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Book Review

Tearing through Walls the Songs: The Three Mangansakan Anthologies of Recent Moro Literatures

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“In their bamboo huts, where bullets / Could trace them, they tried to hide...” whispered the first two lines of the opening poem in the latest collection, and the last piece, an essay, ended with a sigh of relief, *“For a while, I forgot all the hardships that I endured in his absence. My anger vanished. What mattered at that moment was that we were united as a family.”* No, you are not reading a single narrative, but it seems that you are because the latter lines seem consistent as an ending to the above opening lines. Whether you know some history of our Moro peoples or not, you will be sucked into the eddy of narrative energies in the book, and get yourself the education you need. The poem is titled *“Children of Homeland”*, and the essay is *“A Short Memoir of an MNLF Combatant’s Wife”*. Between these two narratives is a planet of young memories groping for meanings under the shadow of shards of a violent past imposed on them by the greed, prevarications, and betrayals of imperial colonialists Spain and America, and later of a neocolonial Philippines, that made them fight and lose more lives just to keep their homeland free, but the villainous and separate interventions of the three left them in the bitter end as outsiders begging for space, visibility, and respect in the very land they were first to occupy, defend, and nurture for centuries. The irony that befell them from the tyranny of history continues to cut to the core, and now the younger ones are carrying the torch and making their voices heard.

In the first of Mangansakan’s anthologies, *Children of the Ever-Changing Moon: Essays by Young Moro Writers* (2007), there were already glimpses of conflicts between self and environment, between a traditional household and a modernized daughter; of alienation and sense of displacement because of one’s uncommon name, language spoken, and even ways of praying; of proving oneself twice worthier than a non-Moro applying for the same position; of working for donor agencies making development plans for areas they even have not seen; and of women seeing the need for a place for women in peace-negotiation tables that failed to effect peace. Strong intimations of things to come!

Eight years later, such “interesting times” continued in the second anthology, *Rays of the Invisible Light: Collected Works by Young Moro Writers* (2015). There is a poetic rendition of a *mujahdeen’s* fond memories of his wife and pacification of his crying son, and how the *azan* (call to prayer) is accomplished in the midst of a battle; a new divorcee sticks to her decision willfully against her

family's wishes, while a wife whose husband has taken a second wife debates with herself whether to get him back or go it alone with her children. A young student takes *haram* foods knowingly just to make her feel she belongs with her non-Muslim classmate friends, ignorant of Muslim culture and ways, while another woman takes pleasure in a *haram* kiss outside of marriage. Bolder writings, with more willful characters. Perhaps because four of these budding writers were new graduates and one was a senior student at that time, with all five coming from the University of the Philippines (UP)-Mindanao. But, of course, in both these early collections, there were also narratives on pleasurable trips to local places; memories of deaths of fathers and grandmothers, and of the birth of a son that redeems a male-less family; English-speaking locals, religious events, and a woman's tragic life as a *sugo-on* (slave). While the first anthology consisted only of essays, the second one included poetry, short fiction, essays, and even a screenplay—a movement, as it were, from the mind and its logic and rhetoric towards the imagination and the heart, which is the seat of understanding in Islam.

Panumtuman (2024), the third anthology, is a welcome breakthrough of a kind—the first collection with the highest number not just of living Moro writers participating but also of contemporary Moro writings assembled between book covers. Comprehensive is a good word to describe it, and it covers as well—and never forget this—the Moro writers and Moro literatures in both the Sulu Archipelago and the Bangsamoro homeland in Mindanao island. From sixteen writers in the 2007 outing to a mere twelve in the 2015 collection, the count has now soared to thirty-four. Female writers outnumbered the males in the first two books, but the males came back strong in the third book, outnumbering the females by two writers. In the final tally, however, the females dominated over the males with an edge of eight writers. Still a good number for both genders of writing enthusiasts. This countdown is significant because the number of authors between the first two books and the third one is phenomenal. The Divine has been secretly at work! But credit for this dramatic surge in numbers must also be given to the University of Southeastern Philippines (USEP), which hosted an International Conference on Bangsamoro Literature on September 29-30, 2022, where the works of aspiring Moro writers were analyzed and evaluated by a panel of three Muslim writers prior to publication. Mangansakan was commissioned to edit the projected anthology, and in his role, he sourced additional writers and materials from the Bangsamoro Literary Review, which was initiated in 2021 by the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) Deputy Minority Floor Leader MP Atty. Rasol Mitmug, Jr., who had asked him and Kristine Ong Muslim to take on the job of editors.

The title “panumtuman” chosen by Mangansakan is a triple-edged word that in Tausug means “memory” or “remembrance,” close to the Maguindanao “panutuman” which means “recipient of advice,” and to the Meranaw “thoma” or advice and “kathoma” which is to dispense advice. Altogether, *Panumtuman*, the book was intended to contain memories of the past that offer advice for the present. Salient, solid links there. In fact, some narratives in the book have dealt with practices and behaviors in the past that could be worth some rethinking at the present time. In the near future, we will be looking forward to these young writers engaging with the far past through intertextuality, allusion, or direct reference, and casting the relevance of its light on some pressing issues at hand, with the same moral perspective that is the virtue and power of Islamic writings of various kinds everywhere.

More writers mean more themes and topics covered, more styles unveiled, and more voices heard and given individuation. This is a situation that has long been forthcoming from our Moro writers. The differences in quality of writing and imagination are not so wide between the simple gestures of the beginning writers and the more involved and developed ones of those with more experience and writings behind them. Already, there are gems of narratives here, too, as well as more promising for writers to watch. Of the 50 writers in the three anthologies, two writers—Pearlsha Abubakar and Loren Hallilah Lao—who were in all three should have their own books by now, if not soon; and four writers in the second and third collections—Diandra Macarambon, Mohammad Nassefh Macla, Datu Sharif Pendatun III, and Sahara Silongan—should be preparing for their own books by now.

Editor Mangansakan II is in all three, and he has already four books now; in the latter two anthologies are Kristine Ong Muslim, who is the most published Moro writer at the present time, and Arifah Macacua Jamil, who will have her own book soon, along with Elin Anisha Guro, who is also in the last two books. Ideally, all literary productions by Moro writers, as well as by non-Moro Islam writers, should be published in the regions where the writers reside or else somewhere in Mindanao where they will be easily accessible to the writers' groups and their communities and to the constituents of the Bangsamoro itself, as well as of the rest of Mindanao. This is the way to support and help improve the publishing situation in these southernmost islands.

The first of two tables below shows the increase in the number not just of Moro writers published in a span of seventeen (17) years but also of ethnolinguistic groups represented, while the second table identifies the genres chosen by the writers in the book.

Table 1

Representation of Writers by Ethnolinguistic Group & Gender*

Books	Kgn		Mag		Mer		Sam		Tau		Ykn		[NIM]		Total	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
CECM (2007)			4	3	4	1	2		2						12	4
RIL (2015)		1	2	2	3				2		1		1		9	3
P (2024)		3	3	6	8	1	2	2	2	5	1	1			16	18
Sum		4	9	11	15	2	4	2	6	5	2	1	1		37	25
															62	
Sub-total 1				9^	13^				4^						-6	
Sub-total 2		3^^	8^^	8^^	11+				3^^						-6	
Sub-total 2		3	8	8	11	2	4	2	3	5	2	1	1		29	21
Final Total	3		17		13		6		8		3		1		50	

Legend: (a) *Kagan, Maguindanao, Meranaw, Sama, Tausug, and Yakan. I have inserted the NIM (Non-Indigenous but Muslim) to accommodate one writer in the second anthology who was a convert to Islam. In Islam, we are all born Muslims, and those who "convert" to Islam in reality only revert to it; (b) ^One writer is in all three books so minus 2 from the total; (c) ^^One writer is in two books so minus 1 from the total; and (4) +Two writers are in two books so minus 2 from the total.

Table 2

Number of Works Submitted per Genre, Ethnolinguistic Group, & Gender

Genre	Kgn		Mag		Mer		Sam		Tau		Ykn		[NIM]		Total	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M		
FIC		2	0	2	10"	0	2	0	4	2	0	1	1		24	
NONFIC		0	6	9	5	2	2	1	3	4	2	0			34	
POETRY		6^	6	3	3	0	0	1	1	0	0	0			20	
SCRPLAY				1											1	
Total (gen)		8	12	15	18	2	4	2	8	6	2	1				
Final Total	8		27		20		6		14		3		1		79	

Legend: (1) ^ includes 2 works republished in Panuntuman from RIL; and (2) " includes one work republished in Panuntuman from RIL.

In his first two anthologies, Mangansakan was careful to note the political environments surrounding the publications: for the first, the anxiety regarding the fate of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) that was meant to bring peace through the creation of a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity to replace the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM); and for the second, the decision of the Supreme Court in 2008 that declared the signing of the MOA-AD as unconstitutional and led to the resumption of hostilities between the military and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF); the Mamasapano massacre of journalists and supporters of a Moro politician in 2009, and the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro (CAB) in 2014 that led to the creation of a Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2019. Mangansakan took the CAB as a sign that “We needed to be heard. We needed to speak our minds. Suddenly, it was time for this anthology [2015] to come out.”

In the present anthology, Mangansakan admits his first encounter with the idea of a “Bangsamoro literature” and interprets it as a body “of works produced by writers who ascribe to a Bangsamoro identity and carry a distinct mark of the *bangsa* or nation of the authors.” The “distinct mark” he refers to can only refer primarily to the Islamic worldview characteristic of Muslim writings, and secondarily to the respective *bangsa* or ethnographic group the writer belongs to, which, however, becomes distinct only when the writer makes it known through the setting and/or the language used in the work. There are stories or poems, of course, that are placeless. But already, in some stories, certain qualities of Islamic arts can be seen, i.e., the sense of temporality and circularity of events, the Qur’anic segmentation of narratives into independent modules, the absence of finality in closures that give the narrative a breathing space that continues into the infinite. So while the writer’s identity as a Moro is essential, the “*bangsa* mark” in the work could only be optional, although here it could be felt in the quiet celebrations of survival intimated by many of the narratives.

The idea of a “Bangsamoro literature” is no different from, but only a politicization of, the “Moro literature” identified by Datu Gumbay Piang in a 1932 essay and the “Muslim literature” that Samuel Tan in a 1974 essay defined as “literature written or produced by Muslims.” Tan added a second kind of Muslim literature, which is a “literature written on or about the Muslims” by non-Muslims. It is what, in another and longer essay I have been working on, I called “non-Moro Islam,” or more specifically “non-Tausug (or non-Meranaw or non-Maguindanao and so on) Islam,” which is literature written by non-Moro Filipinos writing on or about Moro arts and literatures and the like¹ whether they reside within Bangsamoro regions or not, like the works of Tan himself or this writer and many others.

In the three anthologies, the language used is mostly English, especially in the first two books, with some words, phrases, or sentences in Filipino, Maguindanao, Arabic, and Arabic interspersed. A glossary was mindfully included in them. In the *Panumtuman*, which has no glossary, there are already eight works written in the authors’ respective or chosen languages and translated into English. There are poems in the Kagan, Maguindanao, and Sinama Pangutaran languages; fiction in Filipino and Kagan; and essays in Filipino and Tausug. One Tausug essay is styled differently, with two paragraphs in Tausug alternating with their English translations throughout the piece. These are good signs. It was as if the bits and pieces of marginalized indigenous terms inserted in the first two books had finally found courage, confidence, and self-respect to debut in *Panumtuman* in their full glory as respectable literary languages. In fact, in the Tausug essay I mentioned above, in the alternation of Tausug and English texts, the writer has secretly communicated to the reader the right of the Tausug language to be on the same page with English, and with the Tausug even leading the English version after it. I certainly hope that in the next editions of Bangsamoro—or, plainly, Moro—literary works, there will be more Moro languages used to explore and calibrate the kaleidoscope of thoughts and emotions in the various literary genres until such a time when these colonial-vintage genres are finally

¹To distinguish it from the writings of non-Filipinos on or about Moro matters that I have called “non-Muslim Islam literature,” after the official term adopted by Western writers writing on or about Muslim matters (see Peterson 2023). In the coming years, there will imaginably be more non-Moro Filipinos working on Moro and Islamic matters.

replaced by terms and forms and the respective languages of the different Moro *bangsas*.

The insertions of local words in texts and the assertion of Moro languages as more primary and appropriate than English are small but significant details that, however, intimate the conscious decolonizing efforts of our Moro writers. In a later and longer essay, Tan saw the importance of and need for decolonization as a way of changing the national orientation from the hegemonizing and hegemonic neocolonialism inherited from its American colonialists to one that recognizes “the distinctiveness or differences of all ethnic groups that constitute the Filipino national community” in order to eliminate “the undesirable effects of the ‘superior-inferior’ or ‘civilized-primitive’ dichotomies which have marked the relationships between the Christians and non-Christians” in the country. Mangansakan supports the idea of decolonization in his Introduction, thus: “Decolonizing literature is not only about diversifying the literary canon but also about actively centering the experiences, histories, and worldviews of the Bangsamoro, requiring a critical reevaluation of existing literary canons and the recognition of regional minority writers, including the Bangsamoro, to Philippine literature.” The USEP-Institute of Languages and Creative Arts (ILCA), in fact, is a contribution to this decolonization process through the attention and importance it is giving to the learning of local languages. And I will have to add that decolonization also means that the Moro writer should mine their respective oral traditions as important sources of creativity and criticism. They should read and study one another’s texts and more Islamic works from other Muslim countries, many of which could be accessed online, and shun the colossal colonial cul-de-sac that are writers’ workshops, literary contests, and the idea of canons that continue to be carnivals of colonialist capitalism, deepening its epistemic hold on the fan base of colonized natives and the unwary. Islam has nothing to do with these abettors of the *nafs al-ammara*, or lower self. Moro writers should always lean on the Qur’ān and the Sunnah for guidance and, in the spirit of *tawakkul*, leave it to Allah to define their literary pedigree with the help of their *dhikrs* and select *duas*. They should also never forget that the first word revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the Qur’ān is “Iqra,” which means “Read/Recite!” that is said to point at the importance of literacy in this life and the need to know more of Allah and the wonders of the universe He created. And what is there to read is not just texts in *kitab*s but also, to those gifted with more abilities, the unseen and the signs of the divine that are everywhere.

Along with the various Moro oral literatures and the works of the older modern writers, these three anthologies are laying the foundations for an invigorated modern Moro literature in the next few years—one that is not only forward-looking but also rooted in the older traditions whose blood and *barakah* continue to flow into the new generations of creatives. If the USEP-ILCA could host a regular *halaqah* or study circle for Moro writers only, as well as an advisory staff for those preparing their works for publication, these would be good supporting mechanisms to help increase and enrich not just contributions to the BLR but also publications that should slowly fill up the lean shelf of modern Moro literatures. We should truly count ourselves blessed with the pleasure and privilege of seeing the emergence of the Moro literary voice and creativity amid the fitnah state of the country and the modern world. Mashallah for these three books and the writers therein!

(My last words are an appeal to the book’s editorial staff to be more vigilant in their copy editing of future camera-ready manuscripts to avoid (1) repetitions of lines from prose paragraphs from the preceding page or even of one-half of a poem in the next page, and (2) changing not just font sizes but also the spaces between lines of texts that rattle the reader’s attention and ruin what should have been a painless and enjoyable reading of narratives. They should have added an Errata page or a loose leaf to forewarn the readers about the errors. Allah willing, may there be a second and cleaner edition of *Panumtuman* to reach, this time, the general public.)

Conflict of Interest Statement

I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

AI Disclosure

I declare that this manuscript was prepared without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Hence, the content of this paper is original.

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