



**“The Most Obstinate Passive  
Resistance:” Racialization of Muslim  
Filipinos in United States Colonial  
Discourse, 1898-1913**

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## **“The Most Obstinate Passive Resistance:” Racialization of Muslim Filipinos in United States Colonial Discourse, 1898-1913**

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In examining the language of various texts related to United States policy in the Southern Philippines I hope to reveal the process behind the construction of a racial character for Moros. The evidence suggests that such constructions led to more extreme methods of warfare and a totalitarian approach to destroying Moro Islamic culture.<sup>1</sup> My project concurs with scholars who argue that U. S. imperial actors have often racialized antagonists to deal with moral inconsistencies and re-write the rules of engagement with them. In the Philippines this was done by constructing the Moros as “savage, treacherous,” and incapable of understanding any language other than force. This was not a new exercise in the historical memory of the United States; it was just a new set of protagonists. It had been done with Native Americans with a different narrative employed and it had been part of the racial history with African Americans. This continues to be used whenever there is an encounter with an “other” and revision is deemed necessary for the rules of engagement. While some historians have argued the racialization of Filipinos was constructed in interaction with the Filipinos and others have argued that it was exported, this study suggests that it was a combination of both. The tendency to racialize is what was exported; the racializations often were different for each group of protagonists.

The colonial officials who were first sent into the Southern Philippines had varied views on what should be the strategy for the pacification of the region. Despite this variation there was

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Gowing, ““Moros and Indians: Commonalities of Purpose, Policy and Practice in American Government of Two Hostile Subject Peoples,” Dansalan Research Center Occasional Papers, no. 6, (January, 1977), 6.

unanimity on the need to carry pacification. Different colonial actors adapted different opinions of the racial character of the Moros. These varied points of view reinforced a discourse of social evolution. This discourse argued that savage, racially inferior communities naturally would perish in a confrontation with more advanced civilizations if they would not submit themselves to the guidance of their racial superiors.<sup>2</sup>

While two individuals who contributed to the articulation of Moro policy, Najeeb Saleeby and Father Pio Pi, appeared to have very different ideas about the character of the Moros and the manner in which the Moro problem should be dealt with by U.S. officials, both embraced a view of them as racially, morally, and politically inferior to Europeans. Both men were using the criteria of Eurocentric cultural norms to judge Moro society. Whereas Saleeby believed that the proper amount of tutelage could usher Moros into a civilized state, Father Pi saw no other course of action but strict containment or to elimination. The U.S. military in its first encounter with the Moro tended to mirror Father Pi's sentiments while they articulated the goals of Saleeby.

Father Pio Pi was a Spanish Jesuit priest who completed a manuscript on the Moros that was included in the 1901 War Department Annual Report. His report was read by members of congress, policy makers, and military officers. Pi described the Moros as "haughty, independent, dominating and treacherous" and as "most obstinate in passive aggression."<sup>3</sup> He characterized them as an "obstacle" in the way of the establishment of civilization because of these intrinsic racial characteristics. He saw no other option other than removing them from the region so that

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, 53, 58.

<sup>3</sup> War Department Reports 1904, Appendix VI, 365. "This statement written at the instance of the most reverend apostolic delegate of His Holiness, Mgr. Placidus Louis Chapelle, finished on 8<sup>th</sup> of February 1900.", 374.

civilization could advance.<sup>4</sup> Pio advocated the immigration of more Christian Filipinos to the region to ethnically cleanse the Moro territory because they were supposedly more intelligent and “more docile” than the Moros. He also advised that the Moros be concentrated in small areas if they were to “exist at all.”<sup>5</sup> For Pio Pi the Moros were distinct from Christian Filipinos and corrupted with the vices of gambling, theft, lust, haughtiness. The tone of his report to colonial officials suggested that either a campaign of extreme containment, or extermination, would be the only possible strategies for dealing with them.<sup>6</sup>

Father Pi represented the Moros as an irrevocably corrupt people beyond the reach of Christian civilization. His views represented an extreme application of the theories of social evolution of non-white communities. Rather than getting involved in a civilizing mission with the Moros, Pi advocated their control and if necessary, their extermination. The extent to which his representations of the Moros were embraced by U.S. officials would be reflected in the language and actions of those individuals who had the most frequent contact with them, the U.S. military.

Najeeb Saleeby was the earliest scholar to examine Moro history and culture in the U.S. colonial period. He first wrote the text *Studies in Moro History, Law, and Religion and the Island of Mindanao* in 1905. Saleeby was a Syrian born army physician who had joined the Army and had taken great care to learn the languages and culture of the Moros. He was appointed Agent for Moro Affairs in 1903 by the military governor, General Leonard Wood. Saleeby proposed educating potential Moro leaders in western ideals and bringing them into the

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<sup>4</sup> War department Reports, 1904, Appendix VI, 367, 369.

<sup>5</sup> War Department Reports 1904, Appendix VI, 371- 372.

<sup>6</sup> War Department Report 1904 Appendix VI, 377.

U.S. sponsored power structure within the Philippines. He qualified this by stating that they still lacked the civilizing influence of Spain that had benefited the Christians in the North. He stated that the, “Christian Filipinos had already been civilized by Spain,” and that the Moros had “not yet attained the proper degree of civilization or the proper stages of culture that modern institutions require.”<sup>7</sup> Saleeby’s goal in presenting this text for the policy makers was to argue that the Moros were not savages or incapable of civilization. When discussing Moro opposition to Spanish rule he described the Moros as, “tenacious in battle,” and “obstinate passive resistance in peace.” He openly exhibited sympathy with their plight, and admiration of their martial spirit, and warrior culture.<sup>8</sup>

Saleeby described Islam as the civilizing element of their society that kept them on the peripheries of civilization, but distinguished them from savages of the hunter-gatherer type. He described the individual Moro as, “a faithful and devoted worshipper of Allah ta’ Ala” who “had laws, an organized government, an alphabet, and a system of government.”<sup>9</sup> Saleeby’s representations of the Moros portrayed them as a people in a specific stage of political and social evolution below the zenith of civilization represented by Eurocentric societies. In the late nineteenth century the idea of societies occupying a place on an evolutionary hierarchy was universally accepted amongst western intellectuals. Lewis Henry Morgan, a respected anthropologist, published *Ancient Societies* in 1877 which ranked societies based on this model. Saleeby’s description of the Moros suggested they occupied what Morgan would have referred to as the, “upper stages of barbarism” on this hierarchy. While biology was understood in this

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<sup>7</sup> Najeeb Saleeby, “Moro Problem,” 5.

<sup>8</sup> Saleeby, “The Moro Problem: An Academic Discussion of the History and Solution of the Problem of the Government of the Moros of the Philippines Islands,” Manila, Philippines Islands, 1913, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Saleeby, “The Moro Problem,” 7, 30.

theory as having significant impact on social evolution, there was contention about the ability of societies to move forward on this hierarchy of social development. Saleeby, judging from his writings, embraced the possibility of forward movement in the development of Moro society into a state of civilization.<sup>10</sup>

Among the military and colonial officials the *juramentado* was the classic representation of the Moro. The *juramentado* was a warrior who, on taking an oath to fight against the domination of a non Muslim armed invading force, would embark on a suicide mission to attack larger groups of armed Americans, killing and injuring a few in exchange for his own life. The religious justification for the act was martyrdom and the forgiveness of sins in the next life, and remission of debt or slavery for him and his family in this life, if that was his condition. The *juramentado* captured the imagination of those who saw them as a undisciplined savage people outside of the ideological perimeter of western civilization. In a 1902 letter, Secretary of War Elihu Root described the *juramentado* as “having taken a scared oath to kill the hated Christian,” and he attempted to provide a cultural explanation for the *juramentado* phenomenon by citing the institution of slavery within Moro society as being its cause.<sup>11</sup> The *juramentado*’s apparent irrational act of charging into larger numbers to meet a certain death in exchange for a few American lives, was used to portray the Moro as an irrational, uncontrollable, savage, rather than understood as a tactic of asymmetrical warfare which had roots in the religious, cultural discourse, and institutions of Moro society. The very strength of the Moros’ religious belief seemed to colonial officials’ justification for viewing these people as primitive.

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<sup>10</sup> Mathew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 146-147.

<sup>11</sup> War Department, Letter from the Secretary of War transmitting “An Article on the People of the Philippines Compiled in the Division of Insular Affairs. Washington printing Office, 1901.(from Secretary of War Elihu Root to H.C. Lodge Chairman Committee on the Philippines.) Washington printing Office, 1901, 56.

The construction of the Moro as an uncivilized creature led to accounts of combat that supposedly justified extrajudicial executions and brutal interrogation were acceptable given the character of the enemy. Within the Philippines reports were descriptions replete with menacing sounding, racialized, language. Despite knowing about the indigenous political system of Datus, Americans described the Moros as living in a state of political and social anarchy. The 1901 Philippines Commission declared that “in the interior of Mindanao are fierce and savage tribes owing no allegiance to any government, controlled only by their own passions.” The Moro’s character as a creature prone to violence and sexual rapaciousness was also represented in statements such as, “the Moro is a man built for war,” “wanton destruction is his delight,” and “the morals of Moro society may be compared to those of a rabbit warren.”<sup>12</sup> This dehumanizing imagery of the Moro as a hyper-reproductive, murderous, savage justified a notion that killing them in large numbers and outside the normal rules of warfare was acceptable. On January 27, 1900, Major H.L. Scott recounted an incident in which Moros ambushed U.S. soldiers, killing several with their Bolos and making off with their weapons. The Americans responded by surrounding a nearby community and threatening to burn it to the ground if the suspects were not turned over. The commanding officer also threatened to shoot any inhabitant who tried to leave. Eleven men were arrested who, though initially refusing to give information, were “examined in a most searching way” and confessed. They were subsequently shot while making an “ill advised attempt to escape.”<sup>13</sup>

These characterizations of Moros amounted to a racialization of them as a group and branded them in the minds of colonial officials as unable to govern themselves properly and in

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<sup>12</sup> “An Article on the People,” 60-64, 62.

<sup>13</sup> War Department Annual Reports, 1903 (In fourteen Volumes) Reports of the Chief, Bureau of Insular Affairs, Fourth Annual Report of the Philippines Commission. Washington printing Office, 1904, 504-505.

need of the tutelage of the United States. The Philippines Commission Reports of 1903 pronounced their fate with one sentence: “the Moro does not understand popular government and does not desire it, and he is not likely to until he is changed by education and the introduction of civilized life into his neighborhood.”<sup>14</sup> This statement encapsulated the sentiments of the colonial officials that shaped and dictated policy for several years in the Moro territories.

General Leonard Wood served as Governor of the southern Philippines from 1903 to 1906 under President Theodore Roosevelt. His challenge was to put into practice the application of direct political control and abrogate the Bates agreement. General Wood encouraged this abrogation, citing it as an “impediment to good government” claiming that “force seems to be the only method of reaching them.”<sup>15</sup> Wood believed that a “conciliatory” approach to dealing with the Moros just encouraged rebellion and uprising as it was interpreted by them as cowardice and weakness.<sup>16</sup> Wood reserved his greatest criticism for Sultan Kiram and the blame for the intransigence of the Moros was often placed on the Sultan’s shoulders, who was characterized as licentious, conniving, self serving, and unwilling to carry out U.S. directives. Wood described him in a letter to President Roosevelt as a “little oriental with a half a dozen wives and no children; a state of affairs I am sure you thoroughly disapprove of.” In December of 1903 Wood addressed a letter to Taft claiming that the signers of Bates did not have the will or the ability to make their subjects follows it, and that it “stood in the way of good government in that it recognizes the authority of a class of men who we have found to be corrupt, licentious, and

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<sup>14</sup> 1903 Philippines Commission, 80

<sup>15</sup> Hermann Hagedorn, *Leonard Wood: A Biography in Two Volumes; Volume 2*. New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1931, 37. A: War Department Annual Reports, 1903, 81.

<sup>16</sup> Hagedorn, *Leonard Wood, Vol. 2*, 45.

cruel.”<sup>17</sup> The sexual behavior of the Moros that the letter referred to bothered Wood and his subordinates. The close relationship Wood had with Taft and Roosevelt would tell us that he was well aware that such behavior would be found to be distasteful to them as well. Wood was chosen by Roosevelt as his regimental colonel for the Rough Riders in Cuba. T.R. said Wood possessed “the qualities of entire manliness with entire uprightness and cleanliness of character” which Roosevelt felt was essential for inclusion in such an elite, prestigious, unit. Wood was a man who prided himself on his physical prowess as well as his physical discipline, much like Roosevelt. The discourse of manliness prevalent among Wood, Roosevelt, and their peers included the notion that sexual licentiousness was immoral and unhealthy because it sapped a man’s virility. This was due to a belief within this idea that excessive sexual activity acted as a means of feminizing men and threatening their capacity to reproduce, thus strengthening the race. The Sultan’s sexual promiscuity supposedly led to his inability to father children. In the minds of men like Roosevelt and Wood this confirmed their beliefs that an inability to suppress sexual desire except for reproduction led to a weakening of a race. By focusing on the sexual promiscuity and childlessness of the Sultan this discourse labeled him racially weak, unmanly, and incapable of being an effective leader. Therefore, respecting agreements with him was deemed unnecessary and detrimental to control of the population.<sup>18</sup>

In 1913 as Saleeby was leaving the Moro administration he delivered an address at a conference in Manila which included a paper entitled, “The Moro Problem.” This paper was meant to encourage a change of direction in how the province was administered. Saleeby had

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<sup>17</sup> War Department Annual Reports, 1903, 81. A; Hagedorn, *Leonard Wood, Vol. 2*, 13. B; War Department Annual Reports, 1903, “Report to General Wood as to abrogation of the Bates Treaty” 489. C; War Department Annual Reports, 1903, 501.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Watts, *Rough Rider in the White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 151,162. A; Woolman, “Fighting Islam’s Fierce,” 40. B; Hagedorn, *Leonard Wood, Vol.2*, 65.

long argued that it was more efficient to use Islam as a vehicle to introduce the value of western civilization and democracy into Moro society. Saleeby asserted that the Muslims should be viewed as different from the “pagans” because they had “well defined governmental organization and knowledge of written law.” He was very critical of U.S. characterizations of the Moros as “a black devil incarnate” and specifically criticized the language of the Jones Bill which referred to the Moros as “the most savage of the wild tribes.” He tried to warn U.S. officials that to antagonize the Moro by attacking his religious and cultural institutions was dangerous and would continue to have repercussions. He warned policy-makers that “the hostile Moro is like an angry tiger held at bay. He knows no fear, roars in resentment, and never yields.” Saleeby was clear that his main concern was the successful administration of the Moro areas by the United States. He was convinced that the pacification project should be carried out within the framework of the existing Moro cultural and political structures. Saleeby believed this strategy would cost the least, result in greater stability, and cause less bloodshed.<sup>19</sup>

Though Saleeby’s convictions illustrated the extent to which he had internalized the construct of western cultural supremacy, his acceptance of a concept of the intrinsic inferiority of other races was not as clear. Saleeby, being a product of U.S. assimilation, was cosmopolitan enough to see the positive in Moro culture, even if it was within the context of harnessing it to further U.S. aims. He saw the Moros as noble savages with the potential to be remade into the model of civilizational enlightenment of his adopted country. Saleeby’s proposals to use Moro institutions as a means of political control were synonymous with the tactics of indirect rule used

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<sup>19</sup> Saleeby, “The Moro Problem,” 2, 11, 14, 19. A: Kramer, *Blood of Government*, 353-354. The Jones Bill was introduced in the United States Congress in 1912 by Congressman William A. Jones, a democrat from Arkansas. The Bill’s purpose was to discontinue the colonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines.

by Imperial Great Britain. These tactics were well known in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and were universally recognized as successful.<sup>20</sup>

The language employed when it was necessary to justify abrogation of the Bates agreement and harsh measures against the Moros implied an essentialist racial view of the Moro community. This notion reflected theories of race and social evolution that proposed a biological basis for defects within a racial community. Najeeb Saleeby struggled to counter these applications of these theories, but he remained unsuccessful as long as officials found the discourse useful in justifying policies they perceived necessary to meet political and strategic goals.

## **Conclusion**

U.S. colonial authorities embarked on a campaign to eradicate Moro political autonomy and cultural institutions in an effort to de-legitimize Moro polity and establish a clean slate upon which to remake Moro society. The archival evidence suggests that one of the methods employed was the racialization of Moros as a distinct group that suffered from specific defects in their racial character. These defects, according to the discourse, were so severe as to make self governance an unattainable goal for them. Furthermore, it argued that the only way that stability could prevail in the region was to destroy their political and cultural institutions, and become

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<sup>20</sup> Lord F.D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Hamden, CT: New Haven: Archon Books, 1965), 194-201. Lord Lugard designed the method of colonialism known as indirect rule whereby colonial officials used the existing African political structures to rule over colonial subjects. The native rulers would carry out the laws of the British Empire, collect taxes, and conscript natives to serve in British military service. This practice put a native face on British colonialism and redirected native anger towards native administrators rather than white colonial officials. Under indirect rule British tended to experience less in the way of protracted, bloody, insurgent activity from native Africans. This method was also used in Asia and other British colonial holdings with similar success in the nineteenth century.

their political stewards with the eventual goal of self governance as, culturally reconstructed, brown-skinned, replicas of Americans.

In the imagination of policy makers this was a mission of civilization and a benevolent act for which the Moros would be grateful if they had the capacity to understand the value of the gift of civilization that was being bestowed upon them. Any act of opposition, or any assertion of rights, was seen by U.S. officials as ungratefulness. Protracted martial opposition was characterized as “savagery,” and fed a growing belief that Moros were not entitled to the same considerations in warfare as European races. This was used as justification for abandoning notions espoused within U.S. political culture about fairplay, civilized behavior in wartime, and the use of asymmetrical tactics of warfare against them, including torture and the killing of civilians and captured fighters.

The remaking of the Muslim Filipinos in the imagination of colonial officials as a distinct race occurred as Americans struggled with how to deal with a sporadic insurgency and opposition to U.S. colonial policies. The decision by U.S. officials to administer the occupation of the South by the military, long after civil administration had taken over in the North, was part of this construction of “Moros” as a troublesome race of warrior-like people that required a firmer hand than their Christian counterparts in the North. This racial construction further served to naturalize an authoritarian approach to colonial rule and justification for a campaign of cultural genocide. The evidence further suggests that throughout this discussion taking place amongst officials was the contention between two different interpretations of theories of social evolution. Najeeb Saleeby argued for a more fluid interpretation that allowed for the advancement of entire races, if properly guided along the path to civilization. Father Pio Pi articulated a very rigid understanding of the racial character of Moros that saw them as

hopelessly deviant, and incapable of reaching the western ideal of civilized society. The language used by officers and policy-makers demonstrated that they adopted Pi's view when it suited political and strategic purposes. These actions by U.S. policymakers was part of a larger pattern of behavior dating back to the initial encounter with the racial other in United States history, the Native Americans.

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