Moro Islam and American Indignation: How Moro-Islamic Practices Justified Moro Subjugation on Mindanao to Early-Twentieth Century Americans

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores and details how the practices of Moro Islam on Mindanao justified to Americans in the early twentieth century the forcible subjugation of that society under American authority. Using the arguments against Moro Islam of slavery, degradation of women, “taqiyyya” or lying to “infidels” to advance the cause of Islam, datu abuse of power and robbery as well as torture, the paper addresses how the Moro society based on the Islamic Quran was transformed and modernized under the provincial government of the United States of America after the American victory at Bud Bagsak in 1911, using Christian-American principles and strategies. The sources used to validate the arguments in this paper also quote high-ranking American military officers and other figures of import in the Moro-American War, which serves to increase the reliability of the material therein.
Research Paper on “Moro Islam and American Indignation: How Moro-Islamic Practices Justified Moro Subjugation on Mindanao To Americans”

The thesis argument for this research paper is that Moro-Islamic practices of degradation of women, slavery, perpetual warfare, suicide warfare “jihad” and unequal justice provided the ideological justification to twentieth-century Americans of the Moro-American war and the subjugation of the Moro Province. To substantiate this argument, the practices of Moro Islamic society must first be analyzed and compared to the post-Islamic Moro society constructed by American authorities on the island of Mindanao after the Moro-American War. Research on this topic has proven to be both a challenge and fruitful. Primary sources documenting this period of history are plentiful; such sources include personal writings and memoirs of commanders of American military forces on Mindanao between 1902 and 1913, historical newspaper reports documented in online databases, and the records of the provincial government on Mindanao,
available on the Mindanao government’s official website. Secondary source material
documenting Moro society after the war is also abundant. These sources include theses and
dissertations written by contemporary researchers of the Moro-American War, photographs,
video footage and finally, recently-printed books written on the subject. This research paper will
first analyze Moro-Islamic customs and practices, then describe and compare how these practices
were viewed by Americans, then describe by how Americans used these cultural differences to
justify their own subjugation of the island followed by a conclusive restatement of how the
various points support the thesis and conclude the analysis.

In the 13th Century A.D. the religion of Islam was brought to Mindanao in the Philippines
by three Imams from the Middle East. The followers of Islam were known as Muslims. Islam
was a violent religion, and it was largely spread by the swords of the prophet Mohammad’s
followers. The native people of Mindanao were traditionally very warlike and violent and the
Imams found that converting the Moros to Islam was not difficult due to this cultural similarity.
The Moros traditionally practiced slavery, slave-raiding, tribal warfare, robbery of conquered
tribes, and polygamy. The influence of Islam added suicide warfare against infidels (non-
Muslims) to that list.1 Captain Jack Pershing (who became a Brigadier General during the Moro-
American War) wrote about the Moro-Muslims: “Muslim progress was inhibited most by the
"degrading slavery of concubinage and polygamy" whose "baneful influence encourages
sensuality and lust with all their degrading effect upon the Moro character."2 Islam only
reinforced these practices and cultural customs. Islam gave the Moros not only cultural
reinforcement of their (to American eyes) dangerous and brutal practices, but gave them a belief

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1 James R. Arnold, *The Moro War: How America Battled a Muslim Insurgency in the
2 Thompson, Wayne Wray. “Governors of the Moro Province: Wood, Bliss, and Pershing
that by committing these acts they were fulfilling a divine calling as well. This only served to justify their violence in their own eyes, and served to justify subjugating them under “democratic” and “peaceful”, “civil” government to twentieth century Americans. The Moro definition of masculinity was closely tied to combat. A Moro warrior who lost his bladed weapon for any reason or failed to do well in combat was viewed as an undesirable example of a Moro by other Moros.³ The Catholic Spanish tried to convert the Moros to Roman Catholic Christianity for nearly three-hundred years; however because of the entrenched religious influence of Islam and the Moro resistance to outside influence, the Spanish efforts failed. The Americans were determined not to have such a failure in their attempts to pacify and tame the Moros of Mindanao.

When American forces arrived in Mindanao in 1902, they quickly found that the indigenous Moro tribes were not only very skilled combatants despite their lack of advanced technology, but also that they were determined to fight to the death for any of their dwellings, homes, or territory on Mindanao. The Moros historically used the Islamic principle known as “taqiyya” or lying to advance Islam, to gain victory in unfavorable circumstances.⁴ Peace treaties to the Moros were used to replenish strength of numbers until the enemy could be defeated. Then the treaty would be broken and hostilities would resume. Peace treaties between the Moros were never permanent.⁵ The resulting combination of these factors made the Moros very dangerous, untrustworthy opponents. The practices of the Moros were viewed as barbaric and savage by the Americans. It became clear to the Americans that the more severe Islamic practices had to be

³ The Moro War, 241.
⁴ Ibid, 16.
⁵ Ibid, 109.
ended in order for a provincial government to flourish. One of the practices of the Moros that Americans despised most was the Islamic degradation of women.

The way women were treated by Moro society on Mindanao was repugnant to American eyes. Moro-Islam commanded harsh of Moro women by Moro men, and for centuries this was the norm. Moro women were viewed as second-class citizens. A woman who was caught committing a crime of any type was likely to receive severe punishment. Women faced lashes and severe beatings for a wide range of crimes. For instance, a woman convicted of adultery by the Islamic datu authorities would be “buried up to the chest and stoned with medium-sized stones”. 6 No such penalty existed for a man convicted of adultery, because in Islam adultery was permitted for men. The scales for justice were much different for men than for women in Islamic law. Islamic “Sharia” law also made it easier for a Moro of privileged status to get out of legal trouble. A privileged or wealthy Moro often would be ordered to simply pay a small fine to a council of “datus”, the Moro equivalent of an Islamic Imam, who also served as head of a tribe.7 The result of this was unequal justice, something Americans did not respect or tolerate lightly. The American government responded by outlawing the practice of extra-judicial killings.8 This action corresponded closely with the deadly and frightening Islamic practice of the Moros known as “juramentado” or suicide “jihad” warfare.

6 The Moro War, 16
7 Ibid, 4.
The word “juramentado” is Spanish in origin. It refers to one who “takes an oath.”\(^9\) A Moro warrior who wished to die in “juramentado” jihad was a very dangerous threat. The Moro warrior would first go to a datu, and undergo a ritual of “purification”, so that their soul would be safe and supposedly, “infidel” weaponry wouldn’t harm them unless “Allah” decided to let that warrior be harmed. Next, the warrior would make a vow of absolution to that datu, vowing to kill as many “infidels” as possible or die in the attempt. After this vow was spoken, he could not change his mind. It was a binding contract. The newly-christened “juramentado” would then shave his head and travel to a place with “infidels” such as an American base with “infidel” Americans, or a Filipino settlement full of “Christian” Filipinos. A juramentado would enter this location looking like any other Moro, completely inconspicuous. They did not draw attention to themselves until they were ready to strike. There was no way to know whether a Moro was a juramentado until they bared their shaved heads and unsheathed their blades. When the juramentado sensed the time was right, he would unsheathe his bladed weapon and shout terrifying war cries, and begin to swiftly kill every non-Moro, non-Islamic human being in sight, killing, running and shouting in a fervor that terrified everyone nearby. The shock of this sudden commotion was usually enough to stun and confuse the bystanders for at least one second, which was more than enough time for a juramentado to kill someone. These combatants could not be reasoned with, bribed, bartered with, or dissuaded from their suicidal rampage with anything but lethal force. It often took multiple shots to stop a juramentado or Moro warrior in combat.\(^{10}\) This terrifying experience was featured in the nightmares of many an American soldier during the Moro War.

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The influence of Islam on the datu authorities also led to corruption and “divine right” mentalities among those datus. The “datus” were the Islamic “elders” of Moro society. They were warlords, Imams, and legislators combined into one class. Moro society on Mindanao was overseen and ruled by a council of Islamic datus. The datus ruled according to the Quran, and used it for nearly all legal and legislative as well as personal matters. The result of this was inevitable abuse of power. The datus commanded nearly divine respect, and used it to personal advantage. On page 35 of his doctoral thesis “Islam in the Moro-American War 1899-1913: Implications on Mindanao in the Philippines,” the author Renato Oliveros writes: “The head datu adopted the title sultan from as-sultan zill Allah fi al-ard (the shadow of Allah on Earth).”\(^{11}\) This passage refers to the Sultan of Sulu, but it is an accurate representation of just how much power and authority a datu could have. To the common Moro people, a datu had extreme authority and power. It was a simple matter to determine just how important a particular datu was due to the umbrella they walked under: if the datu had one umbrella bearer accompanying him he was a minor datu, if he had two umbrella bearers he was a major datu, and if the bearer’s umbrella was entirely green, that meant the datu was a holy man who had completed the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia once during his lifetime.\(^{12}\) A datu had complete authority over his tribe. They were very important men, and usually had their own “cotta” or fortified complex. These “cottas” were earthen forts fortified and structured with bamboo. The walls were often too high to scale without ladders, and they usually had tunnels underground or escape passageways so that the datu and his followers could escape if necessary. According to Moro tradition, women and children would often die with their Moro warrior family heads as martyrs. Due to

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\(^{12}\) The Moro War, 11.
censorship by the military of stories leaked to the American press, the American public seldom heard or saw this side of the war’s story.\textsuperscript{13} The datus of Moro society could claim most things as their “right”, because the populace respected them as “Allah’s” representatives, similar to the original Islamic prophet Muhammed.\textsuperscript{14} One of the most common ways datus showed this superiority is through cruel punishment. Cruelty was a very common datu trait according to American opinions of the time. General Davis’s annual report of 1903 specifically details several accounts of this aspect of datu authority. On page 140, he describes the cruelty of “Uto”, a Moro datu:

[“Uto, the once famous Uto, perhaps one of the most cruel men of these later days, gave at times his slaves and sacopes, even for insignificant short-comings, unheard of punishments; and other dattos used to do the same thing although less frequently. Those who escaped from him he punished by cutting the tendons below the knees so that they would be unable to run and walk only with difficulty. Others he ordered to be bound in a place swarming with red ants which are very vicious and whose bites are poisonous and insupportable. Others he cause to be bound naked to the trunks of trees and exposed by day to the burning rays of the sun and by night to the agonizing torments of the mosquitoes which infest and molest that part of the world…”\textsuperscript{15}]

\textsuperscript{13} Manifest Destiny Meets Malay Pirates, 29.
\textsuperscript{15} General George W Davis. “Annual Report of Major General George W. Davis, United States Army Commanding Division of the Philippines from October 1, 1902 to July 26, 1903.”
The final practice of the Moros detailed here that the Americans detested, is robbery and treachery. The Moros as a whole were not a trustworthy group, in the eyes of many American soldiers and authorities on Mindanao during the early twentieth century. The report of General Davis again speaks volumes on this attribute on page 145 of that report:

[“Among the Moros there scarcely exists one who is not a ladron. This is not strange to any who knows a little of the race; for the Datto being the one who robs in the most barefaced manner, can it be expected that his vassals will not rob also? And let not the reader suppose that this vice is confined to dattos only; it is the same with all. They do not commit the robbery themselves, but they have at their orders those who are expert and accustomed to the work.”]¹⁶

To many Americans in the early twentieth century, the Moro Filipinos were viewed as utterly savage due to their brutal practices. This made in their eyes, the total subjugation of the island under Moro authority completely reasonable. When the American government formally declared the establishment of the Moro province in 1903 under Major General Leonard Wood, slavery was outlawed.¹⁷ Before 1903, the United States government made it difficult for slavers

¹⁷ Hurley, 48.
to profit or benefit from the practice by setting a very low price for a slave to buy their own freedom. A payment of $20 to the United States provincial government was legally permissible and acceptable as payment for restoration of freedom. The United States military also freed escaped slaves that asked for freedom, and did not compensate the datu slave-owners for escaped slaves that were freed by American law. The Moro datus resented this, and when the Americans banned slavery entirely in 1903, that resentment turned to anger. To deal with the issue of the Islamic “juramentado” warfare, the American government criminalized the datu’s practice of giving absolution and purification to a Moro warrior before that warrior went on his suicidal “jihad”. Without this “purification” and “vow of absolution” before the datu, a Moro warrior would be condemned if he killed someone according to the Quran. In addition, some American soldiers adopted the practice of suspending dead pigs over the bodies of slain juramentados, letting the pigs’ blood drain on to the juramentado’s body. Any contact with any part of a pig’s body whatsoever in the Quran, was enough to condemn a person to hell. This made this practice quite effective in deterring juramentado recidivism.

To eliminate the practice of treachery and false peace, the Americans enforced the importance of credibility in social and legal dealings. The provincial American government was not forgiving to datus who betrayed their own word, and refused to trust them in the future in most cases. These datus would be the first to be suspected in murder cases, thefts, and other criminal acts. Also of note is the American government’s policy of holding datus of Moro tribes accountable for crimes committed by Moro warriors from that tribe. If the datu refused to hand over the guilty parties, the entire tribe would face punitive action by the U.S. military forces on Mindanao, and the datu could be held personally responsible. A datu who harbored a murderer or

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18 Espana, 92.
murdered someone sometimes faced execution by hanging, as in the case of Datu Sariol who murdered an American officer in his sleep.\textsuperscript{19}

With the evidence located and analyzed in its entirety, it can be accurately argued that the main justification for American subjugation of the Moros on Mindanao was not economic, but rather ideological and legal. While Americans found it difficult to imagine how such “savage” and “brutal” ways of life were helpful, they failed to note that the Moro lifestyle and society had been established for hundreds of years. It is that reason perhaps most of all, which testifies to why the efforts to change such an entrenched societal norm were so difficult.

\textsuperscript{19} The Moro War, 119.
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SECONDARY SOURCES


