

Border and Shaping of Identities: The Fort of Nuestra Señora del Pilar of Zamboanga, Mindanao (Philippines)¹

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Abstract

At the end of the 15th century, Southeast Asia underwent a process of islamisation. Muslim presence in Southern Philippines was strongly fought by the Spaniards since 1570 and until the end of their presence in this archipelago. They named these Muslims moors, due to the similarity they established between them and the Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula. The Philippines was a border territory and the Philippine society was used to live at the edge of the Imperial possessions. The Sulu Sea was a real border zone from a geographical, cultural and historical point of view, whose study allows us to analyse the relations between the Spaniards and the local powers, and vice versa. Within this context, we will focus on the analysis of the history of the Hispanic forts in the island of Mindanao, in particular of the Fort of Nuestra Señora del Pilar of Zamboanga, a really strategic settlement in Southern Philippines, whose historical development allows us to analyse the different policies introduced by the Hispanic Monarchy in these regions subjected to its nominal sovereignty.

Key words: Mindanao, Zamboanga, Fort of Nuestra Señora del Pilar, Piracy, Sulu Sea

Mindanao, Sulu and Northern Borneo in the context of the Governorate and Captaincy General of the Philippine Islands, Border Issues

At the end of the 15th century, Southeast Asia and China had begun their process of islamisation. Generally speaking, it can be said that commercial trade was what brought Islam to these regions via the commercial routes that crossed Northern Africa and Asia (Dupuis, 1975: 274; Al Faruqi and Lamya Al Faruqi, 1986; Robinson and Brown, 1992: I, 88-95; Guermon Prez, 1996: 392-395). Since 1500, there were Muslim population centres established along the Burmese coast, northern Sumatra and Malacca. And it was from that last place from where they established themselves in northern Borneo, the islands of Sulu, and Mindanao; as well as in the northern coast of Java, southern Borneo and the islands of Ternate and Ambon - in the Archipelago of the Moluccas - (Montero y Vidal, 1888: I, 88-95; Luque Talaván, 1998; Majul, 1999: 39-88). Muslim presence in the southern Philippines would be fought by

the Spaniards. It was a conflict that, in a certain manner and in the minds of many Spanish people of the age, prolonged the fight against Islam that had been developed in the Peninsula from 711 to 1492². Particularly because of the pressure exerted by the Spaniards, the islamised Philippine indigenous population was reduced - geographically speaking and in the 19th century - to a few isolated settlements in the south-eastern coast of Mindanao, a coastal strip located at the south of the same island than then connected with a territory called Cotabato, larger in area, that narrowed again until it came to the Spanish settlement of Zamboanga, close to which some small Muslim emplacements were located. The Sulu Archipelago was under complete Muslim authority, except for the three spots that Spain kept under control: the village of Isabelita and an inland fort - both in the island of Basilan -, and another emplacement in the northern coast of the island of Sulu. It was also Muslim territory all the southern coast of Paragua or Palawan, the island of Balabac and the Cagayan Sulu, as well as the northern coast of Borneo. It can be seen how their presence especially in Mindanao was interrupted by the existence of small Spanish settlements usually military settlements; which were more abundant in the northern coast of the island than in the southern coast; as well as by large areas occupied by the insular indigenous groups³.

Muslim piracy in the Philippines as an origin of border tension

The hostile activity of many Philippines' Muslim leaders marred the relationships between them and the Spanish authorities who considered them to be pirates; who used force in order to terminate a conflict that never came to an end. Hundreds of lives were lost in these costly armed conflicts, which also turned out to be, from an economic point of view, very expensive for the Spanish treasury. From the beginning of its presence in the Archipelago, the ongoing concerns that Spain had about this conflict were felt by several Spanish authors who wrote various books about this matter. Those writings, heavily eurocentric, intellectually fed entire generations that came to identify every Philippine Muslim known as *moros* with pirates, slave traders, cruel, bloodthirsty individuals, etc. This assessment led, in turn, to a whole new historiography and literature in which the perception of the other, the different, in this

case the Muslim, deserves a new in depth analysis that is still pending (Luque Talaván, 1999: 57-86).

Fortresses for a border

It was not only historiography that reflected this matter, but in the Philippine coasts, out of the necessity of protecting themselves from pirates, a whole architecture for defensive-offensive purposes arose. It was composed of small forts for protection and watchtowers on high places to prevent attacks (Javellana, 1997; Caulín Martínez and Luque Talaván, 2002: 205-215). From an anthropological perspective, this architecture shows the border tension and the sense of insecurity and intolerance against what was considered to be different, strange and diverse (Lisón Tolosana, 1997: 141). Those defences, which we can refer to as static, coexisted with the dynamic defences depicted by the coastguard vessels in Philippine waters. These tasks, that showed little effectiveness in most of the cases, were already represented in the second half of the 18th century by a squad created in 1775 by the Governor and Captain General Simón de Anda y Salazar (1770-1776). Sometime after that, the same squad, under the governance of his successor José de Basco y Vargas (1778-1787), would be baptised as *marina sutil* (Montero y Vidal, 1888: I, 73-75; Martín Onrubia, 2006/2007: 155-159). All this contributed to make the Philippines a border territory in which society was used to live at the edge, or at the forefront, of the Imperial possessions, with all the associated risks. Therefore, the Sulu Sea became a real border zone from a geographical, cultural and historical point of view. These Muslim states had a strong maritime nature, with a very peculiar organisational system that had to be in contact with the international economy present in the area Chinese and Spanish, mainly and the rapid progress of the European colonialism and modernity. Its strategic position in an area of high commercial value progressively turned Mindanao, and especially Sulu, into a well developed area with a very vital economy where Europeans and Chinese traders too sought to acquire swallows' nests, pearls, sponges, among other products; whereas the Muslims got in exchange goods they appreciated more, like firearms, textiles, etc. (Spoehr, 1968: 177-185; Warren, 1999; Warren, 2000: 7-8; Ollé, 2002; Malcampo, 2007; Crick, 2013: 86-97).

Several campaigns against the Philippine Muslims were carried out already since the 17th century; even if it was during the first half of the 19th century, and more specifically during the mandate of Lieutenant General Narciso Clavería y Zaldúa, Count of Manila (1844-1849), when piratical activity took its biggest blows. In our view, Spain was interested in the eradication of piratical activity in Philippine waters for three main reasons: first, to protect the islands' internal and external trade; second, to safeguard the christianised and hispanised Philippine villages that were usually under attack; and third and last, to avoid that other European powers like France or England, under the pretext of eradicating piracy, took control of the southern Philippines, as they had tried to do a few times before. To these reasons could be added the Crown's intentions to harm the trade routes existent in the Muslim regions, in order to take away resources, and hence autonomy of action, from them.

Hispanisation and construction of the Hispanic space in the southwest of the Philippine Islands, Life in military prisons

During the second half of the 16th century and even afterwards, it can be considered that, in zones like the Philippine Islands, missions and prisons formed systems vanguard and protection of the Hispanic possessions⁴. The military occupation of the archipelago always suffered from a chronic lack of men and, for that reason, it was often necessary to enlist local natives. For example, we can mention that on 21 April, 1609, the Governor and Captain General of the Philippines Juan de Silva, only had five Spanish infantry companies; and on 26 June, 1626, the interim Governor Juan Niño de Tábora took 600 Spanish infantry soldiers and some veteran captains from the Flanders campaigns (Alía Plana, 1993: 18, note number 11). Many of the men sent to serve as soldiers in the archipelago had arrived to that destination to serve sentences for crimes committed: homicide, *estupro*, bigamy, sodomy, adultery, concubinage, and domestic abuse among others. There were also crimes such as *vagamundeo*, gambling, or desertion of the army. Some of these crimes were also accompanied by, apart from harsh destinations in Zamboanga or the Mariana Islands, spiritual punishments given by the Spanish Inquisition. Given the different types of offences, the time of punishment of duty in the islands was variable. The longer periods of sentence that have been documented correspond to ten years, and they often punished a sexual

type of crime committed in New Spain. In the prisons, the psychological pressure exerted by the environment and the hard conditions of life to which the soldiers were subjected (badly supplied, late payments, poor diet, etc.) put them in extreme situations that caused different responses. One of the cases that the Spanish authorities watched the most was that of those prisoners who renounced the Catholic faith and converted to Islam. This was then a border society that certainly gave origin to a new kind of man yet to be studied (García de los Arcos, 1996: 118-119; Luque Talaván, 2011: 165-190).

The Fort of Nuestra Señora del Pilar of Zamboanga (Mindanao)

As it usually happens with other cases, the history of this fortress perfectly summarises the situation of the Philippines during the Spanish rule. Since its establishment in 1635, it had to be abandoned in 1662 - together with the prisons of Terrenate, Calamianes and Iligan - by order of the then Governor and Captain General Sabiniano Manrique de Lara (1653-1663). The reason was the necessity to concentrate the few insular forces in Manila, with the objective of reinforcing the defences of the capital regarding a possible attack of the Chinese senior official Coseng or Cogsenya. A *Real Cédula* [Royal Decree] of 30 December, 1666 promulgated by Mariana of Austria, Queen Regent of Spain, ordered its restoration. The measure could not be applied until 1718, though (Ortiz de la Tabla Ducasse, 1974: 197-201; Molina, 1984: I, 127; Prieto Lucena, 1985: 116-140)⁵. In this section, we will examine its situation at a particular time of its history. For that purpose, we will make use of a very interesting written and illuminated work, product of the initiative of the Governor and Captain General Fernando Valdés Tamón (1729-1739), that gave a description of the state of the fortifications of the Philippines; and that was made in 1739 (Cuesta Domingo and Infante, 1995; Luque Talaván, 2010: 239-255). In 1739, the Fort of Nuestra Señora del Pilar of Zamboanga, under the command of a Governor, was built with lime and pebble, rectangular shape and four bastions. It had a rampart at the entrance to the town, by the sea, that encircled it from the east and the south; where it externally had a stockade too. To the west, where there was a door, it had a marsh acting as a moat. To the north, where it faced the town, there was a man-made moat. On the other hand, the annexed town had its own and well planned fortification system.

The defensive system of Mindanao also had, at that time, the forts of San José of Cagayan, San Francisco Javier of Iligan, Santiago of Dapitan - these three under the jurisdiction of the province of Cebu -; and the ones of San José of Tandag, San Francisco of Cateel and San Juan Bautista of Linão - these three in the province of Caraga⁶. A new list of the state of the islands' fortresses made in 1753 by order of Francisco José de Ovando y Solís, Marquis of Ovando, Governor and Captain General of the Philippine Islands (1750-1754), allows us to know that the fort of Zamboanga had 586 soldiers and seventy three cannons back then; being the one with the biggest number of personnel after the fort of the insular capital, which gives us a precise idea of its importance in the Philippine fortifications system (Ortiz de la Tabla Ducasse, 1974: 180-181)⁷. This was a border territory in a constant state of conquest that was at the same time both vanguard and preliminary position of the territories subjected to the sovereignty of the Spanish Monarchy. The strategic interest of this position is obvious; but we have to remember once again that its location was a busy commercial trade zone between the southern Philippines and the Moluccas, Borneo, China and other Southeast Asian places.

Final thoughts

Under some of the parameters set out above it is not difficult to imagine that the relationships with the indigenous populations of the area not only were not fluid, but in many cases difficult. With more detailed studies of the existent documentation we will undoubtedly be able to start assessing their exact terms. There is no uniform culture. And the space that is the focus of the attention in this current work is good proof of that. This environment would be a multicultural space, where a juxtaposition of human groups in a specific space of contact existed (García Canclini, 2005: 15-16, 29-Ss., y 101)⁸. The perception of the *moro* as an enemy was discussed by some Hispanic authors at the end of the 19th century. Thus, José Nieto Aguilar maintained that the Malayan-Muslim "(...) until today, has only met the *castila* as a soldier or as an intolerant friar and enemy of his religion". Hence his hostile attitude and that Nieto Aguilar held that a change in the policy towards them was needed (Nieto Aguilar, 1893: 159; Luque Talaván, 1999: 57-86).

It might perhaps be time for us experts to start to reinterpret the sources and the old historiography in order to stop seeing the Malayan-Muslim attacks to the Hispanic interests in the Philippines as mere piratical attacks. More than that, it is probable that the Muslim states of the southern Philippines, eager to maintain their independence, used these attacks to destabilise the *castilas* and slow down their expansion in the territories of Mindanao and Sulu. Towards that goal, some European powers supported the Muslims in their purposes, not because they were interested in their sovereignty, but because they wanted, on the one hand, to weaken the Spanish power in the region and, on the other hand, to take advantage of one of the most active and rich markets of Southeast Asia. Fortresses, like the one of Nuestra Señora del Pilar of Zamboanga, served as both offensive and defensive emplacements; as well as living and imprisonment spaces, depending on the circumstances. Life in the border was not simple for the soldiers stationed there. Its distance from the metropolitan and viceregal centers of power and its proximity to the feared Muslim enemy must have activated survival mechanisms in the soldiers that remain to be revealed.

The study of the border, and of its *other side*, enables a better understanding of ours. As Carlo Lisón Tolosana maintains: “The encounter, the communication, are given in the privileged space of the border. In reality, we are always at the border, we are a border. We constantly need to cross the wall in order to anthropologically see us from the outside and at distance and begin to get to know and re-know us. From the other side, we see us as incomplete, unfinished, surmountable. Border tension enriches us, it is a source of knowledge, it humanises us” (Lisón Tolosana, 1997: 141). And while this is true, it is nevertheless clear that the border is much more than that: it is a space of polysemy, of territories division, of conflict, of relationships of varying intensity, of cultural, symbolic exchange, etc. cultural confrontations that, sometimes, caused differences; and, sometimes, contributed to the homogenisation (Grimson, 2000; García Canclini, 2005). In the case of the military prisons of Southern Philippines, that “clash” served to mark differences and configure an identity among the Spanish community in confrontation with the native populations, considered to be enemies.

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Endnote

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²A testimony of this was given on July 3, 1753 by friar Pedro de la Santísima Trinidad Martínez y Arissala, archbishop of Manila: (“Asia/ Breve/ Resumen y Discurso/ en que se prueba ser el unico medio/ y el menos costoso y el mas/ util para librar las/ islas Philipinas/ de la Piratería y gravisimos males/ que cada año hacen los/ Moros/ convecinos en ellas/ en lo Sagrado y Profano/ La Guerra continua/ en sus Casas y tierras sin oir jamas/ tratado alguno de/ Paz, Alianza, ni Tregua/ con una Armada de quatro Galeras/ y ocho ó diez Pancos, que comanda-/se un General practico con in-/depedencia del Governador/ del Presidio de/ Zamboangan. //”. The British Library (London). Manuscripts Room. Add. 17, 624, folios 78 recto – 89 recto).

³Although the Spaniards gave the generic name *moros* to all the islamised groups inside the Philippine territory, under that generic name existed and exist several different groups. The most well known are the Tausug, the Samai, the Yakan, the Bajau, the Maranao, the Magindanao and the Ilanon. In Mindanao, the non-islamised populations are grouped under the generic name *Mindanao lumad*, formed by eighteen ethnic groups (Zamora, 1992: 311).

⁴About another border area of the novohispanic viceroyalty, see Páez Flores, 2002: 28.

⁵Archivo General de Indias (Seville) —from now on AGI—, Filipinas, 201, N. 1, “Expediente sobre el restablecimiento del presidio de Zamboanga” (1665-1686).

⁶*Relacion en que, de orden de su Magestad Catholica (Dios le guarde) se declaran las Plazas, Castillos, Fuerzas, y Presidios de las Provincias sugetas à su Real Dominio en las Yslas Philipinas ... Formada por el mariscal de campo don Fernando Valdès Tamon, à cuio cargo es el Gobierno de dichas Yslas. Año 1739* (Real Biblioteca. Palacio Real. Madrid, folios 28 recto – 39 recto, y 61 recto y vuelto).

⁷AGI, MP-Libros-Manuscritos, 81, “Descripciones con planos y figuras de la capital de Manila, puerto de Cavite, fuerzas de los presidios y otras fortificaciones en todo el distrito de las provincias que sujeta el real dominio en las Yslas Filipinas ... Año de 1753”, XIV: Fuerza de Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zamboanga en la isla de Mindanao, folios. 53 vuelto - 59 vuelto.

⁸About the border and the ethnic groups, see Barth, 1982.

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