

MEANING AND PERCEPTION: THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF THE MUSLIM FILIPINO

Perhaps one of the most important developments in a given society in contact with other societies is interchange of cultural elements. In this process, some of these elements are adapted in their entirety, replacing indigenous elements which may no longer be valid; some are re-interpreted to suit the value systems of the given society, some are remolded within the milieu of this given society to reinforce values that appear to crumble in the face of the new values, and some are integrated into the value systems to preserve certain ideals and at the same time strengthen its influence within the society itself. Such is the case of the values of the ethnic groups in the Philippines, which over the centuries have been in contact with cultures beyond their cultural boundaries. For this brief paper, however, I would like to present the case of Muslim Filipino, who through these long centuries of contact with cultures outside their geographic boundaries have undergone the processes of interchange described above.

Studies published in the *Sulu Studies* give us a very good picture of the pre-contact period of the Sulu Archipelago and a number of works done on ethnic Mindanao also give us the same clear picture of that pre-contact period (See Tiamson below) Tiamson's work, however, includes those that had been written on the Sulu Archipelago.)

Two of the most important contacts of Sulu and Mindanao are with Indian and Arab cultures. In general terms, the advent of the Indian Hindu-Buddhist cultural elements are understood in terms of their development in Indonesian and Malaysian sojourns. While in these regions we see the full efflorescence of this cultural overlay to a point

where the indigenous seems to have lost its influence in the general social phenomena, it certainly contributed to the enrichment of the total culture of the region. Considering the general cultural situation through which the Indian Hindu-Buddhist "filtered" to Sulu and Mindanao, its advent ushered in a new perspective among those that had the full impact of this cultural "invasion." Some of the remains of this "invasion" are seen in the various archaeological artifacts that had been unearthed over the many years that scholars are active in uncovering the past of these islands (see Beyer, Francisco, Evangelista). But the most lasting of these remains is seen in the languages of these groups (see Francisco).

The advent of the Muslim Arab-Indian also underwent the same process as the Indian Hindu-Buddhist. However, there was a difference. The evidence of that advent had a greater impact than the former, for it penetrated into the various aspects of life among these peoples. These elements are much more evident than the Indian in view of their having persisted to the present (see Majul, Francisco, Sarangani).

From both of these contacts, the peoples of Mindanao and Sulu adapted the belief systems which in the long run became the most crucial basis for understanding these peoples—so crucial, particularly of the later contact, that it has become a problem complicating other problems of development in the southern Philippines. However, this is in itself a solution to this problem, for it is in understanding it that these problems can be resolved for the greater benefit of the peoples of Mindanao and Sulu.

Religio-Cultural Encounter

Inevitably, these contacts would bring cultures face to face with each other. It is certain that conflict would occur in the process. In this context, we have here a very graphic representation of an encounter, i.e., indigenous versus Hindu-Buddhist versus Muslim. As expected, there would have been violent confrontations between these divergent belief systems. However, in the long run, a kind of syncretic accommo-

ation occurred, and at this point in time, there are extensive examples of this accommodation. In the encounter between the indigenous and the Hindu-Buddhist, there certainly had been a process of indigenization of the alien elements which therefore avoided the painful process of confrontation. We can only speculate about these accommodations. As we come nearer our time, our illustrations of these accommodations become more and more precise.

I would like to use here for my example one of the most important rituals performed among the Maranaos in the lake area. This is the *kashawing*, a ritual performed by the Maranao farmer before he clears the field for planting rice (Madale). After reciting the Islamic *fatiha*, the verses that precede any prayer, the Maranao farmer prays :

Praises to Allah! Pray that we will not commit sin in invoking the *tonong* of the lake. He created the *tonong* who are invoked when the farmer clears the field. We wish to invite *apo* Taraka, his children and children's children; *apo* Babowa, *apo* Mipesandalan of Masiu, his descendants from here to Maguindanao and Sulu; the *tonong* of the Four Sultanates of Lanao. All the *tonong* of Masiu we wish to invite today, Allah willing.

Come today. Saturday, we will entertain you. The *tonong* of Lembak a Basak, *apo* Mipela-as *apo* Tolodan, *apo* Mikolambo, *apo* Mitrogan, *apo* Kalogologod, *apo* Angangkat, and all of you, come to the festivity today. Come to the ricefields. Your descendants will serve you food and entertain you. Pray to Allah that all farmers will have a bountiful harvest. Safeguard our crops from all calamities. Safeguard all the populace of Balindong from illness and other calamities. May all of us be assured of a good harvest, good health and a prosperous life so that we can invoke you anytime, like today. Give us signs of your sincerity to help us reap a good harvest.

What we are doing is fulfillment of the agreement made between our *apo* and your *apo* in the past, that is, whenever

we clear the field, you are invoked. We are inviting you all to come to the festivities.

We are calling all the *tonong* of the Four Sultanates of Lanao! Bayabao, Masiu, Unayan and Balo-i. All of you must come: your in-laws and children's children; the descendants of the Sultan of Masiu, the Cabugatan of Masiu, as well as the *lokes* of Balindog. All of us are inviting you to come today. Pray to Allah that all have a good harvest. Safeguard us from sickness and other calamities. There is Datu Ada fetching water and all of you must come. There is a seaweed which will be your boat. Ride on it and come with us. All of you must come with us now.

Pray to Allah that we will not commit sin for invoking the *tonong* and for the things we say here. He created all *tonong* and gave them power. Pray to Allah that our offering will be materialized. Let us call *apo* Babowa, *apo* Mipesandalan of Masiu, *apo* Taraka, who made the river Taraka and who later became a *tonong*, *apo* Mipela-as, *apo* Bawa, *apo* Minbalatan, *apo* Mipeker, *apo* Mipenga and *apo* Mikolambo. Here is the food prepared for you by your descendants. *Apo* Kalogologod, *apo* Angangkat, *apo* Radia Keter and *apo* Bekong, all of us are inviting you all to partake of the food.

We are calling you, *tonong* of Masiu, and all *tonong* of the Four Sultanates of Lanao, as well as the in-laws of the *tonong* of Masiu. We are inviting you today, Saturday, and offering you the food prepared by your descendants. In return, we ask you to pray to Allah so that all farmers will have a bountiful harvest. May the fishermen have a bountiful catch. Give blessings to all your descendants and the farmers. We ask you to pray to Allah so that our crops will be safe from rats, worms and others.

My notes on the Maguindanao also show similar rituals that bring to the picture references of Allah in the process of reciting indigenous prayers, interspersed with the names of the various spirits and deities.

I am quite sure that the same phenomenon occurred at the height of the influence of the Hindu-Buddhist in the region. However, in the more orthodox Islamic practices, particularly as the Muslim Filipino becomes more and more in contact with the land of Islam, all these indigenous practices that tend to accommodate the alien Islamic practices are pushed aside in favor of these purer practices.

Hindu-Buddhist-Islamic Continuity

One of the most persistent overlays in culture contact is language, at best the lexical items of a given language. The phenomenon is not a question of a total adoption of the language, its grammar, its vocabulary or its entirety, but from the point of view of the "borrowers" of language, it is more a selective process of adopting some of the most fascinating elements of the vocabulary. I am of the opinion that before the adoption of these terms, there could have been earlier terms used by the society, but because of the impact of the culture bringing the new language into this new location, these terms have found their way into the culture of the "borrowers." For the purpose of the paper, I am using religious terminologies to illustrate this process of continuity, albeit a very loose use of the term. And not to burden you with long enumerations of these terms, I shall use only four of the most important terms that are used in the Hindu-Buddhist religious practices.

In Hindu-Buddhist practices, Sanskrit *upavasa* is the act of abiding in the state of abstinence, or fasting, while in Maranao, Maguindanao and Tausog *puasa* is the practice of abstaining from food between sunrise and sundown (in Islamic terms it is the period of *ramadan*). The fruit of action or karma in Hindu-Buddhist terms is *phala*, basically meaning fruit, fruit of a tree. In Muslim Philippine term, it is *pahala*, meaning "retribution as a reward for good done, reward." On the other side of the coin, it is also punishment for some bad act done. This is also true in the Hindu-Buddhist concept, *phala* meaning "fruit of action," may either be reward or punishment in *suarga*, heaven or *naraka*, hell.

Sanskrit *suarga*, the abode of light and of the gods, heaven, is in

Maguindanao, Maranao and Tausog *solga, surga, sulga*, spiritual heaven, glory. Sanskrit *naraka*, place of torment, or hell is in Maguindanao, Maranao and Tausog *naraka, neraka*, nefarious, cursed of god, sinner, hell. In the very orthodox Hindu-Budhistic meanings of these terms, particularly *suarga* and *naraka*, these religious terms mean merely places where one enjoys the fruit of his action (*suarga*) or where one is subjected to the torment or punishment also a fruit of his action (*naraka*). And these two places are not the end of human life; rather they are just stations along the way to final spiritual liberation, *moksa/nirvana*. To the Hindu-Buddhist, after enjoying the pleasures of heaven or being punished in hell, one is born again to continue along the path ending in *moksa/nirvana*. The worst hell in Hindu-Buddhist concepts is re-birth, *samsara*. for birth itself is hell. While it is true that there are also the pleasures of being born (for man has the capability to undertake good *karma*, action), still the process is itself a manifestation of hell.

In orthodox Islam, the Koran prescribes fasting during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar year, with complete abstinence from food and drink during the hours of daylight. While the sick and those who are on a journey may be exempt at the time of Ramadan, still they must make compensation by fasting on an equal number of days later. This view prevails among the Philippine Muslims in the context of the term *puasa*.

Again, in orthodox Islamic thought, heaven is described thus:

Then the blessed, the godfearing men and women, the humble and charitable, the forgiving, those who have suffered and been persecuted for God's sake, those who have fought in the way of God, shall be summoned to enter the Garden of Paradise, the Abode of peace, the abiding mansion, where they shall dwell forever by flowing rivers, praising God, reclining on silken couches, enjoying heavenly food and drink and the company of dark-eyed maidens and wives of perfect purity, and yet greater bliss which no soul knoweth.

If heaven is described in the most pleasant terms according to the most pleasant terms according to the Koran, the fate of the

. . . covetous, the unbelieving, the worshippers of gods other than Allah, shall be cast into the Fire, to abide therein for ever, with no release from its torments, fed with boiling water and the fruit of the *zaq'qum*, resembling the heads of *shaitans* and like molten brass in the belly.

No description can indeed convey the terror of the Koranic portrayal of Hell, backed up as it is by the sombre asseveration, "Verily, I shall fill Hell with jinns and men altogether," or the horror of the day "when We shall say to Hell, Art thou filled? ' and Hell shall answer 'Are there yet more? ' (1, v. 29).

Note the very Christian aspects of the description of Heaven and Hell. It is however understood that Mohammed, who was raised in a community where the teachings of Christ may have filtered, picked these up as he developed his doctrinal teachings. Nevertheless, the Muslim Filipino takes the description of these two terms as purely Islamic in orientation.

The title of this section, "Hindu-Buddhist-Islamic Continuity," is misleading for (as I described the terms at best in the context of Philippine Muslim's perception of meanings of these terms) there certainly is no continuity of the concepts from the Hindu-Buddhistic to Islamic concept. However, the basic ideas embodied in the terms used in the former are recognizable in the meanings of the latter. Let us not forget that these terms have already changed some of the basic meanings as they are adapted in the intervening societies, namely, Indonesian and Malaysian. And the subtitles of these certainly have had some changes in these intervening regions where they underwent changes in meaning and were re-interpreted to suit local value perceptions.

Re-interpretation of Terminologies

Any culture, with some amount of sophistication, may move out of its original locus and implant itself in another culture which may not be as sophisticated. When the former gets adopted it certainly undergoes changes because the perceptions of those that adopt it is different

from that of the original carriers. The meanings as perceived by the original carriers of that culture, when adopted by the "borrowers," will be glossed over by the internal perception of those that would bring these meanings within the local cultural matrix.

The case of the Maguindanao, Maranao and Tausog (all converts to Islam, but years prior to their conversion had another cultural experience) is a very good example of perceptions based on meanings developed within the given culture. Having become Muslims would necessarily make them adapt the basic teachings of the belief system. But still they retained the terms used before the phenomenon of conversion to identify these concepts. If taken merely as lexical terms, they may mislead one to perceive them in the context of their original meanings in the Sanskrit locus.

Another dramatic development in the process of re-interpretation of concepts is the use of analogy as a tool in the full understanding of the idea. For instance, a Tausog would bring the idea of death and the afterlife, a view generally accepted as universal, within the context of Islam as already assimilated in the local concept. I would like to use the data of Thomas Kiefer on the Tausog:

The Tausug approach to death and the afterlife revolves around the concept of religious merit and its acquisition by man through the accumulation of good deeds and regular performance of ritual obligations. Religious merit has both an active and a passive dimension. As a result of man's active striving to acquire merit, it is called *karayawan*, literally "goodness." As a gift of God to man according to the principle, which only He can ultimately understand, it is called *pahala* (the passive dimension). In addition, *karayawan* in this context also implies a state of pleasure and happiness in the afterlife . . . The idea (is explained) by describing heaven as analogous to a state of perpetual sexual orgasm. But the amount of *karayawan* one receives in heaven is directly proportional to the amount of *pahala* one has been given by God in return for good deeds.

Despite the Islamic color of the above explanation of the terms, still there are the subtle elements seen in the Hindu-Buddhistic concept of heaven, which is just an interim locus where man can enjoy the fruits of his merits according to the quality of his deeds. His punishment in hell is also according to the gravity of his misdeeds, after which he is reborn into the cycle of life and death until he finally attains *moksa/nirvana*.

I would like to venture the thought that side by side with heaven, hell, fruit of action in terms of the impact of Hindu-Buddhistic thought in Sulu and Mindanao would be the conception of spiritual liberation (*moksa/nirvana*), which could not have been understood by the Maguin-danao, the Maranao and the Tausog. With the coming of Islam, which somehow was much easier to understand or to perceive, the terms were retained but given very Islamic meanings and perceived in those terms only. *Samsara*, cycle of birth and rebirth and *moksa/nirvana* were far too abstruse (I would surmise) to be understood by them. Hence these two basic concepts were dropped from their lexical collections because they meant nothing to them. But *puasa*, *pahala*, *naraka*, and *sulga* were/are meaningful as lexical identifications of very Islamic meanings and explanations. I do not, however, mean to advance the view that they have no feeling for abstractions, such as cycle of birth and rebirth or spiritual liberation expressed in *samsara* or *moksa/nirvana*; rather I am inclined to the view that they are more practical. They could see and understand the meaning of *puasa*, because they practice it, *pahala*, because they understand its meaning, *naraka* and *sulga*, because they can see these as results of their actions. Again in the context of Islam which to them was egalitarian compared to the caste type of Hindu-Buddhistic social structuring, these terms were easily meaningful in the context of the practical identifications attached to them.

Concluding Remarks

It is not my intention to write a conclusion to this rather very brief paper, for it is just the beginning of more extensive interpretive essays on the changes that occur in the process of cultural encounter. One of the most dramatic implications that may be drawn from the

above brief discussion is that no culture is free from the "influence" of another culture. Therefore "cultural islands" are never evident in the whole history of mankind. Moreover, in cultural encounter no society is ever immune to being subject to the impact—cross impact to be more precise—of one society upon the other. Changes certainly occur, the processes of which are outlined in the first part of this paper. ¹⁰

Although only the four terms were presented in this paper, we can see the possibilities of an expanded study of the continuity of cultures as they pass on or develop in another location. This is a case of a hospitable meeting place, where the host culture has provided the venue for the accommodation of the two cultural orientations to come to a common understanding of their unified existence. The basic Maguindanao, Maranao and Tausog cultures provided the fertile soil for both Hindu-Buddhistic and Islamic concepts to grow in perfect cross-breeding, each being made one with the other. What we have now in the utilization of Hindu-Buddhistic terms to identify Islamic concepts is indeed a manifestation of the ultimate unity of ideals and ideas. One who does not have the necessary cultural orientation in both cultures may be misled by mere labels with the necessary descriptions.

As one studies further the implications of this phenomenon, one cannot escape the thought that despite perhaps their initial conflict, the two diametrically opposed religious concepts finally found common ground of acceptance in the Maguindanao, Maranao and Tausog (MMT) atmosphere. In other words the MMT atmosphere serves as the bond for the two concepts.

I wish to conclude this paper by saying that there is a wide room for this kind of research in the Philippines, considering the various culture contacts that the country has had in the past. This paper has shown the fantastic capability of the early Filipino, as well as his present breed, to accept new ideas and values without having to entirely annihilate his culture base.

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