

Notes on the Conflict within Mindanawons

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It is not only the issue of constitutionality that we have to face in our search for the solution to the Bangsamoro problem, the Moro struggle for self-determination that has been with us since 1972. We must also confront the emotions that come with the basic issues of identity, ancestral domain, self-governance, control of natural resources, and the right to determine one's final political status. Maybe we should even regard these emotions as one of the basic issues. The truth of the matter is that there seems to be a predominance of negative thoughts and feelings among Pinoy settlers, Bangsamoro, and Lumad alike. The emotions are not exactly kind, and they have also reached the level of official policies.

How, for instance can we explain, the strong resistance from among Christian settlers and Lumads to the use of the phrase "Muslim Mindanao" in the Constitution when it was under deliberation in the Regional Consultative Commission (RCC) and in Congress? Yes, they, the very people who expressed opposition to this phrase were likely among those who took part in the overwhelming ratification of the 1987 Constitution and, consequently, of that phrase, too. On the opposite end, how do we understand the overwhelmingly favorable response to it from among Muslims, such as was duly documented in the public consultations conducted by the RCC? The predominantly Christian provinces of eight out of thirteen provinces listed in the Tripoli Agreement vehemently expressed their desire not to be included in the territory of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The reasons given revealed negative thoughts and feelings about Muslim rather than the objective merits of both the draft organic act produced by the RCC and the actual Organic Act enacted by Congress.

The same manifestations were repeated in 1996 when the famous — or infamous, depending on where one stood — Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) surfaced in the peace talks between the Government of the Philippines (GoP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Yet it turned out that most of the protesting public, including very educated ones, had not read the document.

Substantially the same demonstration of emotions was reportedly triggered by Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) joint Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) in 2008. Voicing popular but negative sentiments from among the settlers in Mindanao, indignant politicians filed for a temporary restraining order (TRO) in the Supreme Court to prevent the signing of the agreement in Malaysia. The Supreme Court did not only abort the signing, it also ruled that the MOA-AD was unconstitutional. Angry rallies denouncing the MOA-AD were held in Zamboanga City, Iligan City, and Kidapawan City, even before the document itself was made known to the public, indicating unmistakably that the anger was not exactly because the protesters or their leaders knew what the MOA-AD was all about, but because of deep-seated emotions that were triggered by the MOA-AD. Which leads one to ask, was MOA-AD the problem? Or was the problem the perceived MOA-AD? Or that, the angry perceivers had something within them that had been agitated and that rushed disturbingly to the surface with the mere mention of the document?

I had the privilege to be “in” many of the above events, and I can attest that the feelings expressed were not necessarily objective reactions based on a thorough reading and understanding of the documents they were opposing. At one point, I asked the owners of some voices in one audience: If the MOA-AD had come from a Bisayan or Christian group, would you have the same reaction? The answer was a quick and resounding “NO!”

Loob, or the inner self, is very important in Pinoy social relations, not only among individuals, but also within families and within the bigger communities. The emotional reactions to “Muslim Mindanao” in 1988-1989, to SPCPD in 1996, and to MOA-AD in 2008 unmistakably displayed what was inside the minds of people and the feelings they have harbored for a long time, much of it inherited from the Spanish period through several generations, cultivated through

the years by Spanish and American colonizers, and carried on by the various governments of the Republic of the Philippines. If one looks closely at the social sciences or social studies being taught in Philippine schools, the Bangsamoro or the Lumad will not find ample and accurate descriptions of themselves in the textbooks; the hand of government in the acts of omission is everywhere in the classrooms.

The Commission on National Integration (CNI) of 1957 and the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997 had been perennially underfunded. The implementation of IPRA itself leaves much to be desired. Today, there is the GoP-MNLF Final Peace Agreement of 1996 that — even representatives of the government admit — nearly fourteen years after the signing, several provisions of which have yet to be fully implemented.

Now we ask again, what is the government’s problem?

Maybe one of the good things that came out of the nonsigning of the GRP-MILF MOA-AD and its being declared as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court is the realization by both private and government institutions that something is indeed amiss. So, now we have combined official and private efforts — community consultations (Konsult Mindanaw, among others) and Dialogue Mindanaw — where people from the settlers and the Bangsamoro and the Lumad can publicly express their sentiments. This is good, it is therapeutic; we need more of this at the local government unit (LGU) level.

Emotion, defined as thought with the element of “like” or “dislike” to it, reveals our innermost feelings about anything, but especially about problems that hit us intensely. It varies in intensity depending on our level of feelings about something. Thus, if something good or bad happens to someone close to us, we spontaneously feel good or bad, too. But if something good or bad happens to someone not close to us, we exhibit hardly any reaction. Worse, when something bad happens to those we regard with disdain, we do not even care.

Our thoughts, words, and feelings for and about each other — the settlers, the Bangsamoro, and the Lumad — have been shaped over many years, handed down from generation to generation. I am of the impression that one highlight of the relationship between Moros and Pinoys from the north is mutual rejection. Many times this is called prejudice. The seed had been sown and nurtured over many years. Now, we are harvesting the whirlwind.

We recall the 333 years, Moro-Spanish wars from 1565 to 1898, interrupted with some quiet years along the way, and the fact that the wars were triggered by Spanish ambitions to colonize the Moros. To do so, the would-be conquerors employed thousands of Pinoy Christians in all expeditions against them (Moros). They conveniently labeled the Moro as *Piratas* (pirates) in Spanish documents. The Moros for their part relentlessly counterattacked by hitting Christian communities in Luzon, the Visayas, and in northern and Eastern Mindanao. If we recall all these, then we should have no difficulty comprehending why there is bad blood between and among Pinoy Christians and Bangsamoros.

The Americans contributed heavily not only to the transmission of negative emotions, they also created their own labels. In the 1903 census, they neatly divided the population into Christians and non-Christians, adding that Christians were civilized and the non-Christians were uncivilized. The latter were categorized under the Moros and the Wild Tribes. These labels colored the public land laws and the number of hectares that people could acquire. These are now classic examples of what is called class legislation, or laws with *unequa'* application. Christian homesteaders were entitled to sixteen or twenty-four hectares, depending on which version was under implementation; the non-Christians were limited to ten or four hectares. It was through the use of these patently discriminatory land laws within the framework of government resettlement programs that the Bangsamoros and Lumad of Mindanao were marginalized in their own ancestral territories.

Prejudice is negative thoughts and feelings; prejudice is negative emotions; prejudice is negative energy. Negative thoughts or feelings for one another remain alive for years, even as we thought we have forgotten about them. Certain triggers send them spontaneously to the surface, as in “Muslim Mindanao,” SPCPD, and MOA-AD.

But energy can be transformed. So, there is hope.

Emotion is thought based on “like” or “dislike,” as already said earlier. Every word is a thought; it is also energy. That is why, according to Dr. Masaru Emoto, a Japanese scientist who has experimented with labels and water crystals, words impact clearly and palpably on water crystals. For example, he pasted the label “beautiful” on a glass of water, and the water crystals came out beautiful; the label “ugly” is pasted on another glass with water coming from the same source, and the water crystal turned out to be just that: ugly. Another label was

“Mother Teresa,” and the water crystal appeared awesomely pleasant; its counterpart was labeled “Hitler,” and the result was hideous. Dr. Emoto concludes that if words can do this to water, imagine what these can do to humans. Humans are up to sixty percent water, and if humans were to be so labeled as Emoto’s glasses of water, we can very well guess how they would turn out.

This, as a matter of fact, is what we humans have been doing to each other. We do not only label things, we also label people, we label one another. What we feel inside comes out as thoughts and words. The textbooks we use in social studies and in the social sciences reveal how we feel about ourselves and about each other. The laws we have — the very Constitution we all vow to uphold — reflect our mass consciousness. *Kung ano ang nasa loob, 'yon din nasa labas* (What is inside appears outside).

What does the history of the Lumad Indigenous Communities and the Bangsamoro in Mindanao tell us?

How do we explain the emergence of liberation movements among the Bangsamoros, such as the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM), the MNLF, and the MILF? How do we explain the ability of such a movement to remain active for more than forty years, despite the massive manpower requirements, the gargantuan logistics needed, the terrible losses in lives and property?

How do we also explain the growing Lumad movement for self-determination?

A rebellion generally reveals an acute level of accumulated hurt and a very deep sense of alienation. A broad-based recourse to armed violence is a very serious decision; it involves entire communities as lives of relatives and friends are put on the line. Indeed, thousands of lives were lost, as well as untold damage to property resulted in the war for Bangsamoro national liberation that was launched in the latter part of 1972. It needed the deployment of seventy-five percent of the entire force of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to quell the uprising.

A quick look into interrelated events in our history will reveal a pattern of acceptance, rejection, and acceptance. *Sandugo* (the blood compact) is one way of bringing strangers, even enemies, together into a relationship of brotherhood. It has deep roots in our various cultures, coming in various names but meaning the same thing. Enemies who have reached a state of mutual rejection, even mutual elimination, submit to a process that transforms negative energy into positive

energy: mutual exclusion to mutual acceptance. In our culture, the sandugo, the mixing of two bloods into one, is the most powerful image of mutual acceptance. Unfortunately, it has been submerged in layers of colonial impositions and practices.

Are we ready to shed our colonial overcoats to solve a festering problem?

We need to look *sa ating loob* (inside ourselves) *at makiramdam sa isa't isa* (and to feel each other out). Do we have it in our heart to accept, not reject, our Bangsamoro co-citizens? Because if we do not, then the automatic response is counter-rejection. That is why there was a movement for national liberation, for counter-identity, for self-determination; that is why it became necessary to resort to arms.

To be annexed in the Treaty of Paris was a form of wholesale nonrecognition and rejection. It meant having one's communal land opened to private ownership through the resettlement program. Seeing one's land being parceled out and titled to individual settlers and corporations is a form of rejection. Being displaced and marginalized in one's territory, being ruled by strangers in one's home, and not being able to decide anymore what to do with one's life are the various ways to mean the same thing: Rejection.

And when rebellion is launched by victims of rejection, those of us who belong to or represent the "stranger" and "dominant" community feel justified in sending government troops to quell these troublesome rebels. We feel safe and comfortable by assuming that the rebels started the trouble. But, did we not push them to do exactly that?

Being taught and compelled to adopt a history that is not one's own is a subtle and grand rejection of one's self-esteem. Government has never officially looked inside itself to see and admit where it has not only failed but where it has actively contributed in the first place to the very creation of the Bangsamoro and Lumad problem. Thus, we yearn for a government with a conscience.

Labeling is rejection. Called Moro piratas during the Spanish colonial regime, non-Christians and uncivilized during the days of American colonization, national cultural minorities in the early days of the republic, now we call them "rebels" or "secessionists." The word "secessionist" has been thoughtlessly used against them, even when they have been part of and have accepted life within the republic. We charge them with wanting to take our lands which we have legally taken from them in the first place — the government said these were



public lands, even when they say they will respect vested rights. We react to the MOA-AD as if it was the handiwork of a some terrible *wakwak* or *aswang* (witch) and sought from the Supreme Court.

We say we want to solve the Bangsamoro problem but we refuse to make changes in the Constitution that had legitimized their marginalization and that would change Bangsamoro life for the better. We need to put a stop to this vicious cycle of rejection and counter-rejection. Our best choice for the future is mutual acceptance. We really cannot adopt a policy of expelling each other out of Mindanao and the country.

If the problem is aggravated by poverty and government neglect, do we answer with half-hearted development? When we respond to victims of the vicious cycle of rejection with palliatives, isn't this compounding the earlier rejections with a new form of rejection — *gilingaw-lingaw* lang (being entertained), as they say in Bisaya.

At this point in time, the cycle of cause and effect has become vicious and never-ending. We cannot tell any more which came first: the roots of the conflict or our feelings about the conflict. Never has there been an admission, especially a public admission, by leaders on both sides of the conflict of the costs of war. Never has there been a common act of acceptance, an act of sorrow that one's behavior and action have caused hurt and immense suffering.



Constitutional change will redefine relationships of communities anchored on the consent of the governed. We have to reflect on a history that does not hide and lie. We have to accept the ideal of peaceful coexistence. Acceptance is decolonization of our minds; it can liberate us from destructive emotions. A common acceptance can be a source of political strength; the mark of political maturity by all concerned.

Are these strange words to us? No, these are an integral part of our culture no matter how diverse: *nakaugat sa ating kultura... nasa ating kalooban... sa bawat isa... sa bawat komunidad... nagkalayo ang ating mga loob... may kalinaw kapag nagkalapit ang loob* (rooted in our culture... it is part of our inner selves... in each one of us... in each community... our inner selves are distant from each other... there can be peace when the inner selves are united or whole).

Loob is a vital ingredient in social relationships among us Filipinos, whether in harmony or in conflict. Where there is harmony, we say *nagkaisang loob* (union of inner selves); where there is conflict, *nagkasiraan ang loob* (severance of inner selves). In between, a step before harmony we say *nagkalapitan ang loob* (coming together of inner selves); prior to conflict when the element of distancing sets in, we say *nagkalayoan ang loob* (distancing between inner selves). This goes for individuals as well as for groups.

When the relationship between two people is in harmony, we say *nagkaisa ang kanilang loob* (there is union between their inner selves). Sometimes we also say *para silang magkapatid* (they are like siblings). They are sensitive to each other's feelings; they feel for each other; they identify with each other's interests; there is plenty of give and take. We have two individuals, who accept each other's distinctness, accept each other's dignity, who are sensitive to each other's sensibilities. We achieve a union when two selves respect and offer kindness to each other.

Expand this into communities and we have a union of two identities: two families joined by intermarriage or a baptism. Where the two families represent barangays, we have an alliance of two barangays. Among nation-states the union is sealed with diplomatic relations, exchanges of ambassadors, treaties of friendship and commerce, and so on. Among corporations we speak of partnerships or joint ventures. Notice that as the relation expands beyond the individual, it also acquires impersonal features, like formal written contracts with clearly defined terms not necessarily attached to feelings.

In the Philippines, this formal written contract can only be a new Constitution, the ultimate response. And final solution. It means *Meron tayong lakas ng loob na tanggapin na nasaktan natin ang isa't isa, at handa tayong makipag-isa* (We have the strength of the will to accept that we have hurt one another, and we are ready to come to a union). The seal of a new relationship is a symbolic sandugo, a new Constitution for a new Philippines.