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Thomas J. O'Shaugnessy

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Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

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HOW MANY MUSLIMS HAS THE PHILIPPINES?

Thomas J. O'Shaughnessy

Statistics on the total number of Muslims in the Philippines have never been more than rough approximations. Unofficial estimates, with no guarantee of accuracy, range from five to twelve percent of the total population. Hilario M. Gomez in 1972 gave a figure of between four and five million, or ten to twelve percent.¹ Datu Udtog Matalam in the Manifesto of the Muslim Independence Movement of May 1, 1968 put the number at four million or eleven percent.² This is also the estimate of Alunan C. Glang.³ In 1957, when the Philippines had about twenty-four million people, *This Week* Sunday magazine said that two million Filipinos or eight percent of the population followed the creed of Islam.⁴ Another estimate reported in 1968 by Antonio Isidro⁵ placed the number at about two million, or 5.4 percent of the population. This last estimate implicitly makes two assumptions: (1) that in 1939 five percent of the people of the Philippines were Muslims; (2) that the ratio of Muslims is growing. Neither of these assumptions, as will be shown, can be adequately defended. Moreover, even this more moderate figure goes beyond the official census returns for that year which yield a total of 677,903 Filipino Muslims or 4.2 percent of the 1939 population of 16,000,303.

Part of the difficulty in getting accurate data is intrinsic to the subject itself. The United Nations *Handbook of Population Census Methods*⁶ has not recommended questions on religious affiliation because of the inexact and incomplete replies usually obtained. Difficulties in getting accurate numbers are compounded in some Muslim areas of the Philippines because of the hostility of the inhabitants to government personnel. Because of disturbed conditions in many Muslim sectors in 1970, census takers apparently sometimes made extrapolations based on extremely limited surveys.

1. Hilario M. Gomez, "Muslim-Christian Relations," in *The Filipino in the Seventies*, ed. Vitaliano R. Gorospe and Richard L. Deats (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1973), p. 160.

2. Cited in Alunan C. Glang, *Muslim Secession or Integration* (Quezon City: Garcia Publishing Co., 1969), p. 103.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

4. Domocao Alonto, "The Problem of the Muslim Minority," *This Week*, 15 September 1957, p. 6.

5. Antonio Isidro, *Muslim-Christian Integration at the Mindanao State University* (Marawi City: University Research Center, Mindanao State University, 1968), p. 4.

6. *Handbook of Population Census Methods*, vol. 3, Demographic and Social Characteristics of the Population, Series F, no. 5 (New York: United Nations, 1959), p. 50.

In some areas too, the mobility of the Philippine Muslim population makes it hard to determine trends of growth or decrease. This is especially true among one of the major groups, the Taosug, a sea-oriented people, many of whom constantly migrate from coastal settlements in Sulu to others in Borneo, Mindanao, and Palawan. The 1939 Census put the unsettled population among the Taosugs at about fifteen percent. Finally, hope of increased assistance from the central government and greater representation in Congress, together with a growing self-assertiveness, seem at times to have caused some Muslim groups to overstate their numbers.

Despite these difficulties, the figures offered by the Bureau of the Census and Statistics will probably yield the best approximation to serve as a starting point. Six official censuses have been taken in the Philippines since 1900. (A seventh census was taken in May 1975, but its results were not available at this writing). That of 1903 has no specific data on religious affiliation, since the need for it was not seen at the time. The five others give statistics for the principal religions of the country. According to the last census, taken in 1970, 96.7 percent of the Muslim population of the Philippines is to be found in seven of the southern provinces: Sulu with 94.4 percent of its population Muslim, Lanao del Sur with 91.3 percent, Cotabato with 37.3 percent, Lanao del Norte with 20.4 percent, Zamboanga del Sur with 16.5 percent, Palawan with 7.2 percent, and Zamboanga del Norte with 5.1 percent. A comparison of average annual rates of increase for Muslims and non-Muslims in these provinces may give some indication of the general trend of population and perhaps a better approximation of the real number of Muslims in the Philippines today. This comparison of trends is given in tables 1 and 2.⁷

According to the census returns the percentage of Muslims in the total population decreased from 4.29% to 4.23% between 1918 and 1939 and to 4.11% by 1948. This decreasing trend becomes more understandable in the light of the low standards of public health and sanitation that prevail in less accessible regions where most of the cultural minorities of the Philippines — including the major Muslim groups — are established. Because

7. The data in these tables are taken from the following sources: *Censo de las Islas Filipinas . . . en 1918* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1921), vol. 2, pp. 50 and 99 (this source gives only percentages for religious affiliation); *Census of the Philippines: 1939*, vol. 1, pts. 1-4, *Reports by Provinces for Census of Population* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1940); *Summary and General Report on the 1948 Census of Population and Agriculture*, vol. 3, pt. 1, *Population* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1954), p. 374; *Census of the Philippines 1960: Population and Housing*, Summary Report, vol. 2 (Manila: Bureau of the Census and Statistics, 1963), p. 18 (table 20); and *Final Report: 1970 Census of Population and Housing*, vols. 1-67 (Manila: National Census and Statistics Office, 1974). The data on religious affiliation in the 1970 Census are found in table III-18 in each volume.

of ignorance and malnutrition they are more susceptible to disease. Tuberculosis and malaria are still major causes of death among the young. A high percentage of mothers die in childbirth. Less than half the children born reach adulthood, most dying in their first year of life. Even of those who survive their childhood, about one third are permanently weakened by disease.⁸ These high mortality rates apply to the smaller groups like the

Table 1
MUSLIM AND NON-MUSLIM POPULATION

	1918	1939	1948	1960	1970
Muslims in the total population	4.29%	4.23%	4.11%	4.86%	4.31%
<i>Philippines</i>					
Non-Muslims	9,871,273	15,322,400	18,442,591	25,770,210	35,100,092
Muslims	443,037	677,903	791,817	1,317,475	1,584,394
<i>Cotabato</i>					
Non-Muslims	61,052	135,939	284,507	672,659	711,430
Muslims	110,926	162,996	155,162	356,460	424,577
<i>Lanao</i>					
Non-Muslims	8,140	80,805	106,703		
Muslims	83,319	162,632	237,215		
<i>Lanao del Norte</i>					
Non-Muslims				214,070	269,089
Muslims				56,533	80,853
<i>Lanao del Sur</i>					
Non-Muslims				22,600	39,239
Muslims				355,727	416,269
<i>Palawan</i>					
Non-Muslims	63,529	87,278	97,655	149,893	219,566
Muslims	5,524	6,395	8,614	12,776	17,069
<i>Sulu</i>					
Non-Muslims	4,147	16,584	13,943	15,972	23,633
Muslims	168,629	230,533	226,883	310,926	401,984
<i>Zamboanga</i>					
Non-Muslims	102,544	263,956	388,593		
Muslims	44,789	92,028	133,348		
<i>Zamboanga del Norte</i>					
Non-Muslims				265,218	388,680
Muslims				16,211	20,699
<i>Zamboanga del Sur</i>					
Non-Muslims				564,171	863,190
Muslims				178,233	170,828

8. Edward R. Kiunisala, "Three Million Forgotten Filipinos," *Philippines Free Press*, 15 December 1962, pp. 5 and 209-11. Some of Kiunisala's numerical data cannot be substantiated, but his main point is true: con-

Table 2
**PERCENT CHANGE IN MUSLIM AND
 NON-MUSLIM POPULATION**
(Growth Unless Otherwise Indicated)

	Average Annual Change between				Total Percent Change between			
	1918 & 1939	1939 & 1948	1948 & 1960	1960 & 1970	1918 & 1939	1939 & 1948	1948 & 1960	1960 & 1970
<i>Philippines</i>								
Non-Muslims	2.62	2.25	3.30	3.62	55.2	20.3	39.7	36.2
Muslims	2.52	1.86	5.52	2.02	53.0	16.8	66.3	20.2
<i>Cotabato</i>								
Non-Muslims	5.83	12.13	11.36	0.57	122.6	109.2	136.4	5.7
Muslims	2.23	-0.53	10.80	1.91	46.9	-4.8	129.7	19.1
<i>Lanao</i>								
Non-Muslims	42.50	3.55	10.15*		892.6	32.0	121.8*	
Muslims	4.52	5.08	6.14*		95.1	45.8	73.7*	
<i>Lanao del Norte</i>								
Non-Muslims				2.57				25.7
Muslims				4.30				43.0
<i>Lanao del Sur</i>								
Non-Muslims				7.36				73.6
Muslims				1.70				17.0
<i>Palawan</i>								
Non-Muslims	1.77	1.31	4.45	4.64	37.3	11.8	53.4	46.4
Muslims	0.74	3.84	4.02	3.36	15.7	34.6	48.3	33.6
<i>Sulu</i>								
Non-Muslims	14.28	-1.76	1.20	4.79	299.9	-15.9	14.5	47.9
Muslims	1.74	-0.16	3.08	2.92	36.7	-1.5	37.0	29.2
<i>Zamboanga</i>								
Non-Muslims	7.49	5.24	9.45*		157.4	47.2	113.4*	
Muslims	5.01	4.97	3.81*		105.4	44.8	45.8*	
<i>Zamboanga del Norte</i>								
Non-Muslims				4.65				46.5
Muslims				2.76				27.6
<i>Zamboanga del Sur</i>								
Non-Muslims				5.30				53.0
Muslims				-0.41				-4.1

*Lanao was divided into two provinces, Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur, in 1959. The figure here given represents the total percent increase of the combined populations of Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur in 1960 over the population of Lanao in 1948. The same procedure is followed for Zamboanga, which was divided in 1952.

Negritos more than to the Muslims, but they can also be verified for many of the latter.

Another reason for the declining proportion of Muslims in the totals recorded until 1948 was their resistance to governmental policy in the early days of the American regime. The aim pursued during the first two decades of the century was the ultimate integration of the Filipino Muslims into the body politic of an independent Philippines. In opposing this policy, the Muslims lost their independence through enforced disarmament; thousands died in battle; and traditional Islamic society was broken up and stripped of much of its former power.⁹

From 1918 on the Muslims also had to compete with Christian Filipinos who immigrated in large numbers into Mindanao during the American and Commonwealth regimes. This massive resettlement program was continued in the postwar years on a similar scale from 1946 to the early sixties, and in reduced proportions during the last decade. Its results are clearly reflected in the high annual average growth rates of non-Muslims in Cotabato (11.36%), Lanao (10.15%), and Zamboanga (9.45%) from 1948 to 1960 as compared with the average rate of 3.30% for the non-Muslim population of the whole country.

Probably the largest Philippine Muslim group, the Magindanao, is to be found in Cotabato. The Census of 1970 gives a total of 424,577 Muslims for this Province, but Dr. Robert B. Fox sets the number for that year between 360,000 and 400,000.¹⁰ The Census figure would require an average annual increase of 10.8% for each of the twelve years between 1948 and 1960. This would represent an annual increase more than three times as great as that of the annual increase of 3.4% for the whole Philippines during the same twelve year period. A 10.8% annual increase becomes less credible when it is noted that under wartime conditions between 1939 and 1948 the Magindanaos registered an average annual decrease of .53 of one percent. Doctors Isidro and Saber graphically portray the situation precisely for the period 1948–1960 when the Magindanaos were supposed to be growing more than three times as rapidly as the rest of the Philippine population.

Extreme economic necessity has forced many Magindanao farmers to sell their lands to adventurous settlers from Christian communities. Christian encroachments have forced some of them to retreat to the interior or to migrate to a few towns that have managed to remain predominantly Muslim . . . 'The national census of 1948 placed 80% of the Moslems as having no definite source of income, no property. This

ditions of health and medical care among the minority groups leave much to be desired.

9. Peter Gordon Gowing, "Mandate in Moroland: The American Government of Muslim Filipinos 1899–1920" (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1968), pp. 799 and 824.

10. In Vitaliano R. Gorospe and Richard L. Deats, eds., *The Filipino in the Seventies* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1973), p. 401.

still holds true today [written in 1960] The victimized, illiterate Moslem farmer may appeal for help, but in most cases the authorities concerned are too busy [to listen] If the average Moslem is a fisherman, he still . . . [employs] crude methods . . . which his forebears used He resorts to dynamite [fishing] . . . and is fined or put in jail. As a result the family suffers."¹¹

Taking into consideration these and similar facts, the compilers of the Human Relations Area Files concluded in 1956: ". . . it appears justified to state that the rate of population increase among the Magindanao is low — certainly less than that of the overall Philippine population."¹² This opinion is confirmed by their average annual growth rate of 2.23% from 1918 to 1939 as compared with the 2.62% average for the non-Muslim Philippine population.

The second largest group would be the Maranao of the two Lanao Provinces. Fox's estimate of 1970, however, would put them in third place with 300,000 to 350,000,¹³ instead of the official figure approaching 500,000 given in the Census of 1970 for the two Lanaos. Non-Muslims inundated the old Lanao Province between 1918 and 1939, with a record annual increase of 42.50%, if full credence is to be given to the Census returns. The annual average for the Maranaos during the same period was 4.52%, almost double that of the national rate of 2.62%. To judge the credibility of the Maranao rate of 4.52% one should recall the great epidemics of cholera and smallpox that killed many of this group during the early days of the American regime. The loss of life was all the greater because the Maranaos refused vaccination out of religious scruple.¹⁴ These facts, it is true, have to be balanced against the peace and order imposed by American rule, which put an end to the mortal feudings that had been traditional among the people of Lanao.¹⁵ Although the Maranao population seems to be increasing, the increase rate of 1.7% registered for the period 1960—1970 would seem closer to the truth than the 5.08% and the 6.14% rates given in the previous two censuses.

The third and fourth largest Muslim groups, the Taosug and the Samal, are concentrated mostly in Sulu Province. The Taosug live in Jolo Island and the Samal, a little less numerous, in the islands to the south, to make up the 401,984 Muslim inhabitants of this province given in the Census of 1970. Before accepting this figure as definitive, however, a few other facts have to be considered. The Sulu Archipelago has limited natural potential-

11. Antonio Isidro and Mamitua Saber, eds., *Muslim Philippines* (Marawi City: University Research Center, Mindanao State University, 1968), p. 83.

12. *Area Handbook of the Philippines: Human Relations Area Files* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1956), 4:1753—54.

13. Gorospe and Deats, p. 401.

14. Isidro and Saber, pp. 91—92.

15. Melvin Mednick, *Encampment of the Lake: The Social Organization of a Moslem Philippine (Moro) People* (Chicago: Philippine Studies Program, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1965), p. 38.

ties for supporting a large non-industrialized population.¹⁶ This is borne out by the annual increase rate of 1.74% between 1918 and 1939, the lowest rate of all the major Muslim areas. During the years 1939 to 1948 the population of the Sulu Province actually decreased from 230,533 to 226,883. Medical care in Sulu is poor: most of the population is infected with malaria in one form or another; and infant mortality runs to over forty percent.¹⁷ The compilers of the Human Relations Area Files were therefore justified in concluding in 1956 that "the growth of the population [of Sulu Province] is at a declining annual rate."¹⁸ The Census of 1960, it is true, records a sudden upsurge in the rate of Muslim population growth in Sulu to 3.08%. But this rate as well as the figure of 310,926 for the Muslim population of 1960 are brought into question by the careful survey made in the late sixties by Richard L. Stone for the population of Siasi municipality. This area is the largest voting district by population in the whole Province of Sulu. Starting with the official census data of 1960 for the barrios, Stone worked out for each of them a revised estimate based on an aerial survey and on calculations by residents of the communities concerned. The total population of the Taosug barrios was 15,066 according to the 1960 Census, but only 10,272 by Stone's revised estimate — thus making the census report overstate the numbers by more than 46%. A similar survey of the Samal barrios found the census data 23% in excess of the revised estimate.¹⁹

Hence the national rate of increase, 5.52% yearly, between 1948 and 1960 certainly deserves to be challenged. Melvin Mednick, an experienced observer of Philippine Islam, writing in 1965, is conservative in his opinion: "... even if Moro population expansion has kept pace with that of the rest of the Philippines, which it probably has not, and granting the possi-

16. *Area Handbook*, 4:1744.

17. Richard L. Stone, "Some Aspects of Muslim Social Organization," in *Brown Heritage: Essays on Philippine Cultural Tradition and Literature*, ed. Antonio G. Manuud (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1967), p. 113. The high infant mortality rate is an estimate made by the clinic staff in Siasi and communicated to Stone. It resembles the figures cited for Manila in the early years of this century: "In Manila at the beginning of the American regime," according to Serafin E. Macaraig, on p. 130 of *Social Problems* (Manila: Educational Supply Co., 1929), "about four fifths of the babies died before they were one year old . . . during the early part of the American period, the infant mortality rate dropped to an average of 444.7 per thousand during the period from 1904 to 1916." (Cited in *Area Handbook*, 1:383).

18. *Area Handbook*, 4:1744.

19. Some of the more egregious overstatements for the Taosug barrios were those of Buan (1960 Census — 714; revised estimate — 250), Kabubu (1960 Census — 960; revised estimate — 300), and Sipanding (1960 Census — 3040; revised estimate — 600). See Stone, "Some Aspects," pp. 100 and 131.

bility of error in enumeration, it is still not likely that the total [Muslim] population is that claimed for it."²⁰ Inflated population returns make possible inflated voting returns, and a stronger voice in national life. Mednick also credits the Filipino Muslims in general and the Taosug-Samal grouping in particular with the most centralized and best organized political structure in the Philippines.²¹ Given this high degree of organization it would not have been difficult for ambitious politicians to exaggerate Muslim voting power. The figures for all four major Muslim groups here studied show definite signs of inflation since World War II, and these four groups constitute more than 94% of the total Muslim population of the country.

In view of the data presented above it is more likely that the Muslim population has continued its decreasing trend, not in absolute numbers, but towards a lower ratio in the total population. This trend is evident in the census reports made between 1918, when it constituted 4.29% of the population, and 1948 when it constituted 4.11%. Even granting that some of the low numbers for Muslims in the 1948 Census may be due to the wartime migration of sea-oriented groups, the population should have become resettled by 1948, three years after hostilities had ended. This 1918-1948 trend would represent an annual decrease of .006 of one percent of Muslims in relation to the total population of the Philippines. The continuance of this trend between 1948 and 1970 would have reduced the Muslims to 3.97% of the total population or about 1,456,000 instead of the 1,584,394 attributed to them in the 1970 Census. Even 1,456,000 may be much too high if the 23% to 46% excess discovered by Stone in Siasi were to be verified even in part in the other Muslim areas.

20. Mednick, pp. 16-17.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 17.