

Muslim Filipinos and Islam

Islam is one of the oldest organized religions to be established in the Philippines. Its origins in the country may be dated back to as early as the 15th century, with the arrival of Arab and Malay muslim traders who converted some of the native inhabitants of the islands. Muslims in the country form 5 percent of the national population.

The Philippine territory was under Islamic rule when the Spaniards arrived and colonized it. Magellan was killed by a Muslim chieftain. Manila (May nilad)was originally Islamic until Miguel López de Legazpi conquered it. Intramoros means Among the moors. The Filipino word moro comes from the Spanish word for the inhabitants of Morocco. A tenacious Islamic legacy is the custom to circumsize('tuli'). When the Spaniards arrived, circumcision was justified as being Christian. Being uncircumcised is considered shameful in Filipino society.

In the early 1990s, Filipino Muslims were firmly rooted in their Islamic faith. Every year many went on the hajj (pilgrimage) to the holy city of Mecca; on return men would be addressed by the honorific "hajj" and women the honorific "hajji". In most Muslim communities, there was at least one mosque from which the muezzin called the faithful to prayer five times a day. Those who responded to the call to public prayer removed their shoes before entering the mosque, aligned themselves in straight rows before the minrab (niche), and offered prayers in the direction of Mecca. An imam, or prayer leader, led the recitation in Arabic verses from the Quran, following the practices of the Sunni sect of Islam common to most of the Muslim world. It was sometimes said that the Moros often neglected to perform the ritual prayer and did not strictly abide by the fast (no food or drink in daylight hours) during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, or perform the duty of almsgiving. They did, however, scrupulously observe other rituals and practices and celebrate great festivals of Islam such as the end of Ramadan; Muhammad's birthday; the night of his ascension to heaven; and the start of the Muslim New Year, the first day of the month of Muharram.

Islam in the Philippines has absorbed indigenous elements, much as has Catholicism. Moros thus make offerings to spirits (diwatas), malevolent or benign, believing that such spirits can and will have an effect on one's health, family, and crops. They also include pre-Islamic customs in ceremonies marking rites of passage--birth, marriage, and death. Moros share the essentials of Islam, but specific practices vary from one Moro group to another. Although Muslim Filipino women are required to stay at the back of the mosque for prayers (out of the sight of men), they are much freer in daily life than are women in many other Islamic societies.

Because of the world resurgence of Islam since World War II, Muslims in the Philippines have a stronger sense of their unity as a religious community than they had in the past. Since the early 1970s, more Muslim teachers have visited the nation and more Philippine Muslims have gone abroad--either on the hajj or on scholarships--to Islamic centers than ever before. They have returned revitalized in their faith and determined to strengthen the ties of their fellow Moros with the international Islamic community. As a result, Muslims have built many new mosques and religious schools, where students (male and female) learn the basic rituals and principles of Islam and learn to read the Quran in Arabic. A number of Muslim institutions of higher learning, such as the Jamiatul Philippine al-Islamia in Marawi, also offer advanced courses in Islamic studies.

Divisions along generational lines have emerged among Moros since the 1960s. Many young Muslims, dissatisfied with the old leaders, asserted that datu and sultans were unnecessary in modern Islamic society. Among themselves, these young reformers were divided between moderates, working within the system for their political goals, and militants, engaging in guerrilla-style warfare. To some degree, the government managed to isolate the militants, but Muslim reformers, whether moderates or militants, were united in their strong religious adherence. This bond was significant, because the Moros felt threatened by the continued expansion of Christians into southern Mindanao and by the prolonged presence of Philippine army troops in their homeland.

Muslims, about 5 percent of the total population, were the most significant minority in the Philippines. Although undifferentiated racially from other Filipinos, in the 1990s they remained outside the mainstream of national life, set apart by their religion and way of life. In the 1970s, in reaction to consolidation of central government power under martial law, which began in 1972, the Muslim Filipino, or Moro population increasingly identified with the worldwide Islamic community, particularly in Malaysia, Indonesia, Libya, and Middle Eastern countries. Longstanding economic grievances stemming from years of governmental neglect and from resentment of popular prejudice against them contributed to the roots of Muslim insurgency.

Moros were confined almost entirely to the southern part of the country--southern and western Mindanao, southern Palawan, and the Sulu Archipelago. Ten subgroups could be identified on the basis of language. Three of these groups made up the great majority of Moros. They were the Maguindanaos of North Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, and Maguindanao provinces; the Maranaos of the two Lanao provinces; and the Tausugs, principally from Jolo Island. Smaller groups were the Samals and Bajaus, principally of the Sulu Archipelago; the Yakans of Zamboanga del Sur Province; the Ilanons and Sangirs of Southern Mindanao Region; the Melabugnans of southern Palawan; and the Jama Mapuns of the tiny Cagayan Islands.

Muslim Filipinos traditionally have not been a closely knit or even allied group. They were fiercely proud of their separate identities, and conflict between them was endemic for centuries. In addition to being divided by different languages and political structures, the separate groups also differed in their degree of Islamic orthodoxy. For example, the Tausugs, the first group to adopt Islam, criticized the more recently Islamicized Yakan and Bajau peoples for being less zealous in observing Islamic tenets and practices. Internal differences among Moros in the 1980s, however, were outweighed by commonalities of historical experience vis-à-vis non-Muslims and by shared cultural, social, and legal traditions.

The traditional structure of Moro society focused on a sultan who was both a secular and a religious leader and whose authority was sanctioned by the Quran. The datu were communal leaders who measured power not by their holdings in landed wealth but by the numbers of their followers. In return for tribute and labor, the datu provided aid in emergencies and advocacy in disputes with followers of another chief. Thus, through his agama (court--actually an informal dispute-settling session), a datu became basic to the smooth function of Moro society. He was a powerful authority figure who might have as many as four wives and who might enslave other Muslims in raids on their villages or in debt bondage. He might also demand revenge (maratabat) for the death of a follower or upon injury to his pride or honor.

The datu continued to play a central role in Moro society in the 1980s. In many parts of Muslim Mindanao, they still administered the sharia (sacred Islamic law) through the agama. They could no

longer expand their circle of followers by raiding other villages, but they achieved the same end by accumulating wealth and then using it to provide aid, employment, and protection for less fortunate neighbors. Datu support was essential for government programs in a Muslim barangay. Although a datu in modern times rarely had more than one wife, polygamy was permitted so long as his wealth was sufficient to provide for more than one. Moro society was still basically hierarchical and familial, at least in rural areas.

The national government policies instituted immediately after independence in 1946 abolished the Bureau for Non-Christian Tribes used by the United States to deal with minorities and encouraged migration of Filipinos from densely settled areas such as Central Luzon to the "open" frontier of Mindanao. By the 1950s, hundreds of thousands of Ilongos, Ilocanos, Tagalogs, and others were settling in North Cotabato and South Cotabato and Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur provinces, where their influx inflamed Moro hostility. The crux of the problem lay in land disputes. Christian migrants to the Cotabatos, for example, complained that they bought land from one Muslim only to have his relatives refuse to recognize the sale and demand more money. Muslims claimed that Christians would title land through government agencies unknown to Muslim residents, for whom land titling was a new institution. Distrust and resentment spread to the public school system, regarded by most Muslims as an agency for the propagation of Christian teachings. By 1970, a terrorist organization of Christians called the Ilagas (Rats) began operating in the Cotabatos, and Muslim armed bands, called Blackshirts, appeared in response. The same thing happened in the Lanaos, where the Muslim Barracudas began fighting the Ilagas. Philippine army troops sent in to restore peace and order were accused by Muslims of siding with the Christians. When martial law was declared in 1972, Muslim Mindanao was in turmoil.

The Philippine government discovered shortly after independence that there was a need for some kind of specialized agency to deal with the Muslim minority and so set up the Commission for National Integration in 1957, which was later replaced by the Office of Muslim Affairs and Cultural Communities. Filipino nationalists envisioned a united country in which Christians and Muslims would be offered economic advantages and the Muslims would be assimilated into the dominant culture. They would simply be Filipinos who had their own mode of worship and who refused to eat pork. This vision, less than ideal to many Christians, was generally rejected by Muslims who feared that it was a euphemistic equivalent of assimilation. Concessions were made to Muslim religion and customs. Muslims were exempted from Philippine laws prohibiting polygamy and divorce, and in 1977 the government attempted to codify Muslim law on personal relationships and to harmonize Muslim customary law with Philippine law. A significant break from past practice was the 1990 establishment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, which gave Muslims in the region control over some aspects of government, but not over national security and foreign affairs.

There were social factors in the early 1990s that militated against the cultural autonomy sought by Muslim leaders. Industrial development and increased migration outside the region brought new educational demands and new roles for women. These changes in turn led to greater assimilation and, in some cases, even intermarriage. Nevertheless, Muslims and Christians generally remained distinct societies often at odds with one another.

Bangsamoro

Bangsamoro is the name of the area claimed by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines. The MILF seeks to establish an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines.

Bangsamoro covers the provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Cotabato, South Cotabato, Davao del Sur, Sarangani, Sultan Kudarat, Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga del Norte, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi. It also includes the southern portion of the province of Palawan.

The term Bangsamoro also refers to the Filipino Muslim people, in general. These include the Tausug and the Maguindanaoans.

The term Bangsamoro comes from the Malay word bangsa, meaning nation or people, and the Spanish word moro, from the older Spanish word Moor, the Reconquista-period term for Arabs or Muslims.

Moro Rebellion

The Moro Rebellion was the second phase of the Philippine-American War, following the so-called Philippine Insurrection phase. After the capture of Philippine patriot Emilio Aguinaldo and the surrender of the majority of Philippine forces on Luzon, many regions remained beyond the control of the American forces. In spite of the announcement of President Theodore Roosevelt in 1902 that the Philippines had been subdued, sporadic fighting continued in many areas.

The southern area of the Philippine Islands continued to resist strenuously. With great difficulty, American forces gained control over the remainder of the Philippine Islands, particularly the moslem (Moro) island centered on Mindanao. The Moro Rebellion did not abate until 1913, when the American government promised the eventual independence of the country.

Modern Moslem inhabitants of the southern Philippines see the Moro Rebellion as one phase of a continuing struggle against outside influences, the Spanish, the Americans, and the central government of the Philippines.

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