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Going home: youth and aspirations in postconflict Marawi, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

It has been years but the reconstruction of Marawi leaves much to be desired. In 2017, a battle between the government and ISIL-affiliated elements destroyed the city. This article turns attention to the youth who have been affected by this conflict. In a postconflict context in which reconstruction has yet to be seen, do the youth aspire to anything? If so, what are their aspirations? Drawing on interviews, we argue that their main aspiration is to 'go home'. We unpack it in two respects: *transparent and people-centered reconstruction* and the *reassertion of Marawi's Islamic identity*. These aspirations are not only couched in a positive language. Underlying them is a critique of the state of affairs: technocratic but inefficient rehabilitation and the moral and religious condition of the community prior to the conflict. By foregrounding the role of aspirations, this article advances the scholarship on young people's participation in postconflict settings.

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It has been years but the reconstruction of Marawi leaves much to be desired. While the construction of mosques, shelters, and other infrastructure is ongoing, the center of the Islamic city, as Marawi is known to its former residents, remains uninhabited (Cabuenas 2020). Although their big clamor is to return to their properties, the reality is that the conflict that took place there left no building untouched. In the news, the most haunting images revealed the irredeemable destruction of the city's Grand Mosque (in the middle of what is now known as ground zero). The Battle of Marawi began in May 2017 when government forces clashed with Abu Sayyaf and the Maute Group, entities affiliated with ISIS (Betteridge-Moes 2017).¹

The military's mandate was to arrest Isnilon Hapilon, then leader of the Abu Sayyaf Group and known in the region for kidnapping and terrorism (UN Security Council 2018). In retaliation, the attackers burned schools, the city jail, and the city's Catholic church as they declared the place a new ISIL caliphate. The conflict carried on for five months until Hapilon and another leader, Omar Maute, were killed. At the end of the conflict, 47 civilians and more than 160 soldiers and policemen were killed (CNN Philippines 2018). In total, 360,000 people who resided in the city and neighboring municipalities were displaced by the conflict. The majority of the internally displaced took refuge

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with relatives in other cities while 10% ended up in evacuation centers (Amnesty International 2017). While many have been relocated to transitional shelters provided by the government, the latest figures show that 120,000 are still displaced.² Years since the conflict ended, the disappointment of the Maranao – the Moro ethnic community in Marawi – remains undeniable. According to Amenodin Cali, a civic leader, ‘Our demand is simple: safe, dignified, and unconditional return’ (Gotinga 2020).

In this article we turn our attention to the youth who have been affected by this conflict. Based on the most recent census, residents between 15 and 29 years old constitute 30% of the city’s population. If younger ones are included, the figure goes up to 71% (Philippine Statistics Authority 2019). A big proportion is out of school; only 71.9% of students were enrolled before the conflict. Displacement has worsened this situation. In a postconflict context in which complete reconstruction has yet to be seen, do the youth aspire to anything? If so, what are their aspirations?

We ask these questions given our familiarity with the deep frustrations among the Moro youth; many are historical grievances passed down the generations (San Diego 2019). And yet they are not powerless (Ragandang 2021). Other Filipino scholars have noted that ‘These youth are not voiceless, just unheard; they are not invisible, just unseen. With so much energy, idealism, and enthusiasm, they are particularly useful in ... interfaith dialogue, community-based conflict resolution, peace education and advocacy, socioeconomic empowerment, among others’ (Huesca 2019, 64). Indeed, for young people, tensions do exist between their frustrations with the status quo and the aspirations they have for themselves and their society (O’Neill 2016). In this article we approach aspirations as ambitions that drive people to behave in particular and practical ways because they believe they are possible (Appadurai 2004). While aspirations may not always be within their reach, they are compelling enough for some of the youth to express their dissent, organize themselves, and challenge the status quo. Resonating with the work of Schwartz (2010), this is a significant counterpoint to other writings on youth in contexts of crisis that highlight their vulnerabilities to violence.

So, what are the aspirations of the youth of Marawi? In what follows, we show that their main aspiration is to ‘go home’, a recurring theme evident throughout our fieldwork. We unpack this aspiration in two respects: *transparent and people-centered reconstruction* and the *reassertion of Marawi’s Islamic identity*. Along the way we also show that these aspirations are not only couched in a positive language. Underlying these nuances is a critique of the state of affairs: the technocratic but inefficient rehabilitation and also the moral and religious condition of the community prior to the conflict. This article advances the scholarship on young people’s participation in postconflict settings by foregrounding the role of aspirations. As future-oriented dispositions, aspirations are crucial in motivating young people in participating in the reconstruction process. But too often what they can offer is limited by the structures and opportunities on the ground.

Methods

Our study draws on interviews with youths aged 18–29 who were affected by the Marawi siege. In the course of our fieldwork, we managed to interview college students, out-of-school youths, and young professionals. We made sure too that our interlocutors represented diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. We followed categories often used

on the ground: Moro (Islamized ethnolinguistic groups), Christians, and *Lumad* (collective term for Indigenous Peoples to distinguish them from Christian settlers and the Moro). Notable about these youths who grew up in Mindanao is the normalcy of conflict. To a large extent, their recurring experience with conflict in Mindanao sets them apart from other Filipino youths (Castillo 2020; Cornelio 2020b).

We conducted our interviews between July 2018 to December 2019. This was a significant period. At the end of 2019, majority had already returned to Marawi. But many others were still displaced and not expected to return until 2022 according to government estimates (HCT and UNOCHA 2019). They were, after all, residents of Marawi's worst affected area, whose main facilities are slated to finish reconstruction before Duterte's presidency ends in 2022. However, they are also not necessarily expected to return to their original properties as certain areas have already been declared 'no build zones' (Suson 2021). Our interviews took place in Iligan and Marawi, two of the major cities in the Northern Mindanao region. Marawi City, the capital of the province of Lanao del Sur, was the epicenter of the siege while Iligan is a chartered city in the province of Lanao del Norte. For being proximal to Marawi, Iligan became a suitable location for the internally displaced. Both Iligan and Marawi are highly urbanized and notable for their religious and cultural diversity and for being the home of the two of the largest campuses of the Mindanao State University (MSU) system. We conducted our interviews in different settings, including temporary shelters, 'tent cities', and the very campus of MSU-Marawi. Classes had already resumed during our fieldwork, but only because the campus was spared from the conflict.

We adopted the narrative approach throughout our interviews. We wanted to provide ample discursive space for the youth to tell their stories. During the interviews, we encouraged our participants to share their stories and views. We began every interview by asking them to recount their experiences before, during, and after the siege (Esin, Fathi, and Squire 2014). We found this approach useful for our interlocutors to share their untold and sensitive stories about the consequences of armed conflict. But during the interview, we noticed that they were ready to reflect on the meanings of the siege and its aftermath for them and their community. Thus they shared their sentiments about displacement, the government's response, and the peace process and various activities of civil society. It was at this point when we asked questions about what they wanted to happen in these areas.

Literature review: aspirations and the youth

We trace the scholarship on youth and aspirations before embarking on our findings. Instrumental here is the work of Appadurai (2004) to turn the concept into a social scientific agenda. Specifically, he refers to aspirations as people's navigational capacities 'nurtured by the possibility of real-world conjectures and refutations' (2004, 69). In his view, aspirations are ambitions or possibilities that drive people to behave in practical and feasible ways to achieve them. But he also notes that what is possible for people is shaped by their current social conditions. The capacity to aspire, in other words, is not the same for everyone. Thus, the concept's immediate application is in development work and poverty alleviation. To increase the capacity to aspire among the poor is to expose them to possibilities beyond their immediate circumstances. Such exposures enable individuals to contest, inquire, and even participate in collective efforts.

Aspirations, in other words, are future-oriented visions with corresponding practices that bring people together to contest the status quo, often inimical to their progress as a community. There is therefore a communal dimension to building aspirations. In this light, the concept of aspirations is closely related to empowerment and voice (Hirschman 1970).

Application

The concept of aspirations has also been applied in different contexts. Its recent deployment in urban studies is notable, for example. Cities are sites where the disenfranchized assert their place; religion through public rituals and protest provides the language to express these urban aspirations (van der Veer 2015; Cornelio 2015b). The concept has been employed too in making sense of grassroots advocacies (like sustainability and low-carbon futures) (Fischer et al. 2017).

With respect to the youth, education and career are recurring aspirations in the literature. In complex regions like Asia, however, scholars insist that linear aspirations involving education, employment, and family are middle-class stereotypes. Political contexts, gender restrictions, and the state of the labor market determine what is possible and what is not for the youth (Naafs and Skelton 2019). Thus, even in affluent societies like Singapore, people's aspirations have to confront the realities of inequality and the increasingly competitive labor market (Cornelio 2015a).

Still with respect to the youth, recent scholarship on aspirations has given attention to crisis situations. Faced with high levels of unemployment, young people in Europe are aspiring to migrate, for example. One important finding is that students and the highly educated are more inclined to migrate to another country on the continent (Van Mol 2016). But this is not unique to them. For many young people around the world, conflict and violence are an enduring reality. This means that crisis is part of everyday life. Bartlett (2018, 2) thus makes the case that it is the assemblage that matters – the 'multiple arrangements and assumptions that allow space for aggression'. These multiple arrangements are evident in spaces where segregation, insecure housing, and forced evictions magnify everyday forms of violence for young people.

Postconflict reconstruction

While many young people are clearly inclined to migrate because of crisis, research shows too that many others are committed to addressing it. Peacebuilding and postconflict reconstruction are concrete areas for them. Research dedicated to these agenda makes for a very strong case to integrate them in the process. If youth are

given venues in which they can succeed, have their voices heard, and participate in decision making in their communities, they may be more inclined to trust in the peace process and strive to further it when they become their countries' leaders. (Schwartz 2010, 18)

Indeed, the role of leaders is crucial in fostering participation. Studies on youth and political participation suggest that policymakers often rely on formal consultation processes (Vromen and Collin 2010; Calamba, Alamon, and Ferolin 2020). The problem, however, is that these processes typically involve expert citizens or youth who are already involved in formal political organizations. As a result, they exclude the wide

experiences of youth who are largely uninvolved, whose aspirations equally matter (Bang 2004). The other problem is that young people turn away from politics and formal consultation processes whenever the integrity of leaders is in question. They do so even if they may have hopeful aspirations about justice and the rule of law, as in the case of Nepal (O'Neill 2016). Elsewhere this exclusion of young people has sustained the frustration among them. In Sri Lanka, for example, restrictions on mobility among the youth deepened feelings of neglect they underwent during the civil war (Azmi, Brun, and Lund 2016). The lesson here is that much creativity is needed to identify youth-led 'spaces and dialogues in which young people are already engaged, such as youth-led networks, local, community and interest-based groups and settings' (Vromen and Collin 2010, 109). Because of urgency during crisis situations, however, the temptation is to neglect the voice of the youth altogether, as has been the case in the Philippines (Ferolin and Fernandez 2019).

As we have pointed out at the outset, our present work is an attempt to bring to the surface their aspirations in postconflict settings. As the next section will show, a significant aspiration is to become part of the process of reconstruction itself. This is why our study is a corrective to the technocratic discourse about youth and postconflict contexts (in Marawi and possibly elsewhere). The irony of course is that for the internally displaced, the technocratic discourse that mostly comes from government agencies and the private sector based in Manila was not only insensitive; it has yet to be felt. Reconstruction has been delayed without justification and the support for livelihood and shelter uneven (Sarangani 2019).

But our work problematizes too the overemphasis on the securitization of the youth in postconflict reconstruction (Sukarieh and Tannock 2018). To be sure, these studies are important in tracing pathways to violent extremism. They show that it is not frustration about human rights, the government, or unemployment that drives support for violence. Perceptions of community discrimination, lower levels of self-efficacy, and links to certain networks matter far more in fostering radicalization (Casey and Pottebaum 2018). However, we want to offer a different angle because, in light of the literature on youth in postconflict contexts, it is clear that their participation is crucial as well. It is in this light that our present study interrogates visions of the future among youth affected by crisis (Cornelio and Calamba 2019). We now turn to our findings.

Going home

They wish to 'go home'. When asked what they wanted, the youth we interviewed have been unequivocal. One example is Jamel, a young Moro student from Marawi. He shares that 'my dream is to go back to Marawi where people are once again happy. This is our place and I hope to witness its beauty again'. There is of course so much more to home as a physical dwelling place. Often, home carries a variety of meanings and emotions for people (Boccagni 2017). No wonder then that on many occasions our interlocutors referred to Marawi as their *inged* (Maranao for community). Ameena, an out-of-school youth, claims that

my dream is to see the old Marawi since we grew up there [and live there] until my mother sees her grandchildren. Of course, whatever we do, our *inged* will always be our *inged* and it hurts to see what Marawi is now.

Home, as described by our young people, refers to the cultural, economic, political, and physical aspects of the city. For them, Marawi is inseparable from their identity, one that has been shaped over time and across generations.

Home is thus a central notion to their aspirations in postconflict Marawi. In this section, we present how they have described the city and made sense of the Marawi siege as a destruction of their home. We will then turn to what ‘going home’ entails for them: *transparent and people-centered reconstruction* and the *reassertion of Marawi’s Islamic identity*.

Marawi as home

So, what does home mean? Shahana, a young Moro from Marawi shares about her family. She begins her story as follows:

Our life before [the siege] was good. As long as my family lived together, I was happy with it. I lived with my cousin, we all lived in one house together with our grandfather when he was still alive. It was a really happy place.

To the other youths we interviewed, life in Marawi before the siege was ‘simple’. It was about living with their respective families, with adequate access to livelihood, water, and education. According to Amera, 19, a young woman from the Maranao ethnic group, ‘my life in Marawi was simple and comfortable’. She explains to us that ‘Marawi was not a perfect place but they were happy and content’. Amir, her peer, shares the same observation: ‘In Marawi, we had our own home, we had livelihood. We were happy because our family lived together’. Now living without electricity and ample water supply, Amera and Amir are in a temporary shelter just outside Marawi.

A big proportion of those we interviewed were Maranao, who constitute the majority of the population in Marawi. The term translates to ‘people of the lake’, referring to the majestic Lake Lanao right next to the city. But Marawi is also a diverse community. Aside from the Maranao, other groups including Christian migrants and *lumad* youths reside in the city and its outskirts. Many of them are students. They are in Marawi because of its tertiary institutions, the most prominent of which is the main campus of Mindanao State University (MSU).³ (Many also used to study at Dansalan College, a private institution run by the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.)⁴ Thus being in Marawi is favorable for young people aspiring to receive quality education. And since MSU is state-owned, ‘it is economical and flexible while other universities and schools are expensive’, explains Matthew, a student of political science.

But not everything about the city is romantic. Some have been willing to open up about the dangers of living in Marawi. As described by Sadam, a Maranao student, ‘I rarely felt secure in the city because of many incidents of killing. One time, I was inside the madrasah and a couple in front of the gate were shot. I am not sure if it was a feud or a political move. Maybe illegal drugs’. They characterize the place as unsafe where conflict was a taken for granted reality.⁵ Indeed, even before the siege took place in 2017, conflicts and gun shots were not new to our interlocutors. *Rido*, for example, was a typical violent confrontation that took place between clans. These were ‘sporadic outbursts of retaliatory violence between families and kinship groups as well as between communities’ (Torres 2014, 3). They typically occurred in areas where law enforcement was weak; conflicts over land ownership and politics commonly escalated

into *rido*. For the youth we interviewed, the normalcy of violence was indeed a sign of lawlessness. Jehana tells us, for example, that ‘before the siege, there had already been many conflicts in Marawi. When you went out to the streets, you would witness someone being shot because of *rido*. It felt like Marawi was lawless. They could do whatever they wanted, like killing someone’. Jehana, 21, is from ground zero and now resides in Iligan City.

But incidents of *rido*, as far as our youths are concerned, do not compare to the Marawi siege. As pointed out by Mera, a Christian and a university student, ‘the usual conflicts in Marawi were caused by feuds between families that lasted for only a short period of time’. By contrast, the impact of the siege is still palpable, years after Marawi was secured by state forces. The resentment is thus understandable. When we interviewed Cristina, another Christian student, she admits to us that she is ‘angry about what happened in Marawi, especially for my friends who lost their homes, their education, and are now living miserable lives’. Cristina even adds that ‘all people are affected whether you are Christian or Muslim, all businesses and everything. The *padian* [public market] in Marawi is now gone’. Benjamin, a Maranao who majors in sociology, offers similar sentiments but opens up too about his fears. He is concerned about the future of his generation. Sobbing during the interview, he tells us: ‘I am worried about young people who have now stopped their education because they will have no source of income in the future. We cannot be dependent on our parents for long’.

Our conversations with them, whether Maranao or otherwise, reveal the deep attachments they have to Marawi. Clearly, they are committed not only because of its picturesque lake or temperate climate. Even to outsiders, these physical features make Marawi a remarkable place. Despite the chaos, they insist that Marawi has ‘a lot of potential’. This is the case even for those who moved to the city only to study. In the course of our fieldwork, we also met young adults who decided to stay in the city and find employment in it. It has become a home for them, to which they owe their identity, education, and commitment. For Shahana, 23, ‘Marawi is now a part of my life and identity. Because Marawi was devastated, many of us also lost our identity’. This explains why immediately after the siege, some of the students we interviewed went back to Marawi to continue their studies. (The classes at MSU were temporarily put on hold during the siege, but they immediately resumed after the authorities gained control of ground zero.) Their decision to return to campus was to them a defiant act of resistance. In what follows, we wish to unpack the aspiration to ‘go home’. As we have indicated above, aspirations are often heterogeneous so unpacking needs to be done (Fischer et al. 2017).

Transparent and people-centered reconstruction

The national government, through its *Task Force Bangon Marawi*, committed to completing the city’s basic infrastructure by the end of 2021 (Cabuenas 2020). At the same time, the rehabilitation of the city is a priority agenda of the newly formed Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, which has allocated PhP 500 million (roughly USD 10 million) (Basman 2021). But despite all the efforts, the situation remains the same for Marawi’s former residents. Many of the internally displaced still reside in temporary shelters while ground zero remains uninhabitable. According to the youths we interviewed, the rehabilitation is a ‘sham’ because the government has failed to fulfill its promise of

reconstructing the city as soon as possible. On Eid'l Fitr in 2017, no less than President Duterte committed that 'I will see to it that Marawi will rise as a prosperous city again ... because if not, I will remain forever the villain' (Salaverria 2017).

But since the process has been slow in spite of the resources allocated to it, it is understandable that young people are demanding transparency. Seeing movements, machines, and manpower in the area has not made any difference to them. They are instead asking for the entire plan of the government. According to Abigail, 22, a Christian student at MSU-Marawi, 'the government must tell the people the rehabilitation they plan for Marawi because they are keen to go back to their homes'. Rendered helpless by the displacement, Matthew shares that 'people can no longer afford to feel disappointed again. And yet this is the case now because welfare delivery and rehabilitation are slow, and our local government here is not responding appropriately'. Matthew, 20, is a recent graduate of political science and now volunteers for a faith-based organization.

Indeed, Marawi's rehabilitation has been widely criticized in Philippine media (Basman 2021). Our interlocutors thus accuse the government of committing irregularities and corruption. For Johaina, 19, a student of public administration, 'the government has been taking all the money'. This is how she puts it when her mother was contacted to prepare for the distribution of cash assistance. But to their dismay, nothing has arrived.

In spite of these sentiments, the youths we interviewed still feel that they could offer something concrete to the reconstruction. This explains why in the course of our fieldwork we repeatedly heard them talk about the importance of making the entire process 'transparent' and 'people-entered'. For them, to feel the action of the government is to allow Marawi residents to participate in planning and consultations. Sadam, for example, opines that 'people's participation is important in the rehabilitation because the government cannot do it only by themselves. It would take longer if only the government worked. But if there were participation among the victims of the siege, I think the rehabilitation would go well'.

But what exactly does contributing to the process mean for our interlocutors? At one level, it is about being effectively represented in conversations and decisions that ultimately affect them. This is a matter worth highlighting because much of the national discourse about reconstructing Marawi come from Manila-based technocrats. We need to explain this point. Immediately after the siege, prominent urban planners made claims that Marawi could be redesigned like Hiroshima so that it would become a tourist site. One even proposed to turn it into a city planned 'around Lanao Lake, like Lake Geneva [so] investors will come ... We can have mountain communities, lake front communities connected by cable cars' (Colina 2017). These remarks earned the ire of Marawi locals for being 'imperial', alluding to the policy elites based in Manila. To emphasize this point, these elites and technocrats include the policy makers and urban planners based in Metro Manila. They comprise the Task Force Bangon Marawi (TFBM), a policy-making body that governs Marawi City's rehabilitation, along with private and foreign firms financing the reconstruction. But for retired professor and peace advocate Rufa Guiam, the TFBM plan for Marawi rehabilitation is 'an invasion of a different kind', robbing the soul of Maranao people. The exclusion of the voice and agency of the Maranao in the reconstruction process adds to their victimization (Guiam 2018). In the literature, these elite discourses echo the 'developmentalist fantasy' of the Philippine state about Mindanao as a frontier that needs to be disciplined via modernization.

At the core of many programs and projects is a desire to overcome and eliminate the 'dark side' of the frontier and bring out the best of its potentials. Every plan is an act of civilization and enlightenment, of bringing the remnants of an inglorious backward parst in the present and together march with the rest of the country to the future. (Abinales 2010, 155)

That Mindanao is a frontier that needs to be disciplined is an important point to unpack as longstanding resentments among the youths we interviewed echo precisely this theme. In our view, recognizing it is a concrete step in addressing the 'continuing terrorist threat to the Philippines' (Banlaoi 2020, 4). It addresses persistent issues especially for the Moro people. As Ramakrishna (2020, 5) rightly notes, the Marawi siege was a 'long time in the making'. In his comprehensive historical overview, he notes that radicalization and networks of terrorism ultimately linked to ISIS constitute only one dimension of the Marawi siege. Unresolved grievances among the Moro people revolve around their marginalization as a result of policies set by Spanish, American, and later on Filipino (Catholic) leaders, involving military rule over them, an educational system led by non-Muslim teachers, and land legislation that empowered Christian settlers to own properties in Mindanao. The guiding principle behind all of it was that Muslims need to be governed and civilized by outsiders. And as other recent studies show too, much of the conflict in Mindanao happens whenever the state enforces its formal institutions and practices on informal economies (Gulane 2013). Doing so has engendered resistance among local strongmen and clan institutions.

We found resonances among the youths we interviewed. For them, Manila-based technocrats are 'insensitive' and out of touch with the locals' own aspirations. In the words of a Maranao student, 'we can forget about McDonald's as long as we are able to return to our true homes' (Cornelio 2017). And so for them, the only way to contest these dominant ideas is by being recognized in conversations. According to Cristina, 'the people of Marawi should be well-represented during the planning'. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. Even the youths we interviewed who were part of community consultations felt that they were there invited but only for tokenistic purposes. Repeatedly, we heard them lament that whatever they said was never taken seriously.

Reassertion of Marawi's Islamic Identity

Our youths were also concerned about the Islamic identity of the city, which they wanted to reclaim. To be sure, what constitutes Islamic identity in Moro communities in Mindanao is contested (Abinales 2018). While this identity could be about political leadership, it can also be about personal piety (such as acceptable clothing and sexual propriety). Some of our interlocutors have raised these points. But for others, reclaiming Marawi's Islamic identity concerns bigger issues: corruption, conflict, and violence. Either way, they insist that the people of Marawi must live up to the place's symbol as the only Islamic city in the Philippines. These observations are present in the narratives of our Muslim, Christians, and *Lumad* interlocutors since some of them are studying or working in Marawi City. After all, they are witnesses to the political and social problems linked to the Islamic identity of Marawi. According to Cristita, a *lumad* who belongs to the Mandaya tribe and a student in Marawi, 'I am always dreaming that the people in Marawi will live up to its name as Islamic City. I want them to get rid of the illegal activities; they have lawyers and professionals to help the rehabilitation'. In April 1980 Marawi was

declared an 'Islamic City' through a local council resolution to honor its predominantly Muslim population (Alonto 2019). There is therefore a strong moral and religious connotation to the claim that Marawi is an Islamic city.

But where does this concern for the moral and religious state of Marawi come from as far as our interlocutors are concerned? The answer takes us back to the Marawi siege. In the course of our interviews, we realized that the attack on the city left many young people divided over the intentions of the Maute Group. For some of them, nothing could justify the violence that was inflicted on the locals. According to Hakima, a Maranao who is about to graduate from university, 'their actions are not found in the Qur'an, especially when they killed people'. For Mawi, 19, what the Maute Group did was completely wrong. She insists that 'they could have fought in a non-violent way' to assert their claim on the city.⁶

Some youths, however, recognize the Maute Group's cause. According to Hana, who hails from ground zero where she once managed her parents' business, 'they wanted to reclaim Marawi to bring back its symbol as an Islamic city'. In another interview, Mary, a Christian student at MSU-Marawi, understands that 'what the Maute Group wanted was for the people in Marawi to live the Islamic way'.

Our interlocutors may have divergent opinions on the actions of the Maute, but it is quite revealing that they all recognize the group's underlying motivation. They insist that referring to Marawi as an Islamic city carries normative expectations. It must thus be 'spiritually clean', 'politically safe', and 'free from any form of violence'.

What they see and experience in Marawi, however, is contradictory to the city's Islamic identity. When we probed this point, our interlocutors have repeatedly called attention to the city's lost values in the form of alcoholism, gambling, and prostitution. The 'public display of affection' among teenagers has been brought up too, alongside their observation that young women no longer wear hijab. For the Maranao youths we interviewed, they are clearly bothered by these behaviors, which their faith has taught them to be inappropriate in a place like Marawi. But they have also brought up the realities of crime, corruption, social strife, and political violence in the city. In the words of Amer, who was displaced from the city and now resides in Manila, 'to live the Islamic faith is an obligation and it is embedded in being a Maranao'.

It is in this sense that they might in fact agree with the Maute Group's underlying intention of restoring Marawi's Islamic way of life. Shifting the blame away from the Maute Group, some of our youths believe, for example, that the atrocities were a result of people's 'non-Islamic doings'. In other words, the Marawi siege was 'Allah's punishment'. For them, the city's moral renewal requires divine intervention. This became clear too when we interviewed Hana. She is convinced that the siege was a 'punishment for people to change'.

How do we make sense of these complex statements? At one level, these reflections reveal young people's critique of the moral and religious state of the people of Marawi. But at another level, these are moral and religious critiques too of the social and political life in the city. Kobi, a Maranao student from another town in Lanao del Sur, insists that 'illegal drugs have taken over Marawi's social and political integrity. There are too many drug dealers and criminals'. He explains that 'there is moral degeneration and I can agree with their [Maute Group] intention of restoring Islamic values but not their conclusion and certainly not their means'. Indeed, speaking of the Marawi siege, they are convinced that

their political leaders could have handled the situation better. 'But most of them disappeared when the attack happened', shares Ganem, an international relations student at MSU. He tells us that even before the attack took place, threats were already circulating, but their leaders did not take them seriously.⁷

Thus, to reclaim Marawi's Islamic identity for many of our interlocutors refers to individual and social transformation. We have youths like Jehana, who believe that 'people should stop doing illegal things such as illegal drugs'. But we have young people too for whom moral transformation should happen at the level of the government and society. For Hakima, her dream for Marawi is 'peace' but one in which 'the culture of silence should no longer exist and people are empowered to get themselves out of corruption and poverty'. Teary-eyed as he reveals his hopes for the city, Jamel longs for 'a Marawi in which people no longer live in fear [of violence]'. Finally, those who allude to the 'unislamic' practices in Marawi also assert that they are not a justification for the siege. According to Mera, 'I am good with the Maute Group's cause to fight for Islam but it was in the wrong place and there are peaceful means instead of using violence'. For young people, the siege served as a lesson. Some say it was a blessing in disguise but would immediately qualify this by insisting that inflicting violence, like what the Maute Group did, cannot be the solution.

Youth and postconflict aspirations

The aspiration to go home is not unique to the youths we interviewed. Work done by other researchers reveals the same aspiration among many other Marawi residents (see Collado 2021). In 2018, locals even organized a peace rally to visit ground zero and demand information about the reconstruction. It was their way of expressing their discontent over the scarcity of information and the denial of entry to even just visit their properties. Sociologist Bianca Franco (2019) thus concludes that the situation is a 'disheartening picture of Marawi's rehabilitation. The people who built the city are now its outcasts'.

Scholars have thus repeatedly pointed to the need to involve internally displaced peoples in planning their return and resettlement in Mindanao. Failure to include them in these conversations raises significant concerns about their effective role in the peace process (Oskarsson 2012). In our present study, however, we have instead paid attention to the youth and their aspirations for several reasons. In conflict areas around the world, young people are not only neglected in the very process of reconstruction itself (Azmi, Brun, and Lund 2016). In many cases, they are readily depicted as agents susceptible to renewed radicalization. In the Philippines, we note that the fear is evident especially in technical reports that emerged after the Marawi siege, all aiming to address drivers of extremism (Casey and Pottebaum 2018). This has in fact been the case in the Philippines for a while given the record of child soldiers in the country (Alvarez et al. 2019). But this fear is also evident in many conflict areas around the world. For some scholars, the securitization of the youth is a global phenomenon (Sukarieh and Tannock 2018). They show how geographies are militarized to restrict their movement (Azmi, Brun, and Lund 2016).

At the same time, young people in postconflict situations are approached too as a confluence of social problems. Scholars have found them to be vulnerable to substance abuse and mental health problems, for example (Petruzzi et al. 2018; Settersen and

McClelland 2018). Without denying the validity of these findings, scholarship has begun recognizing the potential of involving young people in postconflict reconstruction (Schwartz 2010; Huesca 2019). This is a contribution that our study makes especially in the Philippine context where youth have been marginalized from policy and politics (Cornelio 2016, 2020c).

Indeed they have been excluded. In the case of Marawi, the reconstruction has been spearheaded by an inter-agency unit, Task Force Bangon Marawi (TFBM). The unit is composed of different agencies of the national government. As we have explained above, plans and strategies are driven from the top and mainly by technocrats who come from Metro Manila. Even the country's top designers have expressed interest in planning the city and turning it into a spectacular tourist destination that could attract global investors (Colina 2017). Also, Chinese interests became evident over time. Much to the dismay of locals, it turned out that the reconstruction was being entrusted to Chinese-led consortia, whose plans eventually fell through (Sarmiento 2019). The irony of it all is that while planning was dominated by technocrats, in the end it has been an inefficient process that has delayed people's return to the city. And because of inefficiency and perceived corruption, public trust in TFBM and the reconstruction as a whole remains fragile (Sarangani 2019). To establish trust, a report by The Asia Foundation asserts that 'equitable partnerships between national Task Force Bangon Marawi (TFBM) and M'ranao specialists and stakeholders [are] crucial to address community concerns, mitigate project risks, and ensure the success of rehabilitation' (Fernandez, Garcia, and Baunto 2018, 2).

Given that the population of Marawi is young, to listen to the youth's aspirations is indispensable in the reconstruction process. But as we have also indicated above, their participation in consultations is treated in a tokenistic fashion. In our view, these circumstances deepen the resentment that young people have towards not only technocrats but also state forces. This reminds us of the important work of Schoofs and Lara (2013) on the pervasiveness of the shadow economy in the everyday lives of people in Mindanao. They show how such economic activities as cross-border trading, moneylending, and informal land transactions involve illegality and circumvention as the norm in everyday life. But at the same time they are 'guided by ordinary human motivations: to earn a living, to make life easier or simply the desire to enjoy life' (Schoofs and Lara 2013, 10). Why is this the case? They demonstrate the inability of the state to formalize economic transactions for people and whenever they do so, they lead to violent conflicts because they threaten the power of local elites and clan institutions. The entry of external experts is a threat to their everyday life which is why they would rather be allowed to 'go home' and sort matters out for themselves.

Far from arguing their disempowerment, our study demonstrates the ability of displaced youths to contest their status quo. Aspirations are powerful drivers of social action in this regard. Already, we have seen their leadership at play. In the course of our fieldwork, we met youths who have organized themselves to initiative peacebuilding and interfaith activities among peers.⁸ That they have these aspirations explains why some of them are back on campus and others have volunteered as community organizers. But even more fundamentally, it also explains why they all want to 'go home'. They are not simply helpless victims desiring to escape, as might be the case (and as we have discussed above), for young people in other contexts of crisis. In this regard, we echo earlier writings about internally displaced peoples in Mindanao. Without denying their need for

humanitarian assistance, anthropologist Jewel Canuday (2009, 13) reveals the 'politicized nature of the evacuation experience'. In his study, he discovered that while some saw fleeing as a path of peace, others have armed themselves to protect their communities. In an earlier study, Canuday (2006) too documents the ways in which IDPs have formed new solidarities to assert that they have not given up on their respective communities. With respect to our youth, we propose that to continue to aspire in the midst of protracted displacement is in itself an 'agentive exercise' as much as it is a political act, especially in the light of their critiques of the state of reconstruction (Canuday 2006, 133). They long, in other words, for a Marawi that would be different once reconstructed: a city whose moral and religious renewal permeates all aspects of individual, social, and political life.

Conclusion

By highlighting their aspirations, our study has demonstrated that youths affected by the Marawi siege are not passive victims. Their aspirations for the city demonstrate that they have the potential to navigate and transcend personal and structural limitations (Appadurai 2004). In other words, it is clear that the siege has not arrested their capacity to aspire for Marawi. This is a notable observation given that in many parts of the world, violence and crisis do drive young people to leave (Van Mol 2016). Elsewhere, corruption has turned young people away from political participation (O'Neill 2016). But in Marawi, our youth interlocutors aspire to 'go home'.

The conflation between home, hometown, and homeland is well asserted in the literature, especially in relation to the emotional attachments tied to a sense of belonging (Relph 1976). Linked to one's identity, this attachment engenders a deep concern for the conditions of the place. How this deep concern translates to concrete actions on the part of young people varies, especially in contexts where personal aspirations (like social mobility) do not align with the possibilities a place affords them (like livelihood) (Hinton 2011). So, what accounts for our interlocutors' desire to 'go home' and even 'restore the city'? We end our piece by reflecting on this question.

The answer is not only about emotional attachment. It is their recognition that the place has given them so much potential – a city where their 'simple' lives could once flourish and one that must now be restored. No wonder that many of the internally displaced harbor a deep reason for joining the reconstruction effort: 'to once again breathe life into what used to be the vibrant, tight-knit community of the Islamic City' (Basman 2021). At one level, going home is about being part of the reconstruction itself. But at another level, going home is about the moral and religious renewal of its people. They believe that these are achievable aspirations.

In a significant manner, our findings echo what emerging studies have asserted in other contexts: the crucial participation of the youth in postconflict reconstruction. In times of crisis, youth-led spaces that foster their participation tend to be more meaningful and convincing in contrast to the technocratic approach that relies primarily on experts and formal consultations (Vromen and Collin 2010). Our findings also echo similar points raised by other local scholars such as Calamba, Alamon, and Ferolin (2020). They highlight the significant contributions young people have made in responding to local needs brought about by conflict and disaster (see also Cornelio 2020a). Young people have the capacity

to identify vulnerabilities in their own localities and present solutions towards a resilient community. Similarly, in a postconflict setting, the inclusion of youth in decision making is valuable in addressing various issues such as violence and injustices, with which they have direct encounters. The important lesson here is that involving young people in conversations about the present is in itself an empowering act for a generation of youths who will one day become leaders of their communities (Ragandang 2021).

Notes

1. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. In the past decades, such factors as radicalization, access to weapons, and training by foreign elements all provided an 'enabling environment' for violent extremism to take root in Mindanao (Ramakrishna 2020, 8). But observers also contend that the Marawi siege was 'a long time in the making', a result of longstanding marginalization of the Moro people, dating back to the colonial period and to the early twentieth century when land titling favored Christian settlers to own property in Mindanao (Ramakrishna 2020, 5). In the 1960s, the Bangsamoro as a secessionist movement was led by the Moro Independence Movement, the Moro National Liberation Front, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The work of Francisco Lara (2016) and Schoofs and Lara (2013) are also instructive in making sense of the longstanding conflict in Mindanao. The persistence of the informal economy involving informal land markets, illicit gun trade, and kidnapping for ransom points to the power of local strongmen and clan institutions in controlling these operations. In many cases local businessmen and law enforcers are also involved in these activities. Violent conflict ensues whenever the state steps in as formal institutions threaten the power of local strongmen.
2. In fact, the construction of permanent shelters is being funded by national and international agencies (Umel 2021). And for more than a year, the 'most affected area', which covers residences, religious sites, and the market, was off limits because of unexploded ordnances according to the military.
3. MSU is a university system with campuses all over Mindanao. The main campus is in Marawi.
4. The Maute Group occupied Dansalan College until government forces secured it on July 4, 2017 (Cahiles 2017).
5. In fact, this is the case for young people growing up in many parts of Mindanao (Huesca 2019).
6. But our interlocutors also criticize the response of the government, particularly the counter-attack of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. They strongly condemn the airstrikes. For Mawi, whose family used to own a property in the central area, 'the way the government responded to the attacks was too much. There must have been other ways to prevent the loss of our properties and livelihoods'. Indeed, the airstrikes contributed to the massive displacement as well as the loss of lives of people who were trapped inside the battle area. For Rufa Guiam (2020) a retired professor of anthropology at the General Santos campus of Mindanao State University, 'Within five months, it destroyed what took the Meranaw decades and generations of their people to build and nurture. Indeed, making war is easier than waging peace'.
7. Sadam, who received text messages that the city would be attacked, validates this claim: 'I thought it was fake news. For me, it was unthinkable because the members of the Maute Group were Maranaos. I thought Marawi would be spared'. But that did not turn out to be true.
8. These are involvements we intend to pursue in the next phase of our project.

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