Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Educational Policy: Schooling and Ethno-Religious Conflict in the Southern Philippines, 2nd ed.

JEFFREY AYALA MILLIGAN
Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 284 pages.

School education has long been cast as a powerful panacea for the myriad of social, economic, and political ills that might afflict a society. Countless politicians and leaders have pointed to schools as the *deus ex machina* that can single-handedly fix intractable realities of social conflict, material dispossession, and political exclusion. Unsurprisingly, this naive faith in the redemptive power of schools has also recently generated an intense backlash. A new generation of postcolonial social theorists has turned such prevailing wisdom on its head, recasting schools as an instrument of social domination that reflects and entrenches the interests of the powerful. In between these two poles of naive celebration and postcolonial condemnation, others have tried to forge a middle path. In particular, numerous educationalists have sought to take onboard these postcolonial critiques, to acknowledge the ways in which schools have reflected the political and economic agendas of elites, while still also trying to forge a pragmatic path forward in which education might at least help to lessen social disparities and promote a healthy democratic dialogue between communities.

Into this fraught debate over the role of schooling and asymmetrical power dynamics enters Jeffrey Ayala Milligan's ambitious study titled *Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Educational Policy: Schooling and Ethno-Religious Conflict in the Southern Philippines*. In many ways, Milligan argues, the "educational experiences" of the approximately five million Muslim inhabitants of Mindanao and Sulu in the southern area of the Philippines comprise an ideal test "case through which to study the potential and the pitfalls of educational policy as a tool for addressing ethno-religious tensions both in the Philippines and other societies." (p. 5) Before 1900, the 13 ethnolinguistic groupings of Muslims in Mindanao and Sulu had enjoyed effective independence, despite the centuries-old imperial claims of Spain that the area belonged to their Philippine colony. In the 120-plus years since, however, Milligan argues that the American colonial state and their Philippine postcolonial successors based in Manila effectively "made good Spain's territorial claims" and imposed their writ over these southern areas, transforming Mindanao and Sulu into an "internal colony" in which

"Muslims became a subordinated and largely despised minority within the emerging Philippine nation" dominated by a Christian "majority" (p. 4). This process of subordination and internal colonization, in turn, contributed to "a century of on-again, off-again armed conflict" that caused at least 10,000 Muslim deaths during the U.S. colonial period, claimed more than 100,000 lives in a series of secessionist struggles between 1978 and 2006, and as recently as 2017 resulted in the death of more than 1,000 people in one city alone during the "Siege of Marawi." Throughout this tragic historical arc, however, Milligan notes that a wide variety of actors past and present have nevertheless continually articulated "faith" in the power of education as perhaps the best hope for defusing this cycle of violence and fostering lasting peace. Milligan devotes his study to the question of whether such campaigns to promote schooling simply entrench the hegemony of dominant colonial powers or can, in fact, empower Muslims to exercise their own agency in shaping a democratic future.

Over the course of his book, Milligan essentially stakes out three separate but interconnected arguments. Chapters 3 and 4, which are mainly historical in methodology, cover the formative period of direct U.S. colonial rule between 1899 and 1935, the transitional period of the Philippine Commonwealth and World War II, and the first decades of the independent postcolonial Philippine Republic from 1946 until the demise of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986. In this section, Milligan upholds the core tenets of postcolonial theory by contending that education basically served the hegemonic interests of those in power. In chapter 3, for example, the author argues that however much individual teachers might have been motivated "by what they see as noble intentions," American schools in fact implemented a "hidden curriculum" whose main aims were "the deculturalization of Muslim Filipinos and their political-economic subordination to a Philippine government dominated by Christian Filipinos" (p. 74). Since American officials in the first decades of the 20th century deemed Christians closer to some imagined rung of "civilization" than their "savage" Muslim counterparts, Milligan contends, they elevated the interests of these Filipinos behind the guise of "separation of church and state" or "religious freedom." Indeed, the chapter recounts the ways that U.S. officials like Leonard Wood, Tasker Bliss, and John J. Pershing denied the value of Muslim learning in colonial schools while also calling into question whether the inhabitants of Mindanao and Sulu even understood Islam in the first place. For instance, these officials derided the Muslim community as exotic degenerates prone to polygamy, systematically promoted

American and Filipino economic interests through "industrial education" and the enforcement of alienable forms of individual land ownership, and otherwise undermined the power of sultans, datus, and other local Muslim leaders.

Such colonial policies, in turn, left an enduring legacy of "pedagogical imperialism in the Philippine South" long after the establishment of the independent Philippine Republic (p. 95). Milligan follows up in chapter 4 by examining how the new government's policy in effect repurposes the "overtly racist rhetoric of civilization and savagery" through a somewhat softer "language of development-underdevelopment . . . [that] nevertheless continues to position Muslims rhetorically as socially and morally backward" (p. 115). In the words of one of the leaders of the Committee for National Integration set up by the Philippine Congress, "minority" Muslim Filipinos could be "integrated" into the national mainstream, but only "if they should abandon, as the price to they have to pay, their backward ways and adopt those that are in consonance with modern living" (p. 119). Unsurprisingly, this hegemonic ideal of promoting development and integration on the terms of the dominant government in Manila, whether U.S. colonial or Philippine postcolonial, did little to attract Muslim students to such educational programs. Under the Americans in the 1920s, Milligan argues that "fewer than one-in-five school age Muslim students were actually enrolled in school," and that the preponderance of these were in the first or second elementary grades only (p. 87). Similarly, under the Philippine Republic, only 17.7% of school-age children in one province, Lanao del Sur, attended school as of 1961, while only 2% of those were in high school. Mindanao State University, which constituted the major new undertaking of the postcolonial state to encourage integration through advanced education, only managed to graduate 300 local Muslims from its inception in 1961 through 1979. Such lackluster statistics inspired Milligan's mordant quip that "it is an open question whether their American 'benefactors' killed more Muslim Filipinos than they educated" (p. 81).

While the first few chapters offer a harsh postcolonial indictment of education during the periods of U.S colonial rule and the early Philippine Republic, Milligan pivots in a different direction in chapters 5 and 6 to explore the "decolonizing" possibilities that Muslims could pursue after the establishment of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, in 1989, and the successor Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, in 2019. Auguring this shift in tone, Milligan notes at the

start of chapter 5 that it is not only hegemonic government actors, but also subaltern Muslims or the "children of the lake" in the Lanao region, "as well as their families and teachers," who retain some "faith in education as a path to a better life" (p. 144). Indeed, based as chapters 5 and 6 are on ethnographic study and interviews conducted in the 2000s, this section of the book highlights a process of "re-Islamization from below" in which local Muslims can express and advance their social-cultural ideals through the arena of schools. In particular, Milligan examines how Muslims established a parallel private network of *madari* or madrasah schools, how the autonomous local government experimented with new hybrid "integrated schools" like the Ibn Siena Integrated school in Marawi that offered a combination of *madrasah* and public-school curriculum, and the establishment of an Arabic and Islamic Values Education Program (ALIVE) to infuse an awareness of Muslim beliefs within the public schools. While acknowledging constraints that hampered such initiatives, these chapters offer the real possibility of Muslim Filipinos using the arena of education to make their beliefs and views visible to a wider society.

Finally, Milligan proceeds from a straightforward ethnographic study of this Islamization from below trend to conclude chapters 7 and 8 in an altogether different scholarly register of profound philosophical and theoretical meditation. Specifically, the author wonders how scholars can get past the seemingly inescapable impasse posed by postcolonial theory, of offering a damning critique that dismantles much of the old assumptions underlying education, yet struggling to offer "constructive alternatives" for a path forward that can help peoples like the Muslims of the Philippines find a better future. Milligan argues that scholars must move beyond the idea that there is some reality beyond subjective experience, such as the external truths of "civilization" or "development" that justified colonialism. Instead, learning and knowledge must always involve a process of an ongoing "dialogue and debate and revisable, contingent agreements as a 'modus vivendi,' a way of living or conducting oneself that enables complex, mutual coexistence . . . rather than determining what the outcome of such dialogues will be, postcolonial liberalism focuses on members' rights to develop the capabilities necessary to participate as full and equal participants in social debates" (p. 223). Rather than predetermining the endpoint of Muslim and Christian coexistence, both sides must continually revise and renegotiate the basis of their engagement. Milligan concludes by arguing for the fusion of John Dewey's pragmatic educational vision of constantly learning through experience, of "perpetually doing and undoing

… our interaction with the environment," with Cornel West's vision of the prophetic moral traditions of Abrahamic faiths, like Islam, to critique political injustice wherever it may be found (p. 252).

Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Educational Policy constitutes a bravura work of scholarship, covering vast amounts of historical and philosophical ground while still attending to the fine-grained nuances of the educational experiences of Muslim Filipinos in specific times and places. The fact that Milligan manages to weave everything from his analysis of Maranao *darangan* epics as a tool for recovering precolonial Islamic values, to a careful inspection of enrollment figures in American colonial schools during the 1920s, to the philosophies of Cornel West and John Dewey into a coherent narrative is a remarkable achievement. As a historian who has read many works on colonial education in the Philippines beyond Mindanao, I am impressed to read a scholarly work that not only seeks to identify and critique asymmetric power dynamics but also struggles in the difficult work to find a way to forge a sustainable political future through schools. The animating core of Milligan's study, moreover, might well be his powerful ethnographic study of Islamization from below in chapters 5 and 6, which shows that however much people might confront prosaic constraints like underfunding, petty corruption, the difficulty of *madrasah* graduates in obtaining licenses to teach Islamic courses in public schools, the reality that only middle-class people with resources can attend institutions like the Ibn Siena Integrated School, etc., Muslims still seek to find a path that can respect the dignity of their beliefs and culture while also giving them a path toward full participation in the broader society.

Of course, none of this is to say that *Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Educational Policy* is flawless. In embracing such broad scope, for instance, Milligan might analyze some material a bit too hastily. In his chapter on American rule, it would have been interesting to see how the views of colonial educators like Najeeb Saleeby, a Syrian Christian immigrant to the United States who came from a very different cultural place than most American officials, or of minor officials like the Zamboanga District Governor John Park Finley, who sought to bring an Ottoman religious teacher to Mindanao to help encourage "modern Mohammedanism," would have complicated the better-known discourses of figures like John Pershing. Even if the potentially "good intentions" of people like Saleeby did not alter the fundamental hidden transcript of deculturation, it would have been interesting had the author considered whether disagreements among colonial figures could have provided opportunities for Muslim Filipinos to

advance their own agency and objectives. Nevertheless, such small quibbles do not detract from the empirical richness and theoretical sophistication of Milligan's work. *Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Educational Policy* deserves to be read widely not only by experts on Mindanao and the Philippines, but also a wide range of scholars interested in the history of colonial education, postcolonial educational theory, and the place of education in diverse Muslim societies.

Joshua S. Gedacht
Visiting Assistant Professor
Department of History, Rowan University
Glassboro, NJ

DOI: 10.2979/jems.3.2.10