

## WAR AND PEACE IN MINDANAO: TRACING THE ROOTS OF HISTORICAL INJUSTICE

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### Abstrak

Ketidakadilan struktural tampak dinormalisasi dan dilegitimasi dalam budaya masyarakat modern. Masalah Mindanao bukanlah konflik agama antara umat Kristen dan Muslim. Perang dan perdamaian di Mindanao adalah masalah ketidakadilan historis dan struktural. Menggambarkan perpecahan antara Kristen dan Muslim sebagai suatu bentuk perang agama hanya akan membungkam penderitaan Masyarakat Adat. Pengucilan terhadap Lumad disebabkan oleh kekerasan terhadap identitas mereka. Masyarakat Filipina mencapek masyarakat adat sebagai orang yang buta huruf dan Muslim Filipina sebagai orang yang suka melakukan kekerasan. Dalam hirarki sosial-budaya Filipina, orang Kristen berada di puncak sedangkan di tengah-tengahnya adalah orang Filipina Muslim. Tak berdaya dan tanpa suara, di bagian bawah tinggal suku Lumad. Tidak ada perdamaian di masa lalu karena kesenjangan moral ini. Perdamaian bukan hanya sekedar tidak adanya konflik. Perdamaian adalah sebuah proses yang melibatkan pengakuan penuh atas martabat manusia dan penghormatan terhadap hak-hak dasar manusia. Perdamaian hanya dapat dicapai jika bersifat inklusif, yang berarti bahwa perdamaian ditujukan untuk semua manusia dan bukan hanya untuk memenuhi tuntutan ekonomi atau politik dari kelompok yang dominan. Inilah sebabnya mengapa inklusi tidak dapat dibatasi pada distribusi sumber daya. Sementara politik melayani kepuasan para pemain kekuasaan, perdamaian hanya dapat berakar pada solidaritas masyarakat sebagai satu bangsa.

kata kunci: *Ketidakadilan historis; Penindasan struktural; Masalah Mindanao; Lumad; Perdamaian di Bangsamoro*

### Abstract

Structural injustice appears normalized and legitimized in modern societal culture. The Mindanao problem is not a religious conflict between Christians and Muslims. War and peace in Mindanao is a question of historical and structural injustice. Portraying the Christian and Muslim divide as some form of religious war silences the suffering of its Indigenous Peoples. The exclusion of the Lumad is due to a type of violence against their identity. Philippine society labels indigenous peoples as illiterate and the Muslim Filipino as violent. In the Filipino socio-cultural hierarchy, the Christian is at the top whereas in the middle lies the Muslim Filipino. Powerless and without any voice, at the bottom dwells the Lumad. There was no peace in the past because

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of this moral divide. Peace is not just the absence of conflict. It is a process that involves the full recognition of human dignity and the respect for basic human rights. It can only be achieved if it is inclusive, which means that it is meant for all human beings and not just to satisfy the economic or political demands of a dominant group. This is why inclusion cannot be limited to the distribution of resources. While politics caters to the satisfaction of power players, peace is can only be rooted in the solidarity of a people as one nation.

keywords: *Historical injustice; Structural oppression; Mindanao problem; Lumad; Peace in Bangsamoro*

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## Introduction

Early in the morning of December 3, 2023, a grenade was thrown inside the Mindanao State University Gym in Marawi City as Christian students attended a mass. Reports indicate that three people died instantly during the bombing, with several others injured. Marawi City was just recovering from the Marawi Siege in 2017.<sup>1</sup> The city was devastated in the intense military operation by the forces of the Philippine government, which was meant to repel the rebellion led by the Maute Group, the terrorist leader Isnilon Hapilon of the Abu Sayyaf Group, and members of the Jemaah Islamiyah.<sup>2</sup> The immediate reaction from most observers after the MSU Marawi Gym incident was that it appears that radicalized Muslims in Marawi simply wanted to sow terror and cause the divide between Christians and Muslims, the timing of the mass being symbolic of the message that the perpetrators of the terrorist act wanted to convey. In a statement, the administration of the university condemned the violent and appalling act, expressing solidarity with the Christian members of the community. Mindanao, the hotbed of a Moro rebelling since the 70s, is used to such types of violence. This latest act of terror again puts to task the whole region as

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Ryan Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte* (Cotabato City: Elzstyle Publishing, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Godiva Eviota-Rivera et al., "Narratives of Resilience and Solidarity during the Marawi Crisis: Preserving Marawi's Culture of Peace," *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2023): 1–20.

its leaders attempts to pursue, build, and sustain a peaceful society where Muslims, Christians, and Indigenous Peoples live together.

It matters to look into the historical background of the Christian and Muslim conflict in Mindanao to understand the root cause of this moral divide.<sup>3</sup> The early history of the island reveals the flourishing of Muslim sultanates in Sulu and Maguindanao. Trade existed between Muslim traders and the Chinese. According to Mary Beatrice Hernandez, the “Sulu sultanate was the first centralized political bureaucracy in the Philippines.” As Islam made its way through the island of Mindanao, new sultanates and Moro subgroups were formed, including the Maguindanao sultanate. But with the advent of the colonial conquest of the Philippines, beginning with the arrival of Miguel Lopez de Legaspi in 1574 in Cebu, the Spaniards overlords then set their sight on the rest of the country, including Mindanao. Hernandez writes that “the Muslim Filipinos of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago were determined in their struggle against Spanish conquest”. What was considered as a “pirate war” by the Spaniards was actually defensive in nature. The Moros simply fought to protect the sultanates and their way of life from the foreign invaders. Spain failed to conquer the island, but since Christianized Filipinos had fought alongside the Spaniards, this fueled the mistrust and animosity between Christian and Muslim Filipinos, sowing the seeds of what is called “communal antagonism”.<sup>4</sup> The ensuing conflict that lasted for generations is the root cause of the Mindanao problem.

This paper attempts to examine the Mindanao problem by using the theory of “difference politics”. Cultural imperialism, according to Iris Marion Young, is the domination of a people who are labeled as

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<sup>3</sup> Patricio N. Abinales, *Orthodoxy and History in the Muslim-Mindanao Narrative* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Beatrice Hernandez, “THE PHILIPPINES’ MORO CONFLICT: THE PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS IN THE QUEST FOR A SUSTAINABLE PEACE” (Mater Thesis, Washington D.C., Georgetown University, 2017).

inferior by a dominant culture that views itself as superior.<sup>5</sup> By looking down upon others as inferior, a dominant group plants the seed of resentment and ergo, a type of stereotyping that divides a society. In the decades that followed after Spain left the Philippines, its Christian leaders dominated national politics and simply neglected Mindanao. What was more difficult was that such exclusion also developed into a racial prejudice against Muslim Filipinos. This form of racial prejudice can be found in the structures, systems, and norms of modern Philippine society. Such types of injustice and violence have been legitimized and appear invisible.<sup>6</sup> The structural injustices against the Muslim Filipino possess a deep socio-historical context. Behind this age-old tension, Indigenous communities have been erased in the picture, often forced into the peripheries, their narratives muted and unheard.

Young maintains that society must look into institutions that replicate cultural bias and racial prejudice. Some rules found in social and economic systems simply reinforce the unfair treatment of minority groups. Laws and policies that are supposed to address social, cultural, and economic inequalities perpetuate the unjust ways in the basic structure, which is controlled by the Christian majority. The same can be observed in what Young<sup>7</sup> calls the positional hierarchy which allows others to take advantage of the powerless due to the differences in terms of social status, class or economic power. Rules, for instance, are unilaterally decided by the ruling elite, a reality that reflects the hegemonic order in the world. The indigenous Filipino or Lumad is at also at the receiving end of these tensions. Indigenous Peoples in the margins of Philippine society continue to suffer from various forms of oppression. They have remained uneducated, ergo powerless and exploited in a society dominated political overlords and the country's

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<sup>5</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990); Iris Marion Young, "The Five Faces of Oppression" (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 291–305, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343390027003005>.

<sup>7</sup> Young, "The Five Faces of Oppression."

economic elites. This has been normalized and embedded in mainstream Philippine society and its societal culture.

This investigation will look into two types of oppression – religious discrimination and cultural imperialism. The first is concerned with the religious bias against Muslim Filipinos. The Christian majority of the Philippine population has developed a particular prejudice against the Moro, whom many in mainstream Philippine society label as violent. This has resulted in the economic exclusion and socio-political discrimination of the Bangsamoro region for many years. The second has something to do with the displacement of indigenous peoples in Philippine society. Historically, the Torrens System of land titling instituted in the Philippines during the Commonwealth Period forced Indigenous Peoples out of their lands.<sup>8</sup> As a result, Lumads were forced out of their land, excluded from development, their unique culture judged as inferior, and their belief systems subjugated by the majority Christian religion.

The politics of difference looks into the inequalities in societal structures. Oppression, Young says, “is a structural phenomenon that tends to diminish or immobilize certain groups or a people in general”.<sup>9</sup> For young, it is about the subjugation of any person or a minority group through force or violence by those who possess power over their person.<sup>10</sup> Historically, this is apparent in the lack of autonomy on the part of Muslim Filipinos and the inability of Lumads to assert their rights over their land. The social bond in post-colonial Philippine society that defined the interactions between citizens displays the shameless impunity of political overlords over their powerless subjects. Oppression, hence, is comfortably bred in modern society, so designed through the influence of neoliberal policies, political intimidation, and power-play in the system. Young tells us that it is “not

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People's Struggle to Keep Their Homeland* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.

<sup>10</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Structural Injustice and the Politics of Difference,” in *Multiculturalism and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

possible to eliminate it even if we get rid of dictators or by creating new laws, because oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions”.<sup>11</sup>

### **Methodology**

Throughout this study, the investigator will employ textual and interpretive analysis based on the available literature from books, archived documents, newspaper clippings, and scholarly journals. This work is interdisciplinary. By employing philosophical analysis on the materials above, the researcher hopes to define the important questions on the Mindanao problem and offer a hypothesis that is firmly rooted in the belief that sustainable peace can only be achieved by means of holistic efforts and not just by way of state-centric means. To understand the Mindanao problem, the study will examine a number of critical works. Focus Group Discussions were conducted in South Cotabato, Cotabato City, and Zamboanga City.

### **Literature Review**

The prevailing prejudice and misconception that Muslims and Christians in Mindanao have always been in conflict has been critiqued by Abinales (2010) and Lara (2015). The dynamics of the Mindanao problem has been investigated by McCoy (1990), Diaz (2003) and Gloria (2014). The roots of the conflict, which can be traced to the desire of the Spanish colonizers to subjugate Mindanao, has been studied by Jubair (2007), who focused on the Muslim separatist movement, and by Gaspar (2011) who explains the impact of the conflict in the lives of indigenous peoples. Recent studies about the efforts to establish peace in the region is the subject matter of the writings of Rasul (2007) and Eviota (2023). To provide a framework for this paper, the works of I.M. Young (1990; 2000; 2002) on difference politics and oppression as well as the writings of Galtung (1990) and Tanabe (2019) on post-building will be examined.

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<sup>11</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.

## Results and Discussion

### The Role of the Commonwealth Government in the Oppression of Minorities

The Commonwealth Government since the time of President Manuel L. Quezon, who is considered as the country's first traditional politician, focused on the problems of Luzon.<sup>12</sup> Quezon focused on consolidating his power and control of the government. Mindanao in general was largely ignored by the Spanish and American colonizers. But what has been silenced is that beneath the neglect of Muslims was the latent discrimination against the native Filipino. Like the Muslim Filipinos, the intrusion into the lifeworld of the indigenous peoples in the island of Mindanao also began during the time when Spain colonized the country. Karl Gaspar writes that the Spanish colonizers have “demonized the belief systems of our ancestors”. This injustice can be observed in the “destruction of the native religion’s sacred sites and the oppressive manner they dealt with the babaylans”. Christianity, in fact, has become a dangerous weapon of conquest. Gaspar says that “not one element of this belief system treasured by generations through thousands of years that has helped them survive life’s vicissitude, characterized by a belief in a Creator Deity, had any value at all...to a Chauvinistic type of Christianity”.<sup>13</sup>

The establishment of the Philippine Commonwealth Republic resulted in the outlawing of the titles of Sultans in Mindanao and Sulu, an act that was sponsored by President Quezon. The leader presided over the building and control of the nation.<sup>14</sup> Local autonomy was part of the game plan. The President, to protect his position, reached out to the political and economic elites in the provinces and municipalities. However, he simply neglected Mindanao in his national agenda. He was

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<sup>12</sup> Alfred McCoy, “Quezon’s Commonwealth: The Emergence of Philippine Authoritarianism,” in *Philippine Colonial Democracy* (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1988), 114–60.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Gaspar, *Handumanan (Remembrance) : Digging for the Indigenous Wellspring* (Quezon City: Claretian, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Patricio N. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

more concerned about perpetuating himself into power as the president of the republic. The majority of the Filipino people, especially Muslim Filipinos, remained poor. While Mindanao is rich in natural resources, it has been alienated from national progress for decades since the Commonwealth. This is apparent in the lack of a concrete or realistic strategy by past Philippine Presidents to integrate the country's disarticulated economy or to make any attempt at nation-building all-inclusive. In the decades that follow, the paradigm of exclusion persisted in the region as big mining and logging firms would exploit its resources.<sup>15</sup>

Gaspar explains that the Philippine Commonwealth government “abolished the Moro traditional practices (for example, polygamy), various laws where Moros and Lumads were given distinct, separate treatment (provided for by the Bureau of Non-Christian tribes which was later scrapped) and the Moro Board which settled religious disputes”. Pres. Quezon, according to Gaspar, practically failed to realize that he had totally abolished a tradition or system that was working well.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, the President just ignored the diversity of Mindanao's culture and tradition. As a result, Mindanawons felt more isolated from the national agenda of progress. This experience will feed the sentiment of resentment on the part of Muslim Filipinos. Such kind of historical injustice against Muslim Filipinos would give rise to a radical plan for self-determination with the founding of the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM). Its founder, Datu Edtog Matalam envisaged “a Muslim statehood under a federal government”.<sup>17</sup>

The view of history from the South, as proposed by Heidi Gloria, is a critical method in understanding the history of a people who have been forced into the margins of society, and who, despite the relative economic progress achieved by the Philippine state, remained

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<sup>15</sup> Karl Gaspar, “Extractive Industries,” in *Ethics in Contemporary Philippine Society* (Davao City: SMK Publishing, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Gaspar.

<sup>17</sup> Heidi K. Gloria, *History from Below: A View from the Philippine South* (Davao City: Research and Publication Office – Ateneo de Davao University, 2014).

impoverished. Once labelled as the “Land of Promise”, the migration of Christian settlers to Mindanao was never about progress or development. The plantation economy was a scapegoat for the colonial regime’s inability to share equitably whatever growth the country may have achieved after the Spanish colonizers left. The elites in Philippine society simply divided among themselves the spoils left behind by its former colonial masters. In this way, the failed democratic experiment that was the Commonwealth Government was no more than a perpetuation of the elite system of democracy so defined by a patron-client relationship. The patronage system of politics, which is a blatant form of exploitation is based on control and machination through money, intimidation, and political influence. The same system is operative in the Bangsamoro, where powerful clans and families rule. Under a shadow economy, ordinary Muslims depend on political overlords for economic as well as political protection.<sup>18</sup> As political clans vie for power and control, violence sometimes define the conduct of electoral exercises in the region, the most prominent of which was the 2009 Maguindanao Massacre perpetrated by the Ampatuan political dynasty.

Mindanao has been largely ignored ever since due to the fact that the character of politics in post-war Philippines has become “an opportunity for enrichment...where local power holders controlled their resources with weapons and private armies”.<sup>19</sup> There is a socio-political context out of which the narrative of domination and resistance are harshly interwoven. There is a reason why historical injustices bred contempt. The wounds of the past do not heal easily. For Muslims, the Filipino Christian majority do not have sympathy for them. To the Christian majority, there exists a feeling of mistrust. The Lumads, meanwhile, have suffered from a double-bias. To the Christian, the Lumad is uncivilized and illiterate; and to the Muslim, the

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<sup>18</sup> Francisco J. Lara, *Insurgents, Clans, and States: Political Legitimacy and Resurgent Conflict in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*.

Lumad is a weakling who has no ability to fight nor pursue self-determination. A cultural hierarchy, thus, exists in Philippine society. At the top is the Christian and in the middle is the Muslim Filipino. But at the bottom is the Lumad. The Lumad is the least respected among Filipinos. The same human being is not only misrecognized, this individual who is displaced socially alienated in the cities, is stripped of the dignity worthy of every human being.

### **Roots of an Oppression: The Exclusion of the Muslim Filipino**

It is necessary to understand the historical context of the religious bias against Muslim Filipinos. According to Renato Constantino, the Spaniards never considered Mindanao as part of the Philippines.<sup>20</sup> The Spanish colonial rulers were unable to subjugate the island because of the strong resistance of the Moros. The colonizers simply chose to exclude Mindanao from their colonial territory. As a result, the foundation, character, and image of Mindanao was laid in the early part of the 20th century as a land of conflict and religious war. The historical unfolding of a land that was to be mired in Muslim and Christian antagonism beginning in the 70s was a result of years of neglect by the Commonwealth Government. The Jabidah Massacre on March 18, 1968, allegedly perpetrated by the regime of President Ferdinand Marcos, highlighted the decades old oppression suffered by the Moros.<sup>21</sup> Beyond this narrative, the Muslim rebellion in the South is also a result of an oppression caused by a dysfunctional democratic system that favored the landed elites and the vested interests of political families and powerful clans in the capital.

The country's colonial masters focused progress and development in the capital of the country. Manila was the seat of Ilustrado politics. Ilustrado politicians designed the system of elite democracy in the country. It was copied by the Americans and applied during the Philippine Commonwealth. The elitist albeit dysfunctional system

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<sup>20</sup> Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited* (Manila: Tala Publications, 1974).

<sup>21</sup> Gloria, *History from Below: A View from the Philippine South*.

defined the conduct of the state of affairs by the government over its citizens.<sup>22</sup> While the island of Mindanao was in a unique historical position because it has never been conquered by the country's colonizers, it was nevertheless left out in terms of economic progress. Post-colonial politics, rooted in the above patronage style of governance, gave birth to various systemic and structural problems that have stifled the region's development. The region has been perceived as a land of violent conflicts.<sup>23</sup> But according to Patricio Abinales, such view is simply an orthodoxy.<sup>24</sup> Christians and Muslims have lived together in Mindanao. Portraying the same as enemies is a misconception. By painting the situation of Mindanao as a form of religious war, the reality of structural and historical injustice is blurred. The violence overshadows the latent types of oppression that has caused absence of equitable development in Mindanao.

Salah Jubair, a Filipino-Muslim scholar, thinks that the Moro rebellion in Mindanao is one of the longest running wars in history, claiming at least 150,000 lives.<sup>25</sup> Jubair writes that the Moros in Mindanao have always resisted being subjected to foreign rule. The territory has never been conquered. The Americans, for instance, did not bother to include the region in their pacifist approach after the Filipino-American War. Muslim Filipinos in Mindanao, after the Second World War, wanted independence in their pursuit of self-determination, as is the case in the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM) that emerged after the war. But several decades thereafter, while the country is no longer ruled by colonial imperialists, the centralized approach to politics and governance resulted in the exclusion of Mindanao. Such has had a huge impact in the economic and political life of Muslim Filipinos.

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<sup>22</sup> Reynaldo Clemena Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979).

<sup>23</sup> Salah Jubair, *The Long Road to Peace: Inside the GRP-MILF Peace Process* (Davao City: Institute of Bangsamoro Studies, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Abinales, *Orthodoxy and History in the Muslim-Mindanao Narrative*.

<sup>25</sup> Jubair, *The Long Road to Peace: Inside the GRP-MILF Peace Process*.

The Philippines during the American period of colonial rule was divided into 34 Christian provinces, five district provinces, and one Moro Province. The Colonial Government was not respectful of Muslims. Heidi Gloria writes that the first provincial governor of the Moro Province, Leonard Wood, regarded all Muslims as “potential troublemakers and those who defied American laws as incorrigible criminals who deserved the full punishment for their crimes”. Gloria explains that the writing of the Maranao laws started with some optimism, only to falter later. The act of codifying the same was meant to be a blueprint for governance. It was started by Najeeb Saleeby, an Arab scholar and the incumbent education superintendent at that time.<sup>26</sup> Saleeby admitted in his study that there was no singular system of norms and values as each Maranao tribe possessed its own unique set of customs. Gloria says that the scholar thought that some practices were abhorrent to the ways and values of the civilized world.

The problem started the moment the Commonwealth Government thought of Muslim culture blameworthy for the plight of Muslim Filipinos. Muslim culture was seen as backward and anti-West. Instead of instituting reforms and providing the necessary resources to Muslim Mindanao for the region to attain progress, the Philippine Government after the Second World War focused on removing what it wrongly considered as the impediment to the development of Muslim Filipinos, i.e. their culture and tradition. But what needs to be understood is that both Muslim Filipinos and Lumads have actually been displaced by the coming of Christian migrants from Central Luzon. For instance, Christian immigration in Central Mindanao caused the eventual displacements of the local Muslim population. This explains the large Christian-dominated areas in South Cotabato, in General Santos City and Koronadal City.

The bigger problem, however, is that the government during the Commonwealth Period gave vast opportunities to Christians but almost nothing to Muslim Filipinos. The same is not due to favoritism

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<sup>26</sup> Gloria, *History from Below: A View from the Philippine South*.

or preference. Rather, it is rooted in the character of elite democracy that privileges powerful clans. President Quezon allowed political dynasties to flourish in the South as long as they delivered votes for the national candidates of the Nacionalista Party. The governance of the backward economy of the South was left to local rulers and dynasts, who took advantage of the predatory nature of the state. Powerful clans used their enormous influence and power to control the local economy and the lives of the people, who depended on their masters for economic survival and political security. Without any type of opportunity for the young Muslim, the disparity in the lives between Christians and Muslims can be observed almost immediately. Muslim Filipinos simply felt betrayed by their nation.

### **Modern versus Ethnic: The Marginalization of the Lumad**

The way of life of the Lumad (the collective term for Mindanao's indigenous people) is often labelled as substandard, a slight to their unique ethnic identity. In modern society, the young Lumad who goes to the city is judged as illiterate, the same denied and deprived of the rights due to every human being. For Young, structural injustice is a result of a societal culture that imposes a universal set of standards. Such norms dictate a certain form of exclusivity. Knowledge is viewed as modern whereas indigenous culture is seen as obsolete or outdated. For this reason, indigenous peoples have been displaced socially and culturally because the idea of modern living and urban life is patterned or modelled after the West. Traditional wisdom is viewed as out of place in modern society. This harmful type of exclusion is perpetrated by a hegemonic societal culture that simply arrogates itself based on individual success or achievement rather than communal solidarity. Furthermore, the distinction between "modern" and "ethnic" shows the prejudice against indigenous identity and the way of life of the Lumad.

Gaspar says that the control over all public domain by the state has created "a maze of ethnic labels and a litany of tribal affiliations that continue to this to deepen the cultural cleavages into sub-ethnicity and

cultural divisions”.<sup>27</sup> A Manobo who comes down from Mt. Apo to beg in the city suffers the same prejudice as the poor slum dweller in Manila. People wrongly think that the members of ethnic groups know nothing about work when in fact the problem is that the present economic system, patterned after Western capitalism’s propensity for profit, excludes and obscures the Lumad. Many accuse indigenous peoples of simply neglecting their education. Such observations, expressed by the majority of the broader population, are a manifestation of racial discrimination. Gaspar believes that it is wrong to think that the West is superior to the way of life of the Lumad. The Lumads have resisted the influence of modernity to preserve their cultural heritage. For Young, the continuing struggle against socio-economic injustices is an important part of the preservation of one’s cultural identity.

In forging the 2014 Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Muslim rebels, specifically, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Lumads are said to be left out of the discussions. There was an attempt to make the process inclusive, but that was only to satisfy the formality of making the whole mechanism appear fruitful for all parties. In the end, the whole agreement was meant to satisfy the political and economic interests of the MILF, not the whole region. It was about giving power to the MILF in terms of governing the Bangsamoro, but the Lumads remain without a real voice in the process. One of such groups are the Tidorays in Cotabato City, who have been displaced from their original land when the Christian settlements arrived in the early 1920s. There is no religious war between the tripartite people of Mindanao. The issue is due to land.

The question is rooted in the Lumad’s ancestral domain. In the town of T’boli, the whole place has been transformed into a tourist spot, with roads paved in order to make the area accessible to tourists. Resorts line the main arterial road, many of whom travel to the place

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<sup>27</sup> Gaspar, *Handumanan (Remembrance) : Digging for the Indigenous Wellspring*.

to see its majestic waterfalls. But the same place has been stripped of its original allure, its people now employed in the established and have become part of the economic lifeblood of the province. This is a clear manifestation of how the Western way of life has intruded in the culture of the Lumad, who are not reduced into some kind of a relic that tourists want to take a picture with. But the picture that can be painted here is that of disrespect for the ancestral land of the Lumad. While the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (Republic Act 8371) is meant to recognize, respect and protect the rights to ancestral domain of Indigenous Peoples and their communities, the same is only good on paper. The economic as well as social well-being of the Lumads are often dire. This is a result of exploitative and extractive industries that force them out of their land.<sup>28</sup> The land for the Lumad is sacred. The law recognizes this when it states that the concept of ancestral domain does not only cover the physical environment but the total environment of the Lumad, which includes the spiritual and cultural bonds to the areas that the indigenous peoples possess.

But the problem is that capitalism and modernity have largely taken over the way of life of indigenous communities. The Lumad feels that he has to become part of modern society. For this reason, this individual must attend school and be educated in the same way as the Christian. As a result, this young individual who belongs to a rich cultural heritage must be transposed into the Western way of thinking and living. For the Lumad, the idea of peace and harmony is about the abundance of life and being a part of nature. Peace is about holistic well-being, which there is always a sense of satisfaction in one's existence. This is, however, an obvious contradiction to the modern ways of living, which is characterized by consumerism and the concern for profit. As a result of the assimilation of the Lumad to modernity, their unique identity is lost. The Lumad feels that this is a consequence of a system in which they have been confined into the periphery of

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<sup>28</sup> Gaspar, "Extractive Industries."

Philippine society. It is an injustice done against their dignity as a people.

### **Understanding Structural Injustice**

The formation of the Philippine State during the Commonwealth failed to consider the way of life of Muslims in Mindanao. For instance, the clan-based politics in Muslim Mindanao meant that a powerful family was in control of a territory whose inhabitants are beholden to them. The reason for this was economic more than religious. Small families depended on influential political clans for economic sustenance.<sup>29</sup> However, Patricio Diaz reasons out that Muslim leaders themselves also failed to provide “direction and purpose” instead, “the Muslim leaders have exploited their own people for their own self-aggrandizement, collaborated with the Christian settlers and forgot their people when showered with favors by the national government”. Diaz explains that the social structure of Muslim society, which is rooted in traditions, “shaped the life and culture of the Muslims in the past and has resisted change”. He says that “the majority of the Muslim masses are victims of a social system that worked well in the past, but has become irrelevant to the present”.<sup>30</sup>

Peter Kreuzer regards the Mindanao problem as the endless and violent feud between political clans, saying that “political clans strive to infiltrate the institutions of the state and convert them into institutional hangers-on of the clan. They prefer other clans or clan-like organizations as political opponents, since they too have a vital interest in stabilizing the order in which clans have a key political position”.<sup>31</sup> The leaders of the colonial regime took advantage of the predatory nature of such clan-based politics. Local warlords had been considered as a source of a steady type of political support. In this way, loyalty is

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<sup>29</sup> Lara, *Insurgents, Clans, and States: Political Legitimacy and Resurgent Conflict in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines*.

<sup>30</sup> Patricio P. Diaz, *Understanding Mindanao Conflict* (Davao City: MindaNews Publication, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Peter Kreuzer, “Political Clans and Violence in the Southern Philippines” (Frankfurt: Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2005).

treasured by the family. But this complex system does not provide the full picture of the Mindanao problem. In truth, the colonial regime did nothing politically significant to improve the difficult situation of Muslims in Mindanao who were hampered by a lack of progress or economic development.

The Commonwealth Government of President Quezon focused on laying the foundation for a land-based economy in Mindanao. It built a road network which naturally attracted the migrants who were coming to the island. Soon, they would establish their homes wherever these roads were built. The peasant houses and farms along the road network leading to Cotabato in Central Mindanao can be seen a testament in the way Visayan and Luzon migrants positioned themselves. With or without government support or initiative, Christian settlers simply took over the properties along the highway. Such acts often led to resentment. The exodus of migrants who took control of Marbel when 97,000 hectares of land was declared for resettlement pushed the B'laan tribe out of the lush vegetation of the valley. General Paulino Santos led this organized movement. Muslim Filipinos found themselves in the middle of an avalanche of men equally seeking their fortune in the region. Gloria writes that "as the number of the Christian migrants to Mindanao grew, so did the resentment and anxiety of the Muslims".<sup>32</sup>

The Americans, according to Abinales, wanted to make the Moro Province and Davao the last Western frontier. This meant the assimilation of the white man's culture aimed at enabling the "civilization" of the natives. The Americans wanted Mindanao to be like those in the West. But there were problems. Abinales says that the Philippine Commission refused to extend land laws immediately to the Moro Province. As a result, those natives who did not hold land titles were threatened with expulsion. Making Mindanao the last frontier also meant the possibility of "200,000 to 400,000 migrants rushing into Mindanao". Wood wanted exemption in land acquisition limits, arguing

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<sup>32</sup> Gloria, *History from Below: A View from the Philippine South*.

that at least 10,000 hectares would be needed for sugar plantations. While land laws were extended to the South, exemption from the limits to land ownership was not.<sup>33</sup>

The liberal state-centric approach to nation building has actually undermined Muslim Mindanao. But it is not the case that the Christians in Mindanao are in a much better situation compared to their Muslim neighbors. In fact, many Christians are also poor. It can be said, however, that Muslim Mindanao has a more difficult problem. Four of the original provinces that actually voted for their inclusion in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) are the poorest in the country. With a four million population, the Bangsamoro region does not have a single state of the art tertiary health care facility. The life span in the Province of Tawi-Tawi “is 52 years old, compared to Cebu City, which is 72 years old”.<sup>34</sup>

In the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), which consists of six provinces (Lanao del Sur, Basilan except the City of Isabela, Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi), and three cities (Cotabato City, Marawi City, and Lamitan), traditional political clans are now positioning themselves after the power of the government-appointed Bangsamoro Transition Authority expires in 2025. The danger of political conflict is lurking. “The problem is complex,” says Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, OMI of Cotabato City. He thinks that the political, economic and social dimensions of the conflict in Mindanao “have deep cultural and religious root”. For him, the Mindanao problem is rooted in a “triple injustice”, namely, “injustice to the Moro identity,” “injustice to Moro sovereignty,” and “injustice to Moro integral development”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Abinales, *Orthodoxy and History in the Muslim-Mindanao Narrative*.

<sup>34</sup> Amina Rasul, *Broken Peace?: Assessing the 1996 GRP-MNLF Final Peace Agreement* (Makati City: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Diaz, *Understanding Mindanao Conflict*.

The struggle for lasting peace is a very long and tedious process. Liberal peace building has its limits.<sup>36</sup> Juichiro Tanabe sees the holistic approach to peace building as one that includes some aspects of religion and the pursuit of the good life beyond the paradigms of the present global order. He incorporates Buddhist teachings in understanding the communal way of life, which is different from the individualistic approach of liberalism. Putting such things into context, peace is not just about the cessation of hostilities or putting an end to any violent conflict. It cannot also be limited to resource redistribution, the mantra of the state-centric and pragmatic strategy, which only invites clans and other influential families into some form of a powerplay. Peace has to go beyond the political and become a holistic endeavor, which means that the process must consider the respect and recognition of the unique history, culture, and tradition of a people.

The challenge remains. The approach has to be structural, which requires correcting past injustices. It is important, however, to recognize that peace is also an inner struggle of a people, who want a dignified life. The pursuit of a sustainable community in which the way of life of a people is valued requires respecting their struggles. In the case of Mindanao, this must not be limited to Muslim Filipinos. It must also include the indigenous peoples. They have the right to co-exist and benefit from the good of human society. But this must not be viewed as the Lumad becoming modern in the eyes of the world. The concept of progress that has something to do with the modern way of life is a misunderstanding of what it means to flourish. For the Lumad, having the land they can call home is enough. Development is not about possessing the same identity as the modern individual. It is about the freedom to be able to practice a way of life that has defined one's identity for thousands of years.

The idea of inclusion implies rectifying uneven systems and structures that unduly favor the majority. According to Diaz, at present,

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<sup>36</sup> Juichiro Tanabe, "Beyond Liberal Peace: Critique of Liberal Peacebuilding and Exploring a Post-Liberal Hybrid Model of Peacebuilding for a More Humane World," *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2019): 19-42.

“the Muslim problem is clearly evident by contrasting the Muslims and the Christians in neighboring communities. Economically, the Christian community is more progressive; socially, the Christians are more advanced. Culturally, they are different”.<sup>37</sup> Diaz failed to mention that the Lumads in Mindanao are in a much dire situation. They are not only poor; the Lumads are also voiceless. To empower people, there must be a focus on making institutions accessible to all people, without the prejudice against one’s religion or ethnicity. Meritocracy, which is based on skill and competence, for instance, only favors mainstream society.<sup>38</sup> The majority of Muslims in Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-tawi do not have access to college education and training. This makes the young Moro who lives in those provinces prone to recruitment by extremist groups like Abu Sayyaf.

In fact, when it comes to the politics of recognition, inclusivity is not just about creating special events for people to be recognized. It has to be something more fundamental. It is not about making them a part of human society because they already are. Respecting their way of life is about seeing the same as part of everyday life. This means recognizing the lifeworld of the Lumad as something that is not peculiar or different from Christians. For instance, to treat their manner of dressing or their appearance as exotic is a form of discrimination. It is like saying one culture is superior to another. Nor is the real concern for the Lumads about igniting a rebellious spirit and inspiring them with ideological fervor. They don't need that. What they need is for the majority to let them practice the life that they want. Who are we to judge what's proper or not when these people and their communities have actually survived thousands of years while some ideologies are just a hundred years old?

One of the problems in the long road to peace and justice is that Lumad communities are also being exploited by people with ideological leanings. While they advocate for the protection and the

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<sup>37</sup> Diaz, *Understanding Mindanao Conflict*.

<sup>38</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

promotion of the rights of the Lumad, some groups actually inject their ideologies in the pursuit of their own vested interests at the expense of poor indigenous communities whom they use in their own rebellion against the ruling government. These groups are no different from those who exploit and take advantage of the plight of the natives. While corporate entities do so to advance their desire for profit and money, some groups reduce the Lumads into human shields and props during their protests against the government. The pursuit of such agenda violates the right of the Lumad to live a life they want. The same is just another form of oppression under the guise of protecting the rights of indigenous peoples.

Making peace work is not just about ensuring that people benefit from it. The process is something that should be embraced by everyone. This will require going beyond formal channels of discussions and dialogue. Peace must become an integral part of human society. It has to be a way of life. The liberal approach to peace-building, rooted in the allocation of resources, will not work. The peace process has become a means to satisfy the power players in local politics, which consists of clans and influential families. In the end, these politicians are out there to rule the powerless, whose life will remain meaningless in a society that is devoid of significant or meaningful change. The problem of peace is not just a question of sharing the wealth of the state. It cannot be reduced into something that is economic or political. The Lumad people never took arms against the government because it is not in their nature to fight. Violence is not part of their way of life. It is critical to recognize the uniqueness of the identity of people. Beyond identity politics, in order to make the peace agreement in Mindanao sustainable, latent and obvious forms of bias and prejudice against its people must be dismantled by establishing just institutions anchored in democratic inclusion and equitable human progress.

## **Conclusion**

This investigation uses difference politics to re-examine and understand the Mindanao problem. Since the Mindanao problem is

rooted in a moral divide, the struggle for peace must be rooted in the respect and recognition of the unique identities of people. This type of inclusion is meant to form the type of solidarity that characterizes a nation that is open and democratic. The road to peace and justice is long and tedious because there exist a type of resentment anchored in prejudice. Philippine society can be characterized by a hierarchy that puts the Christian at the top and the Muslim Filipino in the middle. The silent cries of the Lumads mean that they have actually been confined into the bottom of this hierarchy, suffering from various labels and the obvious discrimination of their unique cultural identity. The laws protecting the Lumad is only good on paper. As a matter of fact, the Lumad is continually exploited and forced out of their ancestral domain. The introduction of capitalism and modernity has intruded into their way of life, stripping the young Lumad of her sense of identity.

Peace in Mindanao cannot be sustained if the present peace agreement is only meant to satisfy the hunger for power of political clans and families. While viewed by some as a religious conflict, the Mindanao problem is largely rooted in the abuse of power that was perpetrated by the Commonwealth Government whereby Muslim Filipinos were largely ignored and Mindanao neglected. The struggles of the Muslim Filipino are about the desire to be respected and valued. The bias against Muslims is due to a way of thinking that excludes them from nation building. To respect Muslim culture and to preserve the sacred way of life of the Lumad, systems and structures must pay attention to uniqueness of each. Society is not a monolithic and homogenous entity. It is constantly evolving. With its evolution comes the dreams and aspirations of a people who simply want to live and be respected as a human being. Peace, as an inner struggle of human individuals and their communities, must enable meaningful changes in the lives of a people.

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