RETHINKING AQUAPELAGOS IN THE PHILIPPINES' SULU SEA:

Perception and visibility of the state: the *Ramayan* of the Maranao

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ABSTRACT: This study contends that the Maranao people's induction into the Tausug community of the Sulu aquapelago in the Philippines – an induction supervised by the colonial state – exemplifies a case of dialectical insularity or aquapelagicity in the production of a unique islandic identity that evolves through the deconstruction of *Ramayan* legends within templates of *Darangen* mythology. While numerous studies explore the role of myths and cultural narratives in reshaping and reinterpreting the identities of Muslim Filipinos, there is a notable scarcity of research specifically addressing how the Maranao community articulates its desired aquapelagic identity, particularly in the context of the 'piratical' movements and global commerce from the 16th to 18th centuries. Employing an interdisciplinary critical methodology, the study investigates how these reimagined myths provide affective sustenance for the Maranao's imagined community, despite their, arguably, limited awareness of the *Ramayan's* Indic, Hindu, and Puranic origins. The Maranao's distinctive focus on Ravan (who is otherwise typically viewed as the *Ramayan's* anti-hero in mainstream Indian interpretations) serves as a prominent index of their political praxis characterised by a unique affective dimension in their identity within Filipino cultures, the Malay Archipelago, and the larger Southeast Asian legacy of the *Ramayan*. This affective – or what I view as an aquapelagic – reinterpretation of the *Ramayan* within Maranao culture parallels the Tausug's self-representation, characterised by 'piratical' assertions of their 'Muslimness' and their political stance on the Sabah dispute. This occurs within a decolonial framework that unveils the identity of the archipelago as an aquapelago, encompassing the marginal voices that shape its emancipatory future. Eventually, this constitutes a resistance to cultural and psychological erasure by colonial legacies – a resistance that influences the ongoing discourse of preserving unique political identities in the Malay archipelago and the wider Southeast Asian region.

KEYWORDS: Maranao, *Ramayan*, Sulu archipelago, Southeast Asia, aquapelago, myth-making, decolonialisation, Sabah

Introduction

How many versions of the *Ramayan* exist? Hindi promoter Camille Bulcke's response, given many years earlier, became the title of A.K. Ramanujan's essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation* (1991). Authored by sage Valmiki around 2,500 years ago, the *Ramayana* is one of the most prolific global ethical sagas, told and retold countless times by diverse ethnic and linguistic communities. Drawing on French Indologist Sylvain Levi, Arup K. Chatterjee notes that India offered to "three-quarters of Asia, a god, a

religion, a doctrine, an art," with all four elements creating a totalising effect of ritualised performances in kingdoms like that of King Rama I in Siam (Chatterjee, 2024a; Chatterjee, 2024b) to perpetuate the ideology of impermanence – the fleeting nature of power, wealth, life, and relationships – and metamorphosis grounded in ephemerality. Revered across religious boundaries by Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, the Indic oeuvre, with its multiple interpretations, has profoundly shaped Southeast Asian culture for over 1,500 years. The Maranao retelling, *Maharadia Lawana,* is one among many in the region, with its creative amplifications and unique deconstructions channelled through cultural amnesia – a condition Derek Walcott provocatively describes as making history "irrelevant" for islands at the crossroads of multiple spatial paths, where "the loss of history, the amnesia of the races" becomes essential (Walcott, 1974, p.6). Heritagisation in this manner does not imply an arbitrary rejection of history but rather the creation of a new form of consciousness that contrasts with and transcends the constraints of the imposed past, as evidenced in the tale's distinctive 'Muslimness' rooted in dialectical insularity – a case of aquapelagicity that exhibits a unique islandic identity. It is insular because it selectively interprets the epic *Ramayan* within the frameworks of *Darangen* mythology, and the Muslim identity thus reproduced continually evolves through dialectical interactions with the broader Catholic identity of the Philippines and its emerging geopolitical geometries. Informed by this central argument, the study cogitates on the Maranao's 'home' as the setting for sensitisation to their new consciousness. It then discusses their reimagined locale and identity to demonstrate how this self-manumission into a space of negotiation impacts the ongoing struggle toward a rhizomatic model of ontology, as touched on in the final section, in contrast to the homogenising nature of integration into the non-Mohammedan community.

Figure 1 -Rama, Sita and Lakshmana in Exile (Unknown pahari painter, ca. 1780-1815.Wikimedia Commons).

Figure 2 - Ravana Abducting Sita (Chitra Ramayana by Ramachandra Madhwa Mahishi, Illustrated by Balasaheb Pandit Pant Pratinidhi, 1916. Wikimedia Commons).
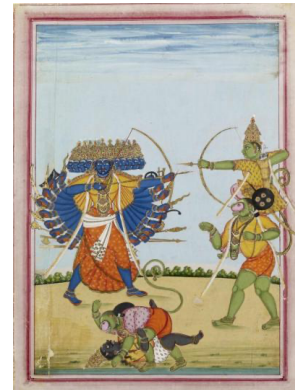
Figure 3 -Rama and Hanuman Fighting Ravana (British Museum Collection. Wikimedia Commons).

The Maranaos are one of the nine groups of Islamic peoples in the Philippines. They are among the most prominent, alongside the Maguindanao, the Tausug, and the Yakan. The Maranao and the Maguindanao are known as skilled metal smiths in Mindanao, the second-largest island after Luzon. The movement of the Maranaos approximately 200 years ago from the uplands to the lowlands was driven by land competition, a rigid social structure, and the eruption of Mt. Makaturing around 1765 (Jenkins et al., 2020; Forrest, 1780; Warren, 1981; Wadsworth, 2019; Bowring, 2019; Saber, 1979). This internal mobility underpins this article's chief hypothesis as previously mentioned. Driven by necessity, a majority of the Maranao group descended into the Sulu aquapelago where they would have envisioned the new trappings of existence, and as such they were emancipated into a new environment where they found themselves transformed into new beings. Borrowing from J.F. Warren, they were known to the world as "eastern sea lords" (1981, p. 149), a designation far more precise than "pirates" or "savages." Their pseudonym reflects the mutual shaping between the people and their environment, producing an identity primarily associated with the Sulu aquapelago. Although Sulu once thrived as a vibrant melange of ethnic groups, which could have painted it with a rich array of traditions and cultures, it was eventually reduced to a single dominant stereotype – a den of pirates – due to the influence of new migrants who brought with them their own cultural densities. Their arrival overshadowed the other inhabitants, so the Sulu aquapelago now bore a derogatory label, which extended to others, such as the Tausug, the most prominent group. With the creolised community now embodying the dominant trait associated with marauding, the Sulu aquapelago would have accommodated the intangible culture the Maranaos brought, which sparked their new identity in a setting that matched their goals and aspirations. Pugh (2013), Walcott (1998), and Philip Hayward & Junko Konishi (2017) all attest to the transfiguration of islands through the inhabitants' belief in the power of oral traditions as a means of navigating existence. Their collective consciousness is able to "represent the island for what it is not." Both islands and peoples have the same movement in the sense that they "transversally become-other" (Rivas, 2019, p.100, 101), suggesting a non-linear process where both the island and its people are in a state of constant transformation from their conventional forms. Sulu's morphing was a classic example of this, where the Maranao migrants, most significantly, experienced the processual nature of belonging, thereby enabling Sulu to forge a new identity also. This reifies the manner of transcendence they enacted in these aquatic/ecological spaces, which in turn shape the epistemologies of both the human and non-human.

Philip Hayward's 'aquapelago' concept provides a framework for examining the hybridised cognisance of one's environment through the "aquatic spaces between and around areas of land [that] have been fundamental to social groups' livelihoods and, consequently, to their senses of identity and belonging" (2012a, p.2). This characterisation offers a nuanced perspective on assemblages as performative spaces where narratives are brought to life and ceremonialised to achieve specific aims. In aquapelagic engagement, Hayward and Konishi (2017, p. 84) accentuate the significance of considering "the various time spans for constitution and the diverse means of their invocation and performance." The evolutionary stages are critical, as it is during these periods that ontological shedding occurs. Within these temporalities, nothing remains sedentary, with island movements being shaped by several factors as socio-economic organisations, technologies, and trade systems. Pragmatically, an aquapelago relies on change as its ever-changing landscape-seascape milieu suggests; hence, it is essentially a "lively assemblage," as a describes it, inspired by the notion of the environment's "vibrant matter" (Bennett, 2010, p.13), where interactions among "actants" – including both animate and inanimate entities – can exert their "will," "cause "unintentional impacts," or be "blocked, diverted, or defeated" by other forces (Hayward, 2012b, p.4). His description suits the metamorphosed Sulu archipelago with the Maranaos as key players,

whose agential determination led to "unintentional impacts" and whose further actions were "blocked" by what anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli calls the power structures that operate through the control and regulation of life and non-life (Povinelli, 2016). The emphasis on the "lively" aspects of the aquapelago underscores the objective of aquapelagic studies, that is, to challenge "pale generalisms" that inadequately represent the "vibrant materiality" of enacted spaces (Hayward, 2012a, p.12). Presupposing misrepresentations, the promotion of aquapelago thus fosters a well-informed characterisation of assemblages that often fall prey to Western ontology.

Eschewing pallidness directly challenges the imperialist, whom I would liken to a painter who, despite being skilled, relies heavily on memory, leaving him "at the mercy of a riot of details, all pouring for justice with the fury of a mob in love with absolute equality" (Baudelaire, 2012, p. 16). The instigator of this "riot of details" in Saidiya Hartman's (1997) discourse is any entity whose muted cries persist across the divide of representation. The Maranao, despite their significant historical contributions – from their pivotal role in trade and the rise of the Sulu Sultanate to their maritime activities – remain "one of the least known and most misunderstood ethnic groups in the modern history of Southeast Asia" (Warren, 2001, pp. 53-54). Therefore, by recognising the Maranao's "vibrant" contributions to the transformation of the Sulu archipelago, it is hoped that the stereotypical perception of the assemblage as merely a den of savage pirates – particularly influenced by Joseph Conrad's 'Eastern' tales that persisted into the 20th century (2001, p. 54) – will be recontextualised in light of its "vibrant materiality" through the aquapelago lens. This perspective, having been largely overlooked, addresses a significant gap in the current literature.
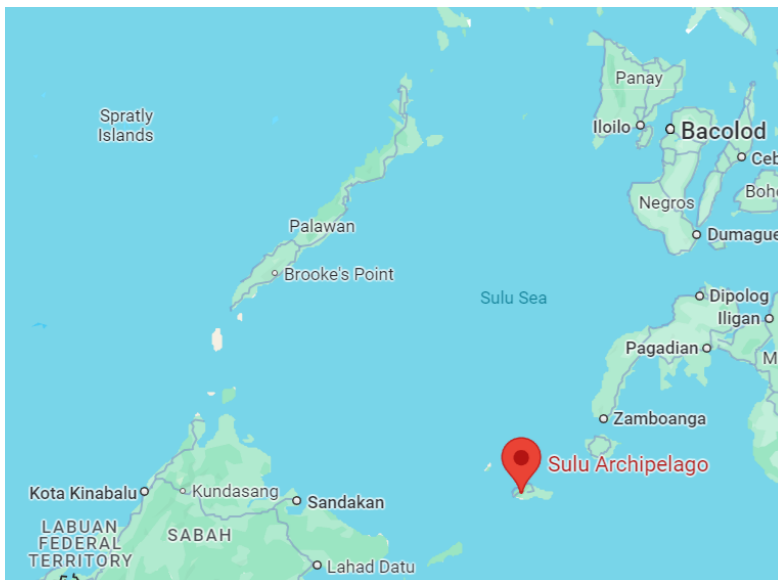

Figure 4 – The Sulu aquapelago (Google Maps, 2024).

The Maranao case exemplifies a rich confluence of sea, boat, monsoon, geography, money, religion, etc. These non-human elements create what May Joseph (2019) calls "complex human affects," which is why Maranao identity is deeply intertwined with the sea, mirroring Ian Maxwell's (2012) observation of the Athenians' profound connection to the Aegean in

Plato's *Phaedo* (360 BC). They epitomise actants who "inhabit aquapelagos more aquapelagically" (Hayward, 2012a, p. 2) because their "personhood" and "landscape" are intertwined (Suwa, 2012). Their experiences and emotions – fuelled by their belief in intangible heritage – are central to their understanding of their relationship with their new environment, which can be further described, borrowing Hayward's description of Haida Gwaii, as "a poetic space where traces and impacts of former interactions and former actants can be deployed to evoke what has been and gone and what may be in the future" (2012b, p.12).[1] Over the years, the aquapelago has been cultivated in the richness of reimaginings that shape spatial ontologies. Therefore, it has become the point of mediation, interrogation and negotiation. While island spatiality can strengthen cultural identity and connections to place, it may also limit Indigenous autonomy due to restricted control over broader socio-political contexts (Grydehøj et al., 2020). Reflecting a broader trend where theoretical connections often lack practical influence, the Maranao experienced dispossession and limited agency despite their connection to the sea. Nevertheless, despite these restrictions, the Maranao responded by presenting themselves as the primary agents in a state of 'cultural amnesia,' a coping mechanism akin to what Walter Mignolo (2011) refers to as decolonial rehabilitation. Recasting them through their aquapelagic agency enriches the discursivisation of their reconstructive actions through myth-making, guided by folk Islam and *maratabat* (pride). Charles Baudelaire (2012) suggests that there is a continuous and fundamental relationship between the physical and the spiritual, which is evidenced by their efforts to combat psychological erasure driven by asceticism and austerity. Consequently, their determination to resist integration into the predominantly Catholic society serves as a metaphorical homage to Maharadia Lawana, who exemplified such discipline. Thus, the reactivated Philippine claim over Sabah will critically examine the extent to which their reimagined identity can influence the current situation, which will be discussed in the final section of this article.

The reimagined identity is most certainly part of an extended historical framework, where previously overlooked aspects are reintegrated and connected to a broader context. This approach challenges the outdated view of any region, such as Southeast Asia, as merely an "awkward residue" in the study of Asia's great civilisations (Reid, 2015, p. 27). However, achieving this requires moving beyond conquest-oriented narratives that, according to Godfrey Baldacchino (2008), might idealise portrayals of figures like pirates – a concern echoed in Joseph's (2019, p.4) discussion of the "risk of nostalgia." This caution is crucial, as there is no limit to how historical narratives can be remoulded. Without such caution, the risk of remarginalisation becomes imminent. As a safety net, Hayward's (2017) concept of the "aquapelagic imaginary" critiques rather than perpetuates hegemonic discourses regarding their impact on indigenous identities. The spread of Islam, which influenced indigeneity and gave rise to folk Islam, supports this view. Highlighting the marginalised perspective, as A.C. Milner notes, emphasises that Southeast Asia's adoption of Islam was driven by pragmatism rather than transformation (Reid, 1993). This approach effectively foregrounds resistance to hegemonic forces featured in island narratives, which create significant interactions beyond simple denaturalisation, as islands are key junctures of contested political identities (Joseph, 2021; Rivas, 2019). Complex issues pertinent to local cultural and religious histories and nationalist ideologies seeking homogeneity are chiefly considered. The Maranao's efforts to resuscitate their desired identity reflect strategic adaptations to external homogenising pressures, necessitating a cultural repositioning to balance pragmatic integration with the preservation of their unique identities.

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[1] The Haida – Indigenous to Haida Gwaii with a history of over 12,500 years – parallel the Maranaos in their skills in trading and raiding. (*See* Lillard, 1998).

'Home' and State Formation

The idea of finding a place to live is tantamount to finding oneself. In the lives of islanders, there is a particular identity shaped by their way of life, which John Connell and Russell King refer to as "insularity and isolation on the one hand, and migration and mobility on the other" (1999. p.2). Hayward and Konishi (2017) assert that this phenomenon can ultimately change the demographics of a region, as their study on the Torres Strait demonstrates. Migration is indispensable for understanding the metamorphosis of an environment wrought over long duree. To pursue this goal, the present study situates the Maranao at the crossroads of migrancy and economic development in Sulu archipelago. Highlighting this interaction will require an explanation of how it materialises and to what extent it is carried out.

The Buranun from Borneo and the Samal and Bajao from Johore (present-day Indonesia) initially populated the Sulu aquapelago and witnessed its Islamisation in the late 14th century, followed by the Maranao/Iranun, or *I-Lanaw-en* (people of the lake), from Lake Lanao before the end of the 18th century (Saleeby, 1908; Wadsworth, 2019; Nimmo, 2001; Warren, 1981, p. 149). This cultural diversity prompts the idea of competing ideals for systematising the environment by which entities can properly function. As expected, Islam's dominance was regarded as the most potent tool for this, as the religion's spread in Southeast Asia was closely aligned with the common business practices of the time, including trading networks and diplomacy (Reid, 2015; Strathern, 2013). The Mohammedan faith gained success mainly by granting individual travelers the right to build communities, leading to the establishment of the Sulu Sultanate by the mid-15th century, with Islam deeply entrenched by this time (Reid, 1993; Kiefer, 1972; Tuminez, 2007; Wadsworth, 2019). By facilitating such unification, the merging of economic and religious aspects became more justifiable and practical.
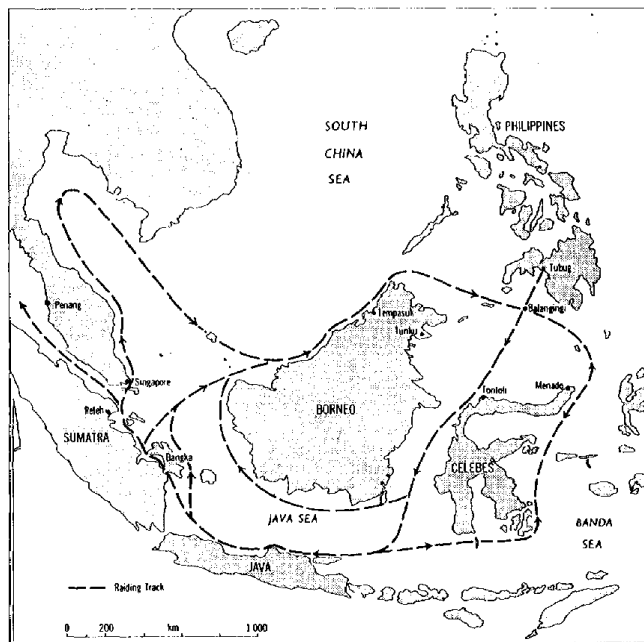

Figure 5 – Slave raiding in Southeast Asia (Warren, 1997, p.203).

From the 1770s to the 1890s, the economic progress of the Sultanate contributed to the growing foreign influx and diverse ethnic composition in any region with a geographically strategic position (Saleeby, 1908; Warren, 1981; Reid, 2015). The Iranun[2] and other Sulu aquapelago inhabitants – Balangingi (Samal) and Tausug – extended their reach as far as the Straits of Malacca due to increasing European trade with China and India. However, this mobility was exploited for activities with a negative connotation, such as pirate expeditions or marauding, notably associated with the Iranun. Southeast Asia, with its myriad islands and strategic chokepoints, provided an ideal environment for such activities, hence the label given to the Sulu aquapelago as the central hub for piracy in the region (Brackmann, 1966; Wadsworth, 2019). The Dutch were among the earliest observers of these Iranun marauders, who were frequently in conflict with the Malays. This image of warring neighboring states depicted a strategy for identity assertion influenced by the commercial landscape of the time.

The Maranao's adoption of their role as marauders, as dictated by the sea, fluidises the masculine obligation, which is no longer confined to farming and fishing. In this sense, the marauder is a newfangled aquatic species whose conscience is answerable to the sea that completes its identity, thus authorising the marauder to lord over his maritime territory. Transcendence of this space had allowed them to develop a unique skill set. Iranun sea warriors, adept in martial arts and seamanship, leveraged their multilingual skills and command of the sea, along with burgeoning opportunities from the opening of China and a booming regional economy, to thrive as both raiders and skilled mariners. In the words of Maxwell, they understood how the seas should be "felt, attuned to, personified, negotiated with, and incorporated, as much as they are charted, quantified, and overcome" (Maxwell, 2012, p.22). It was at this point that slave raiding began to reveal itself as a factor in the ascension of the Sulu Sultanate as a global emporium.

By 1814, since the Iranun were highly proficient in slave trading, the Sultan exerted authority over them through political alliances or clientage relationships with the major ethnic group in the Sulu aquapelago, the Tausug (Warren, 1981; Wadsworth, 2019; Bowring, 2019). While some subscribed to this policy, others retained autonomy as mercenaries, leading to unsanctioned activities in the Visayas and Celebes, which resulted in myths in the Visayas, for instance, about Moro[3] attacks. The policy imposed by the sultan is symptomatic of state formation within a colonial framework (Berenschot, 2023), where the Iranun had the potential to dismantle power structures due to their skills. This means that the sultans were only partially powerful, as their success or failure was heavily dependent on these migrants. Similarly, the Iranun needed the sultan's backing. This phenomenon is often attributed to Asian cultural traits and is marked by reliance on personal obligations and norms of reciprocity. In this mutual relationship, the Iranun emerged in a mutually beneficial position. This explains why, eventually, the Iranun assimilated into the Tausug identity, with entire

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[2] The term 'Illanun' (a variant of Iranun) was 'erroneousl'y extended to include the non-Maranao speaking people of southern Mindanao – the Taosug of Jolo and the Samal of the Sulu archipelago" (Warren, 1981, p. 149). The English variant 'Ilanun' was used to describe Sulu pirates (Warren, 1981), although some scholars prefer terms like "hardy and adventurous people" or "brave and skillful fighters" (Saber, 1979, p.273). To the shore-dwellers of Celebes, the Iranun were referred to as "Magindanao" and were thought to originate from Southern Mindanao (Warren, 1981, pp. 160-161). This label was also applied to the Balangigi Samal in the 1850s.

[3] The political identity of Muslim Filipinos, or 'Moros' – a term used by the Spaniards derived from 'Moors' – is deeply psychological, with Islam and their existential meaning as key components, leading them to reject the Filipino-Christian label.

villages shifting their allegiance to the Tausug in Jolo (Warren, 1981).[4] They established settlements in the Malay world and weaponised the institution of marriage to forge commercial connections on Borneo's northeast coast (Bowring, 2019; Nimmo, 2001). By embracing the Tausug identity, they significantly augmented the Tausug population in North Borneo (Sabah), a phenomenon that remains evident today, as a significant portion of the Tausug community continues to reside in Sabah. All of the foregoing amounts to one thing: a sense of 'home' derived from a requited intangible contribution. One might argue that this form of belonging is superficial, as profiteering is central to this relationship; however, what far exceeds profiteering in this case is the potential for these initially migrant groups to become leaders themselves through their constant engagement with the sea as both raiders and traders.

The ensuing years, marked by intensified slave raiding that impacted the demographics of Luzon, Visayas, Makassar, and Java, were driven by Sulu's extreme need for labour to acquire rare natural products, such as birds' nests. At this point, it is important to consider that maritime raiding is not "savagism [but] the result of phenomenal economic growth and strength" (Warren, 2001, p. 66). This is to prove the Iranun's role in creating a massive commercial and political network with China and England through raiding, transforming Sulu into the "most powerful state in Southeast Asia" (Warren, 2001, p. 143). This accomplishment spotlighted the previous migrants who worked their way to the top despite political pressures from the sultanate. Valourising the Iranun in this manner is not the same as glorifying acts of horror, which are readily deplorable. What is focused is the mechanism that drives sea-lording activity, where the Iranun had been most successful. As observed, raiding gravitated towards a power hierarchy that demanded deep emotional loyalty from subjects to their masters (Wadsworth, 2019). Emphasising this deeply affective interaction demonstrates the moral fibre entrenched in the migrant population, further legitimising their sense of 'home' founded on allegiance. But if looked closely, it questions how humans interact with island environments and the importance of addressing the ethical and political challenges that arise from these interactions, particularly in the context of environmental sustainability. Gómez-Barris and Joseph (2019, p.5) interpret this type of cultural amnesia within Vandana Shiva's concept of "ontological vulnerability" as a "space of confusion, forgetting, and ecological degradation."

Following the Iranun's ascent to power as a result of migration came the true test of their loyalty to their new home – the environment that provided them with maritime and terrestrial sovereignty; the home that was so alluring to colonisers due to features common to Asian islands, such as territorial control, protection, and access to resource-rich mainlands (Grydehøj, 2015). Indeed, Sulu possessed all three elements, making it a prime target for Spain. Historically, small islands offered defensive advantages, protecting against external forces and buffering political authority, as seen in cities such as Copenhagen, Tokyo, Belize City, St. Petersburg, Tyre, and Malta. Additionally, Spain resented Sulu's prominence in fuelling the global economy – particularly the tea trade with London and Canton – leading to its confrontation with Sulu that began in 1578 and the commencement of the Moro Wars, which lasted for three centuries. This scenario depicts political and economic giants confronting smaller entities like Sulu on the periphery. On a positive note, Sulu's previous business dealings with China and England had prepared it for an encounter with another superpower. Although such encounters were far from conventional military exercises, they

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[4] From 1820 to 1848, when regional trade was dominated by the Taosug, some immigrant descendants changed their ethnic identity as their communities became more diverse, identifying themselves by their village or island, such as "the people of Tunkil," rather than as "Iranun" (Warren, 1981, p. 153).

resembled one due to the risks associated with raiding and trading amidst competing groups. The Iranun's skill in maritime raiding, developed over an extended period, was their significant advantage in the fight against the external force that activated their 'home' sensibilities. The Moros dominated the land and controlled the southern seas. They were well aware of their aquapelagic advantage, which was reflected in their image as people who upheld a code of honor among themselves and viewed piracy as an "instinct, not a habit" (Saleeby, 1908, p. 250, 158). This definition of piracy requires examination to determine whether the Moros' sense of purpose was governed by moral duty or mere rote learning. Prior to colonisation, it can be inferred that this "instinct" was driven by political agency – specifically, their self-articulated sense of security amidst constant threats from neighbouring communities. The same holds true during colonisation, when this instinct was amplified by the increased need for security against the psychological erasure imposed by the colonisers.

Figure 6 – "Illanoan" (i.e. Iranun) pirate (Marryat, 1848 - Wikimedia Commons).

At this point, it is necessary to distinguish between piracy and piratical behaviour to shed light on the instinctiveness of the Moro plight for self-determinism. The former often depicts actions as a natural environmental feature (Laubach, 1921), as exemplified by the Balangigi Samalese proverb: "Catching fish is difficult, but catching Borneans is easy" (Warren, 1981, p. 190); the latter emphasises a sense of patriotism. However, drawing on Ewing, Gowing and McAmis (1974) argue that both terms illustrate how piracy cultivate a warlike mentality and

a sense of superiority over Christians and pagans. Applied to the Maranao's aquapelagicity, both terms reflect their heightened sensitivity to the natural features of their territory, allowing them to 'territorialise' – that is, to prevent any form of invasion under the impression that failing to act would mean not fulfilling their primary duty of protecting their newfound identity and home. This confirms their capacity to protect their 'reimagined space' and how their deep-seated behaviour of 'territorialising' is a response to the Spanish imperialists' intent on psychological annihilation.

The perception of the Iranun as savagely cruel had become so entrenched that their widely accepted image was more about reinforcing a narrative of barbarism than about accurately reflecting their behavior to their colonial adversaries, whose machinations demonstrate a "pathology of physical and cultural violence associated with...empire building [that] led to regional tragedies" (Warren, 2001, p. 66). I would like to segue to Epeli Hau'ofa's comment on how this is a form of debilitating consciousness within a language-based hegemony framework, similar to the way he perceived Oceanic culture being referred to by Christian missionaries as "savage, lascivious, and barbaric," which negatively affected their perceptions of their histories and traditions (Hau'ofa, 1994, p. 149). Spain took a similar approach by deliberately using ethnic pseudonyms such as 'Moro' and 'Illanun' to simplify the complex ethnic diversity within the Sulu-Mindanao region. Prior to colonial rule, the Iranun's identity was far from monolithic due to their shifting geo-social topography (Warren, 2001). This means that before the arrival of the colonisers, their identity was fluid and not confined to the linguistic constraints inherent in Western culture. This further indicates that Western and Eastern linguistic systems are not compatible. For instance, in Pugh's (2013) analysis of Caliban's character as a colonial subject in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, his being called a 'savage' relates to his connection to the island and its magic. Due to the association of magic and witchcraft, the islander is reduced to someone who needs to be hunted, deemed deserving of the label 'savage' in the Western worldview. Similarly, Rivas' (2022) observation on the simplification of shamanistic practices in the Philippines by colonial authorities— who labelled them as evil – highlights the reductionist view that strips away the complexity and depth of these practices, which originally served ethical and educational purposes. Colonial powers indeed portray indigenous cultures in a negative light to rationalise their oppression. To assign a linguistic identity to something does not necessarily make the 'naming' process an accepted reality for the one being named, as illustrated. This discrepancy arises because two cultures have distinct ways of perceiving things, just as the *Ramayan*, for instance, can have many retellings, but no two are exactly the same.

To say that the precolonial Iranun identity embodies freedom means that identity is, in Joseph's terms, when referring to the Indian Ocean's precolonial ontologies, "imbued with the weight of its unfoldings" (2019. p. 42). Already, the precolonial status of the indigenous culture is vast, flowing, and vibrant in itself. Thus, returning to Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter," one can demonstrate how the Iranun image and the other actors around it prior to colonisation were in a lively state. Its disruption at the hands of Spain, logically gave the "lively" performers just cause for regaining what was lost. Elevating the idea of precolonial identities, Gómez-Barris and Joseph argue that incorporating indigenous concepts is the best way toward the "engaged praxis of a decolonial future" (2019, p.5). It is within this paradigm that the rehabilitative process could take place, that is, reclaiming what was lost, which is essential for sustaining the community moving forward. This causality is emblematised in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Paradise Regained* (1671), where there is redemption of what is essentially gone – the immanent values among a functioning group – which is a powerful tool that re-ignites the vision of society.
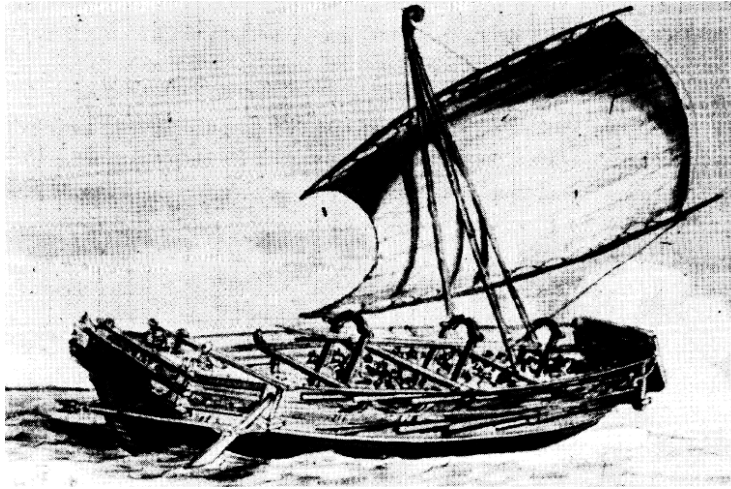
Figure 7 – Slave Raiding Vessel (J. Warren, 1997, p.208).

In a manner befitting aquapelagic life, the Iranun community should have been treated according to their precolonial praxis. However, they faced misery as a consequence of the "snug continental complacency" to "submit to the sea," symptomatic of archipelagic deficiency, which diminished the determination to "privilege maritimity" (Baldachinno, 2012, pp. 23,25). The external view of islands essentially lacks an inner perception of the aquatic space's dictum that governs the inside-outside-inside movement of human and non-human actors. Chiefly overlooked, for instance, were the monsoon winds that facilitated the Iranun's stealth in retaliating against Spanish and Christian forces that had burned villages in Sulu, Maguindanao, and Lanao (Gowing & McAmis, 1974). The point is that the colonisers' inability to navigate the complex climate patterns led the Muslim coalition to further valourise their resilient precolonial identity by adopting the language of the aquapelago. According to Dawson (2012), climate realities significantly impact the waxing and waning of aquapelagos, with which the Iranun and Mohammedan alliance were deeply familiar.

Furthermore, the Iranun's zeal is rooted in their islandic epistemic jurisdiction, linked to the "illusively 'natural' territorialisation of island space [that] encourages political distinction" (Grydehøj, 2015, p. 432). Through considerable effort, Sulu maintained its independence from Spain by leveraging European rivalries and Spain's limited influence in the region, with early state formations by the Tausug and Maguindanao serving as central points of resistance (Tuminez, 2007). At the macro level, Spain's lack of a stronghold in the region reflects inefficiencies in the interaction patterns between Southeast Asia and Eurasia, including "global commercial cycles" and "reactions" (Lieberman, 2009, p. 77-92). Spain's attempts to suppress Islam, combat piracy, and engage in the lucrative slave trade nearly devastated the Sulu Archipelago in a series of conflicts – the Moro Wars – which all point to the sweeping integration of Muslim Filipinos into a predominantly Catholic Philippine society shaped by Western ontology. Despite this indiscrimination, the Maranao and other Sulu inhabitants emerged as the 'eastern sea lords' who best understood their circumstances. And this dance with the waters took place in a world of enchantment where 'lording' over slaves and trades was as lethal as their intent to inhabit the realm of Thanatos for an 'otherworldly' cause.

The Reimagined Space

There is space within place. I begin with this principle because the Iranun's induction into the Sulu aquapelago is not the ultimate endpoint. Rather, it marks the beginning of a processual reidentification within a new space. It emphasises the positionality of the Iranun, allowing them to ascribe to themselves the attribute of terrestrial-maritime efficiency. This establishes the fact that within the Sulu aquapelago, they are afforded another platform by virtue of their evolving skill set, enabling them to reimagine an episteme based on their current and potential capabilities. In this sense, spaces are not to be viewed in isolation, as if contained within a fixed boundary. In fact, recent scholarship on spatial ontologies suggests that island spaces serve as avenues for challenging norms (Pugh, 2013; Joseph, 2021; Grydehøj et al., 2020). Within the decolonial project, this perspective is welcomed, as it helps transcend artificial geographical and political boundaries (Acri, 2023; Hau'ofa, 1994) that are inherently contestable as they are not originally present.

Indologist Juan Francisco explains how the Maranao created their own cultural space by deconstructing Valmiki's *Ramayan* upon its arrival in the Philippines, likely between the mid-17th and early 19th centuries (Francisco, 1969). In common with other Indian aesthetics, the Indic text was indigenised through various pathways in the region, resulting in characterologically hybridised cultural densities. The presence of Indic culture as a major draw from the East is supported by Asia's already diverse cultural landscape, as noted by Tagore and Stutterheim in 1927 (Krishnan, 2023). Therefore, the assumption of the Greater India Society that the culture was transplanted wholesale into an unremarkable Southeast Asia (Kulke, 2023) is unfounded. Referring back to Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter," this underscores that a 'receiving' environment is immanently kinetically endowed. Actants such as the Brahmins, serving as legitimate authorities for the absorption and propagation of such (Wickramasinghe & Henley, 2023), further enrich this vibrant cultural milieu. Driven by the imperative of survival in a new context, human actants naturally assert their capacity to effect change within a culturally dynamic space.

The spread of Hindu texts reflects a broader trend of establishing cosmopolitan entities, similar to the Sanskrit and Arabic cosmopolises. The vernacularisation of Sanskrit epics in early modern Java marked a shift from Hindu-Buddhist to Islamic dominance, with scholars discovering Muslim mystical insights in ancient texts (Arps, 2023). This delineates two main forces—Indianisation and Islamisation—that have shaped cultural and religious progress. Islamisation, in particular, has profoundly influenced South and Southeast Asia, contributing to the rise of large Muslim populations and the unification of diverse regions through scriptural religions and bureaucratic states. Islamisation, with its socio-linguistic adaptability, thrived in the syncretic environment, allowing for local reinterpretation; otherwise, tensions similar to Caliban's struggle in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* would have arisen, as the imposed language did not fully express his "tribal and spiritual connection" (Pugh, 2013, pp. 6-17). Like the Iranun, they viewed Islamisation as a pragmatic survival strategy; hence, folk Islam became a way of recognising the value in conveying their thoughts and emotions while preserving their indigeneity and immanent vibrancy. This proves how an inherited language must embody freedom and distinctiveness; otherwise, one risks becoming Calibanesque, trapped by socio-linguistic biases and inadequacies.

Folk Islam plays a role in blending ancestral beliefs with worship of Allah, as Moros historically invoked spirits and *diwatas* for war and magic (Kiefer, 1972; Saber, 1961). This synthesis is evident in the *Darangen*, a Maranao myth featuring recurring motifs like abduction in the story of Maharadia Lawana. As folk Islam becomes more constituted in their cultural milieu,

selective episode inclusion (Brockington, 2023) capitalised on the Moro Wars, alluded to by "Ikadaraanen," a poetic reference in the *darangen* that denotes the Castilians (Saber, 1961, p. 45). The influence of historical context on the narrative, with earlier antagonists in the *Darangen* being supplanted by newer ones, represents strategic narrative alterations to counter Spanish colonisers. The reduction of *Maharadia Lawana* to a "microscopic size" (Francisco, 1969, p. 202) through these techniques evinces the controlled reception of Iranun cultural, political, and spiritual practices intertwined with folk Islam tenets.

Folk Islam is pervasive throughout the Malay archipelago, as mirror texts show. For instance, Ram's counterparts are not heroes in Valmiki *Ramayan*, but they are in the Maranao tradition. This indicates the modification of Hindu cultural archetypes by folk Islam. In the secularised *wayang kulit*[5] version of Malaysia's *Hikayat Seri Rama*, Maharaja Wana is depicted as more just and loyal compared to Seri Rama, while scenes at Candi Panataran (AD 1369) highlight Hanuman's role, surpassing that of Rama (Kieven, 2011). Attacking Rama's character reflects a divergent belief system, upheld in the characters of Maharaja Wana and Maharadia Lawana, which align with the identity of folk Islam followers. For the Maranao, this creative amplification serves as a site for reimagination and historicisation of their desired identity as impassioned defenders against Spanish colonisers. More importantly, the fusion of indigeneity and Islam supports Mignolo's (2011) view that indigenous practices can heal colonial wounds, enriched by a portmanteau of understanding one's own epistemology in relation to others.

Maharadia Lawana's ethical domain in the eponymous tale represents a strategic flashpoint. He functions as a villain-turned-hero in his place of exile, where "he gathers leaves and wood, ignites them, climbs a tree over the fire, and cries that the world is chained" (Francisco, 1969, pp. 210-211). During his banishment, he reveals his deep concern for the world's redemption from sin. His psychologically driven detachment from his place of exile serves to redirect his efforts towards a world in need of saving, thereby illustrating the protagonism of his reimagined self-connected to the vision of deliverance. Kiefer (1972) observed that the Tausug generally exhibit a similar quality – developed through interactions with the Maranao/Iranun and other migrants to the Sulu Archipelago – manifested in their willingness to sacrifice themselves despite harsh conditions. This represents a form of elitism among them, rooted in folk psychology or *maratabat* (pride), which is deeply ingrained in Maranao culture (Saber et al., 1960). Accordingly, Maharadia Lawana, described as the "son of the Sultan and Sultaness of Pulu Bandiarmasir" (Francisco, 1969, pp. 210-211), honoured himself.

Maratabat, driven by a sense of jingoism, is effective only with a strong adherence to Islam. Defending the 'sanctity of Islam' against the Spanish imperialists involved a ritualistic act of suicide known as *pagsabbil* or *juramentado*. At the height of the Moro Wars, Spanish authorities anticipated mass suicide attacks by the Tausug, who were intent on both killing and being killed in the name of Islam. They channelised their firm convictions through extremism. The transformation of folk Islam into a manifestation of fearlessness illustrates a profound understanding of the redemptive value of jihad to which they were wholly committed. This fervour is mirrored in Maharadia Lawana's act of self-immolation and his acceptance of fate, as exemplified by his death caused by a "cut with any tool... sharpened upon a whetstone kept in the heart of the palace of Pulu Bandiarmasir" (Francisco, 1969, pp.

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[5] Central to Indonesian culture, *wayang kulit* is a form of shadow puppetry featuring romantic tales and religious legends, especially adaptations of India's *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, as well as local stories such as the Panji tales.

210-211). Maharadia Lawana had no recourse, nor did he wish for liberation; indeed, he embraced his destiny. His inherently ascetic nature aligns him with the burden of resistance, akin to Ravana in the *Ramayan*. Muthuvel Karunanidhi and other Tamil leaders, including Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy, reimagined Ravana as a symbol of southern resistance against northern imperialism and Brahminical oppression, thus shaping a political view of the Ramayan legacy as a narrative of Brahmin exploitation of Dravidians (Rajarajan, 2018; Chatterjee, 2024). These polemics led to an interrogative excavation of alternative political systems, for instance, in two Ramayana-based productions, *Ravanodbhavam* and *Ilankeswaran*, where Ravana's character is used to explore centralised rule and egalitarianism during periods of threatened local power (Richman, 2023). Ravana's vilification is countered by this exploration of his polity-infused nature, as seen by those who view him as a king embodying leadership and agency. The collision of Valmiki's *Ramayan* (500-100 BCE) and Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas* (16th century CE) is the most obvious depot of Ravana's liminalities that recalibrate the Ramayan legacy –with its manifold reinterpretations – to attain what Chatterjee calls "the rank of a political theater" (2024, p. 36), where staunch critics from both sides have equal chances to lobby their nationalistic propensities.

While Maharadia Lawana's allegiance is strongly attuned to resistance against the proselytising imperialists, another aspect of his character is associated with abduction. Similar to the *Ramayan*, *Maharadia Lawana* underscores the righteousness of Radia Mangandiri's act of rescuing his wife, implicitly condemning the act of forcibly seizing another's spouse. However, focusing on Maharadia Lawana's character accentuates the cultural nuances inherent in the act of abduction itself. Although Islam condemns such actions, folk Islam may tolerate them within specific contexts. Pertinent to Tausug cultural practices, which are likely reflected in the behaviors of the Iranun/Maranao, and other migrant ethnic groups, Kiefer notes that, alongside highly esteemed methods of marriage, elopement and 'pagsaggau' (literally, capture) are swift, cost-effective methods that signify a man's bravery and masculinity (1972, p. 42-43). Nadu, one of Kiefer's subjects in Sulu, acquired his two wives through *pagsaggau*. Maharadia Lawana's character capitalises on the Tausug culture of risk-taking, where outlaws and criminals who engage in perilous situations are esteemed for exhibiting these virtues. This is embodied by Panglima Munggona, an outlaw hero who fought against the Spaniards, as depicted in Parang Sabil, a Tausug epic (Manuel, 1963). Maharadia Lawana embodies the *maisug* (brave) archetype, which connotes physical prowess, a non-Western conception of violence grounded in rationality (Kiefer, 1972). Echoing Baudelaire, his observation vividly encapsulates this attitude: "each derives its external beauty from the moral laws to which it is subject" (2012, p. 25). Thus, the Tausug disposition is intrinsically linked to their moral obligations. Like the rakshasa warrior-descended Ravana, the elite Maharadia Lawana and the high-ranking Tausug/Maranao shared a profound sense of responsibility, not solely to themselves but to their homeland.

In the context of conquest, the commitment to combat necessitates the psychological resilience inherent in the aforementioned characters. Maharadia Lawana's superiority versus Radia Mangandiri's inferiority spotlights this requisite quality. The transformation of Radia's ostensibly primary role (analogous to Rama's position in the *Ramayan*) into a mere adjunct shows the tale's reception of resistance within a hegemonic cycle where "coloniality lurks, ever-present" (Nadarajah and Grydehøj, 2016, p. 440). In other words, survival demands an acceptance that subjugation persists, irrespective of circumstances. Thus, through the strategic use of episode selection in myth-making, it is evident that the Tausug/Maranao sought to depict their struggle against the colonisers through a character who, like them, is indomitably capable of enduring prolonged suffering, rather than one who is reduced to a figure of ridicule, such as Radia Mangandiri, who is emasculated when Potre Langawi

swallows his testicles. Predictably, the Tausug/Maranao felt that their resistance against the Spaniards required a more formidable symbol, a figure whose personhood could not be lampooned.

Moreover, Radia Mangandiri's foible, as demonstrated by his reliance on Laksamana to defeat Maharadia Lawana, further expresses the Tausug's/Maranao's fearlessness, which gravitates toward Maharadia Lawana's willingness to even self-immolate for the redemption of the world. The Tausug/Maranao, in representing themselves within this narrative cycle, could not employ Radia Mangandiri's character because he lacked what Maharadia Lawana fundamentally possessed – asceticism – an attribute similarly valourised by Jain believers who revere Valmiki's Ravana (Ramanujan, 1991). Essentially, the Tausug/Maranao ethos is rooted in asceticism, manifesting as *pagsabbil* or jihad, which is grounded in the concept of afterlife incentivisation. Adherence to this principle led the Tausug/Maranao to perceive danger and death as illusory (Kiefer, 1972), thus directing their efforts towards upholding an existential praxis centred on what life can accomplish in the present to create a more glorious future existence. This perspective undoubtedly enabled them to endure the vicissitudes of coloniality that creates "monsters thriving in island ecologies" (Rivas, 2022, p. 49). The monsterisation of the colonised, stemming from the colonialist's epistemic deficiency regarding the true nature of the colonised, undermines their original, pre-colonial identity. However, this process provides the colonised with a platform for dignification, sensitising them to an identity they can leverage for survival – transforming from a bastardised native to an aquapelagically 'reclaimed' species – the monster – now occupying an ontologically navigable niche.

Henri Lefebvre's theory of rhythm analysis in *Seen from a Window* posits that "to capture a rhythm one needs to have been captured by it… and abandon oneself to its duration" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 219). This idea is key to understanding how the Tausug/Maranao navigated cyclical rhythms. Lefebvre's concept evokes a colonised-coloniser dynamic, suggesting that within a colonial-decolonial framework, the Tausug must first acknowledge their captured state to eventually assume the role of the coloniser as a form of resistance. Only by fully engaging with this rhythm can they achieve decolonial rehabilitation. Nadarajah and Grydehøj (2016) argue that overcoming colonial residues tied to independence and economic capacity requires human actants to critically confront these lingering traumas. One way to do this is through a necessary death, as exemplified by Maharadia Lawana's demise, which represents a crucial relinquishment for the Tausug/Maranao warriors. Lefebvre's call to "abandon oneself to [rhythm's] duration" suggests that recognising one's role in perpetuating the hegemonic cycle, whether as colonised or coloniser, is key to breaking it. This acceptance fosters a reconciliatory approach, mediating the hegemonic discourse through new realisations and strategies within the decolonial sphere.

Maharadia Lawana's end signifies neither surrender nor defeat but rather a necessary transition to a more meaningful space, driven by what Cheryl McEwan refers to as the "constant creation of diversities" (2019, p. 277). She contends that recognising hegemonic structures and power inequalities cultivates this hybrid space, where certain values are intervened, clarified, and reshaped by various actors, much like how the Maranao perceived colonisation as a process leading to an evolving epistemology through the exile and death of Maharadia Lawana. For the Maranaos, the obliteration of the main character, which would ostensibly appease colonisers and reinforce the notion of Western domination, serves as a catalyst for reflection on the legitimacy of his banishment. His transgressions, beyond the abduction of Potre Malaila Ganding, include causing "the death of many a man in the realm

because of his vile tongue intrigue [and] false representations" (Francisco, 1969, pp. 210-211). The spread of misinformation – though the specifics were not detailed, nor the reasons for his abduction of Potre Malaila Ganding – highlights manipulation by his parents, who orchestrated his exile. This politicisation within the family unit reveals how the Tausug's/Maranao's affective sensibility as a united front is compromised by false representations as fierce pirates, suggesting that eradicating them is the only solution. From a distance, this appears to be an attempt to silence someone who poses an obstacle to a particular agenda.

The annihilation of Maharadia Lawana serves as an analytical lens through which the underlying issue – political expansionism – can be examined. This phenomenon aligns with the "constant creation of diversities" previously mentioned. In Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011), the tension between the desire for a better life and the harsh reality that this pursuit often leads to disappointment and harm is explored. Nevertheless, it remains compelling because it represents a source of meaning or possibility for those who seek it. This perception resonates with both the colonised and the coloniser, each of whom acts as both colonised and coloniser within the rhythm framework. In essence, the decolonial project is not devoid of cruel optimism. It entails both losses and the potential for a more meaningful existence amid the harsh reality, as this is the path forward in a reimagined space.

Rethinking the Centre through the Margins

The reactivation of the Philippine claim to Sabah in 2025, in response to Malaysia's significant Supreme Court victory in France over claims for the territory by descendants of the former Sulu sultanate,[6] necessitates a discussion that extends beyond geopolitical boundaries to incorporate aquapelagic considerations. Revisiting the concept of an aquapelago, which encompasses the interactions among human and non-human actants, their activities, and how these contribute to their identity and potential, reveals not only the geographical and historical dimensions of meaning-making but also the profound, often overlooked, aspects of their existence. The renewed claim is not without its shortcomings, as it fails to account for the intricate interplay of these aforementioned elements. In the context of Ram Sethu, the aquapelagic zone should be understood not "merely in geo-historical terms but also in psychological ways... through the evolution of folkloric motifs" (Chatterjee, 2022, p. 111). Thus, *Maharadia Lawana's* centrality in resuscitating the Maranao's aquapelagic identity offers a more nuanced re-valuation of the territorial dispute. It is commonsensical that this approach aligns with the contemporary context, where the flow of information is rapidly and continuously uninterrupted, allowing for the generation and dissemination of content without adequately interrogating the region's epistemological foundations.

The North Borneo claim was a strategic assertion. Although a monetary settlement might have resolved the issue, former President Diosdado Macapagal elevated it to a national claim, ultimately leading the heirs of the Sultan of Sulu to acknowledge Philippine sovereignty over

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[6] The Philippine-Malaysia dispute over Sabah stems from conflicting claims regarding sovereignty. The Philippines, as the successor to the Sulu Sultanate, asserts a dormant claim, arguing that Sabah was leased, not ceded, to the British North Borneo Company in 1878, and that sovereignty was never fully relinquished. Malaysia considers the 1878 agreement a cession and views the dispute as resolved, citing Sabah's 1963 decision to join Malaysia as an exercise of self-determination. See LawCom (2024).

North Borneo in exchange for financial compensation. This approach exemplifies the creation of a community through political imagination, akin to how the "China threat" narrative regarding Adam's Bridge is propagated by India itself rather than by the West (Chatterjee, 2023, p.7). Such political manoeuvres are often tied to a country's grand visions, which are essential for cultivating national pride. Macapagal's self-determinism apotheosises that objective – an early reprieve to avoid the "eventual consignment of groups of human beings to a perpetual state of wardship" (Hauʻofa, 1994, p. 151). Clearly, the Philippines could not return to its former position, so Macapagal took the initiative to forge a new path toward the centre, perhaps, of the Malay frontier.

Every entity seeks to claim the centre. Lefebvre states, "each group, each entity, each religion and each culture considers itself a centre" (1996, p. 239). Sabah exemplifies this British-centric perspective, where centering ineluctably leads to decentering, resulting in constraints on "sovereignty, human resources, and economic capacity" (Nadarajah and Grydehøj, 2016, p. 441). These challenges, which inherently affect their identity and agency, must be understood as part of a necessary repositioning of their insular lives toward "charting new relationships in and with the world" (Hauʻofa, 1994, p. 152). This involves recognising that such liminality is part of a cyclical rhythm, as previously mentioned, that primarily seeks "to legitimise their economic, social, cultural, and political situation" (Hache, 1998, p. 47). While the Illanun in Sulu and Sabah acknowledge that their knowledge and beliefs related to sustaining insularity may be susceptible to transformations and pressures that could challenge their current position – similar to how Maharadia Lawana's death is used to illustrate a sense of epistemic humility – they also believe that this acknowledgment forms the basis upon which their legitimisation as political actors rests.

Rooted in established bases and kinship across the Malay Archipelago, they maintain a resilient, unified image. This network is sustained by mutual support, evidenced by Indonesian migrant workers in the Southern Philippines; Indonesia's backing of educational and religious programs; its intervention against British aggression toward the Sulu Sultanate; Malaysia's recruitment of Filipino Muslims (Brackmann, 1966); and its mediation between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front despite accusations of aiding secessionists (Al Jazeera, 2020). Specifically, connections with those in Sabah are sustained through ritualised reunions (Saber, 1979). Despite geographical separation, their unity through Islam/folk Islam is evident, which highlights a long-standing tradition of transcending geographic boundaries, such that any attempt to map this 'reimagined zone' would trivialise the ambit of their Muslim identity. I mean to elevate this point by drawing on Chatterjee's ruminations on Ram Setu. He writes,

> *The spirit of sentience that pervades Adam's Bridge dissolves into oblivion when obscured by the invocation of a humanly constructed causeway. What form makes ephemeral is rendered eternal in formlessness.* (Chatterjee, 2024, p. 183).

The essence of an entity, when reduced to tangibility, obscures aspects of its spirit. The Illanun/Tausug in Sabah and Sulu have been ritualising an existence born of aquapelagic spectrality, which permits them to "instigate relationships between seascapes and (is)landscapes and develop emotional attachments and a sense of belonging" (Hayfield & Nielsen, 2022, p. 209). Reintegration by any non-Mohammedan entity, which merely summons the Illanun to a cartographic existence, defies the concept of the "remote aquapelagic zone" – a space that, according to Felicity Greenland and Philip Hayward, allows for indirect experiences such as the imagination of a Japanese aquatic humanoid that represents Japanese reflections on remote whaling perceived through an

anthropomorphising lens (2020, p. 137). Similarly, the Illanun can cultivate a sense of belonging through mediated temporalities and cultural narratives that enable them to identify with the humanoid of indomitability against homogeneity.

This affective insularity is further demonstrated by at least four cases: the largest Iranun slave raids in Southeast Asia in 1755, which targeted Catholic regions in the Philippines; Malaysia's unilateral incorporation of Sabah in 1963 following a plebiscite in which Sabah residents voted to join Malaysia (Limos, 2020); the notorious 1968 Jabidah Massacre, in which Muslim operatives were killed for refusing to execute a mission allegedly ordered by former President Ferdinand Marcos to seize Sabah by force (Doronila, 2013); and the establishment of minor buffer states between Indonesia and the Philippines as a latent motive behind the Philippine claim to Sabah (Brackmann, 1966). Lefebvre's concept of a polyrhythm arising from the tension and resistance between contradictory forces parallels the Philippine government's struggle between homogeneity and diversity. As he explains, "When relations of power take over relations of alliance, when the rhythms of 'the other' make impossible the rhythms of 'the self,' then a total crisis erupts..." (1996, p. 239). Viewed through the lens of polyrhythm, any deliberate undermining by the Philippine government ('other') of the Maranao/Tausug's internal ways of life ('self') would inevitably lead to conflict, as evidenced by the aforementioned instances.

To elucidate this concept, Maxwell's Pearson-inspired notion of assemblages possessing "chiasmatic idiosyncrasy" (Maxwell, 2012, p.23) – where assemblages typify inherent imbricating patterns of interaction – specifically discursivises that the interplay between homogeneity and diversity is anticipated. In practical terms, there is a dynamic tension that emerges in an environment driven by nationalism, which is why the Sabah claim cannot stem from past conditioning. This conditioning, or what Rivas, drawing on the Deleuzian principle, calls the "the unconscious rituals of the past that endure in a people's intuition of a bygone age" (2019, p. 107). These "unconscious rituals," which persist in the present, invigorate Greenland and Hayward's (2020, p. 137) concept of the "remote aquapelagic zone." Recalling Chatterjee's dictum on ephemerality, the Sabah claim fundamentally opposes the goal of perpetuating the 'reimagined space' that cannot be reduced to cartography.

Consequently, within this polyrhythmic context, one observes a shift that occurred when Moros faced widespread discrimination in the Philippines during the 1960s, with their history omitted from textbooks and their culture and religion denigrated, leading to their alienation and resentment – a fact that resonates through Southeast Asian assemblages as a result of colonial history (Tuminez, 2007; SarDesai, 2012). The projected crisis, as mentioned by Lefebvre, indeed materialised, reflecting a natural response in a context characterised by conflicting 'other' and 'self' dynamics. It would be misguided to interpret this as merely an instinctual recalcitrance by the Maranao/Tausug; rather, it is evident how fundamentally ingrained folk Islam is in their identity and sense of belonging. This steadfastness thus further legitimises the notion that the conclusion of Maharadia Lawana's tale represents the inception of a more unified front for these groups.

Using the Mappilas of Kerala, who adapted the *Ramayan* to incorporate Islamic beliefs, I argue that issues of integration disadvantage those resisting cultural hegemony. Geographical isolation, exacerbated by a predominantly Hindu India, contributes to this stigmatisation. In early independence, exclusionary national perceptions led to the "delegitimation of the mongrelised, non-assimilationist trajectories of the minor islands skirting the Malabar shores" (Joseph, 2019, p. 7; Visvanathan, 1993). This marginalisation threatens minority cultures and perpetuates social divisions, highlighting the need to

support diverse island perspectives and challenge hegemonic practices that undermine pluralism.

Au fond, the Philippine government needs a more comprehensive strategy that considers broader geometries and relationships rather than focusing exclusively on individual characteristics among its citizens. The concept of 'identity' is less effective for understanding collective identification compared to the notions of narratives of "location and positionality [and translocational positionality]," which more aptly address how individuals perceive their position within the social order and their sense of belonging, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of essentialised and fragmented identity notions (Anthias, 2002, p. 491). This perspective aligns with Baldacchino's (2004, p. 274) assertion that the study of islandness involves a state of tension between "openness and closure." The dual nature of insularity is evident as islands exhibit both openness (such as trade, cultural exchange, and migration) and closure (such as isolation, self-sufficiency, and distinctive local cultures), which together shape their unique identities. Thus, by inhabiting and embodying the 'margin,' the Maranao and Tausug peoples empower a decolonial framework that compels the archipelago to reveal its nature as an aquapelago. The margin, as a representation of decolonisation, emphasises the perspectival quality of unburdening the archipelago, allowing it to be true to its essence; this metamorphosis cannot remain stagnant in time. The aquapelago, as the archipelago was originally envisioned, is now brought to its rightful, liberating place, through which marginal voices can indeed shape futures of a decolonised space. Consequently, island decolonisation necessitates that governments actively pursue progressive strategies while critically evaluating their own methods and assumptions (Nadarajah and Grydehøj, 2016). In this context, the Illanun diaspora will be afforded the complementarity of decoloniality and aquapelagicity in their endeavour to preserve and sustain their pragmatic consciousness that has consistently catalysed their intention to indigenise Islam.

Conclusion

This study explores the colonial state-supervised assimilation of Maranao individuals into the Tausug community in the Sulu aquapelago, focusing on their migration and adaptation to a new environment shaped by global commerce and reactive forces. Key to this internal aquapelagic mobility was the eruption of Mt. Makaturing, among other factors. Driven by survival, they adopted a reimagined identity embodied by Maharadia Lawana, their version of Ravana from the *Ramayan*, to ensconce and strengthen themselves against the competitive pressures of raiding and slave trading that were central to Sulu's economy. While the Maranao's marauding tendencies were partly shaped by Southeast Asia's geographical choke points, this view overlooks the broader context of aquapelagic interconnectedness.

The Sulu aquapelago draws strength from its connections with the Malay Archipelago, spanning the Philippines, Malaysia (including Sabah), and Indonesia. Despite colonial pressures, this triad has created a buffer against hegemonic influences, using mirror texts and creative amplification to protect their cultural identities. The Maranao synchronised time and space within this aquapelagic context by indigenising Islam, developing a folk Islam that preserved pre-Islamic identities. They transformed a major antagonist from the *Ramayan* into a central figure in their mythology, thus enacting a legend-based structuration of the new Maranao identity. Their isolation from non-believers, while maintaining alliances, reflects their defensive and offensive strategies driven by folk Islam and *maratabat*.

A poignant picture emerges of the Maranao and Mohammedan Filipinos' stance on the Sabah claim, emphasising their aquapelagic epistemology. Disrupting this delicate political landscape would be intolerable to a people disparagingly labelled as pirates. Heritagising them with their tools and symbols – *darangen*, Maharadia Lawana, the sea, boats, and inter-island distances – are central to their 'sacrosanct' identity and statehood, which they would defend to the death. The Philippine government's vision of nationalism diverges from the aquapelagic reality of the Maranao/Tausug communities. Viewing Sulu through an aquapelagic lens offers a deeper understanding of ongoing decolonial strategies that archipelagic frameworks overlook. This research sets a precedent for future aquapelagic studies to focus on the intricate experiences of insiders, particularly in the Philippines, where geography highlights the plurality of religion and the influence of people, climate, landscape, seascape, mindscape, and sovereigntyscape – elements embodying aquapelagic sensibilities. More significantly, it highlights how decolonisation's empowered representation – the margin – reveals the archipelago's identity as an aquapelago, thereby engendering the futures of a decolonised space.Within an aquapelagic framework, the Maranaos' integration into a system governed by external authorities serves as a case study highlighting the fusion of modernity and decoloniality. This intersection underscores the complexities of incorporating indigenous identities within modern state structures. Organisations like ASEAN+4 could draw from this scenario to develop a more inclusive and respectful approach to regional integration, requiring a deep understanding of the historical, cultural, and political dynamics at play.

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