From Orang Besar to Colonial Big Man: Datu Piang of Cotabato and the American Colonial State

Patricia N. Abinales

From Alfred W. McCoy ed.
Lives at the Margins

Any study... can not but bring forth convincing arguments that it is to the material and greatest interest of the Philippines that Luzon and the Visayas make whatever present sacrifices may be necessary in order to extend such financial aid to the public services in Mindanao-Sulu that the latter may quickly be made in fact a part of the Philippines. At present, commercially and socially, southern and central Mindanao and the Sulu group pertain rather to Singapore than to Manila, and must be acknowledged as little more than politically Philippine territory.

—John Pershing

In his memoirs as an observer in the Moro Province, the political tourist Vic Hurley noted an incident in which, during the intense negotiation between the Americans and the sultan of Sulu over the contents of what was later to become the Bates Treaty, the latter insisted that the new colonizers allow him “to hoist the American flag together with his own” when he traveled around and beyond his domain with his entourage. The Americans, as expected, denied the request, and the sultan’s decline as an important personage in “Moroland” proceeded in earnest. While this royal persistence merited only a casual reference by Hurley, a closer examination of this request symbolizes something more significant than a mere supplication, for at the core of this plea lies the nature of the Muslim response to American colonialism’s intrusion into their lives.

This essay looks at the life of Cotabato’s Datu Piang, believed to have been the most powerful Magindanao strongman of his time. In the national narrative Piang is hardly mentioned, while in the smaller domain of “Muslim-Filipino” studies he has often been identified with Muslim collaboration with American colonialism. This relative obscurity and capricious description of Piang conceal one of the most important processes that came about in southern Philippine political development. I refer here
to the changes that Muslim *datus* experienced as their Southeast Asian world began to be replaced with two narrower domains: first, the Moro Province, an administrative unit administered by the U.S. Army that sought to maintain an existence autonomous from Manila; and later the formal integration of southern Mindanao into the larger colonial and Filipinized state.

Muslim reaction to American rule was founded on the experiences and historical memories Muslims had as participants in the Southeast Asian trade network and not as inhabitants of a Philippine territory let alone members of an incipient nation. Upon the consolidation of American rule, this Southeast Asian context was displaced by a new framework—the Moro Province. It is in the narrowing of their horizons that one can better understand Muslim resistance and collaboration. With access to the Southeast Asian world effectively shut off by the colonial reconfiguration of southern Mindanao’s borders, *datus* were left with very little choice but to accept a narrower, district-bound standing as “big men.” While it did impose constraints, this transmutation of *datus* collaborators nevertheless solidified Muslim support for the Moro Province.

The mutation, however, did not stop with the Moro Province. When the U.S. Army’s term ended, so did the existence and autonomy of the Moro Province. A colonial state, now dominated by Filipinos who had been demanding the integration of the “Moros,” began to extend its administrative and political reach into southern Mindanao. Muslim *datus* whose powers had been weakened under army rule were once again forced to adapt to a new order. This time, however, many of them—Datu Piang included—had become too enfeebled and old to once more alter their politics. They would “retire” from politics and be succeeded by a younger generation of Muslim leaders whose fidelity, aspirations, and political educations would be tied closely to the Filipinized colonial state. With their passing, a period in which southern Mindanao’s Muslim communities had their own history—separate from that of Manila—had ended.

The Muslim Response to American Colonialism: A Reconsideration

Studies on Muslim responses to American colonialism base themselves on a unquestioned premise, that is, that Muslims, like other groups confronted with a superior power, either revolted against or collaborated with it. This premise is hardly debatable given its logic and its seeming self-evidence. When applied to Muslim societies, however, the premise becomes problematic. For one thing, there is the motivation underlying the premise. This notion of a dichotomy between Muslim resistance and

Muslim collaboration derives from a postwar intellectual effort to restore the Muslims’ voice in a Filipino nationalist discourse that addresses the country’s relationship (conflictual or not) with its two colonial powers, Spain and the United States. In this nationalist version, the “Moro masses” led by anticolonial leaders fought the Spanish and later the Americans just like the rest of the Filipinos. Some of the Muslim elites likewise collaborated, very much like the caciques of the northern provinces did when the nationalist revolution of 1896 began to unravel. While Islam and Catholicism may have kept Muslim-Christian relations in constant tension, this separation hardly nullified the fact that the obvious parallelism of their responses to colonialism had secured the foundations of their emergence as one people.

Two peculiar issues are evident when we examine this premise more closely. First is the rigidity of the dichotomy. Historical evidence shows that the divide between collaboration and resistance tended to be less distinct than what these scholars try to suggest. Indeed, these two responses overlapped as Muslims tried to cope with a U.S. Army intent on subduing them. The case of a Datu Tahil of Sulit is illustrative. He was a leader at the “Battle [and massacre] at Bud Bagsak,” where his wife and child were killed. Later he was appointed third member of the Provincial Board after his pardon in 1915, and he was one of those groomed for the governorship of Sulit. A parallel case was that of Datu Santiago of Parang, Cotabato, who was an avid supporter of Governor Leonard Wood until 1923 when he led a revolt against the imposition of the head tax (interestingly, a late response, as the head tax had been imposed more than two decades earlier). Santiago later surrendered and was reappointed by Wood as district *licester* (leader) of the area.

The second issue is the framing of the premise itself. Driven by the desire to integrate Muslims into the national narrative, many scholars assume that Muslim responses were no different from the Filipino elite’s reaction to colonialism. Again, the empirical evidence shows the contrary. The Muslims, who never really imagined themselves as part of the Philippines, were kept administratively separate by the Americans. And the distinct nature of the Moro Province as colonial authority nurtured rather than dissolved this sense of separateness. One cannot simply adduce that the revolts were Muslim versions of the great anticolonial resistance. The causes behind most of them point to narrow, rear-guard, and unsuccessful attempts to stave off colonialism. None indicated any forward-looking, anticolonial, or nationalist perspective, and the ease with which these “rebels” were subdued showed not only American military superiority but the lack of unity that unsurprisingly characterized these localized acts of defiance.
It might be less contentious to associate *datu*s cooperation with the "general" collaboration of Filipino "elites" by pointing out the opportunist habit that both groups appear to share. The difference, however, lies in the setting in which this collaboration took place. A long history of conflict with the Spanish proves that these *datu*s historically opposed a colonial presence when it became an obstacle to their trade. But intrinsic to that conflict was also a supercilious attitude toward Spain's Filipino allies. The Muslim *datu*s never regarded them as equals, referring to them as inferiors worthy only of being slaves. It would therefore be presumptuous to assume that these Muslim "elites" transformed themselves overnight from putative slave masters into nationalist soul mates of Filipino *caciques.* This disdain carried over into the American period, and mutual hostility was kept at bay only through the buffer zone that was the Moro Province. The Americans themselves maintained the segregation with their policy of a lengthy civilizing process prior to Muslim integration into the rest of the Philippines. This "gap" between the Muslims' anti-Filipino sentiments and their 180-degree acceptance of their northern neighbors as allies and brothers sharing the same experiences as part of a colonial-national community remains unexplained by nationalist scholars.

The essential error here is in accepting the Philippine frame as a "given" at the onset of American colonial rule in Mindanao. The nationalist imagination that underpins most of the scholarship is based on this orientation. Yet, if one stands on a hill in Cotabato and turns one's back on Manila, one is drawn into an expanse in which the colonial Philippines was but a minor cog—the Southeast Asian trading zone Anthony Reid calls "The Lands below the Winds." It is this constantly changing zone that initially framed the way Muslims related to the American colonial process. Muslims viewed their responses to the Americans in terms of their experiences in Southeast Asia, not just in the Philippines. The issues of resistance and collaboration would be better understood using this zone, rather than the twentieth-century Philippines, as the original frame. And it is in the transformation of this frame, not toward a Muslim-Filipino identity but toward a more colonial but provincial "Moro" identity, that one can further understand the nature and evolution of Muslim collaboration with American colonialism.

**Magindanao as a Southeast Asian Society**

Scholars of Southeast Asia generally agree that a regional trading network existed in precolonial times, extending from China to Africa, of which various Southeast Asian "ports and polities" were a part. The center of this network often changed based on the ability of the trading states to maintain military superiority as well as in the accessibility and control of the commodities being exchanged. The Magindanao Sultanate figured prominently in this trade in the seventeenth century when it emerged as a indigenous network of trade alive in the face of European challenges. It most important of all, it supplied slaves for the various pepper plantations in Magindanao, as it facilitated unification under one sultanate. Once the Europeans became dominant players in the network, the Magindanaos merely adjusted to the new period. The sultanate even managed to expand commercial ties to include the more hostile Spanish, exporting cinnamon to Manila for inclusion in the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade. This contribution continued despite the efforts of the Spanish to suppress it and the shift of the network's center toward the increasing domination of British-controlled Singapore at the turn of the century. The English even planned a settlement in Magindanao territory to compete with the Dutch. European rivalry proved handy to a sultanate that had declared itself neutral, and Magindanao benefited from the presence of three competing colonial powers.

This brief description of the Magindanao Sultanate's part in the trading network brings to the fore two factors previously underemphasized trade but in the ethos of the network itself. Through their participation, Wolters reminds us:

> [One still knows very little of the early history of the Philippines but one should not conclude that these islands remained on the fringe of early Southeast Asia. Their inhabitants did not perceive their map in such a way. They are more likely to have looked outward to what is the Vietnamese coast today or to southern China for the more distant worlds that mattered to them. Every centre was a centre in its own right as far as its inhabitants were concerned, and it was surrounded by its own group of neighbors.]

Ruurdje Lahove is likewise suggests that Magindanao *datu*s intellectual curiosity transcended even their "own group of neighbors." Kudrat enjoyed discussing "religious matters" with a "Jesuit slave" and engaged "foreign visitors" in conversations about "European life and governance" as well as "the habits and customs of other nations." Kudrat was said to be fluent in Spanish and could converse in "Chinese, English and Dutch." Spaniards and Americans, therefore, "confronted" neither an isolated
society nor a parochial set of leaders. On the contrary, what they saw was a "port-state" with a sophisticated organization led by people who were quite aware of their place in a regional trading network and the world beyond it.²⁰

Second, as members of this network the Magindanaos invariably displayed a habit that suggested less the uniqueness of their society than its affinity with the archetypal Southeast Asian community. Let me cite two significant comparisons here. The basic division among Magindanao described by scholars—a conflict between "upstream" and "downstream" communities over control of forest products and slave power—was typical of polities all over Southeast Asia. Barbara Watson-Andaya's classification of hulu (upstream) and hilir (downstream) communities in Jambi echoes the Magindanao's sa-ilud and sa-rayo. Both Jambi and Magindanao were typical models of riverine commercial posts all over the region in which "forest products" were important trading commodities.²¹ Under Sultan Kudrat, the divided Magindanao communities—those belonging to sa-ilud (the lower valley and coastal area), of which Cotabato town was the known capital, and those in sa-rayo (the upper valley), of which Dulawan was the capital—were unified under Kudrat's sultanate.²²

The shape and character of Magindanao authority also corresponded to the coastal Malay orang besar. Magindanao datus conformed closely to "men of prowess," whose powers lay not in the span of territory under their domination but in their ability to project armed power to gain control of slave labor and a monopoly over tradable products. Like most orang besar, Magindanao datus engaged in constant interaction with their communities, their fellow datus, and outside forces to maintain precarious positions that were always subject to challenge.²³ They founded their power on cognatic kinship bonds strengthened by alliances formed through intergroup marriages, very much like other orang besar. They continually accumulated what Wolters calls "political intelligence" about their rivals, valued the importance of having an entourage, and were involved in "diplomatic" negotiations, particularly with forces stronger than they.²⁴ When their power base was stable enough, they engaged in war with each other or against other powers in pursuit of slaves and products.

Especially significant in this regard were the "treaty systems," which obliged mutual armed assistance when either of the signatories needed help. Magindanao datus concluded such an agreement with Spain (while maintaining informal trade ties with the Dutch) to enhance their power and attempt to destroy their Sulu rivals. The insistance of the sultan of Sulu that he must fly the American flag, keep his entourage, and be able to secure American protection if he encountered "trouble with European nations" was obviously intended to project a sense of power and importance not only within his realm but throughout Southeast Asia. All this should not be read as grasping by a petty ruler operating within a confined environment but as an almost always successful behavior that was routinely employed by rulers in the region.²⁵ Thus, when they encountered the Americans the Magindanaos were not as inexperienced a group as scholars suggest.²⁶ There already existed a tradition of dealing with the Dutch, the Spanish, and the English. When they either cooperated with or opposed American rule, their actions were informed more by the historical memory of their Southeast Asian experiences than by some affinity with Filipino nationalism or a nebulous notion of "Muslim ethnic pride." The Magindanao datus' attitude toward the Americans was just like the one any other orang besar would adopt toward powerful outsiders. The Americans were allies and business partners, to be relied upon in their trading in Southeast Asia. For a time, it was this mindset that was the guidepost by which they would assess their relationship with the new colonizer.²⁷

Yet there was something also specifically Magindanao in these turns of the century encounters with the Americans. This had to do with the steadily diminishing fortunes of the sultanate, a decline that began soon after Kudrat's death. The rise of Sulu as the new entrepôt and the defeat of the Magindanaos by this new rival combined with increasing Spanish manipulation of their treaty system to signal the general decline of the Magindanaos.²⁸ The rise to power of Datu Uto was an attempt to resurrect the glories of old, but by the 1880s, with the Spanish successfully fueling division among the Magindanaos, the Uto years merely witnessed the last attempts to reverse the process.²⁹ The Americans thus confronted a Southeast Asian society considerably weakened by local and colonial rivalries and constant internal divisions. The Magindanao datus reacted much like the orang besar of the Malay coasts, but their weakened condition gave them very few options in dealing with the Americans. The extent to which the once powerful Magindanao sultanate had declined was vividly described in a 1905 newspaper account. The sultan of Magindanao,

whose ancestors were once the most powerful chieftains of the Island of Mindanao, is utterly without means of support. Though having no following, he is respected by the Moros [only] on account of his "royal" birth, and is virtually living the life of a tramp. Having no home of his own he spends his time visiting the various chieftains, stopping at each place until his presence ceases to be a novelty, [then] he moves in on some neighboring chieftain.³⁰
It is with this in mind that we can better understand Datu Piang’s encounter with the Americans.

From Parvenu to Magindanao Orang Besar

Datu Piang was a mestizo—the youngest of six children born to Tan Toy, a trader from Amoy, southern China, and “Mora” Tico from Sillik village. His father died when Piang was only eleven, but he left the family well established in Magindanao society. Tan converted to Islam and became “minister of lands” and an economic adviser to the most powerful Magindanao orang besar of that time, Datu Uto. He further reinforced his ties with Magindanao datus by marrying Tico, the daughter of Uto’s ally Datu Ayunan. Tan’s actions were hardly unique; they were in fact part of the “normal practice” of the Chinese in Southeast Asia. As one author put it: “The Chinese become converts, not that their . . . souls are in any degree susceptible to the influence of the Christian religion, but in order to obtain material advantage.” Tan clearly saw his links with the Magindanaos as providing both a business opportunity and a place to raise his family.

Piang, who inherited his father’s business and political acumen, took over where Tan had left off. He established an alliance with Datu Ali of Kudarangan, a village located at the fork where the Bicol River diverges from the Puliangi and flows into Liguanan Lake. This was north of Piang’s village, which was located where the Cotabato River flows into Iligan Bay. Together these two towns controlled the traffic in commodities and slaves between the hinterland and the coast, placing Piang and Ali in an enviable position to profit from the trade. They cemented their relationship further through marriage when Piang gave his favorite daughter, Minka, as wife to Ali. Both datus then sought to protect their fortunes by joining the entourage of Datu Uto. Piang married the daughter of Uto’s top adviser, Datu Ayunan. An aging Uto also gave Piang and Ali extensive control over the trade in commodities and slaves and allowed them to strengthen their armed followings.

Uto later suffered for his actions when his two subordinates, aided by Ayunan, switched their support to the Spanish in the late 1630s. Piang and Ali capitalized on their relationship with the Spanish to take over Uto’s lands “by shrewd tactics” and further weakened their old patron. He also entered into a business arrangement with the Spanish, supplying them with “men and materials [for the construction of Spanish forts in the Magindanao area] and offered other services [armed support] for which he was recompensed.” When the Spanish withdrew from Cotabato after their defeat in Manila at the hands of the Americans, they left Piang and

FROM ORANG BESAR TO COLONIAL BIG MAN

Ali with sufficient weapons to ensure that there would be a peaceful transition to American rule. Both used this expanded firepower to crush Filipino settlers who were planning to establish a Cotabato local government under the Malolos Republic. By the time the Americans arrived, Piang and Ali had become the new strongmen of Magindanao, reuniting the sa-liais and sa-ngay communities last unified under Kudrat.

Before continuing with the story, it is worthwhile to step back and consider what Piang did. The manner in which he rose to power has been noted by observers of Magindanao society. The missing element in these accounts, however, was the appropriate context in which to understand Piang. What is notable about his actions is that they were hardly unique. They were in fact common practice among Southeast Asian strongmen. Marriage alliances were frequently concluded by Maluku sultans for political purposes as well as to establish stability through consensus. The conspiracy that Piang concocted with Ali to undermine Uto was also vintage orang besar. One historian notes that in Southeast Asia “in the absence of firm rules for royal succession, access of the elite to social advancement through acquisition of wealth and manpower could jeopardize the ruler’s position. Men of wealth and commanding influence were often the initiators of court intrigues.” Finally, by supporting the Spanish against Uto, Piang and Ali appeared to be doing what any Malay strongman would do when faced with someone more powerful. Instead of fighting, they cooperated but in such a way that their power and resources within Magindanao society were enhanced.

The same basic principle was carried over to the early American period, when once again Piang and Ali, despite their stature, acknowledged the superior firepower of the new arrivals. They welcomed the Americans and, like the sultan of Sulu, were hoping to cash in on the new order. The only problem was that the Americans had a different notion of who was in charge. Once they began to exercise their colonial prerogatives, the Piang-Ali alliance broke down.

Parting of Ways, Changing of Perspectives

One of the first acts of the army was to declare the formal abolition of the practice of “slavery” throughout southern Mindanao. The decree instantly drew opposition from Muslim datus; some protesting to their overlords, but others seeking to cut off ties with the Americans through armed revolt. Datu Ali was one of those who revolted, assembling his men in early 1903 at his cotta (fort) and daring the Americans to attack. The cotta fell under relentless American attack, and Ali withdrew to the jungle where he engaged the army hit-and-run battles. He eventually
died at the hands of a special unit of Philippine Scouts sent to his Davao hideout to surprise him on October 22, 1905.45 A biography of Ali contends that his revolt resembled similar acts of defiance by both Muslims and Filipinos. It argues that Ali’s audacity was prompted by the Magindanaos' determination “to free themselves from western colonizers’ control.” Thus, his “ascendancy may have been accidental but he dared to unify the divided sultanes to fight against a common aggressor [prompted by] his astuteness and love for his native land.”46 This explanation, however, flies in the face of the evidence. In reality, Ali acted more like an orang besar seeking freedom from American colonialism because he was losing the foundation of his power: the right to acquire and trade slaves. Ali erroneously thought that the Americans would allow him to continue his trade. When they refused, his options became limited, for to concede meant an end to his status as a man of prowess in his territory.

With the establishment of new borders by the Americans, the world of the orang besar became increasingly marginalized. The regional trading network once dominated by the different port-states gave way to a commercial system dominated by the various colonial powers and linked to the economies of Europe and the United States. The encroachment of various colonial boundaries and the growth of the customs and immigration agencies of the colonial states likewise reinforced this displacement of the Southeast Asian network by world capitalism. Moreover, the new colonial map meant a different notion of boundaries as well as rules of access and passage. In the specific case of the Magindanaos, this new border was fixed by the establishment of the Moro Province.47 Ali’s resistance was a futile attempt to prevent the irreversible process of disengaging Magindanao society from its Southeast Asian base and relocating it within Philippine “boundaries.”48 In doing so, it shared the fate of an earlier revolt by Perak Malay chiefs, who rebelled after being informed that a “British protectorate” would deprive them of their power and their slaves. Their defiance and the ensuing arming of the cotab were repeated many years later, this time by a Magindanao man of prowess. Like the Perak chiefs, Ali’s act of defiance would also fail.49

Yet American tenacity in pursuing Ali was not the main reason for his death. Rather, it was the betrayal of his own father-in-law, Datu Piang, that brought about his end. Piaa had earlier masterminded the divorce of his daughter from Ali on the grounds of spousal abuse.50 With his daughter back in his home, Piaa had no qualms about giving Ali to the Americans.51 Piaa’s betrayal not only marked the end of an alliance that had effectively ruled Cotabato in the last years of Spanish rule, but it marked the beginning of a collaborative relationship between the more astute Piaa and the new power in Cotabato.

FROM ORANG BESAR TO COLONIAL BIG MAN

The Collaborator

Unlike Datu Ali, the Americans were more congenial to Piaa not only because of his instant support but because many were sympathetic to his humbling nonroyal origins and rags to riches life story.52 The American perception of Piaa was typified by this official account:

He is very shrewd, has brains and is self-made, being now quite wealthy and in a position to wield power in the valley, as he controls all of Dato Ali’s influence over the tribes and adds to this his own brain. He is the only prominent Moro who seems to appreciate what the American invasion means and the business opportunities it brings with it. The Chinese blood in him makes him a shrewd businessman, and he has accumulated quite a fortune and is daily adding to it. He practically controls all the business of Cotabato, especially exports, through his Chinese agents in that place; has complete control of the Moro productions, and working with the Chinese merchants makes it practically impossible for a white man to enter into business in the Rio Grande, even with much capital behind them.53

Piaa quickly exploited this positive perception to firm up his hold over the Magindanaos. He saw to it that he would become richer. By the late Spanish period, Piaa had already amassed a fortune through control of the trade between communities in the interior and the coastal areas. This wealth was aided by ties with the local Chinese, who traded in wax, coffee, rubber, and gutta-pucha.54 Under the Americans, his partnership blossomed further when Piaa and his associates gained full control of the trade in gutta percha, an insulating material for the trans-Pacific cable that was then being laid.55 They also took over the “Moro Exchanges,” an internal marketing system set up by the army to facilitate trade between communities without Chinese middlemen.56 Piaa convinced the Americans that instead of excluding the Chinese it would be more productive to include them in the exchanges, especially since they would be paying a big portion of the sales tax. The exchanges thus fell under the control of and was eventually subordinated to the interests of the Cotabato Merchants’ Association, the organization joined by the Chinese, aspiring American entrepreneurs, and Datu Piaa.57 Army officials acquiesced to this since Piaa kept Cotabato peaceful.58 Piaa branched out into other ventures, notably the budding timber and rubber industries and rice milling.59 When the army mandated the need to have land titles, Piaa was one of the first to take advantage of the policy and amassed much land.60 He also became a moneylender, netting four to five thousand pesos a month.61 By the
decade’s end, Piang was the wealthiest datu of Cotabato. He had very few rivals; Ali was dead, and Datu Ulo had retired, “sulking in the back country, refusing to have anything to do with the Americans though not averse to borrowing from Piang the money that the crafty Oriental won at trade from the invader.”

Access to colonial state followed economic bounty. As one of the many rewards for his cooperation, Piang was appointed tribal ward leader of Dulawan. The position was created to help in the collection of the head tax and so that its appointee could convey and interpret colonial laws and policies to his constituents. Piang dutifully fulfilled his responsibilities but also took advantage of the opportunity to pursue his own interests. For example, he convinced the Americans to give him a say in tribal ward selections. This enabled him to get members of his entourage appointed, among them his old allies Datus Balaban and Kali of Pandapatan and even the half-brother of Datu Ali, who had helped Piang betray his former brother-in-law. He also convinced the Americans to appoint as ward leader the weak Datto Mastula, heir to the Magindanao Sultanate. This appointment not only enhanced Piang’s standing among the Magindanaos, for it restored some credibility to the old sultan, but it also fit in well with American intentions to use Magindanao royal families for pacification purposes.

Piang did not hesitate to abuse his power, knowing fully well that his indiscretions would be ignored by the Americans. The latter looked the other way when Piang used force against those who opposed him and to collect taxes for the state and tribute for himself. With American consent, he also designated himself “Chief of the Central District of Cotabato.” . . . [He] moved towards Dulawan and attacked Pikit, Reina Regente, and Tumbao, thereby adding these places to his sphere of influence and making the heads of these areas pay tribute to him. Having increased his power over the two mouths of the Pulangi River, he gained stature among the datu of the valley.

He did not hesitate to expropriate assets, even those of other pro-American datu, knowing that in the final analysis the Americans would continue to support him. Thus, when a certain Datu Bakki protested to the Philippine Commission that Piang had “stolen 73 of his carabao,” destroyed his fields, stole his rice harvest, killed his nephew and cousin, and carried off “one hundred and eighty three of his people,” the commission promised to investigate. Nothing came of it since army officers refused to testify against Piang. Piang was also exempted from antislavery laws. He was allowed to keep his old slaves, although he was prohibited from acquiring more.

The Americans were not entirely comfortable with Piang’s actions. Sometimes they had to step in and disapprove some of his antics, such as when he “repeatedly requested to be placed in charge of [collecting the taxes off] all the datos in the valley, saying that he alone could preserve order and collect taxes without difficulty.” In general, however, Piang was allowed to exercise his political power among the Magindanaos provided that it did not disturb the peace.

In power, he carried himself with bravado, not missing an opportunity to display the marks of his dominance. Thus, for the marriage of his daughter Narig to the son of his ally Datu Balabada (Balaband?) of Taviran, Piang ordered the construction of a royal barge complete with “Moro paraphernalia,” including twenty to thirty agangs (brass drums) and lanjakas (small cannons). He announced that he would give his son-in-law P800 in coins and “goods,” and at the ceremony he was “dressed in an undershirt with buttons made of Spanish gold pieces and a white sarong.” With wealth and political influence, came the opportunity to reinvent and be reinvented. Piang had himself declared the sultan of Mindanao despite his nonroyal status. He had his tarsila (genealogy) rewritten to indicate royal blood, justifying his claim to the leadership of Cotabato. This tarsila was rumored to resemble closely the bloodline of an admired idol, the seventeenth-century Kudrat. The Americans contributed to Piang’s reinvention through constant references to his role in keeping Cotabato peaceful. Annual official reports, as well as the accounts of those who met him, were littered with guarded praise. The American fixation on Piang’s “prowess” even extended to the mythical: one admirer wrote a novel about his youth, complete with episodes recounting battles with the supernatural.

What became increasingly important for Piang, however, was that in the recasting of his persona he needed to be linked not only with the past but with the present. It was not enough to declare himself Kudrat’s heir or even to claim as a relative one of the Prophet’s disciples. He also needed to show that his prestige was broader because of what he had assimilated from the Americans. Thus, though accepting the tribal ward leadership was a demotion, he turned it to his advantage by weaving tales to the Magindanaos about how he was using the Americans to administer Cotabato “at his request.”

Transition to Colonial Big Man

As mentioned, Piang’s story has often been associated with Filipino politics who collaborated with the Americans instead of continuing the nationalist revolution. I also argued that Piang’s actions were informed
by a different political frame. Likening Piang to his Filipino counterparts puts the cart before the horse. Indeed, he did become known as a local strongman in what would eventually become a special province of the Philippines. But in the encounter with the Americans, it was his Southeast Asian context that underpinned his actions as datu. To what extent was Piang’s power indicative of this context? Malay modalities of “men of prowess” were clearly operating when Piang first sought to break Dato Uto’s power by creating his own faction, when he entered into marriage alliances with Ali, and when he relied on a loyal entourage for support against Uto.66 Even stories of his sexual prowess, a quality associated with power in Southeast Asia, were deliberately spread to magnify the extent of his power.67 Piang’s agreement with the Spanish and cooperation with the Americans can likewise be understood through a Southeast Asian prism. Wolters notes how Muslim polities joined forces with certain European “country traders” to “thwart the monopolistic plans of other Europeans.”68 It was also within the norm for orang besar to seek the assistance of more powerful foreign forces to alter the internal balance of power in their favor. Perak’s Dato’ Abdullah, for example, accepted British protection because the British “would make him Sultan” and force the other datu to recognize him as such.69 Abdullah’s actions occurred at almost the same time that Piang and Ali were seeking Spanish aid in their struggle against Dato Uto.65

Piang’s relationship with the Spanish and later the Americans helped him keep his power and prestige stable at home. Like other Southeast Asian strongmen, he used colonial firepower “to exert influence in the peripheries” and avoid stories of “instability at the centre [which] traveled quickly and reduced his outreach.”70 With the Americans also came the opportunity to further enrich himself by playing the ingenious role of the broker who kept the balance between community and authority and among the different groups inside the community itself.71 To the Magindanao, he projected himself as their link to the colonizers, a representative who could keep the Americans responsive to their needs. To the Americans, he promoted himself as the only person who could preserve Magindanao loyalty to the Moro Province. The result of acting like a penghulu (sole leader) was the reinforcement of his own power. There was therefore no doubt that Piang’s decision to collaborate was very much influenced by his being a man of prowess. It would be erroneous to ignore this context—the experiential foundation of his actions—in order to dramatize the similarity of his actions to those of Filipino caciques. The similarities cannot be denied, but neither should one rely Piang’s actions out of a world that had—until the Americans arrived—very little in common with the rest of the colony.

FROM ORANG BESAR TO COLONIAL BIG MAN

The next question to ask, then, is at what point Piang ceased to think like an orang besar and opted to become part of the colonial state. I would suggest that this occurred when Piang, even as he tried his orang besar’s best to cope with the Americans, realized that the new order represented a major change in the lives of the Magindanaos. Piang may have attained unprecedented control over Cotabato, but he also knew that his power remained precarious. With prodding from his Chinese allies, who wanted a return to stability, he requested American troops to ensure the maintenance of peace and order in Cotabato.72 Although Piang and Ali’s Christian rivals had been crushed, other Muslim men of prowess had not. On the northern periphery of Magindanao society, Laloan datu were threatening to defy and do battle with the Piang-Ali alliance.73 American firepower provided the opportunity for Piang and Ali to unify Magindanao society once again.

Yet this request for aid from an outside power was different from earlier appeals to the Spanish. For one thing, it came at a time when Magindanao was past its prime as a trading center, its once dominant position in southern Mindanao already upstaged by Sulu.74 Piang may have become “the most powerful man in Cotabato,” but he was also aware that his power rested on very weak foundations and his choices were limited. Trade in guna percha had declined as the supply dwindled due to excessive harvesting.75 The slave system, the most important base of any orang besar’s power, was gone, and those, like Ali, who defied the new regulations were systematically destroyed by the Americans.76 Colonial taxation likewise signified not only loss of income but submission to a higher authority, which was a demotion in stature for a man of prowess. Piang not only had to pay the Americans for allowing him to engage in trade—a hitherto unheard of practice—but his payment signified recognition of their preeminence.

Finally, with the creation of districts with explicit boundaries, there was a redefinition of what the Magindanao understood as their territory. They became attached to and bounded by a well-defined area called Cotabato District. With this reclassification, the earlier Southeast Asian notions of domain had changed; the sa-ilad and sa-rayah (or hulu and hili) were giving way to district, municipal, and village councils. Even the “tribal wards”—thought by the Americans to be the best way to reorganize non-Christian groups—were administrative mechanisms alien to Magindanao society.77 American colonialism also created a barrier that cut Magindanao off from the rest of the Southeast Asian trading network. It did so by setting up barriers to regulate and control a trade that was once “free” and administered by the orang besar. American colonialism thus scaled off Magindanao society, albeit not thoroughly, from the trading
system on which much of its earlier history was based. Those who continued to operate under the old system were declared illegal traders and were liable to be prosecuted. Magindanao traders either had to operate under the new perimeter rules (and likewise submit to the extractions attendant to it, i.e., customs and revenue taxes) or be declared "smugglers" and be subjected to relentless pursuit by the Americans.

Piang was not blind to these changes. With the slave trade over, he knew that trade in goods had become the crucial basis of his wealth. Land was also a new source of wealth, especially once the Americans declared their intentions to "open up" and exploit the resources of Mindanao. Piang adjusted accordingly and with considerable success. By 1926, he had diversified,

accumulating so much wealth during the three or four decades of his power: 42,000 coconut trees (they are good for $1 per tree each year), thousands of carabao, thousands of hectares of rice, land, horses, cattle, buildings, boats and what not—to say nothing of the tithe paid him by his loyal subjects. He is also reputed to have a huge hoard of gold coins.

The setting up of administrative borders within and around southern Mindanao also meant a redirection of trade inward, that is, toward the Americans and Manila. Most important of all, Piang became aware that to keep his power and influence he had to accept the conditions imposed by the new colonial reality. He could not rely any longer on Southeast Asian-style alliances with fellow datus; the downfall of his predecessor had taught him that no one could be "lord" of the Magindanao as Kudrat had been. In order to survive, he had to depend on the Americans. Members of his entourage were likewise drawn to American power. They were more and more likely to seek out his opponents and together try to draw the Americans away from him for their own purposes.

There was little choice but to alter the old notion of prowess and suit it to the terms preferred by the Americans. This meant acquiring the necessary "official" pedigree associating him with the colonial state. The pedirige in turn brought new opportunities to enhance his influence through the use of the powers associated with his office. It was in this context that one can understand why this purportedly most powerful Magindanao datu welcomed the American presence. Piang may have inherited firepower from the Spanish, but he also acknowledged American military superiority: he needed the Americans to remain in power, especially after betraying his own son-in-law. This act ironically became another reminder of the fragility of the sultanate, which had led to the downfall of Datu Uto. Unlike Uto, however, Piang saw a way out of the dilemma by placing all his bets with the new power. It meant, in turn, accepting that the Magindanaos had become a part of the colonial territory. Piang henceforth had to play a different role, one that combined aspects of the old with features of the new. He was still a man of prowess among the Magindanao, but it was a title set upon entirely different foundations. With Piang, the era of the orang besar in southern Mindanao came to a close; he remained a big man, but this time he was operating in a more constricted world.

Filipinization and the Constriction of the Colonial Big Man's World

No sooner had Piang accustomed himself to his new world than it underwent yet another modification. This time the source of change came from an authority beyond Piang's reach—in Manila and Washington. By the second decade of American rule, the ambiguity of U.S. imperial policy had given way to a consensus with Filipino leaders that the business of colonial administration should increasingly be taken over by Filipinos. The Filipinization of the colonial state also called for the hastening of the integration of the "special provinces," including the Moro Province of southern Mindanao. Army leaders who still believed that President McKinley's doctrine of "Benevolent Assimilation" meant two generations of close supervision of their "Moro wards" resisted Filipinization and integration as best as they could. Mindanao Americans likewise agitated for a separation of Mindanao on the grounds that no bond existed between its inhabitants and the rest of the Philippines except perhaps warfare. However, they, failed in the face of their own inadequacies, the failure to muster enough "popular" support among Mindanao communities, and the dogged insistence of Filipinos that Mindanao was an intrinsic part of the Philippines.

Muslim leaders responded differently to Filipinization. Many sided with the Americans and even mobilized their followers for separation—and when this appeared not to be feasible for the autonomy of Mindanao from the state. On the eve of the formal transfer of power, however, it was clear that the Muslims themselves were unable to unite behind their military mentors. Pro-Filipinization forces managed to gain the support of most of the datus of Lanao, and even the sultan of Sulu was eventually swayed in their favor. By 1913, the Moro Province was formally abolished and Cotabato, together with Davao, Lanao, Sulu, and Zamboanga, were reclassified as new "special provinces" under the Manila-directed Department of Mindanao and Sulu. Manuel Quezon, leader of the Filipino politicians, declared that the Muslims had the same "racial identity" as Filipinos and, although they lived in "primitive conditions," they were ready for Filipinization.
Datu Piang's first response to Filipinization was to support the Americans. But once it became clear that Filipinization was inevitable, he hedged his bets. He declared his allegiance to Manila after the establishment of the Department of Mindanao and Sulu. And to prove his loyalty to a skeptical Filipino leadership, he gave his blessing to the expansion of public education in the Muslim areas, a controversial subject, as the majority of Muslims regarded the program as part of a Filipino conspiracy to eradicate Islam in Mindanao. Piang also encouraged his children's involvement in the integration process, ordering them among other things to represent him in delegations to Manila organized by the department. He likewise agreed to send his two sons to the colonial center for higher education. In 1915, Piang was rewarded for his cooperation with an appointment to the lower house of the Philippine Assembly.

Piang, however, remained sensitive to who wielded the ultimate power and made sure that he had a foot on the other side. After the Department of Mindanao and Sulu was established, he continued to secretly support the separatist plans of other datu, including his sons. He promised to help fund a Muslim delegation to Washington, which would lobby for the separation of Mindanao and compete with Quezon for the attention of Congress. His actions were replicated by other datu, who were aware of the increasing likelihood of Filipinization but remained hopeful that anti-Filipino Americans would stage a comeback and reassert control over Mindanao. But, since the U.S. Army had rendered them powerless, they had few resources with which to fight Manila. Once the army left, their options narrowed further; thus, the only way that Mindanao could return was for the datu to convince the Americans in Washington to set the clock back.

This is the reason Piang supported the idea of a Muslim delegation. Yet Piang had enough experience to recognize that the likelihood of Filipinization succeeding was also strong. Thus, even as he tried to play off one side against the other, it was making his life difficult. He described this dilemma to his American friends, complaining that Filipinization had placed him in the "difficult position" of maintaining dual loyalties.

The chances that the Americans would reverse Filipinization improved in 1921 when a presidential victory by the Republican Party brought about a change of regime in the Philippines and the appointment of "Datu" Leonard Wood as governor-general. Wood's appointment caused reverberations in southern Mindanao, especially after he expressed his opposition to the forced Filipinization and integration of Mindanao. Wood proceeded to undo the structures and policies of Filipinization, including reorganizing the administration of southern Mindanao to strengthen his influence in it.

Wood pushed for changes in the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes and intervened in provincial affairs to challenge Filipino control over the Muslims. He proposed that the bureau be transferred to the American-controlled Department of Public Instruction. He also summarily replaced Filipino officials with Americans under the pretext that datu were more at ease working with "los Americanos" than the detested Filipinos. Wood kept himself closely informed about Muslim affairs. He took two trips a year to Mindanao and received Muslim leaders who visited Manila. All the while, he assured the Muslims that Philippine independence was not in the offering and the United States was not contemplating withdrawal from the colony. His claims were later backed up by the recommendations of a special investigator sent by Washington to restore some autonomy in Mindanao.

Wood's actions were resented by the Filipinos but raised hopes among the Muslims. The latter's optimism was further invigorated by the introduction of a bill in the U.S. Congress to separate Mindanao from the Philippines and restore the "Moro Province," which would be governed by officials directly appointed by the American president with Senate concurrence. The ensuing battle between Wood and his sympathizers, on one hand, and the Filipinos on the other were interpreted by many datu as signs of a weakening center. This, in turn, precipitated acts of disloyalty from below. The excitement of a possible return to American direct rule was reflected in a meeting between Wood and the datu:

When General Wood asked all of those present desirous of continued American rule to raise their hands, every Moro in the room threw up first one hand and then the other until pandemonium broke loose, the only unenthusiastic observer being a few representative Filipinos who stood looking on grimly with folded arms. The foremost datu began to execute a dance, and the cheering and stamping rose in volume until two sultans danced forward and each of them embraced one of the two members of the mission.

Datu also began to be more open about their true intentions. Those in favor of integration were the first to support Wood and criticize what they called the excesses of Filipinization. Hadji Butu, who voted for Philippine independence in the Senate, switched sides to advocate the retention of American rule in Mindanao even if the Philippines became independent. Others followed suit; the rivals Datu Mandi and Hadji Abdulla Nuno set aside their differences and declared themselves firmly in support of American rule. The separatist spirit was eventually embodied in a "Declaration of Rights and Purpose" manifesto addressed
to President Coolidge demanding the creation of an “independent constitutional sultanate” for “the Moro nation.” Datu Piang himself was enthusiastic about the changes. Although he did not express this in public, in a rare interview with Vice Governor Joseph R. Hayden, Piang, who had aged considerably, expressed his real views. He was particularly optimistic that the Bacon Bill would be able to correct the betrayal of a promise made by the U.S. Army.

The American Army officers who governed us then were good men and just. They gave us assurance that they would protect us and not turn us over to those whom we do not trust. Whether those officers had the power to make those promises we do not know. But we trusted them. But year after year, slowly, they have given the Christian Filipinos more power over us. Their laws are too complicated for us; the Moros need a simple government. Our own is more simple, ours are laws that have been handed down from father to son for many centuries. My sons have told [me of] one of the bills presented to Congress by Mr. Bacon of New York. They tell me that this is to separate Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan from the rest of the Philippines. That would be better. Perhaps not the best solution but better than present conditions. ... My sons tell me that if this bill of Mr. Bacon becomes a law then more capital would come to Mindanao. That would be good. Then we would have those roads and telegraphs. My oldest son has been in the United States. He tells me that the farmers there have those things and are happy and prosperous.

With advancing age, Piang had to pass the responsibility for conducting his family’s politics to his children, Abdullah, Gumbay, and Ugalingan, although he remained the final arbiter in any major decision. With Piang’s blessing, they joined the chorus, championing the Bacon bill and signing the manifesto. They likewise sought to bring the different Muslim datu and the sultan of Sulu to a “conference” that would “present a solid front against the Christians.” With the assistance of a former American soldier, Piang’s sons had also created a “Moro Commission on Separate Government,” with headquarters in Cotabato, which committed itself to establishing a newspaper to promote separatism and spearheading the organization of the planned delegation to Washington.

This animated resurgence of anti-Manila sentiments among the very datu who earlier had claimed allegiance to Filipinization ended abruptly when Wood died. Suddenly the datu were without their purported guardian, and when Wood’s successor, Henry Stimson, declared himself in favor of a return to “Filipino-American cooperation” their minrevolt was doomed. A despondent and now ailing Datu Piang wrote a letter to President Coolidge, mourning the death of Wood. The letter also expressed what may have been the general sentiment of the Muslim datu with regard to Wood’s passing. He wrote:

After our mastery by the Americans, we expected to be ruled by them. This was vouchsafed and promised us. To that end, there was set up by your able military commanders a government simple, clear of understanding, and suited to our position and condition. The Moros were a large part of the government. Enforcement of its edicts was by Americans assisted by Moros. All was moving well when suddenly it was decreed from Washington and Manila that “the government was to be changed for one complex in organization, soothing in its operation, effective in its results” (the intent in Washington was apparently not to the detriment of the Moros). And, from Manila, it has been carried out in a manner the most humiliating to the Moros ... ever imposed by a great power upon a loyal and helpless people. Early there swarmed over our country, under the aegis of the American flag, buttressed by bayonets (who never dared come otherwise) an array of Filipino office holders ... and pressing closely in their wake [were] civilians, all equally indifferent of our welfare and equally greedy of spoils. Remote was the dream of the Moros from degradation, to extortion, he was soon to become the victim.

Datu Piang lived for another six years with his wives and forty-one of his children. He witnessed his sons’ reintegration into a Filipinodominated colonial politics. His eldest son Abdullah was appointed to the Philippine Assembly, while Ugalingan became a member of the Dulawan Municipal Council and a strong advocate of public education. At midnight on August 23, 1933, Datu Piang died at the age of eighty-seven, leaving a legacy that reflected the extent to which Magindanao society had blended with the new colonial order.

What informed Piang’s responses to Filipinization? Were they reflective of a growing knack for opportunism that had become the norm in Philippine colonial politics? If such was the case, did this mean that integration had begun to work? Or were these rearguard actions of an indigenous leadership further weakened by Manila’s reach? If one goes by motive alone, these questions have their respective answers. Yet, if we add the context, the image becomes a bit more variegated. Rather than merely attributing these datu’s actions to opportunism or desperation, we can see in their overlapping and contradictory responses an effort by Muslim elites to negotiate their way through political change.
The switching of sides, the discrepancy between public declarations and private assurances, and the attempt to play Americans against Filipinos were less the actions of astute operators or small-time conspirators than of a "local elite" unsure of its fate. In the datu's eyes, the Americans appeared to give way to the Filipinos, but even this was not definitive, as the return of Leonard Wood seemed to portend.

It was only when Filipinization was restored in the post-Wood period and was sure of becoming permanently established in Mindanao that these political ambiguities were clarified. Anti-Filipino and separatist sentiments steadily diminished in rhetoric and influence as more datu accepted Filipino rule. These datu grudgingly recognized a change in their fortunes and had to—if only to survive—accommodate themselves to it. While many quickly learned the art of working with the Filipinos, others perceived that the new system might be beyond their capabilities. They had neither the wherewithal, the knowledge, or the experience to deal with Filipinization. A new generation of leaders, more familiar with the new order, had to emerge, and the more forward-looking of the old datu were perceptive enough to recognize this.

Piang was one of them. He was clearly unhappy with Filipinization. He despised the Filipinos and was aware that Filipinization would eventually have a regressive impact on Magindanao. He complained that with Manila's blessing lands in Cotabato would eventually be taken over by Christian settlers and the "shrines [where] once his ancestors gathered in solemn worship [would] be converted into pig-wallow or drinking shops." His estrangement was not only based on his fears of what would happen to his community. He was also clearly unable to deal with his new role as "representative of the Moro people" in the colonial state. Elliot smugly wrote that when he was appointed to the Philippine Assembly Piang appeared more concerned with "soliciting government aid to retrieve one of his wives who had run away from the over-populated home" than thinking about how best to represent the Muslims. He was unfamiliar with the assembly's procedures, and life in Manila during the regular sessions was alienating. Harrison had this description of how Piang and other Muslim leaders fared in the legislature.

Senator Hadji Butu and Representatives Dato Benito, Dato Tampugaw and Dato Piang regard their residence in Manila during the sessions as a sort of exile. I remember seeing Dato Piang, the powerful "boss" of Cotabato Valley, sitting one afternoon at the window of his residence in Manila. His old face was expressive of unhappy longing for his wide rice-fields and herds of carabao [water buffalo] in the Cotabato Valley. To these older men, the "Manila Government" is something far away from the needs and realities of Moro life.

Yet Piang was cognizant that Filipinization might have its political benefits, though this time to a new generation of Muslim leaders. This explains why he opted to send his sons to school and worked to get them involved in the Philippine Assembly. Piang understood that the world of the orang besar had ended with the demise of American rule, and he came to accept the narrowing of his boundaries to those of the Moro Province. He resisted Filipinization because it threatened this constricted world protected by the Americans, but he also began to see the possibility of working his way out of this predicament by linking up with Manila, albeit this time through the activities of his sons. Again, Harrison notes:

[These datu] have, however, a wholesome respect and admiration for their young men who are educated in the American school system. Behind all their self-assertion there is a safe and sane understanding that their followers must perforce forever abandon the old life of incessant warfare, and that now the only way for them to protect their rights is to square themselves with modern conditions and a modern system of government.

Piang did not live to see this change in attitude. His children, however, picked up where he left off. One month after his death, his eldest son Abdullah, once a leading conspirator in the plan to convince Washington to grant autonomy to Mindanao, declared in his first legislative speech that if the B. con bill was passed "I will reside during the rest of my life in Manila because I do not want to separate from you." He added: "Look at my skin. The blood that runs in my veins is not different from that of you Christian Filipinos."

Conclusion

Datu Piang's death on August 23, 1933, went largely unnoticed. There were no announcements of his passing, no half-mast flags even in Cotabato, and no statements of condolence by politicians—American, Filipino, or Muslim—Manila's newspapers, or the public. This slip to obscurity in a way mirrored the diminution of Mindanao from a regional hub to an autonomous province to an integrated but peripheral fragment of the Philippines. The story of Piang is the story of Mindanao as it became bound to the colonial body politic and transformed into a local unit whose history is subordinated to the larger Philippine narrative.
Scholars of the Philippines accept without question the peripheral character of Mindanao. As I have tried to show in this essay, this condition was not intrinsic to the island but the product of politico-historical changes under American colonial rule. Mindanao and Muslim leaders like Piang could have easily moved in other directions. Had the Magindanaos succeeded in keeping the Spanish and Americans out of southern Mindanao, their relations with the Southeast Asian regional trading network would have continued. Later, had the U.S. Army succeeded in keeping the Moro Province autonomous from Manila (or, perhaps better, separated), Magindanaos and others might today live like the residents of Hawaii, Guam, and the other American Pacific territories. That these events never took place is a truism, but their possibility showed that there was nothing immutable about Mindanao as the Philippine periphery.

Muslim political involvement did not end with Piang's death. A new generation, which Harrison predicted would "square off modern conditions and a modern system of government," began to make its presence felt in colonial politics, albeit in a limited role. Age and education were the most obvious differences between these new leaders and their antecedents. But there was more. In his first speech before the convention created to draft the constitution of the Philippine Commonwealth, Aluya Alonto, representative of Lanao, implored his fellow delegates to stop referring to all Muslims as "Moros."

We do not like to be called "Moros" because when we are called "Moros" we feel that we are not considered as part of the Filipino people. You also know that the name "Moro" was given to us by the Spaniards because the Moro had been under the rule of Spain like Mindanao and Sulu. So that I would like to request the members of this Convention that we prefer to be called "Mamamayan Filipino" and not "Moros," because if we are called Moros we will be considered as enemies, for the name "Moro" was given to us by the Spaniards because they failed to penetrate into the Island of Mindanao.137

FROM ORANG BESAR TO COLONIAL BIG MAN

NOTES

Research for this essay was supported by funds from the Social Science Research Council Dissertation Fellowship and the Mellon Foundation-Cornell University Department of Government Dissertation Write-up Fellowship. I am grateful to Donna Amoroso, Benedict Anderson, Alfred McCoy, Vivienne Shue, Takashi Shiraishi, and O. W. Wolters for their comments and criticism of this work in its present and previous forms. All shortcomings of this essay are solely mine.

4. Melvin Mendick refers to American colonialism as having brought together two parallel sociocultural streams in Philippine society—the “Islamized Malays” of southern Mindanao and the “Hispanicized Christian Malayas” of the central and northern Philippines (except the northern regions of the Cordilleras). He adds: “It was not until the assumption of colonial jurisdiction of the Filipinos in 1898 and the resulting pacification of the Moros that the separate streams of development came together” (Encampment of the Lake: The Social Organization of a Muslim-Philippine [Moro] People [Chicago: Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1965], 4).
5. Samuel K. Tan, The Filipino Muslim Armed Struggle, 1900–1972 (Manila: Filipinas Foundation, 1977), 39 (on Talitil), 41 (on Sangaon). The Americans were well aware of the ambiguity of Muslim responses, noting that even those who professed to be their “allies” and “friends” could be the first to break into revolt, especially in the volatile district of Lanang. See Edward Bowditch, “Military Taming of the Moro,” n.d., Capt. Edward Bowditch Papers, rare manuscript collection, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University, 31, 35–36.
"distinctiveness" were aided by such studies as Naseeb Saleh, Studies in Moro History, Law, and Religion, Department of the Interior, Ethnological Survey, Paper 4 (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1905); and The History of Sulu (Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1963).

7. Some scholars argue that Muslim "ethnic pride, a keen sense of freedom and consciousness of individualism" prompted the revolts. Again the historical evidence shows the unreliability of these factors as rallying symbols for a united Muslim opposition. Muslim alliances broke down as fast as they were created because of both the effective "divide-and-rule" policy of the Americans and the disunity among the datus themselves. The American "hands-off" policy toward Islam also hindered any effort to use religion as a unifying theme (see Tan, "Unity and Disunity," 25).

8. Majul echoes the "nationalist" Constantino in this, partially attributing the failure of a unified Muslim anticolonialism to the fact that "certain influential sultans and datus were given gifts, salaries and fiefdoms" (Cesar Adib Majul, The Contemporary Moro Movement in the Philippines [Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1985], 20). Tan regards this collaboration as historical and aimed at preserving "feudal" authority, in a sense very much like the Filipino cagays' use of American rule to preserve and expand their land-based wealth and power (Filipino Muslim Armed Struggle, 95, 105).

9. It is often said among Muslims that the word for slave is bisaya, attesting to the regard the former had for the Visayan communities in the Central Philippines.


12. Majul actually made this observation when he argued: "At bottom, the Moro resistance against Spain in the Philippines was not an isolated or insignificant phenomenon but an essential part of the general resistance of all Muslim peoples in Malaysia against Western imperialism, colonialism and Christianity. In an important sense, the Sultanate was being used as a wider social device by the Islamic society in the Malay world. It is within this context that the history of the Moro Wars should be seen to be better understood and appreciated." Unfortunately, he failed to extend this argument into the American period, preferring to look at the Moro reaction to the Americans as now a part of the heritage of the entire Filipino people in the history of their struggle for freedom (Majul, The Philippines [Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1973], 246).

13. It is especially interesting to note that nationalist scholars appear to ignore even the most obvious observations made by Americans. For example, consider this description of the Muslims: "They do not tithe similar to those of the Malays of Borneo and Johore. Tuang, the headman of the village; Gnam, a Justice of the Peace; Lamudia, Nacuda and Timuay, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd class judges; Gangania, a constable; Baguado, a principal, or Cabeza; Manaditana, eldest son of a principal. . . . Like the Malays, they call the heir of a rajah the Rajah-Muda; the nephew of a sultan uses the epithet Paduka; the son of the sultan calls himself Majarasi, the pure or mighty . . . . Onagka-Kaya corresponds to a magnate; Cachal, to a prince of the blood" (Frederick H. Sawyer, The Inhabitants of the Philippines [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900], 368).


15. J. Kathirithamby-Wells, "Banten: A West Indonesian Port and Polity during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in Kathirithamby-Wells and Villiers, The Southeast Asian Port and Polity, 120.

16. Magindanao sent wax, slaves, gold, tobacco, and rice to a variety of other ports, most notably Sulu and Melaka. It came as a surprise to the Americans, then, that the sultan of Sulu's "strongly built [Singapore] house in Balester road" was a far cry from "his decrepid home at Maynbun [sic], the capital of Sulu" (Mindanao Herald, June 15, 1907). See also John Villiers, "Malassar: The Rise and Fall of an East Indonesian Maritime Trading State, 1521-1669," in Kathirithamby-Wells and Villiers, Southeast Asian Port and Polity, 151.


20. Datu Siorgan's awareness of "regional colonial politics" led him to try to placate the Spaniards by "writing a conciliatory letter to [the Spanish governor-general] begging him for pardon [for allowing the Dutch to trade in his area] and hoping, thereby to avoid a fate similar to Ternate [which the Spaniards attacked in 1663]" (Laarhoven, "Lords of the Great River," 165). The case of Datto Ayunan of Cabilabo was also illustrative. As one American put it: "The Datto Ayunan, who resides in the same neighborhood, also came over to the Spaniards, and learned to understand and speak Spanish very well. He had at least three thousand followers, and in the fighting on the Rio Grande in 1866-67 he took the field, supported the Spanish forces against the other dattos, and rendered important services" (Wolders, History, 6, 8-9, 17). Wolders' observation was confirmed by Philippine scholars like Mednick, who noted that among the Maranaos, a Muslim group close to the Magindanaos, "neither leader nor lad were automatically fixed in their relationship to the political system by birth. An
individual could change the political group and a group could change its relationship to the hierarchy either in the physical or social sense" ("Encampment," 7).


25. Hurley, Switch of the Kres, 154-56. The Magindanao and Joloano treaties recall the attempt of the Malay Temenggongs to play the Dutch and British against each other while retaining control over the port of Singapore. See Carl A. Trocki, Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1979), 46-50.

26. Constantino—in a typical Manila-centric fashion—thus errs when he suggests that the "Muslim south became a beleaguered fortress, a sizable segment of indigenous society that tenaciously resisted Hispanization and colonization. Because of its consequent isolation [sic], it was able to preserve indigenous customs and cultures as well as to continue to receive Muslim influences." (The Philippines: A Past Restated, 26).

27. Sultan of Sulu to Col. Sweet, Governor of Jolo, July 7, 1901, asking to borrow a gunboat and/or arms to "fight those who are opposed to the welfare of my country and my people," in Report of War Department (hereafter ARMD), 1902, 247-54.


30. Mindanao Herald, June 17, 1905.

31. Iloilo, Magindanao, 8.

32. Datu Piang Biography, Joseph Relton Hayden Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Box 28-24 (hereafter JHR).


34. The Pulangi River is one of the largest of the Philippines, and its importance as a trade and military route cannot be understated. See Miguel A. Bernad, "Five Letters Describing the Exploration of the Pulangi or Rio Grande de Mindanao, 1850," Philippine Historical Review 1, no. 2 (1966): 17-62.


36. Iloilo, Mindanao, 63. Iloilo cites Salleby as stating that Piang "learned his method" from his father-in-law. Ayunan was the first to "betray" Uto by transferring his support to the Spanish. The son-in-law followed suit.


FROM ORANG BEGAR TO COLONIAL BIG MAN

39. Even Piang’s father was not an exception. The ties he established with Uto and other Maguindanao leaders resonated in Indonesia as well. See Denys Lombard and Claudine Salmon, "Islam and Chinese," Indonesia 57 (1993): 117-32.


41. Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells, "Restrains on the Development of Merchant Capitalism in Southeast Asia before c. 1800," in Reid, Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era, 132. Kathirithamby-Wells adds: "Titles and positions were strictly speaking, not hereditary, so that winning the personal favour of the ruler was the only guarantee of security of status and office."


43. Gowin, Mandate in Malaysia, 53.


47. The same conflict of "perceptions" may have underpinned the bargaining between the sultan of Sulu and the Americans over the right of the former to fly the American flag when he visited Singapore. The notion of border, sovereignty, and boundaries was, I believe, an issue over which the Muslims and the new colonizers were at odds. On probable Maguindanao notions of "boundaries," see Wolters, History, Culture, and Region, 16-17.

48. These sentiments were shared by Sulu Muslims, who initially saw the formation of the Moro Exchanges as a means by which trading access to Borneo would be denied them. See Douglas Hardy, "American Participation in the Economic Development of Mindanao and Sulu, 1899-1930," Ph.D. diss., James Cook University, 1983, 27.

49. Guiltick, Indigenous Political Systems, 106-8. But this was true not only of Perak. Trocki cites an eighteenth-century Malay resistance to the British presence in Riau as having been aggravated by the slide to destitution of this once prosperous port (Prince of Pirates, 34-35).

50. The divorce—not surprisingly—coincided with Ali’s revolt. See Glan, Muslim Szechuan, 47.

51. As reported one soldier, Piang’s "assistant talked lucidly about the precise location and armaments of Ali’s kota." His own ambitious brother, Tambiun, would also abandon him (Mapaano, "Maguindanao," 115-14).

52. He was, after all, a commoner, who rose through the ranks through the adept use of this talent. Piang maintained close relations with local Chinese entrepreneurs by virtue of his "Chinese blood," also contrived to restore some form of economic normalcy to Cotabato, which the Americans appreciated (Gowin, Mandate in Malaysia, 53).


54. ARMD, 1902, 111. Piang, who maintained close relations with local Chinese entrepreneurs by virtue of his "Chinese blood," also contrived to restore some form of economic normalcy to Cotabato, which the Americans appreciated (Gowin, Mandate in Malaysia, 53).

55. RGMP, 1904, 573. Helen Tait, Recollections of Full Years (New York: Dodd,
Mead, 1914), 74-75. On the use of gutta percha as insulation for underwater cables, as well as the competition among Malay chiefs to monopolize its harvest and trade, see Trocki, Prince of Pirates, 76-77, 82, 88.

56. Crowing, Mandate, 127-29.
57. Mindanao Herald, November 16, 1907. The February 3, 1909, issue of the Herald listed the following leading merchants of Cotabato: Sun Funana, reputedly the wealthiest of all the Chinese, having been in Cotabato for forty years; Yn Deco, who had controlled the gutta percha trade with Datu Piang since the Spanish period; and Chin Kai, owner of the largest lumber store and agent of the shipping line Compania Maritima. Others mentioned were Messrs. Chao Suia, Celestino Alonzo (Christianized), Ty Kongo, Cua Consuy, Quiipo, Ong Lee, Tan Cacao, Tan Opon, Te Liangco, Lim Peu, Ong Baco, Chu Yuqui, Dy Toco, and Tan Se Tun, all described by the Herald as "businessmen."

58. ARWD, 1902, 111.
60. Ilalo, Magindanao, 63-64.
61. Mindanao Herald, November 6, 1907.
63. See Mindanao Herald, August 4, 1906, and August 25, 1906, on Pandapatan and Mantula, respectively. Before his appointment, the latter had been "reduced to tending store for a livelihood" (Crowing, Mandate, 183).
64. The Mindanao Herald observed that the sultan of Magindanao "is held in deep respect by the lesser Moros, and could, had he the inclination, be of great assistance to the government in keeping peace among the tribes in the Mindanao, and in the other article continued: "It is now proposed to build him a residence at Margosa Tubig, and endeavor to make that place his headquarters, where trivial questions among his people will be settled by him. Thus, it is expected, will do much to inspire the Moros with confidence in the Government, as much as they prefer to remain under the Sultan's rule" (June 17, 1906).
65. The American, July 13, 1900.
68. The reporter added, mistakenly, that Piang's "real object is presumed to be to secure an open field for graft" (Mindanao Herald, May 19, 1906).
69. Mindanao Herald, March 31, 1907.
70. Ilalo, Magindanao, 63.
71. Tausa and genealogical accounts that show the links of datus and sultans with past personalities whose bloodlines suggested ties to the Prophet Muhammad or any of his relatives. These are secret, "kept securely by trusted members of a Muslim clan" lest they turn out to be invented, thus rendering the clan's claims to royal descent illegitimate. See Mohammad Fatihy Mahmoud, "The Muslims in the Philippines: A Bibliographic Essay," Asian Studies 12, nos. 2-3 (1974): 173.
75. Hagedorn, Wood, 19.
77. In 1907, Piang was reported to have had six wives and twenty children (Mindanao Herald, March 31, 1907).
82. Kahanmamy-Wells, "Restraints," 137.
84. Mapanao, "Maguindanao," 43.
85. James Warren, Slavery and the Impact of External Trade: The Sulu Sultanate in the 19th Century" in McCoy and De Jesus, Philippine Social History, 415-44.
86. The native gutta percha supply, it is believed, is fast disappearing before the destructive methods employed by the natives and avaricious datu in gathering it (Mindanao Herald, August 10, 1907).
87. Masuda, American Presence in Mindanao," 83. In Zamboanga, provincial officials cheerfully reported that Tribal Ward 3 was "practically weaponless" and that the Moros [there] are in pretty bad shape" after having been banned from raiding neighboring Subano communities for slaves (Mindanao Herald, June 17, 1905).
88. RGMP, 1904, 6-7.
89. This sealing off was never totally successful. As the following description of a Magindanao market shows, the network still continued to reach into Cotabato Valley: "One of the largest markets in the Rio Grande Valley is held at Dullah on Tuesdays and Thursdays of each week. Almost every article of value to a Moro, from buya nut to Singapore cloth of any color, may be purchased on these days. Several Chinese merchants do a thriving trade in cheap prints, silk thread, knives, buttons, etc. All kinds of money is accepted in the market; a Straits Settlements cent or a Spanish silver piece being equal in value to a centavo or peseeta. An examination of 10 copper cents taken from the hand of a passing Moro showed coins from the following countries:
British North Borneo, Sarawak, Hongkong, India, Straits Settlement and the Philippines" (Mindanao Herald, April 13, 1907).

By this time, Zambanga-based ships owned by Americans, Filipinos, Chinese, and even Japanese had taken over from the press of the Sultan and Magindanao sultans as the main vehicles of trade throughout the ports around Asia, from Singapore to Shanghai (Hartley, "American Participation," 28). Manila, however, imposed a ban on allowing passengers from these ports to enter the Philippines through Zambanga or Jolo, a regulation that Mindanao governors tried to have rescinded due to the potential loss of revenue. See Frank W. Carpenter, Department of Mindanao and Sulu, "Report to the Governor-General, Philippine Islands, September 11, 1917, in Report of the Governor-General of the Philippine Islands, 1917, 90.


Ito, Magindanao, 58–63.

The report of the murder of one Hadji Tahib, the minister of war of the sultan of Sulu, for being too close to the Americans may also have pushed Piang toward this colonial option (Mindanao Herald, September 17, 1900).


Zambanga Americans engaged their Filipino rivals in a propaganda war, the most vicious attack being an article in the Mindanao Herald with the title "A Last Filipino." See the reprint in Philippines Free Press, June 8, 1912.

One American columnist even recommended that all Muslims groups be transferred to Sulu so as to leave Mindanao to those Filipinos and Americans "who cared to settle." In Sulu, a "quasi-independent sultanate could be organized [sic] with an American Resident after the manner of the Malay states." This, accordingly, would solve the problems of continuing anti-Christian sentiments among the Muslims, of settling Mindanao, and, most of all, of keeping the Muslims out of Filipino cacique control (Philippines Free Press, August 17, 1907).

Nationalist agitation had reached Mindanao as early as 1906. It increased as Filipinos in Manila began to broaden their power. See Mindanao Herald, August 18, September 15, and September 22, 1906; and Philippines Free Press, August 31, 1907.


Gowing, Mandate, 254. In 1910, the sultan of Sulu, Jamalul Kiram, drew considerable attention when, after his return from the United States, he declared his support for integration, contending that this would strengthen his hand against his Tausug rivals. See Wayne Wray Thompson, "Governors of the Moro Province: Wood, Bliss, and Pershing in the Southern Philippines," Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1975, 5, 198–99, 208–72; and "Por la Isla de Mindanao, Un Gran Convencion," Philippines Free Press, December 12, 1910.


104. Muslims who ingratiated themselves with Quezon cited Piang's construction of two public schools and his support for the primary education of Magindanao children at his own expense as proof that "the Moros [have] realized the value of public schools" (Philippines Free Press, May 11, 1915). See also Philippines Free Press, January 19, 1918.

105. On Piang's children being part of the Mindanao delegations to Manila, see Philippines Free Press, May 6 and October 15, 1915. Piang's second son, Ugaliling, was sent to the Central Luzon Agricultural School to study trade and exchange and English. According to one account, Piang became "the most advanced" among the Cotabato students (Philippines Free Press, January 6, 1917).


107. Interview with Datu Piang, in JRH, Box 28–33.

108. Florence Horn, Orphans of the Pacific: The Philippines (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1941), 153. Many Muslims regarded their relationship with the Americans as intimate and personal, and their loyalties rarely went beyond their immediate superiors. The only exception may be the Muslim deference to Leonard Wood, which resulted from his frequent visits to the districts. See H. H. Elarth, "With Moro Soldiers," Bulletin of the American Historical Collection 14, 2 (1903): 4–6. Muslims were said to be ecstatic about the return of Wood because he renewed his close ties with them (Thomas, "Muslims but Filipinos," 100).

109. See the petition prepared by a Committee of Petitions and Communications that was part of a "Declaration of Rights and Purposes" allegedly signed by various Muslim leaders warning of "bloodeed and disorder" if Mindanao was not kept separate from the Philippines (Tan, Critical Decade, 47–48).


111. Wood asserted that the Moros "are a unit against independence and are united for continuance of American control and, in case of separation of the Philippines from the United States, desire their portion of the Islands to be retained as American territory under American control" ("Conditions in the Philippine Islands: Report of the Special Mission to the Philippine Islands to the Secretary of War," 67th Cong., 2d sess., 1922, H. Doc. 325, 21). See also Tan, Critical Decade, 74.

112. In a cable, Wood expressed his hope that such messages would "rectify" and "neutralize" Quezon's speeches to Muslim leaders regarding independence (November 14, 1923, Bureau of Insular Affairs, file no. 4665–150).


114. Philippine Herald, August 1 and 19, 1926.

115. Fry, "Bacon Bill," 267. See also "Remarks of Hon. Robert L. Bacon of New
York in the House of Representatives, February 9, 1926," in JRH, Box 28-24. Bacon, a childhood friend of Wood, led a "fact-finding" mission to the Philippines on behalf of American business. The mission was guided through Mindanao by Wood. Back in Washington, Bacon was aided in the preparation of his bill by David Barrows, former education director of the Philippines and a Wood ally.

117. Forbes, The Philippine Islands, 47.
119. Hadji Butu also demanded that the Americans accord him power and prestige similar to that given the sultans of Johore and Perak by Britain (Fry, "Bacon Bill," 260, 267).
121. Ten, Critical Decade, 47-49. This movement was by no means unanimous. In Lanao, datu were split between the "pro-independence" and "pro-American" factions, raising fears of renewed violence in what had always been regarded as the most volatile of the Muslim provinces. See Manila Daily Bulletin, August 22, 1926.
123. Joe Hayden to (wife) Betty Hayden, September 12, 1926, Cotabato Province, in JRH, Box 28-24. Piang was believed to be "past seventy."
126. J. R. Hayden to Dr. Bauer, September 21, 1926, Ugalinan Piang, Chairman of the Moro Commission on Separate Government, Dulawan, Cotabato, to the Governor-General, November 26, 1926; and Charles S. Cox, Publicity Manager, Moro Commission on Separate Government, to J. R. Hayden, November 18, 1926. All three letters are in JRH, Box 28-24.
127. Without Wood, the U.S. Senate also lost interest in the Bacon bill and the question of retaining the Philippines as a colony. Quezon and Osmena reasserted their control over the colonial state and worked for the creation of the Philippine Commonwealth as a transition to full independence.
128. Datu Piang to President Coolidge, on the Occurrence of the death of Leonard Wood, August 26, 1927 [a translation], in JRH, I:28-33.
129. Wood cynically noted that "Piang has apparently progressed in the matter of children. He has some forty-one (or forty-four; he can't remember) and about sixty dead" (quoted in Hagedorn, Wood, 392). The same reaction came from his successor, Tasker Bliss. See Frederick Palmer, Bliss, Poeciloman: The Life and Letters of Tasker H. Bliss (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1934). 91. Hayden had the number of Piang's children pegged at thirty-three with twenty dead. He also had "a number of wives" ("Biografa of Datu Piang," 2).
134. Harrison, Cornerstone of Independence, 118.