

# Sulu Power, Contexts and Dynamics<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Sulu power evokes a rare display of the potential of man to reign in society as it consequently ushers the birth of one of the most phenomenal civilizations in the Malay world. Emanating from seemingly negligible epicenter in the Sulu Archipelago and subsequently sways vast territories and oceans, Sulu power is, strategically speaking, destined to emerge. It is not only stride in geographically unique location that borders the Pacific Ocean, Celebes Sea, Malacca Strait and South China Sea, Sulu is unbelievably rich in natural resources a fundamental reason why big powers near and far, past and present—and expectedly the future—have come and gone successively and oftentimes simultaneously to trade, to negotiate and to war with the Tausugs. While some colonial powers got what they wanted, many had to sail away and nursed ashamedly their frustrations. The Tausugs stood their ground; they harnessed their heretofore human potentials as they were emboldened, too, by Islam to face the crucible of history. Undoubtedly, while the Tausugs pride themselves of having been unconquered and proudly claimed of having built a civilization of epic proportion in Southeast Asia that was probably unparalleled during its height, it is undeniable however, like other civilizations, Sulu power has also been subject by the vicissitude of history to experience its inevitable rise and decline. Yet, even then, while other civilizations are short-lived, Sulu's longevity is exceptional. Why and how?

This paper tries to explain the nature of Sulu power, its dynamics, domestic and international contexts including the factors and forces that shaped and continuously re-shaped it. It also discusses the reasons in the rise and decline of Sulu power including its trajectory, challenge and imperative today.

Key terms: Sulu power, national power, geopolitics, cyclical theory of civilization, Orientalism, US “second coming,” Sulu-China relation, Sulu potentials

## **I. Introduction**

Sulu Archipelago looks like a shovel: hence, she has the dogged ability to fill itself; yet, whenever she is about to reach the peak of power, grandeur and wealth, she is doomed to tip over.

- Tausug Chinese aphorism

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This trite metaphor of a Sisyphean kind about the Sulu Archipelago by an old Chinese matriarch who probably heard it from her Chinese ancestors in Jolo long time ago is an apt opening to discuss “Sulu power.” It evokes longevity and stamina in shaping one of seemingly unassuming yet phenomenal chain of islands that became in various epochs a regional power in Southeast Asia as she braced elbows with China and other power centers in the years of old and engaged nonchalantly in peace and in war with Western colonial powers that came to her shore.

More essentially, the same metaphor is instructive of Sulu’s numerous instances of rise and fall and her dogged ability to rise up to valiantly face odds and to build a new beginning reflecting that of Ibn Khaldun’s theory on cycle of civilizations. It probably explains, too, while some contemporary empires of Sulu Sultanate had come and gone quite fast and never to rise up again like Vic Hurley’s comparison of Sulu’s with the old Latin American empires particularly the Incas of Peru and the Aztecs of Mexico, yet, Sulu, her power and struggle, persisted continuing thus the Tausug thrust in history, albeit in varying form and magnitude from bygone era until today.

As the author is presently constrained by time, flesh and bones of this paper will be substantiated soon. What follows is simply a raw caricature of the paper’s hypothesis and preliminary discourse about Sulu power, its elements, context, and dynamics. Meantime, other concerns underscored in the abstract will be fully discussed when the paper is finalized.

## **II. Hypothesis and Assertion**

The politico-economic history of Sulu is defined by both constant and changeable elements of “national power” that cut across three great epochs of communal, imperial (dynastic/colonial) and nation-state system. The periods stretched roughly from Sulu’s recorded history starting from pre-Indic influence until the establishment of the Hindu Kingdom and its dissolution followed by establishment of the Islamic Sultanate until the time when the nation-state system reared its head since the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward. From an internal perspective, the constant and changeable elements of “Sulu power” determine the longevity of Sulu as a civilization wherein its maintenance is largely dictated by an exceedingly difficult task to maneuver the balance of both domestic structure and international environment that underpin the Tausug world. In periods where the balance has been excellently exercised more so when “Sulu power” is in its prime coupled with favorable and, at times, fortuitous regional and international development, Sulu experiences in various episodes of her past unimaginable zeniths of power. But from external dimension however, despite the balance provided by Sulu power between domestic sphere and international environment, excessive international pressure like war and trade blockade often reduced Sulu power substantially so that it takes another round of stride and development before Sulu is able to rise up again.

Conversely, when the balance to maneuver both domestic structure and international pressure got “disjunctured” owing largely to the inability of the Sulu Sultanate, for instance, to develop itself not to mention the wrangling within the political system crippling its ability henceforth to meet the enormous international challenges brought about by the transformation of world order from imperial (dynastic) system to the nation-state system unleashed through centuries of Western

adventurism, colonialism and other forms of cultural encroachment, Sulu power began to deteriorate as a matter of course. It constricted dramatically like an over-stretched rubber band back to its primordial state with its shape badly dilapidated almost to a near breaking point. The imposition of nation-state system through a long and arduous process of Western incursion and domination took the final blow to substantially reduce the power of Sulu from that of a regional power with an independent political institution into that of a mere appendage by other nation(s) despite their exceedingly naïve position not only because of their sheer absence of historical pedigree like that of the Sulu's but the inherently difficult task to tame and to discipline her under a new colonial and post-colonial order. Undeniably, many changeable elements of Sulu power have been disoriented, misplaced and extirpated, while some of them particularly the constant ones have largely remained.

In later times, such elements tried to find expression in various dimensions like governance, politics, rebellion, small-scale business and trading, culture and arts and others. But it is the void of sovereign, independent political and economic institution and its attendant substantive power that has been remiss in Sulu society since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The void has been maintained and continuously magnified as Sulu becomes mere adjunct to other power/s crippling her ability henceforth to effect new, dramatic cycle of history. Yet, somehow, while nation-states are generally responsible in wrestling the changeable aspects of Sulu power, it is worthy to reiterate that many of its essential elements remain generally intact and secure.

This paper takes off from Han Morgenthau's concept of "national power" (1997) framed by Ibn Khaldun's cyclical concept of civilizations (Rosenthal, 1958). While "national power" is obviously an extension of the concept of power from a nation-state perspective, the elements of "national power" (e.g., geography, resources, government, military, diplomacy) of Morgenthau find resonance across periods of international system (e.g., imperial, nation-states) where Sulu history falls in those phases successively.

By using the concept of "national power," the discussion of "Sulu power" is allowed to have some theoretical anchor, although it must be acknowledged that because of unique history of Sulu the discussion of "power" could hardly be framed by framework of nation-states, which is obviously a system of latter development and therefore limited to capture the longevity of Sulu and its history of power. But the advantage of harnessing it is that, the study is allowed to present the elements of "Sulu power" from a more "systematic" perspective allowing thus the presentation to have certain coherence viewed from generally accepted tool of analysis. In order to balance the rather limited concept of "national power," the study frames the issue of power within Ibn Khaldun's concept of civilization (e.g., *umran*) a theory that views society and culture from dynamic perspective of growth and cycle which would explain the longevity including rise and fall and subsequent struggle of Sulu as a political and regional power in Southeast Asia. Besides, while the concept of "national power" provides simply a menu of power variables, Ibn Khaldun's theory helps us in explaining such critical issues like longevity, cycle of power, fluidity and resilience of Sulu as persistent regional player in various epochs in Asia. Finally, it must be stated that this paper only scratches the surface of Sulu power owing largely to the nature of the topic which obviously demands general survey than specific treatment of Sulu power.

### III. Sulu and Power Formation

Except for purposes of historiography, to trace the time when Sulu became a respectable political and economic power is probably futile. The historicity of Sulu and the civilization and power she created cuts across various epochs the nature of which have yet to be ascertained even as it continued to be argued by historians. This means that as the timeline of Sulu history is yet to be fully understood, discussion about “Sulu power” and its genesis remains, at best, preliminary.

The above point speaks about the recent works of Samuel Tan (2003) and Abdulkarim Hedjazi (2002) that utilized chronographic approach in Sulu history by tracing the political institution like rajahship and pre-Indic and Hindu kingdoms that had been established in Sulu. Indeed, this approach reveals the rich history of Sulu as more than the highly preponderant Islamic history as projected in the writings of Najeeb Saleeby (1963) and Cesar Majul (1970). To say the least, while the chronographic trend on Sulu scholarship re-ignited by Tan and Hedjazi is generally significant to historiography, it is less relevant however to subject of power.

It is not to imply though that the additional pre-Islamic timeline to Sulu history suggested by Tan and Hedjazi is not important. It is indeed significant in terms of establishing the depth and longevity of Sulu as a civilization and as a political and regional power through the influence, for instance, of Funan (Cambodia) and Champa (South Vietnam) in Sulu that antedated both the Sri-Vizaya and Madjapahit Empires, two leading powers of Buddhist and Hindu civilizations in Southeast Asia before the coming of Islam in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, while chronographic approach in Sulu history is important especially in establishing annals of history, dynastic reign, periodization and so on (Robinson, 2003: xxiv), a power-based perspective of history is simply concerned with identifying critical elements of power responsible in the rise, decline and struggle of certain nation, state or empire. Hence, critical issues in historiography are quite different from geopolitics.

Power, it must be mentioned, is not necessarily always an empirical thing. Rather, it is meant “the power of man over the minds and actions of other men (Morgenthau, 1997: 117).” It is composed of two parts – constant and changeable. Constant power is generally identified with often present and unchangeable component of a country’s resources like geography, food and natural resources. On the contrary, changeable power is related with such factors like political system, population, national sentiment, industrial capability, military tradition, diplomacy and so on. To say the least, while both typologies of power may be separated theoretically, in actual conduct of power both categories are intimately enmeshed with each other where one cannot exist with out the other. For if they are separate or some of their elements are absent, hazy and transient, then there can possibly be such political entity like nation, state, dynasty and the like, yet it does not necessarily possess actual power. The pertinent questions are: What are the critical elements in the history of Sulu power– constant power or changeable power? Why did Sulu become a regional power despite being just an Archipelagic state with only a diameter of 37 miles measured from east to west? What explains the longevity of Sulu power cutting across three epochs of communal, imperial (dynastic/colonial) and nation-state systems?

It is worthy to note that at the peak of Sulu's "imperial reach" in three epochs mentioned including the period that partly corresponds to James Warren's segmented timeline of so-called Sulu zone (1768-1898), Sulu was able to establish five major pentagonal nodes of regional influence and international network and alliance comprising of Brunei, Maguindanao, Manila and China with the Sulu Archipelago serving as the axis. The depth of international network and alliance with other power centers mentioned is shown in such level like external relation, trade, diplomacy, treaties, including intermarriages. Defying the traditional law of geopolitics where the pivot state should at least be a compact state with substantial wherewithal of both constant and changeable power, it is a question how Sulu being almost a negligible chain of islands was able to serve as a fulcrum of both political and economic power centers in Southeast Asia at many junctures of history.

The significance of a compact state as a requisite of a nation's power is exemplified by the famous remarks of Sir Harold Mackinder, the modern founder of geopolitics: "*Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Islands controls the world.*" Yet, Sulu does not even have a respectable heartland in terms of substantial land mass much less with compact territory. Remiss with this requirement, James Warren contended that Sulu became a regional power as she was able to harness the full potential of her seas, people, resource, and other elements of both constant and changeable power making her a leading maritime state in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Warren describes Sulu and her long tradition of maritime trade:

The tiny archipelago's critical location between the Asian mainland and large islands of Mindanao, Borneo, and Celebes, its varied and productive resource base, and its sizeable population early attracted merchants from China and Makassarese-Buginese mariners from Celebes. The annual arrival of Chinese junks and Bugis prahus at Jolo reflected a regular demand for local products procured principally from the sultanate's essential domain –the sea. The foreigners brought in coarse textiles, silks, ceramic, earthenware, and spices (1985: 3).

Although the establishment of nodal influences across Southeast and China did not happen simultaneously and with the same magnitude where power, trade, alliance, diplomacy and other form of international dealings developed in various phases of Sulu's engagement, it is undeniable that the historicity and familiarity of Sulu power by other regional and international power structures facilitated the forging of that "imperial reach." This is not to mention that apart from other equally significant elements of Sulu's domestic power, the immense international network of Sulu allowed her to engage with and withstand against the various faces of colonialism that tried to pillage her into submission sometimes successively and oftentimes simultaneously. For certain reason, the theme of war of Sulu power has generally been trumpeted by many scholars like Saleeby (1963), Majul (1970), and Dery (1997) for certain consistency with "historical truth" and the authors' choice of what they believed as historically significant in proving certain point or hypothesis. The story of "Moro Wars" is a testament of feat in the art of warfare never before rivaled in Southeast Asian history. Despite other scholars' protestation over such reification of martial, maritime history, to say the least, it serves important function in Sulu historiography. The same equally significant theme has to be done, too, about the history of

Sulu's statecraft, diplomatic engagement, peace and treaty-making experience Mastura (1984), Wadi (1998).

If the fact of Sulu as a maritime state explains why she becomes a regional power, does it follow that all maritime state *ipso facto* becomes a regional power? The Bugis, Madures, Makasares, Achenese, Patanis, Burmese, Tamils, and others were probably also maritime states in their own right at certain periods of their history, but why didn't they become a respectable regional power as the Sulu's? Hence, the explanation that Sulu is a maritime state does not necessarily explain why it becomes a regional power for quite a long time. And perhaps a different but related angle of the question is: what explains the longevity of Sulu power even beyond Warren's period of "Sulu zone"?

Comparatively speaking, such rare feat of grandeur and tenacity is already history by itself. With the Chinese aphorism above in mind whose wisdom points to both longevity and cycle of Sulu power, it is probably important to magnify its historical truth in the Sulu Sultanate by expanding the comparison what was well started by Vic Hurley, an American colonial writer, to more pertinent Islamic empires and Southeast Asian sultanates where the Sulu Sultanate shares relative historical commonality and ideological pedigree.

For instance, in the Fertile Crescent that comprised the old Egypt, Syria and Iraq, the closest in comparison to the Sulu is the Mamluks. While the rise of the Mamluks started in 1250 a period when Islam reached the Sulu Archipelago, by 1516 however the Mamluks succumbed to the Ottoman conquest and never to rise up again. While the Ottoman Empire can in no way be compared to Sulu Sultanate since the former is generally a land-based power that commanded a vast stretch of continents from Europe to Africa, Middle East to Central Asia while the latter is essentially a maritime power with relatively small empirical reach, both share however historical longevity since they rose in relatively similar period, although the Ottomans were first Islamized (Bosworth, 1967). While the rise of Osman Ertoghri in 1281 was simply the beginning of the Islamization of Sulu so that it was only in 1450 the Sulu Sultanate was established a fairly the time when the famous Sulayman "the Magnificent" reigned, the longevity of both Islamic dynasties however surpassed the birth of nation-states in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The main difference however is that while the Ottoman empire was abolished by Turks themselves in 1924 to give way to modern Turkey ending therefore the historic line of Ottoman succession until Caliph Abdulmajid II, the Sulu Sultanate too had been rendered helpless since the birth of the Philippine colonial state and its forced integration to it. The difference however while the successors to Abdulmajid II have already accepted their fate that their grandeur is finally over, the successors to the Sulu Sultanate however continued to claim descent despite the Kiram-Carpenter Agreement in 1915, which practically abolished the sovereignty of the Sulu Sultanate, although the titularship of the Sultanate continued to be recognized by the United States and to some extent the Philippines.

In Persia, the closest to the historical longevity of the Sulu Sultanate is the Safavids whose rise started in 1501. But while the Sulu Sultanate basked on what James Warren calls the formation of the "Sulu Zone" resulting from the triumvirate economic relation between the Sulu Sultanate, China and Britain starting in 1768 until 1898, the Safavid dynasty was finished in 1732 which is just half the longevity of the Sulu Sultanate. Of all Islamic empires it is the Mughal Empire

which shares the closest historical trajectory and colonial experience with the Sulu Sultanate. With the rise of Zahir-ad- Din Babur in 1526, the Mughal Empire lasted until 1858 until the reign of Siraj-ad-Din Bahadur Shah II with the direct British rule in India; it is a time when the Sulu Sultanate was still haggling with its sovereignty with Spain just a little more than three decades with the signing of the Kiram-Bates Treaty in 1899.

Incidentally, Ibn Khaldun's notion of rise and fall of dynasty is unquestionably appropriate as a framework in the Islamic world and even in empires and their realms within compact territories. By conquest or by default, there is a visible break in the succession of power from one empire to another in many cases of the Islamic world. But with Sulu having been a maritime state with scattered islands and islets with no clear epicenter of power and government plus the fact there is an absence of foreign invasion to Sulu from Asia (not Europe and America the Philippines included) except possibly Champa and Madjapahit in much earlier period, there can be no real break in the succession of any Sulu dynasty whether of rajahship or of sultanate type; thus allowing the Tausug the uncontested claim to the Sultanate. By the way, the shift from rajahship to sultanate while representing a major break of dynastic reign is not a product of war between empires; it was of conversion. And because it was so, the line of succession did not create a problem akin to a dynasty succeeding another dynasty; even as the line was easily dissolved through intermarriages and alliances as shown by the marriage of Shariful Hashim with a local princess.

In both counts thus the notion of Sulu as a maritime state does not necessarily explain why she becomes a regional power and that Ibn Khaldun's classical framework is probably constrained to explain the external dimension of Sulu power due to Sulu's archipelagic nature, although it is assumed that Ibn Khaldun's theory is capable to explain the internal dynamics within the sultanate, as excellently discussed by Majul (1970) and Hedjazi (2002, 2003).

#### **IV. Factors and Forces**

Usually, historians answered the questions raised above by relying mostly on the changeable aspects of Sulu power (e.g., Sultanate, warrior tradition, maritime state, slave raiding) which are already quite familiar to students of Sulu history (Saleeby (1963), Majul (1970), Tan (1993), Warren (1985), Hedjazi (2002)). Without necessarily disagreeing with their views, I would like to put in capsule their views that reflect both constant and changeable elements of Sulu power especially those areas which have not given emphasis. Focus is done on the perspectives of Majul and Warren.

Majul by developing and sharpening further the historical perspective of Saleeby on Sulu history, attributes generally the extent of Sulu power and its external expression as by-product of the rise of Sulu's Sultanate with its Islamic reification in various fronts like governance, trade, war and diplomacy and so on. As it about to reach its peak, the Sulu Sultanate was challenge to face the biggest crucible: Spanish colonialism. At the end of her decline another equally damning crucible reared its head: US imperialism (followed by Philippine colonialism). It's so rare for a power entity to be subjected from both front and rear and their continuing after-effects that have lasted even at first cycle of a generation. Yet, in Majul's estimate like others the Sulus took a

good stand transforming the Sulu Sultanate into an ideological state the highest expression of which is Sulu's major role together with the Sultanates of Maguindanao and Buayan in waging the so-called Moro Wars against Spanish forces including northern and Visayan areas that mostly rendered allegiance to Spain and served as her proxies in fighting the Moros whose engagement lasted for many stages. With Majul's reification of the "Moro War," many scholars felt some discomfort by alleging that the history of Muslim Filipinos including Sulu's history and external relation has been generally subsumed by war. John Schumacher lamented it in the preface of Warren's book:

Among the many areas of Philippine history which have suffered from stereotyped generalizations and outdated categories, one of the chiefs is the history of the Muslim Filipinos of Mindanao and Sulu. Interpretations of their relations with Spanish Philippines have ranged from simply dismissing them as pirate principalities to glorifying "Moro wars" (1985: xi).

On his part, Warren expressed similar displeasure when he wrote:

An earlier approach to Sulu history has been to emphasize the rivalry between Catholic Spaniards and the Muslim population of the Sultanate. In the pioneering histories of Sulu by Najeeby Saleeby and Cesar Majul, raiding is interpreted within the framework of the "Moro Wars" as retaliation against Spanish colonialism and religious incursion. I have discarded this approach....Both approaches have underestimated the relationship of slavery and raiding activity to the economy of the Sulu Sultanate in the late eighteenth century (xvii).

While there is truth that Majul gave heavy emphasis on the "Moro Wars," it serves, as mentioned, certain functions in Sulu historiography just as the reification of slave-raiding pattern among the Tausugs in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century also have its historiographical functions as well. With Majul reifying the "Moro Wars" does not mean that he neglected trade and even the issue of slave-raiding. In one of the opening chapters of his book "Muslims in the Philippines" Majul wrote:

Trade has always been a life-line to Sulu which had to import most of its rice from Mindanao and nearby islands. Practically all of its luxury items as well as its firearms and ammunition came from the outside. The Dutch monopoly and restrictive commercial policy in the Indonesian islands which they dominated along with their presence in Makassar, must have served as obstacles to the traditional trade between Sulu and her immediate neighbors. However, the Dutch never did succeed in completely stopping what they proclaimed as "smuggling" of "illegal trading" between the enterprising Bugis and the Sulus. Probably, most of the spices in Jolo were actually brought by the former. Certainly, during the time of Muizz ud-Din and his immediate successors, Bugis traders were often seen in Jolo purchasing captives made by Sulus and Iranuns (248).

This point and many other equally emphatic presentations by Majul on the link between Sulu trade and slave raiding should be more than enough to convince Warren that their difference is

Majul looks at the “forest” while he looks at the “tree” of Sulu history. Moreover, Majul’s view of the Sulu Sultanate as an ideological state being the context of Sulu’s major historical precipitations in war, trade, diplomacy and so on, is no different from Warren’s vesting of role on the Sulu Sultanate as one of the players in the triangular hegemony of trade together with Britain and China leading Sulu to become a regional maritime zone from 1768 to 1898. In a trade war between Great Britain and China where the former needs tea from the latter and China wants spices from the Sulu even as both players provide opium and arms to the Sultanate, Sulu therefore has to rise up to the occasion and engage in the politics of great powers. To meet the demand for spices, Sulu had to swoop for pearl divers and tripang gatherers and so on from the Visayas and Luzon and made them as slave farmers and fisher folks. Why can’t the Sulus just hire them and pay them in return? To all intent and purposes, such a supposedly ideal commercial arrangement has been superimposed by centuries of intense historical antagonism between the Moros and the painted Indians (Bisayan; Indios) making slave-raiding perpetuates. When Sulus possibly counts the cases of Visayans serving as mercenaries and errands in the number of pillage and plunder by Spaniards in Manila in 1571, in Brunei in 1578 followed by Sulu and Maguindanao in the same year to name a few, slave-raiding is a bitter pill (force labor) but kinder than to make people as objects of war and extermination.

The fact that this phenomenon of slave-raiding happens at the third quarter of the Sulu Sultanate shows that the Sultanate’s ideology has already deteriorated where trade and commerce is hardly delineated from acts like slave-raiding. It is akin to many instances of history wherein when the *asabiyyah* (group feeling) of people begins to wane deterioration on their object of interest follows as a matter of course. This is true when we compare the seven stages of the Crusade into the Holy Land where the only strong precipitation of “faith factor” was probably the first and the second stages of the Crusade while the rest of the stages were mostly directed for economic interest and plunder. It’s the same when Jabal bin Tariq occupied Spain through the invitation of one of the Spanish kings who was in rivalry with another contender in the Iberian Peninsula. In the early stage of Islamic expansion by Arab zealots the “faith factor” was probably there but it eventually degenerated into crass economic pursuit at the latter part of Arab conquest of Spain. This and among other arguments are enough to establish that the ideological and economic contradiction that many people lamented over the works of Majul and Warren do not necessarily make their views distinct from each other. In fact, they help in the understanding of Sulu power in various phases of history.

## **V. Limits of Ideology and Zoning Paradigms**

There is no doubt that the works of Majul like that of Warren’s provide important information and insights about Sulu, her history and power. At this juncture, a more general view can be said about the two classic works on Sulu history. Due to lack of space, other specific comments may be dispensed with for the moment.

Essentially, I fault Majul for not pursuing further Ibn Khaldun’s perspective that he used in explaining the rise and fall of Sulu including the sultanate, its power, domain, and influence. By heavily reifying power and ideology as the dominant framework in understanding Sulu history, Majul feeds on the notion of Sulu history that is on a continuing descent, impressing on the

Tausug the need to carry a sort of “salvific” spirit or missionary psychology with the aim to save or to rebuild a lost kingdom. There is nothing wrong with such a spirit and disposition but the process of doing so must be creative than romantic and must be pro-active than inward looking. Indeed, Majul’s work is no doubt Khaldunian but the canvass of his rise and fall appears to be so linear like that of a straight line reaching its zenith possibly under Rajah Bongsu in 1646 and continuously degenerated like a continuing descent until 1915. This is the reason why Majul’s work, while it is able to preserve Moro history particularly the Tausug’s, is generally perceived as too valorizing of the “Moro Wars” a consequence that happens for a work that heavily relies on chronographic style in writing history. If only Majul pursues the Khaldunian thesis that no history, culture and civilization (the Sulu’s included) dies altogether but is capable of being reborn in various forms of cultural expression until it is able to regenerate and bounce back, albeit in new form, Majul would have not simply left a broken spirit and too burdened a soul among Tausugs; he would have left a methodological legacy that is appropriate to the needs of the time. On second thought, anyone who has not read the other works of Majul may probably agree on the point just raised. But when one reads closely his other voluminous works on Sulu and the rest about Philippine Muslims, Majul has indeed provided a comprehensive methodology of social reconstruction, modernization and development. Unfortunately, this is not the subject of this paper this time.

The “Sulu Zone” of James Warren despite its relatively younger age has now elevated into a near classic in Sulu Studies, Philippine Studies, ethno-history and so on. Like other works about Sulu, it has facilitated new scholars of being able to avail a range of materials that have already been written about Sulu, its history, culture, people, and so on. After weighing the materials on one’s hand and probably after doing some archival research and ethnographic field work, one is privileged to assess the merit or demerit of previous works and even have the “power” to challenge previous studies. The new is thus privileged of being able to learn from the old including the power to repudiate past findings and approaches and to present a new one, a new theory, and a new way of looking at Sulu’s grandeurs and pitfalls – past and present and even the future. The underside of such a privilege however is that even how academically senile or theoretically inadequate old works, some of them are simply classics; they are difficult to dislodge. But if the finding, theory and approach of new studies are able to present themselves into a level of paradigm – as a new “science” – then even if it is just a recent study it must be able to break the position of the old and be able to present itself, too, as a “classic” in its own right.

However, by framing Sulu into almost a closed, constricted “zone,” Warren represented it into seemingly neutral geographical compartment akin to a system which has its own autonomous if not independent existence which subsequently undergoes transformation involving “state formation and economic integration.” While it has some research value in terms of providing scope and limitation to make the discussion on the immense economic activity in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, it cannot be denied that his work falls into the trend of Orientalist research on indigenous people, their tradition and territory especially that the same “zone” today has attracted new imperial interest from the United States. Indeed, Warren is generally objective in his presentation of the “zone.” Yet, as a member of international geographical society, many people may be convinced that his interest on Sulu embraces not only its historic trade with China, Britain and others but also the deeper relationship between the “zone” as a geography and

as a territorial space with other forces of history like trade, war and other Western interest to form part of what Edward Said said in the “Orientalism” that geography is,

essentially the material underpinning for knowledge about the Orient. All the latent and unchanging characteristics of the Orient stood upon, were rooted in, its geography. Thus on the one hand the geographical Orient nourished its inhabitants, guaranteed their characteristics, and defined their specificity; on the other hand, the geographical Orient solicited the West’s attention, even as – by one of those paradoxes revealed so frequently by organized knowledge – East was East and West was West (1979: 216).

That geography is cognate to power and the trajectory on which the “Sulu Zone” is subsequently been engaged by successive foreign powers make the “Sulu zone” as a text and as an exteriorized unit undetached from what it re-represented. The “zone” as a re-articulation of past territorial space has its current colonial, post-colonial and imperial value that is certainly appreciated by many scholars but which served more directly present hegemonic project of dominant power in such area like the Sulu Archipelago. In his other classic, “Culture and Imperialism” Edward Said wrote:

Territory and possessions are at stake, geography and power. Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that people have planned to have more territory and therefore must do something about its indigenous residents. At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and involves untold misery for others (1993: 5)

Again, with due respect, Warren may not have the negative intention of doing the “Sulu zone” in light of Edward Said’s notion of geography adjunct to imperialism or vice-versa. “In the case of France,” Edward Said noted, “scientific geography soon gave way to “commercial geography” as the connection between national pride in scientific and civilizational achievement and the fairly rudimentary profit motive was urged, to be channeled into support for colonial acquisition (1979: 218).” This shows that how “objective” geographic studies may be the hard truth is even such an independent work with the nature like that of Warren’s has never been divorced from West’s utilitarianism and power projection if only advance her interest in the Orient and many parts of the Third World. More specifically, while the method of “zoning” by colonial and imperial power is originally used in land, the same method is obviously similar with those in sea since their functions are the same: to survey, to map, and to control. “Zonation,” according to David K.C. Jones “provides the framework for land use planning in the sense that it provides the opportunity for organizing patterns of land use so that vulnerability is minimized. ...it reveals the likely extent of future danger and thereby facilitates contingency planning, or the pre-planning of emergency action to be undertaken in the event of a disaster...on monitoring of present conditions which are used as a basis for forecasting (1991: 53).

Zoning is an extension of Western form of planning that goes back to the enterprise of surveying public lands in the United States that started on September 30, 1785. In “Measuring America:

How the United States was Shaped by the Greatest Land Sale in History,” Andro Linklater writes:

The language of the signs is equally undemonstrative. A stone marker carries a plaque headed “The Point of Beginning” that reads, “1112 feet south of this spot was the point of beginning for surveying the public lands of the United States. There on September 30, 1785, Thomas Hutchins, first Geographer of the United States, began the Geographer’s Line of the Seven Ranges.”.... There is nothing to suggest that it was here that the United States began to take shape, nothing to indicate that from here a grid was laid out across the land that would stretch west to the Pacific Ocean, and north to Canada, and south to the Mexican border, and would cover more than three million square miles, and would create a structure of landownership unique in history, and would provide invisible web that supported the legend of the frontier with its covered wagons and cowboys, its farmers and gold miners and would insidiously permeate its formation into the unconscious mind of every American who ever owned a square yard of soil (2003: 2).

Facilitated by the Regalian Doctrine established previously by Spain in the Philippines, the geography of Sulu had already been surveyed by American colonial authorities in Jolo since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the renewed *Pax Americana* in southern Philippines recently, it is no wonder that the US would expand her interest to the Sulu Sea and its strategic resources, which the “Sulu zone” of Warren rightly serves directly or indirectly.

## **VI. Sulu and US “Second Coming”**

While Warren is oblivious to what the United States would do in Sulu decades after the publication of the “Sulu Zone,” it is not incidental that the same “zone” came to be a renewed subject of interest by the US recently. As Luzon became irrelevant in the new geopolitical and strategic posture of the US in the post-Cold War, Mindanao particularly Western Mindanao and Sulu Archipelago served as the suitable place to serve as a grazing ground for US troops. And the choice of Mindanao and Sulu is not accidental much less without any complication. With blood in the hands of the US especially in the Moroland after it maneuvered to dissolve Moro sovereignty and transferred it illegally to the Philippines in 1946, the “second coming” of the US to Moro areas is an act of double jeopardy of the highest kind. After betraying the Moros and leaving them just like that, the US came back to Mindanao and Sulu as if it is coming for the first time without any sense of guilt and without doing any act of restitution, while subjecting the Moros and the Tausugs to a bloated media war on international terrorism.

By using terrorism as a pretext, the US is oblivious to the legitimate struggle of the Moros for self-determination a cause that is in fact intended to solve the mess that the US originally created in the Moroland. At present, the US appeased, too, the poor Moros and their leaders by throwing on them economic crumbs from time to time as a way to soften the ground and to make it easier for US troops to explore the resources of Mindanao particularly the Sulu Archipelago including the need to map the seabed of the Sulu Sea. By having established its outposts at Camp Navarro in Zamboanga City and in Luuk, Sulu, US forces now practically manned the most strategic area

and sea lane in Southeast Asia that borders the Pacific Ocean, Celebes Sea, Malacca Strait, Sulu Sea, and South China Sea. It is worth to remember that the US had wanted to station its warship in the Malacca Strait three or four years ago. However, the US failed to get its wish as Malaysia and Indonesia refused the said plan. But while it failed to control the Malacca Strait, the US succeeded in controlling the Sulu Sea and the latter proved to be more strategic since by controlling Sulu, its seas and surrounding areas it is as if the US has already controlled the strategic gateway encompassing Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean and South China Sea.

Incidentally, many people because of their sheer naivety succumbed to the pretext of the US that American troops are in Mindanao and Sulu simply to engage in counter-terrorism and to conduct humanitarian assistance or in response to the so-called China's threat. Now they would know. As the US long hid the main reason for entrenching American troops in the Muslim South, the slip of its skirt was revealed three or four months ago that a multi-million dollar oil contract had been sealed between the Philippine government and Exxon Mobil, one of the largest oil companies in the US which provided for exploration and digging of oil in the Sulu Archipelago. With US troops overlooking from Malagutay in Zamboanga and in the mountain of Luuk, Sulu, the US oil exploration in Sulu and probably elsewhere in Mindanao is now guaranteed of security without any cents spent by the Philippine government but whose proceeds and profits will certainly flow not to the treasury of the Philippines but to the US oil companies and American super elites depriving once again the Moros especially the Tausugs in the area of their maritime ancestral resources.

Indeed, the relation of Sulu with foreign powers is a testament of Tausugs' rich international engagement and long experience in the field of statecraft, trade and commerce. However, now that the so-called Sulu Zone is back into the radar screen of foreign policy, it is necessary that Asian powers like China ought to take a second look at the Sulus and their "zones." After all, Sulu-China relation is chiseled by centuries of harmonious relation and deeper commitment bound by deeper, kinder, and familial ties.

## **VII. Harnessing the Potential of Sulu Power**

Following the Khaldunian view on the essential ability of a society to regenerate and to find its creative potential, it follows that even how low its level of power and development, such society is always capable of building a new beginning. This is the premise in order to properly appreciate Sulu history, its culture and power today. Consistent with our assumption that Sulu power has generally remained intact so that what has generally been transformed are the changeable aspects of power (e.g. government, sovereignty, maritime capacity) which are areas subject by the vicissitude of political and dominant power, it follows that given certain impetus the creative potential of Tausug which is inherent in Sulu society is capable of being re-charged and be used for productive pursuit once again.

Comparatively speaking with certain period of Sulu history, the void of political and economic power in Sulu has remained unfilled leaving its potential not properly appreciated and fully utilized. Instead, many of such potentials are wasted on many forms of undesirable pursuit. With the void and with the absence of appropriate institutions to serve as receptacle of development, it

is certainly futile to remain simply romantic and at times nostalgic of the past with out developing progressive values in facing future challenges. For one, Tausug human resources of power (gausbaugbug), values (pangaddatan), cosmology of the Self (pagpahambuuk) and faith (pag-iman) have been generally preserved. It is the essence of what makes a Tausug. All this is the unyielding source of Tausug *spirit d corps*. And it is the value that animates the Tausugs in sustaining their exceptional thrusts in history embracing as, it were, epochal reigns in Southeast Asia.

In another front, land, food and other agricultural and marine resources are generally constant sources of power which have remained intact too in Sulu and her remaining realms. While harnessing these resources require institutional support and others, proper coordination with the people, value formation and other form of empowerment program can be a positive step to till, to develop, and utilize them for productive use of society at large. Indigenous knowledge and technology are generally available but they are not utilized. They have not been modernized too. Indeed, the intricate artistry in food making manifests the Tausug knowledge in food science and preservation. At a time when refrigeration was yet to be discovered the Tausugs have already developed how to preserve their food like piyutu (cassava) and biyanban (rolled cassava), bubuk (pounded coconut meat), tahay (fried exotic fish) that can last for weeks and even months. This knowledge on food technology must have been developed as part of their need to travel, to trade and to adventure to far places. Apart from environment friendly, these foods are healthy and not as taxing to prepare. Mass production of these resources is just waiting for an impetus. It is the same with Tausug delicacies like baulo (cake), daral (rolled and pounded coconut meat), patulakan (rice cake) and many others. If these are properly packaged and marketed, they can surely find a niche in international market.

The Tausug floras and faunas and their exotic fruits like Durian, Marang and Manggis with their unique varieties have been the source of envy by other communities. While these fruits grow wild and abundant in Sulu; they don't grow in other places. Even if they do, the quality is negligible. In fishing, farming, trade and navigation, the Tausug knowledge is exceptional. With their knowledge on the secret of the monsoon (musim), they have developed ways to plant and to harvest them systematically. It is the secret why despite Sulu being simply a chain of islands, she has always been sufficient and abundant with foods. It is the secret, too, why at many phases of history, the Tausug was able to establish a pattern of harvest and trading with their Asian neighbors. This is not to mention that geographically Sulu has always been away from typhoons, hurricanes, tidal waves and other destructive forces of nature. Finally, the exceptional beauty of Sulu, her beaches and seacoasts, land and marine animals, virgin forest and the majestic Bud Tumantanggis have been the symbol of Sulu's grandeur with nature. All these combined are probably the added, exotic reasons why the first palace (astana) of the Islamic sultanate was established in Buansa, Sulu. Why should the Sultan of Sulu dare to live around brick water and dirty river?

What is being impressed is that with the relatively intact resources in Sulu, the fundamental edifice of Sulu power remains available. While that is so, it is the changeable aspects of power that have continuously exacted heavy burden on the Tausugs. It is because such aspects of power have generally been subordinated by power/s which is insensitive and jealous for fear that Sulu may rise once again. Hence, her power is continuously crippled, her creative potentials

repressed, while at times expressed in rebellion and other misplaced violence. If only these potentials are expressed productively in varied form of culture, governance, education, business, art, music, dance and others, it is not far fetched for Tausugs to exhibit their feat and excellence once again.

In closing, the paper concludes with dogged optimism that Sulu power can or ought to be positively retrieved in totally new form beyond its classical, nostalgic conception. It can be harnessed not necessarily through traditional style of getting back Sulu's lost power, sovereignty and freedom but through many creative ways – including the Chinese way. This view is not crass pragmatism; it is sheer recognition on the depth of Sulu-China relation as a strategic ingredient for future co-operation. Even assuming that Sulu is able to have her sovereignty and freedom back, she could not be the “regional power” she once before. The space-time dimension of the past and the present and even the future could never be the same. In today's globalization, no one is sovereign yet everybody is a player. And Sulu with her rich and grandiose past, can be as dexterous and excellent player like others in the Asia Pacific given the right time, the right push, the right values, and the right conception of power appropriate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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