

# AN ENCOUNTER WITH MINDANAO AND SULU CULTURES

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*For the past nine years the Dansalan Research Center in Marawi City has been conducting annual summer sessions on Mindanao and Sulu Cultures. The Director of the Center offers us a brief glimpse at the latest such seminar, which was held from April 11 to May 6 of this year. As even this short report will suggest, the Dansalan project offers a concrete and well-tested model of what can be done to promote interreligious understanding/encounter among educators and ministers and break down the barriers of distrust.*

On Friday, May 6, our Ninth Annual Summer Session on Mindanao and Sulu Cultures ended. Thirty people were enrolled in the month-long program, including four Protestant and three Catholic seminarians, three Carmelite nuns, a Franciscan lay brother, an American Franciscan Catholic priest, a staff member of the University Research Center at Mindanao State University, fifteen college and secondary teachers from various schools in Mindanao, and Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Goodrich from Pemberton, Minnesota, who have recently joined our Dansalan staff as volunteers-in-mission for a year under the United Board for World Ministries. The completion of the course by these thirty friends brings the total number of alumni' from nine years of our Annual Summer Sessions to 177—almost 20 per year. They have been mostly Filipino schoolteachers, church workers, and graduate students; but we have had foreigners as well including American, Canadian, English, Indian, Iranian, Irish, Italian, and Pakistani enrolees. We have always had a few Muslims enrolled also, although naturally the program is designed especially for Christians.

The Annual Summer Session is one of the most important programs we conduct at the Dansalan Research Center in aid of fostering improved knowledge and understanding about Islam in general and Muslim Filipinos in particular. The schedule calls for classes in the morning hours, five days per week from 7:30 to 11:45 in the morning—with a half-hour break for snacks. There are three courses which everybody takes. The first of these, *Introduction to Islam*, was taught by Father Michael Diamond (who has had three years of

graduate studies in Islamics in Rome and has worked in Mindanao since 1969) of the Prelature of Marawi. I myself taught the second basic course, *Islam in the Philippines*, which treated Islam's arrival and spread in the Philippines, the manner in which it has been embraced by Filipinos and has affected their culture and world view, the character of Christian-Muslim encounter in the Archipelago, and the dynamics of contemporary Islamic renewal and change. The third course, *The Muslim Filipinos*, was divided into four week-long segments: one on "The Marano" taught by Dr. Mamitua Saber, a Maranao Muslim sociologist from Mindanao State University; another on "The Literary Heritage of Muslim Filipinos," taught by Prof. Alfredo Tiamson from the staff the Ministry of Muslim Affairs; and a third on "Sulu and the Crisis in the Muslim South," directed by Prof. Asiri Abubakar, a Tausug Muslim from the University of the Philippines. The fourth week is devoted to a discussion of the issues in Muslim-Christian dialogue, led by Msgr. Bienvenido Tudtud, Bishop of the Prelature of Marawi.

One feature of this final week is a day-long dialogue. This year the dialogue involved the Summer Session enrollees (all but one of which were Christians) and twelve local Muslims, some of them teachers from Mindanao State University and the Jamiatul Philippine Al-Isalmia. The dialogue, which began at 9 o'clock in the morning and ended just before 4 in the afternoon, was characterized by an open, animated, and constructive exchange of views on the theme "Our Images of Each Other: What Can We Do About Them?"

The afternoons, evening, and weekends of the Summer Session are free for study and research in the library—and also for special presentations and field trips. This year, Dr. Nagasura Madale of Mindanao State University lectured one afternoon on the folk epics of his people, the Maranao. On another occasion, Father Erwin Schoenstein, O.F.M., one of the enrollees and a long-time missionary in the Philippines, gave a splendid talk on "St. Francis and Islam." On yet another afternoon, three of the Research Officers of the Dansalan Center gave brief reports on their newly completed thesis researches. And one day an official of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Muslim Affairs, Mr. Bani Masnar, came over to explain the organization, functions, and programs of the Ministry.

The field trips included a visit to the Aga Khan Museum at Mindanao State University with its excellent collection of Muslim Filipino artefacts, and to the King Faisal Center for Arabic and Islamic Studies nearby. Our annual one-day picnic found us travelling as far as Poona Bayabao on the east side of the Lake, where we visited a well-preserved Kota (a Marano fort made of earth, stone, and bamboo) and to several other communities where we were hospitably welcomed into the homes of Maranao families. We also witnessed the devastating effects of the drought we've been enduring since October, which has resulted in the lowering of the water level of the Lake by more than three meters with serious consequences for wet-rice agriculture and other farming. On another occasion we visited Tugaya on the west side of Lake Lanao which is famous for its brass foundries. We were fortunate to

come at a time when the workers were pouring molten brass into the clay moulds as part of the ancient "lost wax" method of brasswork.

And, of course, we also attended the Friday Assembly prayers in one of the large mosques in a municipality near Marawi. Summer Session participants, most of whom have never witnessed Muslims at worship in a mosque, are always much moved by the experience. The women are made very welcome among the Muslim women in the curtained-off area in the area of the mosque, and the men take up positions behind the rows of Muslim worshippers who follow the movements of the prayers led by the *Imam* in front. While few could understand the Maranao of the *Khatib*, this year all were impressed by the fervor and animation of his preaching and his recitation from memory of Qur'anic verses in Arabic.

When our Summer Session participants return to their respective homes, they are changed persons. They will never again think of Muslim Filipinos in the same way as before. Their (usually negative) images are radically revised, and they are full of details of what they saw and heard and tasted and learned. And they share their new information and insights with relatives, classmates, students, parishioners, and many other people. Which of course is precisely why we conduct the Summer Session. It has a constructive impact that goes far beyond the relatively small number who enroll each year.

Next year, in 1984, our 10th Annual Summer Session will be the first month of a three-month long International Summer Institute for Islamic Studies.\* This new program, which will be conducted jointly by the Dansalan Research Center and the Prelature of Marawi, will be designed not only for Filipino participants but also for professional church workers of any nationality who are engaged in, or preparing for, ministries in predominantly Muslim contexts. In addition to our usual Summer Session program, we will have more general Islamic Studies courses taught by internationally recognized specialists, both Christian and Muslim. This will be a new venture for us, but we are convinced that it will meet a real need. Already we have had inquiries from as far away as Kenya in Africa, and from India, Pakistan, and Malaysia. Our purpose, as always, is to contribute to better Christian-Muslim understanding as a crucial value in itself and not as a stratagem for the Christian evangelization of Muslims.

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\* Further details on this program are reported in the present Bulletin under "Coming Events."