

Towards an Understanding of Faith and Culture in the Philippines: The Muslim-Filipinos Perspective

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Bismillahi rahman ir raheem. Assalamo allaikom... In the name of Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful. Peace be unto you all... In the midst of some media's biases and prejudices against Islam and the Muslims here in the Philippines, the question, in my opinion, has always been a problem of perspective and methodology.

Any attempt, therefore, to study, understand and appreciate Islam and the culture of the Muslim-Filipinos here should be anchored on a deeper understanding and appreciation of their culture and history. The journey should begin even before the coming of Islam in the 14th century.

Another suggested approach is to look at Islam, or religion for that matter, as a foreign introduction into a particular society and see how the latter has made some adjustments, or rejections, in the process of culture encounter. The final result is what we may call syncreticism, if not integration.

Still another possible approach is to look at the process in terms of culture change, that is to say, to look at the elements of the recipient society that have experienced adjustments in the process, which in turn would be an indication of enrichment of the latter and of its ability to survive and continue in another form. There are also cases of total rejection in the process of culture contact, in the sense that some particular practices eventually die and/or are totally discouraged.

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Whatever approaches are possible, a thorough study of both cultures (e.g. Islam and the recipient society) should be the basis for such an understanding. Moreover, the right way to look into the process of culture change has to be through *dialogue*, not debate—for there are no winners in a debate, only hatred and prejudices. In our case, through a genuine Muslim-Christian dialogue.

For our purpose, we shall highlight the *Maranaos* (“people of the lake”), one of the thirteen ethno-linguistic groups of Muslims in this country. There are some reasons for that, namely, (1) they are the last group who embraced Islam (late 14th century); (2) we are quite familiar with the group; and, (3) for the study of culture change vis-a-vis Islam, there are still vestiges of “pre-Islamic” practices which can be the basis for our intellectual discourse. Besides, the group is very much involved in the Islamic resurgence in this country, not to mention the fact that Marawi is considered an Islamic city by popular demand.

Culture and Islam Defined

Edward B. Taylor (1958) defines culture or civilization as... “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” The definition applies to a both material and non-material culture (James Clifton, 1968:5).

Islam, on the other hand, is derived from the arabic word *salaam*, *salama*, which means peace. *Salaam* is one of the ninety-nine (99) beautiful names of Allah. Islam is more than a religion, it is *din-ul-Islam*, a way of life.

Looking at both definitions, there seems to be no contradictions except for the fact that culture, as defined by anthropologists, has specific fields or areas of specialization, being therefore “compartmentalized,” whereas Islam does not connote “compartmentalization” or “specialization” of knowledge; rather, it speaks of a whole system integrated and united as one.

To quote Syyed Qutb (1977:5):

The Islamic concept of peace requires a general study of the comprehensive theory... Islam is a religion of unity in this great universe, an unity which comprises all elements, from a single particule to the most advanced specie of sophisticated life. It is the

unity of all existence: inanimate, plants, animals and human. All activities in the cosmos are included and integrated in this unity, from the rotation of the planets, to the working of the human mind. Islam finds unity in the planets when following their eternal laws as well as in sould when responding to their natural inclinations to acquire knowledge and implement justice. There is unity of all energies, whether it is the physical striving for necessities or the spiritual craving for elation."

To my mind, the problem with some social scientists is a question of perspective. When one draws a demarcation line between the so-called "secular" vs. the "non-secular," very clearly a distinctive demarcation is drawn between what anthropologists call the "sacred" and the "profane."

Michael D. Lemonick's article in the *Time* magazine (Dec.18/95, 42-49) shares a similar view when states that scholars looking at the Bible are divided into two groups, namely: (1) *maximalists* —those who consider the Bible a legitimate guidebook for archaeological research; and (2) *minimalists* or *nihilists* —those who believe the Bible is a religious document and thus can not be read as any sort of objective account.

From a Muslim perspective we have Ahmed Deedat's (*The Choice: Islam and Christianity*, vol.1, October 1944) who has continuously engaged in a debate on Islam and Christianity. For his zealous efforts to propagate the Truth, he was awarded the King Faisal International Award in 1986. His books and other writings are used as basic materials in the on-going debate on Islam and Christianity.

Truly a dialogue is more fruitful than a debate and this is the "middle way" approach that should be nurtured and encouraged. Let me quote from another Muslim shcolar, Mohd. Z. Khan (1980:66):

Thus, Islam seeks to bring about reconciliation between the followers of different faiths and to establish a basis of respect and honor among them. "Say, O people of the Book, come to an agreement on a principle common between us and you, in that we worship none but Allah and that we associate no partner with Him, and that some of us take not others for lords beside God." (3:65)

Indeed, it is not God's intention at all to draw distinctions among men irrespective of belief, race and color. It is man who built "invisible

walls" of biases and prejudices. It is man who built bridges to mark boundaries among his fellowmen. It is man who created disciplines not for knowledge sake, but for his personal interests and aggrandisement!

The Maranaos: Their Mythical and Islamic Lineage

The *Maranaos* (lake dwellers) claim their lineage to two sources, namely: (1) mythic lineage, traced to a folk hero, Radia Indarapatra, a child born immortal from the seventh layer of Heaven, who descended to earth; and (2) Islamic lineage, traced to Sarip (Sharief) Kabungsuwan, who introduced Islam among the Maguindanaon of what is now Cotabato.

According to Maranao *salsilah* (Arabic: *silsilah*, chain, lineage) Sultan Nabi Bakaramat Adil of Komaramantapuli wanted a child desperately. Every Friday (Islamic influence in the folk narrative), he would assemble his people to pray and request God to have a child. The story narrates that everytime the prayer was heard in Heaven, it shook like an earthquake, which prompted one of the angels to inform God of the Sultan's prayer. God sent one of His angels to the seventh Heaven and found the child, Radia Indarapatra, playing. He was persuaded to be born on earth after he was given several concessions, one of which was that he would be born immortal! He was born to the Sultan's wife and intermarried with the characters in the Maranao epic *Darangen*. From this union came the four *datus* who established the Maranao *pat a penampong ko ranao*, four principalities: *Bayabao*, *Masiu*, *Unayan* and *Balo-i*.

What this narrative suggests is that the mythical lineage of the Maranaos came before their Islamic lineage. The *salsilah* further narrates that, as a result of this union (mythic and Islamic), the former in the process of intermarriages got converted into Islam. What it seems to suggest in turn is that the process itself is an integral part of the Islamization process both of the characters and the individuals.

This concept of "Islamization" is not only recorded in the *salsilah* eventually, but the process itself became the primary source in the recitation of the origin of the people—the *Maranaos*. While "myth" can be delineated from what is "real" in essence, in this process, however, there is no real distinction between myth and reality. Both are real and the people believe the events happened in the distant past.

The narrative further goes that, as a result of the coming of Islam, Bembaran, the seat of the epic Darangen, was "enchanted" and the four folk heroes who were able to escape from the enchantment became the four *datus* whom the *Maranaos* claim their founding *apo* (ancestors).

The fusion of the mythical characters and the religious characters was a process of accommodation. The incipient concept of brotherhood based on blood and kinship (*merepeda sa posed*) expanded into a larger and broader concept of brotherhood called *dar-ul-Islam*.

It further explains why *Maranaos* made offerings to the unseen *inikadowa* and *tonong* (twin-benevolent spirits), because their mythical *apo*, Radia Indarapatra, married a water nymph and begot two children: one who revealed himself, and the other, unseen. Both children made a covenant to protect each other from malevolent spirits. A totem bird (*itotoro*) became the link between the unseen spirits and the seen. Thus, every *Maranao* takes care of the totem bird; otherwise he would get sick or die.

With the arrival of Islam the belief in the unseen spirits was eventually discouraged and the offering of food to the unseen spirits prohibited.

Tohan (literally translated as God) seems to have been the word before Allah came into the consciousness of the people. The *Maranaos* began to understand that there is a Supreme Being more powerful than the *tonong* and *inikadowa*.

Cesar A. Majul (1973:72) describes the coming of Islam to the *Maranaos* of Lake Lanao:

By all indications Islam was brought to Lake Lanao through the *datus* there who were introduced to the faith by means of marriage alliances with the Muslim Iranum and Maguindanao *datus*, principally with the former.

From the hypothesis that Islam began among the Iranum *datus*, especially those in Malabang (coastal area) and Butig, and that the Maranao *datus* then intermarried with the Butig *datus*. It is reasonable to infer that the Maranao *datus* could have been introduced to Islam by means of such marriage alliances.

In both cases what is noticeable is the concept of marriage alliances: one between the mythical characters, traced to the folk hero,

and the Islamic lineage, traced to Sharief Kabungsuwan, through the marriage alliances with the Iranum *datus* who intermarried with the Maguindanaon *datus*, whose lineage is ultimately traced to Sharief Kabungsuwan. Again, what is myth becomes "real" to the extent that there is no distinction between the two.

Majul reiterated that "the idea that Islam was brought to Sulu and Maguindanao by brothers is simply a mythological device and it must not be taken at its face value." What this "mythological device" simply means is that "myth validates reality" and "reality" can also be considered "myth." Indeed, the idea of brotherhood, whether it is based on a myth or traced to an Islamic lineage which is considered "real," is a device to justify or validate the origin of a people. While there seems to be a very thin line dividing myth and reality, the point is that it explains the origin of people. And this is what really matters.

In the lineage of the *Maranaos* there is fusion, intermarriage between mythic and Islamic characters. It was the four founding ancestors who established the four geo-political divisions of what used to be called Lanao. The ancestors set the laws and social order, and established three social classes: *pegawidan*, *pegawid* and *oripen* (those supported, those supporting, and the slave class).

Vestiges of Pre-Islamic Practices

a) *Kashawing: Rice Ritual*. *Kashawing* is a rice ritual performed before the clearing of the rice field is done. The last *Kashawing* I observed, almost ten years ago, was a reenactment, and the farmers who participated in the ritual were reluctant because, according to them, it is discouraged by the *modern ulema* and the performance of such practice is considered "un-Islamic." Thus, the one who performs it commits a sin, because he seeks help from other being, which is contrary to the Islamic concept of *tawhid*, Oneness of Allah.

The farmers finally agreed to perform the "mock" ritual just for "documentation" purposes. They started the incantations (inviting the spirits from the lake to partake from the food offering) by saying:

"We pray that Allah will forgive us...
that we will not commit sin
by invoking our spirits (ancestors)
to partake from this food offering."

Then the ritual proper began by inviting the spirits from the lake to come to the field and partake from the food offerings wrapped in banana leaves.

Finally, when rice was harvested, the first harvest was pounded and offered to the spirits who were responsible for the bountiful harvest.

As the story goes, the first Maranao farmer was "enchanted" because his wife, becoming suspicious, went to the rice-fields to see her husband. She was surprised to see the farm implements working without anyone holding them. As a result of this surprise visit, the farm implements stopped working and her husband became enchanted and lived in the *baléte* tree nearby. The wife decided to jump into the river and she, too, became a spirit that *Maranao* women invoked when they gave birth. During the child baptism, *kaganat sa lantai*, she too was invited to the ritual.

b) *Water Spout (Mga Apo)*. The water spout, considered *mga apo*, ancestors and spirits appeared in the lake to warn the *Maranaos* of incoming disaster. Depending upon their size and the form, each one had a particular name. When they appeared, *Maranaos* in the past burnt incense, called their names and implored them to be spared from their wrath, since the *Maranaos* are their descendants. They believed that by so doing their houses and farm would be spared.

c) *Lailathul Kadr*. On the third week of *Ramadhan* (fasting month), just before dark, the *Maranaos* in the past lighted candles and looked for Lailathul Kadr in the four corners of the house. The belief was that he was a person in white garb with long white beard, dressed like an Arab. If he appeared, one could ask anything from him (perhaps, like Santa Claus) and it would be granted.

This used to be the "folk" belief about Lailathul Kadr. I still recall when I was a child the times my mother told me to perform the ritual and search for Lailathul Kadr. Unfortunately, however, I have not found him yet.

What Lailathul Kadr really means is the "Night of Enlightenment." It was the night when the first revelation of the Al Qur'an took place. It is considered the most blessed night of all nights when devout Muslims observe prayers. Today the *Maranaos* no longer light candles

in search for Lailathul Kadr. However, they still light candles in the graveyards three days before Ramadhan ends.

d) *Hejra*. In the past some *Maranaos* reinterpreted *Hejra* (*Hediará*) as the "end of the world" (*bangkit a donia*). *Hejra* really means the flight from Mecca to Medina. It was in Medina, city of the Prophet (*pbuh*), where he was able to establish Islam and forged peace treaty with the Jews.

There are also other vestiges of pre-Islamic practices among the *Maranaos* which I do not mention here.

Islamic Resurgence Among the *Maranaos*

Islamic resurgence was defined by Chandra Muzaffar (1987:2) as (1) a view from within, a way in which many Muslims themselves see the growing impact of the religion among its adherents; (2) rising again suggests a phenomenon which has happened before; and (3) resurgence as a term embodies the notion of a change, even a threat to those who adhere to other world views. Manifestations of Islamic resurgence is varied.

In the Philippines there are two dimensions to this resurgence: One relates to the non-material observable aspects of Islam; and the other refers to the material (for instance, physical) aspects of Islamic resurgence (N. Madale, 1986:284).

Physical manifestations include more *madaris*, mosques, business establishments and religious centers, as well as the change in the mode and ethics of dressing.

Non-material aspects include a drastic change in behavior and public conduct, eating habits; the notion of *haram* and *halal*; attendance to religious conferences and symposia, increase in the exchange of Muslim scholars; the campaign to Islamize knowledge, etc.

The Ompia Party (Progress and Reform Party), which was organized by *Ulema*, led by Dr. Mahid M. Mutilan, won the gubernatorial seat in the province of Lanao del Sur and some seats in the Board twice in the most recent election. A few weeks ago the *Ulema* had their second national conference in Marawi City.

At the Mindanao State University a few weeks before the *Ulema* National Conference, another international conference was held with the theme "The Islamization of Knowledge in Southeast Asia," in cooperation with the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur.

There is also a very strong campaign and request to President Ramos to appoint an Undersecretary for the *madaris* in this country. The World Islamic League, with a local counterpart, have just completed a project on the textbooks which recommended the "integration" of Islamic values into the curriculum.

From the GRP-MNLF Peace Talks a consensus on Muslim education is viable. The Executive Summary held in General Santos City, July 26-28, 1995 reads:

1. The management, control and supervision of the entire educational system in the area of autonomy shall be the primary concern of the Regional Autonomous Government, consistent with the declared policies of the national educational bodies. The national educational bodies shall monitor compliance by the regional educational system, with national educational policies, standards and regulations, in collaborations with the educational authorities of the autonomous region. The head of the educational system of the Autonomous Government shall have the right to participate in the policy and decision-making activities of the national educational bodies.

2. The government shall undertake the necessary measures to preserve and strengthen the Mindanao State University system, committed to the integration of Christian and Muslims through education. (*From a correspondence with Rody Rudil, Oct. 3, 1995*).

In Summary

This study has shown that some pre-Islamic practices of the *Maranaos* which maybe considered "un-Islamic" were able to survive through time in a process we call culture change. These practices survived because the society had the capacity to make adjustments according to the basic requirements in Islam.

Some practices considered purely "un-Islamic" eventually were discouraged because of the resurgent Islam, and the campaign to discourage practices (if not eliminate them) which are not permitted and sanctioned in Islamic jurisprudence and Shariah.

Radio Ranao, put up by the *Ulema*, is a new radio network, which is even more powerful than the local government station DXSO. In fact, some lecturers of the King Faisal Center of Islamic and Arabic Studies came to me a few days ago and told me that during the coming *Ramadh* (beginning January 20th) no one will listen to the *Ramadh* program aired at DXSO because the other radio station is more powerful. Their suggestion was to invite the best lecturers and discuss the best topics for *Ramadhan*. A remaining problem would be how to finance it.

The Muslim-Christian Dialogue Movement in this country has a long history, more than twenty years long. It started with an Annual Seminar on Islam in Asia. Later it was changed to an Annual Seminar on Mindanao and Sulu cultures. After sometime it became Muslim-Christian dialogue.

In the early years of its existence a Continuing Committee composed of Christians and Muslims were the ones planning for the following conferences.

Throguh the years several themes were explored and the proceedings were published. The last of these series was a manuscript published by New Day Publications, *Understanding Islam*, which got printed just a few days after the death of Dr. Peter G. Gowing, one of the prime movers of the Muslim-Christian dialogue movement in the Philippines.

In spite of what has been done and yet to be done by concerned Muslims and Christians alike, there is still the fear that somehow Islam and the Muslims in this country may become violent and therefore another revolution may occur. Let us pray together that this may never happen again.

There is a crackdown of "Muslim terrorists" both foreign and local who are believed to be members of an international syndicate whose primary goal is to pursue *Jihad*. Some Pakistanis were recently apprehended by government agents. Meanwhile, the GRP is still pursuing the Peace Process. According to some sources, there is another force to reckon with Hashim Salamat and the MILF!

At the grassroots there is a very vibrant and dynamic Islamic resurgence that cannot be overlooked. They are not violent. They are on a spiritual journey to learn the Truth and the ways of the Prophet

(*pbuh*). It is also true that there is a clash between the traditional *Ulema* and the new emerging *Ulema* on several issues.

On the other hand, some sectors of media should be cautioned not to "sensationalize" incidents, and not to use terms such as "Muslim terrorist" and the like. It is not likely to help the tension that is apparently building up as a result of media's live coverage and *in situ* reporting.

In brief, let me conclude by quoting two citations, one from a Christian, the other from an article which I myself wrote some years ago. From Lemonick:

To suggest that many things in the Bible are not historical is not too serious. But to lose biblical history altogether is to lose our tradition.

From an earlier article of mine:

The Muslims have always considered Islam as their strength. In their struggle against all forms of colonization and neo-colonization, Islam and their indigenous culture values and traditions have served them well both as a source of identity and of strength. □

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