TOPIC

Between Conflict and Kinship: Understanding the Social Identity of Bangsamoro Orphans in *Maguindanao* and North Cotabato Province

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Abstract

The ongoing conflict in the Bangsamoro region, located in the southern Philippines, has profoundly impacted many individuals, particularly the children of deceased mujahideen fighters. This study examines the formation of social identity among orphans of Bangsamoro mujahideen, focusing on their navigation of belonging within a community shaped by persistent conflict and radicalization. Rooted in historical grievances, socio-political marginalization, and aspirations for self-determination, the Bangsamoro conflict has given rise to radical groups that further complicate the region's societal dynamics. Using a qualitative methodology, the research incorporates in-depth interviews, participant observations, and analysis of local narratives to explore how these orphans construct their social identities. The study investigates the influences of family, community, and radical ideologies on their identity formation, as well as how they reconcile their orphanhood with the need for belonging in a fragmented society. The findings reveal the complex identity struggles faced by these orphans, as they oscillate between feelings of victimhood and the glorification of their parents' legacies. The pervasive conflict environment and exposure to radical ideologies significantly shape their perceptions of self and others, often leading to the adoption of narratives aligned with their experiences of loss and marginalization. The study concludes that the social identity of Bangsamoro mujahideen orphans emerges from a multifaceted interplay of personal experiences, community dynamics, and broader socio-political contexts. It highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to address their psychological and social needs, mitigate the risk of further radicalization, and promote a more inclusive sense of belonging in the Bangsamoro region.

Keywords: Bangsamoro, mujahideen, orphanhood, Islamic radicalism

Introduction

In November 2023, the Philippine film industry released a film titled "Moro" about the relationship between a brother and sister from the Bangsamoro nation who are intertwined between hatred and care because land dispute. Their mother tries to reconcile, but it ends tragically when both go to the battlefield against the Philippine army.

The Moro film is one of the non-academic sources that serves as a reminder of the ongoing separatist conflict in the southern Philippines. This conflict is similar to the one in southern Thailand (Pattani area), where a minority group, culturally and religiously distinct from the majority, seeks independence. Both regions were historically independent territories that were later annexed by colonizers and subsequently legitimized as part of the modern states that now govern them.

These two conflicts are legacies of colonialism because pattani conflict in Thailand

begin with acquisition Muslim areas (Yala, Narathiwat, Pattani, Songkhla and Satun) from Britain into the Thai kingdom under the umbrella of the Anglo-Siamese Treaty 1909 (Rahayu et al., 2022) and Moro conflict begin Since the era of Spanish colonization with its Christianization mission, and the American colonization in the early 20th century with its social separation policies that marginalized Muslims in Mindanao (Montiel et al., 2012).

This conflict, which is rooted in a long history of colonialism, has given rise to an assertion of their identity. The Moro people, an ethno-religious group in the Philippines, have historically faced marginalization due to Spanish Christianization efforts and American social policies that created socio-political divides. Their assertion of identity can be analyzed through Anthony Smith's theory about ethnosymbolism, which emphasizes the role of shared myths, symbols, and historical memories in shaping group identity (Maxwell & Hannah, 2024; Rigney, 2018; Smith, 2009). For the Moros, Islam serves as both a religious and cultural cornerstone that unites diverse tribes under a shared history of resistance against colonial forces. This identity continues to influence their struggle for self-determination and autonomy, as reflected in the enduring Moro insurgency movements.

Finding froom Buendia (2005) also conclude The Muslim secessionist groups identify themselves as Moros rather than Filipinos, reflecting their belief that their community has never been an integral part of the Philippine nation. They perceive their current struggle as an extension of their ancestors' resistance against foreign domination, initially waged against Spanish and American colonizers. Today, this struggle continues against what they regard as a postcolonial Philippine state governed by Filipinos.

For close to 50 years, the southern island of Mindanao has experienced sporadic, high-intensity violent conflicts stemming from a national vertical conflict involving Muslim armed groups seeking independence from the Philippine state. Known s the Moro conflict, the armed conflict has been fought under two competing banners of national determination (Buendia, 2005).

From there, The Bangsamoro people in Mindanao have faced long-standing oppression, including the plunder of their ancestral lands, militarization of their communities, disrespect for their religion and culture, and interference with their autonomous government that threat their identity (Kapahi & Tañada, 2018).

The state and national government have repeatedly hindered the achievement of lasting peace in Mindanao by creating a false impression of addressing the Moro people's desire for peace while permitting ongoing militarization by Armed Forces of the Philippines and US troops in their communities (Andaya, 2021; Sali & M. Datucali, 2021; Valila Jr, 2023).

This protracted violent struggle can be traced back to the formation of the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM), which emerged in the aftermath of the Jabidah Massacre in 1968 and The ILAGA-Related Massacres Perpetuated By The Military Forces And Government-Backed Vigilante Groups (Aljunied & Curaming, 2012; Curaming, 2017; Curaming & Aljunied, 2012).

This incident, coupled with the increasing Christian presence in the region and escalating tensions related to corporate land acquisitions and human rights abuses during the Marcos era, bolstered a growing sense of Islamic identity among the local Muslim population, intensifying the push for independence (McKenna, 2023).

After the disintegration of MIM, its youth section adopted a nationalist ideology and formed the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). In 1972, when President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law, Mindanao experienced widespread violence involving the MNLF and the Republic of the Philippines' security forces.

The Government of the Philippines and the MNLF signed the Tripoli Agreement in 1976, which called for the cessation of hostilities. In 1977, a rift in the top leadership positions of the MNLF led Hashim Salamat to break away and form the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

The MILF distinguished itself from the secular MNLF by establishing itself as an Islamized, puritanical, religious organization. Unlike the MNLF, the MILF aimed to establish an independent homeland governed by shariah (Islamic law) (Engelbrecht, 2021; Plank, 2015).

But, In the 1990s, the MILF surpassed the MNLF in numbers, establishing itself as the largest Muslim rebel group in the country that also existed among the two main Muslim ethnic groups - the Maranao and the Maguindanao. from here also confirms the research from Özerdem & Podder (2012) about recruitment patterns are influenced not only by religion or ideology, but also by various factors, including geographic location—particularly the proximity to Armed Forces of the Philippines camps—conflict-related displacement, and disparities in the delivery of governance services.

Maguindanao and its neighboring provinces of North Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, and South Cotabato were the epicenter of prolonged violent conflict between the GPH and ideological armed groups from the 1960s to the late 2000s, widely recognized as the main backdrop of the Bangsamoro wars, particularly in the last twenty years (Engelbrecht, 2021; Özerdem & Podder, 2012; Plank, 2015; Ross, 2018).

The recent progress in the peace negotiations between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the former secessionist Bangsamoro groups in the southern region calls for a fresh evaluation of the costs and political implications of war, peace, and resistance. This is especially relevant as the newly established Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), under the leadership of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), establishes its governance structures and processes as an autonomous regional parliament within the Philippines.

In our pursuit, we engage with the offspring of deceased MILF fighters or in Islamic term called *mujahideen* in Maguindanao who sacrificed their lives in clashes with state forces. we aim is to gain insight into how they integrate themselves socially within their communities and the broader Bangsamoro political initiative.

Referred to in local dialects as يتيم /yatim or أيتام /al-aytam (Arabic), ilo (*Bisaya, Mranaw, Maguindanaon*), i'lu (Tausug), or ulila (Tagalog), these children orphaned by war hold significant symbolic and rhetorical weight within the Bangsamoro parliament. The parliament consistently acknowledges those who perished during decades of intermittent conflict, as well as the vulnerable families they left behind.

The inaugural Bangsamoro Autonomy Act, sanctioned by the MILF-led Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) in August 2019, introduced a new Bangsamoro flag. Notably, the flag features a red stripe in its lower third, representing "the blood of the fallen mujahideen who fought for the recognition of identity and self-determination of the Bangsamoro." This sentiment is echoed in the official anthem, which references the sacrifices made to secure "comfort and safety for the future youth."

The MILF emphasizes its Islamic and spiritual identity and aims to establish the new BARMM and its parliament based on "moral governance." The narratives around the shaheed and their orphaned children are integral to the revolutionary Bangsamoro political project. Four peace agreements have been reached between the Philippine Government and the Bangsamoro fronts since the 1970s.

To delve into these narratives, we seek to understand the place of orphans of shaheed within the Bangsamoro struggle. How is this sense of belonging shaped from an Islamic standpoint in the Bangsamoro, and by whom? We adopt a conception of belonging that defines it in terms of "emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home,'" and we observe that this exists at three analytical levels: the first being social locations; the second relating to individuals' identifications and emotional attachments to various collectivities and groupings; and the third relating to ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others' belonging (Gehmacher, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2015; Yuval-Davis & Ryan, 2020).

To examine these levels of belonging within the context of the Bangsamoro, we explore the experiences of orphans of fallen MILF fighters

from the Maguindanaon/Iranun ethnolinguistic group in Central Mindanao and analyze these interactions in relation to their connections with the construct of the society.

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This paper is informed by almost two years of research on the topic. Due to the lack of official or other public-domain information on orphans in the Bangsamoro and in the Philippines more broadly, data collection for an initial region-wide scoping study was conducted from March 2022 to April 2022.

This was supplemented with interviews with family members, community leaders, and religious scholars and educators (asatidz) supporting orphans, followed by in-depth conversations with ten young adult orphans of Maguindanaon and Iranun descent from the provinces of Maguindanao and North Cotabato who consented to their narratives being shared in the public domain.

Research Method

Using qualitative method this research have Two layers of research guide this study: the first layer is a policy-oriented, regional scoping that spans several locations in Mindanao. A comprehensive series of interviews with eight orphans from Maguindanao and North Cotabato, conducted from March to April 2022, forms the second and central focus of this article.

The second layer of inquiry interrogates their relationship to the revolutionary community, including the narratives and value-judgments that carry a distinct emotional, even spiritual charge. The third layer surfaces how the orphans relate to the MILF as an institution, and their views on the new MILF-led Bangsamoro government.

To fulfill our research goals of examining

the construction of personal and collective identity among orphans of *Shaheed* in Central Mindanao, we will utilize the framework of the 'politics of belonging, Of these concepts, the personal legacy of the parent's loss cultivates a sense of responsibility towards the community, both from a cultural and religious sense (Gehmacher, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2015) .

In Figure 1 ,we proposed framework with three interconnected analytical aspects: social and economic positions and categories, such as sex, class, ethnicity, kinship group, or religion; individual and collective identifications and emotional attachments influenced by the associated narratives and categorizations; and ethical and political value systems.

Figure 1 . Mapping layers of identity amongst orphans of Bangsamoro Mujaheden
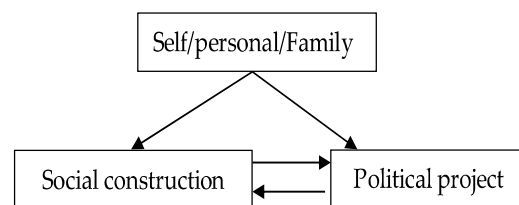
We translate these three analytical facets against the lived realities of these orphans to show how they relate to the *umpungan*, which means "to organize." *umpungan* lexically means 'organization' or a gathering of people often sharing a common purpose. Colloquially, the word refers to the Bangsamoro Movement, or those supporting the jihad for self-determination as the local arena for negotiation of the individual/self *vis-a-vis* the "we"—the family, the grassroots revolutionary community of the MILF, the MILF as an institution, and the Bangsamoro political project.

The orphans' personal experiences of their father's martyrdom reveal varied definitions and meanings of orphanhood, including how they identify themselves and how others relate to them. Their link to the revolutionary community, including emotional and spiritual narratives and value judgments, is examined in the second layer. The final layer examines how orphans regard the MILF and the new

Bangsamoro administration.

Results and Discussion
Localization Jihad as Movement and Struggle

The enduring oppression in the Bangsamoro region has led to the internalization of jihad as a normative practice and behavior among Bangsamoro population, encompassing both women and children (Cardeño et al., 2023). While most of the contemporary literature on the Bangsamoro is framed in the context of peace and security policy, the language communities use to speak of grassroots structures, and their relationships to these structures reveals a more nuanced picture. Of the many commonly used Maguindanaon words reflective of a collective identity, none is more significant and frequently mentioned in today's political climate than *umpungan*.

The term *"umpungan"* is often used to refer to the MILF and its supporters, as opposed to those who do not belong to the organization. Understanding *"umpungan"* is important for grasping the Bangsamoro movement's influence in Maguindanaon politics.

The MILF is led by a relatively unknown Central Committee and has military and political structures across seven provinces and fronts. Despite being a revolutionary movement, it differs from traditional large-scale or positional wars. In addition to its traditionally male format, the MILF includes committees led by women, such as the Social Welfare Committee and the female counterpart of the BIAF, known as the BIWAB.

These committees are typically made up of wives and sisters of the mujahideen. Furthermore, the organization has education-related committees, such as the tarbiyyah, and external structures like the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA) and the Bangsamoro Leadership and Management Institute (BLMI), established as part of the peace architecture.

Even though the attention is often on those in prominent and visible positions, a lot of these structures rely on volunteers and community supporters. They contribute zakat (tithes) and sadaqah (charity), as well as their time and resources. They also fulfill "duty" hours, and may occasionally report to the MILF for a few days, weeks, or months, before returning to work in fields that they may or may not own.

Therefore, the MILF's military arm, the BIAF, is not a formal permanent army, and the MILF is primarily driven by volunteers, including farmers, fisherfolk, religious clerics and scholars, teachers, historians, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and other professionals. While the MILF includes 'traditional' political and military figures at the front and base command levels, the core of its membership is faceless, horizontal, and principally guided by the Islamic clergy, who provide a religious, self-reflective, and self-critical ethical orientation. This membership is represented and embodied by the term *umpungan*.

The collective nature of the *umpungan* is legitimized in relation to the revolutionary movement as a manifestation of the sacred concept of jihad. Jihad is derived from Islamic teachings and refers to "struggling in the path of God" (ý jihâd fî sabîli llâhi). While the Qur'an mentions jihad in various forms of struggle, with an implied encouragement to fight, the military concept of jihad is more explicitly articulated in the hadith.

The military concept of jihad, within its historical and political backdrop, contributed to a powerful narrative of resistance against a repressive, secular, non-Muslim 'Other' in the region. The amalgamation of these concepts is evident in the narrative of the widespread grassroots Bangsamoro struggle, where jihad, as a sacred concept rooted in faith (ibadat), is embodied in the *umpungan* as its core principle. Consequently, it is not surprising that during the most violent years of the conflict leading up to the 2000 all-out-war, many individuals took up arms and embraced the life of a *mujaheed*.

The *Shaheed*: Fallen Martyrs and Their Orphaned Children

The fusion of nationalist and religious elements within the Bangsamoro movement is particularly evident in the use of the term "mujahideen" to describe the combatants of the umpungan. Originating from Arabic, this term

denotes individuals engaged in a struggle. Within the context of the Bangsamoro revolutionary movement, the concept of mujahideen has great reverence, from the 1970s to the present day (Brenton, 2016; Caballero-Anthony, 2018; Druce, 2016; Oreta, 2022).

Joseph "Erap" Estrada, a former action hero and deposed president, led a large-scale violent conflagration against Camp Abubakar, the largest MILF assembly camp in Central Mindanao, during the 2000 All-Out-War, which culminated in the most brutal years of the GPH-MILF conflict in the 90s (Vitug & Gloria, 2000).

Estrada announced his campaign to "eradicate" the MILF and launched the All-Out War. On paper, Estrada's military crusade is a series of launching operations that lasted for six months from February to July 2000. In actuality, clashes between the MILF and the Philippine military were reaching a crescendo in late 1999 following consecutive violent encounters in North Cotabato and Maguindanao. This war stretched from the boundaries of Lanao del Sur to the second district of Maguindanao (Beurau of Democracy Human Rights and Labor, 2020; Liow, 2016; McKenna & Abdula, 2009).

Unofficial accounts suggest a higher number of casualties, with official war estimates citing an estimate of 1,627 government and MILF casualties and 1 million displaced people. The MILF confirmed that 300 fighters had died, whereas the military put the number of casualties at 1,082. The prevalent *umpungan* discourse places the number of shaheed around 300, but there is no official list of that number, according to MILF fighters.

Discrepancies from both ends notwithstanding, these numbers may be considered ballpark figures particularly due to the clandestine nature of the MILF as an armed revolutionary movement. This covertness is pervasive even among its members, wherein interviewed veteran mujahideen for this research stated that they mostly knew their colleagues by their call signs and not their actual names during the height of the All-Out-War.

Despite this discordance in numerical data, it cannot be argued that the war was a pivotal moment in the conflict history of Mindanao.

Contrary to the expectations of the Estrada administration, the war did not crush the Moro insurgency but instead served as added fuel in the fight for Bangsamoro self-determination. The capture of Camp Abubakar compelled the MILF to revert to full-scale guerilla warfare, harassing army detachments and conducting military ambushes. Furthermore, it concretized the infallible sanctity of the shaheed as a potent and transcendental symbol in the narrative of the Bangsamoro struggle.

The reverence given to the shaheed, or Muslim martyrs, is deeply rooted in Islamic texts. Like the concept of jihad, the understanding of the term has evolved, but its original meaning revolves around "dying after fighting for the cause of Allah." In the Bangsamoro, this veneration is preserved, with the shaheed and their sacrifices being honored in icons and symbols of the current political endeavor.

The respect for the mujahideen after their passing extends to their surviving family members, especially their orphans. These orphans, who have firsthand experience of the horrors of war, have been symbolically embraced as part of the revolution, primarily by the leaders of the movement and the political effort. The question now arises: despite being labeled as "belonging" to the cause, how do orphans, particularly the children of the shaheed, perceive their role in this narrative?.

Emotional and Familial Belonging
A. Memory
When discussing belonging, it is important to recognize the connections that tie a person to the associated label. For example, in the case of orphans following their father's death. One aspect we delved into is the concept of memory – how they remember their fathers and the influence of these memories on them. The findings indicated that orphans who were too young to remember their father's death learned about it from their mothers or close relatives. Respondent B provided an anecdote explicitly tackling the sensitivities related to their parent's loss:

"My mother told me that he had died in an accident, and I assumed it was a motorcycle accident. It wasn't until I was in 5th grade, during a visit to my maternal relatives, that I learned the truth. One of them remarked, "Ah, your father was a good man. But he's gone now, a shaheed, and there's nothing more we can do." When I returned home, I asked my mother what a shaheed was. That's when she explained everything to me and told me not to share it with anyone else".

Some orphans remember fond memories with their fathers and noted how they were influenced by these experiences. Those who are not old enough to remember create a memory from shared stories of people who knew their parent. These memories, living and shared, are sparse and impactful, shaping the orphan's acceptance of their parent's death and struggle. Respondent D:

"Our bonding has been 'programmed' in my brain. It can't be discarded no matter where I go, I will carry his memory, his ways, his principles. He is my inspiration, the one I aspire to be."

In some instances, the sparsity of memories is made worse by the political and technological backdrop of the time that was non-conducive to reliving memories of their parents. Respondent E, said:

"I don't remember his face anymore. Nowadays, people take photos a lot and so young children recognize their parents' faces because there are photos. During our time, if not for the cameras, you will forget the face of your parents. And even so, there are only few photos around because you would still need to develop them."

Repressing memories of their father's loss is a common thread observed among the respondents. When asked whether they get tearful or sad when speaking of their father, Respondent G said *"No. I don't like to. I hold it in, so I won't."* Respondent J, also said.

"There are moments when I will feel like crying. There are times when I will feel envious, especially when I see others who still have their fathers with them. Therefore,

I refrain from talking about this. When someone opens [the topic], I want the conversation to end right away. Because I do not want to be emotional in front of them."

B. Immediate Effects

The respondents expressed no bitterness regarding their father's passing, but they highlighted how the impact of the loss is largely economic, particularly given the challenging security conditions in the area. The responsibility of providing for the family typically falls on the mothers as they become single parents. Three respondents mentioned that their mothers had gone abroad to work and provide financial support, while the others mentioned that their surviving parents either took on sporadic jobs or worked as farmers. In some cases, the burden is shared by the eldest children, as in the case of Respondent I:

"I've only reached 6th grade. I stopped going to school because money was tight. Instead, I decided to work abroad for two years."

Beyond the responsibilities taken by the mother, the respondents also noted the familial and community support given to them. Some respondents talked about being raised by relatives, usually a grandparent or an uncle or aunt. Respondent E:

"My uncles were very good to me, and they will tell me stories about my father, but I do not ask them mostly. Sometimes I wonder how it would be like if he was alive but there is no sense in wondering about something that will not happen".

Respondent E's statement resonates with the rest of the orphans regarding the refusal to think of the negative aspect of their father's death. The pain of loss is present, but the general tendency is to focus on the acceptance of the father's fate. The loss through jihad is seen as a blessing and all the orphans interviewed were grateful that their father died a shaheed. Respondent H:

"I am not upset about it because it is not his fault. It was nobody's fault. I am both lucky and unlucky in this regard. Unlucky because I don't have a dad; but lucky because not all

children have a shaheed for a father."

The duality of the experience, in both its positive and negative effects, is encapsulated in the statement below by Respondent F on difficulties as part of dunya (temporal world) and the virtue of sabr (patience):

> "My only regret would be the economic difficulties. But we've held on because that's just how life is. It is Allah that provides us with blessings and life. We held on amidst difficulties and were also grateful because even though our father died, he died in the cause of God."

C. Faith

The acceptance of parental loss by orphans is often viewed in the context of Islamic tradition. In Islam, martyrdom in jihad is reframed to symbolize those who have "attained immortality" (The Quran 2:154) rather than focusing on the negative connotations of death. This perspective of loss impacts the lives of orphans, as seen through the observation of Respondent G, who noted the influence of their father's passing on their religious practices.

> "I was not able to meet him as I was still unborn then. This is why I studied hard in Arabic and Islamic Studies. It was said in the hadith that if there is a child who knows the way of the faith and would pray for her or his parents who are long gone, then that prayer reaches them. Even though I couldn't meet him, at least I can connect with him through my prayers."

The respondents expressed their understanding of jihad as a sacred decision by their parent. Respondents who were old enough to remember shared poignant memories regarding their father's relationship with the struggle.Respondent J:

> "On his last day in our house, he requested my grandmother to let me sleep beside him. On that day when he was about to go back to the war zone, our neighbor asked him. He said, "You're going back to the mountains? What will happen to your children should you die?". It took a while for him to answer, and he just said, "God knows best"."

D. Attitudes on Retribution

Anecdotes highlighting the sanctity of jihad as observed by the parent and as accepted by the orphan were prevalent during the conversations. A key perspective that came out of the bityala is how the orphans observed jihad as 'sacred', wherein, one's intentions do not revolve around their own desires. Orphans noted that feelings of vengefulness are natural when one is to respond by instinct, but such is a way that discredits the sanctity of their parent's martyrdom , Respondent C:

> "When we speak about what happened during that time when he died, we can't avoid feeling upset. But that is what we try to avoid. When one thinks of the grievance, one will feel the urge to take vengeance. That would be unjust, that would just be vengeance. It would be violence because you are doing it out of revenge. It is no longer jihad."

Identity within the Revolutionary Collective

A. Connection to the *Umpungan* (Common Purpose/Organization) Following the Father's Death

As young children during the time of their father's loss, the immediate response of the umpungan set a precedent for the relationship of the orphans to the revolutionary community. A particularly harrowing anecdote comes from Respondent H who was not able to retrieve the remains of their father:

> "My mother told me, "you have to persevere because your father will not come home anymore", but even then, she was continuously looking for him. The umpungan was helping us locate him too. But we never found him, not even a trace. The higher-ups said that he is good as a shaheed now."

As most of the respondents were raised in MILF communities, the support extended by their neighbors and relatives is reflected and perceived as support by the *umpungan*. Respondent A:

> "I was raised by my paternal relatives. They were mujahideen as well. My stepfather is also a mujahid. Everyone [in the community] are

mujahideen."

Respondent B shared mixed feelings regarding the support of the umpungan. In particular, the orphan's family did not receive support within the community but were welcomed by umpungan members outside.

> "Our relatives were not fond of us. The farmland here is owned by my paternal grandfather and we were given our father's share. It seems that the reason [for the resentment] is material wealth. In the crossing [Darapanan], many knew that my father was a shaheed, that I am an orphan of a shaheed. They treat us well. They treat us better than how our relatives did."

B. Public Knowledge of Father's Martyrdom

The orphans lived in a time when the cause of their father's death was widely known but not openly discussed. Most people were uncomfortable talking about it in public due to the sensitivity and context surrounding the situation. Respondent H shared that :

> "I do not mention that my father is a mujahid. When I was in elementary school, only a few understood what a shaheed is and so I do not speak of it. It is only now that I can speak of this fully because BARMM is in place and people now understand what the word meant."

C. Present Connection with the *Umpungan*

The close-knit nature of the community and the umpungan is often perceived by orphans as a unified, multifaceted entity. Positive treatment by the community frequently leads to the orphans' involvement in the movement. Among the ten respondents, five were active BIAF members, two were affiliated with sub-organizations like the SWC and political committee, and one was part of BIWAB.

These affiliations are seen as a way to give back to the community and continue their parents' struggle through the movement. Respondent F captures this sentiment, stating,

> "I didn't cry during his burial, but I wept when we got home. My mind was conditioned to jihad, so I was prepared. I

had already undergone basic training before my father died and became a member of the MILF. I am still called for duty in the movement today."

Two respondents, though not directly part of the umpungan, remain connected to it—one through marriage to a BIAF combatant and the other through family members in the organization. Another orphan, who faced poor treatment from his community due to inheritance issues, expressed reservations about the legacy of jihad but still maintained a passive affiliation with the umpungan, stating, *"I will do whatever I can for jihad, but I cannot promise that I will die for it. I will only give what I can."*

These experiences highlight the blurred lines between community, umpungan, and jihad, where a sense of belonging is often contested. The findings suggest that most orphans continue their parents' legacy by supporting the *umpungan* as an expression of jihad, emphasizing its faith-based aspect as sacred and personal.

However, this religious understanding of jihad also enables some to differentiate themselves and their loss from the umpungan's institutional and political dimensions, as articulated by Respondent J:

> "I am not part of that [umpungan]. I have an indirect relationship because our elders were part of it, but personally, [I have] none. I share the ideals of the umpungan, but I do not see myself as part of the institution. I have a different path in pursuing the goals we want for our people. This is my own struggle."

Political Belonging
A. Political Implications of Orphanhood

Beyond symbols of faith, the shaheed represents a powerful image of the toils and sacrifice for the fulfillment of the Bangsamoro political cause. The orphans in this study understand that the status of a shaheed's orphan is politically loaded, particularly in the context of the Bangsamoro. It is considered a source of pride but carefully guarded; wherein flaunting and using it to one's advantage is perceived as improper.

Respondent J expressed a deep sense of pride in his father's death, stating, "*There are many ways a person can die; I'm glad that my father's loss is something I can be proud of.*" However, he chooses not to openly discuss it, explaining that "*the sanctity is lost, becomes tainted, when you speak of it.*" Given the current context and the establishment of the BARMM, he is cautious not to appear as though he is boasting about it".

The orphans have expressed an awareness that their political capital is shaped by the current political climate and the environment they inhabit. Respondent H reflects on their personal experience within the umpungan, particularly how it is perceived in contested areas like Cotabato City "*Most people here in Cotabato [City] see the umpungan differently. Even if you try to explain it, they won't understand because they weren't raised with the knowledge of jihad. It's better not to engage, as they won't grasp it anyway.*"

The orphans lived in a time when the cause of their father's death was widely known but not openly discussed. Most people were uncomfortable talking about it publicy due to the situation's sensitivity and context. The orphans lived in a time when the cause of their father's death was widely known but not openly discussed. Most people were uncomfortable talking about it in public due to the situation's sensitivity and context. The context and surrounding concepts shape an orphan's sense of political belonging.

Central to this is the legacy of the parent's loss, which fosters a sense of responsibility towards the community, both culturally and religiously. This legacy, often conveyed through lived and shared memories, is vividly expressed in the realization of the umpungan's political project.

Respondent B encapsulates this sentiment "*What we truly want is for our fathers' sacrifices to bear fruit, which is the liberation of the Bangsamoro. In the past, we couldn't act freely. Now, we are no longer afraid of being harmed or killed just because we're Muslim or of being seen as a threat simply for our faith. I felt that discrimination before. Now, we can be free.*"

B. Perspectives on the Political Agenda and the BARMM (Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao)

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), emerging from years of negotiation, represents the core values of the *umpungan* and the objectives of its movement members. Despite its constitution allowing the inclusion of appointees outside the MILF and MNLF, BARMM is still viewed as the political initiative of the umpungan. Respondent H reflects on this connection: "*If my father were still alive, how would he feel? He would likely be very pleased. I wish he were here to see that he contributed to making this possible, proving it was worthwhile.*"

Orphans honor the principles behind BARMM, particularly its focus on moral governance and adherence to Islamic values. While they acknowledge some flaws within the institution, the sanctity of their parents' sacrifices fosters patience and tolerance toward criticism.Respondent E remarks, "*The important thing is that we do not ask for anything in return. Back when we were in hiding, we didn't demand anything. Why should we ask now? Those who didn't help before are quick to demand repayment.*"

In addition to understanding the overlap and distinctions between jihad and umpungan, some orphans highlight the complexities within the political project about their personal experiences. This is evident in Respondents J and B's perspectives, who have directly engaged with the BARMM government, Respondent J shares:

> "I used to be prejudiced against BARMM because I feared it would become another ARMM. Some people only joined when things were already falling into place. However, after meeting individuals working in BARMM, my hopes have risen. Although the fear persists, I have encountered people who genuinely strive to make a positive impact. It is evident that they are attempting to do good."

Respondent B adds:

> "I can see that some are truly dedicated; however, in certain cases, they lack the courage they once had to stand up for justice. There are only two types of people

in BARMM: those who wish for its longevity to continue helping others, and those who exploit the opportunity to engage in unethical actions while BARMM exists."

Overall, the orphans demonstrate a deep respect for BARMM's mission and values, balancing recognizing its imperfections with a commitment to their parents' legacy. This dynamic underscores the nuanced relationship between personal loss, cultural identity, and political engagement within the context of BARMM's development.

C. Attitudes Towards Support From the BARMM Government

Assisting orphans is a top priority for the BARMM government, as indicated by the Bangsamoro Information Office in 2020. Currently, the BTA Parliament is reviewing resolutions and bills focused on the welfare of orphans. A notable example is Parliament Bill No. 71, also known as the Bangsamoro Orphanage Act of 2020. These legislative efforts aim to support all orphans in Bangsamoro, regardless of their parents' affiliations with the *umpungan* (Haji murad, 2021). Community members, including relatives of the shaheed, frequently discuss the need for support. However, a study revealed contrasting views among respondents regarding the concept of support.

> "We would be grateful and thank Allah for whatever assistance the umpungan would provide," responds Respondent C.

Meanwhile respondent b , said *"My father's sacrifice and martyrdom have already bestowed a blessing upon us. We aren't holding out hope that someone will pay us back. We should all take personal responsibility for our lives, but we will also be appreciative.*

Islam bestows fame and honor upon the shaheed and, by implication, their relatives. Such characteristics indicate very influential members in the community's social and political spheres. Still, the orphans' reluctance to use things stands out. While the perspectives do not deny the necessity of government help, they argue that it should be seen more as a means to ease socioeconomic difficulties rather than recompense for their father's sacrifice.

Belonging and 'Orphan-hood': Layers and Tensions

This study delves into the intricate layers of belonging experienced by orphans of fallen members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), where the loss of a parent and the subsequent experience of being an orphan are deeply personal yet also shared within the community. these layers are depicted, highlighting how the orphans' sense of 'belonging' is influenced by three main areas of contention: 1) the 'self,' encompassing personal and familial identity; 2) the Umpungan (or the MILF as an institution); and 3) the political endeavor (BARMM).

Examined from the perspective of recollection, and especially for those too young to recall, it transforms into a potent collective encounter not just among family members but also among extended relatives, neighbors, and other members of the community. This force arises from the profound sentiment of sanctity that a mujahideen's martyrdom in the service of jihad evokes, as supported by the Islamic language. According to all participants, it helps the orphans come to terms with the loss, despite the evident suffering it causes, as well as the economic, educational, and safety consequences of losing the primary provider and leader of the family.

The encounter and any recollections of the deceased parent influence the perspective and orientation of the orphans since every reference to the father appears to be imbued with an indescribable depth. Invariably, they express their motivation to maintain values of religious belief and ethical standards and to perform admirably to pay tribute to their father's legacy; caution is exercised to avoid tarnishing the parent's reputation in society. The responders unanimously acknowledge that the spiritual interpretation of jihad prevents them from being compelled to seek retribution. Instead, it is regarded as a prerogative made by the Shaheed.

The connotation of sanctity implies that instances of martyrdom and orphanhood are generally not known to the general population, save those already part of the *umpungan.* According to the respondents, during their

childhood, they were instructed that discussing how their father passed away to those who were not part of the *umpungan* is considered unpleasant or even potentially harmful. One frequently expressed reaction was that respondents believed discussing their father's death would compromise the religious sacredness of the grief.

Contra to Western or Filipino notions of orphanhood as a cause for sympathy, all participants acknowledge the societal interpretation of spiritual strength as a social advantage. Religions and cultural conventions around orphanhood entail that they receive benevolence and respectful care. Within the revolutionary society, this phenomenon evolves into an extra stratum of social capital, whereby individuals are commonly known as *"wata na umpungan"* (children of the collective), regardless of whether they have been official members of the MILF.

Hence, the orphans of Shaheed are aware that the designation carries religious, cultural, and political significance and seek to avoid being seen as openly displaying it. This indicates a contradiction with the public manner in which the Bangsamoro administration incorporates martyrdom in service to jihad into its political vocabulary, even if the individual orphans and Shaheed are unidentified and unnoticed. In the contemporary BARMM region, characterized by a scarcity of employment opportunities and a prevailing belief that positions in the new Bangsamoro Government are predominantly allocated to individuals involved in the conflict, this tension becomes further complex.

Navigating the Two Sides of the *Umpungan*

These experiences also shape how orphans perceive and relate with the members of the MILF umpungan as well as the Bangsamoro political project. In the same light that they saw their parent giving themselves to a higher struggle, most of the respondents spoke of how they do their best to give back to the umpungan, often through formal membership or at least some level of tacit support in the MILF's community structures.

The orphans' current relationship with the MILF alludes to two sides of the umpungan as loci for negotiation of identity: On one hand, umpungan written with a small 'u' denotes the grassroots community with shared ideals. Comprising unnamed families, communities, and clerics supporting jihad, the dynamic of the small-u umpungan is embedded and horizontal, bound by conviction and faith. Due to the nature of these places, many of the people living in these areas are related to one another and/or are majority MILF supporters.

On the other hand, there is the Umpungan written with the large 'U': the MILF as the formal revolutionary institution, with its sub-organs such as the BIAF, BIWAB, the SWC, and the other associated institutions under a Central Committee. As an Assembly, its structures are formal and regimented, with a more vertical relationship between its political and military powers and the communities represent.

While most respondents perceive the small-u and the big-U umpungan as interchangeable, several stressed that they can be sometimes be exclusive of the other, and that being part of the community umpungan may not necessarily mean agreeing with all aspects of the Bangsamoro political project, saying one can do good without being part of the movement, or the Bangsamoro government, and even vice-versa. With this differentiation, the varied experiences of the orphans of shaheed lead us to test the boundaries of belonging to the revolutionary community. Just as there are layers to the umpungan as a horizontal community with its own inner life, and its relationship to the outwardly-facing MILF institutions, much of this is also defined by dynamics of inclusion and exclusion: who can be deemed part of the umpungan, and who are not?

Similarly, these show the tension between what can be said publicly, and what cannot. Even with the peace agreement, parts of it are still hidden, not only as a security measure but due to the tension between these individuals' inner and outer lives, and between what is considered sacred (faith and sacrifice) and what might be considered profane (individuals'

political and economic agenda, and anything worldly that might be considered part of dunya).

With jihad as an expression of faith, the sacrifice of the shaheed and their families is a service to what is sacred and ineffable. But with the language of religion harnessed as a political force, the experiences of mujahid and umpungan are distilled and channeled as a driver of the new Bangsamoro political project as an autonomous regional government.

Effects on the Current Bangsamoro Transition

The MILF-led BTA and their Manila negotiation partners must consider these conflicts in the current political climate. The CAB (2014) states that the BARMM is secular and multi-cultural. Thus, the MILF-led 'government of the day' has two sources of power: the spiritual narrative of jihad that unites the *umpungan*. The Philippine Government and international observers recognize the MILF as an entity because it signed a peace deal.

The relationship of the Bangsamoro government to the central powers in Manila ensures that the appointive MILF has the mandate amongst traditional politicians, warlords, and clans. However, this very secular source of influence and legitimacy is very different from the traditional imagery of revolutionary struggle—of pious guerillas fighting in the marshlands of Maguindanao against armored tanks and mortars to preserve the community's autonomy and way of life.

Thus, the challenge is to ensure the new narrative of "moral governance" as the new jihad retains some of the grassroots revolutionary potency of the umpungan. While there are no clear operational definitions of moral governance, the speech given by Interim Chief minister Ahod Balawag Ebrahim (nom de guerre Murad Ebrahim, Al-Haj) during the ceremonial turnover of the regional government to the MILF-led BTA (OPAPP 2019) provide certain guideposts: *"We are moving into a new phase of Jihad, one that will be more intense and challenging. Our primary struggle will be against our own inner selves... Our true enemies are oppression, exploitation, and those who stand against the people,"* he stated.

The Interim Chief Minister (and concurrent MILF Chairman's) words heavily refer to criticisms of the old MNLF experience during the previous ARMM, where government service posts were given as rewards to guerillas who had spent their lives in the jungle and were now swiftly expected to become effective bureaucrats. While the MILF has taken steps to avoid a repeat of history (including the hiring of young, highly trained Moro technocrats and the quiet removal of several officials accused of corruption), all respondents note that there seems to be an unspoken assumption that those who had fought jihad should be rewarded, including (and especially) *umpungan* members who were mujahideen, or were related to shaheed.

However, the bityala with the orphans and community members expose tensions with this view. Orphans are loath to 'cheapen' their fallen parent's memory by using it for political cachet to get positions or much-needed socioeconomic support. Others note that while government appointments might seem like a reward to some (primarily through income and access to wealth and influence), it is yet another burden to fulfill. At the same time, the view that something sacred should not be shared also means that it will be difficult to design databases for social protection programs targeting orphans and widows, which require beneficiaries to be legible to the state.

This also has implications for the transitional justice and reconciliation commitments of the CAB, as the views of orphans, widows and umpungan members invite a reconsideration of what constitutes 'justice', 'legitimate grievances', or 'dealing with the past.', based on) manual on the Bangsamoro prefers the expression 'dealing with the past' rather than transitional justice "because it is convinced that dealing with a legacy of violent conflict is not only—or even primarily—the task of legal professionals. On the contrary, just as a majority of the population in the Bangsamoro has been affected by the conflict in some form, so also everyone should be able to contribute in some way to the process of reconciliation

However, community attitudes around

martyrdom differ from existing Philippine accountability mechanisms for human rights violations. Umpungan members do not refer to martyrs as "dead". Instead, they highlight how those who laid down their lives for jihad served the community out of their own free will and by doing so, attained some measure of immortality, which should encourage others to sustain the same courage. How could one question service to the will of Allah (swt)?

As of the time of this writing, the MILF's request for an extension of the political transition period has been approved. This allows the current appointive BTA to continue its work beyond the scheduled May 2022 elections, during which a new President of the Philippines will be elected. There is uncertainty about whether the MILF's political party can prevail against the traditional politicians and ruling elites. Some argue that even if the MILF no longer leads the Bangsamoro parliament after the first elections, the peace process transition will persist due to other unimplemented provisions of the 2014 CAB, including the decommissioning of MILF-BIAF combatants.

However, the current indication is that umpungan and its grassroots relationships will continue to exist in some form even after the transition. Several of the MILF's sub-organs have registered as NGOs and organized civil society groups composed of second-generation MILF and MNLF members are beginning to emerge. While these developments are seen as positive aspects of the post-agreement transition, there are risks in narrowing the definition of legitimate and moral governance in the Bangsamoro to those linked with the umpungan. Moreover, there is a significant minority of Christian settlers and non-Islamized indigenous peoples in the region, many of whom have converted to Christianity. Not all Bangsamoro citizens who suffered in the wars align themselves with the umpungan, whether MILF or MNLF. Therefore, fitting into the new Bangsamoro involves two challenges: ensuring inclusivity to represent the region's interests beyond those of former combatants while preserving the spiritual unity that has historically bound the community together.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the accounts of the orphans of Shaheed and their families, we observe that various types of affiliation influence their personal, familial, and social identities. Their anonymous and unidentified images and experiences are used as emotional, political, and spiritual foundations for the Bangsamoro political endeavor. The stories of faith, bravery, and sacrifice recounted by the guerilla army serve as a potent reservoir of collective experiences and deep sentiments that motivated the group to bring the Philippine state to a deadlock, relinquishing authority and land, and recognizing past injustices. However, conflicts arise in the aftermath of the accord, as the orphans and the revolutionary community must now negotiate a future no longer intertwined with military conflict.

In light of the MILF's emphasis on moral governance as the new jihad, the challenge is to cultivate new manifestations of political imagination and inclusion that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of the *umpungan*, or camp. This is crucial for shaping a future that no longer necessitates the blood of martyrs or the sacrifice of widows and children left behind. Furthermore, fostering religious moderation within the broader Bangsamoro society is essential in promoting peace and unity among diverse Muslim communities. According to Syamsul bahri (2022) Religious moderation plays a crucial role in fostering a family environment that promotes tolerant attitudes and behaviors. Children aspire to cultivate such moderation to develop a sense of respect for the presence and perspectives of others, while refraining from using violence to impose their own will.This includes addressing extreme ideologies while upholding the values of tolerance, coexistence, and respect for other faiths and beliefs.

Further research should explore the role of religious moderation in the post-conflict transition of the Bangsamoro, particularly how it can be integrated into education, governance, and interfaith dialogue. A focus on how religious moderation can facilitate a more inclusive political landscape, and the

involvement of young people in this process, would be valuable for long-term stability and peacebuilding efforts.

Acknowledgement

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