

COTABATO: PROMISED LAND

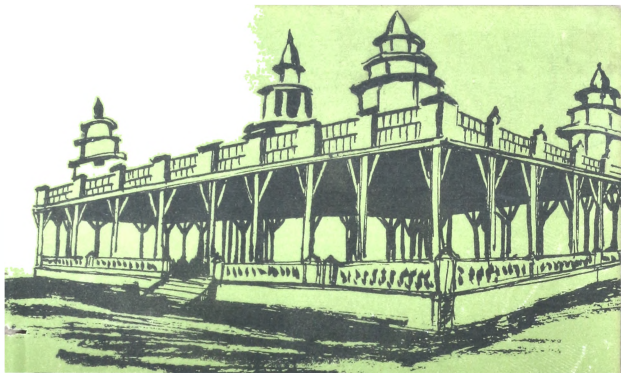
COTABATO is the biggest and potentially the richest province of the Philippines. At present it is a vast expanse of forest and fertile land, fed and made more fertile by the second longest river in the Philippines—the Rio Grande. The marshes and swamps along the river, if converted into fishponds, could supply the entire archipelago with fish. Its vast plains if converted to ramie plantations could produce enough fiber for twice the population of the Philippines. The rich alluvial soil along the river if properly cultivated could feed the entire nation.

As it is Cotabato is just growing. A Malabon entrepreneur who constructed a group of fishponds near the mouth of the river has to charter a plane to bring his fish to Manila. The ramie plantation at Buluan keeps the Japanese textile mills continuously supplied with fiber. And the corn produced by the mechanized farms is sold

in the Visayan markets. And yet, one feels that the present level of production has hardly touched the fringes of its vast potential wealth.

The Rio Grande is the most important transportation lane of the province. This river in spite of its size is shallow in many parts. Thus transportation is crude and expensive; and thus the cost of commodities that go in or out of the province rises almost automatically. Road building in Cotabato is just starting and the bureau of public works estimates that it might take another decade before the province is provided with an adequate system of land transportation.

Probably because of this one gets in Cotabato a sense of feverish impermanence. It is as if those who are engaged in the extraction of its wealth feel that their days are numbered and therefore they have to get what they want with almost hedonistic frenzy. The pulse of life here is unnatural;



it lacks the evenness and rhythm that usually goes with seasonal pursuits.

THE CENTER of the province is Dadiangas now called General Santos, in honor of the late General Paulino Santos who opened the territory for settlement. Dadiangas has more than 45,000 inhabitants. The town nestles in an area that produces coffee, corn and cotton in abundant quantities. The original 3,000 settlers who came with General Santos in 1939 had spread to Ala Valley, Koronadal, Lagao and Marbel. Their struggles against locusts, malaria and poverty are now paying off. They now own farms that are worth a hundred times more than their original value.

Cotabato can very well be called the melting pot of the Philippines. Here people from all groups live together—Ilongos, Cebuanos, Tagalogs, and Maguindanaws. They have raised towns that they have purposely named after the places of their birth—New Capiz, New Iloilo and New Cebu. But the houses of the settlers in these new towns are uniformly drab and makeshift. Newness is equivalent to impermanence. However, nobody seems to be bothered by hard gruelling labor because here work is the rule of existence.

Like Sulu and the coastal regions of southern Mindanao, Cotabato was settled before and during the Spanish regime by Malays and Indonesians. In the 15th century, the Malayan

settlers in the province were converted to the Moslem faith by Sariph Kabungsuan, an Arab-Malay imam who visited the region with traders. Like the rest of Moroland, Cotabato has never known the domination of the Spaniards.

The Americans however were able to subjugate the Maguin-danaws. This was the beginning of the progress of the province. With the establishment of the rule of law in the province, settlers from all over the Philippines emigrated to the province.

Agriculture is the basic industry in the province. The farmers of Cotabato are now beginning to realize the advantages of mechanization. The cotton and coffee plantations are now mechanized.

BUT THE crop that Cotabato has claimed for its own is ramie. This remarkable fiber thrives very well in the porous soil of Cotabato. Ramcor, the biggest ramie plantation in the Philippines, covers an area that stretches from one horizon to another. The corporation sends its fiber down the Rio Grande to steamers waiting at the mouth. The fiber is sent to Japan for processing and weaving. Ramcor is planning to put up its own plant soon.

The biggest problem of Co-

tabato is rats. The rice-producing area of the province is periodically attacked by hordes of rats. The government is doing its best to eliminate the pest.

Another big problem of Cotabato is the cultural conflict between the Moslems and the Christians. There seems to exist among them a feeling of mutual distrust. This distrust sometimes erupts into bloody battles. One still remembers the massacre on Tigkawayan when a group of Christian settlers descended upon a moro village and practically wiped it out.

The basis of this conflict is economic. The datos, fearful of loss of power, still wish to assert their authority over the christian settlers. Once an area is cleared and planted, a datu would demand its return. The Christian, quite naturally, would defend his right and a fight would start. However, the Philippine Constabulary has the situation well in hand and now even the powerful datos think twice before they decide to tackle this band of professional soldiers.

Cotabato is the promised land of Mindanao. Properly directed, it could become one of the Philippines' most important provinces. The industry of the pioneers in Cotabato would surely transform that province to an economic force.

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