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Muslims: The Misunderstood Filipinos

Abdullah T. Madale



Current literature on the Muslim Filipinos contains several errors and misconceptions which continue to be perpetrated by persons who are supposed to be knowledgeable because of their educational qualifications, experiences and high positions either in government or in the private sector. These errors and misconceptions about Muslim Filipinos continue to color, influence and affect the attitudes and perceptions of persons charged with the delicate responsibility of developing programs and projects affecting Muslim Filipinos in particular and Mindanao in general. In turn, the failure of these programs and projects is blamed on the Muslim Filipinos either for their lack of support or perceived efforts to destroy them.

Not a few high government officials and prominent non-Muslims have been heard to remark that "they cannot understand the continuing struggle of some Muslim Filipino groups to carve out an independent state in spite of millions of pesos poured into Mindanao for its progress and development." It must be conceded that Mindanao, which is both Muslim and Christian, has been a recipient of government programs and projects costing millions, if not billions of pesos. Yet, the Muslim Filipinos, in particular, continue to complain.

As an educator, we say that the Muslims of the Philippines are a misunderstood group. The errors and misconceptions about them continue to remain with government and the private sector in spite of the past and present efforts to address them either through the normal government agencies or through task forces or political and geographical instruments such as the Autonomous Government for Muslim Mindanao, or the earlier Commission on National Integration established on the bases of the findings of the Congressional

Committee on the Moro Problem chaired by former Maranaw Senator Ahmad Domocao Alonto of Lanao del Sur.

Causes of Errors or Misconceptions

A possible cause of these errors or misconceptions about Muslim Filipinos is miseducation which translates either wrong information and data or insufficient information or data about them in textbooks, references and other literature taught in our schools. To date, very few textbooks contain sufficient and correct information and data about Muslim Filipinos. The situation is possibly worse in private educational institutions although there could be exceptions.

Another cause is colonial in character. Efforts by the colonial powers to institute a "divide and rule" policy among Muslim and non-Muslim Filipinos have borne fruit resulting in a continuing culture of misunderstanding, enmity, and intolerance. In rural areas in Mindanao, there are still Muslims who refuse to be called Filipino, which term they find synonymous to "non-Muslim" or "Christian." On the other hand there are still Christian mothers who frighten their errant children with the admonition: "There is a Moro." In Visaya, this is said thus: "Mahadlok ka sa Moro."

A third cause has to do with government unconsciously treating Muslim Filipinos as "special citizens" which results in a negative conception that a Muslim Filipino is "different and, therefore, should be either given special consideration, ignored or simply tolerated." This attitude sometimes becomes condescending and is roundly condemned by the Muslim Filipino. Another effect is for the Muslim Filipino to lose confidence in his own capability.

A fourth possible cause may be traced to the media which has the propensity to write or capitalize on negative aspects of the Muslim Filipino character which may also be found among non-Muslims. For example, stories about crimes always carry the descriptive adjective "Muslim" resulting in headlines like "Muslim bandits kill five" or "Muslim official charged with graft." It is pointless to cite an example of crime stories involving non-Muslims where the religious affiliation of the criminal is included.

A fifth cause is the Mindanao Problem which continues to fester, inspite of the signing of a peace accord between the mainstream Moro National Liberation Front and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines. In the concept or perception of the average Filipino the

Mindanao Problem is directly traceable to the Muslim Filipinos whose wants and needs appear to be insatiable. For this reason non-Muslims who possess this attitude have reason to be antagonistic against the Muslim Filipinos.

A sixth cause is the inefficient local government in Muslim areas which breeds family feuds, graft, corruption and other crimes. There is a popular saying among Muslims that "Philippine laws end where Muslim Mindanao begins." Indeed, there is truth to this adage because in Muslim areas laws are only for the rich, powerful and royal families. Unfortunately, the government appears helpless or uncaring. That is why, Muslim Filipinos are attracted to rebel groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front which attends promptly to their complaints. For example, if a carabao is stolen, a report to the local MILF instantly brings results with the perpetrator being captured and tried. If he is found guilty, he is punished promptly. On the other hand, a report of a lost carabao to government authorities is a costly, long process. The carabao owner will probably be asked for "gasoline" money or an amount equivalent to the cost of his carabao, before it is returned. In this case the thief or rustler not only gets the cash equivalent of the carabao he has stolen but he is also left unpunished.

A seventh cause is confusion caused by the operation of two sets of laws such as the Roman Law which the government follows and the Shariah, a divine law to which every Muslim must submit himself if he wishes to go to heaven. Human made laws, Muslim Filipinos have discovered, are weak, inefficient and corruptible as well as unfair and unjust while the Shariah is fair, just and instant. A Muslim Filipino who goes to jail for a crime thinks that he will not be punished in the afterlife for it. But a punishment under the Shariah affects him not only on earth but also in the afterlife. Therefore, he prefers the Shariah rather than the Roman law which he knows he can bend with the help of dishonest lawyers.

Errors or Misconceptions

There are only over a million Muslim Filipinos. This figure is erroneous because it is not based on census but mere speculation. Even election figures lie as to the exact number of Muslim Filipino electors. To the Muslim Filipinos, when a lower figure is cited, it is resented because they know that in this country number is power. For

want of a figure on the Muslim Filipino populace, it probably would be closer to the truth to say that they constitute a little less than ten percent of the total population. This is supported by the facts that Muslim families are larger than the average Filipino family and that plural marriages which they practice also add to this claim.

There are more than 10 Muslim ethno-linguistic groups found in the Philippines. As far as can be determined the major Muslim Filipino groups are: Maranaws of the Lanao Provinces; Maguindanaons of the Cotabato and Maguindanao provinces; Tau Sug of Sulu and Tawi-Tawi; Sama of Tawi-Tawi; Yakan of Basilan; Jama Mapun of Cagayan de Tawi-Tawi; Iranon of Buldon and other border towns in Lanao and Maguindanao and a few other ethno-linguistic groups scattered in Mindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Palawan.

All Muslim Filipinos are alike. This is a misconception. Except for a few groupings, Muslim Filipinos are principally bound by their religion, Islam, and less by their culture, tradition, or language. For example, the Maranaws, Maguindanaons and Iranon share mutually intelligible languages, culture and traditions. In the same manner, the Tau Sug, Sama, and, to some extent, Yakan have a mutually intelligible language and some common cultural, traditional, and social foundations. But these two groups require Pilipino or English to be able to communicate with each other. In other words except for religion and, probably, a common history which is largely contemporary, Muslim Filipinos are distinct and different by themselves as they are with Christian Filipino groups. However, if you remove Islam and Christianity, a common cultural matrix which is largely indigenous is likely to surface. An example is superstitious beliefs which are found among practically most, if not all, Filipino groups whether Muslim, Christian or indigenous.

Members of the Islamized ethno-linguistic groups such as the Maranaws, Tau Sug, Maguindanaons or Sama are all Muslims. Such a statement is quite incorrect because there are members of these groups who are either only nominally Muslims or who have been converted to other religions. When a Maranaw claims that he is a Muslim and somebody says that he is So and So and is eating pork when he is also a Maranaw or a Muslim, this should explain it. Even persons who may call themselves Muslims may not be practicing Muslims but Muslims by "accident of birth or circumstance."

All Muslims are good, God-fearing, law-abiding and peaceful. Theoretically, a Muslim is a good person, i. e., he will do no harm to a fellowman. In fact a Muslim is defined as "one who submits

willingly to the will of Allah." But there are persons who are Muslims in prayer but not in action or deed. It is incorrect, therefore, to look at a Muslim or Islam through the example or practices of some Muslims.

Muslim Misconception Beliefs

Muslims are warlike, troublesome. This is again another misconception. Just like the Arabs, the various Islamized groups already possess certain characteristics which even Islam could only minimize and not completely eradicate. Maratabat or fierce pride which is found in other Malays is not an inherent Muslim characteristic but more of an indigenous propensity to take offense easily. It is called "face" or "hiya" among other Filipino groups. Another explanation for the Maranaw maratabat is his over-sensitive nature that may be due to his having been isolated or his long history of fighting for survival. As we say in the Muslim areas, it is presumed that one is brave, otherwise one cannot survive. Among the Sama of Tawi-Tawi, a newborn baby is submerged in water to test his capacity to survive.

Muslims believe only in Islam and Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him!). This is another misconception. Muslims believe in all the Prophets and the revealed Books. In fact, a Muslim is under obligation to spread the word of God to his fellowmen or go to hell.

"Only a dead Moro is a good Moro." This statement reportedly came from the Americans. It was natural for Americans to feel this way because the Moros or Muslims continuously fought them as they did the other colonizers who came to offer them peace, but actually desired to convert them to another religion. In Mindanao, for example, annihilating the Muslim Filipinos, if this is possible, will not solve any problem. Allah will not allow it.

A Muslim is non-productive because he spends so much time praying. This is incorrect. The Muslim believes that preparing for the Hereafter takes precedence over worldly wealth or pleasure. In other words, while it is not wrong for the Muslim to seek wealth on earth, this should be done only as a means of going to heaven rather than as an end in itself. Besides, true wealth and happiness cannot be found on earth but in heaven. Also, everything in this world is a gift from Allah. One, therefore, should not aspire to acquire more wealth than what he needs for himself and for others.

A Muslim abhors pig which he reveres. The Qur'an says, and science has proven it, that the pig is a dirty animal and that eating its meat gives one all kinds of diseases. This is the reason Muslims do not eat pork or its by-products, be it lard, etc. But it is not only pork which is prohibited to a Muslim. Other animals like monkey, snake, crocodile, and others may not also be eaten by a Muslim. Liquors, too, or any food which may cause intoxication or affect one's sanity may not also be partaken of. To a Muslim, eating *haram*, forbidden food, no matter how minute, results in his isolation from Allah for forty days. This means that for forty days, every act of faith or prayer of a Muslim will remain unanswered by Allah.

A Muslim will go to heaven if he kills a Christian or any non-believer. But Islam teaches that taking the life of a living being including animals is a sin. That is why a Muslim is forbidden to eat food from an animal that is not butchered in accordance with Islam. In some rare instances, however, a man, whether he is a Muslim or a Christian may take the life of another. But this is the exception rather than the rule. At any rate, it is only Allah who can render the decision and not any man or any rule.

A Muslim may not marry a Christian or any non-Muslim. What Islam prohibits is marriage between a Muslim and an atheist or a non-believer or one without a religion. Prophet Muhammed (Peace Be Upon Him!) once married a Christian, a daughter of a defeated King, who, he did not wish to be harmed.

Muslims are mostly ignorant and unprogressive. Islamic education in the Philippines and in other Muslim countries plays a critical role in the practice of Islam. In fact, the Holy Qur'an enjoins a Muslim to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. If older Muslim Filipinos prevented their children from going to school, it was not because they did not know the value of education but that they did not wish their conversion which was the goal of education, especially during the Spanish and American regimes. Today, literacy among Muslims, especially in Arabic, is very high. To conservative Muslims a western type of education is still unacceptable, especially if Islamic education is abandoned. This explains why in Muslim areas public school pupils leave on the weekend for their Islamic education in the *madaris*.

The agrarian problem in Mindanao is caused by the practice of Muslims to sell their lands several times, i.e., a Christian buys the land from a Muslim. Later, his kin come to get their share. Such a problem arises because non-Muslims misunderstand land ownership

in Islam. Theoretically, land belongs to Allah. Man can possess land only if he needs it. After he is through using it, he allows another Muslim to cultivate it. This means that most, if not all lands, are communal rather than private. No one person can, therefore, sell a Muslim land. If such sale is made, the buyer needs to secure the consent of the community itself or its leader. The torrens title has violated the concept of land ownership in Islam. For this reason, the agrarian problem in Mindanao has become complicated.

There are no illegitimate children in Islam. Strictly speaking, no physical or sexual contact is possible outside marriage. That is why children born to a Muslim couple are legitimate. Of course, there are exceptions where a child may be born out of wedlock. In such a situation a great sin is committed. It is said that the couple who bear a child out of wedlock must consume that child in the Hereafter as punishment. In property sharing, the male issue gets a larger share than the female issue.

Muslims are polygamous. Islam allows a Muslim male to marry four women simultaneously, provided that he can fulfill certain requirements, i.e., he can treat them fairly and justly; he is financially stable; he is physically fit and that the earlier wife agrees to the succeeding marriage. Under such requirements, polygamy becomes a restriction rather than a license. It makes the Muslim male responsible in his relationship with a woman. In non-Muslim societies, a man is free to engage in extra-marital sex and even have children which he and his society condemn.

Muslims fast by not taking solid food. However, they may drink water, juice, etc. To a Muslim, fasting means complete abstinence from food, beverages, and any sinful act. The objective of fasting is not only to cleanse the physical self, but also to attain spiritual purity. It also teaches Muslims to love one another by experiencing what the poor among them experience. Islam enjoins the Muslim to share what he has during the Ramadhan so that he can get more blessings from Allah. Sex during the hours of fasting can only be atoned for by fasting continuously for sixty days, freeing 60 slaves or feeding 60 persons.

Muslim Misconceived Nationalism

The integration of Muslim Filipinos into the mainstream national society can happen only if they adopt the culture of the Filipino majority. Nothing could be far from the truth. In Muslim countries,

Christian minority live peacefully and progressively because the latter are governed by their own laws. In the Philippines the Muslim minority are prohibited from being governed by the Shariah which is a violation of Islam. Once government consents to putting the Muslim Filipinos under the Shariah peace will prevail in the Philippines.

Graft and corruption is rampant in Muslim areas among Muslim Filipinos. The culture of graft and corruption is nation-wide. It is committed not only by Muslims but also by non-Muslims. But in Muslim communities, the people are very sensitive to graft and corruption because its physical manifestations are easily recognized.

Muslims are unreliable. They are also treacherous. Again, this is a trait which knows no race nor religion. A Muslim is a true friend. If his friend is attacked, he will die first. But once he becomes an enemy, he is the worst enemy that one can have. There is a saying among Muslim Maranaws that a Muslim is as soft as cotton when treated fairly and justly, but he is as hard as granite if he is persecuted. In the epic Darangen, Prince Bantugan says that "he preferred death to several lives of cowardice and indignity."

Muslim Filipinos value their guns more than their wives. This is an exaggeration of a reality which every Muslim must face. Because of family feuds, it is the gun rather than the wife which a man can rely on to protect himself and his family, including his wife. It is quite unfair to equate the importance of an inanimate object to the mother of one's children. The value of a Muslim woman may be gauged from the fact that her male relatives are prepared to die in her defense.

Muslim Filipinos are rich. The visitor to Muslim areas like Marawi City will doubtless have this initial impression because of the activities which one witnesses. However, poverty actually stalks Muslim communities. There are now more beggars than before. Crime has increased. But because Muslim Filipino families are closely knit, poverty is held at bay. Every Muslim is a keeper, not only of his brother but also his family. What one has is shared with his relatives. Also the Maranaw is an astute businessman. He is satisfied with a small profit and is attracted to any kind of business. This explains why centers of trade and commerce all over the country experience an influx of Maranaw itinerant merchants who sell everything from batik to perfume. Slowly, the Maranaw merchant is posing a stiff challenge to the Chinese entrepreneur.

The Muslim Filipinos are indolent, carefree and fatalistic. The truth is that a Muslim is hardworking. But he chooses the type of work

or activity he wishes to get involved in. If you visit Tugaya municipality in Lanao del Sur at day time, you will see adults playing chess or whiling away their time. But at night, a visit to this same place will show how industrious the people are. As soon as dusk falls and the prayers are said, the Tugayan begins his work, fashioning jewelry made of gold or silver or producing daggers and other forms of weaponry to be exported to Malaysia.

Muslim Filipino marriages are expensive and ostentatious. This is true with only a few weddings between rich Muslims. The average marriage or wedding is done very simply, involving a dowry of as little as P5,000.00 and simple snacks. Islam actually prohibits lavish weddings.

Muslim Filipinos seek independence or separation from their Christian countrymen. In actuality, Muslim Filipinos seek their governance by Shariah. This is the only way by which they can be assured of a place in heaven. But this is not to say that, if Shariah is implemented, it will prejudice Christians. There are countries with mixed population that allow the minority to be governed by their own laws. The Shariah should apply only to the Muslims wherever they live. Christian Filipinos must be assured that the application of the Shariah will not in any way deprive them of their inherent rights as Filipino citizens. In the same manner, Muslim Filipinos must be made to understand that the Shariah is intended to strengthen their faith by subjecting them to Islamic laws and sanctions which shall insure the fulfillment of their dreams, aspirations and goals as Muslims and as Filipino citizens.

Muslim Filipinos are disloyal to the country. This is absolutely false. Muslim Filipinos were active in the defense of their country beginning with the Spaniards and up to the Japanese regime. If they are fighting the government, it is not because they are disloyal. They wish only to be allowed to live completely and fully as Muslims while remaining loyal to their country. Islam enjoins the Muslim who lives under a non-Muslim country and government to support and be loyal to that country.

Solutions to the Misconceptions

The immediate solution to the above-enumerated errors or misconceptions is through education. The schools must include the Islamic part of the Filipino legacy in their curriculum which should

also include our indigenous communities. Teachers who are in the service should be given orientation courses to equip them with sufficient information and data about the Muslims and indigenous groups. The curriculum of teacher-training institutions, the military schools and schools for future diplomats, community development workers and other courses which prepare a person for work in the rural communities, should include subjects on Muslim culture and indigenous communities. In short, the Filipino must know, understand and love himself before he can work with other Filipinos.

Philippine laws must be applied equally, forcefully and continuously to all Filipinos, be they Muslims, Christians, atheists, rich, poor, young or old. Local government agencies must perform their task efficiently and fairly. Every local government official from the agriculturist to the mayor or Governor must be compelled to perform his assigned task. They must be made responsible and responsive to the needs, ambitions, and aspirations of their people. To be able to perform their jobs effectively, local government officials must live and work in their communities. Their frequent travel to Manila must be curbed. The Department of Interior and Local Government should supervise local government units and monitor their activities, particularly their development programs and projects.

In areas where drug addiction, gun running and other criminal activities appear rampant, local government officials must tie up with the intelligence agencies in order to monitor the movement and activities of known or suspected criminal elements. No community should be allowed to develop into a haven or a sanctuary for criminal elements. This can be insured if a tie-up is drawn up among the local government officials, the PNP, the military and concerned citizens.

In Muslim and indigenous communities, traditional leaders, whose influence is still strong, should be given a role to play in keeping the peace, development programs and projects, and socio-cultural activities intended to develop moral values, nationalism, and adherence to democratic processes. People empowerment should be encouraged and extended sufficient support by government.

To prop up and improve the local economy, small-scale industries producing and processing local products such as essential commodities should be developed, encouraged and extended financial and technical assistance. For this purpose, municipal, provincial and regional level marketing and distribution systems should be set up with the support of the government in order to insure equitable distribution of food and essential commodities at all times. Of course, farm

to market roads, communication and monitoring systems must be installed as well as transportation facilities improved.

Small lending institutions should be set up in strategic areas to extend assistance to small-scale industries and small-scale businessmen. Banks in urban centers can concentrate on big financial transactions while the financial needs of rural areas are effectively addressed by small lending institutions. Such a set up will minimize red tape and voluminous paper work as well as collaterals which presently discourage entrepreneurs.

Migration from the rural to urban communities must be rationalized, not curtailed. Perhaps a scheme could be devised whereby persons who intend to migrate to the urban centers can be helped, so that they will not turn into squatters or become urban poor. In like manner, persons who live in the rural communities should be assisted, so that they will be encouraged to remain where they are and not try to seek greener pastures that are non-existent. For this purpose, high standard educational institutions should be developed in rural communities, small scale industries set up, and necessary facilities and services introduced. In this way, people will not waste time, effort and money going to urban centers just to buy grocery, watch the movies, or mail their letters. In Marawi City, you need to go to Iligan to make a long distance or overseas call, fax a message, or buy groceries. Hospitalization also requires a long distance trip to Iligan or Cagayan because hospital facilities are locally unavailable or insufficient.

It is encouraging to note that Muslim Ulama's are now interacting with Christian bishops and other religious leaders. But such contacts should be made more frequent and broadened to include other elements or sectors of society such as NGOs and people's organizations. Preaching and proselitization activities should be coordinated with local authorities, so that their real intentions will not be the subject of suspicion or speculation. Even in religious activities there should be transparency. After all, a devout believer will not easily succumb to satanic importunings. Usually it is the ignorant, unbeliever and weak in faith, who easily submit to satanic blabberings.

Finally, we shall need Mindanao leaders like the late Senator Tomas Cabili, Governor Salvador Lluch, Senator Salipada K. Pendatun and Sultan Haroun Al Raschid Lucman, to name just a few, whose leadership knew no ethno-linguistic nor religious boundaries. They were Mindanao not Christian nor Muslim leaders. Their concern was Mindanao and the Mindanaons.

The Mindanao of the past cannot be the Mindanao of today. But God has not changed our hearts and minds. As individual Filipinos and believers in God, we continue to possess the capacity to understand, to tolerate and to unite. All that we need is the right environment, the right leaders, and a common objective to become united, peaceful and progressive.