Language and *Maratabat*: A Potential Source of Ethnic Conflict

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Abstract

In almost all societies, people find the speech of others an irresistible target of criticism. This study aimed to analyze how use of terms in a linguistic context can be a source of conflict between Maranaos and Bisaya-speaking residents in Iligan City and Cagayan de Oro City. Data were gathered using the qualitative method of research specifically face-to-face in-depth interviews involving 20 respondents. The findings revealed that when Bisaya-speaking locals hear individuals speak Maranao language they become cautious and distrustful. The Maranaos shared the same reaction. Both groups tend to withdraw and avoid possible interaction for fear of being misunderstood and offensive. This study documented words used and the circumstances surrounding the utterances of the said words that violated the *maratabat* of Maranaos. *Maratabat* is the Maranaos' deep sense of personal honor, dignity, self-esteem, and reputation. This is one aspect that makes them different from the other ethnic groups in Southern Philippines. This study concluded that language can be a source of conflict for the Maranaos especially when their *maratabat* that gives them a sense of pride and honor is violated.

Keywords: Language, *maratabat*, ethnic conflict, interpretive phenomenological analysis

Introduction

As societies grow increasingly multicultural and globalization leads to increasing interaction of contacts across societies, differences become more prominent. Ironically, the more the international system resembles a global community, the more opportunity there is for abrasion. Contact promotes not only understanding but also conflict. A good point at which to start a linguistic and cultural exercise of this kind is the commonplace observation that the meaning of a word is lodged within the way of life and outlook of the society that speaks it. By "meaning," it refers to reference, usage, and connotations, not just dictionary definition. Languages do not exist in isolation as abstract systems

of signs but within unique, organic habitats, complex ecologies of sensibility and interaction. Coupland, Sarangani, and Candlin (2014) emphasized that social life presents itself as having a set of social categories including linguistic biases and stereotypes that influence social interactions that may sometimes lead to conflict. This is another way of saying that language and culture are inseparable; language reflects culture, and culture is reproduced by language. Over the years, studies have shown that linguistic differences may have social significance (Kristiansen, 2001) and that language plays a significant role in empowering members of society and in their ability to participate in issues of public concern (Jayaweera, 2012).

In almost all societies, people find the speech of others an irresistible target of criticism. Such is the case between the Maranao and Bisaya interaction. Literally, Maranao means people of the lake. Their homeland is called Lanao which means lake. The Maranao group of language speakers is considered as the second largest non-Christian community in the Philippines. According to Maranda (2009), they are traditional people identified as a distinct linguistic group processing a culture preserved through the centuries. Like other ethnic groups in Mindanao, the Maranaos are considered courageous in protecting and preserving their values and traditions (Fardejah, 2017). In the Philippine Human Development Report (2005), it was revealed that due to armed conflict, families had been uprooted and one-fifth to one-third of major Muslim tribes now live in areas outside their ancestral homelands.

Moreover, Maranaos have managed to maintain a closed society over the years. They have a deep sense of personal honor, dignity, self-esteem, and reputation called *maratabat*. This is one aspect that makes them different from the other ethnic groups in Southern Philippines. In Galban's (2017) interview with Prof. Aminoding B. Limpao and Faridah D. Alango of Mindanao State University-Marawi, it was revealed that *maratabat* is a "mental construct" or a "concept" that can be considered as the key to understanding Maranao culture. This is particularly captured in the following lines:

> *… it is the maratabat that drives every Maranao to protect every member of his or her clan, preserve the family honor or from physical or mental harm. It is the Maranao maratabat that leaves them no choice but to observe strict Islamic laws and family traditions, including pre-arranged marriages, giving and fixing of dowry and the like. To the Maranaos, maratabat is part of every Muslim's way of life. We are useless without our maratabat.*

The term *maratabat* is an Arab loan word which means rank, status and respect ascribed to a particular rank or status. According to Reimer (cited in Maranda, 2009), the Maranaos have carried the concept beyond its Arabic sense and have expanded the meaning "rank" to sensitivity about rank; from "prestige" to seeking after prestige; from "status" to status honor and status enhancement. When *maratabat* is offended even to a degree by a non-Maranao and might be regarded as trivial, retribution is demanded and can easily take violent forms. The technical term for offended *maratabat* is "boring a *maratabat*" or soiled honor or besmirched pride.

Studies documenting and analysing conflicts in Mindanao gave more emphasis on the three Muslim insurgents: the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the Abu Sayyaf which is one of the most violent jihadist groups in Mindanao. Abu Sayyaf means "bearer of the sword" and it is most known for kidnapping for ransom, and for attacking the military and even civilians. Others focused on clan conflicts in Mindanao involving *rido*.

Of particular interest is the study of Kamlian (2005). It covers the magnitude of clan conflicts in Mindanao. It focuses on specific cases of conflict, the underlying factors of the conflict, circumstances surrounding the conflict, its interaction with state-related conflicts, and the potential for conflict resolution. Likewise, Durante, Gomez, Sevilla, and Mañego (2005) did a study that aimed to comprehend *rido* particularly its nature and occurrence. It investigated the causes, destructive expressions, settlement patterns, and key stakeholders' recommendations relative to *rido*.

Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored on the principle that "certain behavioural propensities, including the capacity for aggression, are common to virtually all humans. This does not mean that they are genetically determined…humans have a capacity to be both aggressive and altruistic…the behaviour shown depends on a host of developmental, experiential, social and circumstantial factors (Hinde, 1997). In this case, one factor considered is language specifically the words used that violate one's *maratabat* or sense of pride and honor.

Furthermore, social psychological theory about social identity and intergroup conflict (Tajfel, 1979) lends support to this study. Experiments find that in-group preference (ethnocentrism) is derivesd from social categorization as such, even without competition, hostility or rejection of other groups. Self-esteem, social identity, and ethnocentrism are validated in social interactions with like-minded persons. When group membership becomes salient in conflict, social boundaries sharpen, individual relations across groups become depersonalized and stereotyped.

Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (2006) cited Lockwood (1964) who developed a distinction, implicit in Marxism, between 'system' and 'social' conflict. System conflict occurs when institutions are not in harmony. For instance, the political subsystem pursues policies which conflict with the needs of the economic subsystem. Social conflict is interpersonal and occurs only within social interactions. It is this type of conflict that this study delved into.

Humans have some primary needs such as food, shelter, sexual satisfaction, protection and so on. The satisfaction of such needs require adaptation of some techniques and means for growing or finding and distributing food. It also requires the construction of dwelling and the establishment of heterosexual relation. In addition to the primary needs there exists secondary need which is the need for communication and language. In order to enhance cooperation and control conflict, social norms and social sanctions are deemed necessary (Malinowski, 1962, pp. 132-33). If primary and secondary needs are analyzed in the context of the means of their realization, one would conclude that human beings are social beings.

Objective of the Study

This study then aimed at understanding how language can be a source of conflict between Maranaos and Bisaya-speaking residents in the two key cities in Northern Mindanao. Since interaction is inevitable between the two groups, this study documented words used that violated the *maratabat* of Maranaos and the surrounding circumstances where those words were spoken.

Methodology

Research Design. This study made use of the qualitative method of research involving face-to-face in-depth interviews with the participants. According to Hollway and Jefferson (2000), face-to-face interview is one of the most common types of qualitative research method employed to determine contextualized experiences of the individuals and the meanings attached to it.

Participants of the Study. Twenty Maranaos who gave their informed consent comprised the participants of the study. They were those who had encounters with the Bisaya-speaking locals and had their *maratabat* slighted during the interaction. Rubrico (2006), a consultant for Philippine languages, stressed that Bisaya and Binisaya can be used interchangeably to mean the language the Mindanao people use. People from Mindanao refrain using Cebuano as they consider this the language from Cebu. Hence, it was maintained to use the term Bisaya-speaking locals in this study.

This served as part of the criteria for identifying the participants of the study. They represented both sexes aged 21 to 50 years old. They were chosen by means of the key informant technique and snowball sampling.

Data Gathering Procedure. Data were gathered using the interview guide designed to elicit the respondents' experience on how language can be a source of conflict between Maranaos and Bisaya-speaking residents in Iligan City and Cagayan de Oro City. However, prior to the interviews, the researchers first sought the participants' Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) where the objective of the study was clearly explained to them including how the data would be processed, stored, and accessed. They were also informed of their right to refuse to respond to any question that would make them uncomfortable.

Data Analysis. The data generated from the interviews were subjected to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) deemed appropriate for the purpose of this study. IPA is concerned with the analysis of how the participants make sense and meaning of their life experiences (Smith, 2009). It is then a phenomenological approach that focuses on "exploring experience in its own terms." It is also interpretive considering that the researchers tried to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Context is important in applying this approach and it does not intend to make premature generalizations about the larger population. It, however, arrives at general claims after the careful analysis of individual cases. As what Smith (2009) emphasizes, "delving deeper into the particular also takes us closer to the universal."

Results and Discussion

The results and its discussions revolved

around two central themes namely: Maranao stereotypes and *maratabat* and anti-Muslim bias and *maratabat*. Maranao stereotype refers to a commonly held image of the Maranaos while the anti-Muslim bias means the prejudices against the Muslim Maranaos. The implications of the results to the possibility of an ethnic conflict are discussed at the end of this section.

Maranao Stereotypes and *Maratabat*. Accordingly, "*maratabat*" is a Muslim Maranao term which means a family honor. It is the wellspring of family values and their inspiration to improve economic status to the point of endangering the lives of family members. Words spoken to a Maranao taken as an affront to the *maratabat* are not only spoken to an individual but to the family and relatives as well. This being a family-oriented society. The study of Bartolome (2001) on the Conceptualization of the Maranao Personality supports this claim.

One stereotype captured in the interviews is being called '*bogok*' (dumb) in school. One female participant shared:

"In school, I could sense that some Bisaya students treat me differently. They are cautious with their words and actions. They can just say 'bogok' (dumb) to other non-Maranao students but not to me. It is because there was a time when they raised a question about the paper I submitted casting doubt on whether I cheated or not. I really got mad because it hurt my maratabat that in my mind I wanted them dead. They were smart enough to notice it and never did it again."

Another male participant revealed that:

"In our school, the Maranaos are a minority but just less than half of the population. Only few of us really excel in school and I observed that most non-Maranaos consider us as 'mahina sa klase' (slow learner). That really is an insult that hurt our maratabat."

Six respondents shared the same experience being called slow learner or dumb in school. One respondent heard it from the teacher although not directly while the others overheard it from the classmates. Although the word was said indirectly, it hurt their *maratabat* deeply. Three of them said it affected them so much that many times they lost motivation to go back to school.

Another female participant inter-viewed shared this particular incident in school:

"I heard my Bisaya classmate told another classmate that I gave something to my teacher, a supposed bribe, so that I could get a passing mark. To me, it was really an insult and an attack to my maratabat. My capability was underestimated but more than that my morality was questioned."

Maranda (2009) contended that *maratabat* is more than the amor propio (self-esteem) of the Filipinos. It is one of the distinguishing features of the Maranao culture---a mark of distinction which makes them unique among all the other ethnic groups." It defines their selfhood and identity. "It is a virtue among Maranaos,"

said one participant because it is valued by oneself. Others are also expected to do so. He further added,

> *"Mine is triggered when I am insulted and belittled because of my tribe and faith. When this happens, I just keep silent…a very noticeable silence."*

For him…

> *"…the tongue is a powerful human muscle. It can hurt and move a Maranao's maratabat. Insulting words hit the emotions that usually open conflicts even among the Maranaos.*

This explains why reaction in this case is loss of motivation to go to school and wishing those who insulted them dead. In the study of Bartolome (2001), the findings revealed that the Maranaos have *maratabat* (pride/self-esteem) and do not want to be belittled by other people.

Meanwhile, the other three took it as a challenge and look up to other Maranaos who are successful professionals like doctors and lawyers. They said, "Alam naming hindi lang kami nakaka-experience being labelled as bogok" (We know that we are not the only ones who experience being labelled as dumb).

Consequently, both groups tend to withdraw and avoid possible interaction for fear of being misunderstood and offensive. There were instances when the Maranaos, to avoid criticism and conflict, would try to speak fluently in Bisaya hiding the Maranao accent. One male respondent, 50 years old and a taxi driver, shared his experience:

"Ang uban mga Bisaya pataka lang ug komento sa mga Maranao. Moingon sila nga ang mga Maranao 'hugawan,' 'maro,' ug 'dili masaligan.'Pag-ingon nila ana wala sila kahibalo nga ako Maranao kay nagtarong man jud ko ug Binisaya kanang dilimaklaro ang Maranao nga tono. Ako silang gipangutana nganong moingon man mo nga ang mga Maranao hugawan? Ingon sila kay ang mga Maranao manluwa bisan asa. Ingon pa gyud sila nga dili masaligan ang mga Maranao kay loyal lang na sila sa ilang clan. Mag-unay man gani na sila. Pagkadungog nako ana nainsulto gyud ko ug nasakitan akong maratabat. Kung dili lang ko edukado ug nagtoo sa Koran, mapatay gyud nako sila."

(Some Bisaya are very tactless about their words especially when they give comments about the Maranaos. They would say that Maranaos are dirty, treacherous, and cannot be trusted. When they said these words they were not aware that I am a Maranao because I tried my best to speak fluently in Bisaya and hide my Maranao accent. I asked them why they say Maranaos are dirty. They said it is because Maranaos spit anywhere. They also said that Maranaos cannot be trusted because they are only loyal to their clan. They even fight against each other. Hearing these words really insulted me and injured my Maratabat. If I was not educated and do not believe in the teachings of Koran, I would have killed them).

Three respondents shared the experience of Maranaos being called dirty and could not be trusted. Although these words were not directly said to them but still the same they were referring to the Maranaos. One participant added that:

> *"What is worst is when fingers are pointing at them while saying those accusing words. It can really make a Maranao want to kill."*

These stereotypes given to Maranao people could perhaps be among many that exist out there. One factor is the level of awareness about this particular ethnic group. Kamlian (2017) stressed that many secondary and even college students studied history books that inaccurately depict images of Mindanao's indigenous peoples particularly the Lumads and the Bangsamoro. Consequently, inaccurate perception about the culture, identity, and history of the Muslim people continues to proliferate in the consciousness among many Filipinos.

In this study, it is evident that language could indeed be a source of conflict particularly when it already involves challenging the *maratabat* of the Maranaos. One participant revealed that

> *"…the Maranaos are so protective of their maratabat that only very few would desire to become domestic helpers. They would rather engage in small business ventures than to be a slave of anyone. Most of them are not motivated to speak Bisaya because they consider it as the language of the slave. As what I have known the Maranaos were not conquered by the Spaniards. That is why I have heard some Maranaos*

> *do not consider themselves Filipinos because the term came from King Philip of Spain."*

Moreover, another participant intimated that…

> *"…the Maranao women are inclined to wear gold jewelries as one of the ways to promote their maratabat. They also pursue higher education and aim for higher position in the government to protect their maratabat."*

This proves how important is the *maratabat* to a Maranao. Most if not all aspirations are directed towards preserving their *maratabat*. The study of Kamlian (2005) revealed that incidences of *rido* usually emanated from a violated *maratabat*. In fact, Durante et al. (2005) stressed that a *rido* is likely to ensue anytime once this sense of honor is tarnished.

Accordingly, a violation of this deep sense of pride could justify killing someone whether or not the person is bad and/or the cause of conflict is illegal. According to Kamlian (2005), *rido* is "conflict that escalates from individuals to kin members through retaliation." It can also happen to non-kin individuals or groups, from generation to generation and could even last a lifetime. Durante et al. (2005) found out that blood vengeance does not only occur among Muslim tribes but also among Christians and other tribal groups.

Anti-Muslim Bias and Maratabat

The Philippines is predominantly a Christian society and even dubbed as the only Christian nation in Asia. Muslim in the Philippines constitutes the largest

minority group comprising seven percent of the population as compared to the 80 percent of the Christian majority (Hilsdon, 2009). Maranaos belong to the Philippine Muslim ethnic group mostly situated around Lake Lanao in the northwestern portion of the island of Mindanao. From the interviews conducted with the participants, five participants confessed deep hatred for those who would call the Maranaos as *"muklo"* (referring to Muslims) and "terrorista" (terrorists). One respondent said that sometimes the Bisaya would ask them:

> *"Ngano man nga ang mga muklo terrorista? Sila biya ang gadala ug gubot sa Middle East, Europe, ug bisan dinhi sa Mindanao." (Why is it that the Muslims are terrorists? They are the ones bringing trouble in Middle East, Europe and even here in Mindanao).*

When being a Muslim is associated with violence and terrorism, all participants would say that these individuals are not true Muslims because that is not what Qur'an teaches. When someone says bad about Islam, says one participant,

> *"the knowledgeable one would just ignore it because Zabr or patience is a requisite to have a good Imam (faith). However, the one who has little knowledge would really go in a state of rage."*

One participant recalled that there was a time when her classmate asked her:

> *"Why is it Muslims have many wives? Is it not immoral? How would you feel if your husband takes two or more wives?"*

The participant revealed that these kind of questions although asked in ignorance hurt her *maratabat* deeply. It is because she felt being judged and her classmates were prejudiced toward her faith and culture. As a result, she distanced herself from her classmates. She only got involved with them if she really needed to but not in casual circumstances. For her, being Maranao and Muslim could be so lonely because she felt she needed to isolate herself to avoid conflict. The participant added,

> *"I have to protect my maratabat because as experienced by many Maranaos, violated maratabat led to rido even among Maranaos."*

HDN-Pulse Asia Inc. (2005) articulated that a majority of Mindanaoans appear to regard Muslims as violent. A majority of those from Mindanao agree that Muslims are probably terrorists and/or extremists (56%) and are prone to run amok (54%).

Moreover, one respondent said that they did not like to be called "ranix" which refers to Maranao when the Bisaya talk about their religion and culture. He added that they are very sensitive to these kinds of discussions because they know that many Bisaya do not have full comprehension of their culture and religion. All the other participants shared these sentiments. To this, one participant said:

> *"Language can be a source of conflict if not spoken properly and in the proper context. In the Maranao community, speech should be aligned with Islamic faith. Hurting anyone verbally is contradictory to the teaching of Qur'an."*

According to the Philippine Human Development Report (2005), personal testimonies of anti-Muslim bias are not imagined or random. Opinion surveys have corroborated a significant degree of latent anti-Muslim bias across the country and that is about 33 percent to 39 percent of the Filipinos.

According to Laluddin (2016), some theories due to the elemental mistake in the study of social phenomenon, cannot accurately explain the social reality of the Muslim societies. However, this does not mean complete rejection of the sociological theories, as they may provide significant insights on some aspects of social phenomenon. Nevertheless, it fails to present a balanced perspective of social reality due to its singular focus and in this context the physical aspect of the social phenomenon. It undermines the importance of the metaphysical aspect in understanding social reality under the guise of scientific method. Thus, he proposed to include the metaphysical aspect in understanding social reality. He said that an Islamic perception of social reality is not only the theoretical aspect but also the practical aspect. For example, the cardinal value of religion is given priority over that of life, as is clear from the case of jihad where the cardinal value of life is given up in pursuit of the cardinal value of religion due to the importance of religion in human life.

Conclusion

Maratabat is one of the dominant cultural traits of the Maranaos. Words used that definitely violate the *maratabat* are those that have something to do with Maranao stereotypes and anti-Muslim biases. These include being labelled as dumb, treacherous, dirty, cannot be trusted, terrorists and even immoral. A potential conflict could ensue when a Maranao's *maratabat* which is intricately linked to family honor is violated using these careless words. Thus, language can indeed be a potent force in ethnic conflict. This implies the need to promote greater understanding about Maranao culture through curriculum integration, for local government units to come up with projects and programs promoting cultural solidarity amidst diverse ethnic groups within the locality, and for religious leaders to promote the culture of peace. Their role in attaining peace in Mindanao cannot be undermined as they are the authorities that people look up to with regard to their personal and cultural values.

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