

## REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo (Sulu, Philippines)

**Elgin Glenn R Salomon**

University of the Philippines Visayas, the Philippines

email: [ersalomon@up.edu.ph](mailto:ersalomon@up.edu.ph)

### Abstract

*Examining the case of the 1974 Battle of Jolo, this article unpacks how Tausug survivors have constructed, remembered, and made sense of their memories of one of the bloodiest conflicts between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a Muslim secessionist movement in the southern Philippines, and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) during the martial law period (1972-1986). As counter-memory to the narratives of the MNLF and the military on the 1974 Battle of Jolo, this study argues that while many of the survivors want to forget and move on from the tragedy of war and violence, their memories revealed layers of problems faced by Muslim Mindanao in the recent decades. Some survivors are eager to document their experiences to reclaim their agency, while many of them transmit their collective memories and life lessons to the next generations of Tausug.*

*[Artikel ini mengungkap bagaimana para orang-orang Tausug, yang mengalami Pertempuran Jolo tahun 1974, membangun, mengingat, dan memaknai ingatan mereka tentang salah satu konflik paling berdarah antara Front Pembebasan Nasional Moro (MNLF) dengan Angkatan Bersenjata Filipina (AFP) selama periode darurat militer (1972-1986) tersebut. Sebagai memori tandingan terhadap narasi MNLF tentang Pertempuran Jolo Tahun*



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*1974, penulis berpendapat bahwa banyak penyintas ingin melupakan dan mengalihkan perhatian mereka dari tragedi perang dan kekerasan di atas. Sementara, konstruksi ingatan mereka mengungkapkan lapisan-lapisan masalah yang dihadapi oleh Muslim Mindanao dalam beberapa dekade terakhir. Beberapa penyintas sangat ingin mendokumentasikan pengalaman mereka untuk mendapatkan kembali hak pilihan mereka, sementara banyak dari mereka tetap meneruskan cerita tentang kenangan kolektif dan pelajaran hidup ini kepada generasi Tausug berikutnya.]*

**Keywords:** counter-memory, martial law, Tausug, Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Ferdinand Marcos

## A. Introduction

When Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos proclaimed martial law on 21 September 1972, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) fought the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a Muslim secessionist group based in the island of Mindanao and Sulu archipelago, in the southern Philippines. The MNLF sought to liberate the Bangsa Moro people from the terror, oppression, and tyranny of Filipino colonialism.<sup>1</sup> On 7 February 1974, one of the bloodiest conflicts happened between the AFP and the MNLF after the rebels swiftly invaded the town of Jolo, the provincial capital of Sulu.<sup>2</sup> The Tausug, the dominant ethnolinguistic group in the province, was surprised by the invasion of MNLF. The Air Force dropped napalm bombs while the military used gunships and armed helicopters to attack the rebels. Combat between the MNLF rebels and the armed forces in Jolo resulted in the death of at least 300 civilians. Two-thirds of the town was left in ashes, and around 40,000 people were left homeless. A New York Times reporter compared the destruction to what had happened during World War II.<sup>3</sup> However, despite the damage

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<sup>1</sup> Nur Misuari, "Declaration of Independence Manifesto", in *Nur Misuari: An authorized biography*, ed. by Tom Stern (Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing Inc, 2012), pp. 177-178.

<sup>2</sup> Elgin Glenn R. Salomon, "The 1974 Battle of Jolo: Testimonial Narrative and Intra-Tausug Relations", *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 54, no. 4 (2022), pp. 619-634; Agnes Shari Tan Aliman, *The Siege of Jolo, 1974* (Quezon City: Central Book Supply Inc, 2021); Leina Hasani Halud, "A Narrative Analysis of the 1974 Sulu Wars", Master Thesis (Philippines: University of the Philippines Diliman).

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Lelyveld, "Fight in Philippine Town Leaves Rubble and Death", *New York Times* (23 Feb 1974), <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/02/23/archives/fight-inphilippine-town-leaves-rubble-and-death-battle-for-a.html>, accessed 23 Sep 2023.

Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo and casualties brought by the battle, many survivors want to forget and move on from the tragedy.

Recent literature discussing the construction of memory on martial law in the Philippines highlighted how disinformation romanticized the period (1972-1986) as the Golden Age of the country. Amplified in social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok, the disinformation discourse led to the popularity of the return of the Marcoses to power.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to reclaiming the voice of martial law survivors, studies also examine their experiences of human rights violation and marginalization.<sup>5</sup> Many of them who experienced these horrors and atrocities resisted the pro-imperialist and crony capitalist policies of President Marcos. Mostly belonging to the Philippine Left, they came from various sectors of society, including women, peasants, fisherfolks, students, and indigenous people. Aside from the Left, political oppositionists and the ‘middle forces’ participated actively in

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<sup>4</sup> Fernan Talamayan, “The Politics of Nostalgia and the Marcos Golden Age in the Philippines”, *Asia Review*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2021), pp. 273-304; Oscar T. Serquiña Jr., “The Living, the Virtual, and the Dead: Philippine Political Figures in Online Spaces”, *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, vol. 67, no.1 (2019), pp. 59–93; Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr., “Political Conjuncture and Scholarly Disjunctures: Reflections on Studies of the Philippine State under Marcos”, *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, vol 67 no. 1 (2019), pp. 3–30; Christian Victor A. Masangkay and Larah Vinda del Mundo, “Where to Bury Marcos? Dead Body Politics in the Marcos Playbook”, *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of the Third World Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2016), pp. 1–38; Victor Felipe Bautista, “The Pervert’s Guide to Historical Revisionism: Traversing the Marcos Fantasy”, *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, vol. 66, no. 3 (2018), pp. 273–300; Jose Santos P. Ardivilla “The Marcos Memes and the Manipulation of Memory”, in *Remembering/Rethinking EDSA*, ed. by John Paul Manzanilla and Caroline Hau (Mandaluyong: Anvil Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Grace Concepcion, “Writing and Rewriting the Self: Narrative Projection and Transformation in Martial Law Autobiographies”, *Humanities Diliman*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2021), pp. 65-92; Mila Astorga-Garcia, “Surviving Media Repression before and during Martial Law in the Philippines”, *Media Asia*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2021), pp. 139-143; Lei A. Pangilinan-Jamolin, Rowen P. de Guzman and Dan Paolo R. Yema, “Experiences of Selected University of the Philippines Los Banos (UPLB) Community Members during Martial Law in the Philippines” *UP Los Banos Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2020), pp. 68-86; Mary Grace Concepcion. “Writing the Self and Exigencies of Survival: Autobiography as Catharsis and Commemoration”. *Philippine Studies Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, vol. 66, no. 3 (2018), pp. 301-224; Portia Reyes, “Claiming History: Memoirs of the Struggle against Ferdinand Marcos’s Martial Law Regime in the Philippines”, *Sojourn Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2018), pp. 497-498; Ferdinand Llanes, *Tibak Rising: Activism in the Days of Martial Law* (Pasig: Anvil Publishing, 2012).

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remembering the anti-Marcos movement of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>6</sup> The survivors often reflected that impunity, poverty, and corruption persisted in Philippine society, and remembering their experiences is already resisting the continuing marginalization of many Filipinos.

However, the narratives of war and violence in Muslim Mindanao during the martial law period remained marginalized. Unlike the Marcos dictatorship's abuses concerning the insurgency of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF), the documentation on the war of Muslim Mindanao remained less.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the conflicts in Muslim Mindanao have been overshadowed in recent years by the presence of extremists such as the Maute Group, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The knowledge gap regarding the 1974 Battle of Jolo is more apparent when considering the overall context of the Muslim secessionist movement in the existing literature.<sup>8</sup> Although the battle caused tremendous damage and was consequential to the Muslim secessionist movement in the 1970s, some works on martial law in the Philippines failed to tackle the said event.

Unfortunately, there were no historical markers for the 1974 Battle of Jolo. However, the narrative of the AFP is amplified through

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<sup>6</sup> According to historian Lisandro Claudio, middle force refers to formerly apolitical middle class and upper class groups that joined the struggle mainly after the assassination of Pres. Marcos's arch-rival Senator Benigno Aquino; Lisandro E. Claudio, "Memories of the anti-Marcos movement: The Left and the Mnemonic Dynamics of the Post-Authoritarian Philippines", *South East Asia Research*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2010), p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel K. Tan, *The Muslim South and Beyond* (Quezon City, University of the Philippines Press, 2010); Patricio Abinales, *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the Formation of the Philippine Nation-State* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000); Fortunato Abat, *The CEMCOM Story The Day We Nearly Lost Mindanao* (Manila: FCA Publication, 1999); Thomas Mckenna, *Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Thayil Jacob Sonny George, *Revolt in Mindanao: The Rise of Islam in Philippine Politics* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1980); Cesar Adib Majul, "The Moro Struggle in the Philippines". *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 10, no.2 (1988), pp. 897–922.

<sup>8</sup> Warina Sushil Jukuy, "Personal Essay, 7 Feb 1974: Montage from a Kid's Memory Bank", *MindaNews*, 7 Feb 2015, <https://www.mindanews.com/mindaviews/2015/02/personal-essay-7-feb-1974-montage-from-a-kids-memory-bank/> accessed 23 Sept 2023; Carmen A. Abubakar, "Beyond Forgetting: The Moros during the Martial Law", in *Memory, Truth-telling and the Pursuit of Justice a Conference on the Legacies of the Marcos Dictatorship* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2001), pp.171-174; Teresa M. Custodio and Jose Y. Dalisay, *Kasaysayan: The History of the Filipino People*, vol. 9. Pleasantville (NY: Reader's Digest, 1998).

Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo markers and memorials that commemorate the valiance of the soldiers who fought against the MNLF rebels during martial law. Among the memorials are (1) the Memorial of Brig General Teodulfo Bautista and his thirty-five men who were killed by the MNLF on 10 October 1977, in the town of Patikul Sulu and (2) a replica and marker in the town of Luuk, Sulu dedicated to the indigenous patrol boat that was used by the military troops under the South Western Command (SOWESCOM).<sup>9</sup>

These layers of marginalization of the 1974 Battle of Jolo in the historiography of the martial law period in the Philippines further contribute to the relegation of its survivors' memories to the margin. The survivors' perspective of the past would then serve as a counter-memory where they add nuances to the official memory of the MNLF regarding the 1974 Battle of Jolo.

Counter-memory of survivors of war are considered as marginalized discourses of the past. According to Michel Foucault, counter-memory refers to memories that differ from, and often challenge, dominant discourses.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to traditional history, counter-memory offers a new perspective by revising existing histories that focus on localized experiences of oppression, thereby reframing and refocusing dominant narratives.<sup>11</sup> Aside from promoting the marginalized assertion of a 'bottom-up' perspective, it also recognized the democratization and pluralization of memories that cannot be easily integrated into the dominant discourse.<sup>12</sup>

Two recently published works of literature comprehensively highlighted the experiences of survivors during the 1974 Battle of Jolo. Agnes Shari Tan Aliman's book *The Siege of Jolo, 1974* recounted the experiences of Tausug survivors by collecting their narratives. It emphasized how the survivors surpassed the challenges of war and violence. Interestingly, it also underlined some commentaries on the

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<sup>9</sup> Julie S. Alipala, "In War-wearily Sulu, Park Honors Soldiers", *Inquirer.net*, 18 Sept. 2022, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1665941/in-war-weary-sulu-park-honors-soldiers>, accessed 5 Nov 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memories Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practice", *Annual Reviews of Sociology*, vol. 24 (1998), p. 126; George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 213.

<sup>11</sup> Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, p. 213.

<sup>12</sup> Zane Radzobe, "Performance as Counter-history: Latvian Theater Makers' Reflections on National History", *Nordic Theater Studies*, vol. 31, no.1 (2019), p. 94; Olick and Robbins, "Social Memories Studies, p. 126.

present condition of Sulu provinces.<sup>13</sup> Addressing the oversimplified ‘MNLF rebels vs. military’ perspective in the historiography of the ‘Moro problems’, Elgin Glenn Salomon narrated eyewitness accounts of the battle where he argued that the event tarnished the relationship between the Christian and Muslim Tausug who lived peacefully before the violence transpired. While many Christians and Chinese who resided in Jolo self-identified themselves as Tausug, it raised a query about the notion that Tausug are only Muslims. While many Jolo residents migrated to other places, the upland folks moved to the town due to their fears of the military. Allegedly, the military believed that the upland folks (tau gimba) were influenced by the MNLF. This military policy made many Christian Tausug more sceptical of their Muslim neighbours.<sup>14</sup>

This article moves beyond the disinformation surrounding the memory construction of Filipinos regarding martial law to examine how Tausug survivors recall their experiences of the 1974 Battle of Jolo. Countering the construction of memories of the MNLF and the military during martial law, this study looks at the mechanisms of how survivors understand, recall, and make sense of their memories. While many of the survivors moved on from the tragedy of war and violence, their memories revealed layers of issues faced by Muslim Mindanao in recent decades. This study utilized fifteen semi-structured interviews from February to September 2021.<sup>15</sup> Using the counter-memory framework, this article provides a space for the survivors from the margin to voice their reflections and discernments on the 1974 Battle of Jolo and other events that affected Muslim Mindanao in the past decades.

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<sup>13</sup> Aliman, *The Siege of Jolo, 1974*.

<sup>14</sup> Salomon, “The 1974 Battle of Jolo”.

<sup>15</sup> My initial interviewees were recommended by Muslim Tausug scholar Darwin Absari, an Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies at the Institute of Islamic Studies (IIS), University of the Philippines, and the Consortium for Bangsamoro Civil Society Inc. (CBCS), a solidarity network of Bangsamoro NGOs and other civil society organizations. Utilizing the snowball method, these interviewees recommended acquaintances to participate in this study. Due to limitations posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (especially travel restrictions imposed by the Philippine government), Interviews were conducted for the safety of the author and participants. Tagalog was used throughout the interviews and each interview lasted for one to two hours. The transcripts of all interviews were translated into English by the author. All interviewee names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. To supplement the collected interviews, this study also utilized the book *The Siege of Jolo, 1974* (2022) by Shari Tan Aliman, a collection of narratives on the 1974 Battle of Jolo. The said book collected 25 narratives from civilians who witnessed the battle.

## B. Historical Background

The introduction of Islam by Muslim traders from insular Southeast Asia in the late fourteenth century contributed to the political and social systems of Islamized ethnolinguistic groups in Mindanao. After Tausug founded the Sulu Sultanate in the latter half of the fifteenth century, Mindanao became an intersection of regional and global exchange. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Spanish colonialists tried to subjugate the Muslim groups in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago through invasions and Christianization. The Spaniards started to use the word *Moros* as an encompassing term for all Muslims in Mindanao, whatever their ethnolinguistic background. The Spaniards failed to subjugate the Tausug until the mid-nineteenth century, when, after attacks on Jolo, the Sultanate recognized Spanish sovereignty. However, the colonizers could only impose nominal rule on the Tausug.

The Americans handed over the Philippines, including the Sulu Sultanate, as the result of the Treaty of Paris in 1898. Perceiving the Muslim Philippines as uncivilized and barbaric, the American authorities introduced progressive reforms to civilize, develop, and educate their newly colonized Muslim subjects. However, opposing forced education, payment of local tax, and the incorporation of the Muslim lands to the United States-controlled Philippines, the Muslims launched sporadic and local resistance throughout Mindanao.<sup>16</sup> The Americans violently pacified the Moroland, which resulted in two of the bloodiest uprisings in Jolo: the Battle of Bud Daho (1906) and the Battle of Bud Bagsak (1913), where the US troops massacred over 600 and 3,000 Tausug, respectively.<sup>17</sup>

By 1920, the Americans had transferred control of Mindanao and Sulu to Christian Filipinos, marking the beginning of internal colonialism. This transfer of power resulted in the Muslims becoming politically, economically, and socially marginalized as religious minorities in the Philippines.<sup>18</sup> In the same period, transnational corporations such as BF Goodrich (1919), del Monte (1925), and Goodyear Tire and Rubber

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<sup>16</sup> Patricio Abinales, *Orthodoxy and History in the Muslim Mindanao Narrative* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Lualhati Abreu, "Colonialism and Resistance a Historical Perspective", in Bobby Tuazon, *The Moro Reader History and Contemporary Struggles of the Bangsamoro People* (Quezon City: CenPEG Publications, 2008), p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Ayala Milligan, "Teaching between the Cross and Crescent Moon: Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Public Education in the Southern Philippines", *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 47, no. 4 (2003), p. 471.

Co. (1929) also extended their plantations, which encroached on the ancestral lands of the indigenous peoples and the Muslims in mainland Mindanao.<sup>19</sup> After World War II, many Christian Filipinos migrated to mainland Mindanao, especially from Western Visayas (central Philippines). Consequently, the Christian population increased rapidly while the Moros were displaced from their land.

Later, political leaders in Manila, such as Pres. Ferdinand Marcos began to intervene and control the political affairs of the Moros. They challenged the authorities of the local elites like Cotabato Gov. Udtog Matalam and Sen. Saripada Pendatun,<sup>20</sup> which caused conflicts over land ownership and political contention. The escalated conflict led to the creation of *Ilaga* (Visayan term for rat), a Christian paramilitary group that caused violence against the Maguindanao and Maranao Muslims. The *Ilaga* collaborated with Christian politicians and the Philippine Constabulary<sup>21</sup> and organized some of the most violent massacres throughout mainland Mindanao. The Muslims led by Gov. Matalam countered the *Ilaga* by creating the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) in May 1968 with their armed forces called the 'Blackshirts' in Cotabato or the 'Barracudas' in Lanao.

Although Sulu was spared from the mass migration of Christians and the conflict between Christians and Muslims, the news about these massacres reached the archipelago. The Tausug sympathized with the Maranao and Maguindanao in mainland Mindanao and were angered by how the state forces treated them. These abuses motivated them to participate in the armed secessionist movement.

Pres. Ferdinand Marcos conscripted young men (mainly from Sulu) to invade Sabah and reclaim its sovereignty from Malaysia. However, twenty-eight men were massacred on Corregidor Island on 18 March 1968, after some disputes with military superiors and some unmet expectations by the conscripts.<sup>22</sup> This incident became popularly known as the Jabidah Massacre. With the student radicalization movement

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<sup>19</sup> Abreu, "Colonialism and Resistance", p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Mckenna, *Everyday Politics*, p.145.

<sup>21</sup> Named after the Ilonggo word for rat, the group was founded by Feliciano Luceno or popularly known as Kumander Toothpick. As the most popular explanation, the Muslim used it as an acronym for Ilonggo Landgrabbing Association. Philippine Constabulary is the predecessor of the Philippine National Police.

<sup>22</sup> Rommel A. Curaming and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, "Social Memory and State-Civil Society Relations in the Philippines: Forgetting and Remembering the Jabidah Massacre", *Time & Society*, vol. 21, no.1 (2012), pp. 89-90.

in the late 1960s, the oppressive internal colonialism by the Christian Philippines, the popularity of Nasserite nationalism among the Muslim intellectuals, and the continuing neglect of the national government to the needs of the people in the southern Philippines eventually galvanized the Moro secessionist movement.

However, Pres. Marcos signed Proclamation 1081, which placed the entire Philippines under martial law. Aside from citing the growing influence of the CPP-NPA throughout the country, Pres. Marcos also justified the declaration of Martial Law “from the unsettled conflict between certain elements of the Christian and Muslim population of Mindanao and Sulu, between the Christian ‘Ilagas’ and the Muslim ‘Barracudas,’” and the “government troops, and certain lawless organizations such as the Mindanao Independence Movement”.<sup>23</sup> A ban on political groups after the proclamation of martial law caused the termination of the MIM and the activation of underground MNLF and its armed wing, the Bangsa Moro Army (BMA), on 21 October 1972.<sup>24</sup>

Founded by Misuari, a Tausug-Sama and a former lecturer at the University of the Philippines (UP), and in alliance with Hashim Salamat of the Maguindanao and Dimas Pundato of the Maranaos, the MNLF aimed to establish Moro nationhood or the Bangsamoro as a response to a colonial and neocolonial rule that oppressed the Moros.<sup>25</sup> As part of Moro’s “national consciousness”, the MNLF deployed the notion of collective victimhood to strengthen their legitimacy to form a separate nation-state:

The decision to become free and independent has been deeply embedded in our national consciousness as we have inherited such consciousness from the three centuries of the continuous struggle of our forebears for the preservation of our national freedom, our homeland, and Islam.<sup>26</sup>

The rebels established their training camps and initiated offensives in the remote areas of the Sulu Archipelago. In response, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) militarized the hinterlands. Some civilians and their family members experienced abuses at the hands of

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<sup>23</sup> “Declaration of Martial Law”, *Official Gazette*, 21 Sep 1974, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/featured/declaration-of-martial-law/>, accessed 25 Sep 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2005), pp. 216-217.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217

<sup>26</sup> Nur Misuari, *The Final Struggle of the Moro People*, Manuscript (1973), p. 2.

the military, which drove them to join the rebel group. The MNLF fought unconventionally through guerilla tactics and their familiarity with the terrains, yet they sustained victories during the early years of martial law.<sup>27</sup>

Although Misuari initially benefited from the traditional leaders, they began to see him as a threat to their authority. Putting him in his proper place, the traditional leaders “spread the word that the MNLF was a camouflaged communist group”.<sup>28</sup> Fortifying the words, the Marcos government then used the ‘divide and conquer’ strategy by splitting them into ‘Maoist’ and the ‘Masses.’ In the eyes of the government, the ‘Maoists’ like Misuari were rebels who adhered to the teachings of Mao Zedong. At the same time, the ‘Masses’ were traditional leaders and their allies within the movement. They became the local government executive of the provinces of Sulu and the newly formed Tawi-Tawi after the offer of Pres. Marcos convinced them. The local clan leaders, who became known as the Magic 8, allied with the Marcos government.<sup>29</sup>

Aside from the ‘divide and conquer’ strategy, the Marcos government also created the Civilian Home Defense Forces (CHDF) and encouraged the other Tausug civilians to fight the ‘Maoists’. On 4 February 1974, Commodore Romulo Espaldon of AFP’s SOWESCOM launched Oplan Centurion to recover the towns of Maimbung, Parang, and Indanan. With the help of private armed groups of the Magic 8, the AFP effectively neutralized the ‘Maoists’ in the hinterland. By 6 February, the MNLF withdrew from the three towns. To avoid the cordon from these troops and to divert the soldiers’ attention from the hinterland, the rebels decided to invade the Jolo in the early hours of 7 February 1974.

### **C. AFP’s Memory of the 1974 Battle of Jolo**

The accounts of the military on the 1974 Battle of Jolo were narrated in (1) the first chapter of the book titled *A Mindanao Story: Troubled Decades in the Eye of the Storm* (2005) by retired Major General Delfin Castro, former commander of Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), and (2) testimonies of Gen. Madrino Munoz and Gen. Salvador Mison,

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<sup>27</sup> Elgin Glenn R. Salomon, “Testimonial Narratives of Muslim Tausug: Against Militarization in Sulu (1972-1974)”, *Studia Islamika*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2002), p. 256.

<sup>28</sup> Tom Stern, *Nur Misuari: An Authorized Biography* (Mandaluyong City: Anvil, 2009), p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> The members of the group include Habib Tupay Loong, Ali Abubakar, Hadji Abbas Estino, aka Maas Bawang, Bagis Talib, Jairulla Abdurajak, Imam Madisan Maldisa, Ahmad Omar and Lutian Ahajan.

Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo colonel and commander of the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion during the 1974 Battle of Jolo in *The Siege of Jolo, 1974* by Shari Tan-Aliman (2022).<sup>30</sup>

On 4 February 1974, the military initiated Oplan Centurion to retake control of certain municipalities from the MNLF through an amphibious assault.<sup>31</sup> With the help of the Magic 8, the battalion went to Bud Datu and Maimbung and defeated the MNLF.<sup>32</sup> By 6 February, the AFP had wildly succeeded, with the MNLF retreating from the municipalities. The rebels were overwhelmed by the military firepower. This MNLF retreat resulted in their invasion of Jolo on 7 February. Gen. Madrino Munoz noted, “[b]y attacking the town proper, the rebels intended to slow down the military’s pursuit.”<sup>33</sup> Gen. Salvador Mison attested that Misuari was present throughout the battle.<sup>34</sup>

Over 1000 MNLF rebels headed by Alvarez Isnadji, Hadji Van Jajurie, and Sical Sahibad arrived in Jolo to attack the Brigade HQ.<sup>35</sup> However, the AFP, particularly the Philippine Air Force (PAF) Sulu Air Task Group (SATAG) headed by Col. Ernesto Ravina stationed at a nearby airport, spotted them and opened fire, resulting in a battle. The MNLF managed to occupy most of the Notre Dame building, which was heavily fortified by the AFP and overlooked both SATAG and the Brigade HQ.<sup>36</sup> Despite this, they failed to capture a portion of the rooftop where SATAG’s heavy machine guns and recoilless rifles were positioned, covering the Brigade HQ approaches. The MNLF nearly overran half of the Brigade. However, a brigade reserve battalion with a tank and an armoured personnel carrier (APC) blocked the western approach of the MNLF from the Notre Dame building. This blockade prevented the MNLF from expanding its position. During the attack, Col. Alfonso Alcosoba, commander of the Army 4th Infantry Division at the Brigade HQ, took command of operations around Jolo town.<sup>37</sup>

The armed confrontation between the military and the MNLF continued for two days. Gen. Munoz observed that the fighting was

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<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, the AFP has no official memory of the battle. This study then relies on the narratives of prominent military figures.

<sup>31</sup> Delfin Castro, *A Mindanao Story: Troubled Decades in the Eye of the Storm* (Manila: Delfin Castro, 2005), p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Aliman, *The Siege of Jolo*, p. 199.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95

<sup>35</sup> Castro, *A Mindanao Story: Troubled Decades*, p.13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

heaviest at the Jolo Airport and Notre Dame of Jolo.<sup>38</sup> Two additional AFP battalions, namely the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion of Gen. Salvador Mison and the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion under Lt. Col. Jaime Echeverria, launched a counter-attack to secure Jolo.<sup>39</sup> Snipers were fired at the soldiers from Perlas Theater, shooting the navy boats, the nearby gas station, and the Masonic Temple.<sup>40</sup> In response, the first Charlie Company 14th Battalion platoon countered the snipers. Meanwhile, the Alpha Company held their position in Busbus near Jolo Bakery and Jolo Power. When all the rebels were cornered at Ever Theater near the wharf, The army requested the Air Force to bomb the area. Admiral Espaldon quickly disagreed. He believed that if they bombed the town, they would kill all the people since they were outside the pier. Gen. Espaldon shared his sentiments:

I bought the ship to the pier. Tied it to the pier... The Theater was about 200 yards away. Okay., One at a time! Fire one [looks at binoculars]. Then we asked the ground force, “O, what happened there?”. “Nothing happened. They’re still inside. Fire two. One by one. And it was so effective. We fired six or seven rounds... Then all the rebels came out and surrendered.<sup>41</sup>

Maj. Gen. Castro’s account mentioned that on the afternoon of 8 February, a Caltex station was hit and sparked fires that broke out all over town.<sup>42</sup> But Gen. Munoz stated that the MNLF “burned the town to serve as a distraction” against the military. “About 60% of the commercial areas and 40% of the residential areas were razed to the ground”, Gen. Munoz said.<sup>43</sup> The military also dealt with “desperate people and opportunists”, including some soldiers who were looting homes and stores to steal money, food, and other essential items.<sup>44</sup> Some enlisted men sympathized with the MNLF rebels due to either kinship or religious ties. Gen Espino took it upon himself to relieve the Constabulary

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<sup>38</sup> Aliman, *The Siege of Jolo*, p. 91.

<sup>39</sup> Castro, *A Mindanao Story: Troubled Decades*, p.13.

<sup>40</sup> Aliman, *The Siege of Jolo*, p. 100.

<sup>41</sup> *Admiral Espaldon on the 1974 Battle of Jolo*, Rear Admiral Romulo Espaldon (7 Feb 2021), <https://web.facebook.com/FatherofTawiTawi/videos/2962374930665349>, accessed 12 Jun 2024.

<sup>42</sup> AFP’s narratives did not specify who hit the Caltex station; Castro, *A Mindanao Story: Troubled Decades*, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Aliman, *The Siege of Jolo*, p.92.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo men supporting the MNLF rebels.<sup>45</sup>

The intense firepower from the AFP, including jet strafing, compelled the MNLF to regroup at the stairways on the right wing of the Notre Dame building. The MNLF decided to withdraw, where they were chased by troops supported by F-86 jets and armed helicopters. They went to Mt. Tumatangis, Bud Datu, and nearby hills between Indanan and Jolo.<sup>46</sup> The AFP then launched a counter-attack against the hiding rebels. Brig. Gen Munoz was appointed mayor of Jolo and spearheaded the town's rebuilding.<sup>47</sup>

#### **D. MNLF's Narrative of the 1974 Battle of Jolo**

Sources from the perspective of the MNLF and its members on the 1974 Battle can be found in the Report of the Secretary of the Lupah Sug Revolutionary Committee, which was sent to the Chairman of the Central Committee of the MNLF. This report is referenced in Nur Misuari's article, "The Rise and Fall of Moro Statehood," published in the 1992 issue of *Philippine Development Forum* (Vol. 6, No. 2). Substantial information can be found in Stern's authorized biography, "Nur Misuari: An Authorized Biography" (2012) and the article *Burning of Jolo MNLF Account* from the official website of MNLF.<sup>48</sup> The testimonies of Ibrahim Idjirani, one of the leaders of the MNLF, were written in *The Siege of Jolo, 1974* by Shari Tan-Aliman (2022).

On 4 February 1974, the MNLF fought courageously against a force of more than three battalions from the AFP that landed in the town of Maimbung, Sulu. While they fought against the MNLF, the AFP suffered casualties of 150 men. The AFP then "vindictively revenged by killing merciless civilians inside their hide-outs".<sup>49</sup> By 5 February, the MNLF staged a resistance in Parang and killed 15 soldiers. While the military used Armored Personnel Car (APC) and tanks, the MNLF strongly resisted the military in Anuling, Patikul town, where 20 enemies died while the rebels had no casualties. This battle signaled MNLF's

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Castro, *A Mindanao Story: Troubled Decades*, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> Aliman, *The Siege of Jolo*, p. 201.

<sup>48</sup> The official website of the MNLF was deactivated. But the Sulu Online Library, an independent, non-partisan, and non-profit website that aims to promote the history and culture of the Sulu archipelago was able to retrieve the article from the MNLF website.

<sup>49</sup> Nur Misuari, "The Rise and Fall of Moro Statehood", *Philippine Development Forum*, vol. 6, no.2 (1992), p.34.

attack on Jolo.

The MNLF believed that capturing Jolo was essential to demoralize the AFP. Before dawn, hundreds of MNLF fighters infiltrated Jolo and set up strategically selected fire bases. While the soldiers were sleeping, they began to march from Indanan towards Jolo. In the initial hours, it seemed that Misuari's forces were on the verge of overtaking the army's main camp. However, the government forces started firing at the rebels when they saw that they were already mobilizing.<sup>50</sup> Some rebels entered the Walled City while the combined forces of the military and the Philippine Constabulary (PC) fired at them. Some members of the MNLF assembled in the vicinity of the Philippine National Bank near the Notre Dame Jolo Grade School. Confrontations also happened in Jolo Pier, Plaza Tulay, and Tigbaw. Contrary to the testimony of Gen. Mison, Misuari was in Camp Moro in Sabah and then moved to Campuran Base in Sandakan. Despite his absence, he directed MNLF's military strategies in the battle.<sup>51</sup>

The MNLF claimed that they successfully seized Jolo because they dominated every crucial area of the town except for areas controlled by the Philippine Constabulary. Some rebels hid in the residents' houses while others fired the padlock to open the Sulu Provincial Jail. The MNLF rebels gunned down two helicopters, one Spotter plane and one U-47 plane. They also estimated that they killed 100 soldiers on the first day of the battle and 120 soldiers on its second day.

However, the "artillery shells from the Philippine Navy's big guns screamed in among a rain of rocket".<sup>52</sup> The Air Force strafed the city and used napalm bombs. They also utilized their "jet fighter planes, T-28 'Tora-Tora' warplanes and helicopter gunships bombardment and machine gun firing from the sky".<sup>53</sup> Vital sites of the town were not spared from the bombings, including "the central Tulay mosque, Chinese Pun Tai Kung temple, and the entire town of Jolo." Meanwhile, the AFP gathered the civilians, mostly 300 men in Busbus, and massacred them. Some 500 more civilians were taken hostage while some children and women "were molested raped savagely".<sup>54</sup> The military also shot

<sup>50</sup> The AFP fired 30 calibers, 40 calibers, M-60s, and M-79, along with other guns against the MNLF rebels; Stern, *Nur Misuari*, p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> Stern, *Nur Misuari*, p. 65.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> "Burning of Jolo MNLF Account", 7 Feb. 2013, [http://mnlfnct.com/Article/Editorial\\_07Feb2013\\_Revisiting%20the%20Feb%207%20Burning%20of%20Jolo.htm](http://mnlfnct.com/Article/Editorial_07Feb2013_Revisiting%20the%20Feb%207%20Burning%20of%20Jolo.htm) accessed 15 Sept 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Misuari, "The Rise and Fall of Moro Statehood", p.36.

the Caltex gas station with an M-79 that burned the whole town. Aside from that, the incendiary shells of the naval boats “worsened the fire and burned all the houses.”<sup>55</sup>

Howitzers blasted MNLF positions, and fierce hand-to-hand fighting broke out as the Philippine Marines fought to regain the city. It was difficult for the MNLF to expand their position in Jolo due to the presence of tanks, recoilless rifles, and 50-calibre guns.<sup>56</sup> The MNLF then decided to withdraw.

The civilians took refuge in other parts of Sulu to escape Jolo’s chaotic situation. Misuari’s authorized biography described the condition of Jolo:

As hours passed in the tropical heat, the stench became appealing. Bodies floated in pink rainwater fringed with body scum. Dogs and pigs rooted at decaying corpses while crows pecked out dead eyes until stuffed with their necrophilic diets, the birds staggered like drunks, too heavy to fly. The crackle of burning houses sent flames and smoke rolling skyward, spreading a vast umbrella of darkness.<sup>57</sup>

The official narrative of the MNLF used the third-week issue of Philippine DISPATCH of April 1986 to contradict the stories and claims of the Marcos government that the rebels bombed and burned Jolo. They stressed that the government reported one-sidedly on what happened during the battle by downplaying “the AFP-MNLF war to domesticize its international repercussions and while distorted facts and events to confuse the subservient Filipinos and the urban domiciled Moros”.<sup>58</sup> On 18 March 1974, on the sixth anniversary of the Jabidah Massacre and more than a month after the battle, Misuari issued a Declaration of Independence where they declared that they disbanded all their “political, economic, and other binds with the oppressive government of the Philippines under the dictatorial regime of President Ferdinand Marcos to secure a free and independent state for the Bangsa Moro people”.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>57</sup> Stern, *Nur Misuari*, p. 65.

<sup>58</sup> “Burning of Jolo MNLF Account”.

<sup>59</sup> Stern, *Nur Misuari*, p.66

## E. The Memories of Tausug Survivors of the Battle

### 1. *Nostalgia on the Old Jolo*

Before the 1974 Battle of Jolo happened, the town remained relatively peaceful. However, the military and MNLF conflict erupted in Sulu Island's hinterlands. Malik, a soldier during the early years of martial law, pointed out this observation when the violence erupted in Sulu: "There was no violence within the town proper of Jolo, but in the other municipalities, there was an ongoing war."<sup>60</sup>

Products from nearby Sabah, Malaysia, even reached Jolo. As an exporter of tropical fruits and cash crops such as abaca, Jolo experienced economic development despite being located in the country's periphery. On the other hand, the sizable Chinese population or *lannang* engaged in businesses. "Before the war, we could freely stroll around the town (Jolo)", said Maria, a Christian Tausug who is the daughter of a soldier.<sup>61</sup> Khalifa, a Muslim Tausug who is also a retired teacher, reminisces about the peace and order situation of Jolo before the battle:

You know what, Jolo was very beautiful. There is no discrimination or disparity between Christians and Muslims. Intermarriages were also common. The economy of Jolo is very developed. Jolo is the crossroad to Malaysia, so we enjoyed foreign goods.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, Sayeed, a college student when the siege of Jolo happened, uttered his observation when he remembered the simplicity of his childhood. "Life was good. The price of fish was cheap. Fruits like mangosteen and durian were abundant. It feels like no one is poor."<sup>63</sup> Yearning for the "traditional but disappearing way of life",<sup>64</sup> most of the survivors experienced nostalgia for the old Jolo that they witnessed when they were still young. They discuss their life in Jolo during their high school reunion, and for them, it is pleasant to remember their good memories of the town before the battle.

Nevertheless, Khalid, a former MNLF member who returned to the folds of the law weeks before the 1974 Battle of Jolo commenced, expressed his sadness over the current state of Jolo:

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with Malik, 15 Mar 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Maria, 10 Mar 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Khalifa, 10 Mar 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Sayeed, 6 Mar 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Anthony Heath, Lindsay Richards, and Julia Jungblut, "The Evolution of Nostalgia in Britain 1879-2019", *Sociological Forum*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2022), p. 1418.

## Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo

We have places where we can stroll around or sell our products. We also have cinemas where we can watch movies. It is so sad that these places were razed to the ground and did not recover. It is very sad. Look at the structures (in the town). The corruption in Sulu is reflected in the state of the buildings, roads, and infrastructures.<sup>65</sup>

After the battle, the survivors observed that corruption and violence thrived throughout the province. As reflected in the narrative, many Tausug left Jolo and searched for greener pastures. Many affluent Tausug, especially the Chinese and Christians, also exited due to security reasons. Omar shared his views on these problems:

The relationship between Christians and Muslims was really good. The Christians are not afraid to interact with the Muslims. However, after 1974 and later during the advent of kidnapping around the 1980s and 1990s, they were already afraid.<sup>66</sup>

Longing to return to his particular imagination of his homeland<sup>67</sup> during his childhood years, Mario, a Christian Tausug of Chinese descent who migrated to Bulacan (in Luzon Island) after the battle, said that Jolo needs to heighten discipline in its residents due to its peace and order situation in recent years.

Jolo will be back to those good old days if there is not much politics.... The illiterates (from the hinterland) are already in the town proper. They do not have manners. It is different, but for now, Jolo needs the military.<sup>68</sup>

The development that the Sulu archipelago experienced before the battle became the source of their honour and pride as a Tausug. Manifesting a “comforting past but a hateful present”,<sup>69</sup> most of the survivors said that if corruption and violence continue, the Jolo that they witnessed when they were still young will remain an elusive dream.

## 2. *Remembering Who is at Fault*

While the Tausug remember that they were caught in the conflict between the rebels and the soldiers, they reminisce their haunting memories, and some of them blame the MNLF for the sufferings they

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Khalid, 23 Mar 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Omar, 15 Mar 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Rebecca Bryant, “Writing the Catastrophe: Nostalgia and its Histories in Cyprus”, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, vol. 26, no.2 (2008), p. 403.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Mario, 10 Mar 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Roper, “Nostalgia as an Emotional Experience in the Great War”, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 54, no.2 (2011), pp. 421-451.

experienced in 1974. While Sayeed remembered his experiences, he blamed the MNLF for starting the conflict:

It was the fault of the MNLF. Why would they invade the town of their relatives? Who suffered? Their relatives! Who lost their loved ones? Whose properties vanished because of the fire? They [rebels] might die, but their relatives were still alive, and they were suffering.<sup>70</sup>

Meanwhile, Daniel Gaspar, who was a high school student, echoed the sentiment of the Sayeed: “If the MNLF’s purpose was liberation, why did they have to destroy their own land and harm their own people?”<sup>71</sup>

Sayeed and Gaspar argued that their serious lack of judgment in invading Jolo disregarded the civilians who would suffer from the consequences of war and violence. Some survivors thought that although the AFP caused heavy damage to Jolo, it was justifiable for them to maximize the use of force. From the perspective of the military and the government, the rebels were a menace to the security and sovereignty of the state. More so, Daniel Gaspar and many others remembered the benevolence of the military that helped them escape Jolo. “The military escorted us from Camp Asturias to the Jambatan (The Jolo Pier) ... Two navy boats took the people to Zamboanga,” said Gaspar.<sup>72</sup>

On the other hand, the survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo witnessed how the military bombed Jolo. Some survivors experienced human rights violations committed by the AFP. Jocelyn Haron, daughter of a driver in one of the offices of the government, narrates the experience of her neighbour:

Our neighbour was interrogated and threatened by some people in military uniform. Some said they were MNLF rebels who planned to capture him. Fortunately, they changed their minds and let him go. But he got so traumatized that he seemed to have lost his mind after that incident.<sup>73</sup>

As the battle’s intensity escalated, the military grew increasingly wary of civilians, as they found themselves, according to Stathis Kalyvas, “in an environment where distinguishing between civilians and enemy combatants was impossible.”<sup>74</sup> Perlas Theater became a notorious place where suspected rebels were tortured and killed. Tom Duane Garcia was

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Sayeed, 6 Mar 2021.

<sup>71</sup> Aliman, *The Siege of Jolo*, p. 106.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>74</sup> Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 69.

Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo seven years old when the battle happened, but his father was detained at the Perlas Theater by mere suspicion that he was an MNLF rebel. Garcia narrated his family's experience:

We went to the Jolo Pier to wait for the naval boat. My father was stopped by soldiers when he got there. They questioned him and demanded to see his residence certificate (cedula)... After being detained for several hours, my father was released. I think he may have been so traumatized at that time. I realized he was not himself when our neighbour Aida Ulama gave him a glass of water, but he angrily threw the water she gave him.<sup>75</sup>

With the absence of peace and order, the military allegedly looted pawnshops. Amir narrated the experience shared with him by his cousin:

You know what... the soldiers blasted the pawnshops and stores and even banks in Jolo. My cousin said, "We put grenades on the door." Then [he told me], "We stole the gold jewellery that was pawned in the shop." The helmets [of the soldiers] were full of gold because the people of Jolo love to collect gold.<sup>76</sup>

However, survivors like Hussein believe that both MNLF and AFP were culpable for the damages done to Jolo and its residents, "The fault of the rebels was that they entered Jolo, but the military's fault was they needlessly involved the civilians...The rebels did not know that there were a lot of civilians that would be unintentionally involved."<sup>77</sup> As narrated by Wilhemina Aluk, an elementary school pupil when the battle erupted, "I think that in a war, no one wins. Everyone loses. They must not use religion as an issue or a rallying cry in Mindanao. No one owns Mindanao but all peace-loving Filipinos."<sup>78</sup>

### 3. *Remembering as Unpacking the Problems in Muslim Mindanao*

How society remembers the past can be attributed to the interests and conditions in the present. Remembering the 1974 Battle of Jolo unpacked the various problems that Muslim Mindanao faced after the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution. While the survivors reminisced their memories of the battles, they shared their commentaries on the overall condition of Sulu in recent years. After the battle, the survivors believe that the town has not fully recovered from the damage caused by the war. Mohammad, a former college instructor in one of the colleges

<sup>75</sup> Aliman, *The Siege of Jolo*, p.167.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Amir, 21 Aug 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Omar, 15 Mar 2021.

<sup>78</sup> Aliman, *The Siege of Jolo*, p. 128.

in Manila, narrated his perspective on the peace and order situation that remained a vital problem in the town after the 1974 Battle of Jolo:

Yes, my observation is that when the war started, it was hard to go back to the time before martial law. It is difficult to trade in Jolo. It is difficult. It seems like you cannot just walk like you are not afraid to do it. Yes, people were even afraid to walk.<sup>79</sup>

The survivors also mentioned that the strategy of Pres. Marcos during martial law, “divide-and-conquer”, split the Tausug populace. The categorization of the Marcos government to the MNLF into ‘Maoist’ and ‘Masses’ left an enduring legacy for the people of Sulu. Amir, who is currently a professor at one of the universities in Zamboanga City, narrated how the ‘Masses’ became more powerful after the Marcos government pampered them.

The divide-and-conquer tactic of the Marcos government resulted in conflict among the Tausug. As narrated by Amir, “That is why the conflict resulted in Tausug versus Tausug later. That is the most bitter part of the revolution, Moro versus Moro. That should not have happened if not because of the (Philippine) government.”<sup>80</sup>

While some survivors narrated their experiences during the 1974 Battle of Jolo, they also expressed their disappointment with the MNLF. Such disappointment was further articulated by Mohamad, who came from a family of entrepreneurs:

On the other side, MNLF is also at fault because they immediately entered the town during the 1974 Battle of Jolo. Every year, they always promise that we will be independent (from the Philippines). They always promise. They convince the people that we will be independent. Eventually, many Muslims realize that independence is not true. That’s why many would say, “Misuari is a liar!”<sup>81</sup>

Some Tausug, including Khalifa, an MNLF member before the 1974 Battle of Jolo erupted, began to lose his trust in the group ever since allegations of corruption appeared during the 2000s.

With the unfolding of events, I already have a different point of view on the MNLF... We supported them. Then, when they handled the government, supposedly, it was their chance to fix Sulu, but did they fix it? They did not fix it! But they were given time to rule the ARMM, the

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with Mohamad, 1 Apr 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Amir, 21 Aug 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Mohamad, 1 Apr 2021.

Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo  
Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao.<sup>82</sup>

On 23 December 1976, the Philippine government and the MNLF signed the Tripoli Agreement, and under this deal, an autonomous region was to be created in Mindanao. After the 1986 People Power Revolution that ousted Pres. Marcos, Pres. Corazon Aquino signed an act that established the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. On 2 September 1996, the Philippine Government and the MNLF signed the 1996 Final Peace Agreement or the Jakarta Accord to implement the 1976 Tripoli Agreement. The agreement resulted in a permanent ceasefire and a plan for the rebels to take over the leadership of the autonomous government in the Muslim-dominated conflict-affected areas.<sup>83</sup> Three days after, Nur Misuari, who ran unopposed, was elected as the governor of the MNLF.

A resolution was issued on 29 April 2001 that declared Misuari as “incompetent” to remain as MNLF’s chairman.<sup>84</sup> Nur Misuari was also charged with graft and malversation over acquiring Php 115.2 million in textbooks in 2000 and 2001.<sup>85</sup> Showing his anger against the Philippine government of Pres. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, Misuari took over the Cabatangan government complex in Zamboanga City and held hostage the residents where they were marched around the city. The Philippine government charged Misuari with rebellion, but he sought refuge in Sabah, Malaysia. The Royal Malaysian Police arrested Misuari and extradited him to the Philippines. Nevertheless, the Philippine government eventually released him, dropping his rebellion charges in 2008.

Later, the Philippine government planned a peace deal with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front that would sideline the MNLF and the 1996 agreement. Nur Misuari declared the independence of the Bangsamoro Republik on 12 August 2013 at Talipao Sulu. Nearly a month after the declaration, the MNLF rebels invaded Zamboanga City and claimed that it was their pre-emptive response to the large troop movement of the military. The 19-day Zamboanga Siege resulted in the

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Khalifa, 10 Mar 2021.

<sup>83</sup> Francisco Lara, *Insurgents, Clans and State Political Legitimacy and Resurgent Conflict in Muslim Mindanao Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2014), p. 59.

<sup>84</sup> Rizal G. Buendia, “The GRP-MILF Peace Talks: Quo Vadis?”, *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2004), pp. 205.

<sup>85</sup> ABS-CBN News, “Nur Misuari to ‘defend self against arrest warrant: spokesman’”. 6 Sept 2017, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/09/06/17/nur-misuari-to-defend-self-against-arrest-warrant-spokesman>, accessed 23 Sept 2023.

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death of 200 individuals (mostly MNLF rebels), including 20 soldiers, 6 police officers, and 13 civilians.

Although the MNLF significantly contributed to the realization of the autonomy of Muslim Mindanao, their alleged hypocrisy infuriated some Tausug survivors. Just like what happened in Jolo in 1976, their invasions resulted in death, injuries, and destruction of properties. Many Tausug felt betrayed that these people once bravely fought for the self-determination of Muslim Mindanao. However, eventually, they got involved in corrupt practices and wreaked havoc in Zamboanga City.

Some of them, like Farida and her mother, were still emotional when they remembered how they survived the battle. Farida usually recalled the 1974 Battle of Jolo every time animosities suddenly appeared in Mindanao, “Even though I was not a victim in the siege of Zamboanga in 2013, every time Zamboanga was burned, I was crying. That is where I learned that I have a trauma from the war (1974 Battle of Jolo).”<sup>86</sup> The changing dynamics of politics in the Sulu archipelago today, such as the proliferation of violent extremism and poverty, contribute to how the Tausug remember the battle. Given these problems, many survivors chose to move on from this tragedy.

#### 4. *Moving-on and Forgiveness*

The 1974 Battle of Jolo carried pain and sorrow to the Tausug, where many of them lost their loved ones. Interestingly, the survivors said that their battle experiences were not worth remembering. Jolo and the province of Sulu do not have a day of remembrance or special holiday to commemorate the 1974 Battle of Jolo. Maria expressed her dismay over this issue:

It seems I don't remember that we commemorate this event just like how we remember 21 August or Ninoy Aquino (Benigno Aquino Jr.) Day. In Jolo, there is no opportunity to remember it. I can only recall that it happened in 1974. Even when I was in high school, I could not recall that we did not have class on that date (7 February). I do not even understand why we have no holiday on that date.<sup>87</sup>

Supporting Maria, Omar, a Muslim Tausug who belongs to one of the most influential families in Sulu, said, “We do not remember it. We would only say: “Oh, it is 7 February today”. That is how we remember

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Farida, 10 Aug 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Maria, 10 Mar 2021.

Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo it. There is no commemoration. We do not think about that. It has no significance”.<sup>88</sup>

Interestingly, Ibrahim reflected on his memory during martial law and compared it with the Battle of Bud Dajo, where Americans massacred many Tausug in 1906.

Why would we commemorate an event if it is not happy for us? We are reminded of the dark past. Your relative who got lost is now dead. The missing (individuals) were still missing. What is good about the happenings in the past? How would you commemorate that? What good memory does it portray? Just like in the Battle of Bud Dajo during the American colonial period, when the Americans came back here to Sulu, my teacher told us, “You have no shame! You engage with the Americans. You don’t know that after the Battle of Dajo, the Americans destroyed (the mountain), then you will celebrate the anniversary that we were massacred? Go back to history! Our past is so dark that you will celebrate (the anniversary of Bud Dajo)? It’s awful.” My teacher is saying that it’s not good for remembering because it (the past) is so dark. So, we must look forward and see the future.<sup>89</sup>

Anchored on *sipug* (shame), the survivors deemed that the tragedy in Jolo was not part of the glorious past of the Tausug, an ethnic group known for its valiance against the Spanish and American colonizers.

Meanwhile, for Mario, they would intentionally forget the said event. “We still remember it. But as time goes by, we forget about it. That is not memorable. That is horror”.<sup>90</sup> Omar articulated the reason why it is not commemorated among the Tausug:

Just like what I have said, the people of Jolo are angry towards the MNLF because of what they did. The event is not worthy to be remembered or commemorated. If we recall the past, it is like remembering the hardship that we experienced. So, we don’t discuss it. It is traumatic.<sup>91</sup>

As noted by Diokno, “The rampant poverty and marginalization, the return of the perpetrators of abuses in power, and the long bureaucratic process to seek justice contributed to the silencing of the

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<sup>88</sup> Interview with Omar, 15 Mar 2021.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Ibrahim, 24 Apr 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Mario, 10 Mar 2021.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Omar, 15 Mar 2021.

narratives of the survivors of human rights violation of Martial Law not only in Sulu but also elsewhere.”<sup>92</sup> The province of Sulu consistently ranks as one of the poorest provinces in the country due to continuing armed conflicts that resulted in socioeconomic uncertainty, constrained economic opportunities, and inadequate social services.<sup>93</sup>

Looking at the material condition of Sulu for the past decades, these narratives exemplified Connerton’s concept of forgetting as humiliated silence where “some acts of silence may be an attempt to bury things beyond expression and the reach of memory, yet such silencing, while they are a type of repression, can at the same time be a form of survival, and the desire to forget may be an essential ingredient in that process of survival”.<sup>94</sup> Recalling the tragedy and demanding accountability against the people involved does not make sense to them anymore in the present. Viewing forgetting as a form of survival,<sup>95</sup> the survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo were already satisfied that their families faced and survived immediate challenges in life. For some of them, their experiences in Jolo did not hinder them from pursuing their careers.

Articulating the teaching of Roman Catholicism, Maria, a Christian Tausug, said she already forgave the perpetrators of the violence. “If God knows how to forgive, I can also forgive because I was still a kid when it happened, and I was still in elementary”.<sup>96</sup> With love and mercy, forgiveness is shown by Jesus, who forgave his enemies on the cross, even without waiting for them to ask for forgiveness.<sup>97</sup> From the perspective of a Muslim Tausug, Amir also echoes the sentiment of Maria: “Despite what happened, I forgave them. It is up to God to punish them --if ever

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<sup>92</sup> Maria Serena Diokno, “Memory as a Means of Forgetting” in *Memory, Truth-telling, and the Pursuit of Justice A Conference on the Legacies of the Marcos Dictatorship* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2001), pp. 84-85.

<sup>93</sup> Bart Manoguid, “SAAD Sulu creates significant progress in Agri-development, pines for consistent social protection initiatives”, *Special Program for Agricultural Development Program Department of Agriculture*, <https://saad.da.gov.ph/2023/02/saad-sulu-creates-significant-progress-in-agri-development-pines-for-consistent-social-protection-initiatives-2> (accessed 20 Sep 2023).

<sup>94</sup> Paul Connerton, *Seven Types of Forgetting*, *Memory Studies*, vol. 1, no.1(2008), p. 68.

<sup>95</sup> Francisco Delich, “The Social Construction of Memory and Forgetting”, *Diogenes*, vol. 51, no. 1(2004), p. 69.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Maria, 10 Mar 2021.

<sup>97</sup> Yehudith Auerbach, “Forgiveness and Reconciliation: The Religious Dimension”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2005), p. 279.

Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo they have one. For me, I am not the right person to judge them”.<sup>98</sup>

### 5. *Remembering as Reclaiming Survivor's Agency*

Although some survivors chose to move on from the battle, some found ways to reminisce about their unique experiences. After the interview, Abdul mentioned that he felt relieved that it was the first time he talked about his survival experiences in 1974 since he had no avenue to share these matters. As the breadwinner of the family, he has been busy taking care of his family, and it was an opportunity for him to process his thoughts regarding his experiences with the 1974 Battle of Jolo. On the other hand, Maria believed that there was a silver lining in experiencing the battle because it strengthened her character:

Because, I am still the same person, although I am more mature and stronger. I'm stronger because I am already accustomed to the war, (while) I live in the (military) camp. I am already accustomed to these things.<sup>99</sup>

Meanwhile, Farida said that “[They] never commemorate it (1974 Battle of Jolo), [they] just talk about it. Today, we have social media, so we write about it.”<sup>100</sup> Farida, who is currently a human rights advocate, runs a blog where she wrote short articles about her experiences in 1974. In 2015, her blog post also appeared in one of the leading newspapers in Mindanao.

Farida's experience was articulated by Cathy Caruth that trauma is a paradox where “the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness”.<sup>101</sup> Despite experiencing the effects of the battle, her story, which was published in her blog and newspaper, became an avenue for her to understand the complexity of the problems in Mindanao while simultaneously confronting her experience. Eventually, she felt that her writing healed her from the trauma:

Usually, I talk about it, I write about it, and they were crying and wanted me to write a book about it. My memoirs. I have parts one to four, but just snippets. Because most of my writings were raw, there is no analysis or interpretation. And then, it evolved because as part of growing up, there were additional inputs of data. It became like you are a third-party

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Amir, 21 Aug 2021.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Maria, 10 Mar 2021.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Farida, 10 Aug 2021.

<sup>101</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Introduction”, *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma*, vol. 48, no.1 (1991), p. 6.

observer of your younger self. You need to distance yourself from that to be able to understand it well. Because that is how philosophizing works, right? Sometimes, some things turn out to be as simple as they are, as much that you have not yet understood. Only when you distance yourself, it is a perfect time can you comprehend it.<sup>102</sup>

Like autobiographers who wrote about their personal experiences during martial law,<sup>103</sup> Farida was encouraged by other people, particularly her daughter, to write a book about her childhood experience. She hopes that the next generations learn from her experiences in 1974. Her blog served as a space where she could freely speak and communicate without fear, which could cover those who could speak and listen for wisdom.<sup>104</sup>

## 6. *Transmitting Memories and the Lessons Learnt*

The survivors' memories of the 1974 Battle of Jolo remained at the margin of discourse on martial law. However, their stories were a testament to the survivors' bravery in overcoming the obstacles that strengthened their character. Although it was on the margin of Philippine history, the survivors still transmit their memories and lessons of the battle to their children and their grandchildren.<sup>105</sup> Omar recalled an instance:

You need to be critical of the ideology (of a group). Some of them are only good at talking, but their words are not true. The things that they say for the country, for the religion, for the nationality are not true. The civilians would suffer in the long run.<sup>106</sup>

Eating with the whole family is one of the few instances where its members would get together and discuss mundane or even political matters. Sharing experiences at the dining table helps transmit and instill valuable lessons to their children or grandchildren, especially on the moral dimension of war and violence. These lessons could guide them in their life decisions as they grow old. Nevertheless, to easily visualize the lessons,

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Farida, 10 Aug 2021.

<sup>103</sup> Concepcion, "Writing and Rewriting the Self", p. 65.

<sup>104</sup> Degung Santikarma, "Monument, Document and Mass Grave: The Politics of Representing Violence in Bali in *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present*, ed. by Mary S. Zurbuchen (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), p. 322.

<sup>105</sup> Jularat Damrongviteetham, "Narratives of the "Red Barrel" Incident: Collective and Individual Memories in Lamsin, Southern Thailand", in Kah Seng Lo, Stephen Dobbs, and Ernest Koh, *Oral History in Southeast Asia Memories and Fragments* (England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 102.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Omar, 15 Mar 2021.

Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo survivors often used their personal experiences through their memories of the past. They frequently shared their experiences with their children and grandchildren, hoping that they would learn something from the tragedy that they faced. Watching the news on the television with family members can also be an effective tool in transmitting memory, especially if it reminds them of their past experiences in Jolo. Maria remembers one instance when she narrated her experience to her son:

I talked with my auntie and, of course, she is older. So, we say that (Jolo) is not already peaceful. Then my son would ask me what happened (during the 1974 Battle of Jolo), and I said, “My son, we experienced that, the actual war.” Because my son watched the television... I said to my auntie, “See, Jolo has not experienced peace”. “You are right! When will Jolo attain peace and order?” my auntie asked. But my eldest son said, “What happened, Mother?” Then I said, “It (our experience) was bad”. They would listen to me. I recount the stories while reenacting them. That’s why my sons laugh at me. That’s how I narrate my story.<sup>107</sup>

Meanwhile, Ibrahim, who works as a public school teacher, holds a great responsibility to educate the children of Jolo on what happened during martial law:

There were instances when I had opportunities to talk to them (students), especially how wars destroy livelihood. Then, I reveal the suffering of their parents during Martial Law – How we sold out food in the aftermath of the 1974 incident. The encounter was on 7 February. As a teacher, I show the children that through our story, they will not emulate what happened and join organizations that were not good.<sup>108</sup>

Ibrahim admits that many of his former students would love to carry weapons. Experiencing the tragedy of the battle, he does not want them to experience what they have undergone nearly fifty years ago. He was also aware that extremist groups like ASG and JI knew how to convince the young Moros by making promises. As noted in the testimonies of both Omar and Ibrahim, they want the next generation of Tausug to be critical of the ideologies that might be dangerous to society, such as extremism or terrorism. Most importantly, their experiences articulate their aspiration for long-lasting peace in Mindanao, where both Christians and Muslims can coexist, as narrated by Virginia Villanueva, who was already a medical doctor when violence erupted in Jolo:

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with Maria, 10 Mar 2021.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Ibrahim, 24 Apr 2021.

Reflecting on the war and the burning in Jolo, I can say that mutual understanding is what we need to maintain lasting peace and harmony between Christians and Muslims.<sup>109</sup>

Intergenerational transmission of memory is shaped through the social interaction of members where they interpret the “assimilated interaction in terms of their social location and potentially develop new ideas, thought, and behaviour”.<sup>110</sup> Through this transmission, the narrators believed that understanding the past through their stories could contribute to peace in Sulu and Muslim Mindanao at large.

## F. Concluding Remarks

Moving beyond the disinformation surrounding Filipino memory construction of martial law, this article unpacks how the Tausug survivors construct, remember, and make sense of their memories of the 1974 Battle of Jolo. Their memories revealed layers of issues faced by Muslim Mindanao after the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution. While some of them felt nostalgic upon reflecting on the current condition of Jolo, many of them want to move on from the tragedy of war and violence. Reclaiming their agency, some survivors are eager to document their experiences. Although many of them moved on from the tragedy, some of them found ways to transmit the memories to the next generations of Tausug.

This article will hopefully inspire more Filipinos and Bangsa Moro scholars to delve into the silenced narratives of the martial law period in Muslim Mindanao and to study how the survivors interpret their experiences in the past. This article also hopes that the government will spearhead a transitional justice approach to the 1974 Battle of Jolo to prevent similar incidents of violence in the southern Philippines from happening again.

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<sup>109</sup> Aliman, *The Siege of Jolo*, p. 138.

<sup>110</sup> Adeline Low Hwee Cheng, “The Past in the Present: Memories of the 1964 ‘Racial Riots’ in Singapore” in *Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia*, ed. by Roxana Waterson and Kwok Kian-Woon (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2012), p.203.

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