

**Sulu Treaties:
Their Historical Implications on the Moro Quest for Self-Determination**

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“The Moros exemplify what may be considered the highest stage of civilization to which the Malays have ever attained unaided.”

– Dean C. Worcester

In the course of its reign over the Sulu Archipelago and adjacent islands, the Sultanate of Sulu entered into several treaties, some of which were preserved and translated for the perusal and study of future generations. These treaties reflect in varying degrees the political status of the Sultanate in the community of nations, the extent of the political sophistication of the Moros, and the dynamics of war and peace in Sulu’s historical relations with the Spaniards and, later, the Americans.

An early 1725 treaty, for instance, provided for trade between Manila and Jolo and the mutual return of captives. A subsequent treaty signed between Datu Muhammad Ismael and Datu Jaafar for the Moros and Governor General Fernando Valdez for the Spaniards in 1737, and ratified by Sultan Alimuddin I, mentioned of free trade and use of passports between the Sulu Sultanate and the Spanish government in Manila. Almost a century hence, or in 1836, another commercial treaty was signed between Sultan Jamalul Kiram I and Captain Jose M. Halcon representing General Pedro Antonio Salazar.

History shows, however, that the Sulu Sultan did not limit the signing of treaties to the Spaniards. In 1849, British explorer Sir James Brooke visited Jolo and entered into a treaty with the Sultan, containing, among others, a promise by the Sultan neither to make any cessions of territory within his dominion nor recognize sovereignty rights nor promise fealty to any nation without the consent of Great Britain. This treaty was protested by the Spanish governor of Zamboanga, which led to the signing of the Treaty of April 30, 1851, containing the so-called Act of Incorporation (of Sulu) into the Spanish Monarchy to counter diplomatic and commercial advances by the British. The most famous of the other foreign agreements, of course, was the Cession Treaty of 1878 between Sultan Jamalul A’lam and Baron von Overbeck, ceding the Sultanate’s property that is now known as Sabah in Borneo to a British merchant company.

During the American occupation of the Philippines, the Bates Treaty was concluded between the Sulu Sultan and the Americans on August 20, 1899 and ratified by President McKinley on October 27, 1899—a move which was largely seen as a diplomatic attempt to pacify the Moros of Sulu while the Americans were fighting the rebellion in Luzon.

These treaties and other formal agreements entered into by the Sulu Sultanate with sovereign nations deserve closer scrutiny particularly for their historical significance and implications in the wake of the renewed interest in Moro self-determination rekindled by the controversial MILF-GRP Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain. It is our hope that the calm study of history can generate an understanding and perspective that will help us untangle the webs of problems that now confront us in Mindanao.