

Headline: On extreme weather events and conflict (1)

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General Santos City—I am in recuperating mode here, after a relapse of a knee injury from tripping over an old wooden staircase of a municipal hall while doing fieldwork for a research project. This exploratory project looks at the nexus of violent conflict and extreme weather events in selected low-lying areas in Maguindanao province, with United States Institute for Peace funding.

A small team of researchers, led by Dr. Laurence L. Delina, professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, is implementing this small but significant project, in which I am the local social research specialist. My main responsibility in this project is gathering field-based data through qualitative means like community-focused group discussions and key informant interviews with regional and local policymakers, social development practitioners, and leaders of local civil society organizations.

It is small since it covers selected “catch-basin” areas in the central part of Maguindanao, notably the municipalities of Datu Piang, Rajah Buayan, and Pagalungan. But it is significant in the sense that it delves into the intersectionality of extreme weather events and armed conflict, something that has just stirred the interest of researchers and donor agencies alike.

Later this month, I will be writing a series of columns on this research project's results.

Doing fieldwork for this project was like a homecoming journey for me. More than four decades ago, I stayed in Datu Piang temporarily for about three months to do fieldwork for my first graduate thesis on a cultural aspect of Maguindanao culture— their folklore. I struggled to speak Magindanawn then, as required of cultural anthropology students like me. Before that, I contacted some leading gatekeepers of Magindanawn culture, engaging them in semiguided conversations and free-flowing discussions not only on my research topic but on almost any aspect of life with my conversation partners. In Magindanawn, this type of narrative sharing is termed binabasal—from the word babasal, Magindanawn for squash. As we all know, the squash vine can go anywhere there is sunlight and space for it; this is the basis for a conversation that can lead to almost any topic under the sun, weather and time permitting.

Last December 2021 was my first visit after 44 years. I noticed Datu Piang still holds that old charm that drew my anthropological curiosity enough to make it and the entire province and now, the autonomous region where Maguindanao belongs, as my core geographical area of research interest. But it pains me to think that the older versions of the people and teenagers I met during the late 1970s are still where they are, living in their small houses, built now on pools of stagnant water. In the barangay where I did most of the fieldwork, a few houses with some concrete structures (like walls and floors) are already in place. But these are of families with members working abroad as domestic help or those who have secured some government positions in the local government unit (in the población). A few of them have recently benefited from some government largesse, whether legally or otherwise.

Local officials in Datu Piang have changed over the years, but the quality of life for most impoverished people there has remained the same.

Residents of barangay Damabalas face a serious environmental problem that can probably lead to community tensions and eventually, conflict. It is the town's garbage dumpsite, an area of about 15

meters wide, surrounded by four small marshes. For almost a decade now, the solid wastes of the entire town of Datu Piang are dumped on one side of the barangay road that traverses Damabalas. On the day of my first revisit, I saw the mound of solid waste incinerated. It emitted a foul odor from the different solid wastes strewn all over that small space (about 10-15 meters wide), plastics, baby diapers, and carcasses of dogs and cats.

When I asked one informant about this, he said, quite dispassionately, "oh, the municipal government has paid for the rent of the use of the land as the dumpsite, so there is no problem."

(To be continued)

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