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Politics of Labeling the Philippines' Muslims[1]

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In context

Muslim insurgency in the Philippines, symbolized today by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), is one of the longest struggles against colonialism and imperialism in the past 400 years. This paper seeks to situate the MILF within a context of Muslim-Christian dynamics, focusing primarily on issues of discourse and terminology.

Since 9/11, the Philippine government has had to balance its membership in the anti-terrorist Coalition of the Willing[2] and ensure that it does not alienate its sizeable Muslim citizenry while it is engaged in the crucial stage of pursuing an internal peace initiative with the Moros. The Philippine government has struggled with the question of how it should name its opponents. One way of displaying its participation in the coalition is by putting a terrorist label on an internal opponent, such as the National Democratic Front (NDF), and thereby situating its internal struggle within the broader Global War on Terror (GWOT). While a similar designation on the MILF may earn for the government the approval of the Bush administration in Washington, the terrorist tag would hinder peace negotiations as it implies all-out-war.

Terrorist tagging has already been used to downgrade and stigmatize those established rebel groups with no demonstrated terrorist tradition,[3] as seen with the communist New People's Army (NPA) and the MILF. Still, other anti-state groups in the Philippines such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), among others, desire the terrorist tag, due to the high-profile media coverage that follows and the ASG's intention to have its acts and movements merit public attention.

Unconscious or conscious tools used – such as othering, labeling, and terrorist tagging – bode policy implications that also spill over to relationships between the internal populace and external actors. When used by the powerful, such as the concerned state or the perceived superpower, the United States, terrorist tagging means defining a certain policy towards the labeled group. It is meant to threaten an anti-state actor to mend its ways. In the Philippine case, the tag is supposed to halt the flow of foreign funds and support for the rebel group and give the military green light to launch a sustained offensive. Such policies also have implications on the relationship between the Muslim and Christian citizens of the country. Labeling rebel groups as terrorists and lumping them together with those from a religious community such as the Muslims alienate the bigger Muslim community from supporting nationalist government goals and may even shore up support for Muslim independence initiative.

The portrayal of Islam in the West and the Philippines

The 1979 Iranian revolution and the 1981 assassination of Egyptian head of state Anwar Sadat dramatically illustrate the emergence of Islamist-oriented upsurges within highly frustrated socioeconomic environments. Yet, these events eventually became the primary lens through which every other Islamist movement came to be viewed. This somehow displays the limited vocabulary with which Islam is presented in the West, and the strong legacy that Said's *Orientalism* still plays in these representations.

At a presentation during a conference in Malaysia, Kocher (1995) identifies two recurring themes in Western perceptions of the Islamic world: A belief that the global struggles of Muslims lack legitimacy as well as justice; and the immediate association of Islam with a political culture that is profoundly authoritarian and anti-democratic. The Islamic world has been consistently seen as alien and exotic, and the causes fought for by the Muslims have been deemed incomprehensible, which is why most Islamic political and social movements have not been able to capture the attention and sympathy of Western citizens. Instead, the actions and ideology of Muslim extremists – the fundamentalists of the popular press – are seen to represent the entire body of Muslims. Such a view has only increased in our post-Cold War era, where a

perceived global threat of fundamentalist Islam has replaced the former bugbears of national liberation, ethnonationalism, and tribalism.

The images of political transformation that pro-Western Arab and Islamic autocratic regimes present to foreign observers only blur the picture further. From this undemocratic environment, reports from the heart of Muslim societies have not been transmitted through the media without being sensationalized, either internally or externally. In local media, the acts of a politicized, even criminal-intentioned, few – the bomber, the kidnapper, or the terrorist – are headlined to be "Muslim" as to the identification of the doer. Such is carried by international news agencies and even vice versa.

When media practitioners seek direct contact with Islamist figures, the criteria they employ would more likely involve radicalism of discourse or exoticness of garb and seem to have little to do with the ability of these people to effectively communicate anything other than high emotion and incoherent ranting. Also, instead of using Muslim researchers or academics as source for opinion on issues affecting Muslims, media solicit views from the radical fringe of Muslim communities. For instance, in the war on terror, Osama bin Laden has been made the symbol of anti-Bush rhetoric.

The least repulsive expressions of Islamism are therefore systematically ignored and the multiplicity of voices within Muslim communities is overlooked. Instead, the world is presented with views perceived to be more authentic as they are seen to more closely correlate with the unconscious public expectations. When television journalism chooses to engage with Islamist movements, for example, it often concentrates on the most frustrated fringes – the highly conservative peasants of remote rural areas in Egypt or those from Algerian suburbs who had been recently expelled from university – without locating them in a broader and social context. The authorized spokesmen of the Islamic movements who can reduce these distances are all too often viewed as too diplomatic and are dismissed when they do not conform to stereotypes. Still, within the Islamic world, the systematic internal media demonization of Islamic opposition groups is partly mitigated by the activities of Islamic activists on the ground – in mosques and through welfare associations and trade unions.

Long-standing revolutionary movements are threatened with being cast together with smaller homegrown groups that employ terrorist tactics. Clear differentiation must be made between the two in addressing policies towards either, for while they may both espouse the same Islamist agenda, they have different traditions of violence. The danger of non-differentiation is that when the two are lumped together as one and the same, the legitimate demands of the legitimate rebel groups can be ignored.

The Philippines is such a case in point, where several Muslim anti-state groups are sometimes treated as one, all falling under the label "Muslim." The Mindanao Muslim as savage is based on what the late Columbia University professor Edward Said (1979) would call the Cultural Other. What separates the Spaniards, Americans, and their Christian Filipino allies from the Moros – a derogatory label first used by Spanish colonizers – are geography, religion, and culture. It is a comparison of opposites between the Us and the Them. In particular, the Spaniard colonizers referenced themselves in relation to who they were not (Concepcion 2006).

Historiography and nationalism in the Philippines

In the thirteenth century, Islamic missionaries and traders introduced in the Philippines their religion and a governance system based on the sultanates. The arrival of the Spaniards in 1521 and their subsequent introduction of Catholicism soon after informally divided the territory between the Christianized north and the resistant Islamic south. The north would eventually become identified as developed, advanced, and oriented towards the West; while the South evoked Moro: Relatively backward, heathen, conservative, and oriented towards the Middle East (Constantino 1991).

A prejudice against the south was entrenched soon after the arrival of the Spaniards when they employed the derogatory term Moro to describe those uncivilized natives who refused to convert to Christianity and treated their corresponding region as a foreign territory. The term Moro, as a colonial construct to encompass all Mohammedans of different sultanates, overlooked the territorial and cultural distinctions of the Muslim groups in the archipelago. From 1565 to 1898, sporadic wars

between the Moros and the Spanish, who were aided by their Filipinized colonial subjects, were generally described as a Christian fight against Moro pirates.

Such perception of indigenous resistance carried over to the American period, during which the foremost on the pacification agenda for the created Moro Provinces was to "maintain law and order." American reports would usually refer to the Moros as outlaws, pirates, assassins, murderers, troublemakers, and the like. Likewise, the Moros had a negative construct of the American government. According to Saber (1975, 36-46), Many Moros construed such government as a *gobirno a sarwang a tao* (government of a different people).

The Tribal Ward system was established to assimilate the "uncivilized tribes" into the mainstream of the colonial system (Worcester 1914, 53). The Philippine Commission created a Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes under the Department of Interior. Two years after the bureau's creation, it was renamed the Ethnological Survey for the Philippine Islands,[4] tasked with a view to "learning the most practical way of bringing about their (the non-Christian tribes') advancement in civilization and material prosperity" (Rodil 2003).

As a result, the non-Christian label[5] reappeared in several important laws, especially those affecting the ownership and distribution of land and those relating to special administrative structures (Rodil 2000). A collection of American colonial photographs from the period shows the colonized natives acquiring their status through their intimate association (or clothing similarities) with white males. These Northern natives stand in contrast with the Others – the unnamed native servants and the "wild uncivilized Moros" who, together with the Igorots and non-Christian tribes, occupied the bottom rung of the American classificatory grid where the main criterion for civilization was belief in Christianity (Datuin 2004).

The legacy of this colonial past is still manifested in the representations of the Muslims in Mindanao in Philippine cultural festivals and secondary school textbooks. The script for the *moro-moro,* a form of dramatic play, and accounts in Filipino textbooks extol the Spanish conquest, their Christianization of the Philippines, and their influence towards their Christianized Filipino allies. History books used in the secondary public and private schools still propagate colonial prejudices, inaccurately

portraying Islam and Muslim history and culture (Bula 1992).

Not only is the Moro degraded internally, but the role, position, and voice of this population are either forgotten or degraded in Philippine historiography. Since those first Muslims who arrived in the Philippines left almost no historical narrative, the task of chronicling the first history of the region was taken up by the Spaniards. While most Spanish historians recognized that the Moros had the most developed social organization at that time, with the precolonial sultanates able to enter into treaties with foreigners, such a feat generally merited mere mention.

Later, Filipino historians focused exclusively on those events that occurred in the Christianized north. As revealed in the various histories of the revolt against Spanish colonization, nationalism was observed to have been reserved only for the Filipinos in the north in general but specifically attributed to the fighting (Christian) Tagalog- and Pampango-speaking communities.

This historical monopoly was not shared with communities in other parts of the archipelago, although revolts and uprisings in those areas between the natives and the Spaniards were heavily documented. The absence of Moros in mainstream Philippine literature is dramatic. Without any explanation, at least one historian had been known to exclude

the Filipino Moro resistance from his book as it was his judgment call that Muslim resistance was not part of the Filipino nationalist response to alien rule. This state of affairs is confounding to some scholars.

Filipino nationalism, and the beginnings of a unified national identity *vis-à-vis* the Spanish, began to emerge with the attempts to break through the racial, educational, economic, and social barriers imposed during the colonial process. Yet, as mentioned above, the position of the Moro in the nationalist movement was unclear. With Filipinism strongly equated with Christianity in the view of the Muslims, the Muslims found it difficult to accept their proposed identity as Filipinos. Then, too, the fledgling Filipinism seemed to exclude the south. Even today, Filipino historians, writers, or intellectuals find it inconvenient to mention the fact that Claro M. Recto, the great Filipino nationalist, was the author of the Colonization of Mindanao Act.

The dilemma of Filipinism as a unifying concept was further aggravated by the fact that the ambiguities of ethnoreligious origin were unresolved by the time of the 1935 Constitution. The absence of a common national language – hindered by diverse ethnic languages and growing popularity of English – contributed to the cultural gap between Christians and non-Christians. Still, the 1935 Constitution did begin to sow the seeds of Filipinism by declaring that the Philippines would be a republican state and that the Christians and non-Christians were co-equal and parallel in importance.

Muslims, Moros, or Filipinos?

It is important to explore the terms used over the course of this conflict (Moro, Bangsamoro, Muslim, and Filipino), as the interpretation and evolution of the Bangsamoro issue is a significant factor. While a group of Muslims resurrected the concept of a Muslim struggle or Muslim nation as an antithesis to Filipinism in the late 1920s, the term Moro continued to be internally stigmatized until the late 1960s. The term's pejorative connotations were summarized in General Leonard Wood's statement that "the only good Moro is a dead Moro."

In a conference organized by the Muslim Association of the Philippines in the 1950s to unite the Muslims, the word Moro was rejected as unacceptable. A decision was made to use the term Bangsa Moro or Muslim to designate these ethnic communities (including all the

Cordillera tribes and the Lumad hilltribes), which was formalized under the National Cultural Communities under Republic Act 1881. With such law, which also created the Commission on National Integration (CNI) in 1957, the Philippine government decreed that non-Christian Filipinos would henceforth be called the National Cultural Communities.

In order to erase the social stigma that came with the "tribal" label, the Constitution of 1973 and 1987 introduced the terms "cultural communities," "indigenous cultural communities," and "autonomous regions." In the 1970s, the Office on Muslim Affairs was created to serve Muslim communities all over the country. Previously, in 1950, Senator Ahmad Alonto started using the term "Muslim" to refer to all Muslim citizens. Still, even this Muslim label is unsatisfactory as it conveniently consolidates thirteen specific ethnolinguistic groups in Mindanao, something that some groups are not comfortable with.

This type of labeling explains the mistrust of Muslims against their portrayal in mainstream media and literature. A nuanced explanation would showcase a diverse Muslim populace such that the experiences of a Moro in one province cannot be equated with that of another. Within the Mindanao society itself, an individual is recognized primarily for his ethnic affiliation rather than religion. Even today, a Maranaw, a fellow Muslim Filipino, is as foreign and frightening to a Sama as is a Christian Filipino.

Many Moros currently define themselves as non-Filipinos. A 1993 study, for instance, shows that sixty-one percent of a Muslim sample did not consider themselves as Filipino citizens. An earlier study done in 1946 among Moro college students indicates a higher rate of rejection at 89.4 percent: They preferred to be called Moros or Muslims rather than Filipinos. Among themselves, however, they identified their groups as Taosug, Maranao, Maguindanao, etc.

Moro as a badge of honor

The establishment of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the late 1960s was the beginning of a process to uplift the term Moro. The MNLF viewed the term as a symbol of being unconquered by foreigners. Indeed, the expression "Moros, not Filipinos" demonstrates the MNLF interpretation of the Filipino as similar to "foreign colonizers," like the Spaniards, Americans, and Japanese.

The term had active political and militant connotations, whereas the

word Muslim was seen to be religious and thus passive. Indeed, the MNLF broadened the use of the word (to include Christians and hilltribes), using it to apply and incorporate those groups under the following categories: Groups that resisted Western colonizers in Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan; groups that asserted their right for self-determination; groups that were being oppressed; and groups that sympathized with the Moro plight.

For its part, the MILF later made known in usage the term "Bangsamoro people," defining such as the "native inhabitants composed of Islamized ethnic groups, highlanders, Lumads, and other non-Muslims with Bangsamoro ancestry and those who have been born, raised, and educated in the Bangsamoro homeland, signifying and declaring legally their being Bangsamoro members."

Others cite the historically powerless position of the minority *vis-à-vis* the majority, aggravated by previous policies of internal migration (Christians moving from north to the south) and displacement. While some view the Moro problem within the framework of social constructivist communication theories, Marxist critical theories, and postcolonial discourse, others argue that the key problem is the maintenance of Filipino colonial rule. The MNLF, MILF, Bangsamoro Liberation Organization, and intellectuals, however, do maintain that if the Philippine government truly wants to solve the so-called Moro problem, it must exert an honest-to-goodness effort to understand the feelings, sentiments, biases, ideals, prejudices, customs, traditions, and historical experience of the Bangsamoro, as enunciated or articulated by the Moros themselves. A real effort in cultural interpretation must be made, in order to solve the communication gap between the Muslim and Christian Filipino communities.

Today, Muslim and Christian communities in the Philippines interpret key documents (such as the Philippine Constitution and the Tripoli Agreement) in different manners, particularly with respect to upholding identity and territorial rights. The contest over terminologies gained resurgence since the MILF entered into peace negotiations with the government in 1997. The language of peace negotiations can actually become technical or legalistic with terms like status of belligerency and ancestral domain, as well as reference to certain international laws like the Geneva Convention and Protocol One.

Naming the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)

The 1968 Jabidah massacre and the Philippine claim to Sabah islands brought about a new surge of militancy among Muslim youth. The former incident, where young Muslim army recruits were allegedly massacred for not following orders to attack Muslim Sabah, galvanized Muslim-led rallies and even triggered the MNLF's formation. However, in the unfolding Moro struggle for self-determination, the MNLF would soon be perceived as receptive to accepting autonomy as the way to solve the Moro/Muslim woes.

It was mainly over this fundamental difference of opinion that caused the MILF to break away from the MNLF in 1984. The MILF saw itself as an Islamist revolutionary organization and refused to follow the MNLF's acceptance of autonomy as the ultimate solution to the problem in the south. MILF chairperson Salamat Hashim (now deceased) was quite unequivocal and consistent in his statements to the effect that any solution (to the Mindanao problem) less than full independence of the Bangsamoro Muslims will not work.

The MILF asserts an even longer history, arguing that it was formed in reaction to the 1898 Treaty of Paris that illegally included the unconquered Bangsamoro homeland. The MILF further claims to be the sole representative of the Bangsamoro people. With these, the MILF can be seen as an Islamist revolutionary organization, as contrasted to the MNLF which accepted autonomy as the framework of governance for the Muslim minority.

Today, the military identifies the MILF to be one of three major threats to the state's internal security, along with the Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army/National Democratic Front (CPP/NPA/NDF) and the ASG. Official documents with the Department of National Defense (DND) and the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP) habitually classify the MILF as secessionist, rebel, or separatist, with such label routinely fed to media when sources from these offices comment on the MILF for public record. But despite military suspicion of the MILF's links to the "terrorist" Jemaah Islamiyah, the government has been careful to exclude the MILF from its list of terrorist organizations.[6]

Stopping short at officially labeling the MILF as terrorist is done to prevent antagonizing the organization and to encourage its willing and continued participation in peace negotiations. It is also partly due to the recognition of the Bangsamoro minority struggle by the fifty-seven member nations of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), that has identified the Bangsamoro minority issue as an important one. Given this semblance of legitimacy from the international community, the MILF has achieved a more respectable standing compared to the ASG that has been categorized as a terrorist group,[7] sometimes referred to as a bandit group or a criminal gang.

Peace talks can positively improve the public image of rebel organizations, as they are made to appear rational, level-headed, and flexible and are seen to engage in reasoned argument rather than the rhetoric of violence. In contrast, however, Filipino- and centralized-controlled media and the educational source have tended to bolster Muslim fears that they may have no place in the Filipino national community, leaving a belief that their only hope for the future lies in their identification with the Muslim world. Some media groups use Moro when they mean MILF, demonstrating the press' indiscriminate use of "labeling and pejorative words." Indeed, many of the country's broadsheets are observed to have this habit of using Moro, Muslim, and MILF interchangeably when referring to MILF fighters. This reflects a general disregard for nuanced distinctions between these terms which could be a manifestation of bias against the groups concerned. Of course, it could also be plain and simple ignorance and a general laziness to do one's homework.

De-labeling, addressing biases

In a 2002 study by the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) of 1,633 articles from the five main Philippine broadsheets, only twenty may be classified as containing background material on the government-Moro rebel conflict.[8] This finding highlights the general ignorance with which the Moro/Muslim problem continues to be addressed by mainstream media.

The media has a vital role in promoting peace, given its enormous capacity to promote better understanding and mutual knowledge

by bridging the gap between different cultures through sharing information and cultivating dialogue. However, before such could be done, media practitioners have to recognize that telling the truth about the other requires introspection and self-examination of prejudices, biases, and moral frontiers.

Mindanao State University professor Rufa Cagoco-Guiam suggests that those who report on the Mindanao peace process need to go back to the historical background of the Muslim-Christian conflict. Furthermore, she encourages the need to examine not only one source, but all possible sources of information about the circumstances that engendered the war in Southern Mindanao, as doing so will help the journalists ask sensitive and intelligent questions when they interview informants from both sides of the conflict.

In addition, the journalist must read up on the various cultures of the thirteen Muslim ethnolinguistic groups, as no two groups are the same even as some speak mutually intelligible languages. Similarly, regarding the terminology used, there is a need to be highly conscious of the distinctions of terms denoting religious identity and those used to refer to cultures or groups of people. Reporters need to know when to use the word Muslim and cultural terms like Maguindanaon.

More importantly, they should be careful when describing people who are criminal suspects. In particular, they should avoid mentioning an individual's religion as this may serve to create more divisions in an already fragmented society.

Notes

[1] The earlier version of this article was edited by Michael Batia, St Anthony's, Oxford University.

[2] The Bush administration used the term "Coalition of the Willing" to refer to the forty-nine countries that signified support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

[3] Author's interview with Atty. Soliman Santos, author of *The Moro Islamic challenge.*

[4] Annual Report of the Philippine Commission, 1901 Part I, p. 38.

[5] In fact, the words 'civilized' and 'Christians' were spontaneously interchanged; so were 'non-Christian' and 'wild.'

[6] Unlike the Philippine government's acceptance of the CPP's classification as a terrorist organization in a US list.

[7] Terror-listing by the United States implies being alienated from legal transactions and recognition. The law makes it illegal for people in the US or subject to US jurisdiction to provide material support to the foreign terrorist organizations (FTO). It further requires US financial assistances to block FTO assets. It also provides a basis for the US to deny visas to representatives and members of the FTOs who wish to gain entry into American soil.

[8] In the period surveyed for analysis (March–June 2000), five major Manila dailies showed 670 reports on the ASG hostages/kidnapping and 434 reports on the military/MILF, out of a total number 1,633 articles on Mindanao.

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