A Culture at Sea: Examining the “Moro” Peoples through a Model of a Pilang

The item catalogued in the collection of the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology as “model of sailing boat” (60-20-70/D2459) offers a unique lens through which to examine the set of ethnic groups in the Philippines collectively referred to as the Moro, an indigenous population of Sunni Muslims. According to the ledger associated with the set of artifacts with which this ship model was donated, the “Commissioner of the United States Philippine Commission” collected this model for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition—a World’s Fair held in St. Louis, Missouri in 1904—sometime between 1903 and 1904 while in the Philippines. The ledger goes on to describe this item as a model of a Moro vessel from the Zamboanga area, a former Philippine province on the island of Mindanao. This area was once an independent nation, the Republic of Zamboanga and is home to the vast majority of the Muslim Moro population of the Philippines, including the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

The history of the Moro people is rife with conflict. Due to their common connection through Islam, the identity of the Moro ethnic groups has long been distinct from that of the rest of the Philippines and, as a result, this group has been engaged in a fight for sovereignty that has lasted several centuries and involved a number of different foes. Islam first came to the area with the arrival Muslim missionaries from the Persian Gulf in the late fourteenth century. As the

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1 Interestingly, the leader of the body known as the Second Philippine Commission was the Governor-General of the Philippines, a role held by William Howard Taft during the reported collection of this model (hence the informal name of this body, the Taft Commission). [Dolan, R. E., ed. (1991), Philippines: A Country Study, Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress.]

native population converted to Islam, the religion began to spread from island to island and, in the centuries that followed, three independent Islamic sultanates formed on the southern islands of what is now the Philippines. The sultanates were able to maintain their sovereignty during the Spanish rule of the Philippines by fighting off Spanish incursions and conducting raids along the coastal towns in the north.³

The native peoples of the Philippines have long relied upon the sea and a brief perusal of a map of this region reveals the reason for this dependency: thousands of islands make up the archipelagos of the Philippines and neighboring Indonesia and Malaysia, making it possible to travel within sight of land throughout the entire area. With abundant resources in the form of highly productive fisheries and the potential for trade, the sea is inextricably linked to Philippine culture, often shaping their worldview and certainly their history. In many respects, the sea is responsible for the rich mosaic of diverse peoples in Southeast Asia, functioning as both the gulf between populations and the common link, thereby helping to explain the various cultural divergences as well as commonalities⁴. The case of the Moro and the other Filipino ethnic groups is a prime example of this, and this boat model in many ways helps to highlight their common connection as well as divisive history.

Based on its various attributes and the information gathered from supporting documents regarding its provenance, this model is likely based on the pilang, a double outrigger sailing vessel common to Mindanao.⁵ This type of vessel is reportedly used for fishing and occasionally as a houseboat⁶; however, it is also likely that it would have been used for transportation between

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³ Majul, S. A. (1973), Muslims in the Philippines (2d ed.), Quezon City: Published for the Asian Center by the University of the Philippines Press.
⁵ Ibid, 68.
⁶ Ibid, 67.
the various islands of the Philippines that other parts of Southeast Asia and could have been used to carry out the raids that the Moro conducted on Spanish held coastal towns on the northern Philippine islands. Without going into too much detail regarding the construction of the model and the boat it is likely based off of, the pilang often ranges from 4.5 m to 10 m in length and is known for its intricate carvings on the prow of the bow and stern, which beyond the outrigger structures is one of the defining features of the model. Still commonly used today, the time period in which this boat originated is unclear; however, it was clearly in existence in the early part of the twentieth century.

This type of boat traces its lineage to other predominantly Muslim areas in the Philippines than Mindanao. Reportedly common to the Siasi and Jolo areas in the Sulu archipelago, the fact that this form of boat, whether specifically the pilang or not, made its way to the Moro area on Mindanao highlights the historic common link of Islam between these areas. Many of the attributes of this model and the boat it is likely based off of can also be seen in other types of vessels common to the Philippines, thereby suggesting that the flow of information and cultural exchange has not always occurred exclusively between the various Islamic ethnic groups, but rather with non-Muslim peoples as well. Further analysis of the specific features and ship construction of the model will likely reveal much regarding the history of the Moro people and their various interactions with other ethnic groups in this part of Southeast Asia.

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7 Ibid, 71.  
8 Ibid.  
References


