Unpacking Stories of Conflict as Pathways to Peacebuilding

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What is the story of conflict in Central Mindanao and Sulu? Muslim and Christian leaders shared their stories of the history of conflict in Mindanao. Unpacking their stories reveal that there is no one story to the conflict. The narratives of conflict in Central Mindanao revolve on issues surrounding land, politics, and the armed struggle. The accounts of conflict in Sulu tell the stories of Christianization and colonization, Martial Law and militarization, poverty and lawlessness, and politics and dynasties. Recognizing these multiple stories of conflict can open up diverse pathways to peacebuilding in the Mindanao region.

“The Mindanao Conflict”
In the region of Mindanao in Southern Philippines is one of “the longest and most intense political conflicts” (Montiel, Rodil, & de Guzman, 2012). Known as ‘the Mindanao Conflict’, it is understood and explained through various perspectives – religious, ethnic, economic, and political. From an ethno-religious perspective, the conflict may be viewed as arising from differences among the various religious and ethnic groups in Mindanao, particularly between Muslims and Christians (Dictaan-Bang-oa, 2004). However, a deeper analysis of the conflict in Mindanao necessitates adopting both economic and political perspectives. Economic factors, such as poverty, deprivation, loss of land, and loss of access to production technologies, may be understood as both causes and consequences of the Mindanao conflict (Human Development Network, 2005; Schiavo-Campo & Judd, 2005). Aside from economic factors, the Mindanao conflict can also be attributed to political factors such as poor governance, corruption, and politicking (Coronel-Ferrer, 2005a). Furthermore, the conflict in Mindanao may also be linked to criminal activities such as massacres, bombings, kidnappings, extortions, and illegal drug trafficking (Coronel-Ferrer, 2005b). This research sought to examine these various perspectives by asking key informants from the various social groups to narrate the story of conflict in Mindanao.

Research Process
Story-telling or “Kuwentuhan”
Members of Christian and Muslim social groups were asked to narrate the story of conflict in their particular locations. In Central Mindanao, three leaders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) comprised the Muslim group whereas five members of the Mindanao Christian Highlanders Association (MICHA) represented the Christian group. In Sulu, three religious leaders and three barangay officials from the municipalities of Jolo and Indanan participated in the study.

Separate kuwentuhan or story-telling sessions with Christian and Muslim participants were conducted. During the kuwentuhan sessions, participants were asked the following question: “What is the story of conflict in Mindanao?” The kuwentuhan sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to uncover patterns in the stories of the history of conflict in Mindanao.
Stories of Conflict in Central Mindanao

“First of all, land conflict, although the political system is really the root... a system that is unfair. And second, political leaders. And third, the system where the Bangsamoro people are low and deprived of opportunities.” (MILF commander)

“It is still land, although land only serves as a reason. Next is the level of politics... And for as long as the Muslims hold arms, this area can never be peaceful.” (MICHA member)

Legal owners or original owners? Land was a central theme in the story of conflict in Mindanao. The question of who are the rightful owners of the land in Central Mindanao was often highlighted in the story-telling sessions. For Christians, the meaning of land ownership was tied to several processes and evidences as to how they eventually owned the land. They talked about how Muslim leaders gave land to Christian settlers who helped develop the land. Some Christian settlers were also able to acquire land by developing open lands. As one Christian participant shared, “It is an open area. You cultivate it. You buy it. And then you clear it.” In the process, the area of land that they cultivated was awarded to them by the government. Christian settlers also engaged in the purchase or exchange of goods for land, with participants highlighting how several payments of goods were made to Muslim owners in exchange for the land. The process of land registration and titling lay at the core of the Christian story of land ownership. For Christians, they are the rightful owners of the land as evidenced by the legal documents they hold.

Muslims from Central Mindanao shared their own stories about Muslims as the original inhabitants of the land in Mindanao. According to them, Muslim leaders originally owned the land in Mindanao. As one Muslim participant shared, “If we will look back on the deepest reason of the conflict, we will see that our Christian brothers do not really own anything here in Mindanao. But now, they own almost all of the land. We do not know the reason why and how the land has gone to them.” Muslims questioned the legal processes and the government support that were involved in the acquisition of land by the Christians settlers. They also lamented their consequent displacement and marginalization, as a result of government policies on land ownership in Mindanao. Central to the Muslim story of land ownership is losing the land that is rightfully theirs. For Muslims, they are the rightful owners of the land because the Muslim people were the original inhabitants and the historical owners of the land in Mindanao.

Political oppression or politicized conflict? The political story of conflict in Central Mindanao was a story of political oppression for Muslims and a story of a conflict politicized for Christians. Muslims made sense of the conflict in Mindanao as a result of political oppression carried out by the Christian-dominated Philippine government against the Muslim people. As one Muslim participant shared, “These settlers and their leaders appear to oppress the people who have been here for a long time. They were oppressed economically and politically.” One of the events most often narrated by Muslims as evidence of political oppression was the Jabidah massacre. As described by one Muslim leader, “Former President Marcos planned to exterminate all Muslims. The Jabidah massacre (was) where all Muslim military trainees were killed by the government military forces, and other atrocities by the military (were committed) against the Muslim people.” Muslims tell
the story of the Muslim people as victims of oppression, violence, and marginalization, brought about by the Christian-dominated Philippine government. Such political oppression led to the rise of Muslim ideological and armed groups which sought to fight for the rights and aspirations of the Muslim people in Mindanao.

Christians countered the Muslims’ grievances against the Philippine government by emphasizing how Muslim leaders also hold key government positions in Mindanao. As one Christian explained, “They tell us that they were oppressed. But who holds the highest position in region 12, in Mindanao? Who are the directors? Aren’t they Muslims and their brothers?” Among Christians, the conflict in Mindanao was aggravated by the support of other Islamic countries for Muslims in Mindanao, deepening the religious divide between Christians and Muslims. While Muslims positioned themselves as politically oppressed and marginalized, Christians positioned Muslims as politically powerful and violent.

**Freedom fighters or rebels?** The formation of armed groups on both sides of the conflict was another dominant theme in the storytelling of Christians and Muslims. On the side of Muslims, among the armed groups created were the Baraccudas, the Blackshirts, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Muslims justified the creation of Muslim armed groups as a means to secure the advancement of the Bangsamoro (Muslim nation) cause as well as a way to protect Muslims from Philippine military forces. However, from the point of view of Christians, these Muslim armed groups did not arise from an ideological background but rather from the vested interest of Muslim political leaders.

On the side of Christians, the Ilaga group and the Mindanao Christian Highlanders Association (MICHAA) were established. Christians justified the formation of these Christian armed groups as a means of protecting the rights and interests of Christians from the threats brought about by Muslim armed groups. But from the perspective of Muslims, these Christian armed groups facilitated the systematic land grabbing activities of Christians against Muslims in Mindanao.

The stories of conflict in Central Mindanao revolved around three main themes: (1) land, (2) politics, and, (3) the armed struggle. While both Christians and Muslims narrated the same issues as central to the conflict, they positioned themselves and each other differently. Both Muslims and Christians saw their own group as the victim and the other as the aggressor. Each saw its own group as right and the other as wrong. A summary is presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Christians as Storytellers</th>
<th>Muslims as Storytellers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Legal ownership</td>
<td>Historical ownership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Politicization of conflict</td>
<td>Political oppression</td>
</tr>
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<td>Armed Struggle</td>
<td>Muslim groups as rebels, Christian groups as defenders</td>
<td>Muslim groups as freedom fighters, Christian groups as aggressors</td>
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Table 1. Stories of Conflict in Central Mindanao
“Martial law and militarization were also key themes in the Muslims’ stories of conflict in Sulu.”

Stories of Conflict in Sulu
The narratives of conflict in Sulu revealed a unique set of stories from that of the narratives of conflict in Central Mindanao.

Resistance to colonization and Christianization. Central to the narratives of Muslims about the conflict in Sulu is their history of local resistance against colonization and Christianization. As one Muslim shared, “Many groups tried to subjugate and conquer Sulu, such as the Spaniards, Americans, and Japanese. Both the Spaniards and Americans tried to introduce Christianity which was resisted by some people with grave consequences.” Another Muslim spoke of the Tausug concept of parang sabit, “our culture has the concept of parang sabit when the Spaniards came to Christianize us...,” which refers to defending one’s freedom or liberty.

Martial law and militarization. Martial law and militarization were also key themes in the Muslims’ stories of conflict in Sulu. Muslims described Martial law as a period when several atrocities were committed against the Muslim people in Sulu. According to them, Martial law led to the militarization of the province, and consequently, to several violent events between Muslim groups and the Philippine military forces. It was noted that during the Martial law period, “people became uncontrolled, civilians were dislocated, livelihoods were badly affected, and unemployment increased.” Because of Martial law and the entry of military forces in Sulu, “many died, many were injured, arrested, even ordinary civilians not involved in the war.” These events were seen as leading to the formation of Muslim armed groups that sought to redress the injustices committed to the Muslim people in Sulu by the Philippine military.

The themes of resistance to colonization and Christianization as well as Martial law and militarization, that were central to the stories of conflict among Muslims, were not evident in the narratives of conflict among Christians. What were shared in the stories of the two groups were themes of poverty and lawlessness as well as the state of politics and political dynasties in the history of conflict in Sulu.

Poverty and lawlessness. Both Christians and Muslims emphasized poverty and lawlessness in their stories of the conflict in Sulu. Poverty was seen as one of the main reasons for the rise of lawless groups engaged in kidnappings, banditry, and killings in the province. It was said that “these lawless armed groups kidnap for livelihood.” and
that “criminal activities were undertaken for survival.”

**Politics and dynasties.** Both Christians and Muslims also underlined the story of conflict in Sulu as intertwined with the nature of politics in the province. They highlighted the prevalence of political dynasties, families that hold a monopoly of political power in Sulu. As shared by one participant, “if they become mayor or vice mayor, they do not want to be replaced.” It is believed that part of the reason why there is conflict in Sulu is because political power is concentrated in the hands of a few families.

Muslims shared their unique stories of the conflict in Sulu as emanating from the history of Moro resistance to colonization and Christianization, and of Moro oppression during Martial law and the consequent militarization in the area. While Christians were silent on the history of Moro resistance and oppression, they shared with Muslims the stories of poverty and lawlessness as well as that of political dynasties in Sulu. A summary is presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Christians as Storytellers</th>
<th>Muslims as Storytellers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resistance to Colonization and Christianization</td>
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<td>Parang sabil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martial Law and Militarization</td>
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<td>Atrocities committed against Muslim people led to formation of Muslim armed groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poverty and Lawlessness</td>
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<td>Criminal activities as a means of survival</td>
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<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td></td>
<td>Political dynasties</td>
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**Stories of Conflict as Pathways to Peacebuilding**

The stories that groups of people hold about the conflict in Central Mindanao and Sulu are shared in some aspects but contested in fundamental ways. The question that arises is how these diverse narratives that Muslims and Christians believe to be the rightful story of their own people can lead to diverse pathways to peacebuilding in the region.

**On the Land Conflict.** There is a huge challenge facing the Philippine government on how to bridge stories of land ownership based on the legal claims of Christians and the historical claims of Muslims. One group’s story cannot simply be disregarded while privileging the story of the other. How can these two stories be used as a framework for determining the legitimacy of land claims in Mindanao? Is there a possibility of creating new stories about land ownership in Mindanao – stories that integrate elements from both sides?

**On the Structural and Dispositional Causes of Conflict.** Again, two stories – one structural, one dispositional – need to be acknowledged as a guide in peacebuilding initiatives in Mindanao.

From the vantage point of Muslims, the story of conflict in Mindanao is a story of oppression and marginalization of the Muslim people. For Muslims, there is conflict in Mindanao because of the structural configuration of the Philippine government. The Muslim story calls on the Philippine government to adopt significant changes in its structure and operations. Such structural changes would show that the Philippine government is indeed a fair institution that will place peace and development in the region a priority in governance.

The Christian perspective on the story of conflict in Mindanao is a story of negative attitudes and behaviors of certain Muslim entities. There remains a view among Christians that there is conflict in Mindanao because Muslim groups tend to be violent. Thus, the Christian story
calls for peacebuilding activities that will help facilitate a shift in attitudes among Christians as well as a change in practices among Muslims towards an everyday culture of respect for differences. An important challenge is to shift the focus of the Christian story from viewing violence as a negative trait that is inherent among Muslims to the conditions that provoke Muslims to engage in violence. The shift from an essentialist view of conflict and violence as due to people’s traits or dispositions to a situational view of conflict and violence as dependent on the social situation in a community may be a path to peace.

**On the Armed Conflict.** The stories of Muslims and Christians of the history of the armed struggle in Mindanao both justify the creation of armed groups to counter oppression by the other. Each group saw themselves as the victim and the other as aggressor. How to make each group see themselves as also the aggressor and to see the other as also the victim may be one pathway to peacebuilding. Beyond blaming the other for the conflict, perhaps there can be a pathway to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Yet, another important element that needs to be taken into account in relation to the armed conflict is the challenge for the Philippine military to be perceived as defenders and protectors of the Muslim people in Mindanao, particularly after years of violent encounters between the Philippine military and Muslim armed groups and after the violent events linked to the Philippine military during the Martial law period.

There is no one story to the conflict in Mindanao but rather multiple stories carried by the Muslim and Christian people of Central Mindanao and Sulu. The co-existence of multiple truths highlight the importance of listening to the narratives of local people in view of tracing pathways for peacebuilding that will hold true for the people in the region. In becoming open to the story of the other and in acknowledging the other’s narrative as just as legitimate and valid as one’s one, the possibility of creating a shared sense of responsibility for the conflict and consequently a sense of responsibility for peacebuilding may arise. These pathways to peace can hopefully heal wounds, bridge differences, and instill personal, cultural, and social change in Mindanao.

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**References**


