

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS STORY IS NOT FICTION. Every character is flesh and blood, every incident a fact, every village a cartographic reality, every quotation a faithful transcription from the narratives of witnesses and participants.

This is a story of a people caught in a web of conflict and prejudice. This is a story they themselves compose and narrate. This is a story that has a beginning somewhere in history and an end—I hope—sometime in the near future. This is a continuing saga, of a people caught in a situation not of their doing, where victim becomes villain and villain turns victim.

This narrative is only a small fragment of a huge, unfinished picture. I hope, however, that the story it tells will open the reader's eyes to a wider reality, to an understanding of the battle that is continuously being waged, both literally and literarily, in Mindanao.

In the late 1980s, when I went home to Mindanao, my Muslim friends told me that if I wanted to become a successful journalist, I should study Islam and understand the religion by heart, because it would become the "wave of the future." I tried and failed.

When I met my friends again, they were already talking about *mujahedeens* who were to liberate Mindanao from "the clutches of oppression." They also told me about a phantom about to haunt the whole island and drive the oppressors away. They told me about the "Abusayap," a group of young idealistic Muslims which, my friends told me, was partly a military creation.

There's my story at last, I told myself. I did my research, went to the area, read books on Islamic revivalism, and talked to both Muslim leaders and ordinary citizens. I wrote

news stories as I tried to fathom what the name Abu Sayyaf meant. I tried to understand the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism as I wrote about how bandit leaders and military officials rode together in military vehicles while ordinary soldiers and bandits killed each other in the battle zone.

Many branded my stories “incredible.” A few years later, however, came vindication, when an Abu Sayyaf bandit and some government officials confessed that there was, indeed, collusion between them. But by then it was too late. The phantom had become a monster that killed, not for freedom nor for religion, but for money.

I went back to Mindanao and stayed in Basilan for a few months. Again I talked to as many people as I could, both Muslim and Christian, and they told me their fears. Both peoples had become victims, hostages not only by the Abu Sayyaf but also by a government that offers solutions to non-existent problems.

I was tempted to come out and tell a story based on my perception of the reality I saw, only to realize that analysis has been done already. Any new attempt to analyze the situation will only diminish reality. Again, I tried to look at the situation from the eyes of religion, from Islam and Christianity; I felt inadequate. But when I listened and let the people and their own experience speak, I found I could breathe.

This was not an easy story to write because I did not think about it. I just let the pieces fall; I just let the material flow. I did try to provide some context, but still in a story-driven format, through the three “interessionals” that spiral inside the main narrative.

This is not an expose. This is a story. I would like this book to be read as a story because, as the Italian biographer Paco Ignacio Taibo II would say, only then may it be understood. I tried my best, and may have in many instances failed, *not* to explain the meaning of the narrative or the consequences of the incidents, to allow the reader to look for them. I would, however, warn the faithful reader not to look for meaning where there is none.

Central to the narrative is the life of Father Rhoel Gallardo, a young Claretian missionary who was killed, many say martyred, by the Abu Sayyaf. His death inspired a lot of people, especially religious and missionaries, well-meaning people all, from around the world. Here was a man willing to die for his faith, ready to give up his life for others, a very rare man in a selfish age.

I am bound to point out, however, that Father Rhoel's death also inspired some Christians to take up arms and kill fellow human beings "to defend the faith." To some degree, his death fuelled a cycle of violence that has ruled too many parts of the world in recent history.

In the end, this is a story about faith, the faith of a people on an island—nay, in a nation—which has been held hostage by circumstances that bred the Abu Sayyaf. I hope the reader will read it with the eyes of faith, a faith that is rooted in understanding.

We have nothing to lose if, to paraphrase the psalmist, we walk with the people into the mountain by listening to their story. Maybe we will find salvation there.

Jose Torres Jr.

July 28, 2001