Stereotypes that Divide, Transformations that can Unite

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How do Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos view each other? In the South of the Philippines, in between Tawi-tawi and Basilan, the province of Sulu is land to these three groups. In our aim to contribute to peacebuilding in Mindanao, we looked at the attitudes of these three groups to each other. Our study found that Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos generally have positive attitudes toward each other, with Bisayas seen most positively. However, negative stereotypes persist about Tausugs and Badjaos. How can these stereotypes be transformed towards building peace in Sulu?

A Background on Sulu
The Sulu archipelago boasts beautiful islands that form a continuous chain in the southern Philippines. It is located halfway between the Zamboanga Peninsula and the island province of Tawi-Tawi. Its major islands are Jolo, Siasi, and Tawi-Tawi (Teo, 1989). According to the 2007 Census of the Population, the province of Sulu has a total population of 849,670, with 140,307 people living in Jolo, the provincial capital. The name Sulu came from the Malayan word Suluk, meaning current, as it is surrounded by the Sulu Sea in the northeast and the Celebes Sea in the southeast. The natives call it Lupa Sug, meaning Land of the Current. Its capital, Jolo, is called by the locals as Tiyanggi Sug or simply Tiyanggi, meaning market.

Islam is entrenched in the history of Sulu and its natives, the Tausugs. It was Sayeed Abubakar, an Arabian missionary from Johore, Malaysia, who became the Sultan of Sulu in the 13th century and proclaimed Islam as the official political and social institution of the sultanate. Other than Tausugs, other groups living in Sulu are the Bisayas (Lara & Champaign, 2009), and Badjaos (Teo, 1989).
**Research Process**

A scale to measure people’s attitude to Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos was developed using the method of Shah (1999). This method in constructing an attitude scale uses trait adjectives gathered from the target population. These trait adjectives are common words people use to describe the three groups. Each adjective has a corresponding numerical value to evaluate if the attitude to each group is positive or negative. A scale containing 20 trait adjectives (10 positive and 10 negative) was developed. Below is the final list of adjectives that were included in the final Shah Scale:

- Amoy isda
- Maalaga
- Mabuti
- Magalang
- Mamamatay-tao
- Mapang-abuso
- Masungit
- Matiyaga
- Pabaya sa anak
- Palaasa
- Binabale-wala
- Maasikaso sa pamilya
- Madaling mahalin
- Magaling sa negosyo
- Mapagkakatiwalaan
- Mapangutya sa kapwa
- Matulungin
- Matalino
- Walang pinag-aralan

With the assistance provided by the NDJC Peace Center, 90 participants (45 males and 45 females), 16 to 48 years old, took part in the study. 30 Tausugs, 30 Bisayas, and 30 Badjaos were asked to answer three attitude scales. They were asked to check the adjectives that best describe Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos. Statistical analyses, namely, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) and discriminant analysis (DA), were then conducted.

Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos: The People of Sulu

Around 85% of the total population in Sulu classify themselves as Tausugs. Samal-Badjaos, on the other hand, make up 12%. Lastly, Bisayas who are migrant from different ethnic origins from the north of Sulu, make up about 3% of the total Sulu population (Province of Sulu, 2012).
The third group of people in Sulu consists of the Badjaos. Badjaos are described as quiet people who want to be left on their own, who live simply in their huts by the sea and engage in fishing for food (Glionna, 2009). Badjaos are sometimes referred to as Samal-Badjaos or Samal Luwaan, meaning “outcast.” Badjaos are the smallest ethnic group in Sulu. They are harmless, peaceful, seemingly contented and happy people who do not demand for privileges from the government and consider the sea as most important for their survival. Badjaos remain to be poor due to their lack of aspirations and indifference to education and technology (Teo, 1989).

In our aim to contribute to peacebuilding in Sulu and to gain a better understanding of the intergroup relations among its people, we conducted a study that investigated the attitudes of Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos towards themselves and each other.

**Intergroup Attitudes and Stereotypes**

Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos generally have positive attitudes toward each other. In our study, all the respondents had a positive overall rating of each group. This means that as a whole, Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos view each other in a positive light.

In terms of their overall rating, Bisayas received the highest score. Tausugs came second. And Badjaos third. This implies that the people of Jolo view Bisayas most positively, followed by Tausugs, and Badjaos least positively. Still, all groups were viewed positively.

Six adjectives were commonly used to describe Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos. Five of the six adjectives were positive. These are: *mabuti* (kind), *magaling sa negosyo* (business-savvy), *mapagkakatiwalaan* (trustworthy), *matalino* (intelligent), and *matulungin* (helpful).

However, one of the six adjectives used to describe all three groups was negative. This trait was *mapangutya sa kapwa* (cynical of others) Another negative adjective, *padalos-dalos* (rash), was used to describe Badjaos and Tausugs but was never used to describe Bisayas.

Among the three groups, it is the Bisayas as a group who are always viewed positively. This is based on the results that the adjectives used by the respondents to describe Bisayas are all positive. This means that Tausugs and Badjaos always have positive views of Bisayas.

While our findings reflect that overall attitudes toward the three groups are positive and several positive adjectives are shared by Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos, our results also indicate that there are negative stereotypes. In particular, a number of respondents ascribed negative traits to Tausugs and Badjaos.

Negative adjectives associated with Tausugs are *mamamatay-tao* (assassin/killer), *mapang-abuso* (abusive), and *masungit* (short-tempered). However, despite these negative stereotypes, the general attitude towards Tausugs is positive.

Negative adjectives were also associated with the Badjaos. The traits *amoy isda* (smell
like fish), *binabale-wala* (taken for granted), *pabaya sa anak* (neglectful of children), and *walang pinag-aralan* (uneducated) were the most common adjectives ascribed to Badjaos. However, despite these negative stereotypes, the general attitude towards Badjaos is positive.

Bisayas was the only group that was not associated with any negative trait in our study. Using the items checked by the participants in the scale to describe Bisayas, the trait adjectives that were commonly used are *maalaga* (caring), *maasikaso* (attentive to others’ needs), *madaling mahalin*, and *matiyaga* (persevering). The respondents in our study also had the highest positive overall attitude scores towards Bisayas as a group.

**Highlighting Positive Attitudes**

We conducted this study with the aim of contributing to peacebuilding in Sulu by understanding the intergroup attitudes among its people, the Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos. The results of this study may be used to achieve these goals by coming up with community interventions to facilitate understanding among the three groups. Providing baseline knowledge on how Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos perceive each other in their own communities may aid in facilitating intergroup dialogue and building positive intergroup relations.

One way of utilizing the results of this study is to highlight the commonalities rather than the differences among the three groups. The finding that Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos view each other positively and describe each other in positive ways can be used to facilitate intergroup dialogue. Highlighting the positive feelings the groups have of each other can be the framework of programs aimed at promoting multicultural and multiethnic cooperation.

Interestingly, since the findings of our research show that all three groups perceive Bisayas positively, a possible suggestion is for Bisayas to play an active role in bringing the Tausug and Badjao groups together to build and maintain peace in their communities. With the help of government and nongovernment organizations as well as humanitarian groups, Bisayas can capitalize on their positive image among the different groups of people in Sulu by initiating peacebuilding efforts and encouraging their Tausug and Badjao counterparts to participate in their endeavor to achieve peace and sustain it in their own communities.

**Transforming Negative Stereotypes**

Another way of learning from this study is making the people of Sulu aware of the stereotypes they have of each other. Awareness can lead to an understanding of why these stereotypes exist. Awareness can also lead to finding ways on how to not let these stereotypes divide groups. For example, with the awareness that it is part of Badjao culture to live by the sea shore or on their boats to catch fish for a living, Tausugs and Bisayas can better understand why Badjaos are *amoy isda* (smell like fish) and not take that trait against them. Likewise, by being oriented to the fact that Tausugs are overprotective of their identity as the original settlers of Sulu, Bisayas and Badjaos may have a deeper understanding of why Tausugs are stereotyped as *mapang-abuso* (abusive).

“...coming up with community interventions to facilitate understanding among the three groups.”
Facilitating awareness of negative stereotypes may also lead to an understanding on how to transform these stereotypes. With people conscious of how they view themselves and each other, they may realize that they can change their negative attitudes towards each other. They can become more watchful of their beliefs and attitudes that lead to misunderstanding and conflict. Multicultural sensitivity programs can be developed so that Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos will not only develop sensitivity towards each others' culture, beliefs, and practices, but will also build awareness of their own identities as the people of Sulu.

It is hoped that with better knowledge of Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos' perceptions of each other, a more peaceful intergroup dialogue can be facilitated. Knowing the specific experiences, histories, and subjectivities of the diverse peoples of Sulu can lead to a deepened understanding of each other. Such understanding can develop into sensitivity towards each other. Such sensitivity can develop into affinity, care, and compassion for one another.

Transforming stereotypes that divide to awareness that can unite may be a valuable step to peace.

“...sensitivity can develop into affinity, care, and compassion for one another.”

**Building Positive Intergroup Relations**

The results of this study can be used as a guide or reference point for assessing the attitudes of Tausugs, Bisayas, and Badjaos in different communities. It can be the basis for developing programs on multicultural and multiethnic sensitivity for the diverse people of Sulu. It can be the framework for facilitating intergroup dialogue and building positive intergroup relations by transforming negative stereotypes and building on the diverse groups' positive views of one another.

Furthermore, this study shows that personal transformation is required if groups are to change the negative attitudes they have of each other. Acknowledging and accepting their own thoughts and feelings about each other, their subjectivities that create conflict, is a step towards achieving peace in their communities.
References


