

PEOPLE AND SETTING

The islanders of Cagayan de Sulu first emerged into the notice of history in 1521 when Pigafetta, a survivor of Magellan's expedition to the Philippines, briefly visited the island on the way to the Moluccas with the remnants of the expedition. "The people of that island," he observed, "are Moros and were banished from an island called Burne" (Pigafetta 1525: 207).

These active islanders, who are trade-oriented Muslims, call themselves Jama Mapun, their island Tana' Mapun, and their language Pullum Mapun. An important branch of the generic Samal-Badjao group of the Sulu archipelago and North Borneo, they are sometimes called Samal Cagayan by the Tausug of Sulu, Badjao or Orang Cagayan by the coastal Muslims of Borneo. To the Christianized peoples of the Philippines, they are known with the other Muslim groups simply and exonymically as "Moros."

Cagayan de Sulu has been an important trade center from very remote

times. Trade porcelain discovered in archaeological sites in the southeast end of the island near Lupa' Pula date back to late T'ang or beginning Sung, i.e., the ninth and eleventh centuries, and "rank among the oldest class of porcelain found in the Philippines" (Beyer 1947: 299). Early Ming and Sawankhalok wares of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have also been found in a neighboring site. Keppel considered the island, "from its size and population . . . next in importance to Sulu itself" (Gazetteer 1902: 409). And Harrison (1966: 119, footnote 45) says that "westerly Suluks largely looked [and look today] to Cagayan Sooloo as culture and trade focus."

The importance of Cagayan de Sulu to trade lies in its strategic position on two trade routes used by the Chinese and the Arabs, Persians and Malayo-Muslims. Majul (1964b: 362) suggests that the earliest intrusion of Islam into Sulu could have originated from Chinese-Arab trading communities in south China. Any vessel wishing to penetrate into the Sulu archipelago from China would be blocked by the length of Luzon, Palawan, and Borneo. The only break in this wall of landmass consists of the straits of Balabac between southern Palawan and North Borneo in the south, and the passage between northern Palawan, Mindoro, and Luzon in the north. Trade vessels choosing the first passage were likely to stop at Cagayan de Sulu, for it is in a direct line between Balabac and the main entrepot of Jolo. Those who preferred the northern passage near Mindoro would proceed from the Luzon ports to the Visayas, or trade along the eastern length of Palawan until they were ready to cross over to Jolo again passing close to, and presumably stopping in, Cagayan de Sulu.

The Balabac straits were also the passageway for the later Muslim influence originating from Brunei. Saleeby (1963: 43) notes that the route leading from Brunei to Cagayan de Sulu, Pangutaran, Zamboanga, and ultimately to Jolo seems to have been taken by all Muslim missionaries and invaders mentioned in the (Sulu) Tarsila.