This paper explores how the unique American regime known as the “Moroland Province” in Mindanao and Sulu accelerated the development of Filipino national imaginings during the colonial period. From 1900 to 1935, American bureaucrats and officials administered Mindanao and Sulu as a region politically, economically, and culturally autonomous from the rest of its holdings in the Philippines. This separateness manifested itself in military rule between 1900 and 1914, trade policies that discouraged interregional commerce with Luzon and the Visayans to the North, and exclusion from political bodies like the Philippine Assembly. In turn, such patterns of governance elicited protest from Manuel Quezon, Manuel Roxas, and other leading nationalist politicos, who perceived Mindanao and Sulu’s detachment from the rest of the Philippines as a threat to their aspirations for national independence and personal political power. Moreover, these disputes would in transform Mindanao and Sulu into a central arena of contestation in the struggle for Filipino autonomy and independence from the United States.

My paper employs the dual theoretical lens of Thongchai Winichakul’s “geo-body” and Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg’s “juridical statehood” to elucidate the resonance of Mindanao and Sulu for the broader notion of Filipino nationhood. As Thongchai explains in his work, the international environment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century increasingly defined nationhood and sovereignty through bounded boundaries, or “geo-bodies,” represented on a map. Jackson & Rosberg similarly posits juridical integrity and a unified legal framework as one of the definitive prerequisites for the nation as it emerged during this time. These two approaches suggest how colonial policies in Moroland, which undermined the geographic and juridical unity
of the Philippines, could jeopardize the legitimating rationale for any prospective Filipino nation and mobilize nationalists to action.

Building off the theoretical foundation of Thongchai and Jackson & Rosberg, my paper traces the evolution of Mindanao and Sulu’s position in the Philippines from Spanish rule through the post-colonial period. In the first section, the paper examines how the Spanish, long unable to incorporate recalcitrant Mindanao and Sulu into its Asian holdings, redoubled their efforts at control in the late nineteenth century in the context of a changing international system. The next section considers the arrival of Americans in Mindanao and Sulu, the genesis and development of a separate “Moroland” administrative regime, and the increased emphasis on the region’s peculiarly Muslim character. The third part of the paper focuses on discontent in Manila’s elite precincts over the status of “Moroland” and the campaign to integrate datu and regional leaders into the fabric of the emergent Filipino polity. The fourth section dissects the pitched battle over the Bacon Bill of 1926 in the United States Congress, which proposed to confer Mindanao and Sulu with “independence” from the rest of the Philippines. The last section offers a reflection on the implications of the colonial “Moroland” entity for an independent post-colonial Philippines and for the incipient separatist movements embodied by the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.