

BRUNEI VS. SPAIN OVER THE PHILIPPINES

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BEFORE Miguel Lopez de Legaspi implanted the first Spanish settlement in the Philippines at Cebu in 1565, an Asian power had already established political influence over a large part of the archipelago. This power was the Sultanate of Brunei on the island of Borneo.

It is interesting to note, at this point, that the first Spaniards to come in contact with Brunei were the remnants of the Magellan expedition who hurriedly left Cebu after the great navigator was killed by Lapu-Lapu in Mactan and several of his officers were massacred at a party given in their honor by Rajah Humabon. Led by Sebastian Elcano and with kidnapped Filipino pilots to guide them, the surviving Spaniards sailed towards the southwest, missing Panay, passing Cagayan de Sulu, and skirting the southern tip of Palawan until they arrived at Brunei Bay.

The Spaniards were dazzled by the wealth and pomp of Brunei. Antonio Pigafetta, the official chronicler of the expedition, gave a vivid account of their visit to the palace of the sultan. He wrote:¹

The next day the king of that island sent a prabu to the ships; it was very handsome, with its prow and stern ornamented with gold; on the bow

fluttered a white and blue flag, with a tuft of peacock's feathers at the top of the staff; there were in the prabu some people playing on pipes and drums, and many other persons . . .

Six days later the king again sent three very ornamented prabus, which came playing pipes and drums and cymbals, and going round the ships, their crews saluted them, firing the bombards without stones. Then they made us a present of various victuals, but all made with rice, either wrapped in leaves in the form of a long cylinder, or in the shape of a sugar loaf, or in the shape of a cake, with eggs and honey. They then said that their king was well pleased that we should make provisions here of wood and water, and that we might traffic at our pleasure with the islanders. Having heard this, seven of us entered one of the prabus, taking with us presents for the king and for some of his court.

When we arrived at the city, we were obliged to wait about two hours in the prabu, until there came thither two elephants covered with silk, and twelve men, each of whom carried a porcelain vase covered with silk, for conveying and wrapping up our presents. We mounted the elephants, and those twelve men preceded us, carrying the vases with our

presents. We went as far as the house of the governor, who gave us supper with many sorts of viands. There we slept through the night, on mattresses filled with cotton, and covered with silk, with sheets of Cambay stuff.

On the following day we remained doing nothing in the house till midday, and after that we set out for the king's palace. We were again mounted upon the elephants, and the men with the presents preceded us as before. From the governor's house to that of the king, all the streets were full of men armed with swords, spears, and bucklers, the king having so commanded. We entered the palace still mounted upon the elephants; we then dismounted, and ascended a staircase, accompanied by the governor and some of the chief men, and entered a large room full of courtiers, whom we should call barons of the kingdom; there we sat upon a carpet, and the vases with the presents placed near us.

At the end of this hall there was another a little higher, but not so large, all hung with silk stuffs, among which were two curtains of brocade hung up, and leaving two windows which gave light to the room.

There were placed three hundred men of the king's guard with naked daggers in their hands, which they held on their thighs. At the end of the second hall was a great opening, covered with a curtain of brocade, and on this being raised we saw the king sitting at a table, with a little child of his, chewing betel. Behind him there were only women.

Then one of the chief men informed us that we could not speak to the king, but that if we wished to convey anything

to him, we were to say it to him, and he would say it to a chief or courtier of higher rank, who would lay it before a brother of the governor, who was in the smaller room, and then by means of a blowpipe placed in a fissure in the wall would communicate our thoughts to a man who was near the king, and from him the king would understand them. He taught us meanwhile to make three obeisances to the king, with the hands joined above the head, raising first one then the other foot, and then to kiss the hands to him. This is the royal obeisance

Then by the mode which had been indicated to us, we gave him to understand that we belonged to the King of Spain, who wished to be in peace with him, and wished for nothing else than to be able to trade with his island. The king caused an answer to be given that he was most pleased that the King of Spain was his friend, and that we could take wood and water in the states, and traffic according to our pleasure. That done we offered the presents, and at each thing which they gave to him, he made a slight inclination with his head. To each of us was then given some brocade, with cloth of gold, and some silk, which they placed upon one of our shoulders and then took away to take care of them. A collation of cloves and cinnamon was then served to us, and after that the curtains were drawn and the windows closed. All the men who were in the palace had their middles covered with cloth of gold and silk, they carried in their hands daggers with gold hilts, adorned with pearls and precious stones, and they had many rings on their fingers.

This city is entirely built on foundations in the salt water, except the houses of the king and some of the princes; it contains twenty-five thousand fires or families. The houses are all of wood, placed on great piles to raise them high up. When the tide rises the women go in boats through the city selling provisions and necessaries. In front of the king's house there is a wall made of great bricks, with barbicans like forts, upon which fifty-six bombards of metal, and six of iron. They fired many shots from them during the two days that we passed in the city.

From Pigafetta's description, the city must have been in a place known as Kota Batu, now in complete ruins. The place is where the Brunei Museum is located today.

THE history of the pre-European period in Brunei, as in the Philippines, is vague and accounts of early Brunei-Philippine contacts are mainly found in traditions one of the most important of which is the story of ten Bornean chieftains led by Datu Puti who left Brunei to escape tyranny and settled in Panay and Southern Luzon. This tradition, known as the Maragtas, has gained much popularity and even some degree of acceptance as historical fact.² It does not, however, shed much light on early Brunei-Philippine relations.

In the absence of other available sources, we have to rely heavily on Spanish records for our knowledge of early Philippine history. Some of these accounts — those dating around 1570 — claim that it was only the Manila Bay area that was ruled by Brunei nobles.³

When the Spaniards arrived in Manila in 1570, they found that Rajah Soliman was the ruler of the place and his uncle, Rajah Lakandula, was reigning in nearby Tondo. Both were descendants of the royal family of Brunei.

But a more thorough study of the Spanish sources reveals that the following places were either under direct political control of Brunei or within its sphere of influence when Legaspi arrived in 1565: Sulu, Palawan, Calamianes, Mindoro, and the region around Manila including what are now Bataan, Pampanga, Bulacan, Rizal, Manila, Cavite, and part of Laguna.⁴

Furthermore, Brunei's influence was felt in the Visayas and Northern Mindanao. Antonio de Morga noted that there was close ethnic similarity between the inhabitants of the Visayas and those of the people of Borneo. For example, the costumes worn: G-string, sarong, and red *potong* (cloth wrapped around the forehead) and tattooing of bodies made the Visayans look much like the people of Brunei in appearance.⁵

Legaspi wrote that Brunei Malays were frequenting the Visayas. He reported to the King of Spain an encounter with certain Moros who "under the pretext of being traders, preach the Mahometan faith."⁶ He suggested that he be allowed to expel these Brunei Malays from the Philippine islands.

From Cebu, Legaspi transferred his headquarters to Panay from where he sent expeditions to the Moslem city of Manila. The first Spanish invasion of the city in 1570 must have been known in Brunei, yet for some reason she did not go to the assistance of her colony,

although it was suspected that the Brunei Court encouraged the resistance of Rajah Soliman in the second and final invasion of Legaspi in 1571.

From the time the Spaniards established a settlement in Cebu to the conquest of Manila was a period of six years. Brunei had enough time to send aid to her subjects in the Philippines. If any assistance was sent at all, it must have been negligible. It seems that the Sultan of Brunei was slow in reacting militarily to the Spanish threat.

It was not until 1574 that Brunei made preparations to attack the Spaniards. Sultan Abdul Kahar was reportedly preparing 100 large ships and 100 smaller vessels to carry 7,000 to 8,000 men.⁷ But the attack never took place, perhaps because Sultan Kahar learned that his plans had been discovered by the enemy. Instead, the Bruneis resorted to inciting the Filipinos to revolt against Spain. To encourage the Filipinos to rise against the colonizers, the Bruneis conducted raids in the Visayan islands. It was probably in one of these raids that a Spaniard named Diego Felipe and two Christian Visayans from Cebu were carried off to Brunei as captives.

When Governor-General Francisco de Sande learned of this incident, he wrote the new Sultan, Saif-el-Rejal (Lejar in Spanish accounts) demanding the release of the captives.⁸ And when a messenger of Rajah Soliman and some chiefs and freemen of Brunei fled to Manila to seek "political asylum," Sande accused the Sultan of detaining these "Spanish subjects."⁹

Yet like the Bruneis, the Spaniards

were also not able to take strong military action in the first several years of their provocative confrontation. This was due to the lack of Spanish troops to undertake a war against Brunei. Besides, the Governor-General wanted to be sure that the conquered Moslem communities of the Philippines would not rise in revolt if a large part of the Spanish force was withdrawn from the islands to invade the Bornean sultanate.

Then a break came for the Spaniards in 1578. A civil war broke out in Brunei. One of the princes (*pengiran*), Sri Lela, half-brother of Sultan Lejar, appeared in Manila and solicited Spanish assistance against his brother.¹⁰ He impressed the Spaniards that he was the rightful ruler and that Sultan Saif-el-Rejal was a usurper of the throne. The royal chronicles (*silah-silah*) of Brunei, however, blame the licentiousness of the Sultan for his brother's rebellion. The *silah-silah* also mentions another half-brother, Sri Ratna, on the side of Sri Lela.¹¹

Before launching the 1578 expedition to conquer Brunei, Governor-General Sande wrote to Sultan Rejal giving the reasons for his declaration of war:¹²

There in Manila, Cebu (sic) and other districts, it has been rumored that you have tried and are trying to do us harm, and to make war upon us; that you have tried to induce and have solicited the natives of Luzon and other districts to rebel and revolt against us; that you have left your residence for this purpose of warring against us with a fleet of ships.

The Spaniards had other motives in waging war against Brunei, motives

other than to stop the latter from interfering with Spanish affairs in the Philippines. Firstly, Sande was tempted by the offer of Sri Lela to make Brunei a tributary of Spain. Secondly, the conquest of Brunei would possibly "lead to the conquest of all the Archipelago of Maluco" and thereby wrest from the Portuguese the monopoly of the spice trade.¹³

The expedition to Brunei was led by no less than Governor-General Francisco de Sande himself. It consisted of thirty to forty boats, 400 Spaniards, 1,500 Christian Filipinos, and 300 Bruneis contributed by Sri Lela. Despite Brunei's brick walls and cannons (there were sixty-two when Pigafetta visited the city in 1521) the Sultan's defenders were routed during the first attack and fled to the mountains. Sultan Rejal escaped. He joined his allies, the Borneo Bisayans, in Melano.¹⁴

Sande took possession of Brunei as a vassal state of Spain and drew up a document to this effect, officially witnessed by Pedro Lucas, Luis de Guarnica, and Francisco Chacon.¹⁵ He then installed Sri Lela to the throne and remained for some time in Brunei before returning to Manila.

While in Brunei, Sande made another decision which had far-reaching effects in Philippine history. He ordered the invasion and conquest of Sulu. This he did because in the Battle of Brunei troops from Sulu fought on the side of the Bruneis. The Sulus seized two galleys, three smaller vessels, artillery and ammunition which they took to their island. Sande sent Captain Esteban

Rodriguez de Figueroa with a number of vessels and ordered him to take Sulu and, if successful, to attack Maguindanao.

A reading of his instructions to Figueroa shows, however, that Sande had other purposes than just to chastise the Sulus (Tausugs) who at the time were ruled by a penguiran of Brunei known to the Spaniards as Rajah Ilog Panguilan. He was the seventh sultan of Sulu and his real name was Mohammedul Halim Panguiran Buddiman.¹⁶ Sande's instructions to Figueroa read in part:¹⁷

From this city and Island of Borneo, God willing, you shall go to the Islands of Sulu, where you shall endeavor to reduce that chief and his people to the obedience of his Majesty. You shall bargain with them as to what tribute they shall pay, which shall be in pearls, as they are wont to give to the King of Brunei. You shall exercise great care and, if possible, much mildness; for it is of importance that those islands should not become depopulated; therefore, in case they receive you peaceably, you shall treat them well. And, in addition to the above, you must order that, besides the tribute that they are to pay in pearls, they shall obtain as many of them as possible, so that we, the Spaniards or Castilians, may buy them; that they must trade with us from now on; that every year Castilians will go to their lands with cloths and merchandise from China, of whatever they shall declare that they may need. You shall inform yourself of their needs; and if they wish to come to our settlements you shall give them permission to go freely to Manila and to come to Borneo, although not to steal.

The instructions consisted of eighteen paragraphs which, in summary, spelled out the following purposes: first, to reduce Sulu to a vassal state; second, to exact tribute in pearls; third, to secure the trade of Sulu for the Spaniards; fourth, to punish the Sultan of Sulu for the help he rendered the Sultan of Brunei against the Spanish forces; fifth, to rescue the Christian slaves in Sulu; sixth, to deprive the Sulus of their artillery and ammunition and of all vessels except fishing boats in order to stop their piracy; seventh, to compel the Sulus to become peaceful agriculturists; eighth, to uproot the 'accursed doctrine' of Mohammed to convert the Sulus to Christianity.¹⁸

Captain Figueroa's armada reached Jolo in June 1578. After a stiff resistance Panguran Buddiman surrendered and agreed to place his territories which covered Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Basilan, and Zamboanga under dominion of Spain and to pay tribute. As a sign of his vassalage, he offered twelve pearls and five pieces of gold. Since he did not have enough men to garrison Jolo, even if he had doubts about the Sultan's faithfulness to his word, Figueroa had to leave Sulu without troops to maintain the Sulus' allegiance to the Spanish crown. He sailed to Maguindanao (now Cotabato) but the Maguindanaos refrained from opposing him and fled to the interior. Figueroa returned to Manila and according to Saleeby his expedition gave no permanent advantage in the South.¹⁹

But the attack on Sulu started the so-called "Moro Wars" that lasted until the end of the Spanish regime and whose repercussions are still being felt to this day.

Back in Brunei, as soon as Sande had left, Sultan Saif-el-Rejal rallied his forces. A Portuguese detachment under Captain Antonio de Brito arrived to assist the Sultan and with a strengthened army he was able to regain power. Once more Sri Lela requested for Spanish help. Governor-General Gonzalo Ronquillo de Peñalosa, who had succeeded Sande, sent another expedition to Brunei in 1580, under the command of Captain Gabriel de Rivera.

The Spaniards again succeeded in driving away Sultan Rejal, destroying much of his city in the process. Once again they handed the throne to their ally and sailed back to Manila. Unfortunately for Sri Lela, the pleasures of power were short-lived. As soon as Rivera left Brunei, the loyalist faction reentered the city, pursued the usurper to the south, and in the Battle of Kuala Belait, killed him.

Brunei continued its interest in the Philippines. The Sultan knew he did not have the strength to wrest Manila and his other northern territories, but he thought he could at least harrass the Spaniards to save Sulu. He sent reinforcements to Sulu which was being subjected to frequent Spanish assaults. For instance, when Captain Juan Juarez Gallinato attacked Jolo in 1602, he observed that 'Borneo and Ternate natives' were among the defenders of the town.²⁰

In retaliation, Bruneis and Sulus raided coastal places in Luzon and the Visayas. One of the biggest raids was made on the naval shipyard in Pantao, Camarines in 1627. It was headed by Sultan Bungsu of Sulu and with him, perhaps as second in command, was the

famous Datu Ache. The combined Brunei-Sulu force took the Spaniards by surprise. Pantao is on the eastern part of the Bicol region, away from the routes of the raiders and the Spaniards did not suspect the Muslims to raid that far.

The base commanders were among the first to fall in the surprise attack. Then one by one the men were killed until only seven were left. Seeing that further resistance was useless, the survivors hurriedly loaded government funds, women, children, and some of the wounded on a vessel and fled.

The raiders helped themselves to the loot. It is believed that Pantao was the most profitable raid so far made by the Muslims. Spanish losses were estimated at P1,000,000.00. But the biggest prize for Sultan Bungsu was Doña Lucia, a comely Spanish lady. The Spanish alcalde of Cebu, Don Cristobal de Lugo, offered to ransom her but Sultan Bungsu refused to part with his prize whom he treated like a queen.²¹

Angered by Bungsu's refusal of ransom, Lugo attacked Sulu where his men killed furiously, burned the town of Jolo, despoiled the fields and desecrated the mosques and graves. But if Lugo thought he could punish the Sulus enough, he was wrong. The following year Brunei-Sulu raiders struck Leyte and Samar. The Spanish responded by fitting seventy vessels for another assault on Jolo. Master of Camp Lorenzo de Olazo was put in command with 350 Spanish and 2,000 native troops. At the start of the attack, however, Olazo was wounded and his men were demoralized. Instead of pursuing the siege on Jolo, the troops took their revenge on small coastal villages which they burned and

pillaged before sailing back to Manila.²²

In 1629 the Sulus and Camucones who were inhabitants of northeastern Borneo and probably subjects of Brunei, combined again under Datu Ache and raided towns in Samar, Leyte, and Calamianes, striking their targets early in the morning when the people were attending mass in church. In Calamianes, the raiders captured Fr. Juan de San Antonio and slew another priest.²³ The Spaniards countered by dispatching another expedition against Sulu and Mindanao where they destroyed seven large *joangas* and thirty-three small vessels in Jolo.

In 1636 a strange event was noted. A fleet of Sulus raced after a fleet of Borneans going home from a raid in the Visayas, overtook it near Palawan and relieved it of its fifteen caracoas and Filipino captives. Why did the Sulus strike against their allies? Steve Runciman claims that after the death of Sultan Hasan, the youngest son of Sultan Rejal, 'the other Sultans of the islands, as well as the Sultan of Sulu, regained full independence.'²⁴

Beginning from the middle of the 17th century, Spanish accounts ceased to mention the presence of "Brunei pirates" in Philippine waters. Perhaps the Sultan realized that in view of the separation of Sulu and the much stronger position of Spain in Luzon and the Visayas, it was futile for her to hope to regain her former territories in the Philippines. From this period, the "Moro War" was only between Spain on the one hand and Sulu and Maguindanao on the other.

The conflict between Spain and Brunei had ended, but it had spawned a bitter struggle that lasted two and a half centuries more.

FOOTNOTES

¹Pigafetta's account as translated by Lord Stanley of Alderley, *The First Voyage Round the World by Magellan* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1874), pp. 110-118.

²Pedro Monteclaro, *Maragtas* (Manila, 1956 ed.). For discussion on the historicity of Maragtas, see *Maragtas Symposium*, (Manila: National Historical Commission, 1970).

³Emma H. Blair and James A. Robertson, *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1893* (Taiwan edition, n.d.), XL, 38; hereafter cited as Blair and Robertson.

⁴F. Delor Angeles, "Brunei and the Moro Wars," *The Brunei Museum Journal*, I, 120.

⁵Antonio de Morga, *Historical Accounts of the Philippine Islands* (Manila: Jose Rizal National Centennial Commission, 1962), pp. 241-245.

⁶Blair and Robertson, II, 156.

⁷Angeles, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

⁸Blair and Robertson, IV, 152.

⁹Angeles, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Brunei Annual Report, 1966* (Brunei, 1968), p. 265.

¹²Blair and Robertson, IV, 153.

¹³Joaquin Martinez de Zuniega, *Historia de las Islas Filipinas Compuesta* (Manila, 1863), reprinted by Filipiniana Book Guild (Manila, 1966), pp. 65-66.

¹⁴Blair and Robertson, IV, 198.

¹⁵Antonio Molina, *The Philippines Through the Centuries* (Manila: UST Cooperative, 1960), p. 78.

¹⁶Najeeb M. Saleeby, *The History of Sulu* (Manila, 1908) reprinted by the Filipiniana Book Guild (Manila, 1963), p. 48.

¹⁷Blair and Robertson, IV, 174 ff.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Saleeby, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

²⁰Morga, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

²¹Blair and Robertson, XXII, 205.

²²For an account of Olazo's expedition to Sulu, see Blair and Robertson, XXIII.

²³Angeles, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

²⁴Steven Runciman, *The White Rajahs: A History of Sarawak from 1841 to 1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 56.