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in Philippine Muslim Separatism**

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# **SAINTS, SCHOLARS AND THE IDEALISED PAST IN PHILIPPINE MUSLIM SEPARATISM<sup>1</sup>**

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A popular analytical perspective on contemporary atavistic movements is summed up eloquently in a recent work by Eduardo Galeano (2000: 24).

Believing themselves condemned to choose between copying [the globalising culture of the West] and casting themselves adrift, many local cultures, off-balance, torn loose, fading away, take refuge in the past. With desperate frequency, cultures seek shelter in religious fundamentalism or other absolute truths; they propose a return to times gone by, the more puritanical the better, as if there were no other response to overpowering modernity than intolerance and nostalgia.

While this view understandably appeals to analysts equally frustrated with the passive acceptance of Western popular culture and the passionate embrace of fundamentalisms, its generalising sweep obscures important dynamics and contradictions found within such 'local cultures.' There are various evidentiary and logical objections to this approach to atavistic movements, but I wish to focus on just one – I want to present evidence from the Muslim separatist movement in the Philippines to question the assumption found in the popular view that puritanism and intolerance are natural correlates of atavistic movements.

Galeano's coupling of 'local cultures' with puritanism – and of intolerance with nostalgia – is of particular interest here. Atavism is quite literally an attempt to return to one's ancestors – almost always local ancestors. A return to times gone by, in local terms, is a return to simpler, more secure times. That is not at all the same thing as a desire for a more pure, a more exacting, a more rationalised way of life. In fact, when a separatist movement combines atavistic and culture-purifying goals, they may very well contradict one another with significant consequences. Such has been the case with the Muslim separatist movement in the Philippines. To understand the place of atavism and puritanism in that movement I review the largely local tradition of saints and the

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more universal Muslim institution of religious scholars as they have interacted in the contemporary Muslim Philippines. I consider the contradictions between atavism and puritanism by interpreting the narratives of Sultan Mohammad Adil, a prominent supporter of Muslim separatism in the Philippines.

### **Muslims in the Philippines**

The Muslim territories of the Philippines mark the periphery of the Eurasian Islamic world. Indeed, with the exception of a few Muslim groups in easternmost Indonesia, no indigenous population of Muslims in the world lives at a farther distance from the Islamic heartland than do the Muslims of the Philippines. There are an estimated 3.5 million Muslims in the Philippines. While they represent less than five percent of the population of the Philippines (the only predominately Christian country in Southeast Asia), Philippine Muslims are geographically concentrated in the south of the country, primarily on the large island of Mindanao and in the Sulu archipelago, and are distinguished from Christian Filipinos not only by their profession of Islam but also by their evasion of 300 years of Spanish colonial domination. Philippine Muslims have always been separated from one another in this archipelagic nation by significant linguistic and geographic distance. They are divided into three major and ten minor ethnolinguistic groups and dispersed across the southern islands. Most of the examples below are drawn from my ethnographic and ethnohistorical research among the Magindanaons of central Mindanao, the largest Philippine Muslim ethnolinguistic group.

Both Philippine Muslim tradition and available historical evidence suggest that Muslim political institutions were established in Sulu by the mid-fifteenth century and in Mindanao before the middle of the sixteenth century. Muslim missionaries and knowledge of Islam were probably present at least 100 years earlier in each case. Although dates and processes cannot be established with certainty, it seems clear that Islam was introduced to the southern Philippines as part of the last phase of a conversion process that swept across Southeast Asia from west to east beginning in the late thirteenth century (see Majul 1978; Scott 1994).

As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the Islam that developed in the Philippines was very much an Islam-in-place, which is to say it was an Islam adapted to local physical and cultural environments. Islam was grafted onto sets of indigenous beliefs and rituals concerning ancestors, nature spirits and supernatural potency or soul substance (see Reid 1993). This tendency toward the development of a 'practical Islam' (Ellen 1983) shaped as much by local beliefs and practices as by ideas emanating from distant religious centres, was accentuated in the Philippines because of its geographical remoteness from those centres as well as by the interference of Spanish intruders who were actively antagonistic toward Islamic teaching.

Islamisation brought two somewhat disparate social consequences to the Muslim Philippines. First, the introduction of Muslim political institutions

consolidated local aristocracies and facilitated political centralisation. Where before only chiefdoms existed, now there were sultanates – states organised on the Islamic model. A Philippine sultan was not an absolute ruler, as was the Ottoman Sultan or, for that matter, the King of Spain. But neither was he simply a first among equals. He did not have direct power over every one of his subjects. He ruled his own followers, for he was also a chief (or *datu*) and he ruled other *datus* who governed their own followers. The sultan did, however, reserve some exclusive powers to himself. Only he could declare war or conclude treaties with foreign states.

The sultan's court was splendid, with numerous officials and attendants and much wealth conspicuously displayed. Ceremonies were elaborate and entertainments lavish. The sultan himself was expected to be both dignified and generous and to serve as a model of proper religious observance, even though full observance seemed not to extend far beyond the limits of the court. The sultan also was believed to possess unique supernatural powers by virtue of his position. The Sultan of Magindanao would bathe annually in the Pulangi River to rid it of evil spirits. Ordinary people were careful never to bathe downstream from the sultan, believing that the water that flowed past his body was so charged it would injure them.

Magindanaon sultans ruled by right of their membership in a new aristocratic lineage whose founding figure was Sarip (from the Arabic 'Sharif') Kabungsuwan, the legendary figure who is said to have brought Islam to Mindanao. Kabungsuwan, the wandering son ('kabungsuwan' means youngest son) of a Malay princess and an Arab father, was himself said to be a direct descendent of the Prophet Mohammad. He arrived in Mindanao at the northern mouth of the Pulangi and soon after married Putri Tunina, who was found as an infant in a section of bamboo. Putri Tunina's magical birth, a common motif in origin myths throughout the Philippines and Southeast Asia, assured that aristocratic descent line begun by Sarip Kabungsuwan was a completely novel one. The Muslim nobility of Cotabato were *datus* (local chiefs) who traced their ancestry to Kabungsuwan and through him to the Prophet Mohammad. Ideally, sultans were drawn only from those who were *pulna*, or pure; that is, those who could trace direct descent from Sarip Kabungsuwan through both parents. Islam therefore consolidated the *datu* aristocracy of Cotabato even across the boundaries of sultanates.

Islamisation also brought Sufi teachings to the Southern Philippines, and with them a source of grace and notability alternate to the sanctified aristocracy that arrived with the institution of the sultanate. It is well established that Sufi teachers played a primary missionising role in the spread of Islam throughout Southeast Asia (see Ellen 1983; Roff 1985). With its oral transmission of mystical knowledge, its attention to sacred places, and its emphasis on ecstatic experience of the divine, Sufism was an Islamic tradition that accorded well with indigenous Southeast Asian religious practices, which featured local spirits, shamanic trances, and the manipulation of spiritual forces.

No Sufi writings have survived in the Muslim Philippines as they have in Malaysia and Indonesia. Nevertheless, Sufism is clearly evidenced in the oral traditions of the region, particularly in stories concerning Muslim holy men or, as they are usually termed in English-language treatments of the topic, Sufi 'saints.' The literal, and more descriptive, translation of the Arabic term - *a wliya* 'Allah' - is 'friends of God.' (Ernst 1997: 58-9). In Magindanaon tradition, Muslim holy men take two related forms, each conforming with Sufi models found elsewhere in the Islamic world. First is a category of individuals who held the title Saik a Datu (from the Arabic *shaykh*, literally an old man, but in Islam a term designating an individual respected for religious learning or piety). These were men possessing esoteric spiritual knowledge and supernatural powers who shared their knowledge and used their powers to benefit others. They may have been members of the nobility although the term 'datu' can also be read in its original sense of leader. They were, therefore, spiritual leaders who were distinguished from others, including other datus, by their spiritual potency and their mode of living.

Another category was that of *sutti a tau* – a holy or, more accurately, a pure man (the Magindanaon term 'sutti' is of Sanskrit origin and means pure or undefiled). These individuals, more mythical than historical, were poor, simple, unlettered, but filled with the presence of the divine. They were ascetics known for their ecstatic love of God and their unselfconscious service to others. Unlike *saik a datus*, *sutti a tau* were not distinguished by their spiritual knowledge. They were, in fact, usually ignorant not only of religious knowledge but of any formal knowledge. Most were even ignorant of their own holy status. Evidence for others of their closeness to the divine is provided by the miracles bestowed upon them and upon those for whom they intercede after their death.

Although spiritual leaders (*saik a datus*) and pure men (*sutti a tau*) are very different sorts of religious figures, both are distinguished from worldly leaders by their self-effacement as opposed to the self-aggrandisement of the nobility. Their combination of humility, simplicity and (relative) non-violence paired with the possession of great supernatural potency provides an alternative model of a man of prowess from that associated with datu. Islam thus worked two somewhat contrary but complexly-connected effects in the Muslim Philippines. It intensified and consolidated an existing social hierarchy based upon birthright validated by personal force but at the same time it provided an alternative model for divinely-ordained social relations – one that celebrated spiritual equality and altruism. That model not only served as consolation for those on the bottom of the traditional social order but also may have had the effect of modifying the actions of autocratic rulers toward those beneath them.

### **Western Colonialism in the Muslim Philippines**

The establishment of Muslim political institutions in the southern Philippines and the seizure by Spain in 1571 of the northern islands were separated by only a few decades. For more than 300 years, the Spaniards made repeated attempts to subjugate the southern sultanates but never fully succeeded. They were

more successful at negotiating treaties with particular sultanates and at impeding direct trade between the Mindanao sultanates and Chinese trading ships, leading eventually to their economic decline. For their part, Mindanao sultans authorised maritime raids against Spanish-held territories that were quite costly, in terms of both plunder and prestige, to the colonisers. The Spanish introduction of steam-powered gunboats in 1846 effectively put an end to Muslim maritime raiding and led eventually to the decline of the sultanates.

In 1899 the Spaniards were succeeded by American occupiers. Muslim armed resistance to American colonial occupation at the opening of the twentieth century was sporadic but fierce. At least 3,000 Philippine Muslims were killed by American forces between 1903 and 1906 (Gowing 1983: 164). American forces eventually subdued Philippine Muslims by means of overwhelming force, establishing colonial control and ending the formal authority of sultans and datus. American colonisers were also responsible for making the Muslim peoples of Mindanao and Sulu *Philippine* Muslims by forcibly incorporating Muslim territories into the Philippine colonial and then national state and by attempting to yoke Philippine Christians and Muslims together into a single nation.

While it was American colonisers who created Philippine Muslims it was the Spaniards who manufactured Moros. The term is Spanish and originally labelled Spain's North African enemies, particularly those from the coast of Morocco. The Moros (in English, Moors) were of course not only Spain's enemies but its colonisers as well. Spain's *reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula remained a recent memory when Spaniards, now become imperialists themselves, sailed to the far side of the world and encountered fierce warriors in fast ships shouting the same universal battle cry – Allahu Akbar, God is Most Great – heard on the peninsula. Here also were Moros. The Spaniards met those new-found Muslim enemies in the way they knew best, by attempting either to convert them or kill them. American colonisers continued the usage of 'Moro' even though it had become an epithet among Christian Filipinos, denoting savages and pirates. In a bold piece of semantic alchemy, Philippine Muslim nationalists during the late 1960s appropriated the term 'Moro', shook it free of its colonial and pejorative roots and transformed it into a positive symbol of collective identity – one that denominated the citizens of their newly-imagined nation. For Philippine Muslim nationalists, 'Moro' denotes the descendants of those unsubjected peoples whom the Spaniards and their colonised subjects feared and distrusted. The 'Moro National Liberation Front' was formed to direct the struggle for an independent political entity proclaimed to be the *Bangsa Moro* or Philippine Muslim Nation.

### **Muslim Armed Separatism in the Postcolonial Philippines**

The Bangsamoro rebellion developed out of a political movement for Muslim separatism that originated among a small set of Philippine Muslim students and intellectuals in the late 1960s. That movement had as its goal the establishment of a single independent homeland for all the Muslim peoples of the Philippines.



The remote causes of Muslim separatism in the modern Philippines may be traced to Western colonisers. A more proximate cause may be found in the policies and practices of the postcolonial, Christian-dominated Philippine State. Until the 1950s, Muslims formed the majority population of almost every region of the southern Philippines. In the early 1950s, the Philippine government began to sponsor large scale migration from the poor and politically troublesome regions of the north and central parts of the country to the agricultural frontiers of the lightly populated southern islands. The large, fertile, and under-populated island of Mindanao became the primary destination for Christian migration to the southern Philippines and by the late 1960s Mindanao Muslims found themselves a relatively impoverished minority in their own homeland.

Tensions brought about by massive Christian migration to the Muslim South eventually led to the eruption of sectarian violence in Mindanao in 1970. That violence, which in many cases was initiated or exacerbated by government soldiers, was a primary justification used by President Ferdinand Marcos to declare martial law in 1972. One of the very first actions of the martial law regime was an attempt to disarm Philippine Muslims. In response, the underground Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was activated as an armed separatist movement. Muslim separatist rebels, numbering as many as 30,000 armed insurgents, fought the Philippine Armed Forces to a stalemate, obliging the Philippine Government to negotiate a cease-fire and peace treaty in 1977. Muslim civilians overwhelmingly supported the separatist insurgents and suffered cruelly at the hands of the Philippine military. The peace settlement, which called for the establishment of a 'Muslim Autonomous Region' in the southern Philippines, was never genuinely implemented by the Marcos administration. As a consequence, fighting broke out once more before the end of 1977, but did not again approach the level of intensity experienced prior to the cease-fire. The Muslim separatist movement entered a period of disarray marked by factional infighting and a weakening of popular support. By the early 1980s it had refashioned itself in Mindanao into a mass-based and self-consciously Islamic movement guided by Islamic clerics.

### **The Dual Goals of the Bangsamoro Movement**

Although often portrayed in media reports today as a movement to establish an Islamic state in the southern Philippines, The Muslim separatist movement that began in 1968 was primarily an ethnonationalist endeavour; that is, it had as its primary goal the creation of a Philippine Muslim nation – a nation-state governed by Philippine Muslims, though not necessarily an Islamic state as that is usually defined. As is by now well-known, the principal founder of the Muslim separatist movement in the Philippines, Nur Misuari, was trained as a political scientist at the University of the Philippines and had virtually no formal Islamic education.

The compound term coined by Misuari and other separatists to name their imagined nation – Bangsamoro – is itself instructive. 'Bangsa' is a term of Malay



origin and may be glossed as nation but in the southern Philippines it has traditionally denoted a descent group. The Bangsamoros, therefore, are defined as contemporary descendants of local ancestors who fought the Spaniards and resisted Hispanicisation throughout the Spanish colonial period. Those ancestors were depicted as the first nationalists of the Philippines, an entity whose very name denotes a colonised people. 'Moro not Filipino' became a slogan of the Bangsamoro armed insurgency that began in 1972 and continues to this day. The principal goal of that struggle was the Moro Nation (Bangsamoro), imagined as a sovereign republic composed of the descendants of those freedom fighters.

A logical correlate of the nationalist appeal of the Bangsamoro movement was renewed emphasis on traditional Philippine Muslim political institutions, particularly the long-defunct sultanates, which were, it was pointed out, the first indigenous states in the Philippines. In the process, the notion of aristocratic, autocratic leadership was retained, at least implicitly, as an intrinsic component of Moro political culture. This required movement leaders – most of whom were commoners, to acknowledge the contemporary descendants of those sultans and other members of the traditional nobility – or *datus* – who led the resistance to Spanish (and later American) colonialism.

And there they met a problem, because many contemporary members of the traditional nobility tended to be not only a Westernising elite but also deeply invested in the Philippine state from which movement leaders were so anxious to separate. That was because the most successful *datus* of the American colonial period, after an initial period of resistance, publicly collaborated with American colonial authorities and used American resources to consolidate both their economic base and their political control over the Muslim populace. They ruled in much the same autocratic fashion as their pre-colonial predecessors but now as gatekeepers for an alien central authority.

Muslim separatist movement leaders responded to this '*datu*' problem in two ways. For one, they distinguished between individual *datus* and the traditional aristocracy as a cultural institution, chiding most contemporary *datus* for slipping from the high standards of their heroic forefathers, while at the same time reaffirming their status as members of a hereditary nobility. A second response was to put forward an alternative source of moral authority, and this in fact comprised the second goal of the Muslim separatist movement--to reform local religious and cultural practices under the leadership of a new set of religious leaders. The 1950s and 60s saw a dramatic expansion of educational opportunities for Philippine Muslim scholars at centres of Islamic learning in the Middle East. While there had long been individuals schooled in basic Islamic doctrine in the southern Philippines, vast distances and the interference of Western colonisers in Southeast Asia ensured that Islam developed in-place in the Muslim Philippines with relatively little influence from distant Islamic centres. That relative isolation changed in the 1950s and 60s as Philippine Muslim students received scholarships Arab states to study at Middle Eastern Islamic universities such as Al Azhar in Cairo. After long periods of study (averaging

eight years) they returned home as well-educated religious teachers. A significant number of them returned to the Philippines not long before the first armed clashes of the separatist rebellion. Though most supported the rebellion, they were not, for the most part, its principal leaders, at least not at the outset. The new religious scholars were not able to speak out openly in public, in fact, until after the first cease-fire agreement in late 1976. When they were able to teach freely they strenuously advocated the reform of particular local cultural practices and called for a return to the plain, unadulterated teachings of Islamic scripture.

Members of the traditional nobility, including those who supported the separatist movement, viewed the efforts of the new Islamic teachers (*ulama*) as unwarranted tampering with cherished local customs and an attempted usurpation of their traditional religious authority. They certainly did not regard the reformation efforts as a return to any locally relevant times-gone-by. According to their traditional ruling ideology, *datus*, by definition, were members of *sharif* descent lines and thus direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Under traditional arrangements moral authority was constituted in them and all religious functionaries were under their command. The new clerics contradicted that claim by theological refutation and actual practice. For the rest of the paper I want to examine this conflict between the revanchist and reformative goals of the Muslim separatist movement in the Philippines by examining the career and opinions of one of its more prominent aristocratic supporters, Sultan Mohammad Adil.

### **Sultan Mohammad H. Adil**

Mohammad Adil, who is 75 years old and holds the title of Sultan of Cotabato, has lived, by any measure, a remarkable life. He is one of the few surviving members of a group of young Muslim aristocrats whose educations were fostered in the late American colonial period (1927-1941) by Edward Kuder, the American Superintendent of Schools in the southern Philippines. These students, who left their families to live under Kuder's roof, were educated in Western arts and sciences but also encouraged by him to appreciate what he termed the 'positive' aspects of their Islamic heritage. They went on to become some of the most prominent Muslim leaders of the postcolonial period. Sultan Adil exemplifies this new Western-educated Muslim elite, yet even among this unique group his personal history has been extraordinary. While still a teenager he fought the Japanese as a guerrilla officer and later attended college in Manila. He went on to a military career, and as an officer in the Philippine Constabulary (a national police force) was responsible for capturing some of the most notorious Muslim bandits and smugglers of the period. When, under Marcos, the national government began a program of aggressive actions against Philippine Muslims and precipitated a Muslim separatist rebellion, he resigned his commission and took an active role in the leadership of the armed separatist movement, eventually attaining the rank of Brigadier General in the Bangsamoro Army. In 1988 he participated as a representative of the Moro National Liberation Front in the first peace negotiations of the post-Marcos era,

sitting across the table from Philippine military officers with whom he had served. One of his sons was killed fighting in the rebellion. He is a devout and observant Muslim who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Sultan Adil's extraordinary passage from colonial ward to instrument of power of the Philippine state to Muslim separatist illustrates the postcolonial contradictions that led eventually to the development of a political movement calling for Muslim self-determination. Those contradictions were experienced individually by Adil in the anti-Muslim bias that impeded his progress through the ranks and by the personal betrayal he felt at the hands of the administration of Marcos. At the same time, his decision to reject the state he had served for so long and join the separatists was also facilitated by the fact that a Muslim political clan that had been his longstanding local enemy had prominently joined the other side.

Sultan Adil tells marvellous stories and I have been recording them for more than 10 years now. One of the first statements he made to me on the topic of the new religious scholars (ulama) concisely reveals the attitudes of traditionalists.

Our elders had a saying: '*Amayngka madakel niya a ulama nakauma, a magkapir tanu*' [When many ulamas come among us, we will become unbelievers]. It means that the ulamas cause trouble. If 100 clerics return to the Philippines [from studying in the Middle East], 100 different translations of Islam will develop. The ulamas are trying to destroy our culture.

This characterisation depicts the ulama as outsiders bringing foreign ideas and confusion--outsiders who, in their attempts to reform local practices, are destroying cherished culture. He goes on:

According to the ulama, the [traditional] death commemoration is not allowed, but it is a beautiful practice... What has happened now is that, on the seventh day after a death, people report that they hear the voice of the deceased crying: 'I am hungry, give me food'.

Sultan Adil's favourite story on the subject is based on a parable concerning a *sutti a tau* (holy man) first related to him by his grand uncle. He has updated it in this telling by including four young Islamic scholars:

Once an Arab missionary came to Cotabato. He was accompanied by four young men who had studied Islam in the Middle East. They arrived at the waterfront in Cotabato City at high noon because the young men wanted to bring the missionary across the wide Pulangi River in time to lead the prayers at the large mosque there. So they found a ferryman, a *bankero*. He was a very old man but he was the

only one left because all the other bankeros were out taking their noon meals. The four young men spoke to the old ferryman. Grandfather, this man here is an ulama. Please carry him across the river. When they reached the middle of the river the missionary looked at the old ferryman, who was in ragged attire, and asked him, 'Old man, do you know the five pillars of Islam and six articles of faith of Islam?' The old man replied, 'No, I do not know them.' The missionary asked him, 'What is your religion?'

'I am a Muslim.'

'Well then you must be telling me a lie,' said the missionary.

'I am not lying, ulama, I do not know the five pillars of Islam and the six articles of faith of Islam.'

'How could you not know them? You are an old man. What have you been doing all your life?'

'Since I was old enough to hold a paddle I have been ferrying people across the river. In the rain, under the sun, during lightning and thunder, through heavy waves, if somebody across the river calls me, 'Bankero, please come paddle me across', I go and bring them across without any complaint.' And the ulama said, 'How much do these passengers pay you?'

'I do not know. Sometimes they place some coins in my boat. I leave that in the hands of Allah. I am just happy serving these people.'

The missionary said, 'I ask you again for the last time, is it true that in your 80 years you have not learned even one of the five pillars of Islam and the six articles of faith of Islam?' The bankero said, 'It is true I do not know even one, but I leave that in the hands of Allah.'

The ulama replied, 'Then most surely you will never enter paradise. Most surely you will go to *narakah* [hell].' Immediately after he said those words, from nowhere, a dark cloud engulfed the boat. A violent wind came up, thunder crashed and the waves began to roll. The missionary dropped his prayer beads and clutched the sides of the boat in fear. The ferryman called to him over the wind, asking him if he knew how to swim. Just then a huge wave capsized the boat. The bankero swam to shore safely but the body of the ulama was found the next day floating downstream.

The divine message sent with a thunderclap in this story is clear: saintliness – expressed in direct humanitarian service – trumps formal religious learning every time.

Another favourite illustrative story of Sultan Adil concerns an experience he himself had at the Friday prayer service at a local mosque in 1971, shortly before the declaration of martial law and the beginning of the Muslim separatist rebellion:

After the prayers, a young ulama, just returned from studying in the Middle East, gave his Khutbah, [sermon]. He was talking about his education in Cairo and these were the most irritating statements he made. He said: 'You have to know how to read and write Arabic because that is the language which was used by the angel Gabriel to communicate the message of the Holy Quran from Allah to the Prophet Mohammad. And those who do not know Arabic, they will be sorry.' That was the thrust of his sermon. He talked about many more things but that was the part I remembered the most. So after his sermon, The Imam of that mosque requested me to give some parting words.

I stood to speak and immediately I reacted. 'Well', I said, 'You know who I am, and I cannot read and write Arabic. Now, this gentleman here has said that those who cannot read and write Arabic will most surely be sorry because their activities here in the world, however noble, will not be appreciated by Allah. Now, I said, this much I can tell you. I do not believe that Allah will not appreciate what I have done. And may Allah forgive me, but that ulama there is the most ignorant person I have ever heard speak. He is ignorant because he claims that Allah is ignorant. He says that Allah knows only one language--Arabic. In my case, I can speak English, I can speak Tagalog, I can speak Tausug, I can speak Chabacano, I can speak a little Tiruray, I speak Illongo, all in addition to my native language. Am I more knowledgeable than his Allah? No! You study on it. Consider the whining of the deer, the singing of the birds, the cricket's chirping, the thunder, the sounds beneath the ocean and underneath the earth. Allah understands all of these sounds because all are his creations. Allah knows everything. He loves and understands all sounds. This man is belittling and desecrating Allah who is the source of all sounds on earth.'

There are various other stories like this told by Sultan Adil but all make a similar point: the new religious scholars seek to formalise and Arabise an Islam-in-place that needs no reforming other than to remind local Muslims of its essential

message of brotherhood and uncomplicated spirituality. The new ulama lack the moral authority to lead Philippine Muslims because they are concerned only with surface manifestations of Islam and lack the wisdom to recognise its essence when they see it.

That critique of the new ulama leaves open the question of what the basis for moral authority ought to be. Because all agree that there are both good and bad datus, noble blood by itself does not suffice. What is the source for enlightened traditional leadership? How are good datus created? One potential source was Western education and the traditional nobility has had relatively more access to it than others in this century, resulting in the contemporary irony that the most westernised segment of Philippine Muslim society is also the most protective of traditional culture. To the extent that their American colonisers had a coherent policy at all toward Philippine Muslims, it was to civilise them without Christianising them. Regarded as some of the most backward inhabitants of a benighted colonial possession, Philippine Muslims became recipients of a special variant of the 'White love' described by Vicente Rafael (2000) in his book of that name. American colonial agents chose to develop enlightened (meaning Western-educated) traditional leaders by educating promising children of local aristocracies. Sultan Adil is, in a sense, a living example of that policy in practice.

In addition to acquiring Western educations, young aristocrats were to be encouraged in the 'positive' aspects of Islam. It may be said then, that Philippine Muslim culture has undergone two attempts at externally-generated reform in the twentieth century, the first by American colonisers in the first decades of the century and the second in the last decades initiated by Middle-East educated clerics. The first attempt focused on cleansing Philippine Muslim culture of polygyny and slavery – two practices that preoccupied American colonial agents in spite (or maybe because) of the fact they were very poorly understood. Superficially, at least, the attempted reforms met with some success. Local slavery, which bore little resemblance to that practised in the West, was outlawed and curtailed although various forms of bonded labour arrangements continued for the rest of the century. While Western-educated datus tended to remain monogamous, many simply adopted the Hispanicised Filipino pattern of a single wife and multiple mistresses (lavishly displayed in recent years by newly-deposed Philippine president Estrada). In general, however, the overall effect of American endeavours to 'develop' Philippine Muslim culture was not great. Even the most Western-educated datus continued to rule autocratically and adjudicate traditionally, while assuming the trappings of Western-style bureaucratic and democratic governance. In their 'localised despotism' they were little different from power brokers elsewhere in the Philippines described in John Sidel's (1999: 1) recent work on bossism in the Philippines.

No datu was more influenced by American colonial instruction than Sultan Adil. He speaks fondly of his days with the American, Edward Kuder, and even occasionally refers to himself as a 'Moro-Americano.' But his primary identity is



as a datu and the major theme of his adult life has been adapting that traditional local status to new more formalised settings. While American colonial educators convinced themselves that they provided the basis for enlightened Muslim leadership, there is limited evidence to support that claim.

What then is the inspiration for enlightened aristocratic leadership; the model that points the way to a utopian future by harkening back to an idealised local past? It is the local tradition of saints, a tradition carried by the Sufis who brought Islam to much of Southeast Asia, but which also has roots in Hinduism as well as in indigenous Southeast Asian religions. Sufism is of course an important variant of universal, translocal Islam, but all the same, Muslim saints are fundamentally local phenomena, wherever they are found. In Sultan Adil's local tradition, saints appear in his story of the old boatman; or in his stories about Bansalaw, an illiterate, untutored man who spent his life selflessly growing food for others and was carried to heaven by a flock of white doves on the day that he died; and even in his stories of his own great-uncle, a Saik a Datu (spiritual leader) with renowned curing powers, who resisted American colonialism not only by force of arms but also culturally, by refusing to eat, drink, or wear anything purchased in a store or to travel in any motorised vehicle.

The cultural tradition of local saints, emphasising voluntary poverty and selflessness, provided (and continues to provide) a mostly-imaginary alternative to the reality of pronounced social stratification and autocratic rule. It also, of course offers cultural material to construct an idealised past where all datu were good datu and saintly behaviour was the rule rather than the exception. Sultan Adil and many other fighters and supporters of the Bangsamoro movement seek to revive not the universal idealised Islamic past of the days of the prophet Mohammad and his followers, but the local idealised past when saints dwelt in the homeland and Islamic brotherhood was expressed in everyday life. Another story of Sultan Adil describes what that past was like.

'You are all surface!' I howled at these ulama. 'If I asked you how much money you have, you would say 'None', but you have money. Now you know, one of the most honored virtues of our old folks before was that if a man went fishing and was successful, he would place his catch in a bag and if anyone asked, 'How many fish did you catch?', he would open his bag and count and then he would give some of his fish away. But nobody is practising that now. You goddamn fools. I know that you are bowed by the weight of the sack because there are so many fish, fifty or more, and you answer, 'Just a few, just a few.' God will punish you so that you will never succeed in life.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued elsewhere (McKenna 1998) that scholars of the Muslim Philippines have tended to overestimate the role of a universal, scriptural Islam in motivating the Muslim separatist movement and have under-analysed the motive force of local or 'practical Islam' (Ellen 1983). While it is certainly true that Philippine Muslims recognise that they are part of a vast Islamic world, it is just as true that their religious beliefs and practices developed over hundreds of year in relative isolation from centres of Islamic learning. The atavism expressed by most fighters and supporters of the Muslim separatist movement that I have interviewed is a yearning for a particular idealised past that is not a place of puritanism and intolerance but one of fellowship and reciprocity – a place of security where local saints abide.

I do not mean to limit my argument to the Muslim Philippines with its somewhat unique history. It is important for anthropologists and other social scientists to question the assumed link between atavism and puritanism wherever it is proposed. That can only be done by penetrating beneath the heated rhetoric of movement leaders and the overheated prose of journalistic accounts to look for the actual constructions of the past embraced by ordinary adherents of those movements.

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