Setting: Sulu and Jolo

A chain of small islands lying approximately midway between Mindanao and Borneo effectively delineates the home land of the peoples of Sulu. Known as the Sulu Archipelago, these islands total some 448 and are of various shapes and sizes. The biggest and most important are Jolo, Siasi, Tawi-Tawi, Sanga-Sanga, Sibutu, and Cagayan de Sulu.[5] At present, the archipelago constitutes the southernmost province within the Republic of the Philippines. It extends about 170 miles from the southwestern tip of Mindanao island. The capital town of Jolo on the island of the same name is estimated to be 590 miles south of Manila, the primate city in the country; Sibutu is estimated by Saleeby to be about 15 miles north of Borneo.[6]

The total land area is 1,087 square miles (about 282,000 hectares), most of which is volcanic and coral. The arable land currently allows some agricultural production, and the sea yields some marine products. But it is neither as agriculturalists nor as fishermen that the peoples of Sulu are known in history and in present-day Philippines. They are known rather as fierce, independent, sea-faring "Moros" or Muslims, who, together with other Muslim groups in Mindanao, have frequently been in hostile relationships with the Christian majority (called "Bisaya" by the Sulu Muslims) who originate from the northern part of the country.[7]

CONTEMPORARY SULU

Sulu is a Muslim province. As Table 1 shows, out of a total population of 326,898 in 1960, 95 percent are at least nominally Muslim.[8] Nonetheless it is also worth noting that the population is more heterogeneous in terms of mother tongue, as Table 2 shows.

TABLE 1. POPULATION OF SULU BY RELIGION, 1960

Religion	Percent
Muslim	95
Christian	4
Others	1
Total	100

Calculated from PH-S, Table 16, p. 12.

TABLE 2. POPULATION OF SULU BY MOTHER TONGUE, 1960

Language	Percent
Taosug	72.9
Samal	21.0
Badjaw	3.7
Other Philippine languages	2.3
Non-Philippine languages	0.1
Total	100

Calculated from PH-S, Table 15, p. 11.

The Muslim population consists of the Taosug and the Samal.[9] The Taosug are clearly predominant in the northern islands of the archipelago, the Samal in the southern (Tawi-Tawi) islands. Many coastal or island towns have a Badjaw district, but the greatest concentration of this group is found in Sitangkai, near North Borneo.

A hierarchical ranking of the three groups is easily observable, with the aggressive Taosug as most dominant.[10] The Samal occupy a social position lower than that of the Taosug but interaction among members of the two groups is frequent and intermarriage is common. The Taosug and the Samal languages are, on the whole, mutually unintelligible, but many Samal can understand Taosug even if they do not speak it. The Badjaw occupy an outcast position in the society. Their interaction with members of both groups is confined almost entirely in the market or store where the Badjaw sell or barter their small catch of fish in return for household items.

The Christian population, which began migrating to Sulu from different parts of the Philippines after the turn of the century, is concentrated mostly in the larger towns, namely, Jolo and Siasi in the north, and Bongao in the south. They are characteristically government employees, owners or employees of business enterprises, and professionals.

In the absence of more systematic studies on the subject, it is difficult to make a generalized characterization on the present state of social relations between Muslim and Christian in Sulu. There is a considerable amount of interaction between groups, and, especially among the educated and the elite of both groups, interaction with a great deal of positive sentiment. There has been no overt and widespread conflict in recent years on a Muslim *versus* Christian basis. Nonetheless, the stereotype carried by both Muslim and Christian of members of the other group is a generally negative one, even among those who have regular, very satisfactory and pleasant dealings with members of the other group. The tendency appears to be to retain the stereotype and treat the individual positive experiences as exceptions to the rule.

Non-Filipino residents of Sulu, on the other hand, enjoy a notable

degree of acceptance by Muslim and Christian alike. This is especially true in the case of the small number of Americans and Europeans who are mostly missionaries.[11] For instance, the Roman Catholic missionaries belonging to the Order of Mary Immaculate (also known as Oblates) and who run a chain of six schools in the province enjoy a social prestige that would at least equal if not surpass that of the local elite. The Chinese, continuing their traditional roles as businessmen, seem to enjoy better acceptance in Sulu than in many other parts of the Philippines.[12]

Sulu's reputation for unstable peace and order conditions is exaggerated in the national press. However, the province does seem to require a more significant degree of police presence and action than other areas. Although there is no organized resistance against the government, casual bandit and pirate groups intermittently harrass the people and the authorities. The Philippine Constabulary has stationed eleven companies (about 1,200 officers and men) in Sulu while other provinces of comparable size could be assigned less than a quarter of this force. There are also auxiliary contigents of the Philippine Navy and Marines. Navy patrol boats scour the Sulu seas for smugglers bringing in goods from North Borneo.

The abolition of Special Provinces in 1950 was the latest in a series of measures which resulted in Sulu becoming a regular part of the national governmental structure;[13] local government executives and legislators were henceforth directly elected by the people.

To what extent do Sulu Muslims identify with the national state? To what extent do they still think of political power and religious power being "united at the top in the person of the sultan who was thus both the political and ecclesiastical authority,"[14] the situation that existed when the sultanate was at the height of its power? These are pertinent questions that are difficult to answer categorically if only because they were not directly addressed to in the research. On an impressionistic basis, traditional leaders at the local level play important roles in the selection of individuals who hold formal political positions if not hold these themselves; thus, in the ordinary individual's perception, traditional authority and government authority are likely to overlap considerably. However, in more urbanized areas like Jolo, this overlap is probably less of a problem; certainly, the educated Muslim sees the distinction clearly.

Formally, the functions of the once-ruling sultanate have been taken over by the state. Nonetheless individual titled persons still command a measurable degree of influence and discharge at least some of their traditional functions, especially in the rural areas, which comprise most of the province. The datu and the panglima are still called upon to exercise their powers of arbitration and mediation according to traditional laws and customs in cases of conflict involving persons who belong to their groups.

The judicial functions of the old nobility are formalized and

systematized in the so-called *agama* (religious) courts which have been set up to render judgment according to traditional Muslim customs and practices (*adat*) disputes involving Muslim protagonists. The establishment of these courts are traced to the early days of the American occupation.

The agama is considered the judicial arm of the sultan, and the three major claimants to the sultanate have apparently set up their respective courts with different and more or less definable territorial jurisdictions. The first court is presided over by Sultan Mohammad Esmail Kiram, whose area of influence extends over the southeastern part of Jolo island. The second is traced to the late Sultan Jamalul Abirin; it decides cases coming mostly from the northeastern part of Jolo island. The third is under Datu Hadji Amilbangsa, father of Sultan Ombra Amilbangsa; its area of influence is mostly over the southern islands of the archipelago. Although the head court of each of these jurisdictions is in Jolo town, the presiding officials have appointed representatives who are also headmen in many municipalities.

The court of Sultan Esmail has a compilation of laws covering various domains, but most of the cases brought before it involve violations of chastity or of the marriage contract. The court hears complaints from the aggrieved party, issues summonses, conducts hearings, and renders decisions. Penalty is by fines.

In the eyes of Philippine judicial officials in Sulu, the agama courts are considered to function in place of duly constituted Philippine courts when it adjudicates divorce cases. Divorce is not allowed in the country, except for Muslims in accordance with law.[15] Divorces granted by agama courts are considered as satisfying the legal requirements and are therefore ratified by state courts. All other agama court decisions, when accepted by interested contending parties, are considered extrajudicial settlements. However, harmony is not always achieved. Some Muslims who are dissatisfied with a decision made in one court over, for instance, disputes involving ownership of land, would take their cases to the other court. When the decisions of the two types of courts do not agree, the litigant would maintain the one most favorable to him as the correct decision, and the dispute continues.

The mercantile activities of the past are carried on by a small segment of the population that is actively engaged in the trade with Borneo; much of this trade is illegal, frequently hazardous, but highly profitable for the investors. A more elaborate discussion of the trade is given in a subsequent chapter.

There is no industrial activity to speak of in the province; as a recent survey indicates, there are no manufacturing industries except those that process goods for local consumption.[16] Neither is the province particularly

rich in natural resources. Of its total land area, 27 percent is cultivated or cultivable land and a similar percentage consists of forests; the rest is brushland, swamp, open land and corals.[17] It has no known mineral resources of significant quantity. But even the natural resources that it does have are either not exploited or are exploited inefficiently. The timber resources, for instance, can support an industry adequate to meet local demand for lumber. Yet activity in this sphere has continued to decline and local builders now import lumber from Basilan; in 1959 log cutting in the province totalled only 27 cubic meters.[18]

Coconut, palay, fruits and various types of root crops are the province's most important agricultural products.[19] Exports consist almost wholly of copra (which also figures prominently as a barter trade item in the important Sulu-Borneo trade), and small quantities of abaca and kapok. Other products are consumed locally. These include the staples cassava and rice, and a wide variety of fruits. Rice is not produced in sufficient quantity to meet local demand, hence a certain amount is imported every year.

The sea has always provided Sulu with products for export, and it still does. Records of shipment from the port of Jolo indicate that dried fish, M.O.P. shells, *gunimos* (*bolinao*), dried shark fins and sea sponges are major export items; others are ornamental shells, M.O.P. blackslips, *tracha*, *trepang*, dried *dilis*, and seaweed.[20] Some local residents have expressed the opinion that Sulu's future economic prosperity would depend to a great extent on the proper exploitation of its marine resources. No systematic survey and evaluation in this regard seems to have been made. It is evident, however, that fishing and gathering techniques, like agricultural techniques, are still characteristically crude, and at least some incremental gains could be made with their improvement.

JOLO TOWN

Jolo, the administrative capital town of Sulu, is also the province's metropolis. Located on the northeastern coast of the island with the same name, it has a naturally protected harbor which provides a good port for boats of various sizes. From time to time freighters plying international waters dock at Jolo to load cargoes of copra and abaca. Three interisland boats carrying passengers and cargo make weekly calls at Jolo, connecting the town with the outer island ports of Siasi, Bongao, Sibutu, and Sitangkai, and with such Mindanao ports as Zamboanga, Cotabato, and Davao. In addition, numerous smaller boats, locally called *kumpit*, make both regular and unscheduled trips to various parts of the archipelago and Mindanao.