
Boxing Day in Cotabato

Notes from the Field

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Stuck in a Manila traffic jam and monsoon flood, the taxi driver turned to me. "The biggest problem in the Philippines today is the Muslims. They are dishonest." Two weeks later in a more remote locale, a commander of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front looked over the table at me and explained that Filipinos are taken to drink and prostitution, and are not as moral as Muslims. Both men agreed on one thing: Mindanao's Muslims are distinct from Christian Filipinos.

There are important differences between Muslims and Christians in the Philippines as well as throughout the world. But an exclusive focus on difference serves to naturalize separation. Ignored are commonalities between the religious communities in the Philippines: friendliness, family spats, a love-hate relationship with the United States, singing, basketball ... and boxing.

In June 2008, I spoke with Abdulaziz, a prominent elder, at his home in Cotabato, Mindanao. A former Barangay Chairman who is close to the separatists, Abdulaziz is an expert on traditional peace ceremonies. Over tea and cookies, we were discussing his many experiences. When the topic shifted to human rights abuses, the old man grew restless. "The abuses Moros suffered under Estrada proved that the problem was not just with Marcos, but instead the Philippines.

Muslims still do not have the land stolen by Christian settlers, and we have to fight back!" As the emotion peaked, the conversation stopped. The room was suddenly crowded with young men and women, and the television was turned on.

Manny Pacquiao versus David Diaz, live from Las Vegas for boxing's lightweight title! Pacquiao has won titles across numerous weight classes and is the Philippines' prized athlete. He was born to a Catholic family in Bukidnon, near Cotabato, and now resides in General Santos City. But there was no sense Pacquiao was a hometown boy. There is too much tension between local Muslims and Catholic settlers to allow that. No, Moro enthusiasm for Pacquiao appears to be a national sentiment.

The Muslim audience was not just watching the fight—they were participating in it, screaming at the television with every blow landed by Pacquiao. One Muslim woman yelped in delight when Diaz started to bleed. A bearded cleric proclaimed Pacquiao the 'Mexi-cutioner'. The room was packed, the crowd praising Pacquiao's training, skill, and humility. All this time, Abdulaziz' stare did not leave the television. "Pacquiao," he said of the Christian boxer, "is one of us."

For just one hour, these Moros were Filipinos. This is not to say that under each Moro headscarf or beard lays a 'real Pinoy'. But the match showed that the conflict between Moro and Filipino is neither primordial nor fundamentalist. Mindanao's Muslims have similar passions as Catholic Filipinos—but also legitimate concerns with their place in the Philippine state. There is great anger towards human rights abuses, state religious symbols, land ownership, and corruption. Many of Mindanao's Muslims want to build a more Islamic society, especially in the realms of education and law. These people are not radicals and are not cultural opposites of Catholic Filipinos.

When Pacquiao knocked Diaz out in the ninth round, my friends viewed it as a triumph for all Filipinos. We celebrated with a feast of fish and rice. I hoped to continue talking about the conflict, but it was not to be. As lunch ended, the first of many replays of the fight began, the audience duplicating their previous excitement. I submitted to the inevitable and decided to simply enjoy this boxing day in Cotabato.