

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN MARRIAGES IN THE PHILIPPINES: SOME TENTATIVE GENERALIZATIONS

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A review of the three major studies of Philippine Muslim-Christian marriages which have been conducted to date shows a number of common patterns. In general, such couples are characterized by high levels of educational and occupational attainment, late age at marriage, and prior geographic mobility away from their traditional home community. Implications of these findings for the Philippine educational system are explored.

Introduction

It is a fact of social transaction that when two groups of people come in contact with each other, some form of alliance is bound to occur no matter how hostile these groups are with one other. The alliance can take the form of a political peace pact, territorial concession, defense, economic agreement or matrimonial union between certain individual members from each group. The romantic fiction of Romeo and Juliet dramatizes this latter phenomenon. A number of historical incidents have been recorded of friendly alliances between two groups that had traditionally been against one another which began with intermarriage.¹

In the Philippines, cases of marriages among Filipino Muslims and Christians indicate that marital alliance and union among individuals belonging to groups separated for centuries by prejudice, suspicion, cultural contrasts, and sharply distinctive social characteristics is already a social reality. Despite the tensions and prejudices which have dominated the social relations between Filipino Muslims and Christians to this day (e.g. Lacar and Hunt. 1972, Bulatao 1973), a significant number of individuals have crossed the ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural barriers to matrimony. Although the rate of Muslim-Christian intermarriage is still low and some still consider the marriage of a Muslim to Christian, or vice versa, as a calamity, the fact is that it has taken place and will, in all probability, continue to take place (Gowing 1969). Casual observation in Lanao indicates

that even during the height of the Mindanao conflict—erroneously dubbed by some as the “Muslim-Christian” conflict—a great many Maranao Muslim men from Marawi got married to Christians and, significantly, a few Maranao women who had gone to Manila subsequently became married to Christians. Despite this trend, direct empirical studies of such marriages have only been started recently (Lacar and Sarip 1984).

Objectives

This paper has three objectives:

1. To present some of the salient commonalities in the findings of three separate studies on the subject of Muslim-Christian marriages in the Philippines.
2. To advance some tentative generalizations regarding Muslim-Christian marriages in the Philippines, for it appears that there is already a sufficient body of data on the subject to do this.
3. To outline some of the implications of the data on intermarriage among Muslims and Christians for the larger concern of national consciousness or integration.

Background of the Paper

At this point, I would like to describe the three studies which serve as the basis of this paper.

The first study was that which I conducted in 1969 upon a sample of 50 Muslim-Christian couples in Cotabato (Lacar 1970). Of the 50

couples, 35 involved male Muslims married to Christian women, while 15 were Muslim women married to Christian men.² The specific locale of this study was Midsayap and Pikit, which were noted as the center in Cotabato of the Mindanao Independence Movement in the early part of the 1970s, as led by the Matalams. At the time of this study, there were 74 cases of Muslim-Christian marriages in Pikit and Cotabato which were known to me. However, I could only study 50 of these couples.

Basically, the study was an attempt to answer the question: What are the sociological dynamics of Muslim-Christian marriages in Cotabato? More specifically, it sought to find answers to such questions as (1) what are the socio-demographic characteristics of intermarried individuals? ; (2) what problems did each partner in the intermarriage encounter during their courtship, engagement, marriage and after marriage? ; and (3) to what extent do these marriages conform to or deviate from the Islamic law (Shari'a)?

The second study was carried out by Jumdanan J. Sandangan in Jolo, Sulu in 1981. This was a replication of my original thesis research and was also done as part of a requirement for an M.A. thesis in Anthropology at the University of San Carlos. (Sandangan, 1982). The study interviewed a total of 180 Muslim-Christian couples or 360 individuals in Jolo. Of the 180 couples, 120 were marriages involving a male Muslim with female Christian, and 60 were female Muslims with Christian husbands.

The third study is one which was conducted only recently by the Coordination Center for Research and Development of MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology under my supervision.³ In this case, fully 200 Maranao-Christian couples or 400 individuals were interviewed in Lanao. Of the 200 couples, 197 involved a male Muslim and a female Christian, while only three consisted of female Muslims with male Christians. Actually, there were five known couples in Marawi involving a female Maranao and a male Christian. However, only three agreed to be interviewed. We also know of fourteen other Maranao women in Manila who are married to

Christians. These, too, refused interviews, since they were still hiding from the wife's family. All in all, then, the three studies have analyzed a total of 430 couples.

Major Patterns in the Findings of the Three Studies

Socio-demographic characteristics

Educational Attainment. All the three studies indicate that the intermarried individuals had a high level of education at the time of their marriage. Among the Maguindanao-Christian couples, for example, 74 percent of the male Muslims had at least a 2-year college education while all of the female Muslims married to Christian men in this study had at least three years of college education. Sandangan, too, reports that close to 50 percent of his Jolo couples have had some college education, while a little over 60 percent are at least a high school graduate. Finally, the analysis of Maranao-Christian couples in Lanao found that more than 60 percent of the couples have had a college-level education. Four of the respondents, in fact, had earned a Ph.D.

When viewed *vis-a-vis* data on the educational attainment of the general population, the couples in this study are very highly educated. Consider, for instance, that in 1970, 37.9 percent of eligible Filipino Muslims (aged 5-19) were in school. The comparative figure among Christians at this same point in time was 49.0 percent in school (Hill, 1982).

Income and Occupation. The high educational attainment of the respondents in all the three studies is reflected again in their occupation and income at the time of marriage. Thus, among the Cotabato couples, 94 percent of those who were working had a white collar job or a professional occupation such as teaching or law. Among the Jolo couples, more than two thirds were in the professional, technical and service categories, with an average annual income of ₱8,142 at the time of the marriage. The comparable income figure in the Cotabato group was about ₱3,000 annually. The difference in annual average income between the

Cotabato and Jolo couples may be explained by the fact that the Cotabato study was carried out in 1969 whereas the Jolo study took place in 1981. For the couples from Lanao, the male Muslim respondents tended to have titles ranging from directors, chiefs of offices, and officers-in-charge of some government or private agencies at the time of the marriage, with an average annual income of ₱18,500.

Again, when we compare the occupational and income characteristics of the intermarried couples with those of the general population, the former group is much better off. For example, 1972 income data for Philippine Muslims show that 50 percent of them earned less than ₱3,000 a year and that the top 5 percent of the Muslims in the Philippines earned only ₱15,000 a year. The national average annual income at this time was ₱3,736 (Mijares and Belarmino 1973).

Occupationally, data for 1970-1972 show that 70 percent of the Muslim population above 10 years old in the country were employed in agriculture, forestry, and fishing; whereas only 30 percent were employed in the non-agricultural sector. Among Christians, 33 percent were in the non-agricultural employment sector and 67 percent were in agriculture, forestry, and fishing (Mijares and Belarmino 1973).

Religious Ties. There appear to be two common patterns among the couples with regard to religious ties before marriage. Data on the religious ties among male Muslim-female Christian couples indicate a sizeable proportion of both husbands and wives reporting that they were either fairly religious or very religious. On the other hand, among male Christian-female Muslim couples, the opposite pattern seems to be the case, i.e., a sizeable proportion reported themselves as either not religious at all or indifferent to religion before marriage. A sex-ethnic differential in the strength and weakness of religious ties is indicated by the data in all the three studies. A possible explanation of this pattern is the sex-selective religious emphasis in Christianity and in Islam. Among Filipino Christians, women seem to be more religious in terms of frequency of church attendance, although men dominate as far as decision-making

positions are concerned. On the other hand, Islam is a religion that is clearly dominated by men, with the women occupying the background. In fact, in the mosques, women are segregated at the back.

Age at marriage. Late age at marriage is another characteristic that seems to be common among respondents in all of the three studies. Thus, data for the Cotabato couples show that the male Muslims averaged 28 years of age at the time of their marriage, while comparable figures stood at 28 years for the female Christians, 33 years for male Christians and 27 years for female Muslims. A generally similar pattern can be noted among the Jolo couples studied by Sandangan, while the oldest group of all (in terms of age at marriage) appears to be that from Lanao. Average age at marriage in this study stood at 31 years for Muslim males, 34 years for Christian males, 29 years for female Muslims and 28 years for Christian wives.

Again, these statistics are quite distinctive when compared to the general population. The comparable national figures for the years 1956 to 1964 among homogamous Filipino marriages was 24 years of age for males and 21 for females. (Smith 1968).

Geographic Mobility. Data from all the three studies indicate that the initial contacts among the respondents were in places located far from the watchful eyes of traditionally-bound parents. Over two thirds of all the respondents in all the three studies affirmed that when they met they were either students in places far from their hometown or were already working in other towns. It thus seems that the distance of their places of employment from the parents' home and their economic, as well as social, emancipation encouraged the respondents to ignore the old forms of social control against marriage with persons from other religious groups.

Some Tentative Generalizations

Given these findings, some tentative generalizations may now be advanced with regard to the subject.

Generalization No. 1. Muslim-Christian inter-marriages in the Philippines will continue to

take place at a rate faster than they have taken place in the 1960s and 1970s, but will be a phenomenon dominated largely by the very highly educated professionals and economically mobile individuals. As far as can be determined, uneducated individuals, whether Muslim or Christian, have very little tendency toward intermarriage. Cultural and religious prejudices are the major obstacles to such marriages, compounded by cultural and religious stereotypes that stem from disparities in the degree of their emancipation from tradition and the lack of social advantages which may be exchanged in the marital union.

Moreover, in a culture like ours where education is an almost certain key to upward social mobility, it is expected that the educated ones will desire marriage with partners who are also educated (Reynolds 1965). Among Muslims, whether male or female, the higher their education, the more open they will become towards intermarriage with Christians. Education will probably play a more critical role when the union involves a female Muslim and a male Christian.

Generalization No. 2. Schools and places of employment will continue to provide ample opportunities for close social interaction and the development of primary types of social relations among members of the opposite sex from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. As such, these will increase the probabilities for cross-religious romance and marriage. The more open social climate of the schools and places of employment tend to encourage inter-ethnic association, which will in turn result in occasional intermarriages.

Generalization No. 3. At present, the prevailing attitude in communities in Mindanao regarding Muslim-Christian marriages is generally one of tacit toleration. People do not openly encourage it, but it is not publicly condemned or discouraged. Neither intermarried couples nor their children are subjected to intense community pressures or prejudices.⁴

It is predicted that, in the next decade or so, attitudes towards intermarriage between Muslims and Christians will become even more tolerant. Already a number of female Maranao

Muslims, the group considered to be the most conservative on the matter of marriage between a female Muslim and a male Christian (Matuan 1983), have been married to Christians. At least five are known to be residing in the Islamic City of Marawi whose Christian husbands are already accepted by the Muslim women's respective families. That these couples are able to stay unmolested in Marawi indicates very strongly that the barrier against Muslim women marrying Christians is now giving way to change. While it is true that some of the Maranao Muslim women who have married Christian men still hide in Manila or in other places in the Visayas for fear of their husband's safety, it is equally true that some are already living in Marawi unmolested and accepted by the woman's kin.

Generalization No. 4. Social change in its varied forms produces individuals who, because of their ability to accept modernization, become detached from their own cultural tradition. In a society that is experiencing rapid cultural change, these individuals find themselves unable to participate successfully in their social relations with people of their original cultural orientations. In many cases these are more highly educated and mobile individuals. Their education and exposure to other groups alienate them from their tradition and lead them to become dissatisfied with their own background. In the end they become less identified with their own traditional group and are drawn toward the culture group which they perceive as having more advanced standards. Thus, in marriage as in friendship, these individuals will seek the potential mate whose social characteristics approximate those traits which they have learned to value. This phenomenon is one of the major reasons why Muslims, and to a lesser extent Christians, have generally taken a conservative attitude toward education in our country.

For an educated and emancipated male Muslim, for instance, marriage with a less-educated Muslim woman would represent a return to the traditional patterns. In this sort of marriage he would be expected to act in a traditional fashion towards his spouse, his educational sophistication notwithstanding. On the other hand,

the tradition-liberated Muslim woman might still prefer marriage with a Christian man, knowing that she would probably get more egalitarian treatment from him than she would be able to obtain from a Muslim husband, again because of the traditional role expectations between a Muslim man and woman.

Generalization No. 5. Traditional Muslim groups in the Philippines did not allow individual choice in the selection of a mate. Today, vestiges of this norm continue to exist even when the children have already acquired a college education. Since the parents of young adolescents seek a partner for their son or daughter, personal choice is irrelevant. Today, however, as a result of increased social contacts, expanded educational facilities, travel, and the mass media, the custom of parental choice has become less acceptable to the young. Individual choice of a marriage partner is becoming more significant among the younger generation of educated and mobile Muslims.

In general, it appears likely that the romantic ideal in the choice of a mate will become more and more dominant in the process of courtship among all groups in the Philippines, including the Muslims. This also suggests changes in the role played by parents in the mate-selection process, such as will increase the probabilities of Muslim-Christian intermarriages.

Generalization No. 6. The acquisition of changed social values as a consequence of expanded social contacts, education, and economic mobility tend also to have other consequences such as a disillusionment with and defiance of tradition and a desire for status improvement. There is ample evidence from the data of the three studies that the Muslims who crossed the religious barrier in marriage were disillusioned with the traditional ways of doing things and sought improvement on their own by defying these traditions. Muslim women, for instance, married to Christians abhor the thought of arranged marriage or of "sharing their husband with other wives." For their part, the Muslim men who chose to intermarry were opposed to the practice of giving "large amounts of dowry." Again, then, it may be predicted that as more and more Muslims become

educated, more will acquire changed social values. As a result, increasing numbers will experience disillusionment with their traditional cultural patterns and will defy these traditions by marrying across ethnic and religious barriers.

Implications

The pivotal role of education in the intermarriages described here suggests some strategies and policy implications which are directly relevant to the role that schools can play in achieving the goal of national integration. The educational institutions can do this task in a manner that no other institution can, provided that certain procedures are adhered to sincerely by all concerned and in a manner which is free from the interference of individual political interests.

First, an expanded educational package that will directly benefit the broad mass base of the population throughout the MINSUPALA region can be instituted. Such a package must begin at the primary level and should be implemented by the government as a matter of national priority in order that the long-term impact of education on our people's acquisition of values favorable to national integration will be more extensive. It is a fact that the school dropout rate in the rural areas of Mindanao is one of the highest in the Philippines. The root cause of the high dropout rate is primarily economic in nature, thus indicating that our present development efforts have not really reached their target groups. There is an urgent need for the intensification of all government attempts at the amelioration of poverty, with special focus on reaching those groups that will benefit most from these efforts. It is a well documented sociological phenomenon that the poor are usually the least likely to take advantage of the new opportunities created by development efforts (Hunt 1965). Thus, it is only when the poor have risen beyond a certain threshold of poverty that they begin to take advantage of programs designed to help them.

A clear case in point is the study-now-pay-later plan of the Philippine government. Ministry of Education and Culture officials admit that, as of December 1980, only a little over 3

percent of minority students (who are among the poorest in the country) have taken advantage of this program. On the other hand, almost 40 percent of the lowland Christian groups have availed themselves of this opportunity (Anonymous 1982).

Once again, it must be emphasized that political interferences must not be allowed to creep into these efforts. On their part, the Muslim leadership must demonstrate that they can handle the financial aspects of development projects in a manner which is above-board and beyond moral suspicion. It is a sad commentary on the leaders of the Filipino Muslim community that there has been, in the past, a tendency on their part to take advantage of development projects for personal gains while the large mass of their impoverished brothers continues to suffer in economic deprivation and misery.

Second, development approach and strategy in the Muslim regions must veer away from a military perspective, for the problems in Mindanao are primarily problems of economic equity, social justice, unbalanced development, and social neglect. Civil reforms and programs that are free from political overtones will go a longer way towards solving the conflicts in Mindanao than can any massive military operation. Military operations only disrupt the social processes that cultivate peaceful relations, as when schools have to be shut down because of military confrontations.

Third, the government must encourage and support *Madrasah* schools in Muslim areas as a matter of national policy and as a means of enabling additional Muslims to go to school. This is an imperative step towards bringing the fruits of education to a wider Muslim population, so that its positive effects upon national integration will become widespread.

The curriculum of the *Madaris* (plural of *Madrasah*) must be consistent with the cultural outlook of Muslims. As such, it should help develop a healthy pride in their own ethnic origin and history, without at the same time becoming ethnocentric. It must develop among Muslims a sense of respect for themselves and for others; a sense of psychological security, and the assur-

ance that they have some things of value to offer to all of us. Possessed with that security and self-respect, they can become more open, tolerant, and patriotic. Moreover, such a curriculum must stress full understanding of Islam. For a good Muslim is a good patriot; a good Muslim Filipino will be a good Filipino citizen.

We must realize that Filipino Muslims are probably one of the most isolated Muslim groups in the world, as far as the main currents of progressive Islamic thought are concerned. A progressive Muslimization of our Filipino Muslims will be a necessary precondition for the emergence of a loyal and patriotic Filipino Muslim citizenry.

The *madrasah* schools being contemplated here must be supervised and governed by a corps of Muslim administrators who are highly qualified, competent, and known for their integrity. Integrity and competence must be the sole basis of their selection. Muslim themselves must accept this as a *sine qua non* of the procedure.

Fourth, As a matter of national policy, courses on Islamic peoples of the Philippines and Southeast Asia can be offered at the tertiary level of our educational system. These courses can take the place of irrelevant subjects, such as Spanish, in the present curriculum. It is a sad commentary on our educational plan that while American studies, French, Japanese, Chinese, German, etc. are given prominence in many school curricula, there are probably no more than five institutions in the entire country that can offer competently-taught courses on Islamic studies.

Conclusion

The fact that marriages have occurred among Muslims and Christians indicates that a process of integration has been taking place between these two groups. Although the rate of these intermarriages is still low, and considered by some as a calamity, it is nevertheless continuing to take place. Indeed, all signs point to an increase in this phenomenon due to the heightened levels of education, geographic mobility, and cultural contact now being noted in the country.

Notes

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¹Notable examples are the marriages of Catherine of Braganza from Portugal to King Charles II of England and that of Mary I of England to King Philip of Spain.

²This study was conducted originally as a master's thesis at Silliman University (Lacar 1970) but was subsequently published in book form by New Day Publishers (Lacar 1980).

³The study was conducted with the assistance of Mrs. Hadji Sarip Riwarung, Irene Macarambon and Sophia B. Guro. (Lacar and Sarip 1984).

⁴It must be mentioned that Muslims derisively call children of intermarried couples as "Bisaya," which means slave. However, this appellation seems to be given only to children of lower class couples and is neither widespread nor open. Few children of upper status couples feel they are not welcomed into the friendship circle of Muslims because of their supposedly Bisaya status. Interviews with Muslims who know children of a Muslim-Christian union reveal that "mestizos" are not shunned because they are "mestizos," but rather because they tend to seek domination over non-mestizos. Also worthy of note is the fact that prejudiced attitudes against "mestizos" seem to be shown only by Muslims and not by Christians.

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