Struggles to defend their freedom, homeland and way of life as well as the quest for peace are persistent themes in the history of the Sulus, particularly the Tausugs. Interspersed with peace treaties and resumption of hostilities, the embattled existence of the Sulus has been going on for more than four centuries. The state of war for centuries was, and still is, the source of the underdevelopment of Sulu society as well as the alienation and antagonism between the Sulus and other segments of what is now the Philippine national community. Among the Sulus, Islam remains a unifying force in their struggle against aggression for centuries and is currently shaping their sense of Moro solidarity.

**Sulusa**

The term Jolo is the Spanish corruption of the word Sulu, sometimes, written Soooloo in British and American sources. The present town of Jolo is a watershed. In the early days, it was referred to as Bawang, the name given to a sizable body of water where two river systems – one coming from the Southwest, the Maimbung area; the other from the Northeast, the area around Patikul and their respective tributaries – drain into the more formidable current of the Sulu Sea. It was later called Laum Banua when it became the capital of the Sultanate of Sulu. The word banua refers to community or settlement as well as the headman or ruler of a community in Sulu. The word laum means inside, core or center. Hence, Laum Banua can be interpreted to mean central banua or the core or center of banuas. The settlement at Bawang was one of the earliest well-known and prosperous banuas in Sulu, aside from Maimbung and Buansa. When the Sultanate form of government unified most of the banuas into a national community and
its capital was transferred from Buansa to Bawang, the latter came to be known as Laum Banua being the place from where the central and highest political authority of land emanated.

The natives always refer to the present mainland Sulu as Sug which means current, or putting it descriptively, Lupah Sug (land of the current). In an historico-political sense, however, Lupah Sug does not only allude to the present Sulu island. It is the appropriate designation for the entire Sulu archipelago. Lupah Sug is also capable of evoking certain profound memories. It reminds the Sulus, particularly the Tausugs, of the power and affluence of the Sultanate; it sums up the long series of wars dating back to the Spanish times; it symbolizes the Sulus' historical consciousness of resistance against any attempt at subjugating them. Lupah Sug also brings to mind a place where various cross-currents of Asian cultures merged fully and fruitfully, whereby a Sulu or Tausug owes the awareness of his distinct identity and the tempering of his character. The spirit of such heritage has infused solidarity among the Sulus up to the present.

In an historico-political sense, the term Sulus referred to the different groups of people who came under the rule of the Sultanate of Sulu. They were the Tausugs, the Samas (Samals), the Yakans, the Jama Mapun, the natives of Palawan, the Pala-u or Luwaan (Badjaos) and later, to include the people of the north Borneo, now called Sabah. Today, however, the term Sulus is used in a geographical reference to the people residing in the present Province of Sulu. This includes only the Tausugs, the Samas, the Badjaus, and other groups who identify themselves as inhabitants of Sulu. The Tausugs are predominant and they compose the third largest Moro group in the Philippines. Because of their dominant political role during the heyday of the Sultanate of Sulu, there remain today scattered Tausug communities in the former domains of the Sulu Sultanate in Tawi-Tawi, Basilan, the Zamboanga peninsula, Palawan and Sabah.

Historical accounts as well as oral traditions relate that before the advent of Islam, the religion of the Sulus was characterized by the worship of stones, graves and celestial bodies. Their socio-political institution was focused around
the Banua which was similar to the barangay system in the northern part of the Philippine archipelago. A Banua was composed of a number of mostly related families under a local leadership, a raja or datu as the case may be and situated within a defined territory. It was relatively independent; although there were also alliances among banuas for purposes of trade and mutual defense.

Some elements of Chinese, Indian as well as other distinct Javanese or Malay cultures had been assimilated by the Sulus before they were Islamized. Traces of these cultures could still be identified in the religious practices, art methods, costumes, languages and the adat or customary law of the Sulus today. For instance, the titles like Paduka, Maharaja, Raja, Raja Sipad (from the Sanskrit Raja Shripaduka), and Batara (from the Sanskrit Bhatara, meaning lord) are of Indian origin. The burning of incense during performance of rituals and the observance of “cleansing” day (the Panulak Balah, literally to drive away evil or misfortune) are also attributed to Indian influence. Traces of Chinese elements in Sulu culture are discernible in the manner and style of dressing, the use of Chinese textiles, culinary habits, agricultural techniques such as the system of grafting and other methods to improve the quality of fruits, and the adoption of architectural designs and ornamentation. The exclusive use of color yellow by Sulu Royalty is said to be Chinese court influence. Javanese or Malay culture is predominant in the costumes, languages, and adat of the Sulus. Over and above these influences, however, the coming of Islam has contributed more sophistication and dimension to the cultural traditions of the Sulus.

Islam

The initial spread of Islam to Sulu was a function of trade. Historical accounts revealed that from around the end of the 13th century, or possibly earlier, Sulu was already an active participant of the ten international trade between maritime Southeast Asia and mainland Asia. The well-known foreign participants in the Sulu trade were the Chinese and Arab traders. Among the early trade partners of the Sulus, however, the Arabs were the ones who had left the deepest imprints
on their lives and cultures since some Arab Muslim traders also performed missionary activities.

Since travel in those days was not easy, considering the point of origin especially of the Arab Muslim traders, it was possible that they stayed for quite a long time or even got married and had permanent residence in places where they happened to conduct business. Hence, “there existed during the last quarter of the thirteenth century, if not earlier, a Muslim settlement community in Sulu.” Furthermore, the existence of such settlement, which was mainly composed of foreign Muslim traders, would also suggest that as early as that period Islamic influences had already reached the shores of Sulu. And the same settlement must have helped to facilitate the missionary activities of the learned men in Islam, the Makhdumin, who arrived in Sulu at a later period. Aside from trading with the Suluses, some Arab Muslim traders also performed missionary activities. And the same settlement must have helped much to facilitate the missionary activities of the learned men in Islam, the Makhdumin, who arrived in Sulu at a later period.

In the history of Sulu, the period from around 1380 to 1450 witnessed the arrival of learned men in Islam and the rise of a centralized government – the Sultanate. This period was highlighted by the coming of Karim ul-Makhdum, a missionary-scholar from Arabia, who reached Sulu around 1380. About ten years after, Raja Baginda, a Sumatran prince, with some learned men in Islam arrived at Sulu after a brief stop in Zamboanga and Basilan. He settled in Buansa which later on became the Sultanates’s first capital. Sayyid Al-Hashim Abu Bakr followed Raja Baginda and around 1450 he established the Sultanate of Sulu. He became the first Sultan with the title Paduka Mahasari Maulana Al-Sultan Sharif-ul-Hashim and all Sultans claimed descent from him.

**Bangsa Sug**

The coming of Islam not only gradually changed the beliefs of the Suluses from polytheism to monotheism, but also led to the unification of their banuas to a
bangsa (nation). Since the establishment of the Sultanate of Sulu, the Sulus referred to themselves as Bangsa Sug (Sulu Nation). At the height of its power, the territorial domains of the Sultanate included the entire Sulu archipelago (i.e. including Tawi-Tawi), Basilan, Palawan, the Zamboanga peninsula and North Borneo (now Sabah). The Sultanate of Sulu was a multi-ethnic state and was the first and only native state that survived the onslaught of Spanish colonialism in what is now the Philippine archipelago.

Throughout its existence the institutions of the Sultanate made an effort to observe and implement Islamic laws and traditions. The Sultan was the highest official of the state and he exercised both civil and religious functions. He was, however, not an absolute ruler. The Ruma Bichara (state council), composed of the Raja Muda (heir apparent) and some powerful royal datus, was charged with the functions of formulating laws and policies of the state. With regard to local affairs as in administration of outlying regions or island territories the Sultan was represented by other lesser officials like the Panglima, Maharaja, and Ulangkaya. On religious affairs, he consulted the Qadi (judge) and the Ulama (scholars) in various parts of his domain.

It could be said that, with the establishment of the Sultanate, Islam had already made a strong foundation in Sulu. Islam, which did not completely eradicate the pre-Islamic traditions of the Sulus, brought new knowledge and culture. Notwithstanding its legacy of deep cultural imprints on Sulu society, Islam’s remarkable ideological impact on the Sulus was, and still is, expressed in their sense of nationality and a wider sense of unity with other Muslim communities in the Philippines, Southeast Asia and the rest of the ummah (worldwide Islamic community).

The life activities of the Sulus had expanded considerably during the heyday of the Sultanate. The Sulus had developed strong religious, political, economic, dynastic and military ties with the immediate neighboring Sultanates of Maguindanao, Buayan and the Lanao Lake area. Such relationships were also extended to include the Muslim principalities in what are now Indonesia and Malaysia;
furthermore, the Sultans of Sulu had embarked on diplomatic and direct trade relations with China whenever possible. Such ventures reflected the desire of Sulu Sultans to expand their authority and wealth, and to strengthen the Sultanate’s influence through Chinese recognition and commerce. Hence, before the coming of the Spaniards, Jolo had already emerged as one of the international trading ports in maritime Southeast Asia that were frequently visited by Arab, Chinese, and other Asian traders. In the words of Dr. Najeeb M. Saleeby:

...while Manila and Cebu were still small and insignificant settlements, Jolo had reached the proportion of a city and was, without exception, the richest and foremost settlements in the Philippines islands.

In brief, with Islam and the Sultanate form of government it inspired, it could be said that the Sulus had attained the status comparable to the modern-day concept of nation-state and had developed higher socio-economic and political institutions earlier than any other natives of the Philippine archipelago before and at the time of the Spanish conquest. In fact, before the arrival of the Spaniards, the power of the Sulus was already felt

...all over Luzon and the Bisayan Islands, the Celebes Sea, Palawan, North Borneo, and the China Sea, and their trade extended from China and Japan, at one extreme, to Malacca, Sumatra and Java at the other.

The status of the Sultanate of Sulu as a sovereign and independent state was recognized by Spain, its chief colonial adversary, as well as by the British, the French, the Dutch and the Americans in most of their treaty relations with the Sulus. The Peace Treaty of 1737 between Spain and Sulu during the reign of Sultan Azim ud-Din (Alimuddin) clearly demonstrated the stature of the Sultanate as a sovereign power. This treaty contained five articles. The first article proclaimed the determination of Sulu and Spain to preserve peace, to settle their
differences amicably, and to prohibit hostilities between their subjects. The second article provided for mutual aid and alliance against foreign enemy except the other European powers. The third article provided for free trade between the two countries. The fourth article provided that each country should be held responsible for violations of the treaty committed by its subjects. The fifth article provided for the exchange of prisoners and return of church images and ornaments in the possession of the Sulus. Commenting on the aforesaid treaty, one scholar made the following observations:

...it is important to note in view of later developments that it was a treaty strictly so called, that is was one between two sovereign states, each recognized as such by the other.

The Sultanate of Sulu existed for almost five centuries, i.e., from around 1450 to 1915 when Sultan Jamalul Kiram II gave up his temporal powers in favor of American colonial rule under the Carpenter agreement of 1915. It was the first and the last centralized political authority in Philippine archipelago prior to the birth of the Republic of the Philippines in 1946. Throughout its existence, the Sultanate was practically presided over by a single dynasty since all Sulu sultans claimed descent from the first sultan Abu Bakr or Sharif ul-Hashim. The continued existence of the Sultanate for almost five centuries is one of the main reasons why up to this day the Sulus can hardly envision of a politico-social life without their own governing authority.

**Against Spain**

The Sulus, just like the other Moro people in the south, resolutely resisted the Spanish attempts to colonize and Christianize them. The more than three centuries of armed conflicts between the Spaniards, who enlisted the support of the Christianized natives of the north, and the Moros is recorded in history as the Moro Wars. There was no stage of the Moro Wars during the Spanish and Ameri-
can colonial periods wherein the Sulus had not fought either in the defensive or offensive positions. The Sulus' bloody and mainly successful resistance against Spain was an effort to defend their freedom, homeland and way of life. The same could be said of the resistance against the Americans.

The state of war between the Sulus and Spaniards started during the last quarter of the 16th century. For a period of almost three centuries, i.e., up to around the middle of the 19th century, the Sulus remained politically supreme in their dominion. This was partly due to the moral as well as material support they received from neighboring Muslim principalities. Indeed the Sulus’ strong identification with the Ummah (Islamic Community) facilitated and secured support from the largely Islamic Malaysian world. In some instances during that period, the power of the Sulus to resist the onslaught of Spanish colonialism was reinforced by their alliances with other Western powers like the Dutch and the British.

Two of the important events during that period which almost led to the Sulus’ downfall could be mentioned here. In 1638, three years after the establishment of Spanish garrison (Fort Pilar) in Zamboanga, Spanish forces attacked Sulu during the reign of Sultan Mawalil Wasit I (Rajah Bungsu), one of the most outstanding Sulu Sultans and a contemporary of the famous Sultan Kudarat of Maguindanao. The invaders had their initial victory. For the first time, the defense of Jolo fell and the capital of the Sultanate was temporarily transferred to Dungun, Tawi-Tawi, in 1639. However, the occupation of Jolo by the Spanish troops was temporary. Rajah Bungsu’s aggressive and able leadership, his alliance with Makassar in 1638 and the Dutch in 1644, as well as the Koxinga threat in the north, forced the Spaniards to evacuate Jolo and make a truce with the Sulus in 1646. Another event occurred in the 1740s when Sultan Azim-ud-Din I, popularly known as Alimud-Din, “beguiled by a flattery and impelled by greed at the offer of Spanish money and protection, accepted the missionaries to his ultimate undoing and the loss of his throne.” However, Sulus independence was saved and secured in due time when Azim-ud-Din I was dethroned on account
of his soft disposition towards the Spaniards by his brother and successor, Datu Bantilan, who reigned as Sultan Muiz-ud-Din.

The decline of the Sulus’ resistance against the Spaniards began during the second half of the 19th century. During that time the Dutch and the British had already made considerable gains in their colonization of the Netherlands East Indies and British Malaya. This turn of events made the Sulus at the middle of the colonial power play and territorial expansions in maritime Southeast Asia by three Western colonizers – the British, the Dutch and the Spaniards. The British and the Dutch were originally interested in trade and later, in territorial concessions. The Spaniards were, as usual, bent to colonize and extend the sovereignty of the Spanish monarchy to Sulu. The pressure of colonial policies on the Sulu Sultanate had greatly affected its defense posture. Under the tight circumstances, the Sultans were forced to enter into unequal treaties or agreements with the above mentioned colonial powers that ultimately led to disastrous consequences to the Sulus’ political independence.

The last Spanish attack on Jolo in 1876 led to the capture and the 6th burning of the town. The capital of the Sultanate was transferred to Maimbung and Jolo remained occupied by the Spaniards until 1899 when the Americans arrived to replace them. Indeed the Sulus defeat in 1876 marked the end of their organized resistance against Spain. Due to Spanish pressures and bribery, the royal datus were divided and some of them had pledged support for Spanish sovereignty. Since that period, the Sultanate ceased to provide leadership or guidance to the centuries-old resistance of the Sulus against western colonialism and imperialism. The same period also witnessed the rise of some Sulus who fought against their own people in behalf of the colonizers for personal reasons.

Be that as it may, the yearning among the Sulus to resist western colonialism and imperialism and their native allies did not altogether cease. When organized resistance under the Sultanate failed, individual or group resistance emerged as exemplified by the rise of the Parrangsabils (Juramentados in Spanish sources) since the last Spanish occupation of Jolo in 1876. The tradition of Parrangsabil
originally referred to individual or group of Sulu warriors who had taken an oath
to continue the resistance against the Spanish occupation of their capital. After
performing specific rituals and prayers with religious leaders, the Parrangsabils
would rush at the Spanish invaders with the determination to kill as many as
possible and not to expect to return alive. They hoped to merit paradise as a
reward. To the Parrangsabils “the enemy of the state was also an enemy to ‘Al-
lahu Ta’ala,’ and no life was deemed too dear to sacrifice for the cause of home
and God.” More than three hundred soldiers were killed by the Parrangsabils
in the town of Jolo alone during the last eight years of Spanish occupation. Par-
rangsabil remains a living tradition among the Sulus up to the present.

In brief, the present town of Jolo was the bone of contention for 321 years,
beginning with the first Spanish attack in 1578 and ending in the departure of
the Spanish troops in 1899. Jolo was assaulted by Spanish forces on sixteen occa-
sions, five of which resulted in its capture. However, no permanent Spanish gar-
rison was established in Jolo until 1876. During the 321 years of struggle for Jolo,
the Sulus defended their capital for 290 years, the Spaniards held it for around
31 years and were able to maintain control mainly in the town of Jolo for only 22
years.

Against America

When the Americans arrived in Sulu at the turn of this century, they just
started from where the Spaniards had left. The Americans had generally adopt-
ed a dual policy towards the Moros, in general, and the Sulus, in particular. First,
they used persuasion/co-option and a “policy of attraction” particularly among
the traditional elite by giving them economic concessions and guaranteeing
non-interference in the religious and customary affairs of the Sulus in exchange
for their political allegiance to America. Second, brutal force was used against
those who were not convinced of and opposed America’s “manifest destiny” “to
develop, to civilize, to educate, to train in the science of self-government” the
people of Moroland. Hence, history has recorded America’s “judicious applica-
tion” of the .45 caliber pistol, the old single shot muskets and Mausers as well as canons during a decade (1903–1913) of “pacification campaign” in Sulu when thousands of Sulus, including women and children, had fallen both inside and outside their kutahs (forts). A century ago, Najeeb M. Saleeby summed up why the Sulus resisted Spanish and American colonialism:

...The Sulu has been pictured to the outside world as a black devil incar-
nate, borne in mischief and conceived in inequity, without human char-
acteristic, barbarous and savage as his second cousin the Orang-utan of
Borneo. The Sulu had no means or chance of pleading his cause before
an international court, and his cry could not be heard or registered by a
foreign hand or press. He was not met except with a predeter-mination
to fight him. He was not approached except with the intention of sharing
his treasure. He was not invited except to surrender his right of govern-
ment and no alternative was offered him except tribute or death. It is out
of reason to expect such people to abandon their customs, traditions,
government, and religion without a struggle. It is out of reason to expect
them to yield to threats and be daunted by a bombshell shot from a dis-
tance.

American attitudes towards the Moros and their culture were generally negative. In 1903, Capt. John J. Pershing, who was later promoted to Brigadier General and subsequently appointed as the third Governor of the Moro Province, recorded his first and lasting impression of the Moro when he said: “He is a savage.” That same year, General Samuel S. Summer who commanded troops in Mind-
anao and Sulu declared that:

... it will be necessary to eradicate about all the customs that have here-
tofore governed the Moros’ habits of life. They are essentially different
people from us in thought, word and action and their religion will be a
serious bar to any efforts towards Christian civilization. So long as Mohammedanism prevails, Anglo-Saxon civilization will make slow headway.

General Leonard Wood, the first Governor of the Moro Province also described his own impression of the Moros:

The Moros and other savage peoples have no laws – simply a few customs which are nowhere general... In short, nothing has been found worthy of codification or imitation, and little or nothing which does not exist in better form wherever humane, decent and civilized laws are in force.

It must be also pointed out that some of the American military officials assigned in Moroland during the “Pacification campaign” were veterans of the campaigns against the Indians in the American West. And so their popular motto “A good Indian is a dead Indian” became “A good Moro is a dead Moro.”

**Filipinization**

When the Americans came to Sulu archipelago they decided, although they just kept it to themselves, to take away the political independence of the Sulus, and they took it by all means.

From 1903–1920, the American military and civilian officials initially exercised indirect and, later, direct control and responsibility over Sulu affairs. This period witnessed Brigadier General John C. Bates concluded a treaty with Sultan Jamalul Kiram II on August 1899 (Bates Treaty) which made the Sulu Sultanate a protected state of the United States, as it had been in relation to Spain after the treaty of 1878. Among other things, the Sultan formally acknowledged U.S. sovereignty and the American pledged not to interfere with internal affairs, religion and adat (customary law) of the Sulus. The Americans agreed to fully respect the rights and dignity of the Sultan and datus of Sulus, provided they would be allowed to occupy and control such places “as public interests seem to demand,”
and giving due compensation to the owners of property taken. The Sulus were allowed to have free, unlimited and undutiable trade in domestic products with any part of the Philippines. The officials of the Sultanate were given monthly salaries ranging from $15 to $250. The U.S. unilaterally abrogated the Bates Treaty on March 2, 1904, claiming the Sultan failed to stop Sulus’ resistance and that the treaty was a hindrance to the effective administration of the region.

The Sulu archipelago became one of the five districts of the Moro Province, 1903–1913, which was successively governed by three American military officers and modeled in many respects after the Spanish “Politico-Military Government of Mindanao and Adjacent Islands” (commandancia). From 1914–1920, Sulu archipelago was administered by the Department of Mindanao and Sulu, headed by an American civilian administrator, Frank W. Carpenter. The establishment of civilian-controlled administration since 1914 after the Sulus were “pacified” was aimed at pursuing the so-called “policy of attraction.” Among others, the main features of this policy were the implementation of more public works, health and educational programs in Moroland as well as the encouragement of settlers from Luzon and Visayas into the south. In line with preparing the Philippines for eventual independence as promised by the Jones Law of 1916, the Department also intensified the “Filipinization” of Moroland by increasing the number of natives from the north assigned to positions of governmental authority in the south and the introduction of basically western or Christian-oriented laws and traditions in Moro areas. For twenty one years (1899–1920), therefore, the Americans took direct hand in their efforts to “develop, civilize, educate” the Moros.

Since 1920 up to the Commonwealth (1935–1946), the Americans passed their colonial mission to their mainly northern Filipino allies to whom authority in Moroland was mostly entrusted. During that period, it could generally said that policy making and administration in Moroland were generally controlled by northern Filipino officials, at first under the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes in the Department of the Interior and then, during the Commonwealth, under the Commissioner for Mindanao and Sulu. The operation of governmental struc-
tures in the Sulu archipelago throughout those years served to incorporate the Sulus and their homeland into the Philippine body politic. Sulus’ resistance to this incorporation was always overwhelmed by the pervasive and coercive powers of the state, at first through the instrumentality of the U.S. army and later of the Philippine Scouts and Philippine Constabulary. Peter G. Gowing summed up the Americans and their allies attitude towards the Moros during that period as follows:

The American looked on the Moros as savages needing to be civilized; the Christian Filipinos agreed, and also looked upon the homeland of the Moros as a territory promising vast economic resources for an independent Philippines. Neither the Americans nor the Christian Filipinos were disposed to be sensitive to the Moros’ sense of nationality.

It must be pointed out, however, that the administration of Sulu archipelago during the aforesaid period was not entirely devoid of Sulus’ participation. Some Sulu leaders, especially from among the American-educated and datu-rank, were given positions in the local or national administration. But most of them, if not all, were known to be sympathetic to the incorporation of Sulu into the Philippine body politic. The Sulus as a whole were not enthusiastic about the Filipinization of their homeland. It could be said that many Sulus welcomed the implementation of more health and infrastructure programs in Sulu. But many Sulus then were suspicious or resentful of the educational system established by the Americans because its curricular offerings were basically Western or Christian-oriented and devoid of Islamic and Sulu traditions.

Even after their major military defeat at the 1913 Battle of Bud Bagsak, many Sulus occasionally resorted to armed resistance, however, in vain, if only to dramatize their dislike of being labeled as Filipinos. This was exemplified in the revolt of Datu Tahil, a veteran of the 1913 Battle of Bud Bagsak, in 1927 and the Kamlun uprising in 1951. In 1961 Congressman Datu Ombra Amilbangsa intro-
duced House Bill 5682 calling for “granting and recognizing the independence” of the Sulu archipelago. The Bill did not produce any result, but it highlighted the Sulus’ sense of deprivation and their resentment against the Manila government for its neglect of the Province of Sulu. While undertaking his research in Sulu in the late 1960s, Thomas M. Kiefer observed that consciousness of being part of Philippine body politic was “only the commitment of the educated Tausug leadership”, but most rural Tausugs had “only a very hazy idea of the meaning of the Philippine national government.”

Since 1972 the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) has emerged as a leading articulator among contemporary Moro organizations of the centuries old Moro armed tradition to defend their freedom, homeland and way of life. The founding Chairman of the MNLF, Nurullaji (Nur) Misuari, and many of its top leaders and members hail from the Sulu archipelago. Misuari has played a significant role in defining and popularizing contemporary Moro aspirations and collective identity – Bangsamoro (Moro people, race or nation). The MNLF has initially demanded for the secession of Moroland from the Philippine Republic. But in the Tripoli Agreement of December 23, 1976 and the Final Peace Agreement of September 2, 1996 signed by the representatives of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the MNLF, with the participation of the Organization Islamic Conference (OIC), the MNLF agreed to the establishment of autonomy for the Moros within the realm of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines. The signing of the Tripoli Agreement and the Final Peace Agreement between the GRP and the MNLF can be interpreted as a watershed in the shift of the Philippine government’s official policy from integration to autonomy vis-a-vis the Moros. When the MNLF accepted autonomy a faction emerged and formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to continue the armed struggle for independence. The MILF has been engaged in peace talks with the government but no definitive agreement has been reached.

Among the most disastrous consequences of the centuries old Spanish-Sulu
wars were the heavy casualties suffered by the Sulus and the destruction of their communities. Thousands of Sulus, including women and children, died during decades of American “pacification campaigns” in the Sulu archipelago. The ongoing more than three decades of war involving the Sulus since the declaration of Martial Law in 1972 has led to terrible losses on the part of Sulus in terms of lives and properties. Thousands of Sulus were, and still are, displaced particularly those in Sabah. Nobody knows exactly how many Sulus reside in Sabah today. It was estimated in 1983 that between 160,000 and 200,000 Sulu evacuees were living in Sabah. The latest estimates range from 300,000 to half million.

Conclusion

The Sulus’ bloody and mainly successful resistance against Spain for centuries was an effort to defend their freedom, homeland and way of life. The same could be said of their resistance against America, particularly the American policy to incorporate the Sulus into the Philippine body politic. But history has also demonstrated that the Sulus have seldom turned their back at any opportunity to make with their enemies.

Historically, it was only during the American colonial regime that Sulu society was gradually incorporated into the Philippine body politic. This was accomplished either by force or persuasion by the American colonizers and their native allies. By then, the term Moro problem emerged. To the Americans and their native allies then, the problem was entirely the Sulus and their “backward” society while there was nothing wrong with their encroachment into the Sulu archipelago.

There is no doubt, therefore, that a glance at Sulu’s history would reveal that armed resistance seems to be a destiny that the Sulus have learned to accept. Indeed, it was a destiny manifested by one of the longest series of wars ever fought not only in the Philippines but in Southeast Asia. What makes this fact significant is that literature written about the Sulu Moros hardly hints at a history of peace. Indeed, since the last quarter of the 16th century up to the present,
there is no generation in Sulu archipelago that has not fought or witnessed war in their homeland. Other segments of Philippine society today are still tempted to say that the Sulus have never been peaceful people. This attitude tends to perpetuate the image of the Sulus, including Islam in the Philippines, as one that espouses violence and exclusivism. On the contrary, it was, and still is, the Sulus’ desire to live in peace in their homeland that led their life to be described by others as one of violence.

The problem we face today, and the same is true to generations before us, is how Moro resistance against Spain and America can be accommodated within the framework of a truly national struggle for freedom. The history of the struggle for freedom of the Filipino people (including the Moros) cannot just revolve around the events of the 1890’s particularly the short lived revolution of 1896. Such history should include the struggles of those who preserved their freedom and those who endeavored to regain their freedom since 1896.

Western colonial policies of war and persuasion eventually led to the dismemberment of the Bangsa Sug (Sulu Nation). But Bangsa Sug survived for almost five centuries, that is, from around 1450 to 1915. Hence its mark and memory can hardly be ignored or forgotten up to the present. The Moro people in southern Philippines particularly the Sulus are radicalized today not by global jihad but mainly by the circumstances of their marginalization in their own homeland such as poverty and the underdevelopment of their communities.

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