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Islam in Sulu

CUTHBERT BILLMAN, O.M.I.

THAT Islam is the dominant religious creed in the province of Sulu is a fact that needs no demonstration. Since the first mosque was built on the island of Tawi-tawi in southern Sulu by Arab missionaries in pre-Spanish times, Islam has been the only accepted religion of the Suluanos. It is likewise an accepted fact that during the centuries of Islam in Sulu the people were bound together more by their common cultural and ethnical ties than by their spiritual heritage. Historical research has revealed that religion played a minimum role in welding the tribes into a unified whole.

During the immediate pre-war years, the period we shall consider here, there was little evidence to indicate that the centuries of Islam had made any permanent contribution to the social, political or economic life of the Moro, or indeed had made any deep or lasting impression even upon his religious life. The average Suluano's religious life was limited to the simple *pagtammam* service in the mosque after his birth, his marriage by the *imams* in a ceremony that varied from island to island and often from barrio to barrio, and finally a not-so-traditional Muslim burial service that was founded more on local custom than on imported Islamic tradition.

Furthermore the mosques throughout the archipelago were few, poor and shabbily constructed. The majority of them were nothing more than open sheds with a two or three-foot wall and a slightly overhanging roof of either galvanized iron

or nipa. There was no furniture of any kind and often the only piece of religious equipment in evidence was an empty gasoline drum hung in one corner and serving as a bell to call the faithful to prayer.

The administration of these mosques was in the hands of imans who while simple and religious men knew little of the faith they professed. Furthermore they lacked the social status of recognized leaders in the community and consequently along with the people they served were under the complete social and economic domination of the datus and wealthier *hadjis*, who were themselves seldom if ever seen in the mosque. Consequently the influence of the imans was purely religious and very ineffectual. Some of them, however, conducted schools that were attached to the larger and wealthier mosques. Here once a week they gathered a handful of elementary school children (rarely did they succeed in attracting those of the high-school level) and taught them the simpler precepts of the Koran, a few Arabic prayers (often without benefit of translation), and a mild form of anti-Christian propaganda.

One of the most notable features of this period was the complete lack of interest on the part of the educated class in Islam as such or in any mosque activity. This class, composed of political leaders, educators, lawyers, businessmen and land-owners, exercised their influence solely through their chosen fields. Rarely if ever, no matter how strong their will to power, did they consider Islam as a unifying or binding force between themselves and their followers. And to their lack of interest in religion can be traced in some degree the similar lack of interest on the part of the lower classes. It is true that there were a few Suluanos who had been to the religious schools of the Near East and had returned to do missionary work among their own people, but their influence was seldom felt beyond the bounds of the locality where they settled.

In summary, it can be said that the influence of Islam upon the people of Sulu in the pre-war years was weak and ineffectual. Some individuals took what advantage they could from it, both spiritually and materially; spiritually by drawing

from its symbols and limited religious exercises a certain spiritual satisfaction, and materially through mosque fees and sharing in the fines imposed by the religious *agama* courts. But the bulk of the people had no tangible share in any aspect of the religion whatever and consequently the activity of their daily living was little affected by it. They were untouched by the moral principles emanating from the mosque; their knowledge of the true meaning of Islam or of the content of the Koran was practically nil and what moral principles they acknowledged and professed were based on pure naturalism. This widespread indifference to Islam in the pre-war years was the rule rather than the exception, a fact noted and accepted by the Moro as well as the Christian observer.

There were many contributing factors to Islam's low estate during this period, such as the high illiteracy rate of its followers, the poverty of the mosques and an uneducated iman class. Careful observation, however, suggests that the chief cause was the complete lack of any organization. There was no indication of any leadership, either on the local or provincial level, that attempted to give the people that sense of belonging to a highly organized and tightly knit group which would result in giving them a feeling of participation in a living, forceful religious body. Consequently the Islamic religious body was not only split into as many independent units as there were mosques, but reduced to the ineffectual state described above.

However, during the years since the war, the religious and social status of Islam underwent a tremendous transformation; and today it is a living, vibrant force that touches and definitely influences every class of society in Sulu. One simple significant fact is that today the term "Moro" is in disrepute. Conferred on the Suluano by the Spaniard, the epithet was formerly accepted as signifying the fiercely independent, courageous and anti-Christian spirit of the native of Sulu. Today, however, it is abhorred by the Suluano and he insists upon being called a Muslim, for "Muslim" more clearly denotes the religious profession which has now captured his interest and allegiance.

Still more indicative of the growth of Islam's influence in Sulu is the large number of mosques constructed since the war. These are large, expensive and highly decorated and are to be found in every municipality and barrio of the province. And they are well attended, not only for the traditional Friday services, but even for the daily morning and evening prayer ritual. The largest and most expensive mosque in Sulu is found in Maimbung, the ancient seat of the sultans of Sulu on the island of Jolo. It is a painted concrete edifice, constructed at the cost of ₱150,000. It is gaily and profusely decorated both inside and out and has eight minarets of varying size. On the island of Siasi the Muslim Association is now campaigning for ₱60,000 to build a new concrete mosque, with attached classrooms, to replace the present large but inadequate wooden one. All sizable communities now possess rather expensive mosques that were constructed since the war, usually with a cement base and a wooden upper structure, and paid for by community subscription with much of the construction often accomplished by cooperative labor.

The wooden mosque in Jolo is the largest of its kind in the province, covering nearly one full block. It is situated in the center of town facing the famous Plaza Tulay. On Fridays it is crowded all day with worshippers, among them college and high-school students as well as adults of all classes. At noon on Fridays the local radio station broadcasts direct from the mosque the Muslim *surah*, which consists of prayers in both Arabic and Tau Sug, while hundreds of families listen in and pray along with the hadjis. Further, at seven each evening the same station broadcasts the regular mosque prayer service for the close of the day. The head of this mosque is Hadji Ustadz Radjae Yahihya, who spent four years studying in the Muslim schools of Pakistan and Egypt, speaks Arabic fluently and is considered the outstanding Islamic scholar of Sulu.

Attached to every mosque of any size that exists today in Sulu is a Muslim school. These schools hold classes every Friday and teach the Koran, Arabic, and principles of morality based on Islamic writings. If the mosque is located in a large community and is well attended classes are held every day.

Attending these schools are elementary and high-school students, youths not otherwise going to school and even adults. In many of these mosque schools are found teachers who studied in the Muslim schools of Indonesia and Pakistan and are acknowledged in the community and the surrounding areas as eminent Muslims and scholars. The mosque in Jolo maintains, appropriately, the most famous center of learning in the province, the Madrasa School. Its dean and rector is the aforementioned Hadji Radjae. Classes are held every day and under his leadership the study is profound and serious.

Furthermore, under the leadership of Hadji Radjae and with the spirited cooperation of Jolo's social and civic leaders a number of Islamic societies have been formed. Chief among them is the Islamic Congress, a province-wide organization which began in the Jolo mosque where its meetings as well as the induction of its officers continue to be held. Among its members are nearly all the recognized Muslim leaders of the province. The outstanding local adult group is the *Ilaw ha Katigidlum* (*Light in Darkness*) which according to its constitution is strictly a religious society, although its secondary aim is social. Most of its activities are mosque-centered. Among the many Muslim youth associations of Jolo the most notable is the "Knights of Islam", which is composed mostly of the sons of the more prominent citizens and is strongly dominated by the more influential hadjis who frequent the mosque.

While it must be admitted that there was political purpose on the part of some of the adult organizers of these societies, yet adherence to them is prompted chiefly by the new spirit of Islam that is sweeping the province and by a desire for a closer cooperation among the Muslims themselves. In all municipalities of the province counterparts of the above-mentioned associations are found; and reports from the interior indicate that in those areas the direction of these groups is even more mosque-centered than in the larger communities.

On the Muslim feast day commemorating the Hegira of Mohammed recently, the mosque schools and Islamic youth

groups of Jolo and the surrounding municipalities demonstrated their strength and unity by staging a huge parade around the town. Twenty-eight sizable groups participated. Each was composed of both young men and women, and each society or school was distinguished by a uniform of a distinct color scheme. Heading the parade were the civic, political and social leaders, both men and women, of all the municipalities represented. The demonstration was truly impressive and very significant of the growing power of Islam among the youth of the province.

Over the past years many Muslim missionaries have come to Sulu either on the invitation of various hadjis or sent by foreign Muslim associations in order to revive religious fervor and to establish, often for the first time, many of the Islamic traditions of dress and social and religious behavior. They have always been well received and have usually succeeded in convincing a fair percentage of their listeners to accept their teachings. A few years back one of the immediate results of a missionary's visit was that young girls and women, whenever they visited a mosque, took to wearing a long flowing veil, either white or colored, that completely covered the head, neck and shoulders. Further it was through the assistance and mediation of these same missionaries that Alfilar University in Cairo has made a standing offer of a free scholarship to any Muslim of Sulu provided he has the necessary scholastic qualifications for university work and will pay his own fare to Cairo.

Observers in Sulu have come to realize that for the first time in generations Islam is being felt as a force in the spiritual and social life of the people. Muslim leaders both political and otherwise have been quick to recognize this trend and have come to acknowledge the necessity of identifying themselves with Islamic religious and social activities lest they cut themselves off from what promises to be the most potent source of community action in the province.

The question therefore naturally arises — what has been the specific cause of this resurgence of Islam? The answer I believe is to be found in the exact opposite of the cause

of its pre-war ineffectiveness, and that is organization. Today Islam has reached its present peak in Sulu because of an intelligent and highly efficient organization that has been able to revive the religious creed of the people and at the same time to strengthen its social structure through an appeal to the people's sense of cultural solidarity. The people of Sulu had reached a stage where there was almost a complete lack of any social, cultural or religious unity among them. Over the years a sort of cultural disintegration had set in, and unless something was done about it there was evident danger that, living on a hundred widely scattered islands as they did, they would eventually lose all trace of unity and solidarity.

A strengthening of the religious ties seemed to be the surest way to weld them into one strong provincial group. The step was taken, and outside forces were called in to play a major role in realigning Islam in Sulu with the traditional Islamic practices of Egypt and the nations of the Arab Bloc. It is difficult to determine just what contribution these nations made in terms of advice, money and missionaries to Islam in Sulu, but there is ample proof that they made a definite and substantial contribution.

It has often been asked by visitors to Sulu whether this recent development will alienate the Muslims further from the central government at Manila. Will their increased religious fervor tend to make them gravitate towards the centers of Islamism in the Near and Far East and lessen their regard for the national authority which is so strongly Christian? Will it make them more conscious of their minority status with a consequent rise in the spirit of rebellion against whatever forms part of the Christian Filipino tradition? Only history itself, of course, can answer these questions. But a continued study and closer observation of Islamic trends in Sulu may help to indicate in what direction lies the future history of our Muslim brothers.