Meanings of Peace among the Tri-People of Jolo, Sulu

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What is the meaning of peace for the different groups in Jolo, Sulu? In this study, Christians, Muslims and Badjaos understood peace as an ideal state that arises from the everyday actions of people. While the three groups had shared meanings of peace, they also had unique meanings of peace as derived from their unique experiences and context as a group. The tri-people also reflected on the presence and/or absence of peace in the region. More importantly, they put forth their own suggestions for achieving and sustaining peace in Jolo, Sulu.

**Peace: A Multitude of Meanings**

The experiences of people caught in the midst of conflict and violence in Southern Philippines have led to the birth of a dynamic and active movement for peace in the region. In the face of several challenges, this movement, composed of several sectors in society, such as government agencies, non-government organizations, academic institutions, religious groups, people’s organizations and communities, has continued to advocate and work for peace in Mindanao and Sulu. It is within this context of peacebuilding in Mindanao that this present research seeks to ask: What is the meaning of peace among the different social groups in Jolo, Sulu? Specifically, how do members of Christian, Muslim and Badjao groups understand the concept of peace?

Previous research has shown that the meanings of peace may vary depending on various factors, such as the culture, politics, and history of a society, as well as the everyday experiences of people in particular social contexts. For instance, the meaning of peace as reflected in the word Shalom from ancient Judaism suggests a more religious interpretation, focusing on how justice and fairness are attained through God’s will (Hye-Ok, 2009; Ishida, 1969). Similarly, eirene (Greece), pax (Rome), he ping (China), and heiwa (Japan) exhibit a more political understanding of peace, highlighting the notions of order and prosperity. In India, the words ahimsa and shanti both emphasize the meaning of peace in relation to tranquility of mind and non-violence.

The concept of peace has also been understood in terms of its relationship to violence (Galtung, 1996). On the one hand, negative peace refers to the absence of direct violence, which involves explicitly violent acts such as war and fighting. On the other hand, positive peace pertains to efforts to reduce structural violence, which is manifested in conditions that prevent people from satisfying their fundamental human needs. Thus, positive peace is achieved through initiatives meant to address poverty, exploitation, discrimination, inequality, and injustice. A more recent study on the meanings of peace highlighted four aspects: (1) ideals pertaining to individual and personal aspirations, (2) positive interpersonal relations, (3) metaphors and images, and (4) practical elements related to peacebuilding (Sarri, 2007).

Other studies have shown differences in the meanings of peace as explained by women and men (Sacipa, Ballesteros, Cardozo, Novoa, & Tovar, 2006). For women, the concept of peace was primarily linked to personal characteristics and interpersonal relations. Peace for women was about spiritual tranquility, harmony, and love.
For men, the concept of peace was mainly associated with community relations and political conditions. Peace for men was about creating agreements between communities and the government to improve the structural conditions that affect the everyday lives of people in conflict situations.

The same research also explored differences in how adults and youth understand peace. Adults highlighted personal agency while young people emphasized the role of other people in building peace. For instance, adults emphasized their own roles as agents of peace whereas the youth identified historical characters as peace builders. In addition, as compared to younger participants, older participants were more likely to cite the importance of the attainment of basic needs and the improvement of socioeconomic conditions as integral to peace building.

In another study, the meanings of peace also varied in relation to a person’s experiences of war and peace activism (Sarrica & Contarello, 2004). The understanding of peace among those who have experienced war was observed to be dynamic and concrete, with the meanings of peace tied to people’s everyday behavior, attitudes and values. These include advocating for justice and nonviolence through activities such as discussions and meetings. On the other hand, those who had no experience of war made sense of peace as a stable and abstract concept that was associated with non-concrete concepts (utopia, good), external symbols (sun, rainbow) as well as close relations (friendship, family). Such patterns of difference were also observed between peace activists and non-activists.

During the group discussions, three main areas were probed: (1) the things that come to their mind when they hear the word ‘peace’; (2) their opinions regarding the existence or absence of peace in Jolo, Sulu; and, (3) the steps they thought should be taken to maintain and build peace in the region.

Shared Meanings of Peace: An Ideal Achieved through the Everyday

Christians, Muslims, and Badjaos understood the concept of peace as an ideal state that results from everyday processes that people undertake. For the three social groups, peace is a condition wherein people are able to satisfy their personal, interpersonal, and intergroup needs. Peace involves the fulfillment of people’s need for sustenance and entails the ability to provide for the

Research Process
Group Discussions with Tri-People Community Leaders

Through focus group discussions, male and female community leaders from three social groups (Christian, Muslim and Badjao) were asked to talk about the meanings of peace. Each group discussion involved community leaders from the same sex and social group (e.g., female Muslim group, male Christian group, etc.), with ages ranging from 16 to 55 years old. The participants represented different communities and villages in Jolo, Sulu. A total of six focus group discussions were conducted from late 2009 to early 2010.
physical nourishment of oneself and one’s family – “mabuti ang hanapbuhay, mabuti ang pagtulog, mabuti ang pagkain” (we have adequate livelihood, we can sleep well at night, and we can eat well). Peace also encompasses assurances regarding people’s security – “ligtas ang mga tao” (the people are safe). Thus, peace refers to freedom from violence, harm, danger, or unfortunate events – “malaya ang mga taong maglakad-lakad sa lugar nila... hindi sila takot” (people are free to walk around their neighborhood... they are not afraid). Peace also includes freedom from natural and human-made calamities.

Peace also implies achieving harmony among peoples, which involves unity and cooperation among different groups – “walang pag-aaway sa komunidad” (there is no fighting among community members), “may kaligayahan, nagkakasundo ang mga tao” (there is happiness, people get along with one another). The concept of peace was also deeply intertwined with the notion of justice and human dignity. As such, peace is present when economic, political, and social structures provide members of different groups with equal chances for participation – “dapat mapakinggan ang mga tao” (the people should be listened to). Finally, peace was also linked to development, or when a community is prosperous and progressive – “there is progress”, “kasaganahan ng buhay ng tao at lugar” (prosperity in the life of the people and the place).

According to the tri-people of Jolo, peace also involves several processes that people undertake in their everyday lives. Peace is brought about by the provision of livelihood opportunities, educational assistance, and medical services for different groups of people – “we need livelihood projects, scholarship programs for the indigents”. Peace is also achieved through the cultivation of one’s personal values that allow for harmonious relationships between different groups of people – “kung mayroong kaunting nasabi iyong hindi maganda, intindihin na lang natin iyon” (if you hear someone say something unpleasant, just try to understand), “iwasan ang inggit” (avoid envy). Peace also involves personal and social efforts to maintain the cleanliness of one’s surroundings and to protect the environment – “may respeto sa kalikasan, sa mga hayop” (there is respect for nature, for animals), “may kalinisan sa paligid” (there is cleanliness in the surroundings).
Continuous dialogue and communication among peoples of different cultures and faith, as characterized by respect, understanding, and appreciation, also form an integral part of the meaning of peace for the three groups – “we have the capacity to dialogue not just between but also within the group… mag-usap ang iba’t-ibang parties about peace” (we have the capacity to dialogue not just between but also within the group… different parties can talk about peace”). For Muslims, Christians, and Badjaos alike, people attain peace by ensuring that all sectors in a community are properly represented in relation to important economic, political, and social matters – “iyong all sectors in the community are well-represented… mayroon silang voice kung ano man iyong tingin nila na dapat gawin, kung ano iyong kaya nilang gawin to achieve peace” (when all sectors in the community are well-represented… they have a voice regarding what needs to be done, what they can do to achieve peace”). Lastly, notions of peace were linked to the shared efforts of leaders and community members in improving the people’s quality of life. This includes initiatives to curtail criminal activities and to uphold the law in Jolo, Sulu – “kung itutuwid ang batas” (if the law will be made right).

Specific Meanings of Peace
Alongside the shared meanings of peace across the three social groups, specific meanings of peace were also emphasized in the narratives of Badjaos, Muslims, and Christians.

The Christian perspective. For Christians, human dignity is a fundamental aspect to peace – “people should learn to uphold human dignity because it is the basic thing”. They also believe that peace exists when there is unity and understanding among peoples – “nagkakaintindihan, nagkakasundo ang lahat ng tao” (all people are in harmony with one another). Peace is also seen in people striving to achieve unity and love – “kapag may pagmamahalan at pagkakaisa sa mga tao” (when there is love and unity among people). Christians also described peace as the exercise forgiveness and reconciliation – “pagpapatawaran” (forgiveness). They also referred to peace in relation to being free from harm and danger – “we are free from killings, kidnappings, extortions, and other man-made calamities”. For Christians, notions of peace are closely linked to human dignity, harmonious relationships, and human security.

The Muslim perspective. An important aspect of peace for Muslims is the existence of leaders who practice integrity – “kung matuwid ang nasa itaas na leader, matuwid rin ang mga tao” (when the leader is upright, the people are also upright); “kapag walang corruption, matuwid ang pamamahala” (when there is no corruption then there is good governance). The meaning of peace is linked to the government’s provision of vital services to its constituents – “sa tulong nila, may kaunlaran sa komunidad” (with their help, progress in the community can be achieved). For Muslims, achieving peace also involves abiding by the teachings of Islam – “iyong religious ang mga tao, sumusunod
sa turo ng Islam” (people are religious and follow the teachings of Islam). Peace is further understood as inextricably intertwined with asserting the Muslim people’s rights and struggle for freedom – “mayroong karapatan ang mga tao, mayroon silang kalayaan” (when people have rights, when people have freedom). For Muslims, notions of peace are closely associated to good governance, the significance of religion in people’s lives, and the respect for people’s rights and freedom.

The Badjao perspective. For Badjaos, the absence of conflict and violence is an important component of peace – “walang kaguluhan sa komunidad” (there is no violence and conflict in the community), “mayroong katahimikan” (there is peace and quiet). Peace is also associated with prosperity through the provision of livelihood opportunities for community members – “may kasaganahan” (there is prosperity), “dapat talaga mayroong kabuhayan ang mga tao para hindi makaisip na gumawa ng hindi maganda” (people really need livelihood so that they will not resort to engaging in crime and violence). Badjaos also make sense of peace in relation to their experiences of being subjected to prejudice and discrimination. As such, Badjaos believe that peace can only be realized when people are free from oppression – “may respeto, walang pang-aapi” (there is respect, there is no oppression), “walang diskriminasyon” (there is no discrimination). For Badjaos, notions of peace are closely aligned to the absence of conflict, prosperity at the community level, and non-discrimination.

Reflecting on the Presence/Absence of Peace in Jolo
The Muslims, Christians, and Badjaos also reflected on the current conditions in Jolo. Some affirmed the existence of peace in the region. There is peace because there is no ongoing large-scale war in Sulu – “walang giyera” (there is no all-out war). Also, there is peace because conflicts are easily resolved at the barangay level – “kapag may kaguluhan, ma-settle naman agad” (when there is discord, it is immediately resolved). They also point to the progress that is evident in the community, as seen in the provision of basic needs such as water and education – “hindi na namamatay ang tubig” (we no longer lack water), “mayroon nang nakatayo ng mga day care centers para sa pag-aral ng mga bata” (there are now day care centers for the education of the children). Peace exists in the community because people know each other – “magkakakilala ang mga tao, mula bata hanggang lumaki sila” (people know each other from birth). Participants likewise added that peace exists in the locality because several groups continue to promote various activities to resolve conflict, prevent crimes, and provide the basic needs of people – “mayroon pa ring mga peace activities tulad ng seminars and advocacy” (there are still peace activities such as seminars and advocacy), “mayroon namang livelihood programs” (there are also livelihood programs). Finally, there is peace in Jolo, Sulu because for most people, life goes on amidst the various challenges that they face in their everyday lives – “kahit may mga bomba, nandiyan pa rin ang mga tao, namumuhay pa rin sila kasama ang mga pamilya nila” (despite the bombings, people are still here, living their lives with their families).

Others, however, believed that there is no peace in Jolo, Sulu. Crimes continue to be committed with alarming frequency, intensity, and impunity. Instances of kidnapping, extortion, robbery, murder, rape, and drug trafficking persist and instill fear and distress among community members – “takot ang mga tao, hindi sila makatulog, hindi sila makakain dahil sa takot sa mga krimen dito” (people are afraid, they cannot sleep, they cannot eat, out of fear of the crimes taking place). Peace remains to be a fragile reality as groups engage in family conflicts or feuds between clans, locally known as pagbanta. There is no peace because there is no justice, as law enforcers fail to make the perpetrators of criminal activities accountable for their
wrongdoings – “walang justice sa Lupah Sug” (there is no justice in Lupah Sug), “minsan dahil sa politika, hindi makagalaw ang mga pulis, hindi nila magawa ang dapat gawin laban sa kriminalidad” (sometimes because of politics, the police cannot do anything, they cannot do what is needed to fight crime). Also, people from other social groups continue to discriminate against Badjaos by denying them certain rights – “masakit para sa aming mga Samal, parang lahat ng masama ibinabato sa amin” (it hurts for us Samals, it is as if everything that is wrong is thrown at us). Peace has also remained elusive for the people of Jolo, Sulu as the culture of political violence, corruption, and patronage politics – “guns, goons, and money” – persists with serious implications for the well-being of the community.

Moving Forward: Ways for Achieving and Sustaining Peace in Jolo, Sulu

Several suggestions for achieving and sustaining peace were identified by Badjaos, Muslims, and Christians. At the personal level, the importance of developing a peaceful mindset within the individual was cited – “magkaroon ng peace kung magsimula tayo sa sarili natin” (there will be peace if we start with ourselves). At the intergroup level, the importance of correcting stereotypes to eliminate prejudice and discrimination against specific social groups was highlighted – “mawala ang mga maling paniniwala, mawala ang diskriminasyon” (to erase stereotypes, to eliminate discrimination). The challenge of exercising respect, acceptance, and appreciation for the rights and ways of life of different groups was noted – “mag-respeto sila sa kapwa nila, iyong hindi apakan ang karapatan ng mga tao” (for them to respect others, and not step on the rights of people). The importance of supporting conflict-resolution initiatives between feuding parties in the region was also emphasized – “dapat pagkasunduin ang mga nag-away na grupo” (feuding groups should be made to come to an understanding).

Many of the suggestions for achieving and sustaining peace in Jolo fall at the societal level. One peacebuilding initiative proposed is the implementation of a gun ban in Sulu to help eliminate armed fighting and criminal activities – “marami talagang mga baril dito, kaya para magkaroon ng peace, dapat may gun ban” (there are really so many guns here, a gun ban is needed to achieve peace). Also emphasized was the challenge of preserving the natural environment in Sulu – “alagaan ang environment, huwag pabayaan” (take care of the environment, not neglect it). Emphasis was given to the significance of engaging in dialogues with local officials in Sulu to make them accountable not only for the enforcement of laws but also for the implementation of good governance…

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(there has to be no corruption, government funds should go to the community); ensuring the participation of different social groups in local affairs through proper consultation and representation – “dapat talaga kukuha sila ng Badjao representative, iyong pwedeng takbuhan ng mga Badjao kapag may problema” (there has to be a Badjao representative in government, one that Badjaos can go to for their problems); and facilitating the provision and delivery of basic services to poor and marginalized groups in the province – “iyong mga health providers, minsan napapabayaan ang mga Samal, iyong mga Badjao hindi ini-enterain” (the health providers sometimes neglect the Samals, Badjaos are not entertained). The tri-people of Jolo also noted the need for community members to continuously demand and work for peace in Sulu, even in the face of threats and challenges – “stand up for peace, be vigilant, ipakita mong you are willing to do your part as a citizen para sa kapayapaan” (stand up for peace, be vigilant, show that you are willing to do your part as a citizen for peace).

The tri-people of Jolo, Sulu, surfaced the multiple and diverse meanings of peace. The multiplicity, diversity, and dynamism in the meanings of peace and peacebuilding in the region should allow for various peace strategies that can respond to the unique and shared experiences of Christians, Muslims, and Badjaos in the province of Sulu, and in Mindanao as a whole.

References