



## DANGEROUS SULU AND HER CHARMING ODDITIES

SALVADOR L. BAUTISTA

If I were to be marooned in an island and had my choice, I would choose Sulu and spend the rest of my life there. I like her, not alone for her glamour datus with their many wives, the hadjis and panditas; not alone for the legendary princes and princesses and their royal courts; not alone for the pleasure of hunting and diving for the much-coveted mother of pearl, but also for her mysterious hold on the thrill-hunter. In Sulu, a great thrill is derived from seeking danger in a reckless sort of way, where death becomes closer to one every moment of his life. Sulu is the place where the slinking and skulking moro's every move is watched with suspicion and apprehension. It is a place where great fortunes change hands in fleeting moments of the still night and in the swirling waters of the expansive Celebes Sea, used as a hunting ground and a barter counter for ill-gotten goods. It is a place where the State's trained water patrol police match their skills, wit for wit, cunning for cunning against the sly, scheming members of a smuggling syndicate that bring into the country slit-eyed aliens, costly jewelry, cigarettes, opium, silks, and various bootleg concoctions, all duty free. Towards morning, the **mangngi** (bad moros) and their contraband disappear into thin air.

Truly, Sulu does not have the beauty and glitter of Manila, the

noise and the pretensions of Cebu, the abundance of Cotabato, the expanse of Bukidnon, the big business of Davao or the Chinese touch of Zamboanga; but life in Sulu is more interesting because of the great gambles that spell fortune or dishonor, riches, or poverty, and success or failure—all against the backdrop of moro psychology, which is half sly, half astute. According to our books, Sulu is inhabited by the fiercest tribe of moros who are called **juramentados**, brandishing their sharp kris, their barongs and spears, or becoming berserk, turning suddenly belligerent against the constituted authorities, and building impregnable cottas. It is apparent, however, that this impression is not a just appraisal, for the heart of Sulu is peaceful, calm, and harmless. and nowhere in the whole Philippines is travel more peaceful than in the "wilds" of Sulu.

Sulu's climate is mild and soft. Clean, pungent air prevails. White coral reefs run a long stretch around the coastline like a split white ribbon. I like Sulu for her white sands, for the placid, bluish-green, clear water of its seas. I like her for the luscious fruits: durian, mangosteen, and lanzones, which are plentiful all the year round. There is an intoxicating air of tranquillity and abundance as one climbs the altitudes of rolling green. The sides of the roads as far as the eye can see, are lined

with green rice harvests or swaying palm trees loaded with maturing fruit. The cost of living is cheap; fish is plentiful and **maluhay** (cheap); a family of five can live on one-peso worth of fish for two days.

At night, unlike in other places in Central Luzon, there are no roving hordes of blood-thirsty men with bad thoughts in their minds who leave suffering and sorrow in the wake of their depredations, except, perhaps, in the hills yonder, where isolated maraudings, like those of the band of Kamlon, are found. It is not an uncommon sight, however, to see young boys of tender age carrying shotguns and carbines; hip pockets bulging with the deadly 45s, not due to belligerence or arrogance, but merely for the love of display, and of course, as protection against the danger from possible marauders. This fondness for "fighting hardware" also stems from their rugged and rustic individualism. The few badmen that exist live in the interior hills. They feel they have grudges, real or fancied, against authorities, supposedly committed against them and their families. And so they entrench themselves in strongly fortified cottas, and most of them belong to the "black teeth" tribe that seldom come down from the hills to mingle with their more educated brothers. They are not as ruthless as they are known to be, but they naturally make a common enemy of those that have trespassed their rights and forced them to submit themselves against the will of others. They recognize only one law: the law of self-preservation.

On moonlit nights, the young blades of the villages flock to where they hear some young dam-

sels strumming soulfully the "gabbang." They do not go there to sing their wings because the young girls are all "marayaw" (good) and friendly, and their old folks are equally friendly. They go there to exchange "langugs" (jokes) with the old men who would laugh boisterously at good jokes. Although it is considered a high offense for one to hold the hands of the young girls (moro custom forbids this as being immoral), they are also susceptible to the allurements and charms of beauty, specially if they are young, eligible men. So, in those gatherings, the young men match their skills in native songs. The "gabbang," their sole instrument of music, resounds to far-off distances. It is crudely made of wood and shaped like a small boat about  $2/3$  meter long. It looks like a xylophone, made of split pieces of bamboo strapped in rows and serving as keys. The serenaders compete with one another in their singing, which is usually at a high pitch, of two-two beats, slightly going up and down in songsong, and finally failing off, swanlike, to a sentimental finale. It is very similar to the "day-eng" of the Igorots, but it is more sentimental, as the singer puts her soul into the song and twitches every muscle of her face, as if in deep pain, to secure desired effects and to harmonize with the very high, screeching tone of the "gabbang".

The Teacher's role: Nowhere in the Philippines can one find greater respect paid to the teachers than in Sulu. The "mastal," as he is fondly called, is the "umbul" one (number one) citizen in the community. He is looked up to with the greatest respect, for in a way, he weilds a great influence and respectability in the community.

The "mastal" commands influence and authority. He is consulted to when problems of community welfare come up for decision. Usually, the "mastals" form the panel of distinguished guests in every civic gathering, and are given preferred seats in social community programs. The old folks go to them for advice on certain matters involving state regulations. Usually, too, the "mastal" marries the choice belle of the village. The school children love and respect their "mastal," while the oldsters look upon him for guidance and consider him a model citizen. The "mastals" therefore, are leaders of their respective communities, second only to their "gobnol" (governor).

Marriages or proposals for marriage come in the form of preliminary overtures made by the prospective groom. He woes the prospective bride's father, instead of her. Dowries are first consideration, the father having the sole decision on all matters of dowries. The prospective groom offer him (the father) lavish gifts, and once the question of dowries is settled, the father gives his consent to the marriage. Love has very little bearing, if at all, to the consideration of marriage, and the girl may not necessarily be "engaged" to the man, as we know this elsewhere. She may not even know the man. Thus, according to this quaint custom, a man, provided he can afford to support and can give dowries, can ask for marriage as many a girls' hand as he can support. Separation can be effected just as easily. Once, a prominent man who had three wives lost the third wife, just because the generator of his movie failed to function, which happen-

ing embarrassed her before her guests. Asked why she was leaving him, when practically she has had everything she needed—a big house, many lands, money, jewelry and a movie show house—she rasped back, "a movie show, bah! oay cine (no show)."

In Sulu, the Import Control laws have very little or no effect at all on the everyday needs of young ladies. The young "dalagas" concoct their own beauty kits with native formulas. They make their own face powder from the native rice pounded fine to a pulp and sieved. The fine powdery grains are mixed with the leaves of "kakawate," and pounded further until the juice comes out. The resulting juice is then colored with yellow "luya" or "kunig" tint which is spread as "mascara" giving the admixture a yellow light all over the face. They also use this concoction on the skin of their arms, legs, and heels. After two or three days, the "mascara" is washed off, leaving a fine, soft skin.

Blemishes can also be removed with this cosmetics and thru this procedure. After the washing, one can really appreciate the silken touch of the skin. For painting their lips, the young girls use "achuete" or any red piece of paper. The young girls are really pretty, after the make-up. The young girls sport usually tight-fitting kimonos which are in combinations of red and yellow for effect, and a very loose "sawal". The flabby "sawal" is strapped around the waist. After folding the wide rim a knot is tied to secure it tight. The girls also sport a long, one-piece shawl or bandana which is worn from their shoulder across their bosoms to the hips. For

slippers, they use colored ones with gold trimmings. Their hair is braided nicely and with much "sticking", much like a Chinese girl's with gold hair pins bedecking their coiffure.

The moro weddings are most colorful. Days before the celebration, the bride's home is decorated with buntings, banners and vari-colored streamers. From post to ceiling, the house is covered with the most colorful embroidered draperies, made of arabic designs and figures. Big mantle pieces cover every inch of the ceiling. The floor is covered with big-sized mats where the relatives of both parties assemble in big numbers. They take sitting or squatting positions, filling every available space and the effusions of sweat and bodily odor fill the air and suffocate the room. The oldsters chew buyo incessantly, and show their colored teeth as they grin and spit continuously into a common receptacle that is passed around for that purpose. While the beating of the gongs continue intermittently, the old women make laborious efforts in the yard, preparing choice viands. The cackling and spurting noise of the fire from dried leaves and split wood accompanies the hum and drum of music from cymbals and gongs. The shuffling of dirty feet disturbs the dust that fly all about and finally settling on the big spread of food on an improvised bamboo table.

Somewhere in the bay, festooned "cumpit," with sails that match in beauty and in colors that of the rainbow, escort the bride and groom. In the ceremonial house, the "gabbang," the cymbals, and the singing continue to rise in intensity, and the brass gongs are

beaten with increasing zeal and ferocity. The two are then pronounced man and wife. The feasting continues for days. The bride and the groom's relatives, their friends and their friends' friends, come streaming in endless numbers. A decorated truck with a playing brass band may be rented to cruise on the streets for days.

After this celebration, there is another celebration which is also as colorful as the wedding ceremony itself—the "hariraya". The moro "hariraya" is equivalent to our own Holy Week. It is a week of feasting. The day is usually spent in going to church or mosque to hear religious services. Each church-goer must bring his or her own mat or "petate" to kneel on. The men usually occupy the front part of the altar and the women the rear. No seats are allowed: people either stand during the service or squat. First, they stand, then they kneel and bow down; their arms are outstretched forward, palms down, and they murmur some prayers. At a certain stage of the service, their arms are raised, palms up and open, and they swing their heads from left to right, while they recite their prayers. At this stage, their souls are already "purified" and cleansed of sins. At the end of the service, those who had harbored ill-feelings and had become enemies for a long time, make up and embrace each other. Their enmities are forgotten; every ill-will is buried in the past. They are new men again, according to their belief.

I love Sulu for its quaint ways, modes, and manners. It has a picturesque culture that is not found in any other place in the Philippines.