

# AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF MINDANAO AND SULU MUSLIMS IN 1899

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This paper presents a recollection of the earliest American impressions of the Philippines and its people in 1899, a year after the American had occupied the country. The particular focus here is on how the Americans viewed the Muslims during those initial encounters, although insights of the Muslim response could also be seen. The view that will be presented were lifted from the book *Our Islands and Their People (As Seen with Camera and Pencil)*, introduced by Major General Joseph Wheeler of the United States Army and arranged by William S. Bryan. The book was published in 1899 by N.D. Thompson Publishing of St. Louis, New York, Chicago and Atlanta, U.S.A. which I imagine must have a large circulation at that time, since it must have been the earliest source of information by the American public about the Philippines. At that time, the Philippines was regarded as the new American possession. The excerpts related to the Muslims of Mindanao were lifted from the second volume of the book. After 92 years have lapsed, it may be worth looking into how things were, to the eyes of the invaders. Since the book is a rare and old material, I thought that sharing some excerpts is also a contribution to historical information on the past revisited. The point of view expressed were those of the members of the American occupying forces.

Chapter 32 of the book is entitled, "The Moros of Sulu." Relevant excerpts were lifted and presented briefly in this

paper. The first account tells how the Americans saw the Muslims at that time, as follows:

The Moro is the most peculiar and picturesque savage that Uncle Sam has yet come in contact with. He is totally unlike the other peoples and tribes who have stood under the folds of the flag of the stars. He is neither Malay nor Papuan, though he probably has some of the worst and wickedest strains of the blood of these two sanguinary races in his veins, acquired by long residence in their vicinity and by selecting occasional extra wives from among other women. The Moro is a stranger in a strange land. Four hundred years ago the Spaniards found him inhabiting the northern part of Borneo, the Sulu Archipelago and a large portion of the island of Mindanao; and he is there yet. The Spaniards called him Moor or Moro because his skin was dark and he worshipped the God of Islam. But if he is a Moor, how did he get to Borneo? The Moro is now a prospective citizen of the United States; he occupies a number of small islands, over which the American flag waves, and we propose to paint him as he is and let others guess where he came from.

Relating to the Spanish experience, the narrative goes as follows:

General Arolas was the only Spaniard who succeeded in establishing authority over the Moros, and that was nothing more than a Spanish suzerainty. The Sultan remained supreme ruler in all the domestic affairs of the archipelago, deferring to Spain only on matters relating to other nations. The flag of the sultan floated side by side with the yellow emblem of Castille, and Spain paid him \$250 per month in order that he might keep himself in the 'splendor and dignity which should attend one of his distinguished and exalted rank.' This was the pompous Spanish way

of expressing the treaty agreement, and the high sounding phrase pleased the Sultan.

The American description of the Sulu Sultanate are as follows:

On the Sultan's jurisdiction:

The Sulu Sultanate embraces between 140 and 150 islands and islets of which about 90 are uninhabited. Sulu is the largest of the group and also the seat of the capital. The island is about 34 miles long and 12 meters wide. The Island population is estimated at about 100,000 persons and the Mohammedans of Mindanao who also recognize the authority of the sultan are supposed to number about 150,000. The Sultanate is a hereditary monarchy under the Salic Law, which excludes women from the throne.

On the structure of government:

The Sultan of Sulu acknowledges the supreme ecclesiastical authority of the Sultan of Turkey and has religious obligations to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. To do so, one of his ministers must act as ruler during his absence. He has three ministers who compose his cabinet as minister of war, minister of justice and master of ceremonies. The Sultan is supreme in his authority over the laws and properties of his subjects. He is advised in matters of state by a Council of Elders. Under him are a number of petty chiefs or datus who collect tribute in his name and pay over to the royal treasury such portion of revenue as remains after satisfying their own wants.

On slavery, the account said:

Slavery is one of the fixed institutions of the archipelago. It exists by birth and by conquest, prisoners of war, insolvent debtors, and the unfortunate seized by piratical expeditions, being held in bondage. The institution is likewise recognized by the Koran and thus becomes one of the tenets of the Moslem religion.

A description of a death of a datu is as follows:

If a datu dies, they intone a dolorous chant; the family burst into lamentations which are finally drowned in the dins of the clashing of cymbals and beating of gongs whilst sometimes a gun is fired. The neighbors rush in and join in the shouting and later settle down quietly to a feast. The body is then sprinkled with salt and camphor, and dressed in white with the kris attached to the waist. The body is placed in a coffin and the mortuary is marked by a stone or wooden tablet with Arabic inscriptions. A slip of board or bamboo is placed around the spot and a piece of wood carved like the bows of a canoe is struck in the earth; in the front of this is placed a coconut shell full of water.

A description of a Moro fighter is as follows:

A Moro is a bout fighter and he chafes under any sort of restraint. He is not by any means a lazy person but he loathes the degradation of work and expects his physical wants to be supplied by his wives and slaves. His time is devoted to affairs of state, to the care of his arms and to murder. In battle, he is the bravest of the brave; death is merely the gate to paradise and consequently, the orthodox Moro feels no dread of it. When engaged in a fight, he makes hideous faces and grimaces to frighten his

opponent, and keeps his legs in constant motion by leaping and prancing about. This is done to confuse the aim of his adversary and to prevent a blow from behind or below his shield from disabling him.

There had been several and frequent cases of *juramentados* in Sulu during the period. The author described the *juramentados* as follows:

A *Juramentado* is an American citizen of Mohammedan faith, who takes a solemn oath before a *pandita* that he will die killing the Christians. But he announces his purpose in advance and thus afford his intended victims an opportunity for the inevitable. He is like a rattlesnake in that he gives warning before he strikes. He informs his people before he goes into this state. He has his eyebrows shaved, takes a bath and puts on his best clothes, usually dresses in white. He then goes to a priest and takes an oath before him that he will die killing the ungodly.

A Captain Dodge contributed the following narrative on what he thought were the qualities of the Moros. He said: "One afternoon I went outside the wall (Sulu) with three companions. We had with us a guitar and a bottle of cognac with which to combat the tedium of a long afternoon. At the sound of the guitar and singing, the native began to emerge from the hollows and graves about us. They approached silently and cautiously, as rabbits will come into a dooryard garden at dusk. We paid no attention and they assembled about us, squatting down in the attitude of frogs looking at us with mingled timidity and wonder. To set their fears at rest, we nodded to them and offered them our bottle. They shook their heads silently and a child among them went up the coconut tree and threw down half a dozen coconuts. Descending, he borrowed a scimitar and chapped the tops off the nuts. Then these natural cups of cold

milk were offered to us in a childish spirit of friendliness. It was saying plainly: This is what we drink."

On how the Muslims were dressed, a description was made as follows:

The costume of the Moros, like their religion and social customs, differs radically from all the other natives of the Philippine Islands. They are naked savages in the sense of this term as it applies to the others, for they wear clothes cut and made according to an invariable style -- a style that has been in fashion for centuries. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule: the children are usually naked and, in wilder regions of the islands, adults are often found in the same conditions. In some instances, the costumes of piratical warriors is often a ridiculous cape of small iron disks hanging forward from the shoulders and leaving the back uncovered. The head is often encased in a huge ugly mask, generally representing some animal head in outline. They are fond of personal adornment and tattooing is carried on extensively. Some of the more influential members of a tribe are often covered from head to foot with grotesque and highly-colored tattooing, while enormous ornaments of iron are worn on different parts of the body.

Foreman, another American soldier, reported that "the Sulu islanders, male and female, dress with far greater taste and ascetic originality than the Christian natives. The women are fond of gay colors, the predominant ones being scarlet and green. Their neither bifurcated garment is very baggy. The bodice is extremely tight with equally close fitting sleeves. They also use a strip of stuff sewn together at the ends, called the *jabul*, which serves to protect the head from the sun's rays. They have a passion for jewelry and wear many finger rings of metal and

sometimes of sea shells, while their earrings are gaudy and of large dimensions. Their hair is gracefully tied with a coil on top of the head and their features are more attractive than those of the generality of Philippine women."

The men wear breeches of bright colors, as tight as gymnasts' "pantaloons, with a large number of buttons up the sides, a kind of waistcoat bottoming up to the throat, a jacket reaching to the hips, with close sleeves and turban. A chief's dress has many adornments and trinkets and is quite elegant. They are robust, of medium height, often of superb physical development, of a dusky bronze color, piercing eyes, low forehead, black hair, which is dressed as a chignon and hanging down the back of the neck. The body is agile, the whole movement is rapid, and they have a wonderful power of holding the breath under water. They are quick of perception, audacious, extremely sober, ready to promise everything and do nothing, vindictive and highly suspicious of a stranger's intentions. They are very long suffering in adversity, cautious in attack, and the bravest of the brave in defense. They disdain work as degrading and only a fit occupation for the slaves, whilst warfare, to their minds, is an honorable calling. Every male over sixteen years of age has to carry at least one fighting weapon at all times and considered himself conscripted in military service."

The meeting between General Bates and the Sultan of Sulu, Sari Baduka, Maha Sari Manalana, Sultan Hadji Muhamad Jamalul Kiram, on the occasion of signing the Bates Treaty at Maybun, the Sultan's residence in Sulu, was described by a lady named, Mrs. Anna Northead Benjamin who was with the party of General Bates. She wrote the following account:

We entered the gate and passed by three soldiers in khaki uniforms and red fezes, who presented arms. These were three of five soldiers that the Sultan had brought back with him from his visit to Mecca, and they were evidently Arabians. Their weapons consisted of five rifles,

four of which were of different makes. The entrance to the house was through a small lean-to shed at one side, which led into a room as bare as a barn chamber. The living apartments were above. A broad flight of rough board stairs, with a strip of carpet down the middle, led to upper region. We ascended and found ourselves in a large darkened apartment in the presence of the Sultan Hadji Jamalul Kiram.

The Sultan was seated in a chair with a high back, in one corner of the room, which had no communication with the outside air. Other seats were arranged before him in a circle, and directly in front of him was a high tabourette with a marble top. The Sultan's vestments were gorgeous: a frock coat of yellow watered silk, a black vest with a gold chain festooned across, a white undershirt of muslin, flowing skirts and trousers of white gauze and patent leather pumps. A high fez of some colored material served as an understudy for a snow-white turban which was wound about it. Later on, feeling oppressed by the heat of this dress, he took it off and disclosed a small white fez beneath, which he wore during the rest of the conference.

The room was the royal dining room. A large table was in the middle and this was set with a varied collections of ancient castors and vases, such as would be especially admired and treasured in some backwoods district at home. Two sides of the room were open but translucent straw screens kept out the glare. Behind us, standing in the doorway and crowding into every corner and recess of the room were the Moro retainers armed to the teeth.

A Bed which stood in one corner of the room had quite a sumptuous appearance. It was said that under this bed, the wife kept his treasure

hoard, being a miserly person. The Sultan is a young man with a dark pock-marked face and a very slender mustache. His heavy features did not express much character and when he spoke his voice was soft and rather plaintive. It was not difficult to accept the fact that Mamma ruled the roost. Capt. Smiley produced a typewritten copy of the articles and the Moro secretary produce one written in Arabic and the conference commenced.

The result of the conference is now a matter of official record. But it is worth noting the Sultan's reaction. According to the American account, the Sultan lingered all the time and especially on one article. The article was on the provision that he should always fly the American flag.

It was said that the Sultan made a journey to Mecca. On this voyage, contrary to his agreement with the Spaniard, he flew his own flag. Nothing had happened to him. He felt that it would be incompatible with his royal dignity, after making the journey once in this independent fashion, to appear again with the American flag hoisted above him.

His interpreter said: "Only once in many years, he makes a journey to Mecca. And while he is willing to fly the American flag at all other times, he would like to fly his own flag then. If he did it once in safety, why not do it again?" This was the burden of the talk for several hours while we sat silently learning of a people whose every idea was strange to us and yet for whom we were forever responsible before God and the World.

Mrs. Benjamin concluded with the following statements: "I wondered how this little two-penny Sultan with an exaggerated idea of his own importance, would feel and act if he had an idea of the vastness and power of the great country whose emissary was so patiently dealing with him in his squalid

capital of Maybun. There was something infinitely pathetic in the way in which he clung to the last shadows of his sovereignty, and in dealing with him, General Bates was uniformly kind and courteous."

The other aspect of the narrative included this excerpt:

The Moro children who gathered to witness the show imagined that the white ladies painted their faces, so they added to the hilarity of the occasion by dusting their little black countenances with rice flour, in order that they might do honor to the great and beautiful ladies who have come from over the sea to pay their respect to the mighty Sultan!

The meeting with the Sultana Inchi Jamela, the mother of the Sultan, and General Bate's party took place before the meeting with the Sultan. The account is as follows:

While we were looking this way and that, trying to find a building sufficiently magnificent to be the abode of one so exalted in rank, we were halted before a small house, the central one of a group of huts, distinguished only from the ones that surrounded it by the fact that it was constructed of rough planks while the others were of bamboo and nipa. We were ushered inside and invited to sit down.

The final meeting is recounted as follows:

The Sultana's appearance is not unprepossessing. She was clad in a gown of black brocade silk, not cut after the latest fashion and wore a scarf of light figured material over her shoulders and some gauzy stuff, like *jusi* on her head so that her head was covered. Her stature is short and her face is that of a woman of sixty.

Her complexion is lighter than that of the average Moro and her small eyes show intelligence and cunning. We now discovered that the purple couch upon which we had been carelessly sitting was the royal throne. When the Sultana entered, we rose and stood until we were introduced to her. On her right hand was a white cotton glove of civilized manufacture which, to our amusement, she had put on wrong, so that the buttons were on top. It was thus that she armed herself against contact with Christian dogs. The space in the room was so limited that the maids of honor, of whom there were two, were obliged to go outside by a backway and climbed in at the window. When the maids have successfully accomplished this feat, declining by a scornful sniff the preferred assistance of one of our officers, the exchange of civilities between her royal highness and General Bates commenced. There was an exchange of amenities between the Sultana and Gen. Bates. The general finally expressed his wish to wait upon the Sultan. The old lady begged him to remember her son's extreme youth and added that the best thing that he could do would be to give him a little advice.

The were other datos in Sulu who were described by the writer. Among them were Dato Mandi, the chief of a village near Zamboanga, Dato Calvi, Dato Joka Nina who was the Dato of Patikolo, Dato Tantung of Tawi-Tawi and also the Sultan of Mindanao (or Maguindanao).

The village of Dato Mandi was described as "thickly populated with little brown-skinned men, women and children, the former dressed in the usual gaudy Moro costume, while the children, to use the expression of one of our sailors, are clothed only in smiles. Dato Mandi informed Mr. Carpenter that he regarded himself an American citizen and desired that a message be sent to the American people stating that he was their best

friend among the Moro chiefs and that he would fight for us if occasion offered. All of which is very comforting to the American people -- for now we know that we have a friend in the Orient. Dato Mandi carries a flame kris a yard long and is very expert at carving his enemies. He promises to visit the United States at an early date and bring his kris with him, on which occasion, it is hoped that his excellency will not 'run amuck'."

'An American lady with the party of General Bates wrote about Dato Calvi who was on the ship going to Sulu. She said: "No Italian bandits or other stage heroes who exult in the triumph of the costumer's art ever presented a more picturesque or ferocious appearance than our band of Moros. Dato Calvi had expressed so much friendliness for our government that General Bates thought he would have favorable influence on the Sultan. But it was impossible, both for reasons of state and for safety, for him to travel without a sufficient number of followers to uphold his dignity. The dato himself was a young fellow and quite a dude, according to Moro standards. He was a man that would be singled out anywhere as used to command; he strutted across the deck in a manner inimitable, his turban of raw silk tied with a style and strong individuality and his clothes showing a certain harmony of taste. The dato was followed everywhere by his betel nut carrier who kept him constantly with good chew. They were shown all the civilized wonders in the way of guns on board and were interested specially in the rapid fire gun which was set going to satisfy their curiosity."

Dato Joka Nina of Patikolo is described in the following: The writer and another soldier named Shuck had good impressions of him.

He is a fine looking man, a lithe, blithe savage, indeed. If he is going to kill you, he will say so.

The dato's house is built out over the waters. He received me kindly in his bare feet and placed before us ten kinds of sweet meats and some excellent coffee. The

dato was glad, he said, to have the Americans near him. He thought they would make good servants and traders. Yes, thought I, but shades of Jefferson and the true American Washington, the countrymen of Lincoln serving a half naked savage! The thought wrung laughter.

This Dato Joka Nina is a character in his way. He is supreme lord of his district and since his successful rumpus with the Sultan, no one dares to dispute his sway. Having whipped the Sultan, it is only natural that he should regard the American as his servants, especially since we pay the Sultan's salary. The dato knows how to be forgiving but he can also mete out ferocious justice when necessary.

Another dato is Dato Tantung of Tawi-Tawi, who was described as follows:

The Sultan rules his people in the various islands through his datos. Dato Tantung is ruler over about ten small islands, the largest of which is Tawi-Tawi. The principal point under his jurisdiction is Bongao which is now garrisoned by American troops. Tantung is not a full-blooded Moro but became chief by subjugating a chief and other smaller chiefs. The natives thought it well for them to follow such a brave man. Next to the Sultan, he is the most powerful native ruler in the Sulu Islands.

There was another sultan whom the Americans wrote about and referred to as the Sultan of Mindanao. (We know this Sultan as Chief of the Sultanate of Maguindanao.) The account on him are as follows:

The Sultan of Mindanao is almost as great a man as the Sultan of Sulu, although his government is subject to the latter... In conference with Col. Hayes and other American officers, His Excellency declared that he was very proud to meet such a distinguished embassy from the

United States. He said that he regarded himself as an American Citizen and was anxious to secure assistance in killing off the "bad Moros" in the adjoining district. It is surprising how naturally the thoughts of these people run to slaughter. Col. Hayes, however, assured His Eminence that the Americans were a nation who loved peace and wanted all the Moros, good and bad, to become good American citizens. This line of conversation mollified the sanguinary monarch and he finally decided that the 'bad Moros' might continue to live, at least until he got a chance at them with his barong.

Slavery was an institution but the Bates Treaty changed the lucrative prices set for slaves. The narrative follows: "In the former times the prices for slaves ranged from \$13 for the lowest to as much as \$500 for the choice specimens, the average being from \$10 to \$20. But the Bates Agreement had fixed the price of slaves at \$20 and no master will accept a price less than the Treaty price."

The other practices which the Americans noted were divorce, the Koran provision allowing four wives, but a chief could keep a harem; the custom of marriage beginning the age of 12; and the custom of dowry; and that marriage is always a question of price, the girl being valued in proportion to her charms and accomplishments.

The narratives presented characterized the first American-Muslim encounters in the Philippines in 1899 when both people had no other way of relating to each other but one based on suspicion and fear. And yet they had managed to handle the situation more with diplomacy than fire power. While the Americans said they came in friendship, the Muslims were aware that they were invaders and their conquest could be bloody as were then happening in Luzon. The peaceful relation was not really because of friendship and trust but more of the

awareness of the presence of superior force and material incentives from the foreigners.