

AMBIGUITIES IN MARANAO SOCIAL RANK DIFFERENTIATION

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April 2, 1974

The system of rank differentiation among the Maranao is characterized by considerable ambiguity. The notion of an ideal system of reckoning rank by ascription exists. As practiced, however, the system must cope with limited genealogical information and additional achievement-oriented criteria. The result is that the circulation of titles is fraught with conflict and tension. The resolution of differences in perceiving rank becomes an arena wherein the role of each individual is redefined time and again — this constant validation being a necessary element in a multicentric power system.

The attempt to set oneself apart from other individuals or groups of individuals is a culture universal. It is manifested in various ways in different societies, the means taken ranging from the adoption of certain ways of dress, body decoration, or public deportment, to the control of resources, influence over the manipulation of power, and the monopoly of certain specialized roles, such as that of ritual leader. In all cases there are prescribed ways of attaining these preferred positions: by ascription, that is, the gaining of a particular rank without any effort on the individual's part, such as by being born to the position; or by achievement, that is, by the individual's competing or otherwise striving to attain a certain rank.

But there are societies in which rank differentiation takes a form that may appear highly imprecise and chaotic, so that a cursory view of the system will leave the beholder utterly confused. In some instances the truth of the matter may be that the system is not chaotic, but ambiguous. Chaos implies an absence of rules in a particular situation; ambiguity, though implying a certain imprecision, still allows for the presence of a pattern. It is to this ambiguity in the attainment, perception, and maintenance of rank in Maranao society that we here address ourselves, an ambiguity best shown in the system of circulating or alternating succession.

This imprecision contributes to the highly volatile character of the day-to-day milieu of Maranao society, which some observers characterize as "endemically conflict-ridden."

This paper will consider the following points: (a) the basis for ranking as conceived ideally, (b) the ranking system as practiced, and (c) circulating succession and the inherent ambiguity of the whole system of rank differentiation. But before proceeding to the first of these topics, a brief description of the social context is in order.

The Setting

The Maranao number about 180,000. They are the second largest of the four major Muslim peoples found in the Philippines, and one of only nine such ethnolinguistic groups in the nation. Muslims inhabit especially the west coast areas of Mindanao, the southern part of Palawan Island, and the entire Sulu archipelago. There is considerable variation among them in terms of language, political complexity, culture, and degree of commitment to orthodox Islam.

Uniqueness of the Maranao. The traditional home of the Maranao is the area around Lake Lanao, Mindanao, 2300 feet above sea level, 50 kilometers from the north shore and 37 kilometers from the southwest coast of Mindanao. Among the islamized people of the Philippines the Maranao are unique because of

their noncoastal, inland, isolated location. This isolation has contributed to the preservation and/or development of certain social-structural features not commonly encountered among other Philippine ethnic groups. Included among these characteristics are ranked descent, intricately arranged marriages with complicated brideprice transactions, a system of elite titles (with keen competition for succession to them), specific association of lines of descent with particular territories, and the conception of a primeval social contract. All of these features operate within the context of a multicentric power system in which basic political relations between power centers are couched in genealogical idiom. On top of these traits is an islamization process introduced into the area approximately 250 years ago. In more recent times, the superimposition of the Philippine central-government bureaucratic system has been exerting an influence that undermines the traditional system.

The preservation of particular unique social-structural features was accomplished mainly through the Maranao's successfully warding off colonial intruders. This allowed them to remain outside foreign administrative control throughout the entire period of Spanish colonial administration. It was only with the coming of the Americans to the area in 1903, initially led by then Captain John J. Pershing, that close contact with the Maranao was made. The American policy of tolerance allowed the uninterrupted operation of the native institutions, a policy that was to continue even after the Americans left the area in 1920 and the Philippine government structure was Filipinized. The Second World War greatly disrupted this status quo.

Economy. The Maranao are primarily sedentary agriculturists growing rice, root crops, and coffee, but there is a sophisticated craft tradition that includes such skills as wood carving, weaving, metal working, and basket making. Most villages are located along the shores of Lake Lanao and are linked by a system of water transport. Marawi City, the largest center, is the major contact point with the outside world and the site of a state university

established there in 1962. Two daily flights from Manila serve the local airport, which is shared with the northern coastal city of Iligan. A fleet of buses and numerous cars ply the route between Marawi and the non-Muslim industrialized area of Iligan.

Like most other Philippine peasant groups, the Maranao have been drawn into the cash and market economy and have to some extent adopted western garb, although the traditional *malong* is still very much in evidence, particularly during ceremonial occasions. The people are exposed to the larger Philippine society through the radio and the cinema, the latter being popular particularly among those residing in Marawi.

When the outlet of Lake Lanao at Maria Cristina Falls was tapped for hydroelectric power, the surrounding area became one of the major industrial centers of the Philippines. A steel mill, several cement factories, chemical fertilizer plants, and a paper mill are only a few of the major enterprises that have been launched within the last decade. The complex around Iligan City now provides a sharp contrast to the industry-free, placid, and spectacularly beautiful highland lake region in the heart of Maranao country.

Traditional political structure. Authority and power among the Maranao is not centralized at any one structural position or at any point in space at a given time. There exists a precise and unchanging number of power centers which are independent of one another but subject to a set of rules defining their interrelationships. The existence of these different power loci is not thought of as the product of some fortuitous combination of events that led to the emergence of strong and independent centers; rather, it is seen as the result of a formal structuring of the entire system at a particular point in the past. At that time the basic relationships between the different power units were precisely defined. This scheme guides and directs the whole system of relationships connecting the established units.

The notion of a unitary society does exist. It allows the Maranao to view his society as one, despite the obvious dispersion of power over considerable space, mainly because of the

manner in which the interconnecting political relations are expressed. These relationships are couched in genealogical idiom which provides an ordering principle that culminates at the apex with a common ancestor. Thus every Maranao can locate himself within the total scheme of the one society.

The Maranao conceives of his society as divided into four major territorial divisions called *pongampong*. The apical ancestors of the *pongampong* are believed to be siblings. It is generally from the name of the apical ancestor for each *pongampong* that the recitation of the *salsila*, or 'chain of descent,' for any one area usually begins. The *pongampong*, which is the maximal territorial division, is subdivided into what may be called (for lack of a native term) *subpongampong* areas. These are rough geographic divisions, and the absence of a label for them may reflect the fact that they do not play a significant role in organizing the villages into territorial units.

The *subpongampong* is further divided into *ingod*, or 'villages.' There are two categorical rankings of villages: (1) the *pegawidan*, 'supported or superordinate,' of which there are 14; and (2) the *pegawid*, 'supporting or subordinate,' of which there are 28. It is at the *ingod* level that political institutions, inheritable titles such as that of *sulutan*, the fixed association of particular lines of descent with a particular village, and differentiation between the various ranks of descent lines are manifested.

Aside from the two major rank categories of villages, there are hordes of small settlements and hamlets which are referred to as *lipongan*, where those without claims to established lines of descent reside. Residents in these settlements are often referred to as *uripon*, or 'slaves,' a term reserved for the lowest class of individuals in Maranao society.

The *ingod* is further subdivided into sectors, then into subsectors, and the subsectors further subdivided into *bangon* — the level of significant kin interaction. It is the members of the *bangon* who contribute to the brideprice or receive their share of it in turn, and who organize retaliatory action in cases of injury to any one of its members. A *bangon* is usually composed of five

or more nuclear families living under one roof, but eating separately.

Kinship is reckoned bilaterally and kin relations crosscut local groups and extend beyond them. The only channel of establishing alliances is through marriage, ideally with a member of a group whose descent line is conceived to be of equal or higher rank, either from one's own village or another. Marriage is a highly complicated affair which involves a long investigation of the rank backgrounds of each party and is further prolonged by an elaborate system of brideprice transaction.

At each structural level of alliance a common ancestor is recognized, with the most significant one located at the *ingod* level. The relationships between villages are determined by the interrelationships of the major titleholders of the different lines of descent, as recorded in the *salsila*.

Ranking Conceived Ideally

The bases for allocating rank are precisely defined in the ideal. Only those individuals who are descended from one of the superordinate lines of descent, by virtue of relationships with a superordinate titleholder, may claim *pegawidan* rank; those descending from the subordinate lines may claim *pegawid* rank; while those who can make no claim to any line of descent are relegated to the *uripon* category.

There exists the conception of a social contract, or charter, which was drawn up in the past. This contract legitimizes the system of political and legal authority and the prerogative of holding a title. The latter in turn qualifies the titleholder to claim a rank, exercise authority, and demand particular responses by virtue of the rank he holds. More than any other factor, this contract (called *taritib*, an Arabic word meaning order or ranking) affects and determines the nature and operation of the system of rank differentiation within the group.

The *taritib* lays out the total ordering or formal structuring of the society. This it does in a scheme that provides criteria for the ranking of descent lines and for determining the specific rights and obligations of those individuals, or groups of individuals, who are considered members of the society. The *taritib* is the

common agreement believed to have been made by the ancestors in the past, etched in copper plates, and sworn to by these forebears. The main provisions of this contract include the following: (a) the precise definition of the superordinate (pegawidan) and subordinate (pegawid) lines of descent, and thus, as a residual category, of those individuals who belong to the uripon category; (2) the specific association of particular lines of descent with particular territories; (3) the specific association of inheritable positions of authority and power as symbolized in a title; (4) provisions for the rights and obligations of individuals holding a title within any one level; and (5) provisions for the protocol involved in the interaction between any two villages, or between individuals within a village.

The above provisions fixed in a frozen state the structural outlines of the system. This structure was to persist and consistently define basic social relationships between individuals and between larger units and the whole society. The basic adherence to these structural principles was to impart precision in reckoning the system of legal prerogatives and, more important, to validate the system of rank differentiation within the society.

The possession of a *grar*, or 'title,' is the most concrete validation of one's rank within the group. These titles are symbolic manifestations of the power structure in any locality where they have their specific association and validity. They legitimize the holders' capacity to exercise authority over the domains with which such titles are specifically associated.

The possession, past or present, of a particular title has consequences not only for the role that the titleholder will play within the group, but, by association, for the role of his whole kin group, no matter how remote the relationship. Being related to a titled kinsman is also a valid indicator of the quality of one's rank.

It was in the *taritib* that the ranks of the different villages were standardized and the titles accompanying offices in each such village created. These titles alone were to be used and claimed in succeeding generations. As ideally

conceived, the rules governing succession to these titles are as follows.

1. All male descendants of the original titleholder, as noted in the *taritib*, may claim a title by virtue of consanguineal relationship, with the first-born male getting the first opportunity to hold the title.

2. All titles will alternately be held by, or circulated between, two or more major lines of descent a generation below the point of significant beginning of descent as stipulated in the genealogy.

3. All female descendants of the same titleholder may also inherit the rank, and can pass on the quality of that rank to their children. Thus their male children will have a basis for claiming it, but the females themselves by virtue of their sex are not allowed to hold titles of authority.

The *taritib* is expressed in a genealogical idiom. The claimed common ancestors of each of the ranked villages appear in the *salsila* to have lived contemporaneously in the past, giving some credence to the claim that they foregathered to draw up the social contract. While one may doubt that the common village ancestors actually came together in this manner, he cannot deny that this idea exists and guides and sanctions present-day social relationships. It shapes and orients the entire system of action.

In view of the apparent precision by which the rules are made and the extent of the social relations they cover, where do the ambiguities come in? This brings us to the question of recruitment to rank and the manner in which it is actually practiced.

The Rank System as Practiced

A very clear distinction must be made between the native's notion of the general principle involved in attaining rank, i.e., ascription, and the actual practice, which operates partly by achievement and partly by ascription. The general principle is relatively precise, but the practice is a source of constant ambiguity. This ambiguity stems from a tenacious insistence on ascription, on the one hand, and, on the other, the admission of additional criteria to compensate for lack of decisive evidence as

to who should succeed to a title on grounds of sheer inheritance.

To provide for an orderly succession to titles by ascription one would need, first of all, accurate knowledge of the biological relationships among previous and present titleholders. But the genealogical information contained in the *taritib* is extremely limited. The entries cover only the names of those holding titles, but do not spell out the relationships of succeeding titleholders to previous ones. Recent transitions to titles are recorded in oral form, it is true, and are generally known by the older members of the community, in particular by the *sultan* and the leading *datus* of the community. But these claims lack the clarity of those found in the *taritib*, because of unrecorded intermarriages among claimants to the same titles. The children of such marriages inherit two or more sets of criteria for claiming a particular title and as a result confusion reigns, particularly when an individual who manages to claim numerous forebears directly descended from a titleholder is pitted against someone else who can claim only a few, but who has instead other characteristics that compensate for a lack of genealogical support. These non-ascriptive features are important secondary criteria for titleholding, as actually practiced.

One's election to be a major claimant to a title must first be concurred in within one's immediate kin group; only then is one given the chance to gain a title. The immediate extended family must first validate an individual's claim, tacitly recognizing his ability to represent the particular descent line in its claim to the title. The immediate kin group's active role and interest in supporting the claimant rest on the fact that they too benefit immensely from the acquisition of a title by any one of its members. The individual's validated rank, evidenced by the holding of a title, affects the ranks of all his relatives as they are perceived by the rest of the villagers. The corresponding level of brideprice that the immediate close relatives can demand in a marriage transaction is also significantly affected.

Validation by the immediate kin group of an individual's ambition to contest a title will

depend on the individual's economic and political power. It is not enough that one can conclusively demonstrate his primacy to the inheritance of a title because of biological links with previous titleholders or claimants. One must possess both economic and political power, a guarantee of his ability to hold, maintain, and carry out the functions that such a title demands. This particular requirement is of prime importance because it is one of the major roles, if not the major role, of a titleholder to mediate in the resolution of conflicts. The mediation process demands the representation of the protagonists by major titleholders, whose participation and presence are the guarantee that decisions taken will be carried out. To hold a title which is not backed by political power would mean very little, and the impotent leader would be an object of ridicule, not reverence and fear.

In modern Maranao society, this compensating strength may be generated by education, by entrepreneurial ventures leading to economic and hence political power, or by access to the central-government political system, which may catapult into prominence an individual with only a weak claim to a title. At an earlier period, only highly recognized *pegawidan* individuals could possibly claim a title. But the new channels for mobility are slowly eroding the criteria formerly used for titleholding and opening up the system to greater numbers of claimants. This in turn leads to more confusion than ever when a titleholder dies.

Since the traditional system plays a dominant role even under the Philippine central-government bureaucratic system, the need to hold a title is intensified in the modern political context. The capacity to participate actively or to strive for leadership in the central-government political system depends on two traditional characteristics: the support of kinsmen and a position of leadership demonstrated by the possession of a title recognized in the *taritib*. The desire for political power makes the succession to titles one of the major sources, perhaps the major source, of continuing conflict within the society.

Given the ambiguities which surround even

the most valid claims to a title, one must constantly validate his rank by acting in a manner that corresponds to it. The higher the rank, the greater the sense of *maratabat*, or 'rank honor.' Not to give evidence of it through an outward behavioral display is to do oneself discredit, and further implies that one's claim to a rank may really have no basis. While this external, constant, and even redundant validation and affirmation of rank may be viewed as a response to the ambiguities of the system, it also brings a highly-charged atmosphere to any social context, particularly if it is a public one.

Moreover, this unending preoccupation with rank differentiation results in intense factionalism, and may explain why Maranao society never reached the degree of political centralization that is seen in the two other major Philippine Muslim groups. Among the Tausug of the Sulu Archipelago centralization culminated in the role of the Sultan of Jolo. The Magindanao of the Cotabato basin also succeeded in centralizing political control. But in Maranao society no equivalent degree of unity was achieved. Earlier writers appropriately described Maranao country as "the land of 1001 sultans and datos" — for depending on the specific structural level one refers to, one does come up with countless sultan or datos.

It is in the system of rank differentiation that one clearly perceives that conflict in Maranao society is institutionalized, and that its very existence or occurrence is necessary to manifest the elements that provide the unifying bond for what otherwise is to an outsider an "endemically conflict-ridden society." Viewed in this context, disruptions, ruptured relationships, and temporary chaos provide the arena in which the individual is offered the chance to find his place in the total scheme of the unitary society.

Note

This is the revised version of a paper read at the National Convention of the Philippine Sociological Society, held at Bocobo Hall, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Q.C., on January 20–21, 1973. The author received the Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Chicago in 1971. During fieldwork in the Lake Lanao area of Lanao del Sur (1967–69), he was a grantee of The Asia Foundation, but completed his dissertation as a fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation. He is currently finishing a book on the social context of Maranao art, assisted by a grant from the Ford Foundation's Southeast Asia Research Fellowship Program. At the time he presented this paper the author was director of the Panamin Research Center.