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The Spanish Fort of Iligan: 1750-60

GHISLAINE LOYRE

The period, 1750-60 coincides with the climax of the Moro "piracy" in the Southern Philippines, the surrounding Malay archipelago and nearby Continental Asia. It is therefore interesting to study part of the defense system established by the Spaniards to protect their colony from the Muslim groups of the Sulu islands, the Maranao and Maguindanao of Mindanao.

The island of Mindanao on its northern coast seemed to have been particularly well guarded from West to East by a row of forts: Iligan, Dapitan, and Misamis (the most recently built). Each of these had a specific protective function. Iligan and Misamis were in a strategic position to prevent the movement of the Mindanao Muslims. Misamis controlled Panguil Bay, a possible shortcut to reach the opposite Illana Bay and the central islands of the Visayas. Iligan defended the Eastern side of Panguil Bay and Iligan Bay with its rivers flowing to the coast, a strategic area for the Maranao raids due to its closeness to the Lanao region. But it is clear that the protection of the forts did not work for piracy kept increasing. What were the causes of this failure? Was it Moro war tactics? Or was it something else?

THE PROBLEMS OF THE ILIGAN FORT

Our concern is the geographic position of the fort at Iligan and its consequent role in relation to the enemy. The efficiency of Iligan, as well as the other forts, was affected by the lack of soldiers, of boats, of arms and food supply, especially rice. The Iligan fort strategy was much hampered by those deficiencies. Nonetheless, the Jesuit father, José Duccós, appears to have directed the only systematically planned expedition to the coast in 1754. This

proved the strategic capacity of Iligan when provided with the right chief and the necessary means.

The main peculiarity of Iligan is its location "in the midst of the Moros" which means that the forts were in the territory of the Moros, and specifically the Maranao.¹ We are not certain whether the coastal region of Iligan Bay was inhabited by them but what is clear is that Maranao tradition claimed this region to be part of their territory. Spaniards themselves tell how close the Maranao were and how easy it was for them to reach Iligan. Today, even the Christian communities settled in the coastal areas, the Maranao settlements going inland and upland are very close to Iligan as they were in 1639. This does not mean that there have been no movement on the part of the Maranao, but their location in this particular area has remained relatively stable. The Moros could walk to the fort, for their villages were about an hour away at most.² Iligan must therefore have controlled the thousands of Moros of the region, for this was their "door" to the sea on their way to plunder the Visayas islands where lived the Christian population converted and administered by the Spaniards.³

To determine the effective role of Iligan, it is necessary to know what were the routes followed by the Maranao. The shore along the bay of Iligan is shallow and imbedded with coral. This impe-

1. Main sources: These documents will be referred to as numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.
 1. Iligan, 8 May 1753, letter of a Jesuit to the Governor, Copy, Pastells Collection, vol. 67, fol. 244-77.
 2. "Discurso breve sobre las fuerzas que se pretende fundar en Misamis en la Buscanal o la segunda ensenada de Panguil que otros llaman laguna." Undated—supposedly 1750 as written by pencil on the front page, Copy, Pastells Collection, vol. 67, 25-61.
 3. Zamboanga, 15 June 1752, "Relacion con noticias de Mindanao, Jolo y Zamboanga," Corregidor of the Province of Iligan to the Governor, Pastells Collection, vol. 67., fol. 263-71, Copy.
 4. Año de 1759, "Diligencias hechas sobre falta de viveres para la manutencion de los Presidios y Real Armamento del Alcalde Maior de Zebu," Original, Pastells Collection, vol. 82, fol. 44-77.
 5. *Cartas edificantes, y curiosas escritas de las misiones extrangeras, por algunos missioneros de la Compañía de Jesus. Traducidas del Frances por el Padre Diego Davin, Madrid, oficina de la viuda de Manuel Fernandez, 1754*, vol XVI: "Relacion compendiosa de los Sucesos en Philipinas, y demas Islas de su juridiccion: de lo obrado por la Real Esquadra, que se halla en Iligan del volcan Taal, Terremotos, lluvias de ceniza, y otros sucessos."
2. Document 1; this distance is confirmed by a letter of the Chaplain of Antipolo to the Governor Antipolo 8th of March 1753, Pastells Collection, vol. 67, fol. 278-281b, Copy.
3. Document 1.

ded the heavy Spanish boats from coming near the shore. On the other hand the entrances of the rivers were clear of coral and this enabled the Moro boats to enter easily. Spanish sources on the navigability of those rivers make it appear that the Maranao went up river a short walk from their homes. The rivers are all navigable only for two to six kilometers: Linamon for 2, Larapan 3.5, Liangan 4, Maigo 6, Maranding 2.⁴ While these are not easy routes, they provide at least convenient bases. Indeed, the rivers were swift escapes from Spaniards passing along the coast. The Maranao knew they could not be followed inside. They left their boats on the banks of the rivers waiting for the monsoon and from these bases they went inland bringing their loot. For instance, the path off Linamon was a particularly gradual slope and therefore an easy climb. On their return, they brought more men and stocks of food, although Moros are reported to carry a minimum of rice, feeding themselves from other sources along the way. Clearly, there were shipyards, but we do not know whether the surrounding forest provided good lumber.⁵ There must have been also a meeting place for the Maranao, although they were not very united. The Maguindanao and the Tausug might have used Iligan as a stop over on their way to the Visayas. It was a safe place if they wanted to join the Maranao, a very likely possibility, though no data are yet at hand to confirm it.

Given its location, how did the fort of Iligan protect its inhabitants and the region? The fort does not appear to have been very useful since the Moros kept preventing the regular routine of daily life. The practice of agriculture was almost impossible. The Moros, not the fort, controlled the surroundings and the inhabitants of the fort did not dare go out for sowing, planting and harvesting. In cases where the crop was left to mature, it was in the end either destroyed or harvested by the Moros.⁶ Consequently, the total population of the fort kept on decreasing and in 1753, there were hardly sixty inhabitants. A large number of the inhabitants ran away to other villages to avoid being killed like "wild animals" by "hunters."⁷ The precaution of farming in groups of twenty-five to thirty people did not prevent the

4. The first four rivers are all in Iligan Bay while Maranding lies within Panguil Bay.

5. Document 5.

6. Document 1.

7. Document 1.

Moro aggressions.⁸ By the time soldiers of the fort were alerted, the enemy was gone and out of reach of the soldiers. In spite of a policy to attract population by a tax exemption, the number of inhabitants kept diminishing.⁹ If they did not run away or get killed, they died of hunger. Figures give an indication of the problem. At one point, the population was one thousand and was later reduced to sixty. In 1731, there were 500 tax payers in Iligan according to the newly arrived *Corregidor*.¹⁰ This means that the fort was lacking in reserve men to reinforce, maintain and supply it with food.

Since the Iligan fort could not even protect its own inhabitants, how could it defend the coast or prevent the northbound Moros? They plundered Sibobon on the other side of the bay, then Siquijor, Initao and Cagayan. In Initao the population could escape to the upper land. Cagayan, despite its own fort, was only saved with the help of forces coming from Dapitan and from other villages. Although these events took place before 1750, they are proofs of Iligan's incapacity. Much closer to Cagayan than Dapitan, it should have been the rescuer. The Moros increased their activities in the fifties and if "nothing is done it will become worse."¹¹ It is with "*ignominia*" and "shame" that Iligan had been surviving, for the Moros did exactly what they wanted, including defying the Spaniards with "30,000 insults."¹² Why was Iligan unable to fulfill its defensive role? Various reasons, human as well as material, were responsible for its condition. One cause which affected all was the "lack of care" by the officers.¹³ This was regrettable when one was aware of the "extreme importance" of that fort.¹⁴

Nonetheless, over the years, with "*infamia*," the fort continued its struggle for survival without any increase in troops while the Moros became more and more daring. They copied the Spaniards' coats, mail, helmets and increased their number of firearms. It is easy to understand why Spanish soldiers did not like being detailed in Mindanao. Beside the risks, conditions were not comfortable.

8. Document 2.

9. Document 1.

10. Document 2.

11. Document 1.

12. Document 1.

13. Document 1.

14. Document 1.

The soldiers were aided by some friendly Moros working on the reinforcement of the fort, an achievement claimed by the Corregidor in his letter.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the fort did not have the necessary tools, not even an ax.¹⁶ The soldiers had the construction work in addition to guarding, as well as exposing their lives to attacks and hunger. They received pay of only one peso monthly which did not justify the inconveniences. The Spanish soldiers received more than the Pampangan soldiers. The Corregidor underlined that this is scandalous, for in the other forts, like Manila and Zamboanga, the soldiers had two pesos pay. He specified that he knew this from his trips to the various forts. Moreover, short in number, the soldiers of Iligan were more exposed. A hundred of them would be necessary, while at that time they were only forty men, Spaniards and natives. Another source gives a similar list of the soldiers of the fort as well as their salaries which coincides in details.¹⁷ The Spaniards were thirty in number including two artillery men. The Pampangans were ten headed by a corporal. These troops appear to have been greatly neglected for they had not received any uniforms for the last five years, a yearly ration or even a monthly *cavan* of rice.¹⁸

Was the situation really irremediable? The Corregidor wanted to increase the number of soldiers and suggested raising their

15. Document 1.

16. Document 2.

17. "Representacion del Corregidor en que dá cuenta del estado de la dotacion de la dotacion de los Presidios de Yligan Misamis ensenada de Panguil Dapitan Cagayan," Año de 1759, 10 fol., Collection Pastells, vol. 82, Original, signed José Ducós.

Spanish troops (25 men):

Teniente	8 pesos
Ayudante	3 pesos
Sargento	3 pesos
Tambor	1 peso, 4 reales
2 Cavo de Escuadra	1 peso, 4 reales
22 Soldados	1 peso, 4 reales
3 Artilleros	12 reales

Infantry from Pampanga:

Alferez	2 pesos
Sargento	12 reales
Cavo	10 reales
10 Soldado es	1 peso

All those men received also one uniform a year and a *cavan* of rice monthly: (1 cavan = 25 gantas, 1 ganta = 3.1 kg)

18. See above.

salaries for better performance in successfully fighting the Moros. The soldiers had to fight if only to save their lives, but taking the offensive was another matter. The Corregidor proposed a solution for augmenting the number of troops without burdening the Royal Treasury. According to him, Cebu could gather as many as one thousand men. Since Cebu did not need so many, a few could be transferred to Iligan.¹⁹ Some men could also come from Iloilo to save Iligan from its "miserable" condition. Thus, everything could be easily improved for the benefit of all the islands.

Another reason why Iligan did not fulfill its role was the scarcity of both finance and materials. Iligan needed two or three well armed *pancos* (flat local boats) which could inspect the coast and its rivers.²⁰ The author insisted that "galeras" which deserve such a name" should be built. We do not know what defects the galeras had. We can imagine that they were not fit or were badly constructed. Consequently, they did not serve their purpose. Iligan, seemed inadequately equipped though we will see later that in 1759, it had at least 8 boats.²¹ If Iligan could not cope for lack of material, the project of constructing a fort in Misamis would not be any better because of the same lack of equipment. Moreover, this planned new fort would risk other dangers and would not survive them unless heavily defended. Misamis could be, within two to three hours, surrounded by as many as two or three thousand Moros for they could easily come by land²² and without difficulty for the "whole region is theirs."

Here is an indication of the little control the Spaniards had in the region and of the failure of the whole system of defense. In consequence, if Iligan had not been destroyed in spite of its evident weariness, it was because of internal divisions among the Maranao themselves.²³ They never united to bring down the fort located in Moroland. No sultan or *datu*²⁴ could muster a sufficient army to attack it in spite of the "multitude of Maranao." One exception was on 2 December 1720, when a numerous army

19. Document 1.

20. Document 2.

21. Document 2.

22. Document 2; Misamis in fact is in Subanun territory which is controlled by the Moros, Maranaos and Maguindanaon, but Misamis is further from the thickly populated Muslim regions than Iligan.

23. Document 2.

24. Local aristocrat.

of the Maranao sultan, Balasi, attacked the fort of Iligan.²⁵ There were in the fort then 30 men (not much different than in 1750), few firearms and little powder.²⁶ Iligan was saved on January 1721 only because a thousand man armada came from Cebu on their way to help Zamboanga which remained besieged for six months, and chased off the Moros. Between 1720 and 1750, the conditions of the fort at Iligan do not seem to have changed much. If Iligan were to resist a siege, clearing of the coastal rivers would require boats to prevent any blockade by the Moros.

It is probable that the shortage of gunpowder aggravated by the absence of artillery would have prevented the undertaking of such an action. From the sources, Iligan appears to have had at least two artillery men, but it is also possible that there were none at times. The bigger fort of Zamboanga had sixty cannons but the irony was that at the time (if not all the time), it had no artillery men²⁷ so the Moros who knew this used to pass below the fortifications without any fear.

In the circumstances, an increase in the forces of these forts could only be a necessary and rewarding investment. But it must be said that the colony at that time had to find its own resources, Spain was unable to finance the defense of its colonies. The Philippines were not self-sufficient for they were receiving the *situado* from New Spain and there were no funds available for helping in the South. Only decided and sustained financial support all over the defense line of Mindanao would have produced any effect. The *Alcalde Mayor* of the Province of Cebu mentions how little cash he had, for tributes were paid to him mainly in rice. He insisted that only his predecessor had a special credit, apparently opened in favor of the Jesuit missionary in Iligan, José Ducós, by order of the Governor General of the Philippines.²⁸ The financial difficulties of Iligan could not be met by the local inhabitants since new immigrants, if there were any, would have been exempted from tribute. The Royal Treasury could not support the missionaries of the forts of Iligan, Dapitan, Cagayan and much less

25. "Estado de la Mision de Zamboanga en 1721," Manila, August 1721, in Ventura del Arco, *Documentos, Datos y Relaciones para la historia de Filipinas hasta hora ineditos fielmente copiados de los originales existentes en Archivo y Biblioteca*, Madrid 1859, vol. IV, pp. 409-35.

26. *Ibid.* p. 422.

27. Document 2.

28. We underline "the power of the Jesuits."

Misamis.²⁹ The previous Corregidor, Armadeo de Vargas, left a personal credit of three thousand pesos which he had advanced for the management of the province. The chronicle does not say if he was ever refunded. The Corregidor expected the amount of ₱1,090 and 9 granos from the Alcalde Mayor of Cebu. It is not known what fraction of the fort's budget this represented, but one can guess that the soldiers' salaries would be more than half of it. It looks like the Corregidor received something but not enough to pay his soldiers, and even less to finance rice purchases.³⁰ Whatever was the case, the pretension of the Corregidor was a bit excessive. He was asking for one thousand cavans of rice, while half of that would have been enough to feed the soldiers for one year. Was he stocking provisions for a longer period? Or, had he in mind some private business with the excess rice? For the moment there is no way of judging either way. One can only surmise that if conditions in Iligan were as bad as reported, some people must have taken advantage of the little there was. One thing is certain, namely, that, all the forts were suffering from the same scarcity.

THE RICE PROBLEM

This scarcity was said to endanger the forts of the province of the Corregidor Jacinto Rodriguez y Morales, namely, Iligan, Cagayan and Misamis. All granaries were totally empty, the report continues. This general lack of rice is not debatable. If no rice was provided the forts would be totally ruined. The immigrant inhabitants of Bohol in Misamis had gone away to find food. Joachin Guerra of Iligan, and Pedro Clemente from Cagayan give exactly the same testimony on the matter--Cagayan, Misamis and Iligan had not received their share of rice for the past months. Despite the lack of harvest, Iligan appeared a little better off, for before January 14, the soldiers had received half a cavan. This happened, according to *Alferez* Joachin Guerra, before he left for Cebu. The last grains of rice must have been distributed with the hope of a new supply coming from Cebu.³¹ Actually the sol-

29. Document 1.

30. Document 4.

31. Document 4. Pedro Clemente would have replaced Joachin Guerra in case of accident at the head of the boat. So he was himself on the trip.

diers had been owed their rice share since November 1758.

The Corregidor could not be accused of neglect for he did make a number of efforts to locate rice. He first went to Cagayan, and from there to Misamis, Camiguin, Iloilo, Bohol, and then to Cebu. The normal source of rice was the local harvest but we know that it was almost nonexistent. The other source was Cebu which received rice from tax payments and from the Islands of Negros, Iloilo, Capiz and Bohol. This supply was redistributed through traders and the Royal Supply Houses under the supervision of the Provincial Alcalde Mayor. In 1758, a letter of request of the Corregidor of the forts of Northern Mindanao sent to the Alcalde Mayor received no answer. As a consequence, rice was scarce in all three forts and the Corregidor went to the mountains of Cagayan to procure rice. The sources do not specify if any had been found. One can guess that it must have been very little or that it had been discretely distributed perhaps, with the Corregidor making a profit on the market. However, there are no data to support this hypothesis. The missionary priest on the island of Camiguin signed on 8 December 1758 a certificate confirming that the Corregidor had sent rice to the island but that the boats which were to transport it had been destroyed by a storm and no boat was left to carry the rice to Mindanao. It is difficult to know how much rice was available since the missionary says that the islands were in a terrible state because of an epidemic which caused numerous deaths. This would also mean a much reduced harvest. These arguments are not, however, very convincing. If Iligan had no boats to collect the available rice in Camiguin, we would expect Cagayan and Misamis to go jointly to get the rice, even if they had only a small number of boats. Though the situation is not clear, the trip to Camiguin could not be undertaken, as far as the fort of Iligan was concerned. The six boats sent to Iloilo and Bohol on 7 August 1758 had not yet returned after six months. Iligan was deprived of those boats and had no news whether the boats were wrecked in a tempest or their crews had deserted. What is evident is that Iligan was crippled without its boats which could have been sent to Camiguin which was closer than Iloilo. Iligan had only one recourse left – Cebu.

On 14 January 1759 the Corregidor wrote a letter from Cagayan to the Alcalde Mayor of Cebu, Luis de Sandoval, saying he had tried all possibilities, but Iligan still remained without rice and

that he had no other recourse than to address his request to Cebu to be supplied with rice from the Royal food supply. Instead of sending such a supply, however, the Alcalde Mayor sold the rice to the Alferez Joachin Guerra, the head of the expedition and carrier of the trip. It was sold at the price of ten reales a cavan instead of six, the regular price offered by the merchants of Cebu. This information is found in all the accounts. The rice bought was unhusked. Where Guerra obtained the amount of money to pay for 160 cavans at 10 reales (1,600 reales equal ₱200 a very high price compared to figures previously cited), is not known. Was he given credit? Had there been an agreement between Guerra and the Alcalde Mayor? There is no answer from the documents. This was the situation in Cebu. The whole episode, which could implicate various personalities remains unclear on several points. The facts have no importance in themselves except for the light they shed on how some Spanish Royal officers carried out their function in the Philippine colony.

It is therefore interesting to continue investigating the case as regards the participation of the Alcalde Mayor. Rice was far from lacking in Cebu. According to all testimonies eight to nine hundred or even 1,200 cavans could be stored in the Royal supply warehouse.³² What is not so obvious was the ownership of this rice.³³ Only the Spaniard Guerra says that it was the Alcalde Mayor's property, but this could be a deception on his part. The Alcalde Mayor could have collected rice to sell when tribute collecting was delayed and when rice was scarce and made a good profit out of the investment. This is more probable since he would lose control of tribute collection when he received orders to pass it on to the hands of the missionaries of Cebu.³⁴ What is certain is that the Alcalde Mayor was buying rice, probably *palay*, at the good price of five reales a cavan. Indeed, two boats arrived from Negros loaded with husked and unhusked rice. The latter could have been bought by the Alcalde. It is clear that he was carrying on a good business in rice, buying at five reales, and selling at ten

32. Document 4, Joachin Guerra, Juan Birzente Perez (Captain), Nicolas Sebastian (Pilot), Martin de la Cruz.

33. Guerra must be a Spaniard for in his interrogation there is no mention of his not knowing or ignoring Spanish as was usually stated to specify whether there was need of an interpreter or not.

34. In his letter of January to the Corregidor.

reales, though the quality of the rice is not indicated. Did the Alcalde have a kind of monopoly in rice? Guerra would not have dared to buy rice cheaper from the merchants if he feared an embargo from the Alcalde. So, either Guerra was looking for a pretext to complete his agreement with the Alcalde or the Alcalde really controlled the trade. The Alcalde refused to give a certificate stating the selling price of the rice, an act from which his culpability could be inferred. The fact that Guerra requested the certificate from the Vicar and Rector of Cebu indicates his own complicity but not the advantage accruing to him from the deal. Would it be going too far to say that the scarcity was encouraged or provoked by some officers to make a profit? The response of the Alcalde Mayor to the Corregidor, that he could not send rice because he was too busy, is not convincing. The rest of the letter is more of an accusation addressed to the Corregidor than an explanation of his own attitude.

None of the major participants in the episode could be held singularly responsible because the whole exchange of correspondence and the other sources are not without ambiguity on various details. While the questions posed have no answers we raise them to determine what elements contributed to the efficiency of the Iligan fort. Unfortunately, no copy exists of the first letter of the Corregidor sent in November 1758 and handcarried by Pedro Clemente to Cebu. It would be hard to justify the violent and rude letter returned in January by the Corregidor for the Corregidor had been bypassing the authority of the Alcalde by taking the initiative in collecting the tribute in Bohol for which he was accused of "bad conduct." So the anger of the Alcalde is not surprising. While he could have sued the Corregidor, nothing of the sort appears in the accounts. Was there a rivalry between the two men? Could the Alcalde have also accused the Corregidor of trying to get more than his share? A last unclear detail remains to be mentioned. Why did every cavan lack two gantas of the twenty-five it was supposed to contain? The sources eliminate the staff's responsibility. Was it an order of the Alcalde? Various people were compromised in the business, from the crew of the boat to the Alcalde.

As a consequence, the poor functioning and inefficiency of the forts does not only derive from the hardships inflicted by the "cruel" and "barbarous" Moros but also from the internal organi-

zation of the Spaniards themselves. The failure of the Spanish against the Moro groups seemed to profit some individuals. To counter those internal hindrances, only a strong and energetic policy sustained by the central government could work.

The proof of this possibility is given by the systematic search of all rivers flowing northwards to Iligan Bay. José Ducós, in spite of the participation of the Commandant Gomez Valdes was named Captain General until 1759. Three galeras arrived at Iligan on 23 April 1754, and three more with Valdes on June 2. Ducós remained at the head of the Triunfo, Trinidad et San Felipe from June 15. During this period, the following rivers had been checked: Linamon, Magon, Liangan, Lupangan, Larapan, Langaran. This lasted from 2 April to 7 November 1754.³⁵ The result of these six months clearing operations were three Moro villages destroyed, 159 boats captured (45 in Limanon Magon and others, 50 in the Panguil Bay, 64 at sea). According to the same document, the Moros of Lanao lost two thousand men. Even if the figures are cut down to counter the possible exaggeration of the report in order to amplify the victory, it remained a success. Unfortunately, we have no source to check the next expedition and its consequences on the Moro raids for the period of the Jesuit Ducós. It is very possible that his very presence might have obliged the Maranao to remain quiet or choose other routes. If these clearing expeditions could be repeated every year, piracy would have been considerably diminished even if they involved only a very limited number of soldiers. A definitive solution would never have been certain, for the Moros could always find other routes, though they surely would be less easy. If effective hindrances were regularly put in the way, piracy would have declined, for it would not have been worth the investment it required. This type of speculation could be fruitless, but at least it opens up other possibilities. Not only would Iligan have breathed easier from such a successful action, but also all the coastal inhabitants of the Visayas and even of Luzon, would have been spared from the raids which ruined so many villages, killed so many Indios and rendered so many captives slaves.