

# Indonesian Diaspora Identity Construction in a Southern Mindanao Border Crossing

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## Abstract

The Sangir and Marore migrants, called thus following their origins in North Sulawesi island regencies, have constituted the Indonesian diasporic groups in present-day Davao del Sur, South Cotabato, and Sarangani provinces, among others. Living in fishing and farming enclaves for generations, they have sought to escape from their poverty-stricken, neglected, and volcanic homeland. This study seeks to understand their “new beginnings” as diasporas through a survey of the social discourses obtaining in their communities. Indistinguishable from native Mindanaoans in physical characteristics, they relive and celebrate their cultural practices of *tamo*, *tulude*, and *jontra* with Filipinos, intermarry, acquire facility in Philippine languages, and integrate socially with locals who reside in the underdeveloped regions even as Indonesian consular services rally them behind the Indonesian flag. Interviews with identified Indonesians and their close Filipino associates sought to establish how their identities are being negotiated in their localities as they are far removed from official, national, and central calls for citizenship and patriotism.

Keywords: Indonesians, diaspora, Sangir, Marore, social discourses, southern Mindanao

*By those on shore, water is frequently overlooked as a ‘place’ and the idea of place invariably evokes terrestrial metaphors like ‘rooting’ and ‘grounding’. Yet, Southeast Asian waters prove, in fact, to be ‘places’ that one can inhabit in diverse ways. (Lowe 2003, 111)*

A STRANGE THING HAPPENED during the 2008 Lubi-Lubi festival in Glan town, Sarangani province. Purportedly a dance festival highlighting the importance of the cocount, this one had a band playing supposedly the Maguindanao *kulintang*. But that was not the case.

It was not a *kulintang*... It was a Javanese *gamelan*, a musical ensemble from Indonesia, typically featuring a variety of instruments like metallophones, xylophones, drums, and gongs. The people playing the *gamelan* spoke Tagalog and Visayan with unfamiliar accents. They had uncommon names, too, like Susanto or Tungal. (Dangzalan 2008)

The players were Indonesians, or at least were of Indonesian descent. They knew the Indonesian *gamelan* and were presumably part of the Indonesian diaspora in the Philippines.

A diaspora is a claim that is used to appeal to and mobilize loyalties (Brubaker 2005, 12, cited in Toninato 2009, 4; Sökefeld 2006, 280). But a diaspora cannot be conceptualized solely on such claims, much less on classic wishes to “return” to a “homeland,” or even descriptions—no matter how “thick” as Geertz would have it—of where people were born or came from. In today’s world, diasporas have been treated with much interest and curiosity, given the diverse experiences of living beyond one’s birthplace. Thus, transnationalism and nomadism both compete for utility and parsimony in making sense of realities of identities and cultures, lending to some kind of thinking that diasporas subvert nation-states (Chiang 2010; Sideri 2008, 46).

In the Indonesian case, no such subversive view has emerged. The Second Congress of the Indonesian Diaspora held in 2013 in Jakarta with the title *Pulang Kampung* (Coming Home) featured discussions on how the Indonesian diaspora should behave relative to their host countries (Antara News 2013a; 2013b). An academic spoke of how important overseas Indonesians were on account of their resources, capabilities, and adaptability, and of what they represent as far as Indonesia is concerned

(Wiryomartono 2012). While it cannot be ascertained whether Indonesians in the Philippines attended this congress, this paper hazards the view that Indonesians of various legal statuses who have lived outside Indonesia, including those in the Philippines, are part of the diaspora.

Nevertheless, only a few Filipinos have taken notice of the Indonesians in their midst. The Indonesian diaspora in southern Mindanao has attracted relatively few studies. In fact, Indonesians—commonly called “Sangir/Marore” because of their language and origins in north Sulawesi—have been mainly living among the local populations of southern Mindanao in the provinces of South Cotabato, including the chartered General Santos City (formerly Dadiangas), Davao del Sur, and Sarangani. These areas are very close to Sulawesi in northeastern Indonesia, whose group of islands are inhabited by people who have historically taken much risk to sail to and settle in southern Mindanao.

Miralao and Makil (2007, 18) lament the lack of government household survey reports on the Indonesians. However, a handful of researches have tackled some issues on both sides of the Philippine-Indonesian border. On the Philippine side, Tan-Cullamar’s 1989 study stands out as a trailblazing attempt to collect as much information as possible about Indonesians who crossed over to Philippine territory (Davao del Sur and Sarangani provinces) and settled in border-crossing areas. Complementing Tan-Cullamar is Tiu’s (2006) narratives of ten (out of about 50) Indonesians in Davao and Cotabato provinces. Recently, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) commissioned the General Santos City-based nongovernment organization, Pasali (2012), to investigate the material conditions of Indonesians in select communities. Pasali estimated 6,000 Indonesians in Mindanao (cited in Basa 2012). Looking from the Indonesian side, Velasco (2010) provides a refreshing view of a people inhabiting “fluid borders”/”borderzones” through her study of how people are coping in Miangas (or Palmas) Island, which was once Philippine territory (Clapano 2003; Abdussalam 2009) but was ceded in 1928 by the United States to Holland (The Netherlands), the then-colonial power in Indonesia.

Together with Bakhti (2010) who claims that Indonesian migration to the Philippines took place on account of the friendship between the two countries, physical nearness, livelihood opportunities, and security, these reports posit the importance of the diaspora for the foreign relations between the two countries. As such, the question of the Indonesian diaspora has mobilized legislators and diplomats to take measures mainly in pursuit of territorial dispute resolution and security cooperation. It may be said that generally, state “border control” thinking and the associated denial of migrant agency have clouded a better understanding of migration, especially in light of globalization (Castles 2002), by keeping diaspora matters within the state’s preserve.

Estimates of the overseas Indonesian population have varied according to indicator, namely, ancestry, place of birth, or language spoken at home (Muhidin and Pardosi 2012, cited in Muhidin and Utomo 2013, 9). The estimates at various periods mentioned below suggest not only unshared definitions of what being “Indonesian” means, but also problems concerning their legal status in host countries. In 2013, the United Nations estimated only 3,325 Indonesian migrants in the Philippines, but the Global Migration Database reported 138,318 in 2000 (cited in Muhidin and Utomo 2013, 11–12). In 2004, the Indonesian consulate spoke of 7,946 undocumented Indonesian citizens in Davao, General Santos, Sarangani Island, Glan, Isulan, Kabacan-Kidapawan, Kiamba, Tikang, Pagang, Balut Island, Santa Maria, and Makdung. Most of them came from Sangir-Talau, North Sulawesi, the Indonesian island closest to the Philippines (Bhakti 2010, 296).<sup>1</sup> Unofficial accounts place the Indonesian population below 40,000 (Basa n.d.), which is enough to qualify as an important subject of study. The figure is a small fraction of the estimated 2.5 million overseas Indonesians in 2010 (cited in Agunias and Newland 2012, 4, Table 1)<sup>2</sup> most of whom are in Malaysia, where Indonesian “illegal migration” (Liouw 2003) is now considered a security problem.<sup>3</sup>

Both documented and undocumented Indonesians pose challenges to a number of Philippine agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development and local government units looking after their

welfare. Some of the private Filipino respondents interviewed for this study remarked that undocumented Indonesians need to be sent back to Indonesia. Others, however, take advantage of this source of cheap labor, akin to the time when some Mindanaoans took pride in having Indonesian maids in their households (cited in Dangzalan 2012). One problem of undocumented Indonesians is that the effective validity dates of their documents have expired; previously documented migrants may—as validity expires—simply have become illegal aliens.

Miralao and Makil (2007) believe that movements of peoples across spaces and national boundaries appear to be irreversible, almost permanent. The nature of Indonesian presence in Mindanao and nearby areas thus encourages more queries on evolving patterns of mobility and identity construction, as states and people’s inattentiveness to state projects on nation reconstruction and reconstitution succumb to liberalizing, globalizing elements (Gietzelt 1989). Furthermore, the said diaspora phenomenon could be considered as some form of “social capital” that helps both home and host countries (Han n.d., 3).

This paper asks what happens to a people—to a diaspora in current language—in highly permeable boundaries that are the sites of continuous shaping of their identity in migration and transnationalism. It seeks to answer whether people of Indonesian descent in southern Mindanao have lost their sense of nationhood and how they have built new ties in the course of the diaspora stream. By surveying the social discourses currently obtaining in their environment, this paper argues that these discourses, more than state actions and statements, significantly shape the formation of Indonesian communities’ identities in southern Mindanao.

Interviews were conducted with 68 Filipino and Indonesian informants in April and May 2013 in select areas. Informants represented a mix of generations (old and young), different genders, and divergent levels and depth of knowledge of Indonesian community life. As is usually the case in community and household surveys, women more than the men were interviewed, since the former were typically based at home; thus, the

findings tended to give more prominence to the information the women shared. Although the interview instruments were in the English language, the responses were usually in Tagalog and Sugbuanon; these were recorded in digital format and long hand. Photos and video footage were also taken to document the landscape and dwellings of the informants. Dr. Domingo Non helped identify target areas from his knowledge from his previous research on indigenous peoples and the health conditions of coastal populations in Mindanao-Sulu-Tawi-tawi. Two of his senior history major students, namely, Mae Mae Camlian and Morrhis Gumapay (residents of General Santos City and Glan, Sarangani, respectively) from Mindanao State University-General Santos City assisted in the conduct of the interviews.

Informants were conveniently selected in General Santos City, Tupi in South Cotabato, Glan in Sarangani province, and Balut Island in Sarangani municipality (province of Davao del Sur). They include self-ascribed Indonesians, hybrids (children of mixed marriages), Filipinos of varied ethnic origins with or around whom Indonesians/hybrids have lived, persons with direct knowledge about the Indonesians such as community leaders, consular officials, and their agents. Their ages vary in order to represent generational differences or similarities in their perceptions about community building in their respective localities. The senior respondents were asked to trace the chronology of the Indonesian diaspora while the younger ones were encouraged to reflect on the changes and challenges of being from a later generation, and of being full-blooded or mixed-race Philippine-born Indonesians who undergo acculturation or integration.

The study focused on Barangay Calumpang in General Santos City, which covers a fairly large area near the shipping and fishing port of Makar. Two enclaves (called “compounds”) in *puroks* (or street block neighborhoods) Quilantang and Balunto<sup>4</sup> in Calumpang were identified as having Indonesian communities. Puting Bato, a nearby barangay was also visited. Quilantang has a basketball court, a chapel, a school, and a clinic, all of them donated by better-off Indonesian philanthropists or

patrons. Tupi, South Cotabato—especially the area of the Masjid Baitur Rahman (*Balai Serba Guna*) and its Tupi Learning Center, where Indonesians have been employed as farm hands—was also included, as were Barangays Burias, Cablalan, Pangyan, and Big and Small Markus in Glan, Sarangani province. Also interviewed were self-employed Indonesian fishermen in puroks Tikang and Panase in San Jose and Jose Abad Santos towns, respectively. Both are in Davao del Sur, areas that were more than an hour's boat ride from Panyang, Glan.

Barangays Mabila and Batuganding in Balut Island (Davao del Sur), very close to Indonesia, were the farthest reaches of this study. One could see the closest Indonesian island (Miangas, also known as Palmas) from the highest points in Balut. Balut Island in the Sarangani municipality of Davao del Sur province extends its historical and unique allure northward to southern Mindanao. Information about Balut Island's unique and enchanting beauty, increasingly disseminated by ever mobile and articulate tourist netizens (Wao 2012), has been the life and soul of inhabitants who have either migrated from northeastern Sulawesi or trace their descent from earlier migrants.

In early April 2013, the Indonesian consulate in Davao City organized a batik-making event held at a mall, which this researcher observed. As will be shown later, the Indonesian government tried to identify their nationals and encouraged them register, and held a batik-making festival and other ceremonies as official acts that remind them of and reinforce their Indonesian identity.

This paper is organized as follows: (1) explanation of the concepts of diaspora and social discourse used in the study; (2) historical background and description of Sangir and Marore Indonesians; (3) a brief clarification on "Indonesianness;" (4) factors driving Indonesian migration to the Philippines; (5) social discourses prominent among the Indonesian diaspora. Some preliminary concluding statements are submitted at the end of this paper. Herewith, a caveat is offered: the descriptions and observations about the conditions and experiences of the Indonesians as diaspora are being made by the researcher as an outsider. They are tentative and preliminary.

## Diaspora and Social Discourse: Grappling with Concepts

The notion of diaspora lies at the core of this study. Herein, the Indonesians are treated not as refugees, fugitives, expatriate, or exiles but as a “minority ethnic group of migrant origin that still maintains sentimental and material links with the homeland.... they have maintained their Indonesian identity inspite of some acculturation experienced upon contact with the majority group (Filipinos)” [Tan-Cullamar 1989, 159–160]. The classical definition of diaspora maintains the elements of homeland, return, and persecution following the Jewish origin of the term. Its modern interpretations retain the minimal importance of these elements and append interpretations of people who have reacted in various ways to their own dispersion, to the positioning of their “real lived experiences,” to their communities as “spaces of cultural diversity” (Harutyunyan 2012, 8; Schramm 2008, 7), and their community formation (Butler 2001, 194).

Tsagarousianou (2004, 59) also thinks there is a “novel opportunity for self-invention inherent in diasporic cultural politics, as clearly reflected in Brah’s claim that *‘diasporas are .... the sites of hope and new beginnings’*” (emphasis supplied by Talampas; Brah 1996, 193 quoted in Tsagarousianou 2004). Diasporas can also be considered imagined communities (Tsagarousianou 2004, 60), in the sense that they are

constructed through the lengthy process of forging links among their members in both local and transnational contexts, ‘of suppressing or neutralising internal differences, of establishing the context in which common experiences can be developed and past experiences can be interpreted in similar ways. This process of imagination ‘involves creating economies of truth, makingsense of the raw material of social experience, in fact, creating this very social experience through discursive practices.’

Diasporic peoples become subject to impressions of and actions by state actors. But where state actors are not exactly or totally in control—or if they are in control for primarily their own interests (such as winning in local elections)—they treat Indonesians invariably in a number of ways,



typically according to the dominant attitude towards them. Such attitudes derive from the kinds of social discourses reigning in these areas.

Carruthers (2007, 195) defines social discourses as the “different discourses found in the general public and social spaces which people inhabit. Social discourses therefore reciprocally link with and shape social life and perceptions.” Furthermore, they are defined instrumentally in the following manner:

... (A) social discourse is ... thoroughly made out of regulated antagonisms between conflicting images, concepts, cognitive discrepancies, and incompatibilities that are still relatively stabilized without ever reaching a state of equilibrium... The fundamental function of social discourse is that, at any given moment in a given society, it is the compulsory medium of communication, intelligibility, and rationality. ... It produces beliefs and carries potent charms. It legitimates and publicizes certain views, tastes, opinions, and themes. (Angenot 2006; cf. Rivers 1987)

The “general public” and the “social spaces” might well be the village, workplaces, and the usual community fixtures and institutions, which are the sites of everyday interactions. In these areas, verbal and nonverbal messages—the overall conduct of individuals and groups—give expression to what resides in peoples’ minds and imaginations of themselves and others (Abdile 2011, 50). As such, this study sought to find the affirmations and tensions existing in social relations; the hints of others’ attempts at domination; the acquisition of new identities and (Brah’s 1996, 193) “new beginnings” and “new hopes;” and the corresponding reactions to such moves in the course of “community formation;” (Butler 2001, 194) and the resulting “new forms of consciousness, collectivity and solidarity.” Indonesian interviewees were asked to relate their experiences of their first contact with Filipinos, their day-to-day encounters, their common practices, the sharing of their labors for community life, and their reflections about the transformations in their thinking about living in Mindanao or leaving again for Indonesia. Filipino interviewees were asked how they found their Indonesian neighbors and coworkers and what they thought should be done to them and why.

### **“Sangir” and “Marore”**

Unless asked pointedly, Indonesians in Mindanao hardly identify themselves as such. Often, they say that they are either “Sangir” or “Marore,” prefixed by the word *orang*, meaning “people” and suggesting origin. In the Philippines, the Sangir are also considered as ethnic minorities by government agencies such as the Department of Education (n.d.) and the National Commission on Culture and the Arts (NCCA)(n.d.). The Department of Education-Sarangani links them to semimythical accounts of a ruler named “Gumasa-langi” of a Sarangani Mindanao polity while the NCCA simply counts them among groups with small populations. The NCCA describes the Indonesian groups thus:

The Sangil (Sangir, Sangihe, Sangu, Marore, Sangirezen, Talaoerezen) are the people who live in the Sangihe and Talaud island group, and in the southern coast of Mindanao about Sarangani Bay. The population is concentrated in Balut and Sarangani islands (2,085) off Mindanao, and Jose Abad Santos (685) in the province of Davao del Sur where there are a total of 4,322 (NSO 1980). The national population is some 10,344 (NM 1994) They speak a language with Indonesian affinities.

Islamic in influence, much of the indigenous culture has changed and been absorbed into the coastal societies, especially into the Kalagan group. The culture is associated with lowland and coastal adaptations with a mixture of intensive cultivation and horticulture. The traditional crop include rice in upland fields, sweet potato, corn, and banana. The people also engage in boat-making and cash-cropping with coconut.

Prior to 1900 the local village group was called a soa, composed of kin groups organized as out-marrying matrilineages. Much later, bilateral relationships developed. Although Christianity and Islam have affected the belief system, much of the aspects of the indigenous religion remain. Ritual specialists serve as intermediaries with the supernatural, particularly with ancestral spirits. (ibid.)

Shinzo Hayase (2007) devotes an entire chapter of his book, *Mindanao Ethnohistory Beyond Nations* to the “birth of small Sangir Kingdoms.” The chapter details early interactions and relations between the “Sangir” (people of Sangihe in present-day northeastern Indonesia) on the one hand and, on the other, the inhabitants and rulers of Mindanao (Sarangani, Cotabato and Maguindanao), the pirates of Sulu (although there were also some Sangir pirates), and European colonizers (Portuguese, Spaniards, and Dutch). Hayase points out that Muslim Sangir moved to Sarangani and Mindanao islands between 1675 and 1775 while the “Catholic Sangir of Siau” proceeded north to Manila, but there is hardly anything available in written references about these Indonesians in the Spanish capital city. Other Christian Sangir were found later in Iloilo. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the Sangir—either Muslim or Christian—sought to learn more about religious doctrines and practices—in the then Spanish-occupied Philippines.

The rise of nation-states during the late colonial period has made the areas previously straddled by the maritime peoples of insular or maritime southeast Asia the domains of distinct countries, although one beset by lingering territorial and related issues. The result, Hayase (2007, 97) states, was that “although the Sangir were divided into two nations, they still had some interactions.” These people from the Sangihe-Talaud area who came as textile and mat traders were “peaceful and industrious... Their bancas are as big as schooners and have a special shape, but they don’t dare enter the bays of Sarangani and Davao because they are afraid of the Moros and Manobos” (Pablo Pastells, as translated in Schreurs 1998, cited in Hayase 2004, 45–46). Moros had been reportedly engaged in pirate attacks in southern Mindanao seas. A census report for 1939 cited by Hayase places the Sangil-speaking population in Davao at 1,347 who were concentrated at a Batulaki municipality village community (Hayase 2007, 223) and practice Islam (222). Sangil-speakers numbered 246 and 676 in Glan and Kling, respectively (218).

Hayase recounts that 10,000 Sangir migrated to Mindanao to take advantage of economic opportunities about 50 years ago. Some

interviewees attest to the migration of their relatives in the early twentieth century, some of whose remains are found in modest graveyards in Glan, Tikang, and Balut Island. Added to the Sangir are the other group whom Filipinos called the Marore, also named after their original residence in northeastern Indonesia. The Marore differ in spoken dialects and in their main religious affiliation—northeastern Indonesians who crossed over to the Philippines via Sarangani have been mainly Christians; the Muslims then as now seem to be a minority group in this diaspora. They came to Mindanao before the Spaniards did (Villano-Campado n.d., 8). The Sangir-Marore population constitute a group that has continuously struggled to survive in Mindanao's backward economy. Some of the "Marore" who left Indonesia converted to Christianity upon reaching Philippine shores—this writer found them in small pockets in coastal Glan town in the province of Sarangani.

The Sangir straddle two countries. Indonesia places them in the Sangihe-Talaud area in the Sangihe Archipelago/Islands where two regencies exercise some form of authority, Sangihe Islands Regency and the Sitaro Islands Regency. There, they are considered one of several subethnic groups speaking their own dialect—the majority ethnic group being Minahasa. Although the Sangihe-Talaud, whose population totaled 210,000 in 2010 (Inforapid 2010) are thus mentioned as composite, the Talaud constitute a distinct subethnic group (Rumteh 2006). Both "Sangir" and "Marore" interviewees speak of poor conditions back home, but Indonesian government leaders have recently promised prosperity for the people of the area through infrastructure development, lest they migrate to the Philippines (Adamrah 2012; Jakarta Post 2013).

Traversing Celebes Sea, the Sangir migrants have since the early 1900s landed in Balut and Sarangani islands (Tan-Cullamar 1989). "Geographic clustering" has occurred as Sangirs settled in Balut Island while those from Marore Island chose Sarangani Island (159). Regardless of where they settled, "(s)ince most of them were unskilled and uneducated, the diaspora created was a "proletarian" one (Tan-Cullamar 1993, 42). Citing various studies, she notes that the opposite of a "proletarian" diaspora is a "mobilized"

one, meaning they have skills scarce in their destination locality. Some interviewees in this study include such persons as those who had training as teachers and were easily absorbed for a number of tasks by the Indonesian consulate rather than seeking other local private or public employment. Philippine government agencies have also laid out plans for the economic development of some areas where Indonesians have settled (RDC XI 2004; RDC XI 2002).

One could not, however, discount historical enmity between Filipinos and the Indonesian migrants.

... sometimes conflict has also occurred between them. Such conflicts have even found their way into the names of a few areas in North Sulawesi, for example, the meaning of Tinakareng is “the area guarded by fences”, because during the early period people from Mindanao accidentally attacked the area. Another example is Miangas, the northernmost island of Indonesia, which means “open for sea pirates”<sup>5</sup> because it used to be visited by pirates from Mindanao. .... During the Kingdoms era in the early 1590s, there were wars between the kingdoms in Sangihe-Talaud and the kingdom in Mindanao. (Bhakti 2010, 297)

### **“Indonesianness” in the Philippines**

In the Philippines, the presence of Indonesians has not been a vehicle for nationalist cultural mobilization. It seems that nobody has cared to place it at the core of any Filipino antforeign campaign. Unlike in Indonesia where the Chinese and Chinese-Indonesians bore the brunt of xenophobic attacks in 1998, the Indonesians in the Philippines have not confronted a similar situation in recent memory.

“Indonesianness” from the perspective of the Indonesian state differs from that of the diaspora. Indonesians have taken pride in *pancalisa* as a state ideology, and subscription to its tenets seems to parallel the use of batik cloth as highly expressive of national identity and cultural heritage (Patria 2010). Indonesian consular and diplomatic officials would want to educate Indonesians in the Philippines so that they can be aware of these

traditions. The consulate has been running a high school in Davao City where a few hundred students attend. They also operate learning centers in Glan, Sarangani and in Tupi, South Cotabato (Basa 2012).

But it seems that more pressing economic needs, rather than state slogans and well-crafted principles, have had more impact on Indonesian migrant behavior. Where they have settled in the Philippines, Indonesians have submitted to what passes for the local fashion of denim pants and t-shirts more than the colorful batik. In fact, it even takes an Indonesian consular activity in a Davao City mall to promote batik-making as an artful undertaking worthy of being a cultural heritage. Meanwhile, efforts at uplifting literacy through two-three hour weekly sessions in a remote learning center deep beneath pineapple plantations in Tupi, South Cotabato have yet to improve people's economic lives. What all this implies is that much as Indonesianness could be strongly willed, the anticipated re-/affirmation of Indonesianness would still be subtle and could involve a long wait.

### **Indonesian Exodus and Return**

Tan-Cullamar (1989, 160–161) listed push-and-pull factors for the rise of Indonesian migration to southern Mindanao:

Push factors in the 1900s:

1. Dutch presence and rule in their homeland
2. Overpopulation
3. Scarce resources
4. Other economic hardships

Pull factors:

1. Geographical proximity
2. Similar climate and environment
3. Perceived improved economic opportunities offered
4. Historical links
5. Socio-cultural ties
6. Family and social networks

Bhakti concurs with these findings but adds that some Indonesians may have been engaged what has been called “circular mobility.” Not all of such movements went smoothly, however, until a formal agreement on border crossing was in place.

Until the early twentieth century, people from the Sangihe-Talaud migrated to southern Philippines in order to improve their economic prosperity (SIC), either to cultivate land in Mindanao, undertake illegal trade between the two regions, or to work in plantations and harbours in the Philippines. These crossings have caused bilateral problems between Indonesia and the Philippines. As a result, the Philippine government undertook forced extradition of 200 Indonesian families from 1963 to 1965. It is also why Indonesia and the Philippines signed a border agreement in 1965. (2010, 296–297)

More than 3,200 Sangirs returned to Indonesia in the early 1970s, followed by more in the mid-1970s to Sangihe-Talaud because of the spread of violence relating to the Muslim secessionist rebellion.<sup>6</sup> From 1983 to 1991, 1,234 spent for their own return to Indonesia (297–298).

Over time, the push-and-pull factors have remained constant encouragements to leave Indonesia. However, at least one factor can be easily discounted in the case of more recent arrivals in the Philippines. The Dutch left Indonesia in the course of the Japanese occupation during World War II and the ensuing anti-Japanese war. Taking its place was the rise of an authoritarian regime under Suharto, the accompanying political repression under this regime, and the resulting precariousness of people’s economic lives despite economic progress courtesy of Indonesia’s oil resources. Likewise, the so-called transmigration policy (Collins 2007, especially chapters seven and nine) adopted by the Indonesian state disadvantaged ethnic groups that later on resulted in local rebellions. What could be added to the list of push factors is the series of volcanic eruptions since the late 1960s and early 1970s that have rendered people helpless and their property vulnerable to obliteration.

Most of these factors should not be taken singularly to account for specific cases; they operate like a set of variables affecting individual decisions, aided by collective approval, to take the one-way overloaded single-sail boat ride across to the Philippine border. It can now be observed that sailing (with better engines and knowledge of wind flows) and communications technologies (via cellular phones and the internet) have improved and enabled further the Philippine-bound diaspora.

### Indonesian Social Discourses, not Political Discourses

In the light of the foregoing, this paper hazards the view that some narratives could constitute diasporic discourses that are derived from the circumstances of the Indonesian diaspora in southern Mindanao. Hardly do these political discourses seek collective approval and action that may involve claims to territory or recognition of sovereign rights. Unlike stateless gypsies/Roma studied by Toninato (2007), who seek representation as a nation, Indonesians in the Philippines have simply sought improvements in their daily lives with modest hopes for their children. There has not been anything in what has been described by the interviewees as indicative of possible interethnic conflict.

Indonesian migrants have not actively engaged in political organizing, but it may happen that they get to assume political authority through elections. For example, the couple, Virginia and Jerry Cawa, were elected as mayor and vice mayor, respectively, of Sarangani municipality in the May 2013 local elections with reported unanimous Indonesian support. But their victory merely indicates the composition of the electorate, not the electoral ambitions of the Indonesian diaspora. It would be risky to claim that the Cawas won because of the diaspora vote or because Virginia is reportedly half-Indonesian.<sup>7</sup> The couple have previously served in inverse (Jerry as mayor, Virginia as vice) and in other local posts before 2013. Furthermore, the suggestion that the victorious couple rode on the back of a 3,000-strong<sup>8</sup> Indonesian electorate and that Indonesian diaspora politics is set to play a bigger role in local affairs could not be sustained by a 2012



threat on the couple's lives (Sun Star 2012). At any rate, the threat elicited no reaction from the Indonesian diaspora or a response that, in other situations, would trigger outrage if not spontaneous communal violence.

What the Indonesians do in Balut and Sarangani Islands and the nearby Indonesian settlements reflect neither a longing for home nor a desire for permanent stay in their present residence or workplace. They partake of rational choices under given circumstances. Younger ones may seek higher education in the Mindanao mainland, as do the children of Pastor Jack Layang (Layang 2013) who study in Davao City and at Mindanao State University in General Santos City. Some, however, are constrained to stake their fortunes where their forebears landed. What this indicates is an emerging possibility of further physical and social mobility that the present situation affords some members of diaspora. How far this may develop may be dependent on factors that Indonesians themselves and the others bring forth.



Pastor Jack Layang  
Photo by Rolando Talampas

### *Juntra* and *Tulude* Nationalism

Asked which practices are truly reflective of their culture, all Indonesian informants in the study readily mentioned the *juntra* and *tulude*. The former is more communally initiated, while the latter, coupled with Indonesian Day celebrations, may be inspired officially. These

practices/occasions, however, are not exclusive but desirous of local involvement, making them acts of sharing and joy, if not of information. Carried continuously and mutually, the same instills respect and harmony, minimizing ethnic difference, and facilitating community building.

In all localities—from General Santos City to Balut Island—visited for this study, pockets of Indonesian communities identify the *jontra/juntra/ampat wayer* (or *sumagat*) as a joyous occasion for community participation. Held on weddings and birthdays, among other occasions, the *juntra* basically involves group singing and dancing—like a disco or a party—started by at least a couple who encourages the merriment by teasing through the lyrics of the songs (“I will take away the ... of ....,” referring to the personal wear of a participant). Some use prerecorded music played on CD/MP3 players. *Juntra* is loud and long, and though it is said not to be lewd or disrespectful, Indonesians seek local official approval before they hold it because the loudspeakers could deny neighbors sleep or rest.

When and where available, the Indonesians play their *tagonggong* (drum), which has been associated with another kind of dance activity for which the Indonesians don native dress. Unable to acquire the brass *kulintang*, they improvise with one made of wood, assembled like a big xylophone. Such a version of the *kulintang* is used in community church in Calumpang, General Santos City, where young boys and girls take pride in playing it during church services.

Indonesians in the Philippines also observe *Tulude*, the traditional thanksgiving day in the Sangihe-Talaud Area held once a year. They say they invite everyone, including Filipinos. *Tulude* is said to be “ceremony of thanksgiving to Mawu Ruata Ghenggona Langi (Almighty God)” [Muhaling n.d.] and it involves the preparation of the traditional “custom cake” called *Tamo* made from rice and other ingredients.<sup>9</sup>

The Indonesian diaspora, wherever they may be, also take part in Indonesian Independence Day held every 17 August and usually organized by the Indonesian consulate. The celebration may be a mandatory expression of Indonesianness that goes a long way in various outreach programs of the

Indonesian government. Once in a while, the Indonesian consulate also calls Indonesian leaders to seminars in General Santos City or Davao City, where they remind the diaspora about their conduct as foreigners even as the Indonesians adopt Filipino norms (Junjor 2013). More than this, the Indonesian consulate in Davao makes it a point to reach out, deploying its own personnel for teaching and liaison work (Tiu 2006).

On Indonesian occasions, *tamo* is a delicacy of special importance. For one thing, it is given to all people in attendance, regardless of ethnicity or nationality. For another, it isn't simply food to be eaten, but involves a valued social ritual.

Tamo old recipe is a mixture of rice, root crops, sugar, coconut oil, but this recipe does not last long because perishable. At this time Tamo recipe consists of rice, sugar and coconut oil. To make Tamo must pass through several customary conditions including, people who will cook not being in a state of fight before it gets to the kitchen, a place to put kuwali must use 3 stones as stoves. Because this cake so sacred oil that drips from the mold are always stored as oil efficacious to cure disease.

The most important part in making Tamo is a ritual "memoto Tamo" (cut Tamo). Before cutting Tamo, who was assigned to cut Tamo must convey *sasalamate sasalamate* named Tamo. The contents of *sasalamate* Tamo Tamo is a story about itself and about the good message or advice to many people. As a food is time wah the past Tamo must be wrapped and not visible. (Walukow 2011)

### Religion Organizes the Diaspora

The active role of Christian churches of various denominations among Indonesians indicates the centrality of religion in their community life. The prominence of places of worship and congregational activity in Calumpang, Tupi, Tikang, and Balut Island, along with the status of religious leaders in the community, complements the centrifugal force of

elected leaders, which binds the members to a form of associational order and process. In Tupi, a *masjid* (Muslims' place of worship) beside the learning center was built with funding assistance from the Indonesian consulate in Davao.

In some of these communities, as in Purok Tikang, men contributed a day's labor in constructing a Christian chapel, reducing construction costs that the community otherwise could not have afforded. Women help maintain the upkeep of the structure. Such chapels are also present in Calumpang, Batuganding, and Mabilang. In their utter simplicity, these places of worship literally have their doors constantly open; there is no fear of theft or destruction. Elsewhere, women are themselves pastors, a practice and a privileged position seldom found in other religions. Children are trained to be moral and devoutly religious. Services are offered in the language of the community and no fees are collected for baptisms and the like. Christian-style burial grounds seem to indicate low mortality rates in the study areas, but this could be misleading.

Despite their various denominations, these Christian churches (United Church of Christ in the Philippines or UCCP, ECOPI, Jesus is Lord, etc.) fall under the umbrella of Alliance Church of Christ that interacts with Muslims. The UCCP wing among the Indonesians has rejected the left-wing alignment of its national organization, indicating that the church does not want to dabble into politics. Even so, it has been reported that Sangirs' Sultan Pagal Colano of Balut Island has participated in an orientation forum on the Bangsamoro Framework Agreement, a government peace initiative with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The Christian Indonesian diaspora have also been aloof from politics, while their Muslim counterparts established their own Sangir District Political Committee (of the MILF) under its chairman Sameer Piang (Ontong 2013). This Sangir involvement in the MILF's political negotiation with the Philippine government seems to have created a distinctly partisan stream in Indonesian diaspora life despite its peace-seeking intentions. It is understandable how and why the Sangir/Sangil have opted to align with the Bangsamoro forces. They came to settle in Southern Mindanao as refugees because of changing political conditions,

while others wanted to escape the Christianizing efforts of Dutch missionaries. They were Islamized by the Maguindanaos after their arrival in Mindanao (Villano-Campado n.d., 10).

### Ethnicity Without the Difference

Oftentimes, ethnicity is declared to differentiate oneself from another. In recent times, it has been invoked for political aims such as establishing a basis for autonomous rule and quest for cultural identification. In the hands of politically-motivated actors, ethnicity becomes an handy instrument to unify a group in pursuit of further action, whether peaceful or not. Ethnicity can be also at the receiving end of oppression or control.

An ethnicity claim, such as when one calls him/herself a “Sangir” or “Marore,” connotes origin, and not a homeland for which feelings of longing and of return are associated and imagined. Informants described themselves relative to their origins and not to a homeland; as such, it would be inappropriate to second-guess the identity construction of the Indonesian diaspora in southern Mindanao based on where they would rather be, or even to suggest that this diaspora entertains an idea of a “regional identity.” In her study of the Indonesians in Miangas/Palmas, Velasco (2010, 108) already pointed out a possible outcome of misplaced academic ignorance: “No one raises an eyebrow at “undocumented” Filipinos married to locals on the islands. It would certainly seem strange to them if an academic came to them to “celebrate” their “hybridity.”

Even when a said “Sangir kingdom” was supposed to have been historically established long ago, ethnicity has not been invoked to solicit sympathies for a movement, much less any organization, that would trigger suspicion of orchestrated action campaigning for a return to a homeland. But the present-day Indonesian communities visited in this study hardly presented evidence of Indonesian material culture since the remaining senior members left Indonesia long ago barely with clothes on their backs, fleeing from volcanic eruptions or departing in stealth against parental wishes. Moving about in a number of places in Mindanao and elsewhere

for lowly paid work would have been inconvenient, especially with so much personal baggage. Furthermore, the number of people who consider Indonesia as their homeland has diminished; and they have contributed less, if at all, to the maintenance of Indonesian ethnicity among the fairly young diaspora, even if some of them advise their children to acquire proficiency in the Bahasa language..

As for the Philippine-born Indonesians, whether full-blooded or mixed-race, the Philippines is both their homeland and origin. Very few of them have visited nearby parts of Indonesia in connection with work or social visits since the cost of travel has generally kept them from doing so. They communicate with relatives through cellular phones and send some money through Western Union. Their ethnicity has been increasingly shaped by what their elders has

relayed to them. Their Sangir or Marore language has been chiefly used between and among those who have spoken these languages since childhood. The majority speak the languages of the host community, namely, Blaan, Maguindanaoan, Ilongo, or Cebuano, which is the lingua franca of central and southern Philippines. Those who have kept Bahasa/“Manado-Malay” as their language have found it useful when acting as interpreters for Filipino-Christian businessmen trading in north Sulawesi. Some fishing companies, said old-timer Andres Barahama,



Andres Barahama

Photo by Rolando Talampas

maintain mixed Filipino-Indonesian-speaking crewmen as a safeguard against possible immigration issues.

Claiming Sangir or Marore ethnicity, which once became a token identification of roots, seems to matter less nowadays, unlike before when Talauds (of the Sangihe-Talaud area) for example, were “bruided to be good workers” (Tiu 2006). This was a better reason for them to be intentionally shipwrecked during bad weather and work as grass cutters for a landowner than to be repatriated to Indonesia. In short, getting “stranded” became a convenient manner and reason to stay in Mindanao. Distinguishing or contrasting between the ethnic work ethic of Indonesians and Filipinos obviously is much forgotten today. Only the 75-year old Andres Barahama of Puting Bato in General Santos City recalls that Filipinos with whom he worked with back then were “clever” or “wise” to skip work as they conveniently did when they were employees of a rice mill in Koronadal, South Cotabato in the 1950s. What everybody else in this study—Indonesians and Filipinos alike—imply is that all lowly and unskilled labor entails long hours just for somebody else’s gain. And this is where ethnicity has mattered less and less for both migrants and permanent residents, Indonesians and Filipinos, respectively. Furthermore, ethnic differentiation has been a divide-and-rule tactic of those who profit from standing above all existing ethnicities. Such comments refer to personal, individual traits, and are certainly not ethnic characterizations or slurs that have generated deep divides between Indonesian and Filipino workmen, because it has always been easy to find positive (as well as negative) habits and practices, among others.

### Diasporic Narratives: Displacement and Settling Down

Blood ties and shared memories color the Indonesian diaspora’s negotiation with their present existence in southern Mindanao. Not too uncommonly, they can still trace their descent and connections to relatives who have moved south or north.

The Barahamas and the Layangs are a case in point. Andres Barahama (2013) is claimed as the uncle of the Barahama clan headed

by Hitler Barahama in Sitio Huai, in Barangay Batuganding, Balut Island. Hitler now heads the small pocket of families in an isolated paradisiacal white sand beach, coconut trees, and native houses. Virtually kept from the rest of the modern world, this small community with many very young children has some elementary knowledge of their language and their past, which has been kept alive for as long as they could remember. The first Barahama to arrive in Balut was Andres's grandfather in the early 1900s. It was also in Balut that Andres and his father were born as full-blooded Indonesians while Andres' unnamed grandparents went back to north Sulawesi and remained there. Andres moved from Balut to Tikang (in fine weather a small banca can be used to sail from Balut to Tikang), where he came to know the Makarunggalangs, the first of whose kin moved to the Philippines and is now buried in Christian fashion, together with three others. At any rate, Mangindohe and other Barahamas live with their families in Quilantang, General Santos City without Andres knowing it (It was this writer who informed Hitler Barahama and the Makatunggalangs in Balut Island and in Tikang who informed them that Andres was still working as a fisherman in General Santos City). The younger descendants of the Makarunggalangs in Tikang have been steadily embraced by the school system; by the General Santos City market to which they bring and sell fish; and by the programs of the Glan local government. They have skilfully built their own boats, big enough to sail in the deeper waters of the Celebes. They raise fowl and pigs, but take no pets such as cats and dogs, as is the custom in Calumpang, Tupi, and Glan. They carefully select and use colorful rooster feathers for their fishing flies and hooks. Some make a living smuggling fighting cocks from Balut Island to Indonesia, sometimes bribing immigration personnel with bottles of Tanduay Rhum and cocks. On their return, they also haul cheap gasoline across the border.

The Layangs are now best represented by Pastor Jack Layang (Layang 2013) who heads the Alliance Church in Sarangani Municipality (Balut and Sarangani Islands). He descended from Kahenggan Layang. Tan-Cullamar



(1989) found that “Cahangang” was the oldest Indonesian in Balut Island at age 82 in 1986. As “Cahangang” narrated then, he sailed for two nights from Marore to Balut in 1925 when he was 18 years old. Pastor Jack incidentally is second cousin of Sarangani mayor-elect Virginia Cawa.

In some barangays of Glan municipality, according to interviews in 2013 with Sao Pansaryang, Joseph Horman, Martin Lahama, and Benjamin Lombohodin, among others, they are the oldest living Indonesians in their respective areas. Sao’s father had already fished in Philippine waters and bought land before settling for good in Balut Island. Sao and his siblings were already born in the Philippines; one of them engages in copra trading. The pioneer members of the other clans were driven by the 1967/1968 volcanic eruption in Tabukan in a Sulawesi island. A 1970 volcanic eruption close to Mangunito, Sangir Island, also compelled Arapan Lawitang (2013), present coordinator of the Tupi Learning Center, to move away from her birthplace to the Philippines. The Ampagis of Purok Panase, Davao del Sur were very young when they left Indonesia in 1968 to seek a better livelihood—they cannot recall what being Indonesian really meant (Ampagi 2013).

The relatives of these Indonesians are now spread in nearby lands, where they till land for others, and in adjacent areas to the Sarangani and Davao del Sur coastlines, where their fishing boats are berthed. All of them have been peacefully interacting with other ethnic groups and religions. They themselves have joined various church organizations, and what cements their relationships with Filipinos is the mutual respect and hospitality which their forebears experienced upon landing on these shores. The scarcity of cheap local labor and the opportunities for livelihood must have conspired very well to keep the Indonesians from leaving this otherwise richly endowed locality. But it is the qualities of their hosts that inspired them to reciprocate the kindness and warm welcome they received.

Away from home, the Indonesians’ senior compatriots relive their customs, traditions, dances and songs, and strive to reproduce what is

left of their Indonesianness in their humble communities, not too uncommonly in the company of their foreign hosts. Some of them have reached a crossroad, where they choose to stay or return to Indonesia (Arceo-Dumlao 2008; MMNS 2010). This is not a choice that forces them to define their own nationality; it is, instead, a personal decision weighed now and then by family and economic considerations. Those who have opted to stay—or even those who have gone away only to come back now and then—have developed the qualities of the Indonesian diaspora.

### **Some Conclusions**

Three points can be raised as to the nature of the Indonesian diaspora in southern Mindanao.

The image of the “illiterate, uneducated, proletarian” Indonesian diaspora that has been used to categorize the waves of migrants from northern Sulawesi has already produced generations of variedly skilled and dynamic people who have sought integration into the many communities of Mindanao and beyond. They have supplied cheap labor for Mindanao’s agriculture and fishery sectors for some time. Their search for “new beginnings” has been extended by the troubles that beset most of Mindanao’s poor people—Indonesian or otherwise—who have had little choices in life. Everybody seems to be seeking the elusive “happy ending.”

Two other findings link with Velasco’s (2010, 109) concluding statements. One involves politics. In Miangas, she says that “state penetration” and “governmentality” have been making the “borderzone more Indonesian.” The “borderzone” she refers to is basically Miangas and Marore. The Indonesian government has recently been trying to improve the physical infrastructures in the borderzone to make itself felt in people’s lives and to prove Miangas is still governed from Jakarta, and not Manila (Antara News 2012). It is still unsure if such would stem the migrant tide to southern Philippines over time. The apparent overextension of the same “state penetration” and “governmentality” exemplified by

the efforts of the Indonesian consulate, its agents and immigration/border staff towards the Indonesian diaspora, could only thin out and become superficial over the long term.

The other point is cultural and generational. In recent years, Velasco (2009, 109) remarked that older Indonesians in Miangas (in Indonesia where Velasco made her study) are “more oriented” towards the Philippines, while younger ones in Miangas (again, in Indonesia) look to either Manado or Jakarta (in Indonesia). Senior interviewees in this study conducted in southern Philippines expressed a sentimental desire to return to Indonesia, and the younger ones (who have known only Mindanao all their lives), with little knowledge of or exposure to Indonesia, consider themselves Filipinos. Preferences such as these are always tied first and foremost to material benefit, but even this is also subject to certain conditionalities. Such conditionalities, like it or not, are more intimately tied to Philippine local realities than might be expected otherwise.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Tan-Cullamar (1989, 160) mentions the first registration of Indonesians in the country was undertaken in 1954. Agung Sampurno, Indonesian vice consul for immigration based in Davao City, said that the 2004 census recorded more than 9,000 Indonesians in General Santos City, Sarangani Province, and Balut Island. He also said that a new census was underway in 2011 in preparation for the 2014 Indonesian elections (Zamboanga Times 2011).
- <sup>2</sup> Muhidin and Utomo (2013) estimate the range of two to six million.
- <sup>3</sup> Indonesians have been suspected of having links with Philippine communists in the 1950s and with so-called “Islamist terrorist” groups in more recent years (Regalado 2007).
- <sup>4</sup> Balunto is not even listed as a purok of Calumpang, per latest Barangay profiles of General Santos City posted on its website.
- <sup>5</sup> One may ask: If a place is open to pirates, how could conflicts arise? Why name it so in the first place? For the patterns of conflict in Asia and southeast Asia, see Croissant and Trinn 2009.
- <sup>6</sup> Andres Barahama who witnessed the arrival of then president Ferdinand Marcos in Balut Island in 1973 said that many returned to Indonesia since they were unable or unwilling to pay about 20 pesos a month collected by local security forces who were willing to condone their illegal presence following the then new border agreement.

- <sup>7</sup> Earlier, Kara David (2008) reported that the mayor's wife was a full-blooded Indonesian. Speaking of blood, an Indonesian remarked that one may be Indonesian by blood but all his documents indicate that he is Filipino.
- <sup>8</sup> Pastor Jack Layang who heads the Alliance Church in Sarangani said that of the 3,000 Indonesians in Sarangani municipality, about 2,000 were born from 1989 onwards, making the oldest among them about 24 years old (Layang 2013).
- <sup>9</sup> Walukow (2011) asserts: "*Tulude* is the largest ceremonial. The main philosophy of *tulude* lies in *Tamo*, where all walks of life can be present without having been invited. In this activity seems the value of togetherness between the government and society, between societies with one another by not distinguishing the status and position in society."

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\* All interviews in the list of references were conducted by the author.