

# Establishment of a Migrant Community: The Story of the *Jamahs* in Iloilo City, Philippines

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**Abstract** - This study was conceptualized to reconstruct the history of the Muslims in Iloilo City who attend worship at the San Nicolas mosque. The study employed the descriptive case study method. The in-depth and semi-structured interviews were the main tools. Other tools were informal and direct observations and focus group discussion. Inconsistencies in the narratives were straightened out in the focus group discussion. The key informants were five Maranao Muslim males from Marawi City. Reasons for migration are mostly economic and majorities are traders from Lanao Del Sur. In the 1970's more migrants came most were single young males to avoid the then conflict between the Muslim rebels and the government troops during the Martial Law. All of the first generation migrants are males, the wives and female children followed once the males had established themselves. There were no concrete problems they have encountered as a community. The second and third generations have already adapted to the Ilonggo lifestyle. In general they encountered no resistance from the Ilonggos, instead, they feel accepted. They have no recollection of stories of resistance from the first generation migrants either.

**Keywords:** establishment of migrants, *Jamahs*, migrant community, migration

## INTRODUCTION

Numerous of people in the Philippines tend to transfer from one place to another for different reasons. Oftentimes, people move from far flung areas to towns and even to cities for different grounds. This movement is both voluntary and involuntary in nature. This movement brought changes to the number of population and its distribution in a certain area.

The term migrant denotes a person living outside his or her native country. Many leave their homes because there are not enough fertile pastures and arable land, food, water, work or other fundamental requirements. The consequences of environmental catastrophes, such as drought or floods, can also force thousands to leave their native countries. Today roughly two thirds of the world's populations live in economically poor countries. The growing gap between rich and poor is the most significant driving force for global migration. In 1960 the income of the richest fifth of the world's population was on average 30 times higher than the poorest fifth. By the year 1990 it was already 60 times higher [1].

Migration, any type, [2] whether documented or undocumented, forced or voluntary can be explained in terms of push-pull factors [3]. Push

factors attribute to the negative characteristics operating at the center of origin whereas pull factors identify the positive characteristics [4] at the center of destination.

There are essentially two types of migrants. One is due to persecution for various reasons, and the other is economic reasons. Persecution is essentially either for political or religious reasons. In such cases, the persons are given asylum to adopted country. Since, it would be inhuman to send them back. An economic migrant does not receive these privileges. It could be noticed in the framework of this distinction that only the voluntary migration situations are susceptible to be described in terms of complex psychological motivations ex ante formulated. In a save the women and the children situation the instinct to preserve its own life and integrity will dominate the individual reactions without any other more sophisticated considerations. Wars, natural disasters, political and religious persecutions, the lack of vital natural resources, social insecurity, all of these generates large human movements for which the shelter motive is prevailing, [1].

People who migrate from one place to another bring with them their respective culture, language, and

even religion. Reasons for migration are mostly due to poverty, violence, economic opportunity, better living conditions and for security. In the Philippines, economic condition is the most reason for migration of people with the dominant pattern of migration is from rural to urban areas.

In the Philippines, it is a fact that there are lots of Bicolanos, Ilocanos, Ilonggos, Cebuanos, Muslims and the like who migrate to urban areas [5]. However, the migration of Muslims always catches the attention of people in urban areas. What makes them different from the rest are their religion, traditions, beliefs and most of all the issues concerning Muslim terrorism. The enormous rate of population growth and the poor perspectives for economic development in some regions give rise to a tremendous migratory pressure, [6].

In 1970 was a decade of turmoil in Mindanao. The so-called “land of promise” was besieged with a bloody Muslim secessionist movement met with strong resistance from the military. When then President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972, many fled the violence-torn island. In search of a peaceful place to live, some 12 Muslims from Lanao del Sur found their way to the tranquil Iloilo City. On November 5, 1977, the Iloilo Islamic Association was established, the forerunner of what is now known as the Iloilo Muslim Community (IMC), the umbrella organization of Muslims in the city. According to Sammy Hadjimanan, IMC spokesperson and Muslim Federation Region 6 public information officer, nearly four decades after the establishment of the Iloilo Islamic Association, the number of Muslims in the city has grown between 2,000 to 3,000 [7].

According to Hadjimanan, Muslims feel welcome in Iloilo City. The Ilonggos are kind and do not discriminate the Muslim community. The very first mosque was located in Quezon Street, City Proper. It was where Muslims gathered to worship. The mosque moved to several areas of the city – Young Men’s Christian Association building on Iznart Street and in Pueblo Concepcion, Mandurriao district – until it found a permanent place in Barangay Magdalo, La Paz district. Now, there are three thriving Muslim communities in Iloilo – one in Barangay Magdalo, La Paz; one in Barangay San Isidro, La Paz; and another in Barangay San Pedro, Molo district. Hadjimanan said leaders of these communities meet regularly and discuss concerns, [7].

This study was conducted to reconstruct the history to establishing Muslim community in the city of Iloilo. An increase in population among Muslims has paved the way for expanding their community and even establishments of various businesses in the city every year. They have been observed to have established their business not only in the city downtown area but in the different malls in the city as well. Thus, the researchers have thought to investigate this phenomenon of the gradual increase in population and how they established their community as their identity from the rest of the Christians in Iloilo City. It is worthwhile to consider this investigation because the researchers wanted to find out the factors that direct their ways or lead them in achieving their recent life statuses and especially their establishment their own community particularly in San Nicolas, La Paz, Iloilo City.

Further, this study is significant to the local government unit to formulate and establish policies that can support the growth and development among Muslim groups and also of the local economy through trade. It will further establish measures to generate moral revenues from the Muslim community in Iloilo City which can also a source of information for the city for policy planning.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The study aimed to reconstruct the history of the Muslims in Iloilo City, particularly those who attend worship at the San Nicolas mosque. Specifically, the study addresses the following objectives: Why did the Muslims in Mindanao migrate to Iloilo City? How did they establish their community? What problems did they meet? How were the problems resolved? What is the dynamics of relations they established with the non-Muslims in the community?

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study employed the descriptive case study method as a means of exploring what constitute Muslim migrants realities and modes of being. Case study [8] as researcher explores in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals. For this study, qualitative research can also be described as an effective model that occurs in a natural setting that enables the researcher to develop a level of detail from being highly involved in the actual experiences [8]. No hypothesis was tested in the study. Further, case studies attempt to learn more

about a little known or poorly understood situation [9].

The respondents or the key informants of the study were five Muslim males with age ranging from 32 to 65. All of them are Maranaos coming from the City of Marawi or the province of Lanao del Sur. During the focus group discussion which was held after a Friday's worship, there were about ten adult *jamahs* who participated and two college age boys and two girls of the same age who participated.

The locale or the community referred to in this study is not one specific geographical or political unit but an organization of migrants forming one religious cluster in the City of Iloilo. This cluster is based in the vicinity of Barangay San Nicolas, Lapaz, Iloilo City right at the back of the Western Institute of Technology Main Building. This could be accessed through an alley between Tony's Fastfood and the former Rizal Commercial Banking Corporation (RCBC) building along Luna Street, La Paz, across the St. Clement's Church.

Since the study relied largely on key informants, in-depth interviews and semi-structured interviews were the main tools utilized for data gathering. Other tools supplementing the main tools were informal conversations, direct observations and focus group discussion (FGD).

Through the informal and iterative nature of semi-structured interviewing, the researchers obtained detailed information about the organization and community under study. Direct observations allowed the researchers to be immersed in the actual setting of the study, note of their facial expressions, body languages, and other hidden transcripts, to have a better understanding of how people act and interpret things given their social situations.

Owing to the dearth of written documentation on the history of the organization under study, research relied heavily on oral narratives. Inconsistencies in the narratives were straightened out in the focus-group discussion with the group coming to agree on a consensus as to what their shared realities are.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

Members of this community are composed of the Jamahs (brothers) in La Paz, Lapuz, Jaro, and even in Molo. There were about 250 members 80 of which are permanent residents of Iloilo City while the rest are transients either renting or living with relatives whose

stay in Iloilo are temporary and seasonal. They claimed to be the biggest and oldest cluster in Iloilo City. The clustering is based on the place of origin, as well as blood and affiliations by marriages. The kind of business that one engages in is also a consideration, with emphasis on "legitimate only enterprise". All of them are engaged in the buy and sell business at first selling goods first at the La Paz Market, then transferred to the malls and diversify their goods according to the demands of the market. From selling malongs, imported sotanghons, canned goods and other food stuffs, they are now into costume jewelries, cellular phones and all its parts and accessories, electronics, ready to wear items and shoes and bags. At present, most of the Jamahs in the community are second and third generation migrants most have Ilongo wives and Iloilo-born children. Though they were modest and would not give exact figures on their income, saying that they earn just enough for them to live, but from observations and calculations, the cluster is made up of well off and middle class families. They dressed decently, were presentable and all their children are in school. With the enterprise they engage in, they are renting mall spaces at an average of PhP 10,000.00 per square meter, or an average stall at PhP 30,000.00 per month.

### **Reasons for Migration**

The earliest migration of Muslim brothers in Iloilo City is in the 1950's. Reasons for migration are mostly economic. Majority are traders from Lanao Del Sur (Maranaos), though there are Tausugs and Magindanaos but they comprise less than 5% of the approximately 3,000 Muslim populations in Iloilo City. They are searching for better opportunities to find a job, to build a carrier, to develop a business, to achieve a higher social status. They are characterized by a pro-active attitude and the involved risks have a lower relative importance. As a consequence, they will prefer the highly developed societies, economic performance oriented, with well developed technological infrastructures, with a dense urban network, a large degree of economic freedom, individualistic and with a "here and now" time perception. A greater difference between origin and destination in terms of economic condition will tend to stimulate this type of migration, [10].

In the 1970's more migrants came most were single young males. The main reason for the migration was to avoid the then conflict between the Muslim

rebels and the government troops during the Martial Law. Those affected by such conflicts mostly flee in large numbers to safe regions in their native land or in a neighboring province or city [1]. There was a massive recruitment of the Bangsa Moro Army/Moro National Liberation Front during the period and back then young males were the target. There were threats from both the rebels and the government's side. The experiences of the migrants and the causes for migration do not only reflect events and decisions in individual lives. They also point to societal realities and sometimes even to injustices that are embodied in global relationships such as poverty and unequal distribution of power and resources. Migrations, in that sense, are a pulse measure for our societies: they reveal tensions and challenges that cannot easily be dismissed. Therefore, migration issues are never sufficiently or adequately addressed when only the migrants themselves are looked at and not the societal and structural realities that surface in realities of migration, [11].

In the 1980's migration was caused by following members of families who made good in Iloilo City and follow the footsteps established by those who migrated earlier. Further, the city having stable economic situations simply shows solidarity as well as share the burden between and among its citizens. In addition, the population of a particular city brought peace and happiness which eventually for the progress of the city.

### **Establishing a Community**

Of the 3,000 Muslim populations today approximately 60% are males and 40% are females. But all of the first generation migrants are males, the wives and female children followed once the males had established themselves. Although the cluster is based in San Nicolas, there was no settlement therein. The first migrant being traders at the La Paz market, were renters in the San Nicolas area because of its proximity to the market. Their first settlements were actually in Lapuz, Mabini St., and Pueblo, Mandurriao where the first mosque of this cluster was located.

In the 1980's they transferred the mosque in San Nicolas when they acquired/purchased from a bank a foreclosed two-storey concrete residential structure standing on a 178 sq.m. lot. The purchase was made possible through a fund raising scheme. The same two-storey structure serves as the mosque, very little renovation was made. The first storey serves as the

reception and wash area, also a place where their children are taught how to read and write in Arabic. Sometimes some travelling Muslims would also utilize the place for sleeping over but only when they have no other place to stay. There are always members present in the mosque everyday though almost all members are present during Fridays. Non-members of the cluster and other transients are also welcome during Friday worships when they opt to attend at the San Nicolas mosque (this usually happens when they are in the vicinity or for convenience because of the location of their trade). In spite of this, they would still like to reiterate that other clusters were different from them. They are neither one and the same nor similar. They would not like to be identified with other Muslims who are into the business of producing and selling pirated DVDs and other "illegal" things. This cluster was established by eleven first generation migrants of whom only three are still living now. The cluster then was a more or less loose organization of Muslim migrants to manage their religious and economic affairs. There could be no council for elders like in their birthplace because they belong to different clans and their issues and circumstances in Iloilo were different from where they came from. Composing this association were sub-clusters. They made use of this sub-cluster to raise funds for their first mosque in Pueblo as well as the one in San Nicolas. The scheme was that for each election period a sub-cluster has to put in money and pool their contribution and whoever had the most money raised, was the sub-cluster where the president shall come from. In 1988, they decided to formalize the association and register with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Their first registered name was Al-Islamiya Association, Inc. This time leadership was through election with the President having a term of three years.

However about three years ago, because the term 'Islamiya' has become associated with a terrorist group, they changed their name to Iloilo Muslim Community Association, Inc. As a leader summed up the change of name "*para di mainit sa autoridad*". Along with the change of name, they also change the structure, the President's term of office and the manner of election. Aside from the executive officers, there is a Board of Directors with each sub-cluster represented, functioning as the legislative body of the association. The President will be appointed by agreement of all members and will only have a one

year term of office. The current President, Sammy Hadjimahan, was also appointed by Mayor Jed Mabilog as the Head of the Office of Muslim Affairs. More like an executive assistant to the mayor on matters relating to Muslim affairs. As acknowledgement on the part of the City Government on the contribution and importance of Muslim traders in the city, the permanent residents were all registered voters of Iloilo City. In fact, every election time candidates would come visit them to solicit for their votes.

### **Problems**

There were no concrete problems they have encountered as a community. The second and third generations have already adapted to the Ilonggo lifestyle. From hindsight, they think that they have proven themselves to be good citizens and contributing to the thriving economy of Iloilo City. In fact the then mayor Mansueto Malabor conscious of their cultural practices in burying their dead gave them then a designated burial area at the Quintin Salas Public Cemetery. Mayor Mabilog also promised them burial area in the proposed Public Cemetery in Ingore, Lapaz. To avoid political conflicts they stand as non-partisan and refused to affiliate with any political party and refrain from block voting. As migrants, they have no problems with land tenure either because they owned the land where the mosques stands or majority of the permanent residents were able to purchase and build their own homes, while others are renting.

In general they encountered no resistance from the Ilonggos, they feel accepted. They have no recollection of stories of resistance from the first generation migrants either. From their view point this could be because majority of them migrated here for "*hanapbuhay*" and as such are careful not to lose the opportunity and privilege of earning their living in the city. Conflicts among their members are addressed and resolved by the association adhering to the Islamic teachings and way of life.

Everybody who were interviewed individually and those who participated in the focus group discussion wanted to stay in Iloilo permanently than go back to their provinces. Iloilo they say is a much better place to live in. The human movements across borders, societies and cultures are not running in an "empty space": the structural characteristics of the economic systems, the institutional architecture of societies, the cultural paradigm and the power

relations between different social groups, define the magnitude and the limits of such movements. If the "hard" economic migration determinants are extensively explained in an abundant literature, the "soft" psychological/cultural determinants of "leave your old life" decision are less analyzed. It is the contention of this paper that what made Muslims stay in Iloilo is not purely an economic decision though it is the main consideration. The Ilonggos' "openness" and "tolerance" with other culture is also a hidden consideration. This is not to say that Ilonggos welcome other cultures with open arms. Being a conservative linguistic group, Ilonggos have a reservation for other culture, only they are not vocal and do not articulate their thoughts and opinions. In a way this made the interaction between cultures smooth and functional (peaceful and civil co-existence)

The migrants on the other hand are careful not to offend their hosts by negotiating and keeping a balance between what they are in their hometowns and what they should be in Iloilo. The smooth interaction being the basis for their survival, they try to re-invent themselves to be people worthy of respect for the natives while at the same time careful not to lose their identities. The Muslim faith (Islam) is one of the absolute religious faiths. Yet, the migrants were able to negotiate their ways to accommodate what should have been prohibited but not to totally abandon the basic religious tenets. Like marrying non-Muslim hosts, the children are allowed not to wear headdress in public but demands to be traditional in the mosque. Members of the community under study also has embraced the Ilonggos giving priority on education but at the same time also conscious to enroll their children in tutorial Arabic lessons in the absence of a *Madrasah* in Iloilo. A traditional Muslim community is highly hierarchical and very clannish. There practices have been re articulated in how they made their clusters and how they deal with other clusters. For example, being the oldest cluster whose members are relatively economically well off, they enjoyed dominance over the other cluster. The emphasis that other clusters are different is also a manifestation of the hierarchical division and clannism. They have been successful in their desire for being integrated yet culturally separate. Conscious of being different and not to be identified with the political and terrorists movements for which Muslims are known for, they changed the name of their community several times.

The Local Government Unit of Iloilo City has finally recognized them as a sector. Traditional ways of conflict resolution is substituted by and functionally carried out by the officers of the community, based on Islamic teachings, so in effect what made this community successful is that they bring with them the cultural necessities of living as Muslims while trying to accommodate and adjust to the Ilonggos way of life.

## CONCLUSIONS

Most Muslim migrants in La Paz, Iloilo City belong to Maranaos coming from the City of Marawi or the province of Lanao del Sur. Reasons for migration are mostly economic. Majority are traders from Lanao Del Sur (Maranaos). They also wanted to escape from the existing conflict between the Muslim rebels and the government troops especially during the Martial Law. Further, Muslim migrants believe that Iloilo City is a good place to establish a business and offer a better place to live in and to flee themselves from exposure to community of violence or anti-social behavior such as limited government services. On the later part, some of the Muslim migrants married Ilonggo women and had Ilonggo children who spent also their education in some universities and colleges in Iloilo City. Aside from the group of Maranaos, There were also Tausug and Maguindanao tribes who established business in various establishments like malls, etc. Lastly, they had good relationship with the rest of the Ilonggos; thus, they found no difficulty to establish their community in a peaceful, loving people of Iloilo City.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Iloilo City government should create a policy or law to address the needs of the Muslim migrants to make them productive for economic development of the city. Also, the city government will create a task force committee for Muslim migrants that will serve as bridge between the former and the latter to disseminate different programs of the national and city government and to strengthen the collaboration between the two communities concerning problems involving peace and order situation and interpersonal relationship. Further, the City government should formulate short and long term plans for Muslim migrants so as to integrate them to the community, to make them productive and to have harmonious relationship among them. Lastly, to the future

researchers, the data in this study will serve as benchmark to conduct another research focusing on formulation of long and short term plans to fully integrate these Muslim migrants to the community.

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