Visualizing Bangsamoro, Imagining Change

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What is the meaning of Bangsamoro for the people of Jolo?
Based on a study conducted with three social groups in Jolo, Sulu, Badjaos, Christians, and Muslims have different meanings to the concept of Bangsamoro. For Badjaos, Bangsamoro is described in relation to violent threats to their security and way of life. For Christians, Bangsamoro is understood in relation to the Muslim people’s right to self-determination, which according to them, may lead to conflict among the groups in Mindanao. For Muslims, Bangsamoro is the path towards Islam as a way of life, one that they believe will lead to the fulfillment of their community’s basic needs. How might an understanding of the different meanings of Bangsamoro facilitate dialogue between these different social groups? How might such dialogue bring about positive change aspired for by Muslims, Christians, and Badjaos?

The Concept of Bangsamoro
The word ‘Bangsamoro’ first emerged in the 1980s, as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) sought to rally support for their struggle to claim a Muslim country independent of the Philippines (Buendia, 2005). This struggle traces its history to the fact that during the pre-colonial times, independent Islamic states known as ‘sultanates’ have already been established in Southern Philippines (Lingga, 2009; Rodil, 2003). The argument of Muslim liberation movements, which includes the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and to some extent, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), stem from narratives of how the natives or original residents of Mindanao (Muslims and Badjaos) have lost their ancestral domain or territories and their right to self-determination to migrant settlers, most of whom were Christians (Lingga, 2009; Rodil, 2009). It was therefore the objective of these Muslim liberation movements to claim these rights to ancestral land and self-determination from Christian settlers in Mindanao as well as from the Philippine government.

Literally, Bangsamoro means Muslim (“Moro”) nation (“bansa” or “bangsa”). On the one hand, the concept presupposes independence from the existing state and the implementation of a different kind of governance that is in keeping with ‘Shariah’ or Islamic laws. More importantly, Bangsamoro highlights the creation of a Muslim homeland where Muslims can exercise power and authority over their own systems of governance (“GRP-MILF draft pact on Bangsamoro homeland”, 2008). However, the concept has also been linked to violence and conflict, as Muslim liberation groups have used the concept as their battle cry as they engage in armed fighting against the Philippine government. Since the inception of these Muslim liberation groups, it has been estimated that more than 100,000 have been killed in the war between these groups and the Philippine government (Bertrand, 2000). The term also gained negative association when linked to the criminal acts committed by the Abu Sayyaf Group, such as kidnappings, bombings and extortion activities (Donnelly, 2004).
As such, Bangsamoro is a controversial, affect-laden and dynamic concept that has evoked a wide range of reactions from different social groups in Mindanao. Apart from the negative meanings ascribed to Bangsamoro in relation to violence and conflict, Bangsamoro also presupposes an inherent “othering” as it identifies a nation for Muslims and not that of the other groups in Mindanao. This can be a source of tension as Mindanao is home to various non-Muslim groups, such as Christians and Badjao (Indigenous Peoples) (“Philippines Moro head assures tribal leaders on land rights, religion”, 2006). A deeper understanding of the respective interpretations of Bangsamoro was sought through discussions and drawing exercises with Badjaos, Christians, and Muslims in Jolo, Sulu.

**Badjao Representation of Bangsamoro: Violence**

The Badjao representation of Bangsamoro comprised of images of armed men, a house with a newly-awakened person, a person running to warn the other people of the armed men, a motorboat with men firing at a fishing boat of the Badjaos, a mango tree, some decorative flowers in the house, and finally, a figure of two civilians running away from the armed men (See Figure 1). Based on the descriptions and explanations provided by the Badjao respondents, this visual representation of Bangsamoro reflects a scene wherein their communities are attacked by armed men who carry the concept of Bangsamoro as their rallying call. Thus, the Badjao respondents understood Bangsamoro in relation to their experiences of being violently assaulted by armed men in their homes, which then threatens their sense of security and way of life. After each attack, the Badjaos go back to enjoying the things they like and spending the time to improve their lives. However, succeeding attacks to their homes and communities continue and the Badjaos are forced to flee every so often.

When asked to entitle their visual representation of Bangsamoro, the Badjao respondents came up with the title “Bangsamoro Abu Sayyaf Mamumunoh or War Freak.” The title was meant to highlight the Badjao representation of Bangsamoro as a group of people who engage in violent activities. Discussions on the meaning of the images drawn in relation to Bangsamoro emphasized the past experiences of the Badjaos with the Abu Sayyaf Group, an armed group that has become known for committing kidnappings, bombings and other criminal activities in Sulu and neighboring islands. As such, for the Badjao respondents, the concept of Bangsamoro is seen in a very negative light as it constitutes a threat to the things that they value most in their lives, such as...
as security and a peaceful existence. What is perhaps striking in this representation of the concept of Bangsamoro is the centrality of violence in the Badjao understanding of Bangsamoro.

**Christian Representation of Bangsamoro: Self-Determination**

The Christian representation of Bangsamoro consisted of a flag with a moon and kris, a mosque, a mountain, islands, a coconut tree, a person facing sideways, and a boat (See Figure 2). Participants described the flag with a moon and kris as usual symbols used in rallies related to Bangsamoro in Jolo, Sulu. The mosque referred to the Islamic house of God while the mountain and the islands literally referred to Jolo and its surrounding islands. The coconut tree was added to the image because it was a usual sight around the island. The person facing sideways reflected the presence of Muslim people. Finally, the boat mirrored the traditional colorful boat historically used by Jolo residents to transport people.

Based on the group’s discussion about the meaning of the images contained in their visual representation about Bangsamoro, Christian respondents made sense of the concept in relation to the Muslim people’s demand for an independent homeland, as
seen in the prominence of the Bangsamoro flag in the drawing. The demand was mostly founded on the Islam religion, with Muslims representing the original inhabitants of Jolo and its neighboring localities. Furthermore, the Christian respondents also acknowledged this call as aimed towards achieving independence and development in line with the Muslim people’s glorious past as a free and prosperous people. When asked to give a title to the drawing, they first thought of giving the drawing the label “The War.” However, upon further negotiation, they entitled their drawing as “The Beyond” or “The Unseen.” This was because they believed that Bangsamoro had a lot of dimensions that were left hidden from the public eye, particularly concerning the situation of non-Muslims in Mindanao if ever laws and institutions supporting Bangsamoro were implemented in the region. For them, the Muslim people’s demand for an independent homeland may potentially result in conflict and even war among the different groups in Mindanao; and such a demand may lead to the displacement and marginalization of non-Muslim groups in the region.

According to the Christians, through Bangsamoro, the Muslim people in Mindanao will be given the chance to govern themselves, to have control over the natural resources of the region, and to determine the course of their own development. As such, Bangsamoro was mainly about the Muslim people’s right to self-governance and prosperity. However, the Christian respondents also expressed feelings of anxiety and confusion given the Muslim people’s claim on Mindanao as their own ancestral land and a domain where they can exercise their own systems of governance and mechanisms for progress. In particular, the anxiety is related to the security of Christian and Badjao peoples in Mindanao should the Muslim people assert their right to self-determination. Christians see this eventuality as possibly leading to conflict and armed fighting given that significant issues such as land ownership, resource sharing, and cultural identities are at stake.

**Muslim Representation of Bangsamoro: Religion**

The Muslim representation of Bangsamoro consisted of a mosque, a Bangsamoro flag, a Philippine flag, school buildings, houses, people, trees and mountains (See Figure 3). The participants explained that the ‘mosque’ represents the religion of the Moro. The
Bangsamoro flag was exclusively for the Bangsamoro homeland while the Philippine flag referred to the entire Philippine nation. The school buildings were drawn because Moro children attend school. The houses and the persons are in the image because they are part of the community. The tree was a symbol of the abundance of fruits in the land whereas the mountain represented the livelihood of the Moro.

Based on the explanations provided by the Muslim respondents on the meanings of the various images in their drawing about Bangsamoro, the concept of Bangsamoro is understood as a path towards the rebirth of the Islam religion. Most central in their drawing of Bangsamoro is the image of the mosque. For the Muslim respondents, Bangsamoro is a means for them to openly practice their religion in the different facets of their everyday lives – in their livelihood, education, and governance. In relation to this representation of Bangsamoro as the practice of Islam, Muslims see Bangsamoro as a way to satisfy their community’s basic needs. This is reflected in the images of a school building, houses, a tree, and a mountain. To live in a community that is oriented towards the Islamic way of life provides them with a channel to fulfill their needs as a people. When asked to give a title to their visual representation, the Muslim respondents gave the title “Bangsamoro Land” because according to them, the land in Mindanao belonged to the Muslim people. Therefore, the land in Mindanao should be appropriated to support the Muslim people’s way of life.

As such, for Muslims, Bangsamoro refers to a way of life wherein Islam serves as the guiding principle of community life. The concept also presupposes a homeland wherein Muslims are able to attain their own basic needs, such as physical sustenance, education, security and peace. This is achieved through the abundant natural resources and gainful employment found in their own homeland. Finally, this representation of Bangsamoro reflects the Muslim claim on Mindanao as their ancestral domain, a meaning that is linked to the Christian representation of Bangsamoro as the realization of the Muslim people’s right to self-determination.

Multiple Meanings, Multiple Truths: A Crucial Principle for Dialogue
The discussions with the three social groups showed that Christians, Muslims and Badjaos have different meanings to the concept of Bangsamoro. For Badjaos, Bangsamoro means violence. For Christians, Bangsamoro is about the Muslim people’s struggle for self-determination. For Muslims, Bangsamoro is about the Islam religion and Muslim way of life. These differences in meaning may be seen as reflecting each group’s unique experiences, history, and current situation in Mindanao. For example, Badjaos as a group may have experienced being displaced in the midst of armed conflict or violence inflicted by some Muslims groups. Christians, in their own group’s history of making Mindanao their home, may fear that they are not part of Bangsamoro. Muslims, as among the first settlers in Mindanao, may have experienced losing their land and their ability to exercise the Islamic way of life because of the dominance of Christianity in the Philippines.

The different groups associate different meanings to social issues like the Bangsamoro not because of their personal characteristics or traits. Nor is it because a group is naturally hostile or antagonistic or wishes to create tension with another group. Clearly, it is because each group has unique
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experiences and realities. Such a pluralistic view assumes that there will be differences in understanding a concept like Bangsamoro given each group’s unique experiences and social-historical context. When we genuinely accept that groups hold different meanings to understanding Bangsamoro or any other social issue in Mindanao, then the space for dialogue and social change is made more real.

In the spirit of dialogue, an important principle then is to recognize that different groups hold different truths to social issues. This recognition of multiple meanings and multiple truths can help bridge groups towards acknowledging each other’s understanding of an issue. With this approach, there is no judgment of who is right or wrong. There is no judgment of which understanding is correct or incorrect. Instead there is the recognition that one’s own group only sees part of the truth and that other groups hold parts of the truth as well. Such recognition and respect of multiple understandings to every issue can facilitate the negotiation or resolution of contentious issues like Bangsamoro.

Imagining Change through Visual Representations of Bangsamoro

Perhaps what is striking in the three groups’ representations of Bangsamoro is how these group-generated images signify an expression of each group’s search for the satisfaction of their basic needs and the preservation of the things that they value most. For Badjaos, Bangsamoro represents their communal need for security from armed groups who attack their communities, thus forcing them to flee. For Christians, Bangsamoro stands for the Muslim demand for self-determination, a demand that needs to be further examined and prudently acted upon so as to prevent conflict and fighting among the different social groups in Mindanao. For Muslims, Bangsamoro symbolizes the freedom to practice one’s religion and to chart the developmental path of their community based on the teachings of the Islamic faith.

Such diverse meanings of Bangsamoro may not be evident in the usual political discourse voiced by political leaders, but represent important and valid expressions for positive
change in Mindanao. For instance, leaders of Muslim liberation groups may see that the violence with which the struggle for Bangsamoro has been waged may have become detrimental to their cause, given the negative reactions of other social groups, particularly of the Badjao people, to the concept of Bangsamoro. Also, Christians may become more aware of the significance of Bangsamoro to the Muslim people and in the process, become more open to dialogue about critical issues such as land ownership, resource sharing, and cultural identities in Mindanao. In the end, such visual representations of Bangsamoro may play a part in imagining and realizing positive social transformations in Mindanao.

Perhaps a visual representation of a peaceful Mindanao where Badjaos, Christians, and Muslims live in harmony with each other can facilitate the imagining of change.

References


