

## Everyday Peace among Muslims and Christians in Iligan City

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### Abstract

While the armed conflict has occurred since around 1970 in the Southern Philippines, Muslims and Christians in the southern Philippines have developed diverse and dynamic relationships at all levels of society on the macro, local, and micro-local levels. This paper examines the everyday practices of ordinary people, including daily interaction among neighbors, Muslim converts who try to maintain good relations with their Christian families, and the fluctuation of identity in inter-marriage families to re-evaluate them as "everyday peace<sup>1</sup>." This paper argues that such practices can re-interpret and challenge the rigid identity and the sense of "we" and "they" constructed through the past violent events and historical discourses. Neuman (2010) argues that identity formation at the community level can be an alternative to identity at the national level. For example, the identity regarding peace and conflict in Southern Philippines is discursively constructed into three rigid categories; Christian settler, Moro, and non-Muslim Indigenous People (IP). In contrast, at the community level, a more flexible and cooperative identity is formed based on the needs of security, welfare, and development of the community. In Neuman's case, the mayor of the municipality and NGOs played a significant role. However, even though community

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<sup>1</sup> According to Mac Ginty, everyday peace is the routinized practices used by individuals and collectives as they navigate their way through life in a deeply divided society that may suffer from ethnic or religious cleavages and be prone to episodic direct violence in addition to chronic or structural violence (Mac Ginty 2014: 549).

leaders and CSOs are not leading such alternative identity formation, we can see the efforts of "everyday peace" in people's daily lives. Therefore, this paper sheds light on people's informal, impromptu, and sometimes unavoidable responses to the problems at particular moments<sup>2</sup>, which are different from official peace activities led by the ideal concept, such as "harmonious coexistence." The argument in this paper can also connect with "an ethic of cohabitation" which Judith Butler suggests in the text of critique of Zionism. Butler explains that the ethic can be a foundation of a performative response to the other that gradually disturbs and changes a rigid and homogeneous national identity (Butler 2013).

### History and Discourse

From the historical perspective, Muslim-Christian Relations in Southern Philippines have been formed and represented through colonial experience and discourses of conflicts. Since the American colonial period, Christian settlers from North and Western Philippines to Mindanao have increased, and the Muslim population has become a minority (Pendleton 1942). Conflicts toward land ownership were rooted in this moment (Silva 1979).

In the 1970s, Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) started the armed struggle for independence. Also, election-related violence and polarization through evacuation occurred (George 1980, Gomez 2000). Even after ARMM was founded in 1990, armed clashes between Islamic rebel groups and the national army occurred several times after 2000. These events contributed to the formation of an aggressive representation of Muslim-Christian relations.

Iligan is a Christian dominant and highly industrial city, but the city has been affected by these historical experiences and discourses. According to the 2010 census, Iligan's population was 321,156, of which 89.7 percent were Christian (with 79.3 percent being Catholic), 9.5 percent Muslim, and 0.8 percent maintaining the animism of the indigenous tribes. Since Muslims make up 5.6 percent of the national

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<sup>2</sup> Mac Ginty points out that everyday peace has an inconsistent nature and it is often fragmentary and episodic, on display at particular moments (Mac Ginty 2021: 19).

population, statistically speaking, the proportion of Muslims in Iligan is only 4 percent higher than the national average. However, living in the city, one gets the sense that 30–40 percent of its inhabitants are Muslims. Perhaps this is because many Muslims from neighboring areas temporarily live in Iligan due to its higher education and employment opportunities. Among the more than 10 Muslim ethnic groups in the Philippines, Maranaos are the majority in Iligan.

In Iligan, one of the most vivid moments in which Muslims and Christians were polarized happened in 2008. In Iligan City, an opposition movement was raised against the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MoA-AD) which determined a new autonomous region, the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE). During that time, tensions between Muslims and Christians increased<sup>3</sup>.

Based on this experience, NGOs/CSOs in Iligan started networking with each other and organizing frequent peace activities, mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians, and grassroots consultations in local communities. While These activities are significant for mitigating prejudice and preventing polarization, NGO peacebuilding programs tend to be idealistic, which is different from the complex reality on the ground, as Mac Ginty pointed out. Thus this paper focuses on the everyday practices at the micro-level.

### **Space for Cohabitation**

Iligan is a religious-ethnic mixed space where diverse residents live side by side. Muslims in Iligan are mostly Maranao people who traditionally believe in Islam and originated from the Lanao regions. Christians called Bisaya are the descendants of settlers who migrated to Mindanao from the other areas of the Philippines. They are the majority of the population of Iligan. In addition, Muslim converts from Christians called Balik-Islam have been increasing since the 1970s. Also, intermarriages between Bisayan Christians and Muslim Maranaos frequently occur. The children of intermarriage are called half Maranao, half Christian, or Mestizo/Mestiza.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with NGO workers and researchers in Iligan City (January, 2020).

Among the Barangays in Iligan, in the population-dense areas where the Muslim population is relatively high, Muslims and Christians live side by side in both communities of deprived people and residential communities for the Middle-class. Aside from residential spaces, there are many opportunities to meet each other such as schools and working spaces.

During my fieldwork, I lived with a Maranao family in a depressed community. In that community, I observed practices between Muslims and Christians, such as supporting sick neighbors, borrowing and lending money and items, sharing side dishes, and cooperating during the disaster.

In the community, Muslims and Christians remain cautious. They were even backbiting each other like... "Christians are alcoholic and drug addict"/"Muslims are less educated, they have no discipline." However, I was surprised that even though they usually gossip with each other, they quickly help the neighbor if he/she has a problem. Probably this is a kind of survival strategy for poor people, but as a result, they form diverse relationships through daily interactions.

In these relationships, sometimes impromptu intimate contact can happen. I introduce one episode. A Muslim family's landlord (he is a Christian man) needed a lower leg amputation because of the complication of Diabetes. The landlord wants to mortgage the house to make money for the medical operation. So, the Muslim family had to choose whether to give him a certain amount of money or leave their home.

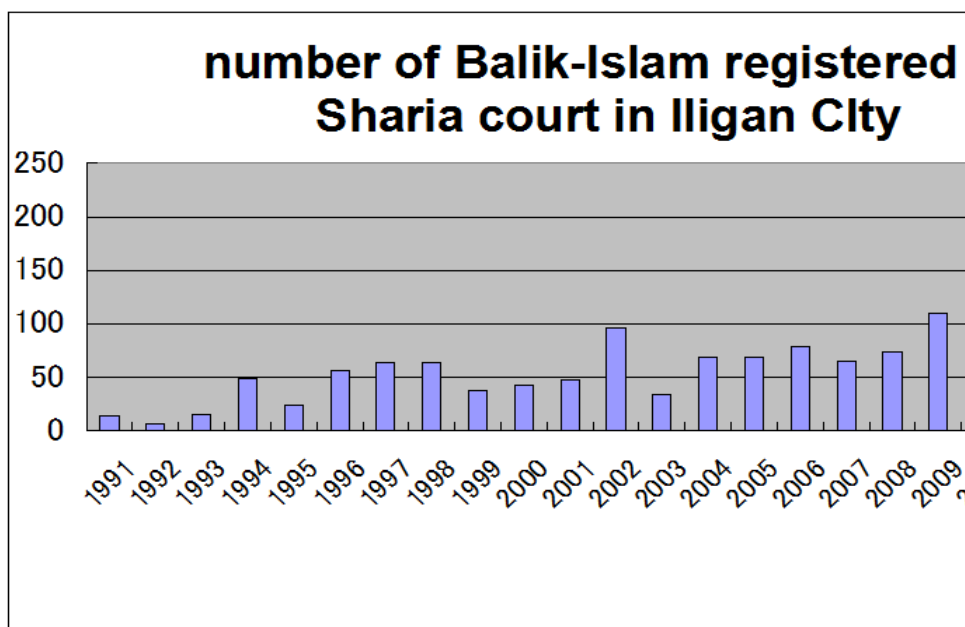
One day, the Muslim family (wife and husband) visited the landlord's house. His leg is black and already necrotic. Seeing the landlord, The Muslim wife and husband sympathized with the pain of the landlord. The Muslim wife touched the necrotic part and asked about his health condition. "Is this part painful...? Why did not become black in this finger...?"

The Muslim wife, husband, and the landlord did not interpret nor put a special meaning on their body contact. For the author, it seemed like an unintentional response to the wound and pain of others. At this

moment, the discourse on Muslim-Christian relations and gender norms was suspended.

### Balik-Islam being In Between and Nexus

Next, this paper focuses on the everyday peace practice of Balik-Islam based on their position as "in-between." Both in the local dialect Cebuano and the Filipino national language, *Balik* means "return" or "go/come back to the former place." Thus, the name "Balik-Islam" refers to their belief that their first and original religion is Islam (Lacar 2001). There are reportedly 220,000 Balik-Islam individuals in the Philippines (Angeles 2011: 158). Although they are often represented as "extremists," "hard-liners," and even "terrorists,"<sup>4</sup> Balik-Islam people in Iligan made efforts to maintain good relations with their Christian families and friends as they stand in-between Muslims and Christians.



**Fig.1 Source: Sharia court in Iligan**

<sup>4</sup> For example, Borer *et al.* 2009.

Fig.1 shows a newly registered number of Balik-Islam per year<sup>5</sup>. There are four prominent organizations of Balik-Islam in Iligan. Among them, the Balik-Islam Society in Southern Philippines (BLISSPhil) is the oldest one, founded in 1986. In the seminar, every Sunday, about 30 to 40 people participate in listening to the sermon of religious leaders.

Regarding Muslim-Christian relations, what is important is that Balik-Islam and many Christians are aware of the difference between the two religions not as an exclusive dichotomy but as being connected as a 'path to happiness'.

In the strategy of Balik-Islam missionary seminar, they emphasize the continuity of Christianity and Islam. They insist that Islam shares the same world views with Christianity, such as One God, Heaven and Hell, while they appeal to a superiority of Islam based on the content of the Bible. For example, they say Islam is more authentic because they pray for one God, Allah, than Christianity teaches Trinity. They also explain that the practices of Muslims are closer to those of Christ and the Virgin Mary. For example, Christ did fasting for forty days and the virgin Mary also wore a veil, just like Muslims do. Interestingly, Christians who are more conscious of the content of Bible tend to be more interested in the teaching of Balik Islam.

On the other hand, many people converted without much concern for the doctrine. I met some cases.

In the missionary seminar of Balik-Islam, four older people were taught the obligations of Muslims, such as fasting and zakat. But these elderlies did not seem serious in listening to the explanation. and one of them grumbled, "That's all enough, but I'm already old; I can't do fasting" and she said, "I know I can go to heaven if I become Muslim, so I want to hurry up and convert." Another woman told me that after confession of faith, "I cannot do fasting because of my age, but I'm happy now because I'm finally free." Their comments indicate

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that this number is not reflected in the actual number of individuals who converted to Islam, because they usually do not register their conversion. In my interview, the people need registration if they go to Hajj (the pilgrimage) to Mecca to obtain a certificate proving the person is a Muslim.

that hope to be happy both in life and after death is the common motivation among people seeking "true religion." I observed that people in the research field shared that value regardless of their religion. This common sense may help the coexistence of the beliefs at the base.

Balik-Islam people sometimes have friction with their family members who remain Christian. If they cannot make a complete agreement, they try to find a compromise to settle it.

One Balik-Islam woman, Mariam, came into conflict with her Christian family over her mother's funeral. Her mother had also converted to Islam at Mariam's suggestion, but her Christian brothers got angry and didn't accept it. Consequently, a Christian funeral was conducted but mixed with an Islamic style. When I entered the house of Mariam, while the white Christian coffin was decorated with flowers and photographs, there were Islamic ornaments on the room's walls. While her brothers invited the priest to perform the mass on Sunday, Maryam held an Islamic missionary seminar on another day. On the day of burial, after arriving at the Christian cemetery, Mariam persuaded her brothers to allow a sermon by a leader of Balik-Islam, a former pastor. Christian relatives and neighbors were also listening to him. In this way, the difference between the two religions arises.

Although Mariam and her Christian families cannot make a complete agreement, it is necessary to make as many adjustments as possible and practice mixed ceremonies to avoid breaking family relations.

### **Foregrounding and Blurring Difference through Intermarriages**

Inter-religious marriage also brings about the same situation. In Iligan, most intermarriages are between Christian women and Muslim men. We can see the gendered norms in this situation. In Islam, a Muslim man can marry a woman of a different faith if she is a "People of the Book," meaning Christian or Jew. Of the twenty couples I interviewed, half of the wives had converted to Islam for the marriage, and in the remained couples, women preserved their faiths. In the opposite combination, a Muslim woman can marry a Christian man if the man converts to Islam before marriage in the Islamic

teaching. But in reality, the norms of Maranao hardly permit the marriage between a Maranao-Muslim woman and a Christian man.

In the case of marriage between Muslim men and Christian women, the couples tend to emphasize their relations are based on love without boundaries. In their narratives, a boy and a girl just met each other, fell in love, and married. For example, asked how the relationship began, they answered, "We met around the Billiard table, and directly I got pregnant." "I'm with him because I just feel lonely." "We were classmates, became girlfriend and boyfriend, then married."

One of the backgrounds of this situation is that there are various opportunities to meet each other, as already explained. In addition, law systems regarding marital relations are plural and can be flexible. Spouses can apply the Civil Code, the Muslim Personal Code, Islamic law (Sharia), and customary law appropriately, depending on their situation.

Although marriage between Muslim men and Christian women is framed as a "natural marriage" and free from the bind of religious differences, the moments when rigid identity comes into the foreground can happen after marriage. For example, Choosing children's religion can be a problematic issue. One Christian wife said, "I wanted my child to be baptized, but my husband did not like it. I explained that when a child is baptized, he gets many sponsors. My husband was crying when we talked about it, but eventually, he accepted it".

Also, when a spouse (in most cases husband) became religiously devoted, the difference in religion became a point of contention. I observe that some Christian wives had remained in their faith for several years, then converted to Islam ten or more years after marriage. One woman told me, "After my mother-in-law died, my husband suddenly became religiously devoted, and he influenced me, and eventually I converted to Islam." In these moments, they must be conscious of each other's religious affiliation and re-identify their relationship as an "inter-religious marriage."

In such moments, people practice an ambiguous implementation to avoid serious confrontation. One Balik-Islam man converted to



Islam after his children were born, while his wife is still Christian. His children were baptized according to their grandparent's wishes. They attend mass on Sundays and Islamic prayers on Fridays. The Balik-Islam man wants to give his children knowledge about both religions and allow them to choose freely. That means he is postponing the decision to avoid conflicts with their grandparents.

One woman, a child of intermarriage, has an ambiguous identity. When asked if she is Muslim or Christian, she said she did not know. She explains her faith in this way. "I think there is no difference between Muslims and Christians apart from the method of prayer. I pray when I want to pray every day I reflect on my actions, thanks to God and ask for better things to come." Her interpretation of faith might come from the painful experience of her family. Because this woman wishes for good family relationships, she tries to make her religious affiliation as ambiguous as possible. Ambiguous implementation connects elements of different religions and preserves choice. They try to make multiple faiths coexist within a family to resist the pressure to choose one. They are examples of practicing the ambiguous way of religious affiliation and identity.

A Christian woman who married a Muslim Maranao man also performed an ambiguous and fluctuated identity. After twenty years of marriage, the husband became religiously devoted. She started putting a hijab on her shoulder after she learned the teaching of Islam from her husband. In the teaching of Islam, a woman must wear a hijab on her head and cover all her hair. But this woman did not want to do that until she felt comfortable. She gradually changed her attire and converted to Islam after several years.

This case means the woman preserved an ambiguous religious affiliation and identity. In my fieldwork, I met some people saying, "I'm a Christian, but I join Islamic fasting (Ramadan) with my Muslim companions." In other cases, a Balik-Islam woman said, "I made a confession of Islam, but I just stopped practicing." Like her, people who stopped Islamic practice are called "Balik-Christitan." And there are people like "Balik-Balik" meaning back and forth between Muslim and Christian.

## **Polygamy as a Crisis of Relation**

Polygamy is one of the biggest problems that does not allow ambiguous implementation and may cause a breakdown in the family. Regarding family laws in the Philippines, Muslim men can have up to four wives, based on the Code of Muslim Personal Laws. Only one wife is allowed if an interreligious marriage is registered on the Civil Code. However, polygamy is possible if the marriage is legalized by Muslim Personal Laws or /and the marriage is legitimated by the Islamic wedding. From a religious perspective, the first condition of legitimated polygamy is to obtain the first wife's consent. In addition, all wives and children must be treated equally - provided with meals, clothes, education, and time and affection.

For Christians, in general, polygamy is one of the negative preconceptions that Christians have of Muslims. Many Christian women married to Muslims say that even if they can adjust to practices of Islam, such as eating habits and worship, they never accept polygamy.

However, in Islam and Maranao society, the idea of emphasizing the advantages of polygamy persists. If one has many wives, his relatives can expand family relationships and strengthen social power in the area. It can be evidence of status as a wealthy, successful, and attractive man. Also, polygamy may have religious rewards. For example, if a man marries a widow to give her economic support and his first wife tolerates polygamy, both will get religious rewards. Because of such a difference in perception regarding polygamy, it can cause a conflict in a family.

Let's see how inter-religious marriage couples deal with the difficulty—this paper focuses on the experience of two women. Case 1 woman married a Maranao Muslim man. Their married relationship was good. But after her husband married a second wife, he became cold to her and their child. This woman started divorce procedures and said, "He is terrible because he marries another woman without consulting me. His relatives say I should accept it, but I can't stand

being with him." This woman thinks his attitude is not due to Islam or his personality, but it is an issue with male-dominated Maranao culture.

Case 2 woman was shocked when she found out that her husband had married a woman who was about twenty years younger than him. Her husband told his parents about his second marriage but did not consult his first wife. However, the woman started to learn the teaching of Islam to understand her husband's behavior somehow. After a few months, she converted to Islam. While they attended an Islamic seminar together, her husband also started concentrating on religious activity. She says her husband's polygamy was a painful experience, but there is also a positive aspect that both became devout Muslims.

For Christian women, polygamy forces them to choose between finding their husband and Islam as difficult to accept or internalizing their husband's and Islam's values more deeply. Polygamy can trigger broken family relations and strengthen the dichotomy between Christians "who reject polygamy" and the Muslims "that accept it." However, as Case 1 woman emphasized, she considered the cause of her divorce was not Islam. Still, the male-dominated Maranao culture, religion but also ethnic group, and gender are applied in discourses on otherizing the incompatible difference.

Her narrative can be interpreted as sliding and pluralizing the difference to prevent one difference from becoming absolute and static. It is crucial for promoting this everyday peace to have conscious of the intersecting voices and reactions regarding polygamy. The author observed many Maranao people insisted that having only one wife is preferable, citing the verse of the Quran. Some Maranao women also reject polygamy when they are directly affected. One Maranao woman told me she did not accept her husband marrying a second woman. She was trying to separate them. Her husband goes to the second wife's house every Monday but must return home at 3 PM for fear of the first wife.

In addition, the women of Balik-Islam are trying to understand polygamy as devoted believers, but deep inside, they find it hard to accept.

One day, I visited a Maranao man's house with a Balik-Islam group. The Maranao man said he had three wives. Surprisingly his first wife and second wife were chatting like friends. The Balik-Islam women were all shocked. One said, "This would be impossible for me; I'd be jealous. I would never allow it" Another woman said, "A true Muslim wife must help her husband. And if he marries a widow or a poor woman, his action has the value of charity". But at the same time, she added, "My husband is young, so he may take another woman and abandon me. If that happens, let the Islamic experts judge his actions."

The Balik-Islam women fear polygamy. They rely on the fact that Islam does not always allow polygamy in its doctrine. In this way, the ideas of Muslims regarding polygamy also vary according to gender, ethnicity, the degree to which it affects them, etc. Since there is such "sliding and pluralizing difference" in Iligan, while discourses including hostility and prejudice are actively exchanged, daily peace is maintained without any one difference destroying crucial relationships.

## **Conclusion**

This paper showed three fields of everyday peace in Iligan. First is a neighborhood in mixed communities. There are mutual help and interaction based on daily needs and empathy for the vulnerable other. The second field is the belief and practices of Balik-Islam. They practice mixed ways of rituals and create opportunities to encounter Muslims and Christians. The third is the dynamism of identity toward intermarriage, which can be both flexible and rigid. Marriage between Muslim men and Christian women seems to be just a "natural" marriage, free from the bind of religious differences. After marriage, however, the spouses and children are pressed to identify how to be "Muslim" or "Christian," responding to the gaze from the outside. They try to handle the problems to avoid severe conflicts through a strategy such as "ambiguous implementation" and "sliding and pluralizing difference."

In the Southern Philippines peace and conflict studies, the economic/political structure analysis is becoming mainstream instead

of focusing on religious and ethnic differences. This paper argues that the issue of identity does not come into the foreground (at least in recent years) because of the practices which re-interpret the dichotomous differences at the micro-local level. As shown in this paper, we should re-evaluate the significance of ordinary people's informal and impromptu daily practices as well as the official peace process and CSO's peace activities.

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