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Roles Played by Meranao Women in the Formation of Meranao of Society; Breaking the Stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to identify the different roles played by Meranao women in Marawi City, how their roles are portrayed and how it is different to traditional Meranao women. The main objective was to bring into light the early position of Meranao women in Muslim society to enlighten us what are the changes happened over the years. Using cultural feminism, the study correct the impressionists adverse picture of the Meranao women as completely subservient to their men, and as giving little importance to their role in life—facts which have consequently assigned them to a secondary status in society. Among the roles identified which broke the stereotype Meranao women are the following: breadwinner, entrepreneur, educator and activist. Furthermore, the author find out that the Meranao women play an important role in political arena such a solving conflict and *ridu* (family feud), organizers of community services, activist of peace process. Majority of the roles they played showed how Meranao women now have started to reassess their rights as they realized that they have more potential that they have been allowed to use in a male dominated society. The woman now assumes new roles to liberate her and be recognized. These new roles they now assume gave them a new identity to recognize their roles in Meranao society. They author concludes that Meranao women defied many cultural norms and principles and struggled to liberate herself by breaking the stereotype of Meranao women to have a new identity in the formation of Meranao society.

Keywords: Meranao, Feminism, Stereotype

Introduction

The Meranao refers to the southern tribe who are now the people of the lake called Ranao in the Iranaon language, a predominantly Muslim region in the Philippines island of Mindanao. They are famous for their artwork, sophisticated weaving, wood and metal crafts, and their epic literature, Darangen.

Unlike their adventurous and extroverted menfolk, the Maranao women and their roles in both traditional and modern contemporary societies are relatively less known to casual or outside visitors. If their customary lifestyle is unique or quite a mystery that perhaps needs to be revealed, it is obviously due to their underexposure to the current urban ways and the lack of information about them through popular and scholarly writings.

Books and periodicals, especially women's magazines, very rarely publish feature stories about these angelic women who live along the shores of scenic Lake Lanao region, where modern education and acculturation are only recently instilling the new traits and values to the indigenous society and culture of this predominantly Muslim area.

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This study aimed to identify the different roles played by a Meranao women in Marawi City, how their roles are portrayed and how is it different to traditional Meranao women. The purpose of this study is to bring into light the early position of Meranao women in Filipino Muslim society for us to have an idea how the changes happened over the years. In fairness to the significance of the Meranao women highly regarded role in the developing Meranao society, this study intends to correct the impressionists' adverse picture of the Meranao women as completely subservient to their men, and as giving little importance to their role in life—facts which have consequently assigned them to a secondary status in society.

Objectives of The Study

The study aimed to identify the different roles played by Meranao women in Marawi City at present and how it is different to traditional Meranao women. The main objective was to bring into light the early position of Meranao women in Muslim society to enlighten us what are the changes that happened over the years and how these changes contributed in the formation of the cultural identity of the Meranao women.

Research Questions

1. What are the dominant roles played by Meranao women today?
2. How do these roles differ from the stereotype of traditional Meranao women?
3. What are the implications of these differences in the cultural identity of Meranao women?

Methodology

The study is quantitative and qualitative in nature. The researcher researched and identified roles of Meranao women in the past. Roles identified were bound by cultures. Two hundred respondents were asked to answers a self-made questionnaires followed by a focus group discussion. The researcher lived with the group, thus direct immersion and observation were made. Using the theories of feminism, the researcher analyzed the data gathered.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural feminism defines woman by focusing on the fundamental female difference-by celebrating connection. Intimacy is valued and gives rise to a feminine ethic of caring. Harm, for the cultural feminist woman, is expressed as separation or isolation from the community. Equality arises when society accepts and respects the feminine differences. The cultural feminist understanding of women necessarily excludes the notion that pregnancy is harm. The core of this majority view of woman is the concept of connected. Consider the logical results of implementing the positive cultural view of feminine differences in our society. Women would be understood as different from men in essential ways that center both physiologically and psychologically on their capacity to conceive, bear, and rear children. Women, by virtue of their human dignity, would be entitles to the same freedom and respect that men have traditionally enjoyed. Meanwhile, their differences would amount neither to inferiority nor vulnerability that might separate them from their community. A positive cultural feminist view would influence all levels of society.

Dr. Nandih Sahu (2008) in her study on feminism said that *cultural feminism* is an approach to feminism thinking and action which claims that either by nature and/or through nurture, women have developed what society refers to as 'feminine' or 'female' characteristics.. This set of characteristics, say cultural feminists, is to be compared and contrasted with the set of 'masculine' or 'male' characteristics which men have developed, also through nature and/or nurture. Cultural feminists fault western thought for its tendency

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to privilege 'male' ways of being, thinking, and doing over 'female' ones. Specifically, they argue that the traits typically associated with men- 'independence', autonomy, intellect, will, wariness, hierarchy, domination, culture, transcendence, product, asceticism, war and death,- are not better, and perhaps worse, than the traits typically associated with 'women'- 'interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, trust, absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace and life (Sahu, 2008).

This theory emphasizes the fundamental personalities differences between men and woman, and those women's differences are special and should be celebrated. This theory of feminism supports the notion that there are biological differences between men and women. For example, "women are kinder and gentler than men, "leading to the mentality that if women ruled the world there would be no wars.

Cultural feminism is the theory that wants to overcome sexism by celebrating women's special qualities, women's ways, and women's experience, often believing that the 'woman's way' is the better way. According to Jane Adams, the feminist text is a radical statement on the role of women in the formation of culture and civilization. Mason attributed the development of many, if not all, the major innovations in art, language, religion, and industry to women. He documented that, in general, it was women who housed, fed, and clothed the species in early societies. Mason stressed the uniqueness of women's abilities and nature, even in the areas of public governance and speech: "Nothing is more natural than that the author of parental government, the founder of tribal kinship, the organizer of industrialism, should have much to say about that form of housekeeping called public economy." Clearly, many of Addams' ideas are traceable to this influential book which not only stressed the significance of women, but even their superiority to men. Mason's concluding paragraph amply conveyed his view:

" It is not here avowed that women may not pursue any path in life they choose, that they have no right to turn aside from old highways to wander in unbeaten tracks. But before it is decided to do that there in no harm in looking backward over the honorable achievements of the sex. All this is stored capital, accumulated experience and energy. If all mankind to come should be better born and nurtured, better instructed in morals and conduct at the start, better clothed and fed and housed all their lives, better married and encompassed and refined, the old ratios of progress would be doubled. All this beneficent labor is the birthright of women, and much of it of women alone. Past glory therein is secure, and it only remains to be seen how far the future will add to its luster in the preservation of holy ideals.

On the other hand, according to Ezra Heywood, the legal subjection of women is thought to be justified by an assumed natural dependence on man. The old claim of tyranny, "The king can do no wrong, is reasserted by that many-headed monster, the majority, which widens the circle of despotism, but retains the fact. As people were to the king, so woman is now an appendage of man, who claims to be her "head," though nature seems not to have limited heads to the exclusive possession of either sex. That there is no natural feeling of dependence, on one hand, or of superiority on the other, is evident to the most casual observer of spontaneous dealings of the sexes. In practical sense and force a girl of fourteen is often ten years older than a boy of the same age; tells him how to act and protects him from the big boys at school.

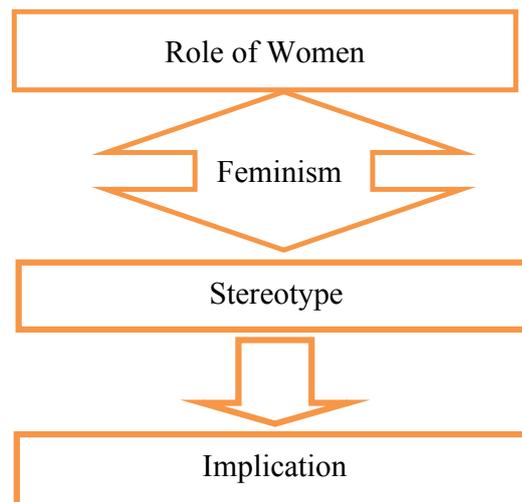
Feminism as a theory has very recently given rise to a new area in criticism, known as *Feminist literary Criticism*. The motto of this literary criticism is a search for underlying,

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powerful female tradition in literature. The feminist literary critics attempt to uncover and interpret women's writing from a symbolic point view and to rediscover the lost works of women in the past. They aim at interpreting the works of the male writer's from a feminist standpoint and to distinguish between the politics, style and language of the male and female writers. Feminist theory is a locale of writing which represents a critical and original contribution to current thinking. With increasing acts of physical belligerence towards women, there is an even greater need for feminist psychoanalytic theory which investigates sexual distinctiveness. Unique to feminist hypothesis is its insistence on the inextricable link between theory and practice and between the communal and private. Theory and experience have a very singular relationship within feminism encapsulated in its slogan 'the personal in political'. Certain terms in contemporary theory are used to sum up what appear to be the key experiences of women.

Among these is 'work', 'family', 'patriarchy', 'sexuality'. These concepts reflect feminism's effort reveal nucleus social processes and to find what constantly reappears in various guises in the literary of women's account. An elementary goal of feminist theory is to comprehend women's oppression in terms of reveals the magnitude of women's individual and collective experiences and their struggles. It analyses how sexual divergence is constructed within any intellectual and common word and builds accounts of experiences from these differences.

Conceptual Framework



Review Of Related Literature

Women in Islam

Islam has entrusted the obligations of the home to a woman, who is in charge of the household work and looks after the nourishing, education and training of the children. The Prophet is reported to have said, "Woman is the guardian of her husband's household and his children and she will be questioned concerning them." (Bukhari and Abu Dawud). Hence, this means that children must find their patience, care, love, and every possible advancement in their all-round education. The wife herself is responsible for the care of her home and the welfare of the family which includes the husband and children. Women have played an important part in their homes, particularly in the training of their children. Management of the household and domestic chores has been the women's responsibilities. The daily routine

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includes: cooking, washing dishes and utensils, cleaning the house, fetching water from the river, serving food at home, gathering firewood, washing clothes, negotiating for foodstuffs with neighbors and entertaining visitors, mainly females. For a man to do the above-mentioned activities are ridiculous, and he is laughed at by the barrio-folks, neighbors, except when his wife, for instance, is physically incapable to work due to illness or after giving birth, and there is no other woman living in the same household. Unmarried men, likewise, do no household work.

Review of Related Studies

Many researchers studied about the Meranao culture but only few studied about Meranao women and the different roles they play in the society. In the study *Meranao Women as Portrayed in Selected Maranao Folktales* of Marial Elena Reyes, Norlaine Mangotara Abdulmalic and Insirah Islao Matanog, it has shown that the biological differences between Maranao men and Maranao women are evidently shown through their gender differences as female and male. These differences were highlighted by the depiction of a Maranao woman's capacity to conceive, bear, and rear a child whom a man is incapable of. In a Maranao society, a woman is expected to provide an heir to her husband. Moreover, through the analyzed short folktales, it was revealed that despite of the patriarchal society, Maranao women played important roles in the formation of Maranao society. They have a social leadership function inside the clan. And more so, if she is holding a female royal title. Lastly, this study showed the struggles of Maranao woman in twofold: they struggle against the discrimination foisted upon them within their own communities, and they struggle against the Muslim stereotype when they step out of the confines of their family and tribe. Nevertheless, there seems to be a change in this traditional picture of Maranao woman, going from one extreme to the other, from a woman staying consciously at home to care for her children and wearing the "hijab" to a woman who is independent from her family.

Findings

1. What are the dominant roles played by Meranao women today?

Meranao women are **providers**. They contribute in providing financial needs of her children. Nowadays, it is very evident that most women who came from different class of society preferred to work. In fact, around eighty percent of the respondents are working. This phenomenon is not just about money or survival for even those Meranao women who are well provided by their husbands chose to work because they choose not to be dependent to their husband especially when they want to buy something for themselves or provide allowance for their parents. Furthermore, they now realize the importance of having a career outside the house. Furthermore, Meranao women chose to work for practical reason. They claim that they chose to work for insurance. In a Meranao culture and Islam religion, Polygamy-marrying more than one woman is allowed. Thus, if a man chose to marry again, a Meranao woman has no right to object. Meranao women chose to work for they believe that if their husband marries again, they will not swallow their "maratabat" from asking or sometimes begging from their husband for allowance to survive. This shows that women now defies the roles assigned to her by society as dependent to male for survival. Women now can stand on their own.

Meranao women are **educated**. One hundred seventy five out of two hundred respondents finished their college degree. Forty of them graduated with masteral degree and fifteen finished their doctorate degree. This implies that more and more Meranao women are having higher education degrees. Anisha Guro emphasized "Education used to be a privilege and a risk reserved for the Meranao men. Nowadays, it is the Moro women who are more

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aggressive in seeking education. Meranao women still fall under the traditional courses known to them, although, the proverbial glass ceiling is being broken as women seek higher education and take courses which were not encouraged to them before.” Again, this is a defiance of the roles assigned to her by the society.

The educational background of Meranao today resulted to becoming an **assertive** woman. Women in Marawi city today are assertive in choosing their future spouse. They now voiced out whom they want to marry. They may entertain suitors at home or outside of it. If the parents want someone, consent from their daughter or son is a requirement. Nowadays, Meranao women is more assertive in choosing his spouse and if parents forced her for marriage, she ran away after the wedding or refused to consummate the marriage which could result to more complicated problems like returning of dowry and family feud.

Meranao women plays an important role **buying the goods of the family**. The respondent stayed in padian (market) for five long hours and stayed in one store to observe and identify the number of men and women who went to the market. The researcher find out that there are more women who went to the market to buy fish, vegetables and others for the family. Only twenty two percent are men.

The contemporary meranao women are **entrepreneurs**. The introduction of the new system of education and the opening of new employment, opportunities have allowed the Meranao women to assume new roles within their society. You can see the Meranao women now who are entrepreneurs or business women. They can be seen in any establishments like supermarkets and malls, within or outside Marawi City. Earning for themselves is certainly not prohibited. They can pursue careers just as men can. However, as pointed out, they should always give due respect to the precepts of the sharia. For instance, even in business places, being modest and wearing hijab is permissible for some Meranao women. Specially, if the family is a member of religious groups.

A Meranao woman is an **educator**. Islam secures women’s rights in education and work. The Prophet responded positively and instantly to women asking him to allocate a certain time to teach the Islam teachings regularly. Women should educate themselves so that they can contribute positively to the society through their intellect, talent, and ability. A complete educational system was introduced for barrio primary school to university, with U.S textbooks that oriented Filipinos toward a U.S. or Western way of life that seemed superior. This can be seen through the changes of the Filipino Muslim society’s especially in the educational system in the whole Philippines.

Meranao women plays an important role in political arena. They are now **leaders**. According to Ex-Vice Mayor of Marawi City, Honorable Yasmin Ala Calandada, women of today are not excluded from participating in national and local political campaigns. In every election, especially in the local elections, women play an important role in the house-to-house campaign where candidates and their sympathizers visit houses to win the family’s votes. It is also worth mentioning that one of the three congressional candidates in Marawi is a woman, name Honorable Faisah Dumarpa, and some of the Governmental Head of Political Institutions are also women. Thus, Meranao women, unexpectedly, have become active on politics. This shows a liberation women assigned to her as a follower and never a leader. Now, they have proven that they are capable to rule a patriarchal society.

When it comes to the way of clothing, researcher find out that wearing of malong inside and outside of the house, is not visible among women, especially among the young ones. Meranao women today are wearing hijab, abaya, or even niqab. The donning of hijab become compulsory to schools and universities in Marawi City that even Christian students in high school institutions do wear. Undeniably, some Muslims in the Philippines, allow any dress that fulfills the required modesty for a Meranao. This shows the new trend that is brought by the Western dress. For example, the elegant combinations of colors on lace dresses, blouses,

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jeans, or coat that made stylish and covered the “aurat”. Hence, Filipino Muslims everywhere in the Philippines tried to combine a Muslim-Westernized fashion in their hijab.

Meranao women are **organizers of community activities**. Educated Meranao women have become more active in performing their civic duties by organizing community activities for old, young, professional, and illiterate ones. Like the Almujaadalah Foundation Development, where it is a non-profit women organization that advocates gender justice, peace building, governance and human rights. Mostly, all the Muslim women organizations, according to Zahra Mapandi, are both governmental and non-governmental, show their solidarity and oneness in adherence to Islamic ideology of having a strong and united Ummah.

As women become community organizers, and since there are different religious groups, the women members from the said different religious groups also organize activities to promote their ideologies. For instance, the Akhawat members of the Markazos shabab organized a yearly Muslim Women Assembly that is being participated by women only. Just recently, Akhawat organized their 30th Muslim World Assembly, entitled: “Langowana Minitayao a Datu na Pangongorinan o Bilantadi a Bae” (Behind Every Great Man, There is a Great Woman), June 22-23, 2013, Marantao Marawi City. Similar to the Mastura Jama’ah of Tablīghi Jama’ah which also organized ta’alim every day at different locations in Marawi City, and involved themselves on the Tablīghi ijtimā or assembly in different location in and outside the Marawi City. Lastly, the Followers of Hazrat Zaynab (as) of Ahl al-Bayt organized Islamic seminars, but usually only the members are invited to the event.

Meranao women now play a very important role in settling a family conflict (ridu) in their community. Meranao women today play the role of **mediators** in conflict situations. “In our culture, women are deeply respected. There are many instances that negotiation cannot be handled by men especially if the domestic cases are related to gender offenses. In that case women are practically more effective than men during negotiation.” (Atar, 2010). Anisha Guro claimed that women are effective as negotiators citing an example: “Women’s involvement in conflict resolution is very crucial, as far as the Meranao society is concerned. Women are respected and honored and when they become leaders and get involved in conflict resolution, parties involved are more inclined to cooperate than with a male negotiator. For instance, former Governor Princess Tarhata Alonto Lucman was a better and braver negotiator who was able to resolve more and high profile conflict than her male successors.”

2. How do these roles differ from the stereotype of traditional Meranao women?

The role of providing financial assistance to her family contradicts to the general stereotype of Meranao women. In general, the datu are expected to be the sole breadwinner, although this phenomenon is changing. Islam has placed some rules on the social roles of women and men. Diang noted: “Traditionally, men are the sole provider for the family but, nowadays,” Meranao women who are helping their husbands to earn more is a welcome change into that traditional practice. Gone were the times in which Meranao man is the only who provides to his family and that it is considered a “*mawag*” when Meranao women goes outside the house to work.

Being an educated Meranao woman is a strong defiance of stereotype Meranao women. The education of stereotype women was confined at home. . They were made to learn Meranao songs known as *bayok* and phrases from the darangen as well as the art of playing the musical instrument *kulintang* , and making mat or *weaving*. They were taught to read, write and memorize only chapters of Quran and songs. Meranao women before were not allowed to go to school especially those who belongs to royal family. During the arrival of western education in Marawi, royal family sent their slaves in schools instead of their

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children thinking that sending them to school will Christianize their children (Sumagayan, 1991).

The most important roles of Meranao women before were to take care and rear her children. These include feeding and putting them to sleep are all women's tasks. She teaches children proper behaviors, honesty and respect for parents, elders and other people. For example, as mentioned in the writing of Sumagayan, that the sense of respect, like calling persons older than oneself *bapa* (uncle) for older men, *babo* (aunt) for older women, and *kaka* (male or female older than one's self) is inculcated in the young not only by their parents, but by other women in the family. To the Filipino Muslims, according to the old ones, a misbehavior or misconduct of a child is judged by others as a reflection of his/her parents' personality. It is, therefore, the duty of every parent, especially mothers, to teach their daughters the value of good manners, refinement, and chastity, because a smear of her character would injure the reputation of her parents and lower the prestige of her family. To a married woman, the prestige and honor of her husband as well as her husband's relatives would be unfavorably affected if she misbehaves.

Meranao women defied the stereotype of women by defying important cultural practice by asserting their right to choose their partner in life. In the past, a Meranao woman did not have the right to choose her husband. Completely, this early and arranged marriage is a Meranao tradition that was practiced by the parents or guardians to search and choose the right man or woman for their children. According to one of the women respondents, Mrs. Saphia Sulog who was from an arranged marriage and who got married at the age of 13 years old, parents arranged the unions among themselves and often without asking the ones who are to be married. Sometimes, the couples are not prepared emotionally and intellectually for this kind of responsibility that the marriages require, and yet this does not seem to matter to the parents or guardians. This is the reason why, for other respondents, few of these arranged marriages are unsuccessful. Henceforth, these general traditional roles played by the Meranao women in the Meranao society have changed because of elements like modernization, in some ways the impact of the religious groups, for the Filipino Meranao women have been subjected to adopt these influences and changes.

The role of going to the market to buy goods for the family breaks the stereotype of Meranao women. Meranao women used to stay at home, waits for the husband to cook and prepare whatever the husband bought from the market. In Meranao culture, women need to stay at home and not allowed to go out without a *Makram* (male companion like brother or father) . The modern behavior of women like going out of the house and roaming outside the house without any *Makram* was not accepted in the past and considered a wrongful act. This restraint on the women's leaving the home for an unnecessary purpose was a manifestation of the society's high regard and protection of the women's dignity and honor and the fear that "over-exposure" outside the house may bring about psychological, social, and moral problems.

Nowadays, we see more women chose to go to the market. One reason for this observation is that Meranao men are not that patient in choosing, surveying and selecting the good quality of goods. From the observation of the researcher, Meranao men just buy whatever they see. Unlike women who will survey first before buying to make sure that she gets a good quality and cheap goods. One respondent claimed that when her husband failed to buy fresh fish, it can be the cause of their argument which could lead to quarrel. That is why the husband stopped going the market and let her do the job so that she will stop complaining.

Meranao women now assume a new role as entrepreneur and educators. Again, this is a defiance to stereotype Meranao women for in Meranao society, women were confined at home. They are not allowed to work nor have a job because it is prohibited in their religion. Cloth-weaving is the usual source of income. It is a traditional activity generally done by

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women of all ages or status—married, unmarried and widows . What constitutes practically women's occupation is weaving blankets or bedding, *langkit* and *malong* and this is the best productiveness among Meranao women before.

According to the old folks that the researcher interviewed, some sewer's women are the one who produce fine hand-embroidered pillowcase, handkerchiefs, women's apparel, and decorative items designed with flowers, leaves and birds. Borrowing and copying one another's design is the practice. Women who own stores embroider while attending to their stores and using as much time as possible away from their routine household duties. Like weaving, embroidery or sewing is an individual activity, and it is not an organized endeavor. Some embroidered articles, like handkerchiefs, are occasionally given free—as a gift with a person's name—to friends and relatives. Yet sometimes, their husband or father will go to the barter and will sell the embroidered stuff. Thus, making this work as their way of earning money to buy foods and things that are necessary to their families

Meranao women today broke the stereotype by joining the political arena. A vast majority of Muslim scholars believes that women cannot become heads of state. Even some of the Ulama (teacher of Islam) in the Philippines, particularly in Marawi City, believed that women should not be participative, for example, in socio-economic matters. Yet, nowadays, Meranao women have enjoyed greater participation in the affairs of the community, as compared with the women in the past.

The role of playing an important role in resolving a conflict (*ridu*) breaks the stereotype of Meranao women. This role used to be dominated by men. According to Sattar, men usually do all the negotiations: "In a Muslim dominated culture, women are not involved in negotiations in any conflict, be it family, community, and group conflict." Today, the presence of a Meranao women is needed a woman to addresses critical issues and brings the parties to settlement whenever there is family conflict. The traditional leaders such as Bae A Labi and other important titles in Maranao clan and community have highest credibility and integrity. "Conflicting parties cannot easily refuse the women on the mode of settlement made by women mediators", according to Satar.

3. What are the implications of these differences in the cultural identity of Meranao women?

The changes over the roles of Meranao today Within Meranao culture today, women do not consider themselves oppressed or exploited because they know their specific roles and place within the community. Women are well respected and influential in the community.

The transformation of Meranao women roles in contemporary Muslim societies, for some contradicts the teachings of Islam, and has a negative impact on it. It is a fact that cannot be denied. However, there is always another positive fact that exists side by side within the society to fulfill their Islamic responsibilities and is increasingly appreciated among Muslim men and women. We can observe here that there is a strong, unified, self-reliant, and God-fearing Meranao women who played their roles in the Filipino Muslim society. Even they are being influenced by some Western way of life, specifically on the educational system, they still maintain the value of family and their faith. Indeed, there is a mutual understanding and cooperation between the religious groups and women that helped outline the responsibilities of each, and influenced the roles of women not just in the family members but also as part of the society.

Conclusion

Meranao women today play very important roles in the formation of Meranao society. They now evolved to new roles-providers, educated, assertive, buying the goods of the family, entrepreneurs, educator, leaders, organizers and mediators. These new roles are

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recognized and a welcome change in the society. These new roles show the defiance of the roles assigned to them by the male dominated society. These new roles they played gave a new identity as a Meranao woman in a patriarchal society.

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