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Philippine Ethnic and Muslim Minorities: Educating Children the Traditional Way

The Philippine government has committed itself to the Millennium Development Goal of achieving 100% primary education in 10 years. At the national level and within the context of formal education, Education for All (EFA) has been adopted as the flagship program and the Department of Education (DepEd) has a mandate to be aggressive in pursuing reforms to boost performance, eg through the Basic Education Reform Agenda (BESRA). BESRA propels the "School First Policy" that aims to give local governments more leeway in planning their education reform agenda. A policy of devolution ensures freedom to local DepEd units in implementing EFA goals, especially in funding. This is complemented by basic reforms within the DepEd bureaucracy, including the transformation of the Non-Formal Education (NFE) Bureau into the Bureau of Alternative Learning Systems (BALS).

Particularly on mountainous Mindanao—home to at least 2 major groups of indigenous and minority populations, the Moro and the Lumad—the Arroyo administration has taken a cue from the Republic Act 9054, otherwise known as the Organic Act on Autonomous Muslim Mindanao—a by-product of the 1996 Peace Accord—to be cognizant of plurality and cultural diversity on Mindanao. Thus, the DepEd is charged with spearheading the cultural integration agenda by including Islamic values and basic Arabic grammar into the curriculum in areas where Muslims are a majority. Meanwhile, catering to the non-Muslim indigenous Lumad, the DepEd passed a memorandum in June 2004 accrediting Indigenous People's (IP) schools. Yet it is apparent that the reforms have so far been national in focus and integrationist, rather than substantial moves towards the full recognition and empowerment of traditional systems and indigenous ways of educating the IP and minority children. Policy is one thing, but implementation remains palliative and lukewarm.

Ethnic and religious minority children of the Mindanao hinterlands

Nulkaisa recalls a vivid memory of her childhood in the hinterlands of Basilan in a remote village called Boheh Bas'seh. Barely into her 6th year, she was already maintaining a daily routine of waking up at 5 am and walking a steep and bushy footpath to her godmother's hut several kilometers away. After she had helped gather firewood and fetched water from the well, she would assist her godmother in preparing the family breakfast and then clear away the food scraps as, one by one, each member of Babuh's family prepared for the farm. Young Nulkaisa would then start tending to the animals and poultry, weed the vegetable patch, and water the flowering shrubs. Babuh Dayang, Nulkaisa's godmother, was her *guru*, or mentor.

FIGURE 1 An elderly *guru* and her *murid* engaged in the traditional *pangadjih ha lihal-lihal*, a customary educational tradition among Sulu mountain people. (Photo by Ishmael Robert/ISDA/Lumah Ma Dilaut)

Under the guidance of a *guru* (Figure 1), the *murid*, or student, is to learn the *Qur'an* (Islamic divine text) as well as domestic skills and the various routine of household chores and fending for a family—some of the life skills that Nulkaisa must master as a result of her *pagguru* ("search for knowledge"). On the side, the *guru* also teaches the traditional artistry that every village girl is supposed to acquire before reaching puberty, such as embroidery and loom-weaving, as well as cultural skills, such as dancing the *pamansak* and chanting the *luguh*. Yet the core course in Nulkaisa's tutorial was *huruf* and *hidjah* (articulation and fluency) in reading and mastery (through memorization) of the *Qur'an*. Nulkaisa's educa-

tion with Babuh Dayang continued for years. After her 14th birthday, she was *pinatammat*, ie considered to have graduated. Yet the bond between *guru* and *murid* is a life-time commitment. When Nulkaisa gave birth to her first child, Babuh Dayang stayed with her for a week and tended her small garden, house and husband until she was strong enough to take up her domestic duties again.

In the remote village in Indanan in Sulu, Hamima also went through the traditional learning system. When she was 7, her mother brought her to the local *masjid* (mosque) and enrolled her in a Muslim school called *madrasa*, which was held in an extension of the *langgal* (house of worship). Hamima attended the *madrasa* for 4 hours daily on Sundays through Thursdays. On Fridays it was compulsory for the *murid* to attend the congregational prayer at the mosque. The *madrasa* students also participated in important community observances and religious rites and festivities, such as the annual *Qur'an* reading during the *Mi'raj* celebration, performed fasting, did penance during Ramadan and the *Hajj*, and joined community celebrations during the important Muslim festivals of *Haylaya* or *Eid*, to break the fast and to observe the day of Arafat simultaneous with the rites in Mecca. On Fridays and Saturdays Hamima would take 1–2 hours out of her playtime for *pangadji Qur'an ha lihal* (Qur'anic study at home) under the guidance of her mother and sometimes her elder sister or spinster aunt.

Community-based and values education

Pangadji ha lihal is home-based *Qur'an* and values education, while in the more formal village-level *madrasa*, instruction is very similar to religious catechetical school. The curriculum includes the fundamental Islamic beliefs and practices (Figure 2), basic *undang-undang* or Arabic alphabet and grammar, *huruf iban hijjah*, or *Qur'an* reading and articulation, and learning simple *duwa'a* (prayers) and values as Muslims. The instruction is bilingual, combining the local language and basic Arabic.

FIGURE 2 The *madrasa*-based QALAM (*Qur'an*-based Alternative Learning and Social Action Module) of the Asian Muslim Action Network in the Philippines (AMANPHIL) in Sulu province is a values-based alternative learning that trains young Moro Muslims in basic social rituals and cultural practices such as the *janazaat* or rite of burial. (Photo by Ishmael Robert/ISDA/Lumah Ma Dilaut)

In the hinterlands, most *madrasa* teachers are products of village instruction and, unlike foreign-trained *asatidz*, only an exceptional few are conversant in Arabic. Consequently, both teacher and pupil are competent only in the basic alphabet and know only a little Arabic vocabulary (not conversational or communicative). The *muddarissen* (*madrasa* teachers) and their *murid* can read the *Qur'an* in Arabic, but most of them still rely on the English version of the *Qur'an* (usually by Yusuf Ali or Marmaduke Pickthal) for its *ma-ana* (meaning) that is then cross-translated for them by an *alim*, or religious learned person, into local language in Bahasa Sug (or Tausug) for use in their instruction. Nevertheless, the Tausug, Sama, and Yakan communities in Sulu use the *kirim*, an indigenous Moro way of writing that uses the Arabic alphabet.

Nulkaisa and Hamima are children who belong to ethnic and religious minorities in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Like most indigenous and minority children, they have never gone to formal and mainstream schools, yet most parents do not really consider their children to have been excluded from education in basic skills, thanks to traditional ways of *pagguru ilmuh*. Indigenous and minority children in remote villages on the coasts and in the

FIGURE 3 Bud Dahu and Bud Tumantangis have been sites of massive Philippine military operations disrupting all forms of social activities including education. In Indanan town, often only home-based traditional instruction is possible. (Photo by Ishmael Robert/ISDA/Lumah Ma Dilaut)

mountains of Mindanao often miss out on formal education for various reasons. Among these are: intermittent conflict (Figure 3); disinterest among a large percentage of the IP and minority population, who do not see the formal school curriculum as relevant; the distance of government schools from the ethnic communities; and grinding poverty.

The ARMM is a political and geographic administrative region carved out of Mindanao by the peace agreement between the Moro National Liberation front and the government of the Republic of the Philippines in September 1996. The ARMM is meant to lump together the Muslim-dominated provinces. Among the hinterlands or mountain provinces are the mainland provinces of Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur, while among the mountainous island groups are Sulu, Basilan, and the Bongao town of Tawitawi. All 3 island provinces used to be the province of Sulu, prior to disaggregation (or more precisely, dismemberment) by the Marcos regime during the height of Moro uprising in the late 1970s, mainly to contain the insurgency. At least 4 ethnolinguistic groups inhabit the Sulu mountain region: the *Yakan*, *Tausug*, *Kalibugan*, and some *Sama* communities. Generally, they are referred to as the People of Sulu or Suluan.

Questioning the relevance of UN indicators

According to the UNDP *Human Development Index*, the 5 provinces of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) have continually exhibited a poor level of literacy (ie reading, writing and arithmetic)—only 57% and below in most provinces—compared to 98% nationally. The UNDP statistics are of course based on a literacy index using the yardstick of mainstream education, or what the Muslim minorities of Sulu consider "Western education," patterned after the American national education system. According to this definition, a person is deemed literate only if she or he is able to read, write, and count in the Western tradition of education.

This of course undermines systems or methods of education and literacy that are indigenous to the Suluans, such as the body of "unwritten" literature that our people have produced: *kissa, kata-kata, da'man*—our oral traditions and history as recorded in the *tarsilas* and *luntars*. Illiterates? Our forebears have educated and made their progeny "literate" in the *kirim*, borne out by the functional literacy we have acquired through *pagguru ilmu* or community- and household-based non-formal acquisition of wisdom, or of devotional education in *pangadji qur'an ha lihal-lihal* (Arabic: *hafiz qur'an*). There is no doubt that the Moro people do not lag behind Christians up north in Luzon and the Visayas who have an average education. Unfortunately, those who define development and literacy have unjustly categorized indigenous and non-formal learning as inadequate for literacy.

For the time being, traditional learning modes, albeit informal and community-centered, continue to prevail as more and more deprived and disenfranchised minority and indigenous families find solace in folk wisdom and local innovations, rediscovering their strength in extant structures such as the *pagguru ha lihal*, the *madrasa*, and customary ways of passing knowledge from parent to child.

To realize the MDG goal for primary education, it might be wise for the national government to acknowledge the enduring systems and extant traditions of

FIGURE 4 An indigenous Sama elder passes on the traditional skills in arts and music to a member of the younger generation in the traditional way of *pagguru ilmu*. (Photo by Ishmael Robert/ISDA/Lumah Ma Dilaut)

indigenous and minority people, and capitalize on these to improve education, not only in terms of participation, but to ensure viability (ie cohort survival of enrollees) and relevance to marginalized and excluded children. Building the capacity of communities and harnessing the participation of grassroots leaders as educators and learning managers may make a big difference, not only in ensuring greater access for ethnic and minority children, but in making the quality of education more relevant and responsive to local needs and the local context (Figure 4). By tapping community-based and culture-oriented learning modes already intrinsic in the ethnic and minority communities, the learning experience becomes more meaningful and sustainable, while the learning process and outcome can be a tool for empowerment.

Meanwhile, national development planners are now diligently monitoring to ensure that indicators indeed measure government success in achieving the MDGs. Civil society participation is in fact encouraged, and community-based partners are invited to help paint a picture of success. Not a few NGOs and CBOs are asked to document best practices in traditional institutions and systems, even as the terms of reference they quote measure success in terms of skills and literacy competence based on mainstream schooling. Often, with governmental earnestness, they wrongly attribute community success to the efforts of formal schooling rather than to the efficacy and resilience of tradition.

Many minority group members like Nulkaisa are indifferent about formal schooling for their children, arguing that it deprives the family of resources, while it is doubtful whether community children would find employment after graduation anyway. She vows to send her children to their godparents for *mag-guru*. Hamima continues to attend her *madrasa* for as long as the fragile peace in her village lasts. For her *tau gimba* upland farming family, formal schooling may be a desirable option, yet schooling may have to wait until the war is over. In militarized villages like Indanan in Sulu, children's schooling depends on stability and a return to order, which might take some time to be achieved.

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