



*Voices from Sulu: A Collection of Tausug Oral Traditions* Compiled and Edited by Gerard Rixhon  
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Voices from Sulu is a very significant collection of Tausog literature intended to preserve the oral traditions passed on by narrators for generations. This book can be likened to a community effort. The editor has compiled various samples and a good number of Sulu natives and other social scientists/researchers collaborated in the recording, transcribing, translating and validating the compiled literature. The narratives go as early as the late 1800s, when the Spaniards first set foot in the island of Sulu, specifically in Jolo. The most famous storyteller whose narratives are herein featured is Mullung, who has reportedly been a storyteller for more than 70 years, noted for his storytelling skills and his philosophy that: “All that was created by Allah is true” which manifests a strong Sufi influence.

The folktales are closely reminiscent of influenced by Middle Eastern tales from the Arabian Nights and Sinbad series. Some of these tales, like “Lisuan” (lazy Juan?) is somewhat similar to the Juan Tamad of Luzon and the Pusung of Sulu, except that



Lisuan is portrayed wise and is never tricky in his dealings. Another story worthy of note is Mullung's version of Sitti Maryam ("sitti" meaning a royal daughter and Maryam the Arabic form of Mary). Although needing to be explained in the perspective that is acceptable to most Muslims, Mullung's version of Mary and Jesus (Sitti Maryam and her child Nabi'Isa) is clearly his own interpretation. The early interaction of the pre-colonial Tausugs is also seen in the story "Pangkat sin Sultan ha Istanbul iban Di" or The Relation between the Sultan of Istanbul and Our Sultan. Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) lies at the crossroads between Asia and Europe and has an ancient history of passage to and from either continent with a past touched by several civilizations and religions. That the cosmopolitan nature of Istanbul, especially its fame for pleasures of the flesh is entwined in the story, reveals the early exposure to and more-than-cursory knowledge of the Tausug to foreign cultures. One folk tale with a lesson, Munabi, teaches the avoidance of jealousy and the fulfillment of a promise. This may not fit in with popular Tausug practices but shows several aspects of Tausug culture.

The "Katantan Bungang-Kahuy Kakaunun Iban Sin Binatang Halal" or The Origin of Edible Fruits and Animals is a creation story with the main lesson of purification as the essential element to worship. This casual and easy relationship and communication with God and creation is typical of, and thus shows Sufi influence. Storyteller Imam Ibbalahim's "In Sultan Sulayman Iban in Sumayang Galura" or King Solomon and the Soaring Garuda, reveals Indonesian (and thus, Hindu as well) and Malay influence on Tausug culture. The soaring garuda is a favorite subject of Indonesian and Malay mythology. Sultan Sulayman is King Solomon in both the Bible and the Q'uran. Once again,

Sufu influence on Tausug Islam is revealed here. There is an old Sufi tradition that attributes Solomon with the ability to talk with birds in a secret language. The stories here by Dayang-Dayang Putli'Nunukan are folktales characterized by common features to Tausug culture, like cockfighting in rural areas and love stories with several twists and turns. The chapters on Poetry give two major ballads, "Parang Sabil of Abdulla" and "Putli'Isara in Spanish Times". Originally composed in prose, these were sung in the 1960s and 1970s by Indah Amura, a popular Jolo Tausug singer often invited to perform in important events and on public radio until martial law banned her from singing "Putli'Isara in Spanish Times" for its alleged subversive message in exhorting people to rise against the government.

The song is one of those featured in this volume. Another song of Indah Amura featured here is "Kissa sin Hal Magtiyaun", an educational ballad on orthodox marriage. This is typical of Muslim tradition where rulers seek advice from mosque officials. Tausug riddles (tigum-tigum or tukud-tukud) are of two types, one is used in casual conversations and the other is sung during celebrations. In the second type, the answer is given after the audience has given its guesses. Proverbs (Masaalla or daman) are sayings collected through the years and so are not within the context of their usage. Poems (tarasul) are didactic but can also be used for entertainment delivered over the radio or during public events. These are written pieces which are meant to be recited because these can be enjoyed by the sound of the words, their cadence and rhythm. Two types of poetry are featured in this volume.



The first contains some aspects of nature and cooking and the other one is on the love for a mother or a sweetheart.

Voices from Sulu presents some elements of Tausug culture, especially its oral traditions rife with imagery and with wide-ranging meanings, going from religious chants to daily sayings. Tausug oral traditions carry religious stories, folk narratives, legends, myths, folktales, songs, spells and charms, proverbs and riddles.

The first four parts of the book cover 24 chapters. Parts 1 and 2 are narratives, the *kissa* (sacred, sometimes also a true narrative) and *kata-kata* (folk tale) and Part 3 is on poetry. Part 4 gives samples of specific collections and Part 5 consists of Rixhon's explanations of the whole journey in coming up with this tone.

The author starts with an introduction which gives an overview of the Tausug, the people, their culture, their past. Included in the introduction Rixhon's mention of the people and institutions that collaborated in the research on the oral traditions of Sulu, the collection and translation of the works as well as the problems encountered along the way to this research. Being an outsider to the culture, he was bound to encounter controversial religious or moral stories. Tausug beliefs, like other Muslim tribes, are based on Islamic principles blended into ancestral or traditional beliefs and customary laws.

Publication of such literary forms would invite criticism from religious officials and devout believers. In the same manner that Maranao (the Muslims of Lanao) religious authorities want their traditional epic "Darangen" to be rid of the Hindu polytheistic features. Some stories that were published in the Sulu Studies Journal were criticized by imams (priests) and religious leaders, allegedly for blasphemous events and personalities. The early Spanish religious authorities had removed passages from the Tagalog epic "Pasyon" which they had deemed

These and other issues/concerns were met by Rixhon's stand of his approach to the study from an anthropologic perspective. He explains the role of the anthropologist with the professional obligation of recording oral traditions in the original context, without editing or rewriting in conformity to any demand of propriety. He further adds that the anthropologist's role is not to judge the rightness or wrongness of any tradition, but to record them to save them from being forgotten, to be shared to a bigger audience and studied in relation to the traditions of other cultures.

Most of the literature presented in this volume is begun with a brief introduction to deal with moral or religious issues. That the Tausug oral traditions sometimes vary from Q'uranic scriptures and Islamic teachings are accompanied by the admonition to treat these stories as coming from the past. These stories should be taken as stages in the development of Islam among the Tausug and are seen from an academic viewpoint to be contrasted with present-day Islamic norms.

All in all, the stories show the relation between traditional Tausug and Islamic traditions. They are Muslims, but specifically and more importantly, Tausug Muslims.