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THE BALIK-ISLAM PHENOMENON FILIPINO MUSLIM REVERTS – BETWEEN THE GULF COUNTRIES AND THE PHILIPPINES

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Thameem Ushama²*

Abstract

Islam arrived in the Philippines long before Christianity. However, today, at most, only 11% are Muslim in this largest Catholic country in Asia. Muslims comprise mainly of the Moros residing in the Southern parts of the country – Mindanao, Palawan, the Sulu Archipelago – and the Balik-Islam. The Balik-Islam are primarily former Christians who have converted or “returned” (Balik) to Islam. Many amongst the Balik-Islam are former expats or migrant workers who embraced Islam in the Gulf countries and have returned to the Philippines. Their understanding and practice of Islam have been greatly influenced by the stricter, more orthodox Salafi and Wahhabi versions practised by their former “arbaab” (boss or master). This paper delves into the Balik-Islam phenomenon; primarily exploring the reasons for Filipinos converting to Islam, the relationship of the Balik-Islam with the Moros, and their place in the history of the Muslims of the Philippines.

Keywords: Balik-Islam, Philippines, Moros, Bangsamoro, Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) Countries, Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW)

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Islam in the Philippines – An Overview

Named after the Spanish king Phillip II, the Philippines is an archipelago of over 7,600 islands in the Western Pacific Ocean, north of Indonesia and south of Taiwan. With over 111 million people, the Philippines is the 13th most populous in the world. It is a predominantly Christian country, where 4 of every 5 Filipinos are Roman Catholic. It is the third-largest Roman Catholic country in the world and the largest Christian nation in Asia.³ This is primarily a result of active and sometimes forced Christian proselytisation during the 333 years under Catholic Spain,⁴ followed by another 42 years of occupation by the Americans.⁵

Nonetheless, Muslims comprise between 6% and 11% of the Philippines. According to a national census in 2015, Muslims made up 6.4% of the population,⁶ whereas the government agency tasked with the welfare of Muslims, the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos, claims that there are almost 12 million Filipinos who identify themselves as Muslim.⁷ Regardless of the actual number, there is no doubt that Islam has played and continues to play a major role in the history and politics of the Philippines. Many Muslims, particularly the Balik-Islam (mainly Catholics who have “reverted” to Islam), argue that had it not been for the brutal Spanish conquest followed by over three hundred years of colonisation, Islam would be the most popular faith among the Filipinos.⁸

³ Patricio N. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 10-12.

⁴ Isaac Donoso, "The Philippines and al-Andalus Linking the Edges of the Classical Islamic World," *Philippine Studies Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints* (2015): 247-73.

⁵ Yūjirō Hayami, Agnes R. Quisumbing, and Lourdes S. Adriano, *Toward an alternative land reform paradigm: a Philippine perspective* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1990), 42-43.

⁶ Dennis S. Mapa, "Philippine Statistics Authority: Religious Affiliation in the Philippines (2020 Census of Population and Housing)," *Philippine Statistics Authority* (2020), accessed September 16, 2023, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/religious-affiliation-philippines-2020-census-population-and-housing>.

⁷ Guilling A. Mamondiong, "Muslim Settlements – statement by the New Secretary," *National Commission on Muslim Filipinos* (2022), accessed September 16, 2023, <https://ncmf.gov.ph/new-secretary>.

⁸ Author, Personal Interviews with Filipino Balik-Islam in Bahrain, 2017-2022.

There are two kinds of Muslim communities in the Philippines – the “Moro” Muslims and the “Balik-Islam” Muslims. The Moro aren’t just “Born Muslims” but may also be considered generational Muslims with family trees extending as far back as the 10th Century CE.. The Moros primarily live in parts of Mindanao, the Palawan archipelago, and the chain of Islands to the southwest known as the Sulu archipelago – Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. These areas are known as the Lands of the Moros or “Bangsamoro.” Some Moro have moved north to Luzon and the capital, Manila and to Visayas.⁹ Balik-Islam means “to return to Islam.” Although the concept of returning to Islam may be applied globally to all those who “return” to the faith upon which all humanity is created (*Din al Fitrah*), it carries a dual meaning in the context of the Philippines. It refers both to returning to the faith of all humanity (*Din al Fitrah*) as well to returning to the faith of their ancestors, who were Muslim prior to the coming of the Christian colonisers. Balik-Islam mainly live in the north, the capital, Manila, other parts of Luzon and the diaspora.¹⁰

History of Islam in the Philippines

Muslims arrived in the Philippine archipelago long before the Christian Missionaries. Islam primarily came to this region from the oceans and seas. This movement was gradual and subtle. Cesar Majul Adib described the coming of Islam to Southeast Asia as an organic process, one that involves and includes all theories of how Islam penetrated these Islands and nations. Adib further argued that the coming of Islam to the Philippines cannot and should not be separated from the coming of Islam to the entire region (the *Nusantara*).¹¹ He posits that this was a singular region, and it was only later that it was divided into various present-day political entities and countries by colonialists. Khairuddin Aljunied contends

⁹ Ajjid Thohir, "A Historical Overview and Initiating Historiography of Islam in the Philippines," *International Journal of Nusantara Islam* 3, no. 2 (2015): 1-18.

¹⁰ Nassef Manabilang Adiong, "Relationship between Balik-Islam (Muslim Reverts) and Full-Fledged Muslims Under the Auspices of Islamic Teachings in Philippine Setting," April 3, 2008, SSRN 1693213.

¹¹ J. Nolasco, "Islam and Philippine Society: The Writings of Cesar Adib Majul," *Asian Studies* 46 (2010): 1-2.

that the coming of Islam was both incidental and intentional.¹²

The earliest encounter between Muslims and the people of the *Nusantara* could be traced back to as early as the 8th century, although no conversions were reported. Adib stated that regions of modern-day Philippines were part of the Arab Chinese trade route at the end of the ninth and early tenth centuries extending north that included Borneo, passed through the Sulu Islands and the Palawan archipelago, included Luzon, Formosa, and continued all the way west to the southern part of Japan where Chinese products were available. Waves of Muslims traders commissioned ports along the coastal regions of the peninsula. Through these traders and merchants, Islam gained momentum in the region. Islam spread in a very ordinary, organic way. Muslim traders, not just from the Arab world but also from India and China (the famous Chinese Admiral Zheng He, for example) visited these Islands mainly for economic reasons. They would trade, settle down at ports, marry into the local community, ensure that *halal* food was available – doing the most ordinary activities that any people would do. Islam did not spread in this region through proselytization, but rather through Muslim traders establishing decent living and conditions for Muslims to thrive; establishing Islam “incidentally.”¹³

During the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century, there is evidence of Muslim missionaries (*du'at*) arriving in the southern Islands, particularly Sulu. This marks the beginning of the “intentional” spread of Islam throughout the region.¹⁰ By the mid-fifteenth century, a Sultanate in Sulu was established under Sharif Hashim Abu Bakr, whose father was a *Sharif* (descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)) from Hadhramawt (Yemen) and whose mother was a princess from Johor (Malaysia). Abu Bakr successfully brought large numbers of locals to Islam and united them under his sultanate. Adib suggested that Abu Bakr’s prophetic and royal lineage, as well as political prowess, helped create the powerful Sulu Sultanate.¹⁴

¹² Khairudin Aljunied, *Islam in Malaysia: An Entwined History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 28-39.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Cesar Adib Majul, "The role of Islam in the history of the Filipino people,"

Similarly, in Mindanao, another Arab-Malay Sharif, Muhammed Kabungsuwan, established a sultanate in Maguindanao circa 1516. The rise of this sultanate is comparable to that of Sulu and, along with the creation of a sultanate in neighbouring Buayan, resulted in the Islamization of the islands of Mindanao. Apart from the influence of these rulers, Islam also grew rapidly in Mindanao and Sulu through trade with Malacca, Java, and Borneo and from missionary (*da'wah*) efforts of the Arabs, Chinese, Indians and Persians.¹⁵

In 1511, after the Portuguese ransacked the Sultanate of Malacca, the Sultanate of Brunei became known as the regional hub of commerce, naval might, and Islam. Between the 15th and 17th centuries, the influence and control of the Sultan of Brunei extended from Borneo in the north to Sulu in the south. When the Spanish Conquistadors arrived in 1565, even Maynilad, the modern-day capital of the Philippines, Manila, was under Muslim rule as a vassal-state of the Brunei Sultanate.¹⁶

From 1565 onwards, the Spanish Conquistadors waged numerous battles with the Muslims of the Philippines. These battles pitted the Christianized natives, the *Indios*, against the Muslim *Moros*, a religious divide that still exists today. The last Muslim ruler of Maynilad, Rajah Solaiman, resisted the Spanish Conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legazpi in the 1570s. The Spanish defeated the Sultanate of Brunei in 1578 and for the next two hundred years, the more numerous Spanish forces pushed Muslim settlements further and further south to the Sulu Islands and the southernmost province of Mindanao.¹⁷

By 1571, when the Spaniards officially took control of the Philippines, the war with the weakened Ummayyad Caliphate in southwestern Europe (*Al-Andalus*) had been ongoing for over a hundred years. Iberian Christians had referred to Muslims as "*Moros*" for centuries. "*Moros*" came from the Roman name for Mauritania – "*Maurus*." This name – along with its anglicised form,

Dansalan Research Center (1989): 308-15.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

“Moors” – was a derogatory term for Muslims in Western Europe. Isaac Donoso argues that the Spaniards brought their hatred against Muslims from the Iberian to the Philippine Peninsula. The *Maurus Africanus* transformed into the *Maurus Asiae*.¹⁸

Donoso further writes that this prejudice and hate of Muslims is showcased in medieval dramas called *Moros y Cristianos*, celebrated in Spain and the Philippines. The *Bida* (hero, typically a Christian Crusader or Conquistador) versus *contrabida* (villain, mostly African, Arab, or Turkish) is a signature trope in Spanish/Mexican *telenovelas* and Filipino *teleseryes* (soap operas). *Moros y Cristianos*, also known as *Moro-Moro* or *Komedya*, are formulaic and stylised plays. These performances, repeated annually at town *fiestas* honouring various Catholic saints in Spain and the Philippines, typically show Muslim Moros engaged in battle with Christians. The plays mostly end with the Moros converting to Christianity and everyone living happily ever after. The *Moros y Cristianos* performances were a highly effective technique of imposing Christianity throughout the Spanish colonies and culturally normalising hatred of Muslims. This bias against Islam continues to play a huge part in the relations between the Christians, the born-Muslims (Moros), and the reverts (Balik-Islam) in the Philippines today.¹⁹

With the exception of a two-year stint of British occupation of Maynilad from 1762, Spain ruled most of the Philippines from 1565 to 1898. For the Muslims in the south, this period of 333 years was one of continued resistance to Spanish Imperialism. The Philippines, along with Cuba, Guam, and Puerto Rico, were ceded to the Americans at the end of the Spanish-American War. Both Christians and Muslims of the Philippines resisted American occupation, and the Philippine-American War broke out in 1899 and lasted for three years. In 1902, the US Congress passed the Philippine Bill that recognised Christian, Muslim, and Pagan Filipinos as distinct from one another.²⁰

¹⁸ Isaac Donoso, "The Hispanic Moros y Cristianos and the Philippine Komedya," *Philippine Humanities Review* 11-12 (2009-2010): 87-120.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hannibal Bara, "The History of Islam in the Philippines," accessed January 2021,

By 1903, it was obvious that the US continued to have the same biases and double standards that their Spanish predecessors practised. However, unlike the Spaniards, the Americans went one step further regarding land ownership. Under the Treaty of Paris in 1898, the US became the sovereign possessor of all lands in the Philippine archipelago. To expedite the unification of the archipelago, the US-Philippine Commission passed several laws that made it easy for Christian Filipinos from the north to grab ancestral Muslim lands in the south easily. The Land Registration Act of 1902 introduced a system that overlooked the traditional customary Muslim laws of land stewardship (*adat*), whereby the Moros believed that they were not “owners”, but “trustees” or “stewards” (*khalifa*) of the land. As such, most Moros refused to register their ancestral lands. In 1903, the Public Land Act made these traditionally Moro-owned lands that were not “registered” become public property automatically. The Moros did not recognise nor participate in these land reclassifications. The newly reclassified public properties were then sold to Americans and Christian Filipinos. Large multinational corporations like B.F. Goodrich, Goodyear, Del Monte, and others also took advantage of the ample fertile cheap lands in Mindanao and the south and bought tens of thousands of hectares of previously Muslim-owned lands. Many northerners moved to the south looking for jobs in these multinationals and a promise of a better life. Furthermore, as part of the US Government’s “homestead system,” large tracts of previously Moro-owned lands were given away for free to Christian Northerners from Luzon and Visayas to resettle Filipinos from the more populous north to the less populated south.²¹

Under the Bates Agreement of 1899, the Sultan of Sulu and the Moro leadership were coerced to accept American rule in exchange for protecting their lands, religion and customs and the promise of eventual autonomy. The Bates Agreement was short-lived. In 1904, after suppressing the uprising in the north, the US unilaterally

<https://ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/subcommissions/subcommission-on-cultural-communities-and-traditional-arts-sccta/central-cultural-communities/the-history-of-the-muslim-in-the-philippines/>

²¹ Peter Gordon Gowing, “Mandate in Moroland: The American Government of Muslim Filipinos, 1899-1920.” *Syracuse University* (1968), 8.

abrogated the Agreement, as it no longer served their interests. This left the Moros vulnerable, and made it easy for the Christian Filipinos to eventually govern them.²²

In 1916, the US Congress passed the “Philippine Autonomy Act”, also known as the Jones Act. This started the process for full independence of the Philippines. Over the next thirty years, the US systematically replaced their own American officials with mainly Christian Filipinos, effectively handing over the rule of the entire country to the Christians exclusively. Spain’s “Moro problem” had been enhanced and amplified by the US, and then inherited by the independent Republic of the Philippines in 1946.²³

Most Philippine Presidents have continued the American colonial policy of encouraging migration from the Christian North to the Muslim South. Large numbers of Christians migrated south, particularly during the presidencies of Manuel Quezon, Ramon Magsaysay, and Ferdinand Marcos. Consequently, by the 1970s, the indigenous Muslims had become a small minority in Mindanao. Northern settlers and large multinational corporations now owned the most fertile lands in Mindanao. The indigenous Muslim population was forced to live on a fraction of the land they originally owned.²⁴

In 1903, Muslim Moros made up over three-quarters of the population of Mindanao and owned most of the land. By 1990s, the Moros comprised a fifth of the population and legally possessed less than 17% of the land – most of which was in the remote and infertile mountainous areas. Four out of every five Moro were landless.²⁵

The Bangsamoro

The word “*Bangsamoro*” is a relatively new political term that is a combination of two words. *Bangsa* from Old Malay means race or people. Moreover, *Moro* was originally a derogatory term for Muslims used by the Spanish Colonialists but was later adopted as a

²² Yūjirō Hayami, Agnes R. Quisumbing, and Lourdes S. Adriano, “Toward an alternative land reform paradigm: a Philippine perspective” *Ateneo de Manila University Press* (1990), 42-43.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

name of pride by the native Muslims of the Philippines.²⁶ For more than 400 years, the Moro–Muslims of the Sulu, parts of Mindanao, Palawan, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi and other southern islands of the Philippines have been at war. They have resisted the Spanish Colonization of their ancestral homes, the American Occupation, and the predominantly Christian governments of the independent Philippines.²⁷

The *Moro* are one race to most outsiders, hence the political word Bangsamoro. However, the indigenous Muslims of the southern Philippines are made up of several distinct tribes and ethnicities that are culturally linked to other peoples of Southeast Asia. The Moros are ethnically related to people in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Patani of southern Thailand. Anthropologically, they may be divided into eleven distinct groups or ethnicities. These groups are the Iranun, the Jama Mapun, the Kalagan, the Subanon people, the Maguindanao, the Maranao, the Molbog, the Sama (including the Badjao, Balanguingui, and various Tawi-Tawi Sama groups), the Sangil, the Tausug and the Yakan. Each ethnic group traditionally lived in geographically distinct regions. However, over time, considerable inter-migration and incursion of foreigners have forced these ethnic groups to share lands. Although each ethnic group has its own language or dialect and unique culture in terms of dress, food, and customs, there has been a mixing of cultures and dialects over the centuries.²⁸

In March 1968, according to a lone survivor, 28 Moro army recruits were killed by the Marcos administration on Corregidor Island. This incident became known as the infamous Jabidah Massacre and was the tipping point for the Moros. It spurred the creation of the Bangsamoro Liberation Organization by a regional

²⁶ Miriam Coronel Ferrer, "The Moro Liberation Movement: From Secession to Autonomy," in *Region, Nation and Homeland*, ed. ISEAS Publishing (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2020), 13-56.

²⁷ Hannibal Bara, "The History of Islam in the Philippines," accessed January 2021, <https://ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/subcommissions/subcommission-on-cultural-communities-and-traditional-arts-sccta/central-cultural-communities/the-history-of-the-muslim-in-the-philippines/>.

²⁸ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Moro," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 3, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Moro>.

Congressman, Haroun al-Rashid Lucman. In response to Muslim anger in Mindanao, the Governor of Cotabato, Udtog Matalam, established the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) that called for the creation of an independent Muslim state. In 1972, partly in reaction to the Muslim secessionist movements, Marcos placed the Philippines under martial law. The short-lived MIM gave way to the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led by Nur Misuari in late 1972.²⁹ The MNLF roused amongst the Moro centuries-old resistance to foreign occupation – first from the Spanish, then the Americans, and now from the Christian Philippine Government.

From the mid-1970s to 2019, various agreements between the MNLF, its offshoot, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the different presidencies of the Philippines resulted in the creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). This was rebranded in 2019 by Rodrigo Duterte as the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).³⁰ The Bangsamoro is currently the only Muslim-majority autonomous region legally recognised in the Philippines.³¹ Like Muslims in Palestine, Kashmir and several other parts of the world, the Muslims of the Philippines have lost so much over the years and are still struggling to establish their freedom and independence from colonialists and their proxy neo-colonial regimes.

The indigenous Muslims of the southern Philippines have endured for hundreds of years, eventually embracing the derogatory term *Moros* as a symbol of pride. These Muslims, the *Moro*, have struggled and, through many setbacks, gained a solidarity that sets them apart from the newly converted Muslims in the north and other parts of the Philippines – the Balik-Islam. Amina Rasul-Bernardo, President of the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy and one

²⁹ Miriam Coronel Ferrer, "The Moro Liberation Movement: From Secession to Autonomy," in *Region, Nation and Homeland*, ed. ISEAS Publishing (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2020), 13-56.

³⁰ A.L. Strachan, "Conflict Analysis of Muslim Mindanao," *Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham* (2015), 2-19.

³¹ Zachary Abuza and Luke Lischin, "The Challenges Facing the Philippines' Bangsamoro Autonomous Region at One Year," *United States Institute of Peace* (2020).

of the known leaders of the *Moro*, is reported to have said regarding Balik-Islam, “*We are Moros; the converts are Muslims.*”³²

The Balik-Islam

*“The rationale behind the phenomenon could be explained in the term “balik” or “return” or “to return.” It implies that those who embrace Islam are actually just returning to the faith, given that historically, the early settlers in the Philippine Islands were generally or already Muslims before the period of colonialism. There is a much deeper explanation beyond history, however. The notion of “balik” or “return” is viewed to have ontological and epistemological dimensions as well. It means that man’s original nature or fitrah is in accord with Islam. Hence, when a person embraces Islam, he is just actually returning to his nature, and thus, s/he has to struggle to return to such nature. In fact, some would say that conversion is not the proper term to describe said phenomenon. Reversion is more appropriate.”*³³

Julkipli Wadi, former Dean of the Institute of Islamic Studies, University of the Philippines, described the Balik-Islam in this way during a Friday sermon (*khutbah*). Most Balik-Islam see themselves in this manner. They identify themselves as a distinct group from the Moros, whom they sometimes describe as “born Muslim” or “cultural Muslims.” Balik-Islam consider themselves first and foremost as part of the *Ummah* – the global Muslim community, and their reversion to Islam is viewed in this universal context. This key distinction sets them apart from their fellow co-religionists, the Moros, who are acutely bound to their history and struggles against imperialism.³⁴

The Balik-Islam movement began in the 1970s when President Marcos imposed martial law. There was an emerging need for skilled labour in many parts of the world, particularly the Gulf Cooperation

³² Vivienne SM. Angeles, “Moros in the media and beyond: representations of Philippine Muslims,” *Contemporary Islam* 4, no. 1 (2010): 51.

³³ Julkipli Wadi, “Balik Islam and the Idea of Return,” Friday Sermon, June 1, 2014, <https://www.mindanews.com/mindaviews/2014/06/crucible-balik-islam-and-the-idea-of-return/>, accessed September 25, 2023.

³⁴ Marybeth T. Acac, “Balik-Islam in the Philippines: Reversion, Symbolic Negotiation, and Becoming the Other.” *PhD diss., Temple University* (2020), 48-50.

Council countries (GCC) that experienced an oil boom after the oil embargo of 1973-74. Marcos' Presidential Decree 442 formally established recruitment and placement programs for Filipinos to work abroad. Although originally designed as a short-term solution to increase foreign exchange, the policy was so successful that it became a mainstay of the Philippines' foreign and labour policies.³⁵ Rebranded in the 1990s, the Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) brought an estimated USD 35 billion in direct foreign remittance to the Philippines in 2018. According to the World Bank, this makes the Philippines the fourth-highest recipient of inward remittances after India (USD 83 billion), China (USD 68 billion) and Mexico (USD 36 billion).³⁶ The Philippine Statistics Authority reported that there were almost 1.83 million OFWs in 2021.³⁷ The most popular country for OFWs is Saudi Arabia, with almost a quarter of all OFWs working in the oil-rich kingdom. Other GCC countries like the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain host over 400,000 Filipino migrant workers.³⁸ Many OFWs in the GCC have embraced Islam over the past four decades. Along with those back in the Philippines who revert to Islam through the efforts and influence of returning OFWs, the number of Balik-Islam in the Philippines ranges from as little as 200,000 to as many as 2 million.³⁹

Filipino anthropologist Luis Lacar finds many Catholic Filipinos turning to Islam "*both intriguing and paradoxical.*" Moreover, he makes a valid point: Why would Catholic Christian Filipinos from the northern parts of the Philippines adopt the religion of the less sophisticated, less educated, and economically challenged Moros – their traditional and historical nemeses?⁴⁰ Marybeth Acac

³⁵ Migration Data, "Remittances," accessed September 24, 2023, <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/remittances/>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Philippine Statistics Authority, *2021 Overseas Filipino Workers (Final Results)*, December 2, 2022, <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/survey/labor-and-employment/survey-overseas-filipinos>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Marybeth T. Acac, "Balik-Islam in the Philippines: Reversion, Symbolic Negotiation, and Becoming the Other" *PhD diss., Temple University* (2020), 5.

⁴⁰ Luis Q. Lacar, "Balik -Islam: Christian converts to Islam in the Philippines, c. 1970-98," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 12, no. 1 (2001): 39.

suggests that this paradoxical situation may be explained by looking at circumstances unique to Balik-Islam. The historical presence of Islam, and the idea that had it not been for the Christian missionary efforts and forced conversions over the centuries, most of the Philippines would have been Muslim are important factors. Nevertheless, Acac insists that there is more to it than that. She argues that Catholic Filipinos living and working amongst the GCC Muslims, who are different from the typical Moro, is a more important factor. She classifies their journey to Islam and their reversion to Islam as a “symbolic negotiation” that includes three major elements – diaspora (migration), discord (disorientation), and *da'wah* (proselytisation).⁴¹

Over the last four decades, millions of Catholic Filipinos have worked in Muslim-majority countries and continue to do so. These, ranked in order of number of OFWs, include Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Malaysia, Oman, and Bahrain. Most Filipinos participating in this “Philippine Labor Brokerage” are from the North, Calabarazon region (southeast of Metro Manila), Manila, and Central Luzon.⁴² They are selected and trained by the Government and are reputed to be hardworking, intelligent, and highly skilled. This is reflected in the overseas jobs they hold. In the GCC countries, Filipino men are mostly hired as skilled factory workers, vocational contract labour (plumbers, electricians, auto mechanics, etc.), and middle management (banking, service industries, retail, and manufacturing). Filipina women work in the service industry (nursing, beauty parlours and hair salons, and restaurants), retail (typically salespeople and store managers) and as skilled domestic help (mostly as nannies). Apart from skill, most OFWs speak fluent English, making it another reason why they are preferred for these prime positions compared to the migrant labourers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. To some extent,

⁴¹ Marybeth T. Acac, "Balik-Islam in the Philippines: Reversion, Symbolic Negotiation, and Becoming the Other" *PhD diss., Temple University* (2020), 86-91.

⁴² Philippine Statistics Authority, *2021 Overseas Filipino Workers (Final Results)*, December 2, 2022, <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/survey/labor-and-employment/survey-overseas-filipinos>.

race, skin colour and physical attractiveness (particularly for female OFWs) are factors in the hiring process.⁴³

Most OFWs transform during their tenure abroad. At a personal level, the new experiences, particularly interacting with many diverse people (not just employers but other employees from different parts of the world), profoundly affect OFWs' worldview. They are exposed to new cultures, languages, food, and dress. Generally, higher income means an improvement in the standard of living both in the host country and for their families back home. More than any other factor, this forces many OFWs to maintain their overseas contracts for as long as possible. Many spend most of their vocational years living away from their families. This ethos of sacrifice by OFWs, made popular by the Philippine Government as "*Bagong Bayani*", meaning "modern-day hero", impacts the individual and the family. On the one hand, becoming homesick and, on the other, not adjusting to living back home due to a lifetime of differing experiences. Many OFWs who spend a long time abroad find it difficult to adjust to life in the Philippines. However, not just the OFWs, their families back home get accustomed to living independently with a better lifestyle due to high monthly remittances from abroad.⁴⁴

In the case of female OFWs, living as migrant workers abroad has additional complications. Many Filipinas are in their early twenties when they arrive in the host countries – typically single and either hired in the service industry or work as domestic help. In most GCC countries, pre-marital relations are frowned upon or outright forbidden. This creates social challenges that they would never experience in their home country. Some marry in their host countries and not always to fellow Filipinos. Others marry at a much older age than they would otherwise. In some cases, they prefer to remain single. In addition, many female OFWs end up working as nannies – taking care of other women's children – this "surrogate" motherhood creates relationships with their host families, particularly the

⁴³ Author's personal observation and experience living in the GCC.

⁴⁴ Marybeth T. Acac, "Balik-Islam in the Philippines: Reversion, Symbolic Negotiation, and Becoming the Other" *PhD diss., Temple University* (2020), 114.

children, that significantly impacts their perception of family and community.⁴⁵

Vivienne Angeles posits that Saudi Arabia's restrictions on the religious practice of non-Muslims create challenging circumstances for Catholic OFWs. Most Filipinos may not be highly religious, but attending Church every week is embedded in their culture. For many of them, not being able to attend mass every week creates another complication of living in the diaspora. Some Catholic OFWs find ways to practice their faith covertly but face the risk of being penalised and deported. Religious restrictions in the GCC have changed and are changing rapidly. Countries like the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain have churches and temples.⁴⁶ Saudi Arabia is fast changing as well. Angeles' observations are valid but are in the process of getting outdated.⁴⁷

Migrating to another part of the world and living in the diaspora changes how OFWs perceive the world around them. Many may experience being uncomfortable living among different people to outright "cultural shock." Most OFWs are Catholic. Furthermore, even if they are not religious or very practising, their identity is "Catholicism." Their self-perception, first and foremost, is being Catholic. Catholic ideas like suffering and sacrifice, especially given their experience living abroad as "*Bagong Bayani*" (modern-day heroes), are internalised and seen as a means of connecting with the Divine. These are coupled with other Catholic concepts like faith and hope. Having faith in Christ as the saviour and hope for eternal salvation. These various Catholic precepts form the identity of most OFWs.³⁰ In the case of Balik-Islam, many describe going through a phase of "deconversion" – a time or moment in their journey where their Catholic worldview is substantially shaken. A time or even stage of conversion that forces them to challenge everything about their belief system. In essence, their "world is turned upside down."

⁴⁵ Author's personal observation and experience living in the GCC.

⁴⁶ Vivienne SM. Angeles, "The Middle East and the Philippines: Transnational Linkages, Labor Migration and the Remaking of Philippine Islam," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 7, nos. 1-2 (2012): 157-81.

⁴⁷ Author's personal observation and experience living in the GCC.

Lewis Rambo calls this a “crisis.” A crisis of faith.⁴⁸ A feeling of disenchantment, disorientation, or discord. A feeling which may arguably be even termed as a form of cognitive dissonance.

While many Balik-Islam experience varying degrees of discord, active or passive *da'wah* in their host countries does play a large part in their eventual acceptance of Islam. In relation to the local Moros or nearby Muslim-majority nations of Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries are viewed by Filipinos as authentically Islamic countries. They are viewed as the centre or origin of Islam. Add to that fluency of Arabic (even if it is a dialect far from the Qur'an) and the stereotypical *khaleeji* (GCC countries) way of dressing – men in white “*thowbs*” and women in black *abayas* – to most Filipinos, this is the “real” Islam.⁴⁹

For non-Muslim migrant workers to the *Khaleej* (GCC), the typical *khaleeji* “*sheikh*” or “*arbaab*” (master or boss) or “*madam*” in their mannerisms, culturally defined dress, language, segregation of gender, and food are all authentically Muslim. For example, in Bahrain, 10% of the OFWs who accept Islam state that it was the Islamic behaviour of their “*arbaab*” or their “*madam*” that brought them to Islam.⁵⁰ Late renowned Professor Ismail al Faruqi referred to this as indirect or passive *da'wah*. Observing or manifesting a virtuous lifestyle becomes a powerful motivation for others to seek Islam.⁵¹ Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) is reported to have said, “*You cannot be a true believer unless you love for your brother what you love for yourself.*”⁵² This golden rule of Islam is frequently cited as the root cause explaining why many non-Muslims have been drawn to Islam.

Active *da'wah*, where Muslims reach out to non-Muslims and educate and invite them to Islam, is a major factor in many Filipino workers becoming Muslim in the GCC. In 2021, almost a thousand

⁴⁸ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion: A Study in Human Nature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 44-55.

⁴⁹ Author's personal experience and observations dealing with Filipinos in the GCC.

⁵⁰ Author, internal unpublished document, *Discover Islam Society Bahrain Annual Report 2021*.

⁵¹ Isma'il al-Faruqi, "On the nature of Islamic Da'wah," *International Review of Mission* 65, no. 260 (1976): 391-409.

⁵² Imam Nawawi, "Forty Ahadith, Hadith 13." from *Sahih Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*.

OFWs took their *shahadah* (became Muslim) in Bahrain. This is approximately 2% of the Filipino expat population on the Island kingdom. Over the last seven years alone, almost 17% of OFWs in Bahrain have switched their religion from Catholicism to Islam. Most of this was through proselytisation efforts of local *Da'wah* organisations. Compared to other Gulf countries, Bahrain has the smallest Filipino expat population. The number of Filipino reverts, Balik-Islam, in the rest of the *Khaleej* (Gulf) countries is far more than in Bahrain. Between 20,000 and 30,000 OFWs in the GCC are estimated to become Muslim yearly.⁵³

Many Balik-Islam in the GCC become *du'aat* (active Islamic “missionaries”) themselves. Ease of communication and use of social media has greatly enhanced the work of *da'wah* over the last several years. The global COVID-19 pandemic has been a massive disruptor and has accelerated the growth of video conferencing and remote working. OFWs are in daily contact with their families back in the Philippines. Many who become Muslim are sharing their faith with their loved ones back home. The number of Balik-Islam is growing faster than ever before.⁵⁴

The most often cited reason for accepting Islam amongst Filipinos is “*Tawheed*” (the strict monotheistic concept of the Oneness of God, Allah, in Islam). *Tawheed* is the central tenet of Islam. It is the most fundamental concept upon which all other aspects of Islam are built and without which one is not a Muslim. The simplicity of the faith follows this. For many reverts, Catholicism did not make “sense” – the idea of three gods and all three being one, of being born in sin, and for god to send his son to die for the sins of the world – all this sounds too convoluted and unnecessarily complex for them.⁵⁴ It was accepted as a matter of faith, as part of the culture that they grew up in and was never to be questioned. In this context, Karin Van Niewerk identifies three precepts of Islam that distinguish it from Christianity: 1. The Oneness of Allah (*Tawheed*); 2. That Islam is the natural religion for all humanity (*Din al-Fitrah*); and 3. That all are born sinless, born Muslim. Niewerk further states that because the process of reverting to Islam is simple and only requires

⁵³ Author, unpublished internal document, *Discover Islam Society Bahrain 2021*.

⁵⁴ Author, unpublished interviews of Filipino Converts 2022.

reciting the *shahadah* – “*I testify there is no God but Allah, and I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah*” – both inviting people to and accepting Islam are straightforward processes.⁵⁵

According to many sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and academicians, converting from one faith to another is undoubtedly a complex process, but one that science may be able to explain. To many secular academics, the notion of “*hidaya*” (guidance) coming from Allah is not an empirically explainable phenomenon. In the case of many Filipino reverts to Islam, the Balik-Islam, this is very much a reality. A recent anecdotal example of a conversion story illustrates this concept beautifully.

Dexter, an OFW, works as a waiter in a fast-food restaurant in Bahrain. He was approached almost two years ago by a fellow OFW who invited Dexter to Islam. Dexter took his *shahadah* in March 2020. In early January 2022, Dexter had the opportunity to perform *Umrah* (a lesser pilgrimage) in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. Dexter was part of a larger group that a Bahraini Da’wah organisation sponsored to perform this Islamic ritual. Dexter had been trying to convince his ailing 90-year-old father to become Muslim for over a year. His father, who lived in Isabella, North Luzon, had resisted to the point of not listening to anything Dexter said about Islam. While in the *Haram*, next to the *Ka’bah* in Makkah, Dexter’s Islamic teacher encouraged him to fervently pray and ask Allah to give *hidaya* to his father. Dexter complied and begged for Allah’s help. Dexter’s father agreed to listen two days later, took the *shahadah*, and became a Muslim. Dexter’s father died five days later and was buried as a Muslim in the Philippines.⁵⁶

On the same *Umrah* journey, Hafsa, a Filipina who converted to Islam in 2019, heard about Dexter’s father’s conversion. While in Madinah, Saudi Arabia, she reached out to her parents in Pastrana, Leyte, via video call using Facebook Messenger. After listening to her and listening to a Filipino *da’ee* (someone who invites others to Islam) who was with Hafsa, both her parents took the *shahadah*.

⁵⁵ Karin Van Nieuwkerk, "'Conversion' to Islam and the Construction of a Pious Self," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 669.

⁵⁶ Author, Personal Interview with Da’ee Umpad, January 24, 2022.

Hafsa's cousin, who lives in the same household with Hafsa's parents, also became Muslim the same day.⁵⁷

These are not just a few incidental stories. These are the reversion narratives of many Balik-Islam. The spiritual aspect of their journey is a major factor in their not only becoming Muslim but becoming practising Muslims who, in turn, want to reach out to their families and friends back home and share their "enlightenment" with them. To discount the spiritual side of Balik-Islam reversion narratives is to miss out on a major factor that may even have social and political implications in the Philippines today. However, not all those who accept Islam do so out of personal conviction. Roughly 5-10% of conversions are related to marriage. Many female OFWs working in the GCC have relationships with locals or other expats. Some of these relationships end in marriage. Islam technically permits Muslim men to marry women from the "People of the Book" (Jews and Christians). However, the groom will frequently insist that the bride become Muslim. Most *Da'wah* institutions in the GCC officiate such "*shahadahs*" and facilitate court-issued "*Shahadah Certificates*", proving that someone has switched their faith to Islam.⁵⁸ Some OFWs become Muslims in exchange for a better job, higher pay or other material incentive. These cases are very few and far between due to two reasons. Filipinos are culturally invested in their Catholic way of life. For many, being Catholic is their identity; switching faith is not trivial. For many Muslims, particularly the Balik-Islam, *da'wah* is not trivial either. According to al-Faruqi, *da'wah* is not about compelling or persuading someone to become Muslim. *Da'wah*, as taught in the Qur'an and exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), is about inviting people to Allah, reasoning with them in a sound and wise manner and giving them the freedom to choose or refuse (Qur'an 16:125).⁵⁹ Islamic *da'wah* differs from the typical evangelical missionary work, and materially incentivising *da'wah* is generally frowned upon and discouraged.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Author, Unpublished Internal Reports, Discover Islam Society Bahrain, 2017-2021.

⁵⁹ Ismail R. al-Faruqi, *Islam: Religion, Practice, Culture & World Order* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2012), 81-82.

The Balik-Islam and the Moros

The conversion narratives of many Balik-Islam are comparable to the conversion narratives of Filipinos who left Catholicism in favour of Evangelical or Pentecostal Protestant sects and consider themselves “Born-Again” Christians. Returning to the original idea that Balik-Islam means converting back to one’s true nature (*Din al-Fitrah*), it is conceivable to view Balik-Islam as “Born-Again Muslims.” Moreover, this is how many Balik-Islam see themselves. They are “Born-Again Muslims” compared to the Moro, simply “Born-Muslims.” Moreover, within this play on words lies the difference between the two Muslim Filipino communities’ worldviews.⁶⁰

Acac asked several Balik-Islam in Manila about their view of the Moro. *“When asked about the difference between the two types of Filipino Muslims, most Balik-Islam were quick to reply that there is essentially no difference; they are all Muslim brothers and sisters. However, during my experiences, this standard response of comradery was almost always qualified by a momentary, sometimes seemingly unconscious divulgence of the tension between the two groups.”*⁶¹ Acac may have stumbled onto an interesting “collective subconscious” that may have to do with the collective experience of having accepted Islam in the “land of Islam” and at the hands of those who are the “original authentic Muslims.”

Labor-class Muslim expats in the GCC, particularly from Asia and Africa, generally have a sense of respect bordering on adulation for their Arab “*arbaab*” (masters). Part of this may be explained pragmatically “that these are your employers, and they have within their power your financial well-being as well as your position and legal status in their country.” But there is more to it. Most low-income labourers are treated quite poorly in the *Khaleej*. Low pay, menial jobs, disrespect, and injustice are not uncommon. Many expats live in “labour camps” where living conditions are way below the average standard of the locals. Labour laws generally favour employers. One would question why anybody wants to work in these

⁶⁰ Marybeth T. Acac, "Balik-Islam in the Philippines: Reversion, Symbolic Negotiation, and Becoming the Other" PhD diss., Temple University (2020), 48-50.

⁶¹ Ibid.

countries. The answer is simply because most home countries' economic and living conditions are even worse. However, apart from the dismal labour conditions, there is also a healthy dose of racism, xenophobia and classism in the GCC. Filipinos are below Westerners (whites) and Arabs (Gulf Arabs first, then others from Arab-speaking nations) but held in higher regard than those from the Indian subcontinent. Sub-Saharan Africans are held in the least regard. This hierarchy, based on colour, language, ethnicity, and national origin, is an open secret across the Gulf countries. The net effect of all this is a high degree of adulation of the local Arabs by the labour-class expats.

Most Muslims in Asia, Africa and many other parts of the world come from communities where one does not question one's religious leaders. The *imam* (leader), *moulvi*, *mawlana*, *sheikh*, *mufti*, and *ustadh* (various terms for Islamic scholars) are always right. Muslims have been trained for generations to be *muqallid* (blind followers). Moreover, if the religious leader is fluent in Arabic, dresses like an Arab sheikh and is from the *Khaleej*, then it would border on sacrilege to question him. In this regard, Catholics are closer to the above-described *muqallid* Muslims than their fellow co-religionist Protestants! It is easier for Filipino Catholics to convert to a version of Islam with strict, well-defined rules, unquestioning obedience to the religious authority, and no room for innovation (*bida*). Acac does not mention this in her "symbolic negotiation", but it fits her hypothesis very well. For OFWs in the GCC, converting to a strict, puritanical version of Islam makes sense.

Acac sheds more light on this facet of the Balik-Islam. "*When asked their opinion of Born Muslims, several Balik-Islam shared their slight contempt for Born Muslims, describing them, for example, as 'lazy to practice their religion' and 'ignorant of the true faith.'*"⁶² When they go back to the Philippines many Balik-Islam are not only keen to share their new-found faith with their friends and family, but they see themselves as "better" and "more original" Muslims than the Moros. Moreover, this is most evident in their dress – many Balik-Islam dress like their former Arab masters – white *thowbs* (male full-length robes) and *igal* (headdress) for the men,

⁶² Ibid., 49.

black *abayas* (female full-length robes), and quite often a full face-covering veil for the women. On the other hand, the Moros have a more traditional dress that resembles other tribes of the *Nusantara* – clothing like *Songkok*, *Malong* and *Patadyong*.⁶³

Conclusion

The Balik-Islam phenomenon in the Philippines is less than fifty years old but has had a major impact on Islam's long and troubled history in the region. The Balik-Islam are reverting to what they consider a purer, less adulterated "original" version of Islam. They may have adopted this version of Islam from their "*arbaab*" in the Gulf countries. Given their Catholic origin, their reverence for religious authority is understandable. It certainly has eased their entry into Islam. Upon accepting Islam, their pre-Islamic perspective on the Moro people as being backward, poor, and uneducated may have been compounded by a sense of religious and moral superiority over the Moro. A more puritanical version of Islam in the Philippines coupled with centuries of injustice for the Moro is a tinderbox waiting to explode!

Despite their differences, the Moro and the Balik-Islam must unite and understand one another. The Moro can augment the Balik-Islam with their rich history, patience in the face of unimaginable losses, and a pluralistic, tolerant view of Islam. The Balik-Islam may help the Moro revive their understanding and practice of Islam. Together, the Muslims of the Philippines have a place in both their country and the *Ummah*. In the Philippines, Muslims need to reach out to Christians – Catholics and Protestants, Hindus, Buddhists and people of all convictions not only to invite them to Islam but also to work together for the common good as was the practice of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). In relation to the larger community of Muslims worldwide, the *Ummah*, a united Muslim of the Philippines, can be a real-life example of how people from different and inimical backgrounds can come together as one.

⁶³ Mina Roces, "Gender, Nation and the Politics of Dress in Twentieth-Century Philippines," *Gender & History* 17, no. 2 (2005): 354-77.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	ب	پ	پ	ز	ز	ز	ز	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	ب	ب	ب	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	پ	پ	پ	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	ت	ت	ت	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h ¹	h ¹
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḏ	ḏ	ž	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a ²
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al ³	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	q	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

¹ – when not final

² – at in construct state

³ – (article) al - or l-

VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form i)	iy (final form i)
	و	uww (final form ū)	uvv
	و	uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ا	i	o or ö
	ا	i	i

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. چ jh گ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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Vol. 29, No. 1, 2024

Contents

ARTICLES

- ISLAMIC APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE AND EXTREMISM: CONTEXTUAL
READING OF HADITHS ON THE MAHDI WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SRI LANKA
Mohammad Ismath Ramzy, Rahimi Md Saad and Rohan Gunaratna 1
- THE BALIK-ISLAM PHENOMENON FILIPINO MUSLIM REVERTS –
BETWEEN THE GULF COUNTRIES AND THE PHILIPPINES 25
Mohamed Quadir Harunani and Thameem Ushama
- EXPLORING THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF *FIQH*:
THE ROLE OF THE SOUL IN ACHIEVING *MAQĀṢID AL-SHARĪ'AH* 47
Nurul Ain Norman and Mohammad Eisa Ruhullah
- THE CONFUSED WHALE OF THE CHINA SEA:
WATER SYMBOLISM IN THE WORKS OF HAMZAH FANSURI 79
Amir H. Zekrgoo
- FROM OBSERVERS TO PARTICIPANTS: SINO-MUSLIM INTELLECTUAL'S
ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ISLAMIC WORLD IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY 99
Bao Hsiu-Ping
- CRITICISMS ON ONTOLOGICAL RELATIVISM OF MODERN SCIENCE 127
BY SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS AND SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR
Khalina Mohammed Khalili
- THE MALAY EPISTEMOLOGICAL BACKGROUND IN
THE ISLAMIC WRITINGS OF HAMZAH FANSŪRĪ 153
Tee Boon Chuan
- REVIEW ESSAY**
- THE ISLAMIZATION OF THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO IN OTTOMAN MANUSCRIPTS 181
Alaeddin Tekin
- חינוך, *CHINUCH*: ISRAEL'S EDUCATION SYSTEM AND QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY 195
Arief S. Arman
- MANUSCRIPT STUDIES**
- DEVOTIONAL POETRY IN TECHNICAL MANUSCRIPT TERMINOLOGY: 207
AN INTRODUCTION TO *THE ROSE GARDEN OF PURITY (GOLZĀR-E ṢAFĀ)*
Amir H. Zekrgoo and Mandana Barkeshli
- BOOK REVIEWS** 223
- KEYNOTE EVENTS AND SPEECHES**
- A FEAST OF CIVILIZATIONS: THE LIFE AND MIND OF TOSHIKKO IZUTSU 231
Anwar Ibrahim
- SILK ROAD, ISLAM, AND CONFUCIANISM 239
Osman Bakar

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