

“HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS TO THE BANGSAMORO”

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My topic for today's talk is about the historical events that led to the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro. I have recently written a book on the subject, *History From Below* published by the University Publications of the Ateneo de Davao. The book traces the origins and development of the problems of Mindanao in the context of Philippine history. For purposes of this talk, I have extracted the most salient points and parts of this book to be able to answer the question, **“Why the Bangsamoro?”**

Why the Bangsamoro?

The problem of Mindanao is rooted in social injustice just as the problem of the HUKBALAHAP-NPA insurgency was similarly borne of injustices in the past. We inherited this problem as one of the dubious legacies of the colonial period and therefore share in its guilt and culpability. Today, we need the Bangsamoro as the olive branch to end warfare in the Philippine south caused by centuries of prejudice, discrimination, deprivation, neglect and plain indifference to the Muslim peoples.

I have chosen four landmarks as historical antecedents to the Mindanao problem for today's discussion:

1. The Moro Wars 16th-20th centuries.
2. Filipinization Program under the Americans through the Commonwealth period.
3. Public Lands Policy and the Agricultural colonies
4. War in Mindanao

The Moro Wars

The longest war in the history of the Spanish colonization of the Philippines was the Moro Wars which were waged by the Philippine Muslims against the Spaniards. Let me take you back in time...

In 1596, the Spanish colonial government reached an agreement with Capt. Esteban Rodriguez de Figueroa to colonize Mindanao. He was to effect the conquest of Mindanao in return for which he would be made governor of the island for life, a position that would be inherited by his heir. The conquest of Mindanao was seen as crucial to the subjugation of Borneo, Sulu, Java and the Moluccas. Unfortunately, when Figueroa's military expedition landed in the marshlands of Sarangani, a Buayan (Buhahayen, also Magdanao) warrior named Ubal recognized him as the leader of the Spanish forces and struck him with a well-aimed blow to the head with a *kampilan*, a native sword. Figueroa fell mortally wounded and died a few days later. Anticipating the Spanish attacks, the Buayans who were relatives of the Ternatan ruling family immediately requested help from their relatives; the Ternatans sent a thousand warriors for the defense of the Buayans of Pulangi. Ternatan royalty known as *cachiles* commanded this force. Thus started the 350- year Moro wars against Spanish colonial administration.

When the Americans succeeded the Spaniards in this war, after having bought the whole Philippine archipelago from Spain via the Treaty of Paris in 1898, they secured formal and informal agreements from the Magindanaos, Tausug and those of Basilan with the intent of neutralizing them. The Muslims agreed to recognize American sovereignty, suppress piracy and apprehend those who would commit crimes against non-Muslims. In return, the Muslims were guaranteed absolute freedom in the practice of Islam. By securing American non-interference in Muslim affairs the Muslims believed they were getting a better deal than they ever did with the Spaniards.

The Filipinization Program

As the Americans went on to implement their new occupation policy i.e. imposing customs regulations, levy taxes, and surveyed land the Muslims began to see more and more of the negative impact of the American presence in Mindanao. Land surveys required mapping and the result was the proliferation of American soldiers all over moroland. After 1901, more American troops were sent to occupy ports in Mindanao. Muslim suspicions erupted into violence until it was suppressed by the superiority of American troops and their weapons. Examples of these were the Battle of Bayang in 1903 and the conquest of Lanao where the Americans saw the extent to which the Muslims preferred death to the ignominy of surrender and defeat.

Consequent to the pacification of the Muslims, Mindanao was organized into a single province known as the Moro Province. The American mandate was to civilize the moros by making slavery illegal while respecting Islamic religion and the customs of the inhabitants for as long as these did not conflict with the principles of basic American law. However, the very word, "civilize" indicated the cultural underpinnings of American rule

which was designed to change the way of life of the Muslims under the presumption that they were not yet civilized.

Apparently, the American policy suffered from a serious oversight; the Muslims of Mindanao had the most advanced political organization at that time. Three sovereign sultanates: Sulu, Magindanao and Buayan already existed in the Philippine south at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16th century. These were the sultanates that led the Moro Wars against both the Spaniards and the Americans. "Civilizing" the Muslims of the Philippines did not take into consideration that having a political organization far more advanced than the barangay meant that the Muslims were capable of effectively resisting aggression or domination.

The Filipinization of Mindanao policy suffered from certain misconceptions one of which was the belief that the Muslims had the same hispanized culture as the Filipinos of Luzon and the Visayas. American policy was torn between the intention of respecting and preserving Muslim culture and harmonizing American rule throughout the Philippines. The realization that the two policies severely contrasted would come later with their attempted implementation.

Under the Commonwealth government the desire of Filipino leaders to take a more direct participation in the governance of Mindanao and Sulu was accommodated by the American administration. With a view to the envisioned grant of independence to the Philippines, Filipino leaders began to lay the steps for the integration of the Muslims into the Filipino society. The immediate reaction of the Muslims was to petition for their own independence. They derided the Filipinization policy as "Christian Filipinization" (Gowing 1983).

A feature of the Filipinization Policy that forever changed the social and geographic landscape in Mindanao and Sulu was the establishment of the agricultural colonies composed of Christian migrants to Mindanao. In 1913, the Philippine Commission passed Acts 2254 and 2280 creating the agricultural colonies. The program was intended to expand a rice-growing colony experiment in Mindanao ostensibly to hasten the development of agriculture in the south and spur economic growth.

The Commonwealth government under President Quezon gave priority to infrastructure hence, roads were built, and lands were surveyed. However, as soon as the news spread that this or that highway was going to be constructed, hordes of migrants followed and took up farms and residences on both sides of the road or highway. There were massive migrations undertaken by individual initiatives with or without government assistance. The organized movement of migrants took place in 1938, led by the pioneer Paulino Santos who chose the Koronadal Valley as the site for homestead of some 97,000 hectares of grasslands in Cotabato. Within ten days of the proclamation of Koronadal as a reservation

for settlers, an exodus of Visayan and Luzon migrants was on its way. The local populations of Muslims and Blaans were simply informed to declare their landholdings for registration purposes and to keep their receipts as evidence of ownership. The latter who had never seen nor heard of registration certificates or tax receipts naturally ignored the advice as irrelevant.

As the number of Christian migrants grew, so did the resentment and anxiety of the Muslims. Before their eyes, they saw their former farmsteads being replaced by Christian-owned farms and residences. The early signs of a growing tension between Muslims and Christians began to darken the horizon but the government was too preoccupied with other matters. Before long the Muslims began to catch up with the tricks attendant to land titles, registration, tax receipts, etc. and came up with their own version e.g. selling the land several times to different owners or refusing to vacate their land after being sold by simply saying, "Iyo ang titulo, akin ang lupa." ("You take the title, I'll take the land.")

The Colonization Act of 1935 could be said to have been the first spark to inflame the modern conflagration in Mindanao. What government administrators conceived as the solution to the land hunger in Luzon and elsewhere in the Philippines started the war of attrition that engulfed the whole Muslim south. During the American occupation a series of laws known as Public Lands Laws prepared the south for the informal migrations by Christians to Mindanao and Sulu. The policy was intended to assert the preponderance of Philippine law and sovereignty over Mindanao, It was a plan to harness the rich timberlands and agricultural potential of the south and hedge against the moves of American industrialists to turn them into one vast privately-owned plantation. Moreover, by encouraging families from Luzon and the Visayas to settle in Mindanao, the government had also hoped that Muslim-Christian relations would ripen to Filipinization and eventually, integration.

Conflict, not integraton became inevitable. Migration continued unabated from the first administration of Manuel Roxas through the successive presidents of the young republic. The land hunger of millions could not be easily sated but the cost of the promised land was now beginning to be felt. As migrants overflowed into the four corners of Mindanao, conflicts of all kinds punctuated the processes and activities in the new resettlement areas. Migrants fought migrants to acquire the best lands. Unlettered Muslims lost even titled lands to unscrupulous settlers who connived with corrupt government officials. The name of the game was landgrabbing.

After independence, the Christian Filipinos stepped into the shoes of their American predecessors and from all appearances, assumed the same biases and prejudices that the Americans harbored against the Muslims. Absorbed in the problems of the HUK rebellion in Luzon, the Christian leaders turned insensitive to problems that beset the other parts of

the country especially those that were remote from the capital. Henceforth, the perspective of government administration was Luzon-centric; the vision emanated from Luzon and its immediate environs. Beyond Manila the vision became progressively dimmer and blurred.

A case in point was the homogenization of basic education. Without gainsaying the laudable purposes of having the same lessons, values, and ethos to the ends of nation-building, a little foresight and sensitivity could have avoided many cultural affronts to the Muslims. Textbooks that taught English sometimes used illustrations offensive to them such as the word “pig”. Not only did the Muslims abhor English but the word “pig” was an abomination to them whether in its oral or written form. Another denigration of Muslim culture is the omission of their heroes in Philippine History books. While textbooks glorify the names of Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio or Apolinario Mabini the absence of Muslim figures like Sultan Kudarat, Panglima Hassan and Jikiri is conspicuous.

Hence, what could have been a rich field for sowing the seeds of reconciliation toward the goal of nationhood was instead used for propagating and perpetuating social behavior that served to widen the chasm between the Muslims and the Christians. Misconceptions and stereotypes of Muslims abounded. A person travelling to the south for the first time would be advised never to trust the word of a Muslim nor turn his back to one (because the Moro nature is to strike when you least suspect it).

The War in Mindanao

In 1968, a Muslim military trainee was found by fishermen off the coast of Manila Bay clinging to a log for dear life. He said he had been floating for four hours and then told the fishermen a strange story. He was one of some 68 Muslim trainees recruited for a secret project called Merdeka or Jabidah. They were undergoing military training in the island of Corregidor during which they protested the non-payment of their monthly allowance of 50 pesos. When their protest went unheeded, the Muslims threatened to resign but were told that no one could leave the island because theirs was a secret project. Then, one day at dawn the Muslim trainees were taken to an airstrip below the camp and in batches of four or five were shot to death. Jibin Arula, who told this story said he was hit in the leg and had the presence of mind to hide in the bushes where he rolled to the sea and clung to a floating log until found by the fishermen. (George 1986)

In spite of four congressional inquiries and full media coverage the whole truth about the Jabidah massacre up to now is not known. The myriad tales woven about Arula’s story pointed to the role of an Air Force major, Eduardo Martelino, a Christian as the leader of the secret military operation that led to the massacre of the Muslim trainees. A prolonged investigation and a court martial eventually acquitted Martelino and his cohorts. The

Muslims interpreted this as an indubitable proof to divide the Muslims who launched rallies and demonstrations calling for Muslim unity to fight the injustices being committed against them. It was at this point that a young Tausug intellectual and University of the Philippines professor, Nur Misuari emerged to champion the Muslim cause.

In May 1968, Udtog Matalam, from the highly prominent Matalam clan of Cotabato announced the formation of the Muslim Independence Movement, later called the Mindanao Independence Movement. Its goal was the creation of an Islamic republic in the Philippine south. The Christians of Cotabato felt greatly threatened by it. The fact that the announcement came six weeks after the Jabidah incident was interpreted by many as the outcome of the Jabidah massacre. Notwithstanding the dubiousness of the connection, a wave of violence gripped Cotabato which received its baptism in blood. Armed gangs proliferated and the government airlifted combat-ready troops thus intensifying the already heavily-charged atmosphere.

Two examples of this Mindanao bloodbath are the Manili massacre and the Battle of Buldon (George 1986).

Manili was small town in Cotabato that felt greatly threatened by the pockets of violence surrounding the population. Some Christians suggested that to ease the tension they should sit together with the Muslims for peace talks. It was decided to hold the talks in the local mosque. Several weeks later, the Manila Times published a story that some sixty-five Muslim men, women and children were massacred inside the mosque by armed men dressed in Philippine Constabulary uniforms and that the probable cause was the killing of some Christians previous to the massacre. The Muslims retaliated by burning Christian houses followed by the killing of more Muslims, and so on. A chain of violence had been unleashed and there was no way of stopping it.

Two months after Manili, the Muslim barrio captain of Buldon was ambushed on his way to the market with his wife. The barrio captain died instantly while his wife survived with a bullet wound in her leg. Two days later, two more Muslim farmers were killed. Next a logging truck with four Christians was ambushed on its way to Buldon. It was widely-rumored that Buldon was the stronghold of the Blackshirts, a Muslim terror group. When government troops arrived they met with heavy gunfire and the Battle of Buldon was on.

Lawlessness in the Muslim south fathered many children. The ineffectiveness of government laws in these parts reflected a social behavior borne of the need for self-preservation. Those who knew no laws made their own. The existence of armed bands and private armies in the late sixties through the seventies reflected the confusion and chaotic conditions prevailing at the time. Most of the Muslim terror groups especially the Barracudas and the Blackshirts were organized to counter the Christian terror group known as the Ilaga said to be founded by seven Christian mayors of Cotabato. The creation

of the MIM was an idea that germinated well, fed by the inability of the government to contain the conflict with justice and impartiality.

The war in Mindanao reached international proportions due to the work of Nur Misuari who represented the persecution of the Muslims as genocide conducted by the Philippine government. Hence, it became the subject of negotiations between the Philippines and Muslim countries notably Libya and other middle east member-states in the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). In a series of meetings and official visits of the OIC to Mindanao to probe the allegations of genocide the findings dispelled the existence of genocide of the Muslims however, the international intervention resulted in the Tripoli Agreement which provided for the creation of the Muslim Autonomous Region in 1977.

The failure of the plebiscite to affirm the MAR during the Marcos administration was followed by the Jeddah Accord in 1987 signed between the Philippine government under Corazon Aquino and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). President Aquino enshrined the creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in the Philippine Constitution of 1987. Two years later, R.A. No. 6734 known as the Organic Act of the ARMM was signed into law and in 1990, the first elections for the ARMM were held in the provinces of Magindanao, Lanao del Sur, Tawi-Tawi and Sulu.

In 1996, the MNLF and the Philippine government signed the final peace agreement which paved the way for the creation of the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SPCPD) and the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) under the administration of President Fidel Ramos. Pursuing the commitment to peace and development President Gloria Arroyo expanded the area of autonomy with the addition of Basilan and Marawi City and this year,2014 saw the signing of the CAB between the government of Benigno Aquino III and the MILF.

The Bangsamoro is an idea whose time has come.

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