

# The Quest for Peace in the Literatures of Mindanao

---

**Christine F. Godinez Ortega**

---

Mindanao State University  
Iligan Institute of Technology

## Abstract

This essay explores the wisdom of the ancients in the pursuit of peace among Mindanao's different communities as inscribed in the people's folk literatures. Many of Mindanao's ethnic communities draw lessons from various epics which are orally chanted or sung whose motifs are usually about war and conflict. Conflict is a reality and is not new but it occurs in order to, ironically, achieve peace. In addition, based on the personal experience of the author, where armed conflict in Central Mindanao occur, in general, as the author asserts, Mindanao is peaceful. A list of various literary pieces written by Mindanaoans themselves is provided which, as the author adds, when taught by an informed teacher could help in understanding the complexities and diversities of Mindanao which the author hopes might lead to promoting peace on the island.

## Keywords

ancient wisdom, conflict, peace, literatures of Mindanao, epic

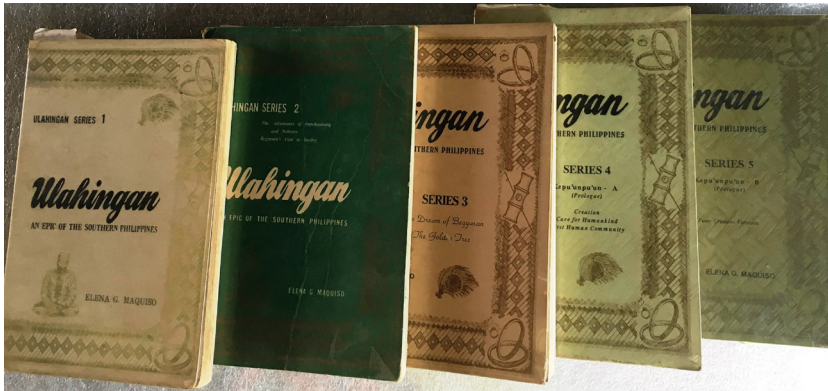


Photo of the Ulahingan Books –  
An Epic of the Southern Philippines



A Talaandig Chanter from  
Lantapan, Bukidnon



Ground Zero: 11 months after the Marawi Siege  
Author takes photo from Rizal Park of a once  
bustling part of Marawi City. Hidden from  
view below is the *padian* (marketplace).



Photo of a Meranaw Onor, a chanter



A photo of the Lanao Lake by Bobby Timonera

## Introduction

Mindanao is not on fire. Today, she is peaceful.

If one looks at the Mindanao map, there are only pockets of occasional conflicts on this island, politicians had called “the land of promise” that is prone to violence but what the late Fr. Miguel Anselmo A. Bernad, SJ had called “a great island”.

How great Mindanao was, is, and will be, depends largely on how writers and scholars write about its past where ancestral wisdom was adhered to, and present realities—the good, pleasurable ones and the bad tidings, to paraphrase Dickens from *The Tale of Two Cities*, who said “be restful for it may end with encourageable times of cheers and hope” (2009).

In the last few years of armed conflicts between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and government forces in Lanao del Norte—the booming of canons fired from a place about 20 minutes from where I live—and having witnessed an encounter between these forces in Balo-i, Lanao del Norte and the threat of the MILF forces invading Iligan City where local politicians made the call to arms, and, fast forward to the present, after the Zamboanga siege led by Nur Misuari of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), things have more or less, quieted down.

This paper therefore attempts to establish the role of the literatures of Mindanao in the building of peace over what the government, religious and civic groups have done in the past in concerted efforts towards peace.

One other attempt is to show that ancestral wisdom is passed on from one generation to the next through oral means or, by way of songs and chants through the Mindanao epics, proving that conflict is not new and it is always a struggle to maintain the peace in whichever era it is.

Exposure to the literatures of Mindanao, once more, should help in the understanding and knowledge and above all, respect of its diversity, immensity, and complexity that Mindanao is, and barring more conflicts, there would certainly be peace in Mindanao. After all, the peoples of Mindanao have lived alongside each other for generations. They know the value of

peace. They know how to nurture peace because happiness and economic prosperity depend on it.

### **MSU-IIT's Peace Efforts**

Apart from the Bishop-Ulama Conference and the Government that take the forefront in dialogs between the government and the two factions of the MNLF, its splinter group, the MILF and still another splinter group, the Bangsa Islamia Federation Front (BIFF), not to mention the Abu Sayaff, the Sabah claim, the National People's Army (NPA), today, universities in Mindanao like the Mindanao State University System, in particular, its flagship campus, the MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology (MSU-IIT) does its share in peace building activities.

Here are four examples of its peace efforts:

- (1) The establishment of the Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao (IPDM) that organizes forums on peace; contests on films about peaceful co-existence with fellow Mindanaoans by students; book launches; and sports activities to foster trust among the students of different religious beliefs and ethnic groups.
- (2) A course in History 3 or the History of the Filipino Muslims and the indigenous Peoples of the Minsupala is taken up by all students that trace the history of the peopling of Mindanao. It likewise occasions dialog between students of different religious affiliations and ethnic groups. It is an opportunity for students to learn from each other or from members of Mindanao's cultural communities and/or to air their grievances against each other. More often than not, discussions get involved and steamy but professors are trained to handle these tight situations, and, things end up well.

In about 80 per cent of school programs or major events in MSU-IIT, invocations are given by a priest, an Imam and a Protestant Minister or all three are present, at the same time.

In other words, the MSU-IIT is a microcosm of what is happening in Mindanao. The diversity of dress and manners, languages and cultures and of Moro men and women, on certain

times of the day, rolling out their mats and praying, facing east towards Mecca, are familiar occurrences on campus.

The Moro women especially, because they are Muslims first and who are members of the *umma,yusuf & sehmitt* (2006) exhibit this ethno-religious dimension on a daily basis with their *abayas* and veiled heads reinforced by a CHED memo giving them freedom to wear veils. The rest of the non-Moro see this too, as a manifestation of political, socio-cultural and nationalist beliefs.

- (3) Cultural shows and themed stage plays are mounted regularly for everybody's enjoyment or discomfort; and,
- (4) most significant of all, literature courses that teach about ethnic groups through fiction and poetry written by Mindanao writers like Antonio Enriquez, Mig Alvarez Enriquez, Ibrahim Jubaira, Gumersindo Rafanan, Marcelo Geocallo, Macario Tiu, Aida Rivera Ford, Anthony Tan, Eduardo P. Ortega, Rebekah Marohombsar Alawi, Francis Macansantos, Calbi Asain, Noralyn Mustafa, Albert Alejo, S.J., Jaime An Lim, and the younger writers, Telesforo Sungkit, Jr., Shemrock Salait Linohon and Zola Gonzalez Macarambon, to name a few, reinforce the learning about how culturally diverse and how complex Mindanao is.

### The Teaching of the Literatures of Mindanao

In the teaching of the literatures of Mindanao, students often wonder over the definition of the word “Mindanao” and wonder some more of what a “Mindanaoan” is. Apart from this, according to the National Artist for Literature Bienvenido Lumbera, the word ‘literatures’ is used instead of the usual singular noun ‘literature’ as an “eloquent insistence of the current thrust of literary education – the plurality of what used to be designated as “Philippine Literature,” the many bodies of literary writing existing alongside what had hitherto been assumed by Manila to be a unified entity represented by works in Tagalog, English, and Spanish” Lumbera (2001).

The word Mindanao to some others “evokes a wealth of images” and is also depicted as a “land of the unknown” (1992).

In the second volume of *Mindanao Harvest: An Anthology of Contemporary Writing* by An Lim & Ortega (1996), writer Marjorie Evasco said, in her introduction that “Mindanao conjures a rich ground for signification” and quoting Resil B. Mojares’s introduction to *Handurawan*, an anthology that consisted of works by 1998-1999 poetry grantees of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) and published by the same:

...Nation and region are interacting, mutually-constitutive realities. They conjure each other and are caught up in a process in which their values are not fixed. Nation and region (even the ethnic itself) are historical artifacts. They involve boundaries, a boundedness, which are not immutable or timeless but dynamic because socially and historically created. They involve as well relations of identity and power which either pull them together or pull them apart.

Evasco concluded that the term “Mindanao” did not mean a biographical place or origin, neither did it refer to Mindanao specific themes the authors in the anthology tackled, neither was it language nor the exoticism of Mindanao’s ethnic cultures because, she emphasized, “in the writer’s imaginative mediation of the literal mass of land ... “Mindanao” and the metaphoric mass of metaphors that color and shade the inner landscape, we arrive all at once new and different in our human journey” An Lim & Ortega, (1996).

We tend to agree with this view but for academic purposes, the teacher of the literatures of Mindanao need to have knowledge of how complex, how diverse Mindanao is. The selections to be taught, if these have to aid in the promotion of peace in the region, must be well selected for their Mindanao themes. I also believe that if these have been written by Mindanao-based writers or writers from Mindanao who had settled elsewhere in the country, they share unique experiences that are reflective of the cultures and realities of what the great island is or is deemed to be.

It is heartening to note that ‘natives’ or those who come from oral cultures like Sungkit, Jr., who has written three novels in Higaunon and translated them into Sebuano, and Linohon with his Higaunon poetry, have taken to

writing down their thoughts and experiences, albeit mostly sad encounters with the abusive military and businessmen or multinationals that want to grab properties or buy ancestral lands for a song or else. Yet, it is also ironic that, in a study by Fatimah Joy S. Almarez on the works by Mindanaoan writing fellows to the Iligan National Writers Workshop from 1994-2013 show that only a handful or about 12 percent of the total 94 writing fellows wrote about armed conflicts and poverty, most of them writing about their own pains and passions, joining workshops as students or after graduation from colleges and universities in the country Almarez (2014).

## **Mindanao: A Great Island**

Mindanao has always been viewed as diverse, a rugged terrain, and ‘a problem’.

It is peopled by about 13 Islamized groups, 21 (ethno linguistic), lumad groups and 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> generation of descendants of Christian settlers and migrants from Luzon and the Visayas who responded to the call of the national government to “develop Mindanao”.

There are many more classifications, groupings, endless ethnic affiliations that have evolved through the years, most of these subjected to treaties, agreements, presidential decrees, and the creation of offices that have failed to address their needs and innumerable problems.

On top of the presence of these diverse and unique groups, often it is the literatures written in English that get national attention but the oral literatures of ethnic groups, the literatures in the local languages fail to get their fair share of exposure thus, a mis-education of the rest of the country about Mindanao.

Many anthologies, textbooks from Mindanao by Mindanaoans have been published but these are few and far between due to many factors. The brave attempts especially by a few editors, Aida Rivera Ford, the late Antonio R. Enriquez, Macario D. Tiu, this writer, and Jaime An Lim as well as the early efforts of the late Alfredo Navarro Salanga and Tita Lacambra Ayala in Davao have made educators and other writers from Manila pay atten-



tion to an often neglected and misunderstood island where the impression of conflict, armed or not, has prevailed to this day.

### Interpretation of Literary Works

In the interpretation of these works, the professor of literature must know beyond form and meaning when taking up cultural sensitivities embedded in these literary works because such advantage enriches understanding of these works.

He must possess cultural knowledge in order for the students to appreciate a short story that explores the contrast of cultures and religions, very good example are the story of “juramentados” of Alvarez Enriquez’s “A White Horse of Alih” the violence between the Tausug and the Sama Badjao in Tan’s “Sweet Grapes, Sour Grapes”; of the Tausug cigarette smugglers in Ortega’s short story “Tapsi”; of a young man’s initiation through a deer hunt in Mustafa’s “A Dream of Morning”; of Bagobo rituals in Rivera Ford’s “Adula”; of religious belief in Jubaira’s “The Prophet Came to My City”; and two versions of the protest poem of the Higaunon-Manobo’s marginalization in “I, Higaunon” by Sungkit and Linohon; or, a vivid depiction of violence amid a pristine landscape in Tony Enriquez’s short story “Spots on their Wings” and his dramatic novel *Subanons* about the ordeal of Subanens during the Martial law years.

### Resistance Writing

All elicit a lively discussion of the poem or the story’s structure, content and language use. In particular, the teacher should use the socio-historical, cultural approaches from the formalist approach and take into consideration authorial intrusions, in-text or glossing or its omission, code switching, use of inter-language and the use of the vernacular transcriptions that signal the writer’s assertion of cultural identity which Edward Said called ‘resistance writing’ and explored by Nancy M. Puno in her paper entitled “Mindanao Resistance Writing: Reinscriptions of Cultural Identity in Mindanao Postcolonial Prose Fiction” Puno, (2006).

This 'resistance writing is akin to what Catherine Rainwater in her book, *Dreams of Fiery Stars* calls 'markers of power' for "the writer requires the reader as cultural outsider to find out or figure out what many," in this case for Rainwater, "Indian readers would already know" Rainwater (69).

Of this, Said (1994) says that resistance culture is ideological in nature and is characterized by efforts at decolonization aimed at the re-constitution of shattered communities and re-possession of culture. Unless culture comes to life through language, in the written literatures of these communities, there will be no link between communal memory and national culture. Resistance writing comes to life when the literary landscape of a people is re-inhabited by its histories, narratives, fables, myths, legends, heroes and heroines. Western narratives of the "history and cultures of 'subordinate' peoples are "challengeable by the people themselves." (Said 195).

In today's postcolonial writing, the Mindanao writer keeps faith with his cultural traditions portraying these for the reader – making him understand nuances of a culture through language. If the text is in English, it is what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin said of the writer's seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1991).

While the writer is in control of his material, he is often fair in his politics because his depiction of a given situation such as tensions between two culturally and religiously diverse characters in a community is well-developed and involved because he, the writer, whether he is conscious of it or not is engaged in what Rainwater calls "counter-colonial agenda in an apparent attempt to enter the dominant discursive space" (67).

Rainwater calls this "semiotic counter-conquest that resembles (in reverse) the European antecedent" that for his part, Todorov says aims not as "domination and empire, but social reform through relocation of non-Indian people from positions of authority to positions of listeners and receivers of knowledge" (67).

In a similar vein, Mindanao writers continue to translate Mindanao realities according to their experiences and vision and, when these works

are taken up in classes, they influence the readers' way of thinking and helps to transform lives.

In this instance, of primary importance is for students to experience the epic through film or a recording or, at best, a live performance that is a learning process in itself because the live performance entails a lot of negotiation with the singer/chanter.

If the text with the originals are available, then a reading of it, usually in translation, follows but the focus should be on the aesthetics -- the symbols especially -- that show how these function in the society of the epic being taken up -- how such practices are passed on from generation to generation and whether these still function today.

This is the attempt at "repositioning" or "reforming" or "reorienting" the students, who are the cultural outsiders, in their engagement and appreciation of the epic from the worldview of the society that produced it.

### **Pre-colonial, oral literatures**

Because as a writer and teacher myself, my bias is on, for lack of a better categorization, the pre-colonial literatures. I would like to focus now on a sample of oral lore already recorded, translated and published.

War remains a motif in these epics which today's readers can learn from because armed conflicts have continued to this day and, in these times may break out anytime, too.

The cause of conflicts from these epics and in real, contemporary times may be summarized as: love triangles, domestic issues, *rido* or clan wars, boundary disputes, expansion of territories or land grabbing, kidnappings, and the settlement of leadership issues.

One thing that keeps the reader happy in some of the episodes of pre-colonial epics is the fact that, unlike the real, armed conflicts where people die, the characters in these epics have a chance to escape our world, they do not go hungry and they do not die.

With a few sprinkles of the fragrant oils for example, fires are quenched and they allow the warriors to live again; or, from the Subanen epic, "Ag Tobig Neg Keboklagan", the god Asog observes from his heavenly abode,

a battle for supremacy between various factions of the same group. When many of the warriors lay dead, Asog descends to earth and breathes life into the dead heroes who live again. Each hero is given a wife and the earth experiences lasting peace. To paraphrase Rainwater, solidarity is established and the people are empowered to lead productive lives.

Or, when souls of heroes are trapped in flutes or in bottles in the hearts of dragons or in shelves in some room in heaven, their wives journey to search for them. Once found, these flutes or bottles are either opened or smashed to free these souls. Mist from the bottle flows into the hero's body reviving him like what happened to Bantugan of the *Darangen* who, afterwards, goes about his mythic life within the epic world.

The quest for, and the struggle to keep the peace is perhaps, as old as the island Mindanao itself. We listen or read how the early peoples have dealt and coped with conflicts, how these were resolved in their own way using the wisdom of their ancestors passed on from generation to generation.

### **Sample: The Dream of Begyasan**

In one episode "The Dream of Begyasan" from the epic *Ulahingan* of the Arumanen-Livunganen Manobo of Central Mindanao collected by Elena G. Maquiso, the warriors anticipate war after the king Begyasan is warned in his dream that an enemy will come to invade his kingdom.

Once Begyasan confirms this warning to the warriors who have gathered in the *torogan*, they begin to boast of their might shouting or speaking loudly that they would vanquish the enemy not with swords or javelins, but with their bare hands. Begyasan quiets them and commands all to put on their battle gear to defend themselves in order to establish peace once more in the land.

From here I will give you the concluding parts of the summary (pages 9-10) of the 4th, 996-line episode (pages 90-91) both quoted verbatim from Series 3 of the *Ulahingan*. The episode was sung by Pasid Mampayanang and collected by the late Maquiso and her team sometime in the early 1990s in Central Mindanao.

### Summary

He (Begyasan) instructs Nebeyew to look out of the window. True enough, Nebeyew sees signs: a shadow blocking the sun, throwing everything into darkness. The frogs begin croaking, much to everyone's consternation. The shadow nears and it turns out to be a lone warrior, black as an iron pot and so tall and huge that it is difficult to see his face.

The invader issues a challenge which is accepted with courtesy. A long battle ensues between the men of Yendang and this lone warrior combatant. The countless warriors of the kingdom are no match to him, he grabs them by the handful and gobbles them up. Eventually he gets hold of Dumiwatag Ayamen and begins to chew him up, too, but Ayamen turns himself into rocks and when the giant insists on chewing him, he bursts into flame.

Dumiwatag Ayamen then brings out the valiant shield and sets it up as a defense. The giant invader does the same thing. The shields form an enclosure of rocks protecting one from the other. They take turns battering the ramparts and that they could no longer withstand the battery. The rocks explode and the giant warrior disappears. In his place they see a fleet of boats full of warriors under the command of a white-haired guyhuyunan and two of his menendul.

The fighting resumes and the heroes of Yendang find themselves in chains. Ayamen knows that the only way to turn the tide of battle is to get hold of the magical vessel in the keeping of the maiden watching the events from her seat up in the clouds. But this maiden is well-guarded by an eagle who sees every act of the mortals below. Ayamen is equally tricky. He thinks of ways to get to the maiden; he transforms himself into lightning, but each attempt is discovered by the eagle. In the face of this quandary, Ayamen decides to consult his spirit guardian. He falls into a trance and the spirit comes to him. He advises the hero to wave the *tubaw* of the *sixty* in front of the eagle. Ayamen instantly knows the strategy by waving the *tubaw* before the eagle's eyes, he could induce the bird into a hypnotic trance. Then he could make a grab of the the magical *tabyew*.

*\* from pages 9-10*

The strategy works. At the time, the invading army begins the dance of victory and the Yendang warriors could no longer unshackle themselves. In their efforts to escape, they burst into flame which becomes so widespread that it threatens to overrun the whole kingdom. Ayamen, who now holds the flask, throws the contents on the spreading fire.

The flames are quickly quenched, the truth is revealed. The black villain is the honored ancestor who has come to teach the people about the ways of war and peace, the very same white-haired chieftain who has come with the fleet of warriors. The wisdom he imparts to them proclaims that peace is better than war, but that if the kingdom were threatened by an enemy, the warriors must defend it, not by their boasting, but by the might of their arms.

I will end this paper with a quotation from lines 2490-2513 of the episode, “The Dream of Begyasan” – the reminder to remember tribal ancestors and ancestral wisdom for us to reflect on and bring back the Dickensian “en-courageable times of cheers and hope”:

2490    This counsel ever alive; \*  
          Do not doubt ancestral wisdom.  
          When you are assailed by problems,  
          To you who are out of our own tribe,  
          The lore of old is a lamp.  
          Those of us who reside here  
          May someday face great trouble,  
          Our spirits may be too fragile  
          To face the tedious trials.  
          Recall it then to your mind

2500    Name them all back, my people.  
          Repeat the words to yourself,  
          They will return, the old ones,

*\* from pages 90-91*

Restore to their wisdom  
Your own personal being;  
Wherever you desire to go,  
Carry it in your travels.  
Never forgetting it ever,  
Serving thus as our parents.  
Our ever-present guidance;

2510    Whatever roads we traverse.  
          We should not ignore it truly  
          Especially in our times,  
          These days of our present lives.

- End -

## Works Cited

- An Lim, Jaime and Christine Godinez Ortega. *Mindanao Harvest 2: An Anthology of Contemporary Writing*. New Day Publishers, 1996.
- Alvarez, Fatimah Joy S. *Images of Mindanaoans and the Literary Devices that Shape Them in Poems and Short Stories by Mindanaoan Writers*. Masteral Thesis. MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology, 2014.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature*. Routledge, 1991.
- Godinez-Ortega, Christine. Ed. *About Us: Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> Iligan National Writers Workshop*. MSU-IIT OVCRE, 2009.
- Puno, Nancy Fe M. "Mindanao Resistance Writing: Reinscriptions of Cultural Identity in Mindanao Postcolonial Prose Fiction." In *Langkit*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2006, 1-27.
- Lumbera, Bienvenido. "Young Writers Dream of Going Canonical." In *Sanghaya 2001 Philippine Art & Culture Yearbook*. National Commission for Culture and Arts, 2001.
- Maquiso, Elena G. 1992. *Ulahingan: An Epic of the Southern Philippines*. Ser. 3. 1992. "The Dream of Begyasan." Silliman University Press, 1992.
- Rainwater, Catherine. *Dreams of Fiery Stars*. University of Philadelphia Press, 1999.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books, 1994.
- Turner, Mark & Lulu Respall Turner. "Introduction: Images of Mindanao" In *Mindanao: Land of Unfulfilled Promise*. Mark Turner, R.J. May and Lulu Respall Turner, eds. New Day Publishers, 1991.
- Yusuf, Imtiyaz and Lars Peter Schmidt. *Understanding Conflict and Approaching Peace in Southern Thailand*. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2006.