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Reclaiming Historical Memory: Abdulmajeed Ansano's Islamic and Vernacular Scholarship on the Philippine Muslim Experience

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ABSTRACT

The mainstream history of the Muslims in the Philippines has been written mostly by secular scholars and, to some extent, by Muslim historians who utilize nationalist historiographical perspectives in their works. On the other hand, a few non-mainstream Islamic scholars or *Ulama* have also produced literature discussing the history of Muslims in the Philippines as an integral part of global Islamic history. One of them is Abdulmajeed Ansano, who wrote in both English and Meranaw. This paper identifies the important historiographical themes in the works of Ansano and other notable scholars. Of particular significance among the findings is Ansano's portrayal of Muslim history especially in his most encompassing work, *Gonanao ko Panagontaman: Pantag ko Paratiyaya, Kaisaisa ago Katagompiya* as a counterpoint to both Filipino nationalist historiography and secular Muslim historiography. Moreover, his use of the Meranaw language demonstrates the symbolic and affective power of vernacular expression in confronting issues such as colonization and social ills. The study reveals how Islamic and vernacular scholarship redefines Philippine Muslim history through alternative frameworks of meaning and historical consciousness that transcend colonial and nationalist paradigms.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Muslim society in the Philippines has undergone significant socio-political transformation since the 1960s, when various Muslim movements emerged in response to national upheavals. One major development during this period was the resurgence of Muslim identity consciousness. While many expressed this awakening through political engagement, others particularly the *ulama* or Islamic scholars sought to articulate it intellectually, writing historical and social accounts that placed Islam at the center of understanding the Muslim experience.

Among the Meranaw *ulama*, Abdulmajeed D. Ansano (1943–2007) stands out as one of the most prolific figures who pursued this intellectual endeavor. Trained in theology at the University of Libya and in Islamic Philosophy at the University of the Philippines, Ansano synthesized Islamic and secular perspectives in analyzing Muslim history and society in the Philippines. His professional background as a professor of Islamic Studies at the King Faisal Center for Islamic, Arabic and Asian Studies at Mindanao State University–Marawi, founding member and vice president of the Islamic political party OMPIA, and Regional Education Secretary of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) informed both the depth and direction of his writings.

This paper examines how Philippine Muslim history and society are represented in the works of the *ulama*, particularly through Ansano's *Gonanao ko Panagontaman: Pantag ko Paratiyaya, Kaisaisa ago Kathagompiya* (*Exposition of Aspirations: Toward Faith, Unity, and Progress*). It also compares his portrayal of Muslim identity and history with that of secularly educated Filipino Muslim historians, highlighting how Ansano's integration of Islamic thought and vernacular expression contributes to alternative ways of writing history.

Historically, Muslim historiography in the Philippines had long been dominated by non-Muslim scholars who often subsumed Muslim history within the nationalist narrative. From the 1960s onward, greater Muslim participation emerged through the works of both Islamic-trained *ulama* such as Ahmad Bashier's *History of Islam in the Philippines* (1964) and secularly educated scholars, exemplified by Cesar Adib Majul's *Muslims in the Philippines* (1973). In contrast to these Arabic and English works, some Meranaw writers, including Ansano, employed the local vernacular as a medium for intellectual interpretation and the reclaiming of Muslim historical experiences. His *Gonanao ko Panagontaman* exemplifies this vernacular approach, merging theological reflection with historical interpretation.

This study examines the works of Abdulmajeed Ansano within the intellectual landscape of Philippine Muslim historiography, highlighting his synthesis of Islamic and vernacular thought as a mode of historical interpretation. Through his writings, particularly *Gonanao ko Panagontaman: Pantag ko Paratiyaya, Kaisaisa ago Kathagompiya*, Ansano advances an epistemic intervention that reclaims Muslim historical consciousness from colonial, secular, and nationalist framings. The analysis addresses three interrelated questions: How does Ansano articulate Islamic and vernacular perspectives in interpreting Muslim history and society? In what ways does his historiographical stance differ from that of secularly educated Muslim scholars? And how do his works re-envision Philippine

Muslim history beyond dominant paradigms? By engaging these questions, the study underscores the potential of Islamic and vernacular scholarship to redefine historical knowledge and assert indigenous intellectual agency in postcolonial Philippine contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Muslim identity and conflict in the Philippines has long been mediated through interpretive frameworks rooted in colonial and Western social-scientific paradigms. These external lenses whether nationalist, developmentalist, or liberal-democratic often obscured indigenous epistemologies and moral vocabularies. Foundational studies such as those of Quimpo (2004) and Anderson (1998) expose how "Filipinization" and Filipino nation-building institutionalized Moro marginalization by constructing Muslims as the perpetual "other" within the imagined Filipino nation. Quimpo's critique of postcolonial state formation reveals how the national project reproduced colonial hierarchies of knowledge and belief, compelling Muslims to assimilate into a Christianized, bureaucratic conception of citizenship. Anderson's notion of a "supra-ethnic majority" similarly underscores how the fusion of Christianity and ethnicity shaped the contours of Philippine nationalism, rendering Islam a residual and subordinate identity within the state's symbolic order.

To extend this critique, Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist framework offers a useful theoretical inflection. His concept of *ethnie* a community bound by shared ancestry, memory, and symbolic heritage clarifies the persistence of Moro identity amid centuries of coercive incorporation. Within this paradigm, the Meranaw conception of *bangsa* or *bangensa*, as discussed by Kawashima (2017), resonates as a culturally embedded articulation of nationhood. It links lineage and faith, genealogy and sovereignty, thereby providing an indigenous alternative to Western constructions of ethnicity and nationalism. The *bangsa* idea positions Islamic cosmology as integral to political identity, suggesting that Moro self-definition is not merely reactive but grounded in a long-standing moral and historical consciousness.

Horowitz's (1985) *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* offers further comparative insight, particularly in highlighting how elite agency, collective memory, and symbolic repertoires sustain ethnic divisions. Yet, when applied to the Bangsamoro context, Horowitz's modernization and plural-society frameworks tend to underplay the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of Moro self-articulation. Muslim intellectuals, as several scholars note, did not simply mobilize around material grievances or elite competition; they also engaged in epistemological recovery, reasserting Islamic moral philosophy and indigenous categories of meaning. It is in this regard that Ansano's corpus emerges as a critical intervention. His writings move beyond descriptive ethnography or conflict analysis to reconstitute Moro historiography from within an Islamic and vernacular epistemic frame.

By synthesizing Qur'anic thought, Maranao symbolism, and local historical consciousness, Ansano reclaims historiography as a mode of epistemic resistance. His *Gonanao ko Panagontaman: Pantag ko Paratiyaya ago Kathagompiya*



functions as a corrective to dominant theories of ethnic conflict by locating the roots of Moro alienation in epistemological exclusion the systematic erasure of Islamic worldviews from national discourse. In this sense, his work aligns with postcolonial and decolonial scholarship that foregrounds the politics of knowledge production. The recovery of Muslim history, for Ansano, is inseparable from the reclamation of interpretive sovereignty.

Thus, the intellectual genealogy spanning Quimpo, Anderson, Smith, and Horowitz provides the conceptual scaffolding against which Ansano's intervention may be situated. His synthesis of Islamic theology, vernacular historiography, and postcolonial critique challenges the dominant paradigms of ethnicity and nationalism in the Philippine context. In doing so, Ansano reframes the Bangsamoro question not as a problem of integration or secession, but as a struggle over the right to define history, identity, and moral order on one's own epistemological terms.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design anchored in a rigorous and systematic content analysis of Abdulmajeed Ansano's corpus. Rather than approaching the texts as mere historical artifacts, the analysis treats them as living sites of epistemological practice venues where vernacular-Islamic historiography intervenes in debates on ethnic identity, collective memory, and the decolonization of historical knowledge. The goal is therefore not descriptive cataloguing but an interpretive exposition that reads Ansano's writings as both intellectual production and ethical argument. Primary materials consist of accessible editions, manuscript drafts, essays, lectures, pedagogical notes, and unpublished writings of *Gonanao ko Panagontaman* and related works retrieved from institutional and private repositories. These items were documented with provenance data including repository name, collection title, and accession numbers to keep a record of where each source came from and how it was used in the analysis. Contextual and secondary materials, such as contemporaneous journalistic accounts, ARMM and government records, and institutional documents from Mindanao State University–Marawi, were likewise examined to situate Ansano's intellectual production within its institutional and historical milieu.

The analytic procedure followed a staged, iterative model of content analysis designed to maximize interpretive depth while maintaining transparency. During familiarization, the corpus was read repeatedly in both the original Meranaw and in English translation (where available). The analytic process involved alternating cycles of broad and detailed textual engagement. Panoramic readings were first undertaken to examine the corpus in its full narrative and rhetorical scope, attending to form, thematic structure, and intertextual reference. These were followed by close textual analyses that focused on lexical precision, citation practices, and the use of figurative and didactic language. Open coding was then applied through systematic, line-by-line annotation to capture both the manifest content and the latent meanings embedded in the text. Inductive codes emerged directly from the data such as

reclamation, vernacular pedagogy, Islamic teleology, and moral historiography while deductive codes were introduced from theoretical literature on ethnicity and postcolonial thought. Codes were catalogued specifying operational definitions, inclusion parameters, and representative textual excerpts to ensure consistency and analytic transparency.

Through axial coding, related themes were consolidated into broader conceptual groupings such as the vernacularization of knowledge, history as moral practice, and institutional epistemologies linking specific rhetorical choices in Ansano's writing to larger theoretical frameworks. These categories were then refined through selective integration, where insights from the data were continually cross-referenced with ethno-symbolist, postcolonial, and ethnic-conflict theories. This iterative movement between text and theory helped sharpen interpretive propositions and illuminate how Ansano's thought challenged dominant ways of knowing. Validation was achieved through careful comparison across texts and archival sources. When contradictions appeared, they were not dismissed as mistakes but treated as productive tensions that deepened the analysis and clarified interpretive boundaries. Throughout the process, analytic memos and codebooks were kept to document interpretive decisions.

Rigor and trustworthiness were ensured through several complementary strategies. Methodological triangulation combined close intertextual reading of Ansano's writings with cross-checking against archival sources to strengthen interpretive grounding. Thick description anchored the analysis in extended quotations and contextual detail. Because language lies at the heart of Ansano's intellectual practice, maintaining translation fidelity was essential. When translation was required, back-translation and consultation with a Meranaw language specialist helped preserve nuance and prevent semantic drift.

Ethical and data management procedures adhered to institutional and archival standards. Permissions and access clearances were obtained before the use of materials. The study recognizes the limits imposed by gaps in textual availability some manuscripts remain lost or inaccessible and by the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry. These challenges were mitigated through careful close reading, cross-textual triangulation, and cautious theoretical framing. Rather than claiming exhaustive coverage or definitive conclusions, the analysis offers a set of theoretically grounded propositions meant to deepen understanding of Ansano's thought. In this spirit, the study is positioned as an invitation for continued archival recovery, critical interpretation, and collaborative reflection on the evolving landscape of Philippine Muslim intellectual history.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Significance of Ansano's Writing

Ansano's works, specifically *Gonanao*, provide representative Islamic perspectives of Muslim history and society in the Philippines. Furthermore, being one of the few authors who have written about Muslim society using the Meranaw language and Islam as a lens, his works serve to provide a different avenue to understand Muslim society. It must be noted



that there are quite many secular Muslim scholars who have ventured into reconstructing Muslim history in the Philippines, but the *ulama* doing the same undertaking are few. Because the *ulama* have their own writing approaches and target audiences, they can have a stronger impact on Muslims in Mindanao.

Ansano's works are specifically made for Muslim readers who can read Meranaw material but who may not be able to read literature in English. The use of Meranaw prose by the author has the desired effect of ensuring that most Meranaw readers can read his books. His command of Meranaw poetry and metaphorical expressions enhances the persuasiveness of his views as they serve to awaken Meranaw sensitivities. This is exemplified by the deliberate use of terminologies that evoke powerful imagery in a Meranaw's mind. Take, for instance, among others, *pepanalainged* (colonizers), *miya arab o saruang a tao* (usurped by foreigners), *limping* (deception), *kiyapangarasi o sedepan* (corruption by the west) and *garobat sa kapanginged* (destabilization of society). Moreover, these works are important in the preservation of the Meranaw language. Ansano recognized this need by observing the people's precarious lack of competence to speak Meranaw, especially the millennials among them. He encourages Maranaos to guard the integrity of their language. It is in this manner that literature produced by *ulama* could be set apart from the mainstream secular literature.

Ansano's works and similar ones by Meranaw writers using the Meranaw language occupy a unique place in the literature of Muslims in the Philippines. Their existence not only adds diversity to the discourse on history and society, but also indicates that as a distinct form of literature they hold good prospects for future development that may yet affect Muslim society.

4.2. Ansano's Deconstruction of Philippine Muslim History

Gonanao, although not a history book, treats at length the history of Muslims in the Philippines, principally that of the Meranaw people who are predominant in the Lanao provinces. It typifies a history that counters both Filipino nationalist and secular Muslim Filipino historiography. He argues that secular Western education and institutions run in conflict to Muslim Filipinos' history and culture. He claims further that Western culture (*sowa sedepan*) and institutions such as schools were used as tools by the Westerners to corrupt Muslim culture (*kiyapangarasi o suwa sedepan*). Specifically, he points to the legacy of Dr. Frank Laubach, an American Missionary renowned for his success in introducing western education to the Maranaos during the 1930s. In retrospection, he reminds us that foremost among the ulterior motives of the Americans in educating Muslims in the Philippines was to wean them away gradually from learning Arabic and Islam in general (*paganay a sorong iran na so kabangkiring o ilay o manga Muslim phoon ko kabatiyaa ko Qur'an*). It must be noted that national integration of Muslims, a matter that is strongly advocated by both Filipino nationalists and secularly educated Muslims, not only implies that the history of Muslim Filipinos is part of Filipino history, but also the acceptance of secular institutions.

Ansano's experience as an Islamic scholar and his understanding

of the neo-colonial situation of Muslims in the country formed the major background of his perceptions concerning the history and conditions of his people. Illustrative of this is his choice of the Meranaw language as a medium to communicate his views. This is evident in his ideas on the importance of language in the history of nations when he asserted in *Gonanao* that those nations which attained a considerable degree of development learned their sciences and received knowledge through their languages, while nations that had theirs in foreign languages became captive to foreign influences. The case of the Muslims in the Philippines is seen in this context. He rationalizes this further by declaring that education is the foundation to building a people's civilization, and to their being a distinct people (*pagetao*).

In view of the circumstances, Islam then is seen as a lens to show that the historical struggles of Muslims in the Philippines are related to Islam's history in many parts of the world. He points to the restiveness of the Muslim world due to foreign domination, a problem he considers to be even more pronounced in some areas where Muslims comprise the minority. It is in these places where foreign colonizers (*phanalainged*) have greatly succeeded in dividing Muslims and in creating collaborators among them who helped in co-opting their fellow Muslims. Such is the case of the Muslim Filipinos' history. Ansano attributes this to the past and present colonial political arrangements and their leadership relative to Muslims in the country. The local Muslim leaders were and still are captives of political ambitions, and many are using the *ulama* for political gains.

Muslims society under colonial rule and at present with its attendant socio-political ills are summed up as plaque or social cancer (*manibelek a paninggas*). This being the case, what logically follows is a consideration of the remedies (*bolong*) for the malady. Consequently, the roles of three historically stepped innovations come up as tools with which to diagnose and prescribe solutions for the problems of Muslims in the country, namely, traditional code of laws (*taritib ago igema*), secularism (*ilemaniya*) as represented by democracy, and finally, Islam.

On *taritib* and *igma*, whereas they had played a significant role in Meranaw society in the past and to some extent in the present, Ansano criticizes them as a regressive and oppressive system not suitable in an Islamic community. This is due to its resolute insistence on the birth right of the datu class or elite families (*tongkaya tao*) to rule and feel privileged over commoners. He went further by comparing the traditional hierarchical social system of the Maranaos inherent in the *taritib* to the caste system of the Hindus. He contends that one of the corrupting roles of the *salsilas* (genealogies) and *taritib* is the prescription of a leadership criteria based on lineage or royalty. On this basis, Ansano espouses that the *taritib* and *igma*, which sustained the traditional political organization of the Meranaws, the four principalities of Lanao (*Pat a Pangamong ko Ranao*), is not a solution to the problem of Maranao society. Concerning secularism and democracy, Ansano relates how these have caused negative social impact on Muslims. He laments as a misjudgment the assessment of some Muslim leaders that economic advancement and the solution of the problems of their people lay in learning the sciences and the



ways of the Westerners. The fact, however, is that this created more harm, like corrupting the people with Western morality and materialism. Accordingly, had there not been enough *ulama* to counter this, most Muslim Filipinos would have been swept by secular interests. Ansano points to the history and nature of secularism itself to explain this premise. Morality and religion are marginalized by secularists who regard these as hindrances that should have little influence on political and economic issues.

Democracy, with its emphasis on secularist liberal education and institutional processes such as elections, has proven to be practically ineffective in addressing problems in the Muslim parts of the Philippines. Far from being a cure, it is portrayed as the culprit that perverts Muslim society, pushing it into deeper socio-political turmoil. Ansano asserts that if it could help Muslim societies, it would have already made its impact in bringing peace and development since the Filipinization of the Philippine government in 1935. The Muslims' different traditions and interests are perceived to contribute partially to this. This claim of incompatibility between Islam and democracy does not come as a surprise since this is very common even among Western scholars. As noted by Carmen Abubakar, this is a widespread belief held both by Muslims and non-Muslims. To clarify, Ansano does not oppose democracy based on the classical arguments that sovereignty can only reside with God, but based on its malpractices in the Philippines.

From the preceding discussion, it is apparent that *Taritib* and *Igma* as well as secularism (democracy), are largely flawed experimentations in Meranaw society. We are then left with Islam, which is portrayed as the more viable answer to Muslim conditions in the Philippines. However, it is unable to work as effectively as it should due to unfavorable conditions in the Philippines. Ansano suggests that this can be resolved by promoting Islam in the hope of achieving societal reformation. This is to be accomplished through the Islamization of the people and government.

It must be noted that although Islamic consciousness seems to be relatively high among Meranaws, Ansano estimates that only about ten percent of them are "good Muslims," while the remaining ninety percent are superficial in their Islamic practices. It is this large group of Muslims who need to be subjected to Islamization. In this regard, he insists that the *ulama* must get heavily involved in politics, notwithstanding his qualms with it and democracy. Ansano argues that the *ulama's* indifference to politics in the past, due to their belief that it is dirty, has strengthened the hand of secularists and emboldened elected officials to be corrupt. As mentioned earlier, Ansano was a high-ranking official of the OMPIA Party.

In addition to the *ulama's* entry into politics and parallel Islamization process, government decentralization and unity between the *ulama* and Muslim professionals are required for societal reform to succeed. More importantly, Ansano also advocates for closer relationships and cooperation with the thirteen Muslim ethno-linguistic groups in the Philippines. He believes that Islamization and societal changes are likely to be fostered if these changes took place.

4.3. Comparisons to Cesar Adib Majul's Ideas on Conditions of Muslims in the Philippines

To illustrate the significance of Ansano's works in the context of historiography, I have chosen to compare some of his ideas with those of Cesar Adib Majul as articulated in two of his books, namely, *Muslims in the Philippines* and *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines*.

The works of Ansano and Majul show many points of intersection and divergence. Their ideas on the political history of the Muslims in the Philippines, particularly contemporary movements, bear semblances in varying degrees. They share rather similar stances that the history of Islam in the Philippines should be seen in the broader context of Islam in the Malay region and the greater Islamic world in general. Where they differ, however, is in their discernment of the history of Muslims in the Philippine context and in what direction it should proceed. Whereas Majul sees better prospects for Muslims in integrating with a pluralistic Filipino nation, Ansano explicitly posits that, when possible, Muslims should control their own destiny as a separate people so that they can practice Islam in its complete form. This is denoted by his emphasis and profound use of *bangsa* (nation) and *pagtao* (people).

The difference between Ansano's and Majul's writings also manifests in their perceived motives based on the contents of their works. Majul's books offer ideas on how Muslims in the Philippines can negotiate between the facts of being Muslims and of being Filipino citizens at the same time. Majul's ideas however, as they were written in the 1970's and 1980's, seem to convince Muslim readers to cast their identity with Filipinos. On the other hand, Ansano only discusses Muslim identity and profusely describes Filipinos as *sarawang a tao* (foreign people). We know that this is hardly a singular opinion by an *Ulama* scholar. Abraham Sakili in 1996 described this so called "Moro Problem" as "a system problem at the bottom of which is the fact that Muslims in the Philippines constitute a nationality distinct from and older than the Filipino nationality". Hence by implication, although he does not explicitly condemn the Filipino identity that Muslims must accommodate to, he also does not endorse nationalist ideas of integration for the Muslims.

Ulama works represent their views regarding the "Muslim" perspective of Philippine Muslim history and society. Not only do they often counter Filipino nationalist standpoints, but they also expose the contradictory views of secularly educated Muslims. Muslim conditions are shown to be the outcome of problems that beset Islam, because of European and American colonization (*kaphanalainged*). In the context of the Philippines, the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores marks the onset of a Dark Age in the history of Islam in the country and Southeast Asia as a whole. On the contrary, the advent of Islam is seen as the beginning of an age of enlightenment that allowed for greater connections with Islamic civilization. Muslim history then is constructed along a narrative of enlightenment-struggle (reformation)- enlightenment lines and this enlightenment can largely be attained through Islamization and societal reforms. Ansano portrays Muslim history in the Philippines as still within the "struggle" phase. The present conditions of the Muslims



are illustrated to be characterized by tones of ignorance of darkness (*jahiliyyah*), and this is largely blamed on the political subjugation of the Muslims and the marginalization of Islam that goes with it. Hence, there is a need for Islamization of the Muslims and the need to create an Islamic government (*parinta Islam*).

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Abdulmajeed Ansano's vernacular and Islamic scholarship reveals that the writing of Philippine Muslim history is not merely a contest between secular and religious paradigms, but an ongoing negotiation over epistemic authority. By re-centering Islam and the Maranao vernacular as interpretive frameworks, Ansano challenges the secular, nationalist, and colonial foundations that have long structured historical knowledge in the Philippines. His *Gonanao ko Panagontaman* demonstrates that reclaiming historical memory entails reclaiming the moral and intellectual autonomy of Muslim communities the right to narrate history through their own conceptual vocabularies.

The implications of these findings extend beyond Ansano's corpus. For future studies of Philippine Muslim history, they highlight the need for methodological pluralism that engages indigenous epistemologies, languages, and theological reasoning as legitimate historical sources. This approach moves historiography away from mere political or ethnographic documentation toward a deeper understanding of how faith, language, and memory shape collective identity.

In the context of contemporary Bangsamoro discourse, Ansano's work underscores that autonomy is not solely a political project but also an epistemological one. The struggle for self-determination involves reconstituting knowledge systems that colonial and national narratives have suppressed. His synthesis of Islamic ethics and local vernacular thought thus provides a template for reimagining the Bangsamoro not only as a political entity but as an intellectual and moral community grounded in its own historical consciousness. Future scholarship, by engaging such vernacular-Islamic frameworks, can further illuminate the plural and dialogic nature of Philippine national identity.

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