

Culture of Peace and Indigenous Women's Engagement in Peacebuilding: A Challenge to Mindanao's Peace Initiatives

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Abstract: In the context of Mindanao, an island beset with war and conflict, peace building efforts have been raised to a certain level of intensity. With the hopes to avoid war and conflict, initiatives toward achieving peace have been documented, but mostly, those which are wanting of stories involving women in the peace building processes. This paper attempts to expose stories of women's engagement in peace building which may provide insights and post challenges to future peace initiatives involving women, especially the *Lumad women*. The term *lumad* collectively refers to the cultural communities in Mindanao. Women are naturally presented as resilient and soft-natured. These characteristics can be seen in a woman at home and in the community. Some cases are presented in this paper which highlight the foregoing attributes of women that enable them to stand out amidst war and conflict.

Keywords: *Peace, Women, Indigenous Peoples*

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“Peace is not merely the absence of war, nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies. Rather it is founded on a correct understanding of the human person.”

– *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, (2004, p. 215)

Peace is the battle cry for Mindanao, an island of cultural diversity, in the Southern part of the Philippines. Literatures put it that for centuries, the Mindanaoans have been faced with the deviations of life; economic, political, social, and spiritual. In its attempt to rise from the vicissitudes, Mindanao has encountered varied programs for peace and development, some of which have ended unsuccessfully, some still in the process towards accomplishment.

Zurk (2008), in her documentation of stories of peacebuilding and development in Mindanao, accounts that the peace situation in Mindanao is made more complex by political warlordism, ethnic prejudice, religion-based differences between Christians and Muslims, as well as the alienation of Indigenous People [the Lumads]. She further reports that,

[t]his complex situation, generally referred to as the Mindanao conflict, has deep historical roots which can be traced back to the Spanish colonial era. It is about rivalry for political and economic dominance. Often the conflict is about land, between Christian settlers who were encouraged by the government to buy land and Lumads as well as Muslims who claim the same land as their ancestral domains (p. 98)

The study conducted by Mercado and Florendo (2003) claims that the conflict in the year 2000 between the government and MILF brought cultural, social, and economic threats to multitude of communities in Mindanao.

In conflict situations, women and elders are more susceptible to violence than male combatants themselves (Johnson, 2011). Majority of refugees are women, the majority of displaced persons are women (Golan, 2005). Women are not just secondary, non-essential entities to conflict. A report by the Commission on Women in 2004 on the state of indigenous peoples and Moro women presents that as of 2001, Region XII and ARMM have the lowest proportion of households with access to potable water, and about 20% of Mindanao households still rely on spring, lake, river and rain and 11% on dug well. The absence of safe potable water has resulted in high incidence of disease and negative impact on family health, which further burdens women on whose shoulders rest family care and responsibilities. The same commission reports that Mindanao performed poorest in education. Extreme poverty, aggravated by the lack of peace and security, has deprived many Lumad and Moro women of basic education. The report continues that despite laws protecting

women, sexual violence against women are rampant. Incest rape, sexual harassment, wife-battering, and abuse in intimate relationships remain an everyday fact in the lives of many women in Mindanao.

Despite the foregoing claims, at the end of the day, the word is hope. Despite the foregoing instances on violence, it is also a fact that, though bearing the wounds of war, women and children stand out as bearers of hope and peace in Mindanao. Amidst the rubble of war, both women and the young people today play a vital role in rehabilitation and peace-building (Mercado, 2003).

Women And Peacebuilding: A Global Concern

There have been stories of peacebuilding involving women in various areas of the globe. Ameerah Haq (2011), for example, in talking about the United Nations (UN) contribution to peace and stability, emphasizes that if UN has to make a lasting contribution in Timor-Leste, it would be by building on the initiative and resilience of the women and helping them become fully involved in determining the country's future. She reports cases of women who played great roles in making and building peace and one of whom was that of Filomena dos Reis who trained Timorese women in mediation, negotiation, and conflict-resolution. Haq recounts that in 2005, Filomena and her colleagues organized a cross-border dialogue between Timorese and Indonesians. The initiative was in response to conflicts between communities due to cattle straying across parts of the border that were not clearly demarcated.

In Somalia, conflicts have opened a space for women to challenge the then male-dominated mechanisms for conflict resolutions. Dini (2010), in her article *Peace Building Efforts by Somali Women*, recounts how these women saw the loss of the male clan elders against the heavily armed young military men, an opportunity to make their intervention in the peace-building arena as mothers, grandmothers, aunts, spouses and sisters.

In the grassfields of Cameroon, particularly in the Bafut community, the character of the successor's mother played considerable role, in the choice of the successor to the throne in Bafut. Mark Bolak Funteh and Jean Gormo (2009) in their article *Women, Conflict and Peace in the Grassfields of Cameroon*, state that the mother was expected to be a respecter of not only the deceased husband, the fon, but also of the entire royal family. She ought to be an embodiment of generosity, humility, and fairness in all judgment otherwise the soundness of the fon in executing his functions and the cherished unity of the royal family would be in complete jeopardy. Hence, the reigning fon carefully studied the character of his wives before deciding who among them was the most suited for major title, a political position for respect and

honor with great responsibility, like to advise the reigning fon, such a responsibility could never be given to any type of a woman.

Julia and Rhida (2001) in their interviews with Kuwaiti women ages 40-50 years about their status and roles played during the Iraqi occupation, found out that women played non-traditional roles such as serving resistance groups and military men who were hiding, buying food from foreign people from allied countries, distributing pamphlets that would encourage Kuwaitis to stay in the country and discourage the Iraqi army from staying, practicing volunteer work, participating in protest demonstrations, and giving their lives in defense of their countries. One respondent testified that they played many contradictory roles that they never thought of doing before the occupation.

In the Fiji Islands, the politics of race has influenced women in responding to national crises. Rolls (2006) recounts that women were “instrumental in maintaining a degree of calm and infusing hope during the crisis (p. 30).” Though the women were just seen as supporters of peace and not really visible in peace processes, this did not hinder them from engaging in peace building. A network of women’s groups was gathered for a peace and prayer vigil and what emerged from the vigil were actions of peaceful solidarity and more groups thereafter were drawn to pray for peace and unity. Rolls emphasizes that the prayers and all the letters of support written by women provided a sense of hope to political detainees.

Women’s Disposition Toward Peace

Women’s vision of peace is not limited to the state of non-war. There are other sources and forms of violence experienced by women even in situations where there is the absence of organized, personal, physical, and direct violence which is the reality we call war (Quintos-Deles, 2000).

Women tend to perceive well-being different from men. They tend to be more sensitive to issues regarding conflict considering their role in terms of the very basic personal needs and family. Women perceive security differently from men, viewing it in terms of shelter, food, and health, while men tend to perceive security in terms of weapon systems and arms (Golan, 2005). It is possible that women would tend to approach peace from human rights perspective, which would emphasize fairness, tolerance, respect for difference, for minorities, for the other, because women live as “the other,” as a minority- not in numbers but in the attitude toward them in society. Women tend to operate on a win-win basis, perhaps due to a background of avoiding conflict, avoiding confrontation – perhaps as peacemakers in the home, between children or in similar situations.

Rolls (2006) in her article *Women as Mediators in the Pacific Conflict Zones*, mentions that the roles of women in peacebuilding can be traced back to their indigenous skills and knowledge, to what they learned from Biblical doctrines and to their love for their country and their families. She cites Afu Billy, a peace advocate in Solomon Islands, who observes that,

[w]hatever sort of violence happens, be it in the home or outside, women are very much affected by it and I think women are more responsible not for the violence but for making sure things are okay, because women look more after the family and when it comes to things like that, they are worried about how the violence is affecting the children (p.33).

Golan (2005) gives as an example the case of Sudan, where women actually achieved something between warring tribes in what had appeared to be an intractable civil war. Golan's theory on the key elements to peace-making and conflict resolution places greater emphasis on women's protection of personal rights, fairness and respect for difference.

Women and The Culture of Peace

A brief discussion on the genesis of the concept of a culture of peace is outlined in the talk of Dr. Virginia Cagawas, titled "Education for a Culture of Peace" delivered during the Mindanawon conference in November 27, 2007. According to her, the concept of a culture of peace actually emerged at end of the Cold War when there was this global campaign for the abolition of war. In 1992, in response to the United Nations agenda for peace, the UNESCO formally adapted the concept of a culture of peace. In 1994, the first international forum on culture of peace was held in El Salvador. The second International Forum titled, "The Manila Forum," was hosted by the Philippines in 1995. It was also in that same year when the UNESCO and a culture of peace building global movement came out and the transition from a culture of war to a culture of peace became a priority of the 28 sessions of the UN General Conference. A resolution declaring the year 2001 as the International Year for a Culture of Peace and year 2002-2012 as a decade of culture of peace and non-violence for the children of the world was passed on during the UN general assembly.

The United Nations Declaration states that a "culture of peace is a set of values, attitudes, traditions, modes of behavior, and ways of life that reflect and inspire respect for life and all human rights; rejection of violence and all its forms and commitment to the prevention of violent conflict by tackling their root causes through dialogue and negotiation; commitment to full participation in the process of equitably meeting the needs of the present and the future generations; promotion

of the equal rights and opportunities of women and men; recognition of the right of everyone to freedom of expression, opinion and information; devotion to principles of freedom, justice democracy, tolerance,, solidarity, cooperation, pluralism, cultural diversity dialogue and understanding between nations, between ethnic, religious, cultural and other groups, and between individuals.” (cited in Castro and Galace (2010)

The 4th World Conference on Women held in September 1995 in Beijing, presents a culture of peace to be a culture of freedom and universal respect, upholding all human rights and eliminating double standards; would be a festival of diversities; would acknowledge the responsibilities of solidarity; would assure the dignity and well-being of the vulnerable. It underscores that in a culture of peace, the human person is enabled to develop the full range of human capacities unlimited by constraints of gender or other aspects of human identities; persons would be educated to value human solidarity, mutuality, and justice and be provided with the skills that enable them to renounce violence as a means to achieve social or individual purposes; power would be derived from shared capacities and responsibilities; conflicts need not produce violence, differences would be mediated in a spirit of mutuality and disputes, settled in ways which reconcile and strengthen communities; there would be space to express human creativity and share human feelings. The said Conference emphasizes that a culture of peace would produce social order based on equal human rights, the human dignity of all persons and reverence for living creatures and life.

A culture of peace is not one-directional. It is encompassing, taking into account, total development. Dr. Toh Swee-Hin’s (2005) paper, *Integrating Interfaith Perspectives in Educating for a Culture of Peace*, delivered at the Third Diversity Forum in Kolkatta, held on March 1-4, 2005, recognizes that the weaving of a culture of peace is necessarily multi-dimensional and holistic. It emphasizes that it is no longer meaningful to see peace as just an absence of war, as popular awareness has tended to claim. Rather, peace also implies justice, human rights, environmental care, intercultural respect, and a deep sense of inner peace.

The foregoing claim on the multidimensionality of a culture of peace finds support in the framework developed by a feminist peace researcher Birgit Brock-Utne (1989, p. 47), on negative and positive peace. Negative Peace refers to the absence of direct violence and Positive Peace refers to the absence of indirect or what is often referred to as structural violence, which is further broken down with reference to whether they arise from organized or unorganized sources.

The table across presents Brock-Utne’s peace framework.

NEGATIVE PEACE		POSITIVE PEACE	
	Absence of personal, physical, and direct violence	Absence of indirect violence shortening life span	Absence of indirect violence reducing quality
UNORGANIZED	(1) Absence of wife-battering, rapes, child abuse, street killings	(2) Absence of inequalities in micro-structures leading to unequal life chances	(5) absence of repression in micro-structures leading to less freedom of choice and fulfillment
ORGANIZED	(3) Absence of war	(4) Absence of economic structures built up within a country or between countries so that life chances of some are reduced. Also the effect of damage on nature, pollution, radiation, etc.	(5) Absence of repression in a country of free speech, the right to organize, etc.

Peacebuilding and The Lumads

The Lumads are the cultural communities of Mindanao. The word Lumad is a Cebuano term for “indigenous” (Jocano, 1998; Rodil, 1994; Gaspar, 2000). Historically, the Indigenous groups in Mindanao were labelled with different names such as Paganos during the Spanish regime, wild tribes in the American colonial period, highlanders, cultural minorities, and tribal Filipinos, among others (Gaspar, 2000; 1998; Rodil, 1994; Kamlian, 1999; Rodil, 1988). In 2007, a conference of Mindanaoan tribes was held and the term Lumad was adopted to refer to the ethnolinguistic tribes of Mindanao.

In the effort to protect their basic rights as they discovered the common situation of deprivation and marginalization, the Indigenous People’s move to give a collective term for them grew out of the political awakening amongst them. To indicate the rise of self-identity among the indigenous peoples of Mindanao, Mindanao historian, Rudy Rodil (2013) shares,

naroon ako nung pinag-usapan ang paggamit nung salitang Lumad. Ninais lamang nila na mgkaroon ng *common identity na maaring maging ideological force, laban sa Labinlima (15) sa labinwalong indigenous groups na nandun ang sumang-ayon sa paggamit ng Lumad bilang kolektibong pangalan para sa non-christian/non-muslim groups sa Mindanao* (I was there when the topic on the use of the term Lumad was brought up. Fifteen [15] out of 18 indigenous peoples groups refer to the non-christian/non-muslim groups in Mindanao)

The Lumads have been very active in the struggle to eradicate conflict and promote peace in Mindanao. The Tribal Communities Association of the Philippines (TRICAP, 1989) outlines certain factors for the presence of conflict which occur from time to time among the Indigenous groups, these are as follows:

1. Confrontation is due to differences in thinking, feeling and interest. Confrontations consist of armed conflict, riot, and rebellion.
2. Stratification is the categorization of the group into levels of ranks. Specific solutions, roles, duties, and responsibilities are assigned to each level or rank. The group stratifies itself to minimize, if not, prevent conflict.
3. Segregation is the separation of the group from the majority. Segregation determines the limits of communication and social relationships. Sociologists theorize that segregation is the result of discriminating practices of the majority against the minority group.
4. Assimilation is the integration of the cultural heritage of various ethnic groups as a result of long standing relationship among them.

Fr. Albert Alejo (2009), in one of his articles for MindanaWon Initiatives for Cultural Dialogue, states that conflicts among and within IP communities have undergone changes. Unlike the past, where IP communities have to deal and solve problems only within and among themselves, the situation has become complicated due to external factors which now have to be considered in Lumad conflict resolution. These factors are: (1) Scale of conflict – modern conflicts involve several villages and provinces, different tribes and communities, and even non-IP groups; (2) Actors – before, conflicts are brought to Datus (tribal leaders) for judgement, but in modern conflicts, other actors may get involve such as government officials, armed groups, company personal missionaries, other new actors like women, youth, and researchers, (3) location – before the location of conflicts are within the tribe but

modern conflict resolutions require going to other places for advocacy; (4) total framework – the presence of different framework, such as small-village community development, province-wide planning, and regional development, requires different elements, strategies, and balancing.

Beatriz Colmo (2012), an Obo-Manobo tribal peace advocate from from Mt. Apo, recounts her experiences of war and conflict. She states that for Lumad or indigenous people of Mindanao, peace is an outcome and evidence of their faith in action. To them, peace is their way of life; thus to them, peace is not regarded as an opportunity nor a privilege but a responsibility where everyone in the community should take part in. She shares about a holistic perspective of peace, which is to her, most valuable; the lumad elders say that when Monama (God) created men, he already set them to be unique, different and had given them a specific and special place to dwell on earth. The Chinese with slant eyes and yellow skin had to occupy China, the blacks had to dwell in Africa and we, the brown skinned people had to live in the Philippines. Even if there are 18 indigenous peoples groups in Mindanao, each has his own territory. Even the animals are also given specific territories. She furthers her story by narrating that the ancestral domain of the Lumad is being robbed of their minerals and fertile soil but the Lumad do not in return rob the robbers. However, according to Colmo, this does not mean that the Lumads welcome the oppression. They had tried to find peaceful means to assert their rights. Yet, in their entire struggle, she emphasizes, that throughout history, they tend to be peace-loving as they can be, even at the most difficult circumstance.

Their ancestors told them that no matter how much the people will expand their lands, one day land will finally own them when they rest in peace. To her, the violence that the Lumads are exposed to affirms their culture of peace. She, as an advocate of peace, further hopes that one day she will be able to help others to follow the path of peace and make peace the Lumad's legitimate legacy to the next generation.

The Mindanao Commission on Women (2012) documented seven stories of indigenous women mediators. These women have been involved in conflict resolutions handling cases like adultery, murder, non-payment of debts, physical injuries, land disputes, and nonfulfillment of mortgage, among others.

When asked about women's engagement in building and promoting peace in the community, Jenita Eko, a president of an indigenous women's association, and one of the seven mediators featured in the above-mentioned documentation, shares that with the involvement of women in the peace processes,

Dili na kaayo mangusog ang mga tigulang nga muhatag dayon ug paghukon nga dili pabor sa mga babayi. Naa na sila'y kahibalo sa mga katungod sa mga babayi. And mga babayi pud mismo, kabalo na pud sila sa ilang katungog. Sa una man gud, maghilom lang man kay basig makasab-an. Di magsaba bisan masakitan na. (The elders now hesitate to pass judgments that are unfavorable to women. They have now better awareness of women's rights. Even the women themselves, already are aware of their rights. Before, women would usually keep quiet lest they will be scolded. Even if they are in pain, they remain silent.) (Eko, 2013)

The Challenge to Mindanao Peace Initiatives

Peace efforts in Mindanao need not discount the engagement of women in the process, especially indigenous women. As Mercado and Florendo (2003) put it, both women and the young people today, play a vital role in rehabilitation and peace-building, amidst the rubbles of war and conflict. They continue that there are no easy answers to dilemma that confounded Central Mindanao. Its sociopolitical realities are products of historical and contemporary processes that encompass not only religions and ethnicities, but economic, political, and cultural issues as well. The authors are convinced that there is no quick fix or magic formula that can solve the problems which have, for years, beset the peoples of this region, because despite several “peace processes” initiated in the past and present, peace in the battle-scarred portion of the Southern Philippines remains as elusive as the search for the fountain of youth or the Holy Grail.

The Bishops-Ulama Conference in 2010 launched a project entitled, ‘Konsult Mindanaw’ which outlines contributions to peace initiatives from their participatory research endeavors. These contributions are presented as People’s Platform for Peace in Mindanao. Konsult Mindanao reports,

[t]he first of these platforms is **Sincerity**. It is all over the recorded sentiments of Konsult Mindanaw participants. We hear people expressing suspicion that some of those who are in charge of peace processes are not really interested in the resolution of the conflict... **Security** addresses people’s fear of all kinds of violence from state-related war to clan conflict to private armies and proliferation of arms, to the fear of hunger and even ecological disaster due to environmental plunder. **Sensitivity** is our word for recognizing the many hurts people experience ranging from the effects of historical injustice, to discrimination, misinterpretation, neglect and culture-blind governance and development programs... we also recognize the people’s energy and commitment to participate in peace-building,

whether as individuals or as communities, and hence we highlight **solidarity**. **Spirituality** may come as a surprise to some civil society groups, development partners, and government agencies, but not to ordinary people, who see that peace can only be lasting if there is healing, which can in turn requires more than economic and social intervention, or political and military solutions... Finally, we conclude **Sustainability** to account for the institutional requirements to support these various efforts (p. 6).

The foregoing finds support in Golan's (Golan, 2005) claim that sustainable peace is not just the absence of war. She emphasizes that there is a need to create, in agreements, the conditions that will provide for a decent society, equality and the possibility for human fulfillment, which can be done through education and in the civil society, where women are most active, where women can engage in dialogue, crossing the divide and bridge-building, which according to her, have been experienced in Cyprus, Somalia, Sudan, Palestine/Israel.

It is along these lines that the Compendium of the Catholic Social Teachings (2004, p. 215) defines "Peace is not merely the absence of war, nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies. Rather it is founded on a correct understanding of the human person."

Engaging in peace processes is a both a gift and a task; a gift because peace is a way of life. It is inherent in us the moment we were born. Yet, it is also a task that entails giving of oneself. Peace is a responsibility to the world, where both men and women, young and old, can participate.

Any peace initiative for Mindanao may anchor on the premise that any person is a potent agent for development, if only to achieve and promote a peaceful and sustainable environment, even women, more so women, who cares. ■

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