

# A HISTORY OF STRUGGLE FOR PEACE OF THE BANGSAMORO:

Shaping the Future Bangsamoro Museum  
of Peoples' History



International Coalition of  
**SITES of CONSCIENCE**



International Coalition of  
**SITES of CONSCIENCE**

## About The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience

The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) is a global network of museums, historic sites and grassroots initiatives dedicated to building a more just and peaceful future through engaging communities in remembering struggles for human rights and addressing their modern repercussions. Founded in 1999, the ICSC now includes more than 250 Sites of Conscience members in 65 countries. The ICSC supports these members through seven regional networks that encourage collaboration and international exchange of knowledge and best practices.

Learn more at [www.sitesofconscience.org](http://www.sitesofconscience.org).

### Cover photo:

A visitor at Tacbil Mosque, the site of the tragic Malisbong or Tacbil Mosque massacre, which happened on September 24, 1974.

Unless otherwise noted, all photos were taken by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

Designed by Lori J. Dawson

# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>2</b>
About the Project .....	2
About the Team .....	4
How to Use This Toolkit .....	5
<b>SITE BACKGROUND</b> .....	<b>7</b>
About Nonviolence International Southeast Asia .....	7
About the Bangsamoro .....	7
<b>METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Depictions of the Bangsamoro in Media and the Larger Philippine Society .....	11
Us vs. Them .....	12
The Role of Family .....	13
The Role of Islam .....	15
Memories and Objects .....	15
<b>PRACTICE</b> .....	<b>17</b>
What You Need .....	17
Speaking From Within .....	18
<b>CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>EVALUATION</b> .....	<b>26</b>
Guidelines .....	26
<b>LESSONS LEARNED</b> .....	<b>27</b>

# INTRODUCTION

## About the Project

*“A History of Struggle for Peace of the Bangsamoro: Shaping the Future Bangsamoro Museum of Peoples’ History”* was a pilot project with the goal of providing a platform for the Bangsamoro community to exchange narratives of their decade long struggle for peace. It also sought to locate sites of historical significance for future memorialization, while identifying objects, memories and stories for inclusion in a future museum of the Bangsamoro and their struggle.

The struggle of the Bangsamoro is rooted in the historical injustices done to their identity and their people. Bangsamoro was not a part of the Spanish-colonized Philippines and was only annexed after the United States took power. Philippine history does not typically recognize this original independence and makes no reference to this recent annexation in the official history taught in schools. The Bangsamoro’s Muslim identity is also ignored in favor of promoting a dominant narrative of the Philippines as the only Catholic nation in Asia.



Tacbil Mosque – The site of the tragic *Malisbong* or *Tacbil Mosque* massacre, which happened on September 24, 1974. Two years after the martial law was declared, 1500 muslim men, women and children were killed by the Philippine military in this town.

For the first time in history, the Bangsamoro identity was officially recognized during the signing of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) in 2012 between the government of the Philippines and the armed group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The FAB introduced an official recognition of the Bangsamoro people's identity and their struggle for peace. Then President Aquino emphasized,

*This agreement creates a new political entity, and it deserves a name that symbolizes and honors the struggles of our forebears in Mindanao, and celebrates the history and character of that part of our nation. That name will be Bangsamoro*

**(President Benigno S. Aquino III Speech on the Framework Agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), 7 October 2012, Malacañan Palace)**

To this date, no single institution has focused on Bangsamoro history with the goal of creating a repository of documents, artifacts, and memorabilia that traces the struggle and the decades long peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF. Nonviolence International Southeast Asia (NISEA) together with several organizations and Bangsamoro individuals recognize the need to create spaces to redress this as well as to explore and address contemporary issues, including:

- Lack of memorialization initiatives of the struggle for peace in the Bangsamoro and the 19 years of negotiations.
- An excessive focus on the history of war in the Bangsamoro to the detriment of the peace process.
- An absence of historical sites addressing the history of the struggle
- No institutionalized platform for dialogue and memory sharing
- Defining the Bangsamoro as a people including non-muslims and indigenous peoples
- Opportunities for people involved in other peace processes, especially Asia, who want to learn from the Bangsamoro experience in a holistic approach.

Previously, the ongoing conflict prevented people from focusing effort on these points. Since the signing of peace agreements, records of the agreements themselves were compiled, but no records about the processes and the people involved and affected by them were collected. Now that a Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) exists and legislation is pending in Congress on the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), work on these issues is more possible and welcome.

NISEA embarked on this project explicitly seeking to work with the people who have lived the struggle from its earliest years. The window to preserve their memories is closing and some records and memories have already disappeared with the passing of some participants. NISEA hopes to preserve voice recordings, videos, photos and written documents, to save the history of the Bangsamoro struggle and to pass on its lessons to future generations and to others engaged in peace processes around the world.

The primary audience for this project are the Bangsamoro youth who will inherit the gains of the struggle for peace. When violence occurs it has a particularly heavy impact on the young, particularly school children from ages 4-17, who experience violence first hand in their environment and are drawn towards violence themselves. To end the cycle of violence, there must be a transformation in society that nuances why violence happens and how awareness

and education can help to break the cycle. In order for them to understand that the struggle for peace in the Bangsamoro was not an easy path and how they can help stop violence from erupting once more, the youth who will inherit the Bangsamoro must learn about the people who made it happen and how.

For those engaged in other peace processes, this toolkit can be a guide in the content development of a museum of peoples' history in the context of an armed struggle for the right to self-determination. It focuses on discussions of the content and envisioning of what the Bangsamoro Museum of Peoples' History should include. The methodology used in this project is an inclusive process that seeks to include the communities and their moral identity at the core of their struggle for peace. The envisioned museum is a platform for sharing the identity of the Bangsamoro that is embodied in the peace process that brought about the comprehensive agreement. The moral identity in focus is not only of cultural, historical or traditional in origin but also originates from a politically negotiated peace accord which is why it is still an ongoing process to ask "who are the Bangsamoro?" Through this project, NISEA aims to raise the public awareness and continue to hope that the public finds inspiration in the peaceful path.

## About the Team

### MITZI AUSTERO

Mitzi Austero is the Programmes Manager of Nonviolence International Southeast Asia. Mitzi is actively working on arms control issues in Southeast Asian region, and universalization and implementation of the Mine Ban Treaty and Convention on Cluster Munition.

Mitzi is a Research Collaborator for the Meiji University Research Institute for the History of Global Arms Transfer. Her areas of research include conventional weapons, arms trade, peace processes, local history, and peasantry in the region. She also works to support peace processes, memorialization and community dialogues in SEA and currently serves as a member of the Asia Steering Committee in the Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

Mitzi holds a BA Social Sciences, majors in Political Science and Psychology and has advanced courses and comprehensive exams in Asian Studies, Major in China Studies. You can follow her on twitter @mitziaustero.



### MARIAM DAUD

Mariam Daud is the Executive Director of the Muslim Mindanao Halal Certification Board Inc. (MMHCBI), a registered and government accredited halal certification board in the Philippines. She's also the Vice President of the Society for Family Development and Education of the Philippines that promotes women's reproductive health in the Islamic community.

Mariam is also a Member of the Board of the Noorus-Salam Central Mindanao, a Muslim women's organization that advocates for peace in the Bangsamoro and women's participation in the peace process. She is also Member of the Board of the Darul Irshad Al Ijtimaee (House of Social Guidance Association).

She joined the Steering Board of Nonviolence International Southeast Asia to provide her expertise and guidance on Islamic principles in peacebuilding and has been actively working with the organization's Building Peace by Teaching Peace Program.



## FRED LUBANG

Fred Lubang is a Mindanaoan peace advocate. He is the Regional Representative of Nonviolence International Southeast Asia, an NGO based in Thailand. Concurrently, he is the National Coordinator of the Philippine Campaign to Ban Landmines (PCBL) and the Secretary General of the South-South Network for Non-State Armed Group Engagement (SSN).



At the international level, he served as a member of the advisory board of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA). He also served as a member of the regional council of the International Peace Bureau, the 1910 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate; He also served as a member of the board and was one of the Co-Chairs of the global Control Arms Campaign which negotiated the Arms Trade Treaty at the UN.

Fred was a Visiting Professor at Hiroshima University, Japan. He also lectured at the Rotary Center on Peace and Conflict Studies at Chulalongkorn University, and at the Graduate School on Human Rights at Mahidol University in Thailand.

Fred holds a Bachelors degree in Education, majors in Mathematics and Physics and a Masters degree on Applied Conflict Transformation Studies. You can follow him on facebook @fredlubang and twitter @fredlubang

## How to use this toolkit

This pilot project was started in February 2016 and data gathering ended in December 2016. As a direct result of this project this toolkit was made to contribute to the growing literature in conducting memorialization projects in the region. This toolkit is intended for peace practitioners hearing peoples' aspirations for peace, for local historians in their documentation work, for local government officials involved in the process of memorialization, for leaders of armed groups who believe in the power of dialogue and peace, and for those who want these values passed on to future generations.

This toolkit has seven parts; the first gives an introduction to the objectives and the historical context of the struggle for peace. The second part discusses the historical background of the site and gives a description of the project and its relevance. The third and fourth parts cover the methodology and practices used during implementation. The last three parts focuses on the challenges and opportunities, a brief evaluation of the project and the lessons learned.





Haji Usman, a mujahideen from Matampay, was one of the first members that joined the armed wing of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces fighters.



# SITE BACKGROUND

## About Nonviolence International Southeast Asia

Nonviolence International is a non-governmental organization (NGO) which has worked with regional partners to build a constituency of peace advocates since 1992. In 2005, Nonviolence International was granted NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations.

Nonviolence International Southeast Asia (NISEA), based in Bangkok, Thailand has been a member of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience since 2007. In 2011 it received funding from the Coalition for a peace education project that had a special focus on teaching violent histories in primary education and the initial work to make Krue Se Mosque, located in the southern province of Pattani in Thailand a Site of Conscience. The “Building Peace by Teaching Peace: A Peace Education Module on Teaching Violent Histories” was published in April 2012.

NISEA’s historically based peace building work works in compliment with its other ongoing programs including capacity building for Southeast Asian governments on humanitarian disarmament issues such as the Arms Trade Treaty, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and the Mine Ban Treaty. NISEA is also actively working with the MILF and the government to clear the Bangsamoro of unexploded ordinances through the Philippine Campaign to Ban Landmines program. The oral histories necessary for successfully identifying unexploded ordinances were the genesis of this project.

## About the Bangsamoro

The name Bangsamoro can be traced through more than 500 years of history, from Spanish colonization in 1578, American occupation and beyond. Spaniards in the Philippines used the term ‘*moro*’ for Muslims, likewise ‘*indio*’ for the early Filipinos. ‘*Bangsa*’ means nation, thus the Bangsamoro became the identity of a certain group of people, predominantly Muslims but also including indigenous peoples called the ‘*lumads*’. The Bangsamoro successfully resisted Spanish colonizers, which tried to capture the territory but failed during their 300-year occupation.

When the United States of America declared the Philippines a territory in 1898, they included Mindanao, a self-governing state which was never colonized by Spain, as part of the governed area through the Treaty of Paris that was agreed upon by US and Spain. This treaty started the annexation of the Bangsamoro to the recognized Spanish-Philippine colony which was then transferred to the US. This reinforced the Bangsamoro’s struggle against colonialization that continued long after the independence of the Philippines from the US.

After centuries of struggle for the right to self-determination, the Government of the Philippines (GPH) entered into the negotiations with one of the Bangsamoro insurgent groups, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) which led to a peace agreement in 1996. But the peace agreement signed with the MNLF had implementation challenges and political/ structural flaws that did not address the root causes of the conflict and resulted in breakaway groups.

The MILF, a large faction of the MNLF-led coalition broke away from the MNLF after they

signed the agreement, because the new law based on the peace agreement was not seen as giving the Bangsamoro real and genuine autonomy. The MILF then continued the armed struggle and, later on, the peace process, a process that is ongoing to this day. An excerpt from the message of MILF Chairman Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim on the “Journey to the Bangsamoro” (MILF Peace Panel: 2015), reiterates the importance of the peace process:

*“The MILF believes that the negotiation is the most civilized way of addressing the conflict. Armed struggle is only an option for self-preservation.”*

**The MILF agreed to enter the arena of peace negotiations with the Government of the Philippines (GPH) with the sole intent of addressing the root cause of the Mindanao conflict and the Bangsamoro Problem, which is the continued denial of the historic and legitimate right of the Bangsamoro people to self-determination.”**

Centuries of struggle in the Bangsamoro brought the recognition of their own political entity and identity and ushered in the last 20 years of ongoing peaceful political negotiations.

The signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, and with the much anticipated Bangsamoro Basic Law pending in Congress, the elusive milestone is almost within arms’ reach. The developments in the peace negotiations have resulted in a positive atmosphere and openness in the Bangsamoro society to begin discussions on the history of the Bangsamoro that looks beyond the conflict.

The Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro officially recognized the Bangsamoro identity in Article I, Section 5:

*“The Parties recognize Bangsamoro identity. Those at the time of conquest and colonization were considered natives or original inhabitants of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago and its adjacent islands including Palawan, and their descendants whether of mixed or full blood shall have the right to identify themselves as Bangsamoro by ascription or self-ascription.”*



The picture shows three generations of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. One of the founders, Grand Mufti Sheik Omar Pasigan with Haji Usman and a much younger battalion commander of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, who all have seen both the war and peace process.



This uniform was the first uniform of the ceasefire committee when the government of the Philippines pursued the negotiations for peace with the Moro National Liberation Front. This uniform belonged to then Grand Mufti Sheik Omar Pasigan, one of the founders of the Moro National Liberation Front who later on became one of the founders of the breakaway Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

# METHODOLOGY

This pilot project embarked on creating opportunities and repositories for the Bangsamoro to exchange narratives, memories and local histories of the struggle for peace. The intention for these collections is that they will be contributed to a future museum and inspire others to look for similar opportunities to create more spaces for the Bangsamoro history to be told. The following sections of this toolkit discusses how the project methodology was formed based on several key concepts of identity and society in the Philippines and among the Bangsamoro, NISEA's experience on site, and through careful consideration of the Islamic perspective that is central to the communities involved in this project.

As NISEA embarked on developing the conceptual framework that the methodology followed, discussions with MILF families and the project team centered on two main ideas:

- History from within
- Values of peace in Islam and its reflection in the Bangsamoro's daily lives and struggles

Historical narratives are often framed by a "them vs us" concept, with "us" being defined by the powerful and the victors. The approach that members of the MILF, their families, and the project team agreed on for this project was to capture the narratives, memories and experiences of people about their struggle for what they believe is just, and in accordance with their Islamic principles. In the ongoing peace process, the Philippine government has always led the opening of the talks and has controlled much of the narrative of the negotiations through official statements. The mainstream media (news agencies, etc.) have also towed the line of the government, which always refers to 'Muslim rebels' or 'Muslim occupiers' which is historically incorrect. The Philippines occupied the Bangsamoro, not the other way around. These narratives, narratives of individuals who came from the Bangsamoro and became part of the struggle, should be able to tell that history. These stories also take into consideration the core values of Islam and its broader definition of their struggle for peace or Jihad. Some of these narratives and stories are woven around 'memory objects' which may later become subjects and artifacts of the future museum.

## Depictions of the Bangsamoro in Media and the Larger Philippine society

Prejudice and biases against the Bangsamoro and the Muslim minority in the Philippines remain in the larger society and can be seen in print as well as social media. There is a widespread perception that Bangsamoro is a dangerous region where armed violence happens on a daily basis. The current president, Rodrigo Duterte has threatened corrupt police officers with the punishment of being sent to Bangsamoro; implying that the region is worse than prison. The Bangsamoro culture is perceived as 'backwards,' mistreating women, in love with weapons (there is a famous saying that the Bangsamoro love their guns more than their wives), violent, and with a disregard for the rule of law. Mainstream media have persisted in perpetuating these stereotypes, and Muslims coming from the southern Philippines have experienced discrimination in urban centers. The Philippine government has always led the opening of the talks and has controlled much of the narrative of the negotiations through official statements. The mainstream media (news agencies, etc.) have also towed the line of the government, which always refers to 'Muslim rebels' or 'Muslim occupiers' which is historically incorrect.



The car, is fondly called "Dona Marilyn." It was named after the 98m long ferry that sank near Malapascua Island in October 1988. The car got its monicker from the passengers joking about their fates as 'doomed' like the sunken vehicle. The car ferried many passengers who included the late Chairman Hashim Salamat and current MILF Chairman Ebrahim Murad back in the days when the armed conflict was raging and the negotiations for peace between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front were starting on a rather rough road. It also served as an ambulance for the wounded and a courier of important messages.

## Us vs Them

It took almost two decades of peace negotiations to finally accept the historical injustices committed against the Bangsamoro. The signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro has begun the initial steps of recognition of the Bangsamoro as an identity, as a people, as well as a reference to a new political/geographical arrangement that redefines the asymmetrical relationship between the Bangsamoro "us" and the Philippine government "them".

Through the years, different organizations have published personal narratives from survivors of massacres and the stories of Muslim combatants. However, there is no Site of Conscience yet in Bangsamoro - there is no museum or gallery or repository of stories, materials, objects that will tell the history of the struggle for peace. Noticeably absent is an institution to safeguard materials and ensure that narratives of Bangsamoro include a Bangsamoro perspective. The history of the Bangsamoro, pre-Spanish, pre-US, and pre-Philippine government and the ongoing struggle should all be told in history books. There should be a recognition of their history, which is not a shared history with the mainstream history of the Philippines. Often, the materials that are developed serve the objectives of people other than the Bangsamoro. The project team talked to many people in Palimbang province who described "white people" (referring to donors) who pay people to come to the area, take pictures, create movies and hold interviews, but with no results for the community and no change in the peoples' lives. It is in this context that NISEA chose to focus as outsiders on fore fronting the communities thoughts and views on what should be the core of the Bangsamoro struggle for peace. In order for this project to succeed, the project team ensured that more than half of the people involved were from within the region.

The inception of this project started more than four years ago, when NISEA initially explored the feasibility of the project during the negotiations for the CAB. Members of the project team approached members of the negotiating panel from both the MILF and the government,

particularly then Chairperson of the GPH panel Prof. Miriam Coronel Ferrer and Chairperson of the MILF negotiating panel Mohagher Iqbal. From there, discussions with members of the project team and families of MILF members started gaining interest.

It is important to clarify the participation of the MILF in these interviews. The participation is not directly from the MILF leadership, although this was also brought to them and interviewed participants are considered 'leaders', but the participation in this project is coming from a more informal avenue – through their families.

## The Role of Family

When asked about the basic unit of Philippines society, the answer would be the family, not the individual. This understanding was key to shaping the project's methodology.

The violence and the historical injustices inflicted over time not only affected combatants but also their families as well. Surviving family members bear witness to the atrocities and have become storytellers in their own right. They have experienced the effects of armed conflicts for generations. In enduring atrocities and finding common struggles against oppression has bonded many people, extending families beyond just blood lines. This toolkit uses the term "family" to refer to both blood and non-blood members of the family.

Trust was also a crucial aspect of the process. Who are we to be trusted? Trust takes time and entails a series of frank discussions on the intent and goals of this effort not just with an individual but also the family of the storyteller.



Ustadz Nando Khalifa, one of the founders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Head of the Committee on Education, together with his son, welcomes the team in his home.

Another important factor in considering the role of the family in this project was the capacity of the people interviewed to recall memories on their own. Some of them were 70-90 years old and needed assistance in recalling dates and events. Family members were able to support that.

Sometimes, family members who found themselves in the conflict also shared their own memories that gave further context and depth to the stories. Additionally, stories coming from whole families, not just the person directly involved in the armed conflict show the other sides of the conflict. It is less well known how armed conflict affected families and how the circumstances forced women and children to become part of the armed conflict indirectly.



Haji Usman narrates the promises of peace and development that he's heard.



## The Role of Islam

Islam unifies the Bangsamoro in their struggle for peace. Islam is integral to the Bangsamoro way of life, a way of life that also hinges on the acceptance of other peoples (indigenous peoples and Christian settlers) as being part of a new political structure. To hear stories about the identity of the Bangsamoro struggle for peace, meant, from the perspective of the MILF families, focusing on the deeply rooted role of Islam, where being moral is principled, honorable and just.

## Memories and Objects

As the search for people and memory objects to include in this project continued, the dialogue and discussions on the contents of the future museum evolved. The questions for the video recordings were narrowed down to these questions:

1. **In your knowledge, what were the motivations for entering into the peace negotiations;**
2. **What did you consider were the milestones/benefits of the peace negotiations;**
3. **Can you share your personal memories of these milestones and what was your role in it;**
4. **What is your message to the future Bangsamoro and Filipino generation;**
5. **Do you have any memorabilia under your care:**
  - a. **War memorabilia**
  - b. **Peace process/negotiations memorabilia**

It was agreed that despite a history that can only be described as bloody, the focus of this project was on how peace was achieved through peaceful negotiations and not through arms. This does not discount the violent history and lives lost during the struggle; the history of the violence will also be told around pictures and memory objects within the context of the time that it occurred. As a case in point, the armed struggle won the battles – but it was the decades of peaceful negotiations that won the struggle for the right to self-determination and for the politically negotiated peace accord that recognizes the Bangsamoro’s right to form a new government entity within the larger Philippine state.

In this pilot project, NISEA attempts to put the focus on what the older generation can leave behind and share for the future, as told through stories of memories of the past, thoughts on the present, and aspirations for the future. NISEA will try to gather the different concepts of moral identity, peace, inclusivity, truth and justice from peoples’ stories from within the movement and the Islamic perspectives.

The methodology chosen is sensitive to the previous exploitation of their story that the community has experienced. Violence and suffering are not romanticized in this project. The project team consulted communities on how best to explain the objectives of the project and how to go about the methodology without causing any harm.



Grand Mufti Sheik Omar Pasigan of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front looks at the captured videos and photos with his grandchildren and Fred Lubang.

# PRACTICE

This section will describe the steps taken to prepare and implement the project from logistics to interviews, and the actual implementation. This section describes the needs and activities as they were implemented. It is important to note that a change in plans and frameworks for projects such as these is inevitable. Future project teams should be able to accommodate changes as their project unfolds.

## What You Need

The project team worked with limited equipment. Pen and paper for note taking and markers and manila paper for explaining the project and framework in the communities were very handy.

For audio recording, the project team was able to borrow a Zoom H5 Handy Recorder (for its main voice recording equipment). Smartphones were also used as back-ups for audio recording. For the video recording and pictures, the team used a Canon 7D with an EF 24-105mm lens.

The project team was composed of a minimum of three or four members at any interview. The team was often able to ask a family member to assist in holding some of the equipment. The team would always have someone asking questions who could speak the local language, another who took care of the recording equipment (video/audio) and someone who was the liaison with the storyteller's family and friends who helped set up the session.

The members of the team should be introduced in meetings well in advance of the interview, so that the idea and concept of the initiative will be well understood by the storyteller and her/his family. The project team does not proceed to interviews until the family and storyteller support the idea and agree to be recorded in a story telling session.

Cars, a good navigator, and a reliable driver were also needed. The members of the team travelled many kilometers to the homes of the storytellers. It was important to visit people in their homes because it helped them feel safe. It also allowed their families to be present which helps in getting them to open up. In some cases, the sons of the older mujahedeen also became mujahedeen and were also interviewed.

Cultural traditions of visiting friends were observed throughout the project as the project team was considered guests in the homes. The interviews only happened after the team received an invitation to go. Local traditions for visiting guests usually meant bringing food, snacks, fruits and coffee so people could gather around a table and talk.

## Speaking From Within

Due to the delicate nature of gathering oral histories and narratives, NISEA sought the help of individuals who are not considered the 'other' by the Bangsamoro in their struggle. NISEA worked with individuals from civil society, religious organizations and leaders in the Moro Islamic Liberation Front to help implement the project. Below is a rough picture of how the project team went about collecting memories and memory objects.

### 1. Agree among the team who we will need to prioritize

The roots of the modern movement are often traced to the 1960s when a group of Muslim Filipino scholars were sent to study in Egypt. The few surviving members of this group are now in their eighties and nineties. The project team and the MILF members that we consulted agreed that we had to prioritize the most vulnerable age groups. Amongst others, we were able to interview 'the last two men standing' from the very first group of scholars and founding members of the movement.

### 2. Choosing the language

When interviewing people, we asked them which language they were most comfortable expressing their thoughts, recollections of events, and messages for the future in. Some chose Maguindanao and others chose a mix of Filipino and Maguindanaoan. This is very important, as research has shown that for multi-lingual people, personalities can change when they change languages, either through priming or through their cognitive process.

Participants we interviewed spoke a minimum of three languages (English, Filipino and Maguindanao) while others spoke four (English, Arabic, Filipino and Maguindanao). We noticed that when they spoke of their ideology and principles, or when they quoted the holy Qu'ran the participants spoke in Arabic. When they recalled their childhood years they spoke in Maguindanaoan, and when they discussed present developments and future messages they spoke in both Filipino and Maguindanaoan.

It is best to have people around that speak multiple languages and can help nuance the use of the words. It is good to note that the project team members, those who were present during interviews, collectively spoke the following languages, all used in the geographic location of the project: Arabic, Bisaya, English, Filipino, Maguindanaoan, Iranon.

Personal knowledge of the individuals and local culture was important in understanding language use. Project team members were either living in or had lived in the Bangsamoro region and were personally familiar with the languages used by the participants as well as being advised by the participant themselves.

### 3. Consult with the community to help identify the people to be interviewed

As we gathered information in the community, we continually asked for recommendations about who else would be best to talk to, who can recall what happened and when. People were more helpful when they were told that the project sought to tell the history from their narratives. Patience is needed to accommodate people's schedules – and more patience is needed to get their approval and invitation.

**4. Explain the objectives of the interview and give the questions in advance**

Transparency goes a long way. We found that being transparent about our project and objectives, including talking about our future plans encouraged participants to share their own aspirations on how they want to be represented and how they want to take part in the initiatives.

**5. Schedule interviews with family members, allow them to decide where to meet**

Due to the old age of our initial respondents, we coordinated with next-of-kin to help us schedule the activities (eg. photos, videos) and they were more than happy to assist.

**6. Provide an informal environment and invite children and grandchildren of the person being interviewed**

Family members, nephews, sons, daughters, and grandchildren were present during the interviews where they assisted with translation and became involved in asking their own questions. This practice followed the basic principle of our project – to be as inclusive as possible and to let the participants tell their stories as they want them to be understood by their children, grandchildren, and other family members. The choices of the interviewees had affected their families, and the families were able to learn about the context of their own circumstances.

As an example, one of the sons of a participant remembered being put on a *carabao* (water buffalo) when he was just a child, which he mentioned during an interview. His father then was able to recall and expand that memory by commenting that this was one of the hardest periods of the struggle, when the armed clashes between the government and the MILF began in the 70s and the *mujahideen* had to evacuate their families.



'Bedz' is a young Muslim scholar studying the Quran and Arabic in Cotabato City. He served as translator for some of the religious verses and old Maguindanaoan words which are not used in the vernacular language.

## **7. Let the person narrate their story as they recall it and stop where they see fit**

Recalling memories of a violent past can take its toll. To recall memories is to relive them, having the support of family around and letting them control what they want or do not want to speak of is important.

Some memories are difficult to talk about, and the project team was made quite aware of this. This is another area where engaged families helped the process. Memories can sometimes bring tears, even to those who have been hardened by battle. It is the family members who help bring people back to the present by reminding them “all that have passed, and there is a better future ahead because of what people who struggled were able to achieve.”

## **8. Ask about memory objects in their care or in the care of others**

Memory objects, as defined in this project, are objects that are significant for the participants. These memory objects have subjective significance – there is an ongoing debate on what can be considered as ‘significant’ memory objects as the value of these things are subjected to the person who witnessed or used them in the past. The team focused on the objects promoting the quest for just and lasting peace in the region, thus tracing the history of the struggle from the roots up until the politically negotiated peace accord between the two parties.

The search for the memory objects took the team from the communities to houses in the city. It was a welcome surprise to know that some houses that you pass by along the streets on a regular basis house memory objects. The search also helped link the project team with more people, who were part of the struggle for peace and had their own memories to share. The project team told participants that they will return for more stories and if available then, to document and/or archive memory objects.

## **9. End the discussion on a lighter note and ask about their fondest memories**

This part usually elicited fun memories – about being young idealists, in places where no one could understand them, but they were able to speak, plan and build a movement, all while wooing their future wives, who would later become part of the struggle.

## **10. End the day by securing your recordings**

At the end of the day the team ensured that all recordings were in place. Audio files were transferred to laptops after every session to make space in case there was another recording session. Batteries were recharged and extra batteries brought along. Sometimes, a 30-minute session would extend to several hours of storytelling. Be prepared to go out to the field with battery packs and plenty of water and snacks to keep you up through long drives and sometimes long waiting hours.

## **11. Fulfill commitments of inclusion and continued engagements**

The team leaves a commitment to the respondents and their families that final products will be shown to them and promised to return for the objects that may be included in the future Bangsamoro museum and for more stories. This commitment should be kept and the team should continue its engagement and communication beyond what the project funding allows.



Community members retell the violent fate the people surrounding the Tacbil Mosque.



Kodzaima Bayao is an active commander in the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces. He recalls battling for his life during the armed clashes between the government forces and the MILF, where he was shot two times.



# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

## A. The project implementation period

In 2016 the Philippines was holding a national election, with Election Day set for May 16, 2016. The campaign period from January-May 2016 created uncertainty over which leadership would take over. After the new president was elected, a government shake-up happened, where all cabinet members and political parties shifted to the new president's party that settled in towards the end of the 2016. Due to the limitations of time and the political and social environment when this pilot project was implemented, NISEA concentrated its efforts with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front while the government side was in flux.

## B. The risk of unhealed wounds

When talking about memories, there is always a danger of hearing about unhealed wounds. Particularly given that the Bangsamoro struggle for peace is not yet finished many of the wounds of the struggle have not had time to heal. Early on, the project team based on years of experience working in the area, on consultation with local partners, and on the project design agreed not to dwell on the violence that the Bangsamoro had experienced. Instead it was decided to focus on peoples' lessons from the past and aspirations for the future.

There are moments where a participant will shed a tear, this is a moment to stop and appreciate how the task of remembering the past is as difficult as living it.

## C. Overcoming Trust Issues

One of the glaring challenges that the team faced while implementing the project was visiting the site of the Palimbang massacre or the Tacbil Masjid massacre. Members of the project team visited the site twice during the implementation of the project. During the first visit they were able to go inside the mosque and take pictures. During their second visit, sometime in late August 2016, their vehicle was followed by men riding motorcycles who eventually rode past them and flagged them to stop.

The men in the motorcycles asked who they were and why they were heading to the mosque. One of the members of our project team introduced himself, gave his full name and told them who his grandparents were (known natives of the place). Only after this did tension ease. The local barangay/community official came to see them and explain why they were followed: A few months back, another international nongovernmental organization came and took pictures, recorded interviews, and published a book. They later found out that they paid the respondents some money but paid the people who came to document even more. The community received nothing but knowledge of another book being written about their tragic suffering.

Building trust with people who have suffered and have not yet achieved closure is a difficult task. Consultations with the local officials, community members, and religious leaders is very important that is why from the outset NISEA believed in an inclusive and transparent process where people can decide for themselves if they would like to take part in the initiative.

The project team ensured that regular meetings with members of the MILF and the project team took place to discuss the progress, new developments and challenges, if any. The project implementation evolved during the year and outcomes were redefined based on the first round of memory collection. Envisioning of the content also evolved throughout the implementation. The planned implementation was designed to be able to accommodate these evolutions.

**D. Unexpected commitment: A pledge to donate a land for the future Bangsamoro Museum of Peoples History**

The project generated interest and appreciation from the communities we worked with. This resulted in a pledge to donate land for the future Bangsamoro Museum of Peoples History. The location of the pledged land is strategic because it is in close proximity to the planned capital of the Bangsamoro government.



This forms part of the wall of the Tacbil Mosque. According to local residents, when they attempted to clean all the blood from the walls of the mosque, the blood came back the next day and they have left it untouched since. The mosque is still used by the community to this day.



These guns were donated to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the 70s and were used during the war.

# EVALUATION

## Guidelines

Below is the evaluation guideline that the team used during the implementation of the project. The team chose not to use a quantitative evaluation as this was seen as the more accessible practice, not putting pressure on participants, most of who were between sixty and eighty years old. Having a more fluid and open evaluation was more practical.

For evaluation of the significance of the project, every participant was asked to reflect on:

1. **What is your idea/concept of a Bangsamoro Museum of Peoples History?**
2. **Do you think this is important?**
3. **If yes, do you think that this should be a priority for the ongoing peace process?**
4. **Do you think the museum is possible/doable?**
5. **Discussion on the new perspectives coming out from the communities**

Evaluations were conducted through informal dialogue, gathering over coffee or dinner to discuss the results of what the group was able to gather so far.

The project team also did assessments on an as needed basis (for example during the election, its following violence, and political change) during the implementation when issues or challenges presented themselves. Evaluations were done through small, focused, group discussions of between five to eight people to give the team and participants a more informal and enabling environment to openly discuss issues as they saw fit. There was no recording equipment used during FGDs, the team relied solely on notes.

# LESSONS LEARNED

In creating a space for history to be revisited, the evolving political environment should be taken into consideration. During this project the political landscape changed significantly following the 2016 national elections in the Philippines. The new president introduced a new paradigm in the peace process, largely effecting the ideas and priorities government institutions followed, as well as who was involved in the peace process from the government side. People involved in the previous administration may no longer be able to speak as openly about their experiences.

With the lack of an official institution that protects the Bangsamoro history and no clear directive if and when this will be created, one of the main challenges is the continually changing opinion and approach of the government. That is why instead of focusing on a single methodology, researchers in this field must be flexible and must keep an open mind on how identities and nationalities are defined.

Building new relationships only gets you from point A to B. In collecting memories and memory objects while creating a future site, you must have a longer relationship with the place and the people that can take you beyond the beginning of the alphabet. Lifelong relationships in the area are crucial.

Understanding the need of the communities affected by conflict is as important as implementing the project. Knowing how the project can help the community, either through consultations with them or open dialogues, is an integral part of the project – more than the outcome, the communities and the people comes first.

Local ownership is also a key component. Discussing the objectives of the project with the community ensures participation and proper methodology will ensure you have active participants. But meaningful contributions can only be achieved when the community has ownership of the project and the process. Letting the community decide and be part of the process opens more windows and will take you beyond the start of the alphabet. In this project only by letting the community lead were people willing to donate land to make the site a reality.



International Coalition of  
**SITES *of* CONSCIENCE**

1.646.397.ICSC (4272)

**[www.sitesofconscience.org](http://www.sitesofconscience.org)**

 [Facebook.com/SitesofConscience](https://www.facebook.com/SitesofConscience)

 [@SitesConscience](https://twitter.com/SitesConscience)

 [SitesofConscience](https://www.instagram.com/SitesofConscience)