The Power of Sulu

The Sulu archipelago trading zone of the 18th to 19th centuries bridged two worlds and lay at a most strategic point for maritime trade. China, the Philippines, and Mindanao were situated to the north, Borneo to the southwest, and to the southeast the Celebes and Moluccas. It was the story of power wielded over European expansion and commerce (the Spanish, Dutch, and British) in relation to the China trading zone during a period when Chinese trade was strong and profitable.

The heart of the zone was the independent Sulu Sultanate, the entrepot to European and Asian commerce. Aside from its critical location, its varied production resource base and sizeable population also attracted neighboring merchants. The annual arrival of Chinese junks and Bugis prahu at Jolo reflected a regular demand for local products procured principally from the Sultanate’s essential domain—the sea.

To support and strengthen its position for this external trade, the Sultanate developed greater power through inter-insular slave raiding-trading, the coastal procurement trade, and intermarriages with ethnic groups that safeguarded the trade route zone. Within the short span of several decades, the Sulu Sultanate had established itself as an important market center and regional power.
Land of the Current

*Lupah Sug* or "The Land of the Current," is the name given by the indigenous inhabitants to mainland Jolo and the adjacent islands of the Sulu Archipelago. Its native inhabitants were predominantly the Tausug, the Sama and, to some extent, the Badjaw.

During the advent of Western colonization, the people of Sulu waged the longest resistance against colonialism in the whole of Asia, surviving attempts of colonization by the Spaniards for more than three centuries. In contrast with the Mayas, Aztecs, and Incas—which perished together with their religion, language, and other institutions before the fanatical onslaught of the *conquistadores*—the people of Sulu continue to survive with their religion and other aspects of their civilization intact. They proved too strong for the Spanish *conquistadores* and too disturbing to the Americans and other colonizers.

Through time, *Lupah Sug* or Sulu had carved for itself an honorable place in history. Several factors propelled it to acquire power for self-preservation and national development, through its dynamic population, strategic location, rich natural resources, productive trade engagements, the Sulu Sultanate, alliance with other nations, and successful engagements in both war and diplomacy with the colonizers. More than its physical power, which had its ebb and tide, Sulu’s real power lies in its unifying ideology which has been molded by the combined potency of Islam and the *addat*, or indigenous belief—a chemistry of ideals that Sulu people had imbibed deeply and used as source of confidence and courage to deal with challenges that came their way.
The Sulu Trading Zone

The trading zone of Sulu was situated on the margins of European empires and China in the late 18th and 19th centuries. The relationship between this zone with China was significant, especially during the time when the China trade was strong and profitable. By fitting into the patterns of China trade with Europe, Sulu established itself as a powerful commercial center.

To have goods to barter for Chinese tea, the British traded firearms to Sulu in exchange for its sea and forest products. The maritime and jungle products to be found within Sulu territories—tripang, bird’s nest, wax, camphor, mother of pearl, tortoise shell—were new products for redressing in particular the British East India Company’s adverse trade imbalance with China.

The Chinese bartered their goods for native products such as mats, yellow wax, lake wood, tortoise shell, and the famous Sulu pearl. To Sulu went textiles and other imported manufactures and, of crucial importance, guns and gunpowder which contributed to Sulu’s physical power. Tausug merchants on the coast and their descendants developed an extensive redistributive trade in which they wrested the function of the collection and distribution of commodities from traditional competitors, Brunei and Cotabato.
The Power of Kinship

To protect the trade routes, the Tausug merchants on the coast and their descendants developed extensive linkages by trade pacts and intermarriages. They intermarried tribal people, protecting all parts of the trading zone. They lived at the mid-reaches of the rivers on Borneo’s northeast coast, the ethnic groups at the periphery of the trade zone, and their Tausug kindred at the center. This network of interpersonal relations, which was fluid across time and subject to disruption, was integrated by the commercial patterns focused on the Sulu Sultanate as the prime redistributive center for the Sulu trading zone.
Sulu’s Military Power & Anti-Colonial Struggle

Contact with China and the Arab World brought to Sulu knowledge of firearms and advance methods of warfare. The Sulu people used this to augment their traditional weaponry, and improved their fighting capability with additional knowledge and resources they acquired from the Europeans. One significant event that enhanced the military capability of the Sulu forces happened in 1775, when the Sulu warriors defeated the British at Balambangan Island near Brunei, from where they hauled back to Sulu huge supplies of British war materials.

With the advent of European colonization in Asia, the people of Sulu took the challenge of not only dealing with the colonizers diplomatically, but confronting them militarily, as need be. In these struggles, the Sulu Sultanate has provided the leadership capable of preserving Sulu’s dignity and sovereignty.

Today, artifacts of power are testimonies of Sulu’s power and just pursuit of rights and liberty. These artifacts serve, in the midst of the present volatile Mindanao situation, as reminders for the urgent need to institute social justice, lasting peace, and meaningful development in southern Philippines.
In international relations, the statutes of the Sulu Sultanate as a sovereign and independent state were recognized by foreign governments. The various treaties that the Sulu Sultanate had signed with the Spanish, British, French, Dutch, and American governments were testimonies of the capability of the Sulu Sultanate to gain the respect of other sovereigns. This diplomatic capability had been recorded back in time, such as in 1417, when the diplomatic delegation from the Sultanate of Sulu won the admiration of the Emperor of China, who ordered a tomb constructed at Dezhou, Shandong Province to honor Sultan Paduka Batara, who died there while on a state visit.
The Slave Trade

As the Sultanate organized its economy around collecting and distributing marine and jungle produce, there was a larger scale of manpower recruitment in Sulu’s economy to do the labor-intensive work of procurement. Slavery developed to meet the accentuated demands of external trade. Jolo became the nerve center for coordinating long-distance slave trade.

The Iranun and Balangingi Samal, driven by their desire for wealth and power, surged out of the Sulu archipelago in search of slaves. Within three decades (1768 – 1798), their raids encompassed all of insular Southeast Asia. Navigating with the monsoon, their well armed boats (prahus) scoured the coasts of the Indonesian world and sailed northwards to the Philippines. They joined with other Iranun and Samals living at satellite stations on the coasts of Borneo, Celebes, and Sumatra. They returned to Jolo loaded with captives to be exchanged for rice, cloth, and luxury goods. The raiding system enabled the Sultanate to incorporate vast numbers of people from the Philippines and eastern Indonesia into the Sulu population. Traffic in slaves reached its peak in Sulu in the period of 1800 –1846, founded on the basis of trade with China and the West.
Islam: Foundation of Expression

The development brought about by contact with Asian people and culture in Sulu was reinforced by the coming of Islam in the 13th century. As a result of Islamization, the people of Sulu learned the Islamic rituals of praying, fasting, and burying the dead, among others. Socially, the sense of belonging of the Sulu Muslims expanded within the context of the *Ummah* (Muslim global community). In the arts, Islam profoundly enriched Sulu visual art expressions with the Islamic aesthetics of abstraction, stylization of form, and the infinite patterning of curvilinear, geometrical, and calligraphic designs. Local music and literature were likewise enriched following the introduction of new Islamic hymns, thoughts, and narratives.

In politics and governance, Islam had provided the ideology for national unity, and legitimized the institution of the Sultanate, which united the different ethnic groups of Sulu and formalized their relations with the neighboring Sultanates of Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia, as well as those of Mindanao. This political affinity was further strengthened by the bond of marriage between the members of the Sulu royalty and those of the other states and nations. This marriage bond had not only reduced political tensions among neighboring nations, but had expanded Sulu's territorial domain and helped strengthened Asian alliance in the face of European colonial intrusion.
Merging Cultures Through Trade

It was primarily in line with trading that several official missions were sent by the Sulu Sultanate to China in the 15th and 18th centuries. In 1417, a visiting member of embassy from Sulu, Sultan Paduka Batara, died in Beijing, China. His tomb, as well as his descendants who are now Chinese citizens, are found in Dezhou, China.

Aside from the Chinese, the people of Sulu had also contact with the Hindus and the Arabs. From contact with these foreigners emerged a hybrid Sulu culture that historically resisted assimilation into the heavy Spanish-American oriented Philippine culture. Traces of these hybrid cultures are manifested in the religious practices, arts, costumes, languages, and adat (customary law). From the Chinese, the Sulus learned culinary habits, use of porcelain dishes, umbrellas, and white cloth for mourning. The exclusive use of the color yellow is believed to be influenced by the royal court of China. From the Hindus, the people of Sulu learned the burning of incense during rituals and the observance of panulak balah, a water-cleansing day traced to the Ganges River holy bath of the Hindus.

Arab influence can be noted in the use of an Arabic script locally called jawi, Moorish arts, and the use of firearms. The greatest gift to Sulu by the Arabs and other Islamized people was the introduction of Islam and its accompanying legacies of beliefs, ritual practices, and organized socio-political institutions.
Sino-Sulu Trade Relations

Sulu appears in Chinese sources as early as the Yuan dynasty (1278 – 1368), and a lengthy account of the tributary mission in 1417 from Sulu to the celestial court is recorded in the Ming Annals. Little appears then to have been written about the Sulu chain of islands for several hundred years until the beginning of the 18th century, which witnessed an earnest renewal of diplomatic activity and trade between China and the Sulu Sultanate. The Ching Annals refer to five separate tribute-bearing missions dispatched by the Sultans of Sulu in the years 1726, 1733, 1754, and 1763. The envoys of these missions spent several years in China before returning to Sulu on one of the great junks voyaging to the “tributary lands” bordering the South China Sea, with renewed friendship and wealth in gifts. The large number of references to Sulu in the Ching Annals reflected the desire of the Sultans to extend their personal authority and wealth, and to strengthen the state’s influence in a politically fragmented region through Chinese recognition and commerce.

The growth of the Sulu Chinese community can be traced to the evolution of the Sulu Sultanate as a regional entrepot in the years following 1768. Many of these early Chinese settlers migrated to Sulu on the great Amoy junks. It can be roughly calculated that between 1770 and 1800, some 18,000 Chinese visited Jolo on trading junks from southern China. Most of the crew members, passengers, and merchants returned to China on the next monsoon, but many came over to stay only long enough to make their fortune.
Tausug Marriage Tradition

Marriage among the Tausug is done by matchmaking or by parental consent. Marriage is primarily for raising a family and extending kinship relations, and secondary for love and sexual satisfaction. Originally, love or courtship among the Tausug did not happen or, if it did, it was mostly a one-sided (man’s side) affair. Courtship occurs during the engagement period, when the match is approved by their elders.

Tausug marriage customs involve several stages before the wedding proper takes place.

1. *Tingug tainga* involves asking information about the subject of the marriage proposal from sources not related to the lady’s family.

2. *Magpahingitah* is to assign some womenfolk the task of having a glimpse of the woman intended to be the future bride.

3. *Pagposihih* involves a group of respected community members who are requested to inquire, informally but courteously, from the family concerned about the wedding expenses and other needs of the bridal party.

4. *Pagpangasawa* is the actual formal asking of the girl’s hand, and is attended by both the paternal (*usba*) and maternal (*waris*) relatives of both families. They discuss wedding expenses, the *ungsud* or dowry, and wedding apparel. As a token of their sincere and honorable intention, the boy’s family brings with them a gold piece in the form of a ring or necklace as *mojar basingan* (love offering) or *tapil-dilah* (literally: tongue’s companion), a symbol or token of honor and desire for the union of the two families.

5. *Pagturul- taymah* is a joyous activity for both families, as it becomes a lavish party second only to the wedding proper. It is on this occasion that the amount of the dowry is announced to the public and that the date of the wedding is set.

6. *Pagtiyaun* or wedding ceremony. The houses of both families prepare and decorate for the wedding. The festive setting is complimented by the joyous faces, colorful attire, and glittering pieces of jewelry worn by both the hosts and guests.

Reference: Juankio A. Bruno, THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE TAUSUG, Centro Escolar University. 1973
The Sulu Sultanate

The economic, political, and social aspects of Sulu life were developed due to the specialized and efficient functioning of the Islamic institutions that were established. In politics, Islam legitimized the institution of the Sultanate as the system of government. This political institution united the ethnic groups of Sulu and formalized their relations with the neighboring sultanates of Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and locally with the Sultanates of Maguindanao and Buayan and the Muslim principalities of Lanao and Manila. With the establishment of the Sultanate, the people of Sulu referred to themselves as Bangsa Sug or Sulu nation.

The Sulu Sultanate as an institution is headed by the Sultan as its highest official who exercised both civil and religious functions. He is assisted by a Rumah Bichara (legislative council) and advised on religious matters by the Qadi (judge) and the Ulama (religious scholars).

At some points in history, the Sultanate of Sulu had jurisdiction and control over wide territories, which include:

- Kalimantan, Indonesia, with Balikpapan as the seat of power
- Sabah, with Sandakan and Marudu as the seats of power
- Palawan as overseer of Visayas and Luzon
- Basilan as overseer of Mindanao
- Sulu as the overall central government.

Sabah or North Borneo became a prized territorial possession of Sulu in 1675, when it was given as a gift by the Sultan of Brunei who sought the aid of the Sulu Sultan to quell an internal revolt.
Sulu Treaties with Foreign Power

1646 The Rajah Bongsu-Lopez Treaty of perpetual friendship and offensive-defensive alliance, secured by Alejandro Lopez, recognizing the jurisdiction of the Sulu territorial realm with provision for withdrawal of the Spanish garrison in Jolo.

1705 The Sultan Shahabuddin cession of Balabak area in Palawan, secured by Juan Morales de Valenzuela through the Sultan of Brunei.

1725 The Sultan Badaruddin I Treaty secured by the Spanish intermediary Ki Kuan, establishing trade relations and providing for the ransom and exchange of captives, and granting the Spaniards some rights on the island of Basilan.

1737 The Sultan Alimuddin Treaty negotiated by Governor and Captain-General Valdez Tamon for defensive-offensive alliance, free trade, and the recognition of the suzerain power of the Sultan for punishing the infractions of the peace.

1746 The Sultan Alimuddin agreement with Ignacio de Arcada, allowing the freedom of Spanish missionaries to preach in his dominion.

1761 The Sultan Bantilan Treaty of friendship and commerce negotiated by the British explorer Alexander Dalrymple, granting peace of land for setting up an English factory in Jolo.

1836 The Sultan Shakirullah capitulations of peace, protection, and commerce negotiated by Governor Jose Halcon of Zamboanga, with provisions arranging the port duties to be paid by trading vessels and the allowing of a Spanish trading house at Jolo. The Sultan and Datus made commitments to prevent piracies.

1842 The Sultan Jamalul Kiram I agreement with Charles Wilkes, securing the protection of commanders and crews of American vessels coming to trade in the Sulu dominions.

1843 The Sultan Pulalon Treaty of Commerce and Amity, secured by the French commander T.F. Page, leading to the negotiation for the cession of Basilan to the French in 1845.

1849 The Sultan Pulalon treaty with James Brooke, establishing peace, friendship, and understanding with a favored clause, and binding himself to allow British subjects to acquire property within his dominion and not to make any cessions to any other nations.

1851 The Sultan Pulalon Peace Treaty with Governor and Captain-General Antonio de Urbizondo, binding himself to maintain the integrity of the territory of Sulu and its dependencies, conceding the protection of Sulu shipping, and granting him annual pension.

1878 Sultan Jamalul Alam treaty negotiated by Governor Carlos Martinez, confirming the Treaty of 1851, granting annual pension to the Sultan with his leading Datus.