

MORO MINI-CANNON

Fierce Moro pirates with their feared rock-filled, waistband cannons reigned with terror from Taiwan to Borneo for 300 years.

By Richard L. Baron

Photography by Randy Jones

European culture developed firearms from the earthen bombard to the pistolette. The Moslem natives of Mindanao, southernmost of the Philippine Islands, took one early idea and kept it, with very little change, until the end of the 19th Century. Mr. Potanciano Badillo of Manila is the foremost collector of this little-known interruption in the line of gun development.

"Beginning in the 12th Century," Badillo explained, "Chinese and Arab-Malayan traders came to the Philippines for gold, silver, and forest products. In exchange, the Arabs left their religion, the Chinese introduced gunpowder, and both contributed cannon."

By the end of the 13th Century, just prior to the arrival of Magellan and the Spaniards, the Moslem religion had spread throughout the southern islands, and the ruling native sultans had highly effective cannon available for use against their neighbors.

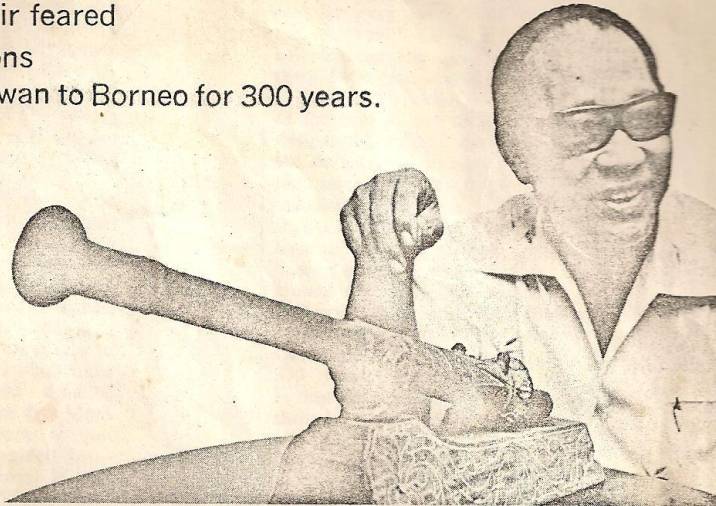
It is here, however, that the line of development stops. For as the Europeans were sizing their culverines down to arquebuses and to pistols, the Moslems of Mindanao scaled their cannon down — to smaller cannon. Badillo has one in his collection 4 inches long.

There are several reasons for this stoppage. While the Filipinos learned to cast the cannons themselves in sand-molds, every other element had to be imported. "The brass had to come from China, the iron from Malaya via Arab traders," Badillo pointed out. "The gunpowder was purchased from the Chinese with rare woods and silver." Thus the non-availability of raw materials hampered experimentation.

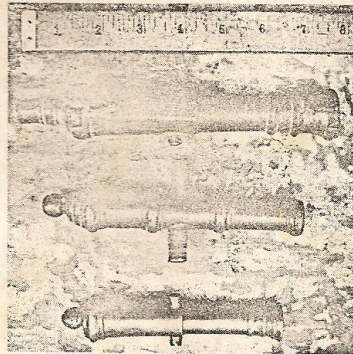
In 1521, Magellan brought the Spanish and Christianity to the Philippines. While most of the northern islands were brought under control and converted to the new religion, Mindanao became the southern bastion of the Moslems, who resisted the spread of the Spanish.

Because of their intractability, the

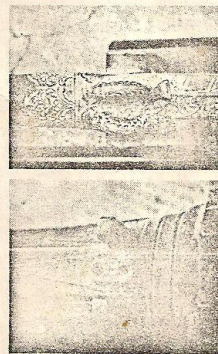
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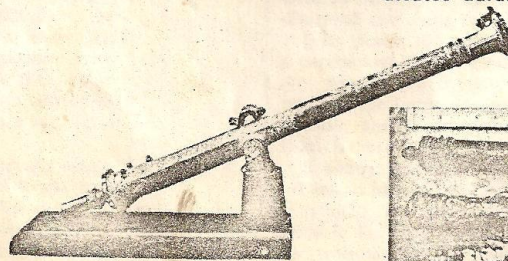
Potanciano Badillo, collector of rare mini-cannon, points with pride to the design of this 25-inch specimen. Badillo's collection ranges in length from 4 to 64 inches.



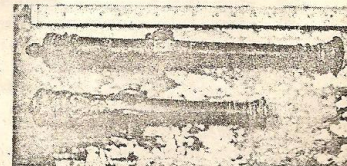
Smallest of the mini-cannon are well under a foot in length, and were worn in waist band by fierce Moro marauders who used them effectively as handguns.



Top: Cast in sand molds, mini-cannon with 'dolphin handles,' has bore size of 1½ inches. Lower: Obviously used for great periods of time, scant erosion indicates durable Moro workmanship.



Largest of Badillo's mini-cannon are 64 inches long, and were mounted on Moro sailing ships or fortifications.



Arabic designs around touch-hole indicates origin of these guns, says Badillo.

Spanish named these Moslem hold-outs "Moros," or Moors. The Moslems of Mindanao have been known as Moros ever since. The Spanish effectively curtailed whatever Filipino technology there was, however, and this included the development of firearms. The Moros lost one of their cannon factories when the Spanish took over Manila, on the island of Luzon. They did retain another factory on Mindanao, and this one remained active under the same Chinese-Filipino family for 300 years.

The cannon are called collectively *lantakas*, from Lake Lanao, the traditional stronghold of the Moro sultans on Mindanao. All cannon made became the property of the sultans, who doled them out to their followers.

Badillo has 15 *lantakas*, ranging in size from 4 to 64 inches in length. Nine of these cannon are under 15 inches long, with muzzle diameters of 1/2-inch. Those guns 20 to 64 inches long have bore sizes of 1 to 2 inches.

The larger cannon were used in a traditional manner. Some were placed in the extensive fortifications around Lake Lanao, built to withstand assaults. Others were mounted on the fast Moro sailing vessels, called *kampits* or *vin-tas*, with which the Moros raided Spanish shipping and settlements. It was during this period, from 1550 to 1850, that the Moros built up their fierce reputation and Mindanao raiders were feared from Taiwan to Borneo.

The mini-cannon were used as handguns, without the niceties of forend grips or stocks; these were used most effectively in the popular tactical maneuver of the area, the ambush. "The Moros loaded these small cannon with Chinese gunpowder," Badillo said, "generally a third of the way up the barrel. Then the next third was filled with gravel or, later, with carefully rounded stones wrapped in banana leaves. The oil from the leaves acted as a lubricant. The Moros apparently learned the value of leaving some barrel length for ballistic purposes from the Chinese."

The loaded mini-cannon was then carried in the waistband of the pantaloons, ready for use. In the event, the Moro simply gripped the barrel in barrel in the palm of his hand, pointed the muzzle in the appropriate direction, then pushed a burning twig down the touch-hole. Badillo said that there was no written record of how accurate these small cannon were, or what their range was. The fact that these guns continued in use for 300 years makes a statement for their value, however.

Some of the cannon, large and small, have swivel spikes attached to the barrels. With these, the cannon could be jammed into the ground, or placed on special stands. The Moros never used

any sort of wheeled carriage. Even the biggest cannon could be carried on the shoulder easily. The small guns could be wedged into tree joints for steady aiming. Later, the Moros picked up the habit of using small forked sticks, from the Spanish who used forked irons to support their arquebuses.

The Moros were not innovators. They took their designs where they found them. For this reason, many of the tiny *lantakas* have ornate handles which are far too small to be of any use, or caisson-mounting stubs which make them look like miniature naval guns.

Some indication of the various origins of the cannon can be gained from the designs of the guns themselves, and from the design work around breech, barrel, and muzzle. Many of the mini-cannon are distinctly Spanish in design, despite their diminutive size. The larger pieces have the slimness of Arab cannon, with flared muzzles and Arabic designs around touch-hole and barrel.

Despite their small size, these mini-cannon helped the Moros in their harassment of the Spanish for more than 375 years. Active in the civil war against the Spaniards, the Moros simply shifted targets after Aguinaldo declared war against the American Army of Occupation in February of 1899.

Travel was very unsafe in the southern islands, and American soldiers were constantly attacked by bolo-swinging Moros. Occasionally, from the jungle, there would come a boom, and a spray of gravel or a rock ball would scatter a U. S. Army patrol. Then the ambusher would take his tiny cannon and fade back into the jungle.

It remained for a U. S. Army captain named John J. Pershing to put an end to Moro insurgency in the Philippines, and it took him ten years to do it. During that time, he dealt with the Moros using hard tactics and shrewd understanding. Pershing strongly advocated the adoption of the .45-caliber automatic pistol as the most effective means of dealing with charging Moro tribesmen. He set up a provincial government and put out a Moro newspaper. Finally, after a grateful President Roosevelt promoted him from captain directly to Brigadier General, Pershing pacified Mindanao in 1911, during his second term as Military Governor. The Moros disarmed and came to the peace tables.

With peace, the mini-cannon became a ceremonial object. Unlike the workaday guns pictured here, some sultans retained the very fanciest of their little cannon, and these were passed down from father to son.

Recently, at the inauguration of two sultans in Malabang, Lanao del Sur, on Mindanao, one of the sultans is pictured in his finest clothing. Tucked into the waistband of his pantaloons, close beside his knife, is a small brass cannon about 6 inches long.