Border Crossing and Politics of Religion in Sulu

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Introduction

Sulu Archipelago lies at the southernmost part of the Philippines, adjoined on both Malaysian and Indonesian border. In a sense, it is a “contact zone” of different nations, ethnic groups, traditions and cultures. Geographically, Sulu Archipelago is connected by Sulu Sea to Sabah (Malaysia), and by Celebes Sea to Kalimantan (Indonesian part of Borneo) and to Sulawesi Island (Indonesia). As we will examine in detail later, between Sulu and its adjoining areas, various border-crossing activities such as fishing voyages, migration, trans-islands trading or “smuggling” are quite active up to this day. These border-crossing activities have deep historical backgrounds. In contemporary Sulu society, the significance and impacts of these border-crossing activities are huge, not only in its socio-economic dimension but also in its cultural and religious aspect as well.

The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the impact of cross-border migration to the local religious (both Islamic and “folk-Islamic”) practices in a Muslim community there, describing the border-crossing activities in Southern Sulu (namely, present-day Tawi-Tawi province). Firstly, this paper gives brief historical context of border-crossing activities in Sulu in general. Then, it describes the border-crossing activities of contemporary Sama society in southern Sulu. Finally, this paper tries to analyze a complex inter-play of cross-border migration, Islamic resurgence and local “traditional” religious practices among the Sama community in Sulu. Special attention will be paid on the Sama community in Tabawan Island in Sulu Archipelago.

Historical Setting: Sulu in the Maritime Malay World

At present, Sulu Archipelago is placed in the southernmost part of the Philippine Republic. It is a typical border zone, keeping both geographical proximity and the cultural affinity to nearby Malaysia and the Indonesia. Geographically, present-day Sulu Archipelago is positioned as the crossroads of three large islands of maritime Southeast Asia: Mindanao, Borneo, and Sulawesi Islands. In pre-colonial time, Sulu was one of the emporiums in the maritime trade in Southeast Asia. Its political and economical center was Jolo Island where capital of the Sulu Sultanate placed. Trading zone of the Sulu Sultanate extends far beyond the Sulu Archipelago itself. The trade was systematically incorporated by the transnational long distance trade between the maritime world of Southeast Asia and China. In the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, sphere of influence of Sulu Sultanate reached northeast coast of Borneo, some part of Celebes
and Palawan Island.

In Sulu, one can easily notice the cultural and religious connection to other parts of Insular Southeast Asia or, more particularly, so called “Malay World” up to this day, because of the predominance of the “Moro” or Filipino Muslim population there. Though the exact detail of early introduction of Islam to the Philippines is still unknown, we can trace roughly its process through the “tarsila” (royal genealogies) of the Muslim rulers of Mindanao and Sulu and from other relevant sources. The term “tarsila” comes from the Arabic “silsilah” (“link” or “chain”). It is used in the Southern Philippines as in other parts of the Indonesian and Malay World to refer to written royal genealogies. According to Majul’s interpretation of the Sulu tarsila, a certain Tuan Mashaika came to the Sulu as one of the earliest known Muslim (Arab) missionary. He was buried in Jolo, and was presumed as one of founding members of Muslim community in Sulu. Though the exact date of his coming to Sulu is still unknown, one can estimate it as early fourteenth century.

In 1380, Sheikh Karimul Makdum (Tuan Sharif Awliya), an Arabic missionary/trader, came to Simunul Island, Southern Sulu. He founded a mosque there, which is the oldest mosque ever built in the Philippines. Majul says that the coming of these makdumim (Islamic missionaries) to the Philippines at that time was an event contemporaneous with similar phenomenon in other parts of the Malay World, and they were not without Sufi elements. After the coming of Sheikh Makdum, a Muslim fleet from Minangkabaw, Sumatra, came to Jolo, and its leader, Raja Baguinda, established himself as leader of Muslim community in Sulu.

In 1450, Sayyed Abu Bakar, an Arabic descendant of the Prophet Muhammed, came to Jolo, and married the daughter of Raja Baguinda. After the death of Raja Baguinda, Sayyed Abu Bakar founded the Sultanate of Sulu and established Islam as a base of both religious and political foundation of the Sulu Sultanate. Around the end of the sixteenth century and in the first decades of the seventeenth century, political alliances with the other Malay Muslim principalities, such as Sultanate of Brunei, against increasing dangers of Western colonization guaranteed the preservation of Islam in the Southern Philippines.

As a matter of fact, the connection to other Malay Islamic states like Brunei was very important in the history of Islam in the Philippines during the pre-colonial time. After the Spaniards conquered Moslem Manila in 1571, they directed their attention southward. The task was more formidable in the south because of the possibility that Brunei would afford protection and support to weaker Moslem rulers in the area. The ruler of Sulu, was a vassal of Brunei and had himself originated from that kingdom. Even during the 17th century, Brunei and Sulu were strongly related concerning the control of northern territory of Borneo where plenty of maritime- and jungle products were produced and sought by foreign traders. In this competition over northern Borneo territory, or present-day Sabah, the Sulu Sultanate finally established hegemony over Brunei in the seventeenth century.

Well, this event is the one of the historical origin of the territorial dispute over Sabah between Malaysia and the Philippines in later periods. In 1877 and 1878, Overbeck, Cowie and Dent brothers succeeded, on annual payments, in getting grants of territory in northern Borneo from sultans of both Brunei and Sulu Sultanates. During the pre-
colonial period in general, both the Sulu and the Maguindanao Sultanate were typical Malay coastal states (“negeri”) in the maritime Southeast Asia. The political and economic center of the Sulu Sultanate was Jolo Island. The trading zone of the Sulu Sultanate extends far beyond the Sulu Archipelago itself. According to Warren, the trade was systematically incorporated by the long distance maritime trade between the maritime world of Southeast Asia and China.6)

The main commodities of this trans-regional trade were mostly marine products such as sea cucumbers, shark-fins, pearls, tortoise shells and edible birds-nests. For supplying labor power needed for collecting these marine products, the Sulu datos (aristocrats) engaged in “slave raiding” in almost all the coastal areas within the maritime Southeast Asia. In the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, the sphere of influence of Sulu Sultanate reached northern and eastern coasts of Borneo, some part of Celebes and Palawan Island. A lot of different ethnic groups engaged in the complex political and/or economical network of Sulu. These groups include such as Tausug, Sama Dea, Sama Dilaut, Iranun, and Chinese, too.7)

Just as same as other Malay maritime states, the Sulu Sultanate embraced Islam as a state religion. Because of this, Sulu followed quite different historical patterns of development compared with the rest of the Philippines. The latter part had been colonized and Christianized by the Spanish colonial power. In a sense, Sulu has been a “margin” or “frontier” of Malay Islamic World. Up to this day, Muslim society in Sulu still maintains its distinctive Islamic cultural heritage within the Christian dominated Philippine Republic.

In the latter half of nineteenth century, Spanish military outpost was constructed in Jolo Island. In 1898, United States engaged a war with Spain resulting from rivalry over Cuba. United States won the war and, as the consequence, took possession of entire Philippine Archipelago, including Sulu. It was only after the colonization of the entire Philippine archipelago by the United States when the Sultanate of Sulu finally brought to the end.

Background of Border-Crossing Activities

As mentioned above, long-distance, inter-islands socio-economic transaction such as trading or migration is not new in this area. For example, inter-islands migration of the Sama (Bajau) people has been existed even before the colonial times. The flow of maritime population is indeed very old. It made a foundation for both socio-economic and the cultural linkage among the area covered by present-day so-called BIMP-EAGA (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines-East ASEAN Growth Area). Inter-islands migration have been quite common among the Sama in this region. The reasons for migration varies; such as seeking for good fishing ground, for avoiding political conflict, and/or through the inter-marriage, and so on.

Especially, cross-border human flow is quite visible between the east coast of Sabah and the southern parts of the Philippines. For example, the Sama people in Semporna have quite a few relatives and even families in Sitangkai, southern most part of the Tawi Tawi through marriage and other social linkages. Besides it, tens of thousands of Muslim Filipino refugees have fled war torn Southern Philippines and settled down in Sabah as “refugees” since early 1970’s. Those refugee population includes several Muslim ethnic groups from the Sulu archipelago such as the Sama (Bajau), Tausug (Suluk) and the
Illanuns (Iranuns). After the middle of 1970’s, a new kind of migrant population increased quite significantly. Those new comers are not mainly a political “refugee” but migrant workers seeking for better economic opportunities. Recently, how to deal with those “refugees” and other migrant populations become a serious socio-political issue in contemporary Sabah.

Border Crossings in Contemporary Sulu

As we have mentioned earlier, after the colonization by the United States, both the maritime trading network of Sulu and the Sultanate itself, which depends on it, were forcefully abolished. However, another kind of cross-border trade and the flow of peoples in and around Sulu are, until now, far from disappearing. Even after the introduction of modern nation states, various cross-border activities like cross-border fishing voyage, “smuggling,” and migration have been flourishing very actively.

Cross Border Fishing Activities

Traditionally, significant parts of Sulu population who have engaged in fishery were the Sama. Sphere of cross-border fishing activities of fishermen from Sulu archipelago is mainly concentrated in and around the border zone between northeast coast of Sabah and the Southern Philippines. However, it is also not uncommon for these Sulu fishermen to reach a sea area around Labuan Island near west coast of Borneo and even the Indonesian waters such as east coast of Kalimantan and/or Sulawesi area. The size of these cross border fishing varies from small scale family-oriented activity to the large scale one which is often organized by Chinese or Indonesian fish buyers and brokers. Not all of these fishing are legal. Therefore, sometimes there are frictions and tensions between the cross-border fishermen and the local authorities such as police or military units responsible for border control. When I visited a small coastal village near Tawau, an east coast town of Sabah, I noticed most villagers are the Sama from Siasi Island, near Jolo. One village boy told me that his father was detained for three months in Indonesia because of engaging illegal cross border fishery in Indonesian waters. According to him, that activity was organized by a Bugis broker but without permission of local authority.

Among the Sama speaking groups, Sama Dilaut is the most sea-oriented people. This group has often described as “Sea Nomads” for their distinctive way of life as boat-dwelling seafarers. As a seafaring nomad, they live and move on their house-boat from one fishing ground to another going after fishes. At present, most Sama Dilaut fishing folk in Sulu live mainly in stilt houses on coastal area, abandoning already the traditional nomadic way of life. However, significant numbers of Sama Dilaut families still live or, at least, spend most of their time in the house-boat in off-shore islands near Semporna, an east coast town of Sabah, Malaysia. The house-boats of Sama Dilaut have several types which are called “lepa,” “kumpit” and “temple” respectively. These house-boats are not only their dwelling spaces, but also their means of transport and their device for fishing itself. They are constantly moving by the houseboat, because the most suitable spot for fishing varies from time to time, depending on conditions like the ebb and flow of tide, directions of winds and so on. One of the important factors is seasonal change of monsoon winds.
Another reason for seafaring movement of Sama Dilaut is to seek security and safety. As we would mention later, there exist a lot of “pirates” or “outlaws” like bandits or “private armies” supported by local warlords in the border zone because law and order have drastically deteriorated because of rampant separatist insurgency in the Southern Philippines. The last but not least reason for moving is social reason; to visit relatives in occasions like religious rituals, wedding ceremonies, and funerals.

**Cross Border Trade**

As we have already mentioned, maritime trade was vital element of social life of Sulu Sultanate. Even after the colonization and abolishment of the Sultanate, maritime cross border trade has been quite active up to this day. Some of these trading activities are officially sanctioned and endorsed under the name of “Barter Trade.” This Barter Trade between Southern Philippine and Sabah is still active.

Due to the geographical proximity with the Southern Philippines, Sandakan and Tawau are the two main ports of this Barter Trade. Monthly average value of goods exported from Sandakan to the Southern Philippines is around 2 million Malaysian Ringgits (RM). These export goods include cigarettes, sugar, biscuits, second hand clothing, generators, radios, casettes tapes and other appliances. The opposite value of goods imported from the Southern Philippines to Sandakan is around RM 30,000 to RM 40,000. These imported goods include household goods such as Philippine-made skin lotions, perfumes, candies and small goods, which are mainly for the consumption for the Filipino immigrants in Sabah. Most of the boats used for barter trade are of sizes ranging from 15 to 20 tons which are known as “kumpits.” There are around 36 shipments per month in average. The licenses for Barter Trade are issued by the State Ministry of Finance and under the proper co-authorization by other agencies such as Custom department, Police, and Immigration. Sabah State Government encouraged this Barter Trade under the framework of BIMP-EAGA economic cooperation.

Except this “Barter Trade” or officially endorsed trade, other cross-border trading is, generally speaking, anything but a “smuggling” at least from the government’s point of view. Therefore, in theory, unauthorized cross-border trade could be an object of strict control and suppression by the respective government authorities. During my fieldwork between the years 1993 to 1994 in Sulu, it was not difficult for me to find these “smugglers” or illegal cross border traders in the villages. Even during 1990’s, illegal cross border trade are nothing but an order of the day. Though goods and articles of the trade are due to time and route, various marine products, manufactured foods and clothing are typical items.

As a kind of informal economy, any exact statistical data on the cross border trade does not exist. However, we can estimate that even today this cross border trade plays a significant role in the local economy in and around the border zone of Sulu. Generally speaking, it can be recognized that cross border trade is more active in the border between Sabah and Sulu, than that of between Sulu and Indonesia. This might be because of difference of strength of border control and also that of economic condition between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Until the first half of 1960’s, the border between Indonesia and the Philippines was much more porous. Due to this fact, there are many local veterans in Sulu who
experienced cross border trade between Sulu and Indonesia during 1950’s to 60’s. Various marine products like sea-cucumbers and shark’s fins were important commodities since pre-colonial period up to present. Now, many sea products are exported to different sides of border depending on the relative market price. Highly depending on changeable weather and other natural condition, the prices of these marine products constantly fluctuate in both sides of border. For fish brokers and traders, the difference of market prices of any sea products between the national borders could give them a great business opportunity.

Therefore, the traders and middlemen are always paying attention to the actual change and fluctuation of prices in both sides of border. This advantage for border crossing trading is by no means limited to marine products. For example, some kinds of beer, liquor, and cigarettes are relatively cheap in the Philippines in compared with Malaysia. Taking advantage of this price differences, many traders of Sulu have engaged in exporting these “contraband” goods (liquors, cigarettes etc.) to Sabah, Malaysia. Of course, these cross border trade of “contraband” goods are illegal; nothing but a “smuggle” from governmental point of view. So these “smuggle” are highly risky business. When I conducted field research in Sulu, I happened to know one trader. He conducted the cross-border trade of liquor between Sitangkai Island (Philippine side) and Semporna, the east coast town of Sabah. On average, the frequency of the trade is three to four times a month during the year 1993. At that time, he procured twenty box of whisky for one trading trip. It cost about 4,300 Philippine pesos at that time. When he brought that whisky to Sabah, he could easily sell it in RM 800 which was, at that time, equivalent to about the double of the original cost.

Cross-Border Migration from Sulu to Sabah

As we have already mentioned, migration or human flow between Sulu and Sabah is nothing new in the history of this area. Generally speaking, there have been four stages of migration to Sabah from neighboring areas, namely; a) pre-colonial unrestricted inter-island “hopping” of seafaring communities from the region’s archipelago states; b) the British “importation” of foreign laborers during the colonial era; c) the “exodus” of Muslim refugees from the southern Philippines in the 1970s and d) the successive influxes of laborers from neighboring countries in response to the rubber and timber economic booms from the 1950s until the early 1980s. In pre-colonial days, the Sama seafarers were relatively free to move between Sulu and Sabah. There was no effective border control up to the 20th century.

Even after the de-colonization and its introduction of modern border control system, human flow between Sulu and Sabah is far from disappearing. As we will analyze more in following section, a kind of civil war between MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front, a Muslim secessionist movement) and Philippine government was going on in Mindanao and Sulu during 1970s. Because of this conflict and its devastating negative effects to local economy, huge numbers of refugees evacuated to Sabah from Sulu. As for the Filipino refugees, there are various estimates of their total number. Sabah State Government estimated that there were 70,000 of them living in Sabah in the 1970s while the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated their number to be closer to 100,000. On the other hand, community leaders in Sabah alleged that
their number might have exceeded 130,000. However, the 1991 Housing and Population Census put their number at 57,197. The differing estimates given at various times by different parties serve only to underline the vital issue of control and co-ordination over the entry and exit of foreign nationals into Sabah.13)

Though the exact ethnic composition of these refugees is unclear, a lot of Sama and Tausug were among them. They were relatively easy to evacuate to Sabah, because of both geographical proximity and the traditional social ties between ethnic communities in both sides of border. Up to present day, this kinds of refugees from Sulu are not uncommon because of ongoing sporadic fighting between Muslim Separatist organizations (like MILF and/or Abu Sayyaf Group) and the Philippine Military in Mindanao and Sulu. If this deteriorating security and economic situation in the Philippine side of border would be the “Push-Factor” of the migration from Sulu to Sabah, the “Pull-Factor” of migration to Sabah is the relative prosperity of Malaysian economy in compared with the Philippines side (especially, Sulu). Up to 1980s, massive inflow of laborer occurred because of “timber boom” in Sabah. Despite the end of the “timber boom” in the 1980s, substantial influx of laborers from the Philippines, particularly from Sulu continued because of relatively poor economic condition and high rate of unemployment in Sulu. It is quite difficult to know the exact number of these immigrants from Sulu to Sabah. According to the 1991 Housing and Population Census, there are 425,175 “Non-Malaysian Citizens” out of the total population of 1,734,685 in Sabah. Thus non-Malaysian made up 24.5% of the total population of Sabah. More recently, non-Malaysian citizens as a whole totaled 784,100 out of the Sabah’s mid-year 1997 population estimate of 2,663,800. Thus, the percentage share of “Non-Malaysians” in Sabah had increased to 29.4% relative to the total population of Sabah.14)

But even this figure may be the underestimation. In 1997, then Rural and Entrepreneurial Minister of Sabah, Datuk Nasir Tun Sakaran confirmed that there were around half million illegal immigrant in Sabah. According to him, Federal and Special Task Force (FSTF) documented the number of illegal immigrants since 1989, and a total of 413,832 illegal immigrants were registered up to August, 1997.15) In 1999, PBS (Parti Bersatu Sabah) Information Chief, Henrynus Amin insisted that the one third of Sabah’s population now comprise foreigners of which half are undocumented people. According to him, while the local population is growing at two per cent, the foreign population is growing at an alarming rate of 4.2%. Based on this figure, he asserted that the undocumented foreign population would have overtaken local Sabahans by the year 2030 unless strong and drastic measures are taken. He also claimed that tens of thousands of foreigners were recruited to work in plantation sector in Sabah in the last decades and some have since obtained blue ICs.16) Another Sabah State official, Assistant minister to the Chief Minister Datuk Mannnan Jaksa acknowledged that there were some 600,000 foreigner in Sabah, mainly Filipinos and Indonesians, before the Government’s regularization program was carried out by the Federal and Special Task Force (FSTF) which ended August 31, 1997. And he stressed the issue of illegal immigrants as serious security threat to Sabah.17)

The huge number of illegal immigrants is confirmed not only by the Malaysian politicians, but also by the officials of the Philippines Government. For example, Jose Brillantes, a Philippine Ambassador to Malaysia, estimated that even the number of
illegal Filipino immigrants only (not including Indonesians) in Sabah is at least half million, as of March, 2002. The regularization program by the Federal and Special Task Force (FSTF) with the assistance of the Philippine Embassy and the Indonesian Consulate took place from March 1, 1997 until August 31, 1997. The purpose of this program was to enable undocumented Indonesian and Filipino migrant workers to obtain travel documents from their respective embassy or consulate to legalize their stay in Sabah. When the deadline ended on August 31, 1997, a total of 413,832 immigrants was registered, of which 294,565 were Indonesian and 119,267 were Filipinos.

However, the total number of immigrants are presumed much higher, considering many immigrants entered Sabah illegally or no valid legal documents and thus escaping the contact with any local authorities. As a matter of facts, Malaysian government agencies have repeatedly conducted a massive operation to detain and deport these illegal immigrants. Even between January and October of the year 2002 only, the FSTF recorded a total of 29,344 illegal immigrants detained at the three main detention centers in Sabah prior to deportation to their respective countries of origin. Of the 29,344 total numbers, 18,540 were Filipinos including 7,501 females, 10,526 Indonesians (including 2,857 females) and 278 other nationalities. During this period, the Tawau detention center recorded 13,791 foreign detainees, followed by Sandakan (10,788) and Menggatal (4,765).

Though some of the Filipino immigrants moved to West Coast of Sabah, or even to Labuan Island, majority of them live in the vicinities of the east coast towns of Sabah, like Tawau, Semporna, Lahad Dato, Sandakan and so on. Interesting phenomenon for our concern here is that because of this massive migration and the sojourn in Sabah, a lot of Filipino immigrants are able to speak Bahasa Melayu fluently. And they reproduced their ties with their fellow Malaysian relatives, families and friends. Some of them even got Malaysian Citizenship or permanent residential rights through naturalization and/or other means including fabricating or fake ICs and so on. In the following sections, we will examine the socio-cultural impacts of this massive cross-border Migration from Sulu to Sabah.

Religious Dynamics in a Border Society: A Case from Tabawan Island

The Research Site: Tabawan island

The Tabawan Island is a relatively small tropical island in Sulu. It belongs to Tawi Tawi province, which occupies southern half part of Sulu Archipelago. According to the local census, its registered population is 18,226, though it is presumed that roughly 40% of the total population is now residing in Sabah, either as “refugees” or as “immigrant workers” status.

Except a few Chinese and Christian Philippine migrants from Visayan region, most residents belong to the Sama speaking group. Economically, most of them are engaging in either small-scale fishery or coconuts farming. However, as a consequence of fierce armed conflict between Muslim secessionist rebels and the Philippine government since 1970’s, the socio-economic situation of the Sulu area is increasingly deteriorating. As it has been already mentioned, huge numbers of Muslims from the area, including Tabawan, are seeking asylum in Sabah, either as refugees or as illegal immigrant workers. Significant numbers of migrants from Tabawan are working in Sabah as either
construction worker or plantation worker in an oil palm plantation and so on.

The Sama speaking people in Tabawan are, without exception, Muslims and they consisted one block of so called “Moro” or Muslim Filipino populations. Although, the Sama people in Tabawan are Muslims, they have been also known for their strong adherence to “folk” or “pre-Islamic” elements among their local religious practices. Especially, shamanism in Tabawan Island is famous even in compared with other Sama speaking groups in neighboring islands in Sulu. Traditionally, the shamanism in Tabawan is based on the belief on spirits called “duwata.”21 A shaman locally called “papagan” is a person who can communicate with duwata (spirits) as a spirit-medium and can cure a sick-person or do divination, when they are possessed by these spirits. Most female shaman can serve as a midwife. Usually, most shamans begin to acquire their ability as a shaman after recovering from a serious illness or after having a mystical vision in their dreams.

This belief on duwata has strong connection with the traditional cosmology in Tabawan. For example, there is a deep-drilled well called “duwata’s well” at the island and is regarded by locals as “the origin of the world (awwal junia).” Because of the existence of this well, according to local belief, Tabawan Island itself is “the center of the world (ponsodd junia).” Besides it, as “the center of the world,” Tabawan island is regarded as a place where mystical grace (“barakat”) was given by the almighty God and the spirit. Stories like below shows the typical traditional cosmology in Tabawan.

**Crisis of Shamanism in Tabawan**

Though once so influential as it were, the shamanism in Tabawan now seems to be at the edge of crisis. Especially after 1980’s, symptoms of crisis of shamanism are becoming more visible as showed in a fact that both a number of villagers joining the shaman’s ritual and the amount of donation (“sadakka”) contributed by them at the ritual are decreasing. The shamans themselves clearly recognize these tendencies. During my stay in the island, several rituals were canceled because of the lack of donation to make up the cost of ritual. In addition to it, the number of shamans itself is sharply decreasing than ever.

The interesting thing is that, confronting this crisis, it can be noticed changes of both forms and contents of the shamanism. One of these changes is that, nowadays, shamans are beginning to emphasize a “punishment by God and the spirit” which was not given so central importance before. This change implies that shamans began to emphasize the “punishment by God and spirits” so that the notion can prevent the followers from the abandonment of the faith. For example, it is often said that one might be punished by the supernatural if he abandons their traditional way of life: traditional clothing, foods and, most importantly, the traditional rituals.

The other conspicuous factor is an effect of activities by modern medical sector in the island. As a center of modern medicine, a free clinic was established by government in ten years ago. Since then, a doctor and three nurses have been actively engaging in medical and health care programs. Since one of the sources of shaman’s social prestige has been based on their ability as a healer or as a midwife, one can easily assume that the penetration of effective alternative by modern medicine can be a serious threat to the folk medical practice of shamans. Indeed, some shamans blame those who prefer modern medical clinic for their treatment. Even one shaman hint that those who rely more on modern clinic than shamans would be cursed by spirits.
However, if one would examine the case more closely, the relationship between the shamanism and the modern medical sector is not necessary hostile nor incompatible one. For example, the clinic staff persuaded some shamans to take a medical training program like sterilizing method so that traditional midwife-shaman could take a complimentary and supportive role to the modern clinic. So far, ten shamans took the course. In the long run, however, one cannot deny that the penetration of modern medicine might give damage to a social basis of shamanism.

Secessionist Movement, Islamic Resurgence and Migration in Sulu

Here, the second and the more profound factor to the crisis of Shamanism will be clarified. That is an impact of the Islamic resurgence in the Philippines. Since it has no room here for describing the whole history of the Islamic resurgence in the Philippines, the author will touch on the only basic background information.

Though over 90 percent of population in the Philippines are Christians, there exist around 6 million Muslim populations in the Mindanao and Sulu area. Historically speaking, unlike colonized Christian majority in the north, Muslims in the Southern Philippines had once formed their own Sultanates or Islamic kingdoms and, by so doing, maintained their respective cultures and distinctive identities, resisting fiercely to the colonization by the Spanish. But, since the turn of this century, through the colonization process by the United States, Muslim society in the South known as “Moro Province” gradually began to be incorporated to the colonial framework at the time.

After the Second World War, the Muslim area of Southern Philippines was totally incorporated to newly independent nation-state: The Republic of the Philippines. But this was not a happy end, at least for the Muslims. Facing the massive in-migration of Christian farmers to the “land of promise” which is a synonym of Mindanao, the Muslims in Mindanao and Sulu began to feel that they were becoming more and more marginalized in their own homeland. At the end, during the second half of 1960’s, land disputes between Christian migrants and Muslim locals gradually lead to sporadic armed confrontation. And in 1968, Datu Matalam, a traditional Muslim politician in Mindanao, declared a beginning of “Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM).” In the first half of 1970’s the armed conflict between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led by a Sulu born Muslim intellectual, Prof. Nur Misuari, was aggravated to almost a level of conventional warfare. Even the city of Jolo, the capital city of the Sulu province, was totally destroyed in 1974 as a result of heavy fighting. This “Mindanao conflict” has exerted profound impacts in many fields up to this day.

One of salient features which accompanies the process of this Muslim secessionist movement is nothing but a deepening of Islamic consciousness in the area. Although it is misleading to say that the Mindanao conflict is just a “religious conflict” (because the Mindanao conflict has many complicated aspects which cannot be reduced as simply “religious”), it has been conceived as such in various scene in the conflict. Indeed, the secessionist cause hold a strong appeal to ordinary Muslims when it was propagated as a kind of “Jihad (Islamic Holy War)” which aims to defend the ancestral Muslim homeland against “land grabbing” by the Christian settlers and the government forces of whom majority were Christians. As a matter of fact, both their identities of being Muslim and
the position of Islam as a spiritual core of their identity were consolidated through the confrontation with the Christian-dominated Armed Forces of the Philippines.

Another important point is that Philippine Muslim’s strong consciousness of belonging to global Islamic community or “Ummah” was drastically intensified. Because, at the height of Mindanao conflict, MNLF and other Muslim rebels in the Philippines were strongly supported, both morally and substantially, by other Islamic Countries like Libya, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Pakistan and so on. To sum up, with this Mindanao conflict as a turning point, Islamic resurgence or deepening sense of Islamic consciousness has drastically grown as significant social phenomenon in Muslim dwelling area in Mindanao and Sulu.

Another important factor of this (re-)assertion of Islamic identity is the experience of massive migration to Sabah, Malaysia and other Islamic countries. As a matter of fact, about 40% of total population of Tabawan lives out of the Philippines at present. Generally speaking, the destinations of immigration from Sulu are not limited to Sabah only. As a matter of fact, it is not uncommon among the Muslim Filipinos in Sabah to travel further to other Middle-eastern countries either as migrant workers or sometime as pilgrim to Mecca. Migration to Middle Eastern countries from Sulu became active after the middle of 1970s. There is no exact data for the number of immigrant workers from Tabawan to Middle eastern countries, but in nearby Simmunul Island the 7% of total male and 14% of total female population had an experience of migration to Middle East as guest workers.22)

These experiences of migration have significant impacts not only on the socio-economical dimension but also of cultural and/or religious dimensions of Sulu society. In these experiences of migration, they could keep contact with various Islamic institutions and/or Islamic organizations in either Malaysia or other Middle-eastern countries, a lot of Muslim immigrants from Sulu obtained much more “authentic” Islamic knowledge and re-assert their religious identity as “true Muslims.” Some of these immigrant entered Islamic institution such as madrasah (Islamic School) in either Malaysia and/or in other Middle Eastern countries. After going back to their natal communities in Sulu, some of these returnee became zealous preacher of what they think “correct,” “authentic” and “pure” version of Islam in their respective natal communities.

**Islamic Resurgence and Local Practice in Sulu**

As concrete examples of Islamic resurgence phenomenon in Sulu, increase of numbers of mosques and madrasas (religious school), strict abstinence from alcoholic drinking, wearing a veil by women, increasing numbers of Islamic campaign seminar or Koran reading contests, and many other phenomenon and events can be mentioned. Especially, propagation activities such as Islamic Seminar in madrasa aiming at propagation of either “more correct,” “orthodox,” or “pure” forms of Islam have become more visible in these days in Sulu. These activities aiming at propagating “more correct Islam” are sometimes called “dawwah” or “dakwah” movement. One distinctive feature of these dawwah movements is their strong connection with foreign dawwah groups or movements in other Islamic countries.

In Sulu also, most activities by local dawwah group were performed in coordination with foreign dawwah groups in Pakistan, Egypt, or in Malaysia. The main areas of their
influences are among relatively urbanized areas like the city of Jolo in Sulu province and the city of Bongao in Tawi Tawi province. Both of them are provincial capital, and are socio-economical center of the respective provinces. The teachers in madrasa generally named “ustadz” are among the most active members of dawwah movement in Sulu. Main activity of ustadz is to propagate “true Islam” to local people. To fulfill this purpose, ustadz usually criticizes furiously the local customs and practices which were perceived by them as “un-Islamic” or “against orthodox Islam.” Next speeches are parts of answers in respond to my interview in one madrasa in Bongao, the provincial capital of Tawi Tawi.

Narrative [1]
Purpose of activity in this madrasa is to teach people about the true Islam. There are still a lot of un-Islamic customs in Tawi Tawi. One of the examples is that a lot of women are still not wearing a veil on their faces.
{Male, 20 years old, a madrasa student}

Narrative [2]
There are many un-Islamic customs and traditions in Tawi Tawi. We are trying to change these un-Islamic traditions so that people can live in truly Islamic way. One of these un-Islamic practices is praying for sacred place like a graveyard in the mountain. Many people do this when their child got sick.
{Male, 36 years old, ustadz}

And when I asked about the belief in spirits like duwata or jinn, the answer was as follows;

Narrative [3]
It’s true that jinn exists even in the teaching of Islam. But the power of those spirits is so weak. Therefore, it is wrong to believe in their power. And it is against Islam if Muslim will give offering to anyone other than Allah.
{The same speaker}

As showed in above, beliefs on the power of the spirits or giving offerings to them are criticized by ustadz for the act will threaten the doctrine of “Tauhid” or the Oneness of God. In recent years, tension between ustadz and the practitioner of local belief have become much higher than before. The reason of this tension is that the strength of Muslim dawwah movements in the area is remarkably increasing for the result of both strong supports by and linkage to the foreign Islamic dawwah organization. Even in Tabawan, several foreign ustadz, most of them are Pakistan nationals, actively engaged in dawwah activity there.

Another important factor is that, as we have already suggested, considerable numbers of Tabawan migrant returnees from Malaysia are apt to become familiar to more “authentic” Islam in Malaysia. Some of them became strong supporters of the dawwah movement after their return to the homeland: Tabawan. As a matter of fact I encountered quite a few migrant workers from Tabawan who were active members of dawwah organization like Jumaah Tableeg in either Sandakan or Lahad Dato. According
to them, after their sojourn in Sabah, they would go back to Tabawan and hope to propagate what they understand as “more authentic” version of Islam to their natal communities.

In compared with effects of modern medicine, consequence of critics by the da'wah movements is more serious and fundamental for local shamans. In the case of modern medicine, it is possible for shamans to coexist with doctors in the Clinic, if shamanism could take a complementary role to modern medicine as our argument already pointed out. However, in the case of da'wah movement, it has no room for shamanism to coexist with them. Because, from the viewpoint of ustaz, the very act of shaman’s ritual itself is defined as an act of “deviation,” thus it should be abandoned.

It is in this context that drastic transformation of shaman’s rituals take place in Tabawan now. Now, it seems that the traditional shaman’s ritual becomes an arena of informal political struggle between the da'wah movement led by ustaz on the one hand and the local shamans on the other.

Transformation of Ritual of Shamanism in Tabawan

Here, we examine more concretely the process of transformation of ritual of shamanism in Tabawan. The ritual examined here is called “Pai Bahau” in local dialect, which means literally “new rice.” This is celebrated annually and the purpose of the ritual is, according to some locals, “to express gratitude for the harvest.” Usually, this ritual is performed in a house of shaman, and villagers are used to bring plates of offering made of yellow colored rice to the house at the time of ritual. Then the offerings are placed on the middle of the house of shaman.

Traditionally, the essential part of Pai Bahau ritual is an act of sniffing at the offering by the spirit-possessed shaman. The meaning of sniffing is symbolic acceptance of the offering by the shaman. After the sniffing, shaman made people to eat offerings. After this, the ritual is about to end. In some cases, there are additional dancing sessions of shamans for several days. An interesting point is that the recent Pai Bahau ritual takes gradually a new form which has never been observed before. The new tendency is, as will be showed later, that the ritual speech of shaman is prolonged longer and emphasized as a essential part of the ritual process. In the traditional form of Pai Bahau ritual, the speech of shaman is neither necessary nor essential part of the ritual. The speech is either dialogue between shaman and the villagers or a long monologue of the shaman. As a typical example, long monologue by a shaman at the Pai Bahau ritual in September 1993 will be examined here. This speech was made by a male shaman named Astarani.23)

Narrative [4]

(4.1) You, the human beings! You commit a sin against customs. You commit a sin against agama (religion), because you are accommodating ustaz!

By them, you are made to believe that the jinns (spirits) are saitan (devil). (…)

(4.2) I am not a saitan! I am an awliya (Holy man in Islam). If you don’t believe in jinn or saitan, I can accept because there is a Jinn Saitan (jinn who is also a saitan). But there is a Jinn Islam, too!

The jinns here (the place of the ritual) are Muslims! So, why don’t you join the ritual? You will be cursed because of this!
You are cursed because you don’t join the ritual anymore. *Jinns* are Muslims. They are not *saitans*.

(4.3) Many people are now following *ustadz*, saying that “*Jinns are saitans*.” But *jinns* are not *saitans*.

It is wrong to think that if you do pray (of Islam), you can enter the Heaven. You don’t have to depend on the pray in mosque.

(4.4) Many people still believe that one can enter the Heaven after death as long as one will pray (in mosque). But this is wrong! Praying is only an obligation to Allah! Even If you don’t pray, you can enter the Heaven when you are good and kind to your neighbor.

(4.5) If any *ustadz* want to debate about this matter with me, I do accept the challenge!

Before analyzing what was said in this speech, we will examine “How it was said?” Because we have to examine the particular context and situation in which it was told so that we can grasp the real meaning of this ambiguous speech. First of all, Astarani (a shaman who spoke the speech) appeared in front of villagers in wearing a white long sleeve coat, winding white turban on head. This is a typical clothing of pious Muslims for praying in mosque or that of religious officials most visible of which is *ustadz*. And the monologue style in front of many followers itself is very much similar to that of a religious sermon (*hutbah*) of *ustadz* at either madrasa or at Friday Prayer in mosques.

From these points, it can be inferred that this shaman is highly conscious about his style of being similar to the style of *ustadz*. Since this kind of monologue was rare at the ritual and becoming distinct among the shamans in Tabawan, it is reasonable to suppose this style is a new innovation as a result of imitation of the style of *ustadz*. Imitating the style of *ustadz*, the shaman tries to be imaged by villagers not as “un-Islamic” position as *ustadz* criticizes them but as a position well matched to Islam. However, a question remains that why shamans try to imitate their tough opponents, namely *ustadz*? It will be answered in analyzing the content of the above case.

In (4.1) of the speech, Astarani criticizes both *ustadz* and the people who accept these *ustadz* as their teacher, saying that the people “commit a sin against religion.” In (4.2), Astarani tries to justify a practice of shamanism as suitable to Islam. The reason he holds for the justification is that *jinns* in Tabawan Island are not *fijn Saitans* but *Jinn Muslims*, i.e., *jinn* embracing Islam. In (4.3) and (4.4), the Shaman tries to challenge the teaching of *ustadz* who are, in general, eager to emphasize the importance of praying five times a day as an essential part of Islam. The interesting point here is that though Astarani tries to stage himself as pious Muslim by imitating the style similar to *ustadz*, he tries to change and manipulate the definition of Islam-ness by his speech. In another word, he tries to get back his being Islam-ness, an important symbolic capital, from the monopoly by *ustadz*. This is done by strategy of imitating (of speech style of *ustadz*) and differentiating (of meaning given by *ustadz*): same style, different (or opposite) content.

Here is a negotiation about the definition of “Islam-ness.” As we have already referred, both *ustadz* and shaman are criticizing each other as “against authentic-Islam.” In this sense, *ustadz* and shaman are competitors of a game where players compete with each other for the acquisition of followers by staging their authenticity in religion. Both of them are trying to define the “true” meaning of Islam. The important point here is that the *Pai*
Bahau ritual now seems to be transformed as an arena of the tacit political struggle. This transformation of rituals of shamans was caused directly by the village level tension between shaman and ustaz in Tabawan. However, it should not be missed that this tension itself was caused from an impact of Islamic resurgence movement rapidly spread since Mindanao conflict and massive border-crossing activities (especially cross-border migration) from Sulu to Sabah.

Concluding Remarks

As we have suggested earlier, Sulu Archipelago is a typical border zone not only in its geographical sense but also for its location as a contact zone of different cultures and identities as well. Among the Muslim minority communities Sulu, generally speaking, the sense of belonging to the Philippine state or national identity in general has been relatively weak so far, because of its both historical and cultural connections to the broader Malay Islamic World. In examining the political dynamics of religion in Sulu, we have to take into consideration another important factor: namely the contemporary cross-border migration and the transnational network of Islamic resurgence movement as the by-product of migration. This is supported by the fact that most Islamic resurgence movements in Sulu are originating from foreign Islamic countries like either Malaysia or other Middle Eastern Countries, and are strongly supported by foreign Islamic organizations such as Jumaah Tableeg. In addition, significant numbers of active members of the movement in Sulu are either Malaysian or Middle Eastern educated Muslims intellectuals like ustaz or those who are close to them. Among them, it is quite natural to recognize the sense of belonging to the transnational—or even global Muslim community (Ummah).

Therefore, significant dynamics of religious transformation in Sulu could not be analyzed fully unless taking the transnational-, border-crossing dimension into consideration. As shown in the case of Tabawan Island, the transformation of local religious practices is caused as a result of complex interplay between the local shamans who cling to more traditional local beliefs and practices, the medical clinic organized by the Philippine government, and ustaz supported by transnational Islamic movement which has strong relationship to cross-border migration from Sulu to Sabah, Malaysia or other Muslim countries. As is clearly showed so far in the case of Sulu society, the significance and impacts of border-crossing activities are not limited in narrow economic dimension. Rather, they could play a tremendous role in shaping and transforming the cultural and religious configurations of local community.

Notes:

1) This paper is mainly based on field research data, which were collected during my field work in Sulu Archipelago and neighboring areas from 1992 to 1995, unless otherwise mentioned. Some of the contents of the latter part of this paper derive from my previous paper, Ikuya Tokoro, “‘Transformation’ of Shamanic Rituals among the Sama of Tabawan Island, Sulu Archipelago, Southern Philippines,” in Globalization in Southeast Asia: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives, eds. S. Yamashita and J. S. Eades, (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003), with several corrections and updated data.

2) Cesar Adib Majul, “An Analysis of the ‘Genealogy of Sulu’,” in Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia. eds. Ahmad Ibrahim and Sharon Siddique et al, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, ISEAS,


9) Ibid., 45–47.


12) IDS op. cit., 8.

13) Ibid.

14) Ibid.


18) *Philippine Star* (Daily Newspaper in Manila, Philippines), 25/05/2002.


20) *Daily Express*, 16/06/2002.

21) In some Sama-speaking groups in other islands in Sulu, these spirits are called “jinn” (from Arabic word) instead of “duwata.”


23) Names of people in this paper are not real names. Speeches by local people were originally in Sinama (Sama dialect).