

## **Building the Lumah Mehe<sup>1</sup>: A Moro Muslim Alternative to Seclusion and Integration**

**Mucha-Shim Quiling Arquiza**

**T**his is a sharing of my personal journey as Moro human rights defender and peace activist, and a reflection on the experiences of my organization as Muslim civil society, as well as that of our partner communities in our work in Zamboanga City and Basilan, Southern Philippines.

### **It's neither the east nor the west**

Islam is beyond the boundaries of culture, beyond religion because Islam is a way of life which inspiration permeates all religions and cultures. The universality of religious values and unity of religion is a recurring theme in the Qur'an. For one, it is a prerequisite for every Muslim to believe in all the prophets and the books of revelation.

It is in this context of the search for the universal message of Islam that I, as member of a minority ethnic and religious community in a predominantly Catholic state, have come to realize that it is neither in isolation and seclusion nor in superficial integration and mainstreaming that Islamic mission is accomplished.

The current social upheavals that have been convulsing the world have in many ways showed to us the ugly faces of globalization, westoxification, and its attending Islamophobia that rides on the bandwagon of world campaign against terrorism. Within the backdrop of the ongoing Moro Islamic Liberation Front-Government of the Republic of the Philippines (MILF-GRP) peace process, the consummation of the Moro National Liberation Front-Government of the Republic of the Philippines (MNLFG-GRP) 1996 peace agreement, and the aftermath of the events of 9/11, two streams of reactions among

the Bangsamoro community emerged. Each reaction harnesses its own support from Muslim traditional leaders and political and religious intellectuals who have defined the Islamic flavoring for the Manila government, particularly in finding projects for peace and development in Mindanao and Sulu.

### Isolation, seclusion, and superiority complex

On the one stream is the extreme tendency for isolationism, seclusion, and persisting superiority complex among Bangsamoro Muslims.

Many Bangsamoro leaders and intellectuals have unfortunately (mistakenly) chosen culture, often that of the Middle East, over the universal ideals and values in Islam. With all due respect to my Muslim brothers and sisters, I take the risk of hurting a cultural sentiment – our famous Moro *maratabba*—and dare to criticize how often we have misused our identity as Muslims as an excuse for retaining old habits. We cling to historical myths and refuse to reckon with the present realities of a multicultural and multi-faith Mindanao.

In the name of culture and religion, recalcitrant conservatism and orthodoxy have been preventing the ushering of genuine change by conveniently hiding the inadequacies of traditional systems of patriarchy and old ideologies, eventually perpetuating inequality and injustice in our very homes. The challenge to democracy and good governance last national elections<sup>2</sup> is but one case in point. The world witnessed massive fraud in Philippine electoral politics under the blatant sponsorship of local leaders in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Blind obedience in command voting is justified by misappropriating and wrongly attributing it to *shura* or consultation, and shamefully claiming it an Islamic obligation for literate leaders to rob the vote from illiterate followers. Outright cheating through vote-buying and *bukot* system<sup>3</sup> is touted as exercise of democracy in Islam.

Mass ignorance of Islamic doctrine and the lack of knowledge of divine teachings even among progressive intellectuals have given full reign to *ulama* and *asatidz* who are vested the sole privilege of issuing opinions on contemporary political and social issues, which, more often than not, are characterized by deaf silence. Or, if ever any issuances are made, these are incoherent and confused mumblings.

A related issue to this is gender equality and reproductive rights where obscure and distorted Qur'anic texts and doubtful prophetic traditions have been carelessly quoted to disclaim that gender inequality exists in Moro society. Age-old *adat* or customary tradition persists because the voice of moral guidance is uncritical and silent. Meanwhile, women are routinely coerced to marry their abductors and rapists, or suffer in the hands of abusive husbands. *Zeenah*, otherwise known as crime of passion, is ambivalently defined. Having no adequate and proper legal assistance, women can be arbitrarily accused of tainting communal honor, providing enough reason for men to start a senseless war. Perpetually chained to their beds and kitchens, many Moro women, regardless of ethnicity or social status, continue to silently languish as they strive to be the ideal and submissive wives, daughters, and mothers. This culture of silence which draws approval by virtue of misappropriated Islamic wisdom has been a convenient excuse for denying women their rights in upholding their integrity as persons and in not entrusting them equal responsibility to lead and exercise reproductive roles in the family and society.

All these have continued because the Moro Muslims, on the veil of strangeness and given the mystery and sanctity shrouding its laws and culture, have the perfect excuse for impunity from scrutiny and criticism by rights' groups or among the faithful who choose to use reason over blind submission to dogma and tradition. The same superiority complex has also persistently cast and excluded the non-Muslims as *kafir*.<sup>4</sup>

Needless to emphasize, the challenge of the times is for us to come out from the shadow of this self-imposed seclusion and shed the false security in being of a different cultural mold.

### Integration and mainstreaming Islam

On the other stream, we also have those who have succumbed to pacification and integration campaigns hook, line, and sinker. This strand comes from the Moro Muslim's response to massive efforts toward Muslim integration in the peace and development projects in post-conflict Mindanao and Sulu, where most of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) and multi- and bilateral international donations go. Integration projects have taken the shape of mainstreaming the *madrusa*<sup>5</sup> or including Islamic instruction in basic public education curriculum and in training teachers to teach Islam in the classrooms. It is also

observed in the culture-sensitization of government programs by equally celebrating and promoting anything from the south that is Muslim, such as Muslim food, Muslim dances, and Muslim costumes, and in the legislative issuances for petty reforms such as public observance of Muslim holidays.

The more ambitious project of ushering in demobilized Moro combatants into national politics has proved to be a fiasco, exemplified by the incarceration of MNLF leader Prof. Nur Misuari and a number of MNLF ex-commanders now turned *trapos*.<sup>6</sup> Though sounding magnanimous in name, these efforts have been lackluster, wanting in values and essence.

Time would not allow me to elaborate further than to say how the watered-down mainstreamed *madrāsa* is faring in a national education system that is mired in its own crisis of quality and misdirected mission. The so-called Islamic values integration in the Revised Basic Education Curriculum (RBEC) are, at best, mere token of introductory Arabic grammar lessons and, in some cases, reducing lofty ideals of Islam to embarrassing antiquarian values. One clear fallout of this mainstreaming project has been the marginalization and the threatened obliteration of community-based religious education and home studies of Qur'an, where real value formation happens.

Yet another aspect of integration is in the power-sharing with Moro political aspirants and their participation in Philippine body politic. This prospered especially in turning Moro ideologues and *mujahideens*<sup>7</sup> into politicians. As a result, we have dynastic monopolies entrenched in government positions where among the infamous cases in the island provinces in the ARMM have been husband-with-two-or-three-wives occupying choicest positions as congressman, governor, city mayor, and heads of strategic local government agencies.

In both streams of Moro Muslim responses, there seems to be a common denominator in demonstrating Islam as lame acts of external display of piety or as superficial cultural show of rituals and ceremonies. Worse, this Islam has become a mere dress code and stamps of clerical approval where to be Muslim or be Islamic is to be confirmed by the anointing powers of the *ulama*, the *imams*, the *asatidz*, or by just any male leader who identifies himself to be a Muslim.

### Response from the Moro civil society

From where civil society stands in the periphery, these paradoxical streams of reactions put us at a crossroad. Our only choice as it appears now is to favor a stance allowing the voice of the grassroots to be heard. Without critically examining and reconstructing the local environment that breeds violence and injustice, the collaboration of Muslim religious leaders and intellectuals might have succeeded in accommodating a few into the Manila-centric government. However, such accommodation might fall into the trap of trivializing and diluting the mission in overhauling the system where the very roots of *Dar-ul Kufur*<sup>8</sup> and human sufferings thrive.

On the other hand, the Bangsamoro nationalist cause has increasingly drifted towards elitism and isolation from the masses who come in and out of evacuation centers in hoards each time the Moro liberation fronts and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) declare a resumption of war. The social and economic costs of a long and protracted war put the Moro liberation movement in danger of losing its mass base, as hunger and deprivation render multitudes of civilians into apathy and desperation. Its factionalism within has deeply cleaved a sense of otherness even among Bangsamoro majority and minority ethnic groups. In stubbornly straddling its high horse, the Moro liberation movement carelessly disregards the Lumad and Christian settlers' questions and stake in the homeland, what with its exclusivity of the peace processes and non-transparency of its political and economic agenda for the autonomous republic it wants to build.

### Crisis in development framework

As part of the civil society, there are at least two significant experiences of the Lumah Ma Dilaut Center for Living Traditions<sup>9</sup> that I could share. Lumah Ma Dilaut is an affiliate of the Asian Muslim Action Network in the Philippines (AMANPHIL), which is a local chapter of the Asia-wide umbrella where Dr. Chandra Muzaffar and Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer are the founding fathers.

Like any self-respecting organization, AMANPHIL and Lumah Ma Dilaut went through a period of discernment in the midst of a crisis of framework that came in the wake of the declaration of the all-out war in 2000 and the continuing militarization in most of the countrysides in Bangsamoro villages. Despite the supposed lull and post-conflict reconstruction scenario in the aftermath of the 1996 peace agreement, violence marked the communities we worked with. This dilemma was intensified by the 9/11 attacks on US cities in 2001 when Islamic extremism was at its resurging peak.

The first realization which came out of this discernment was the need to shift gears: From focusing our work in supporting what we have come to perceive as narrow politics of Bangsamoro nationalism, to continuing and reaffirming our rights-based approach to development and advocacy for peace based on social justice and equity. The Bangsamoro nationalist project has no doubt been an important ground for the intellectual and political maturation of the Moro activists, yet it is disappointing to see that its ideology and claimed *aqueedah* or faith-inspiration have yet to be translated into action on the ground.

The second realization was not only the need to emphasize secular approaches to our activism but also to broaden our perspectives and to ground our work in deep knowledge of Islam. First and foremost was the need to actualize our being Muslims working for human rights and building lasting peace based on social justice and equitability as mission towards humanity.<sup>10</sup> In the process, we experienced a painful period of ideological and spiritual self-examination and, hopefully, renewal. Some of us stuck to the old mission of *da'wah*<sup>11</sup> in the purely Islamic sense. Others insisted to do human rights work in toeing purely the line of the Moro nationalist political agenda. A few of us who were caught in between hung in limbo to see through the birthing of a humble and oft-sidelined program on women and children in vulnerable minority ethnic Moro communities. This rebirth became the Lumah Ma Dilaut Center for Living Traditions.

The creation of Lumah Ma Dilaut necessitated the dramatic transition of our educational work which, in AMANPHIL Culture of Peace (COP) Manual (2001), we described as applying the jihadic paradigm in a *da'wah jama'a*, with the unspoken mission of inviting non-Muslims to turn to Islam. AMANPHIL committed itself to human rights and development work using the Islamic perspective. The COP module it developed in 2001

explored the concrete applications of Islamic precepts in development work and initially shaped and defined its methods of work based on the principle of social change in the jihadic paradigm. Its vision of peaceful co-existence and process of social reconstruction is anchored in the concept of *Tanbeed* or unity and holism.

### From QALAM to KAALAM

In more concrete terms, the reform included shifting from QALAM to KAALAM. QALAM (i.e., inspired by a Qur'an verse The Pen) stands for Qur'an based Alternative Learning and Social Action module that AMANPHIL implemented in Jolo as a pilot study of integrating Islamic values into mainstream public secondary schools by trying to model a *pesantren*-type<sup>12</sup> education and volunteerism project. KAALAM, acronym for *Katutubong Alyansang Lumad-Moro para sa Angkop at Mapagpalayang Edukasyon*, is translated as Lumad-Moro indigenous alliance for appropriate and liberating education. Lumah Ma Dilaut does not describe its work to be jihadic and a *da'wah* in promoting indigenous knowledge systems and practices and in modeling appropriate and empowering program for reviving the spiritual and cultural energies of the Sama ethnic communities. It is nonetheless a self-fulfillment for its mostly Muslim staff as their own personal jihad and a way of *da'wah*. We take pride in our home-made curriculum for the three *iskul-iskul ma Lumah ma dilaut* that we nurture in small Sama Dilaut villages in Zamboanga City and Basilan. At *iskul-iskul*, we teach the values of *pag-ombob* or ancestral reverence, a form of animistic practice by the indigenous Sama Dilaut; we also imbue the learners with the appreciation and valuing of extant cultural traditions of the rural Muslim communities, for example the *Taitih* or *Nisfu'Shaban* (or remembrance of the dead) and the *Rabbana* tradition during *Isra wal mi'raj*.<sup>13</sup> Side by side with teaching the basic Islamic pillars of faith, we tell stories of the Prophet Jesus' nativity as narrated in Surah Maryam in the Qur'an. More than being religious, these traditions and practices have been perfect opportunities for re-invigorating the spirit and binding the force for forging communal harmony.

### Implications and challenges in community development work and peace advocacy

In a nutshell, these two strategic moves have great implications in our community work and peace and rights advocacy. First, the Lumah Ma Dilaut refuses to blindly submit to integration or mainstreaming into the national systems without first ensuring a systemic recognition, empowerment, and institutionalization of traditional systems of governance and justice, and in ensuring a place for the perpetuation of our indigenous knowledge systems and practices where values and spirituality that our faiths teach are embedded.

Second, it is suspicious of isolationist and elitist-sectarian moves by nationalists, especially of agenda that pit oppressed communities against each other, pitch issues of Muslim-Christian conflict, or endorse Bangsamoro nationalist unilateral interests without due respect for the Lumad and other inhabitants in still much contested Moro territories or ancestral domains.

Third, we realize the need to give voice to the most marginalized, excluded, and vulnerable Moro communities. So we chose to work with the Sama Dilaut or Bajau. The Sama Dilaut, considered a Moro people only because of their traditionally plying the Sulu seas, is an interesting case. Narratives from the remnants of this passing traditional society portray a nostalgic story of their transition from sea-nomadism to urban mendicancy. The Philippine Bajaus are largely practicing an indigenous religion. Although a growing number are Islamized, most are only nominally Muslims mired in massive poverty and illiteracy. By and large, they are not considered a political threat by the national government on account of their non-integration into the Moro nationalist movement and their non-inclusion in traditional politico-social structure such as the sultanate or datu systems. As such, they stake the least in power and prestige in current politics. Remaining as fluid, free-spirited communities, they are free citizens of the Malaysia-Philippine-Indonesia-Brunei Darussalam sea basin.

To us, the unique position of the Sama Dilaut could be the ultimate test of the limits of our political and economic tools for empowerment, challenging our sociocultural, even religious and spiritual, constructs

of human development and human rights. At the psychological and moral level, it measures the sincerity of our intentions and the degree of tolerance that we put to volunteerism. In sum, it challenges the appropriateness of our framework for development and grassroots empowerment and in establishing social justice.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that empowerment does not lie in the seclusion and isolation of Islam in a political or nationalist cause, nor in integrating or mainstreaming Islam to the mold of a particular culture. It is erroneous and presumptuous even to say that as Muslim civil society, our project is to evolve an alternative Islamic ideology or Islamic culture as Islam cannot be reduced to a particular theory or cultural face. Our mission is to rediscover the universal message in Islam as the common thread, a unifying force, for all religions and cultures of the world to be comfortable and accepted. Our humble mission is to build a Lumah Mehe, a big home that brings together every culture and religion into one big family of the Islamic way of life.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Lumah Mehe (n. Sinama)* – big house.

<sup>2</sup> National elections were held in May 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Hauling of voters to the polling precincts.

<sup>4</sup> Non-believer and therefore suspect.

<sup>5</sup> Arabic schools.

<sup>6</sup> Traditional politicians.

<sup>7</sup> Freedom fighters.

<sup>8</sup> Literally, house of disbelief. Also Land of Unbelievers.

<sup>9</sup> *Lumah Ma Dilaut (n. Sinama)* – literally, house in the sea. Also, pertaining to the spirit houses that traditional sea nomads used to build, as perhaps the only permanent structure in their transitory and itinerant lifestyle where they meet and commune with the spirits of the ancestors. Lumah Ma Dilaut has been the appropriated term to name our Center for Living Traditions to symbolize a sense of holding on, of returning or coming back, and of reviving the Sama communal spirit and hope.

<sup>10</sup> AMANPHIL Vision, Mission, and Goal.

<sup>11</sup> Enlightenment to the Muslim community.

<sup>12</sup> Or, Pondok Pesantren, are Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia.

<sup>13</sup> Akin to the Sufi tradition of *dhikrit* as remembrance of Allah.