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Research Note

JAMES F. EDER

Muslim Palawan Diversity and Difference on the Periphery of Philippine Islam

Three significant forms of difference crosscut ethnic boundaries within the diverse population of 75,000–100,000 Muslims who presently reside in southern Palawan. These include differences in length of residence and sense of place, in how Islam is known and practiced, and in acceptance of the Philippine state and associated institutions of power. The presence of these and other social differences between Muslims in Palawan makes both ethnic and religious labels of limited predictive value in regard to livelihood, class position, voting behavior, and other important dimensions of Muslim lives.

KEYWORDS: PALAWAN · PHILIPPINE MUSLIMS · ETHNICITY · SOCIAL DIFFERENCES · ETHNOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

In this essay I explore the diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds and geographical origins of the approximately 75,000–100,000 Muslims who reside in southern Palawan and consider how they differ among themselves economically, socially, politically, and religiously. My findings are limited and my analysis is preliminary, and this essay is more a guide to needed further research than it is a definitive overview of Muslim Palawan.

Many of the principal general and historical sources on Philippine Muslims (e.g., Majul 1973; Mastura 1984; Gowing 1979; Gowing and McAmis 1974) are seriously dated and focused on Muslims in Mindanao. Similarly dated are most of the principal ethnographic sources, some of which are based on fieldwork conducted almost two generations ago. Kiefer (1972), for example, remains the main ethnographic account of the Tausug, and Casiño (1976) is the only ethnographic account of the Jama Mapun. Other important groups of Muslims, such as the Maranao, have received little ethnographic attention beyond the brief entries that appear in LeBar (1975). Important exceptions include McKenna's (1998) study of everyday politics and armed separatism in Cotabato, which includes welcome ethnographic coverage of the Magindanaon, and Nimmo's (2001) ethnography of the Sama Dilaut, an Islamized people of Tawi-Tawi. Most recent work has understandably been focused on conflict and rebellion, the desire for autonomy, and other aspects of the long-troubled relationship between Muslims and the Philippine state (e.g., Abinales 2000; Casiño 2000; May 2002) or on the related politics of Muslim cultural citizenship and identity (e.g., Blanchetti 2003; Horvatich 2003). As important as these topics are, the disproportionate amount of attention they receive has left a collective impression, however unintended, that such concerns dominate the everyday lives of Muslims to a greater degree than they actually do in practice. Put differently, much of the research on Philippine Muslims has played to entrenched notions of Muslims as inexorable and undifferentiated "others" in Philippine society, socially, politically, and religiously. In contrast, and with the proviso that it is a view from Palawan, I believe that Philippine Muslims differ among themselves in many of the same ways that non-Muslim Filipinos do, even as in their everyday lives and hopes they also resemble their non-Muslim counterparts to a greater degree than many observers appear to credit.

I first overview the complex ethnolinguistic situation in southern Palawan. Then I consider in turn when ethnic differences among Muslims matter and

when they do not. I argue that, as important as ethnicity may be in some contexts, even within particular ethnic groups Muslims differ importantly in length of residence in Palawan, religious expression, and political orientation. After briefly discussing the challenges that differences among Philippine Muslims in these regards pose for the utility of ethnolinguistic labels and for ethnographic representation, I close with a short summary of my findings and some suggestions for future research.

Palawan Island: On the Periphery of Philippine Islam

Like Mindanao before it, Palawan was long sparsely populated and isolated from the rest of the Philippines but became in the twentieth century a major settler destination. Unlike Mindanao, however, Palawan was not inhabited by substantial numbers of Muslim peoples at the time that settlement of the island from other parts of the country began. Instead, until the early decades of the twentieth century, Palawan was inhabited primarily by three groups of indigenous peoples, the Batak, the Tagbanua, and the Palawan. Compared with other Muslim-inhabited parts of the southern Philippines, then, Palawan Island is distinctive because most Muslims—like most Christians—are of migrant origin. In the Balabac group of islands at the southern tip of Palawan are found several thousand Molbog, an indigenous group of Muslims. Far more numerous, however, are the Tausug, Jama Mapun, and other Muslim inhabitants who originated in Mindanao or Sulu but have also made southern Palawan their home. Some are recent arrivals and others have lived there for generations. Today Muslims of all kinds constitute majority or near-majority populations in Palawan's two southernmost municipalities and substantial minority populations in two others.

In recent decades, Muslims have begun to settle in northern Palawan. In the early 1980s the first mosque was established in Puerto Princesa City; five more have since appeared. Several cater to specific ethnic groups, while others have a mixed clientele. In the early 1990s an Islamic school opened nearby, and in 2007 the Office of Muslim Affairs (OMA) estimated that about 1,000 Muslims resided in Puerto Princesa City, out of a total population of about 170,000 persons.

The highly publicized kidnapping in 2001 of foreign tourists from a beach resort by members of the Abu Sayyaf based elsewhere in the southern Philippines did not involve Muslims in or from Palawan, and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims and between Muslims and state

authorities on the island are peaceful. To be sure, on all sides one can hear expressed negative ethnic and religious stereotypes, but no known Muslim paramilitary groups operate in Palawan, nor can one find jihadis or jihadism. Also important in Palawan is that, unlike in Mindanao, there is no history of alienation of Muslim lands by Christian settlers, and in many respects Muslim settlers and Christian settlers, and their descendants, are in the same economic boat.

In part perhaps for this reason, Palawan's Muslim peoples have attracted little attention from Palawan specialists. With the exception of Casiño's (1976) study of the Jama Mapun, based primarily on research in Cagayan de Tawi-Tawi but in part on research in southern Palawan and, more recently, Blanchetti's (1995) study of Molbog involvement with the seaweed trade in Balabac, conspicuously lacking from the present social science literature on Palawan is any ethnographic research on the island's Muslim inhabitants. The same is true of the Philippine studies literature generally. Although the Tausug and Jama Mapun settled and representatives of the Sultanate of Sulu governed in southern Palawan by the eighteenth century (Warren 1981, 136–38), Palawan and its Muslim inhabitants are scarcely mentioned in any of the principal works on Islam in the Philippines.

Muslim Palawan, Take One: Ethnolinguistic Diversity

The Philippine government census does not record or report information about religion or ethnicity, but the OMA in Puerto Princesa City estimates that the Muslim population in Palawan is about 120,000 to 150,000 persons (or 16–20 percent), out of a total provincial population of about 750,000 persons, about 600,000 of whom live on Palawan Island. The OMA's estimate is likely inflated for political purposes, and a more conservative estimate would be a still robust Muslim population of 75,000 to 100,000 persons (or 10–13 percent of the total population). In the southern municipality of Bataraza where I conducted some of my research, Muslims probably account for about 40 percent of the total population of 53,400 persons. Here are the main Muslim ethnic groups found in Palawan, although the list is likely not exhaustive.

The Molbog are the indigenous people of Balabac Island and some have also long resided in various parts of southern Palawan Island, whither their forebears presumably migrated in years past. According to Lanfranco Blanchetti (1996, 111), linguistic and historical evidence suggest that the

Molbog were once an indigenous Palawan subgroup that converted to Islam after sustained contacts with Tausug and Samal and other elements of the Sulu Sultanate, assuming in the process a new and independent identity. The Molbog are primarily shifting cultivators and secondarily fishermen; but many also grow coconuts and sell copra.

The Jama Mapun are a Sama (Samal) or Sinama-speaking people (see Horvatic 2003, 39) generally found in the southwestern sector of the Sulu Sea, particularly on the island of Cagayan de Tawi-Tawi but also in southern Palawan, northern Borneo, and the numerous small islands scattered in between (Casiño 1976). The Jama Mapun are a farming and maritime trading people. Traditionally shifting cultivators of rice, corn, and cassava, they are probably best known as coconut farmers and copra traders who have long figured prominently as carriers and middlemen in an extensive maritime trade in copra, rice, and forest products between southern Palawan, Sulu, and northern Borneo (Warren 1981, 136–37). The Jama Mapun are today found throughout southern Palawan, and most Bataraza residents regard them as the largest group of Muslims in the municipality. Many there have taken up cultivation of irrigated rice in addition to growing coconuts.

The Tausug are native to the island of Jolo, although scattered Tausug settlements are found throughout Sulu and northern Borneo. In Bataraza, the Tausug are often referred to as Joloanos. They constitute the second most numerous group of Muslims after the Jama Mapun and are similarly found throughout the municipality. Traditional Tausug economic life centered on both agriculture and fishing (Kiefer 1972), although in Bataraza the Tausug are generally regarded as a fishing people, or at least as a people who prefer fishing as a way of life. Tausug residents in Bataraza pride themselves on a long and distinguished history of Tausug settlement and governance in southern Palawan. Antedating both Spanish and American political control and Christian Filipino settlement, this history centers on the centuries-old incorporation of the region into the Sultanate of Sulu and the consequent assignment or emigration there of Tausug administrators, traders, and settlers who established thriving settlements on both coasts of the southern part of the island. By the middle of the nineteenth century, one such Palawan community had a population in excess of 10,000 people, including many resident Chinese, and oral evidence suggests that a number of Tausug trading settlements were established on Palawan's southwest coast as early as 1778,

when the Sulu Sultanate was becoming an emporium for Europe's trade with China (Warren 1981, 137–38).

Less numerous in Bataraza and elsewhere in Palawan are three other groups of Muslims: the Pangutaran, the Maranao, and the Yakan. The Pangutaran originate from Pangutaran Island and neighboring small islands lying northwest of Jolo Island in the Sulu Sea. Like the Jama Mapun, however (and unlike the Tausug), they are generally considered a subgroup of the region's large and diverse group of Sama. The Maranao, one of the largest groups of Muslims in the Philippines, were traditionally centered around Lake Lanao in northern Mindanao, in what are today the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte (Mednick 1975, 36–39). Historically an inland agricultural population, they are today most visibly associated throughout the Philippines with various buy-and-sell activities. Small numbers of Maranao traders, some itinerant and some permanently settled, are found in the Bataraza town marketplace and other urban centers in Palawan, where they deal in textiles, electronics, and other items. Finally, even smaller numbers of Yakan, originating from Basilan Island, have recently settled in the Rio Tuba area of Bataraza.

Long noted by social scientists, but often ignored by others, is the observation that ethnic differences among Philippine Muslims matter in substantial ways, and particularly in ways that reflect the manner in which various Muslim ethnic groups are ranked socially among themselves. A prominent theme in the ethnology of the Sulu region is not just ethnic difference but ethnic ranking, with the ranking of ethnonyms, names for ethnic groups, and their attribution to specific persons and communities all matters of daily discourse among the region's Muslim inhabitants (Frake 1996, 317; see also Stone 1962).

Certainly it is not difficult to find examples of how ethnic differences figure in the lives of Muslims in Palawan. Differences in how Muslims make their living partially coincide with ethnic group membership. The Maranao are commonly associated with marketplace trade, the Molbog and Jama Mapun with farming, and the Tausug with fishing (although at least in Palawan there is a lot of overlap and one does not have to look hard to find, for example, Jama Mapun traders or Tausug farmers). In the political realm—and no less than in the Christian Philippines—ethnic loyalties may powerfully influence voting behavior. The membership of the Muslim Association of Puerto Princesa City was bitterly split each time an election

was held for president, an election that typically pitted a Maranao candidate against a Tausug candidate in an acrimonious contest marked by claims of intimidation, fraud, and other voting irregularities. In the end an agreement was reached that the Association's Maranao members and Tausug members would take turns in successive years fielding their own candidates for president, thereby rotating the presidency over time between the two groups. Or again, in religious practice, if only for language reasons many Muslims prefer to worship together with members of the same ethnic group, and mosques in Bataraza and Puerto Princesa City informally bear the names of the ethnic group most visibly associated with each.

As in Mindanao and Sulu, ethnic differences between Muslims in Palawan also involve culturally constructed social hierarchies and associated claims of superiority and inferiority. Upon meeting me for the first time, the Tausug administrator of one of the mosques in Puerto Princesa City frequented by the Tausug told me, "Islam is the most loving religion, and Tausug are the most loving Muslims." Most of what I heard were stereotypical comments of this same sort—the Molbog are not good Muslims; the Jama Mapun do not look after family members in need as they should; the Maranao are excessively clannish and think they are better than others; the Tausug flout the law and employ explosives in fishing; and so on. Much of this, of course, depends on who one talks to, but the views are meaningful for those who express them, and in some cases they are rooted in histories of grievance, such as the Sama have against the Tausug (Horvatic 2003).

Muslim Palawan, Take Two: Other Forms of Difference

Ethnic differences, however, are only part of the story of Muslim Palawan, for such differences are often not a good predictor of *other* differences among Palawan's Muslim inhabitants—differences that may be equally consequential for many areas of contemporary economic, social, and political life. Here I consider three other forms of difference among Muslims that importantly crosscut ethnic group memberships.

First and reflecting the history and demographic makeup of Palawan generally, Muslims in Palawan vary greatly in their length of residence and in their manner of attachment and sense of place. True, some of the differences in these realms are associated with ethnic background. I explained earlier how in Bataraza, the Molbog are generally regarded as "natives" and most Maranao are relatively recent migrants. Members of the two most

numerous Muslim groups in Bataraza, however, the Tausug and the Jama Mapun, vary widely in their migration and settlement history. Some are very recent arrivals in Palawan, while others have lived there for generations. The same sort of tensions and conflicts between recent migrants and long-time residents found in other parts of the world are also found in Palawan, and these tensions and conflicts may transcend ethnicity. One older Tausug man I spoke with, who had arrived in Palawan from Jolo in 1972, was critical of the new mayor of Bataraza (also a Tausug) for his policy of encouraging would-be Tausug migrants from Jolo to settle in Bataraza. I had expected that the man might be pleased at the prospect that the local numbers of Tausug might thereby swell, but that prospect little interested him. The man instead complained that “there are enough people in Bataraza already” and worried that Bataraza might not remain as peaceful as it was if the social and political unrest that still plagued Jolo might somehow follow these new migrants to Palawan.

Besides differences in terms of when people or their forebears arrived in Palawan, differences that are in principle objectively measurable, there are rival claims about who is a “native” and who is not, claims that sometimes involve differing understandings or constructions of regional history. Are the Jama Mapun native or migrant to Bataraza? It depends on who you talk to and what the terms “native” and “migrant” are taken to mean. Casiño (1976) estimated that half of the then total Philippine Jama Mapun population of 25,000 persons lived in Cagayan de Tawi-Tawi and half lived elsewhere, in scattered communities from southern Palawan to Mindanao and northern Borneo. But is Cagayan de Tawi-Tawi the ancestral heartland from which some Jama Mapun later emanated, or is it a central node in a wider ancestral region? I have long been of the former opinion, and it was shared by many Muslims in Bataraza, but some of the Jama Mapun I spoke with claimed that southern Palawan had always been part of the Jama Mapun’s ancestral domain. Some Tausug can advance similar nativistic claims, given their own long history in southern Palawan.

Second, Muslims in Palawan vary widely in terms of their knowledge and practice of Islam. As with the contrast between migrants and natives, there is some association with ethnicity. As noted earlier, the Molbog are collectively said by others not to be very good Muslims, or at least they practice a more traditional set of Islamic practices than do Muslims of migrant origin. But more important is variation in religious knowledge and practice within

ethnic groups and even within families. Such intragroup variation is visible, for example, in the frequency of mosque attendance and how women comport themselves in public. In both Bataraza and Puerto Princesa City, as elsewhere in the Muslim Philippines, some Jama Mapun and Tausug women wear headscarves, some sport berets or baseball caps, and some do not regularly cover their heads at all. Again, some members of each Muslim ethnic group encourage their children to participate in a government-sponsored madrasah program, whereby primary school students may voluntarily attend an after-hours program of instruction in Arabic and Islamic values, while others do not. These anecdotal observations suggest that, rather than looking to ethnicity to explain differences in Islamic religious practices in the Philippines, researchers might more productively follow the example of Horvatic’s (1994) exploration of the different ways of knowing and learning Islam in an ethnically-homogeneous Sama community in Tawi-Tawi, where the simultaneous presence of traditional and modern Islamic discourses reflects, in part, differences among residents in exposure to mass education.

Third, Muslims in Palawan vary in their support for or willingness to work with the present Philippine government and associated institutions of power. In ways that did not track ethnic lines, Muslims in Palawan were divided and even conflicted among themselves regarding how to vote in the 1989 plebiscite and the 2001 referendum to establish the boundaries of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), and then again in 2008 on the proposal (later withdrawn) to establish a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE). Local Muslim interest in establishing a system of Shari’a courts similar to those already found elsewhere in the southern Philippines is another variable, as is presumably the confidence of Palawan Muslims in the present judicial system. Some Muslims I spoke with were hopeful that several Shari’a courts would be established soon in southern Palawan to serve the needs of local Muslims, while others appeared indifferent to the idea. Even proponents disagreed about the desirable scope of the courts; some felt their jurisdiction should extend to criminal cases involving Muslims, while others thought they should be restricted to resolving divorce petitions, inheritance disputes, and other family matters. Here too differing Muslim views did not reflect ethnic group membership so much as other variables that await further study.

In addition to these three forms of difference and returning to the broader category of Muslims in general, several category-blurring complications

partially confound efforts to determine who is and who is not a Muslim. First is the presence in southern Palawan of substantial numbers of people known variously as the Panimusan or Islamized Palawan, people believed to be descendants of the indigenous Palawan who converted to Islam at some time in the past. (Some Palawan have also converted to Christianity.) The Panimusan vary widely in their religious practices; some are said to be Muslim “in name only” while others pray and attend mosque regularly.

Second are the unknown numbers of Christian converts to Islam. Locally the most common reason for Christian Filipino conversion to Islam is marriage to a Muslim. As with the Panimusan, the degree of religious commitment evidenced by converts varies widely, but the few Muslims I spoke with about converts generally did not regard them as very good Muslims. Many, I was told, simply abstained from eating pork by domestic necessity but did not otherwise practice their new religion. Third, small numbers of the Sama Dilaut (also known as Badjao) have arrived recently in southern Palawan from Tawi-Tawi. Whether they intend to settle there is unclear. The Sama Dilaut show extensive Islamic influence (Nimmo 2001), but, as with the Molbog, they are not regarded as serious Muslims by the Tausug or the Jama Mapun. Some Sama Dilaut attend mosques in Palawan, while some in Bataraza and elsewhere are converts to Christianity (Horvatic 2003, 36).

Representational Challenge

These findings call attention to a significant representational challenge when discussing the lives and concerns of Filipinos of all kinds: How much should be made of religious and ethnic labels and categories? On the one hand, both religion and ethnicity are profoundly important matters throughout the Philippines. On the other, religious and ethnic labels clearly leave much social variation unaccounted for and it is important to recognize and explore their explanatory limits. I have shown here, for example, how in Palawan the category “Tausug” includes both generations-old residents who trace to the Sultanate of Sulu and recently-arrived migrants repatriated from Sabah or fleeing violence in Jolo; both observant and less observant Muslims; and both individuals who favored Palawan’s inclusion in the ARMM and those who opposed it.

Elsewhere I have argued that the Batak, an indigenous people in Palawan, need to be understood not only as a distinct ethnic group but also as occupying a particular disadvantaged class position in wider Philippine

society (Eder 1987). I have also argued that the Cuyonon, a Christian people in Palawan, differ among themselves about what to “do” with their ethnic identity. Some Cuyonon choose to forefront or even celebrate their “Cuyononness,” while others have left it behind and prefer simply to identify as Filipinos (Eder 2004). Similar perspectives, I believe, could usefully be brought to bear on the import of ethnic identity among Philippine Muslims.

Summary and Suggestions for Further Research

To summarize, to call someone a “Muslim” in southern Palawan may not be a good predictor of that person’s ethnic identity, livelihood, class position, political orientation, voting behavior, religiosity, or attachment to place. Further, even ethnic identity—as important as it may sometimes be—is not that helpful a predictor of the remaining variables. Just like religious and ethnic identities and concerns in the non-Muslim Philippines, these identities and concerns matter in some contexts and at some levels of analysis, but not in others. The difference, I have argued here, merits greater attention than it has received to date. Put differently, there is a lot more of interest and importance going on with Muslims in Palawan—and, I suspect, Muslims elsewhere in the Philippines—than a preoccupation with either religion or ethnicity can effectively capture.

With the proviso that this is a view from Palawan whose applicability to other parts of the Muslim-inhabited Philippines remains to be determined, I conclude here by briefly suggesting five possibilities for future research, although there are surely others as well. First, and as prosaic as it may sound, researchers could profitably look at how Muslims, particularly rural Muslims, make their living. Most rural Muslims, like rural dwellers generally, depend on either fishing or farming. How—if at all—do they differ in their preferences for particular kinds of fishing and farming or in their resource management practices? In this context the considerable role of Muslims as transnational actors in southern Palawan also merits attention.

Second, local electoral politics offer important opportunities for study. If, as reported above, Muslims do not simply vote for Muslim candidates and Christians for Christian candidates, why do people vote as they do? That a Muslim barangay captain has won reelection repeatedly in a barangay where Muslims constitute 20 to 30 percent only of the voters and despite regular opposition from well-financed Christian candidates merits attention. And in voting districts such as those in southern Palawan, where large numbers

of voters and some candidates are indigenous people (and hence neither Muslim nor Christian), how does this plurality figure in the outcome of election contests where most candidates are either Christians or Muslims?

Third, the study of Muslim civic associations could provide a useful window on the less conflictual and more everyday political relations between Muslims and the Philippine state. The Muslim Association of Puerto Princesa City may be internally conflicted by a competition for leadership that plays out along ethnic lines, but also revealing of Muslim civic behavior are the association's efforts to work with the city government and other community resources to put up a halal slaughterhouse with an eye on helping Muslim tourists from more orthodox parts of Southeast Asia feel more at home in Palawan.

Fourth, and as Philippine Muslims are no less concerned than non-Muslims with education, Muslim interest and participation in the Department of Education's (DepEd) ALIVE curriculum could be studied. An acronym for Arabic Language and Islamic Values Instruction, the ALIVE curriculum is being implemented by certified madrasah graduates or suitably trained instructors in public schools in districts with significant numbers of Muslim students.

Fifth, among Philippine Muslims there are still other forms of difference that merit attention besides those considered here, particularly social class and gender. Given the prominent role of women in economic, social, and political affairs in the Philippines generally, the concerns of Muslim women and the intersections of gender with Islam and ethnicity among Philippine Muslims appear especially promising topics of study.

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