

Evolution of Identity in Mindanao: An Analysis of the Intellectual Currents from Pre-Colonial to the Present Times

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how the identity in Mindanao evolved from pre-colonial to the present time. The researchers employed a historical research design to contextualize the identity structure by examining existing scholarship such as published books, articles, and journals together with primary sources from government websites to determine the policies implemented by the state in Mindanao that affected the identity of the distinct groups in the region. The analysis is guided by three inquiries. Firstly, it delves into how the pre-colonial Mindanao communities conceptualize identity through indigenous epistemologies, oral traditions, and cosmologies. Second, it explores the roles of kinship structures, community governance, and land ownership that shaped collective identity before the advent and intervention of the colonial regime. Lastly, it examines the ways colonial encounters reshape Mindanao's intellectual currents, specifically how exogenous ideologies were fused with local identity frameworks. By incorporating these queries into the analysis, this paper argues that the evolution of identity in Mindanao is not a single linear trajectory of idea, rather—an overlapping one that resulted in what they have in the present times. This includes how diverse communities in the region shifted, adapted, and embraced certain changes that contributed to who they are. It reveals the dynamic layers of how intellectual and political configurations have historically changed and continues to redefine the identity in the Southern Philippines.

Keywords: Mindanao identity; indigenous epistemologies; identity evaluation; intellectual history.

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1. Introduction

Mindanao, an island often called the "Land of Promise," has historically been seen as a region characterized by diverse identities, intellectual challenges, and collective efforts towards coexistence. To understand the current socio-political landscape of the area, it is essential to look beyond the present administrative divisions and examine the historical occurrences that have played a role in forming the collective identity of its people. This research paper, entitled "Evolution of Identity in Mindanao: An Analysis of the Intellectual Currents from Pre-Colonial to the Present Times," examines the dynamic and frequently contested nature of identity among the diverse communities in the southern Philippines. Through an examination of intellectual currents including pre-colonial kinship structures, the introduction of Islam, the traumatic processes associated with minoritization, and modern discursive efforts toward autonomy. This study aims to trace how the "*Mindanaoan*" identity has been formed, dismantled, and re-conceptualized across centuries.

Indigenous groups in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago lived in social structures characterized by identity rooted in kinship, economic exchange, and ancestral heritage prior to the introduction of Western colonial categories that emphasized rigid ethno-political demarcations [1]. The pre-colonial societal organization was defined by a flexible sense of identity and belonging that is commonly masked by present-day separations. The period was fundamentally characterized by the notion of the *barangay* and more elaborate political organizations like the sultanates, with social interactions being governed through detailed genealogical systems [2].

An illustrative example of this longstanding interconnectedness is evident in the relationship between the Meranaw, a Moro group, and the Higaonon, a non-Moro Lumad group. While currently identified as separate "Moro" and "Lumad" entities, oral narratives and regional genealogical records reveal substantial historical ties. Both groups trace their lineage to a common ancestor, Sharief Alawi, an early Muslim missionary in Northern Mindanao, and possess a history characterized by negotiated coexistence within overlapping territories. This common heritage indicates that pre-colonial Mindanao functioned as a domain of interconnectedness that contested strict identity demarcations, wherein intermarriages and harmonious interactions were customary rather than rare occurrences [3].

The arrival of Islam in the 14th century established a transformative intellectual trend that considerably redirected the path of identity in the region. Islam introduced not only a new religion but also established a comprehensive social and political system in the Sultanate that connected Mindanao and Sulu to the wider Malaysian and Islamic spheres. As observed by Cesar Majul, the concept of "Islamic consciousness" emerged as a formidable force that united diverse populations, empowering them to withstand external aggression and engage with the broader international community with a sense of pride [4].

This period witnessed the emergence of the Sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao, which functioned essentially as sovereign nation-states. At the heart of this identity lay the "*shari'ah*" and the "*adat*" (customary law), serving as the legal and moral basis for governance and societal interactions. For the communities that embraced Islam, identifying as "*Muslim*" evolved into a dominant identity that surpassed local tribal loyalties, fostering a sense of unity which subsequently became the foundation for resistance against Spanish and American colonization [5].

The identity in Mindanao experienced a violent interruption with the advent of Western colonial powers. The Spanish and subsequently American administrations implemented a 'historical process' that altered the status of indigenous peoples—who formerly governed nearly half of the national territory reducing them to minorities within their own lands. This process of minoritization was not accidental but was a deliberate policy of the colonial state, furthered by land laws and resettlement programs that favored Christian migrants from the north [6].

The introduction of the Regalian Doctrine coupled with discriminatory public land statutes undermined customary indigenous land ownership frameworks, leading to extensive displacement within Moro and Lumad communities. This era established a profound "chasm" between the so-called "majority" (Christianized Filipinos) and the "minorities" (Moro and Lumad), a division that was perpetuated as it aligned with the interests of foreign powers. During this period, the prevailing intellectual trend transitioned from an emphasis on sovereign self-identification to a focus on the struggle for survival and the restoration of self-determination [7].

Currently, the pursuit of identity in Mindanao has developed into an intricate politics of ideas and discourses. The formation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) represents the culmination of decades of both armed struggle and discursive efforts to assert a Bangsamoro identity. The identity in question is not fixed; rather, it results from ideational and discursive struggles wherein multiple entities such as the MNLF, MILF, and the Philippine state deliberate over the concepts of autonomy, territorial claims, and rights [8].

Similarly, the Lumad communities have embarked upon their unique intellectual and political awakening. In 1986, various tribes collectively adopted the name "*Lumad*," a Cebuano term employed to differentiate themselves from both the Moro and the Christian majority. This collective identity serves as a strategic instrument in their efforts to secure recognition of ancestral domains and to safeguard their cultural heritage from state-sponsored development initiatives [9].

The progression of identity within Mindanao exemplifies the steadfast resilience and self-determination of its population. Tracing the progression from the adaptable kinship ties characteristic of the pre-colonial age to the assertive self-identifications as "*Bangsamoro*" and "*Lumad*" in present times, it is evident that intellectual currents in this region have been molded through a continuous dialogue balancing tradition with modernity, and reconciling indigenous goals with external impositions [10]. The research aims to further investigate these currents, asserting that genuine "re-identification of self" alongside a "rediscovery of the power and purpose" among the Mindanaoan populace are indispensable for the ultimate attainment of national integration and peace. By grasping the underlying causes of both unity and antagonism, we are able to begin dismantling the artificial categorizations of "*majority*" and "*minority*" and foster a more inclusive national awareness. In order to engage with how the concept of Identity in Mindanao changes over time. This paper can aid by seeking to answer the following queries; firstly, on how pre-colonial Mindanao communities conceptualize identity through indigenous epistemologies, oral traditions, and cosmologies. Second, how did kinship structures, community governance, and land ownership shape collective identity in pre-colonial Mindanao. Lastly, in what ways did colonial encounters reshape Mindanao's intellectual currents, blending exogenous ideologies with local identity frameworks.

This paper crucially dives into the evolution of identity in Mindanao tracing from pre-colonial to present era to

highlight the flourishing and changing ideology that shaped who Mindanaoans are. It shows the different layers of Mindanao studies, the depth and structured analysis about communities in Mindanao that does not sensationalize the common topic which are wars and politics. It highlights a topic about recovery of local and Indigenous knowledge, which stresses the value of intellectual heritage of Mindanao in the limelight of National history which are often overlooked. Therefore, it can be utilized to promote a policy that recognizes self-determination and identity for a peaceful and harmonious society. For decades, renowned Mindanao Historians have been calling for more robust and profound work about Mindanao because it is one way to aid policymakers in structuring a policy that is fair to every community considering the differences with their beliefs and tradition. Moreover, people in power, educators, Non-Government organizations can use it to understand the identity of the Mindanaoans that has evolved in relation to peace and justice in Mindanao. Moreover, it is a relevant topic that can aid both future scholars and policy makers that aims to understand the rich culture of the place. Lastly, for future studies, this paper can be used by other researchers that aim to write about the history of ideas in other regions in the Philippines. It illuminates that one can combine stories, old texts, and recent discourse to tell a deeper history of identity.

This paper focuses on Mindanao as a region drawn mainly from Lumads, Muslims, and Christian communities, tracing the different ideas including faith, self-determination, community governance, and domestic values that shaped the identity of the people of Mindanao from pre-colonial to modern times. However, it does not feign to cover every group or period in complete detail. Rather, it chooses key examples that show notable changes on how identity is understood.

Despite the prospect scope, this paper acknowledges several brief limitations such as the following; first, the geographic and ethnic coverage is uneven (e.g. Sama Dilaut, Teduray and more) are underrepresented due to the scarcity of the literature. Second, the entire analysis of this paper is heavily in English-language and may cause misinterpretation to the indigenous knowledge systems. Third, because of limited documentation of the pre-14th century literature—the identity structures still remain speculative. Fourth, the Moro-centric narratives are well-developed compared to Lumad intellectual history in existing scholarship literature. Lastly, there were no primary fieldwork or oral interviews conducted, which means emic perspectives had no direct representation. These constraints can cause insufficient data and underrepresentation, specifically if the written records are scarce or remote areas are unavailable.

1.1 Mindanao Analyses by Scholars

One of the significant works used for this study is the work titled "**The Minoritization of Indigenous Communities of Mindanao and Sulu Archipelago**" by **B. R. Rodil**. He examines the history behind the deconstruction of the indigenous communities of Mindanao and Sulu Archipelago by colonial and federal government policy. The study describes the ways in which both the Spanish and U.S. colonizers used legal mechanisms (such as the Regalian Doctrine) to transfer land ownership from indigenous communities to the state, overlooking the ancestral territorial claims of the Lumad and Moro [11].

This research sheds light on the impact of internal migration, government-led resettlement, and various

development initiatives on the ongoing marginalization of indigenous communities in their ancestral territories. This study delves into the historical journey of these indigenous peoples as they strive for self-determination, cultural preservation, and political autonomy, facing numerous hurdles along the way. By utilizing primary sources from historical records, along with government statistics as secondary sources and insights from academic research, this study has provided a reliable analysis of the root causes of inequality in Mindanao and Sulu.

The continuing discussion of the Bangsamoro struggle has generated extensive academic and political debate. **The "Politics of Ideas and Discourses: Understanding the Ideational and Discursive Struggles in the Formation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao," authored by Kevin Nielsen M. Agojo and Julio C. Teehankee (2023).** These authors also employ an institutionalist theoretical approach known as "Discursive Institutionalism," which they claim and illustrates how the narrative or discourse regarding the position of the Bangsamoro in society has affected their quest for independence and their capacity to attain autonomy from the Philippine State. Additionally, the article illustrated how education, Islam, colonial history, immigration, and political movements have contributed to shaping the identity and self-perception of Mindanoans, along with the competition between various ideas and narratives that impact regional identity, autonomy, and cultural affiliation [12].

An important source for this research is the study by **Francisco J. Lara, Jr. and Bianca Ysabelle Franco, titled "Identity-Based Conflicts and the Politics of Identity in Eastern Mindanao."** Their research highlights how conflicts rooted in identity, disputes over ancestral land, and competition for resources are significant drivers of violence in Eastern Mindanao. The authors note that despite the passage of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA), indigenous peoples still face ongoing tensions with both government forces and insurgent groups. These conflicts persist because the rights of indigenous communities are closely linked to their identity, their historical resistance against the state, and their claims to natural resources [13]. Additionally, the article highlights that identity in Mindanao is dynamic continually shaped by the legacies of colonialism, government policies, cycles of violence, and the resistance of Indigenous communities. It emphasizes that ethnic or communal affiliation is often a more powerful factor in conflict than ideology itself, revealing how identity formation leaves lasting impacts across generations. In this context, Lara and Franco's research adds valuable insight by exploring how intellectual and historical notions of identity manifest in the everyday social and political realities of Mindanao. Their work significantly deepens our understanding of the evolving Mindanaoan identity from both modern and historical perspectives.

Another substantial literature that has contributed to the research was written by **Noralia U. Ibrahim, titled "Echoes of Kinship: The Untold Meranaw and Higaonon Connections in Lanao and Mindanao."** Ibrahim unpacks the deep-rooted genealogical and socio-cultural bonds linking the Meranaw and Higaonon communities. She shows how these relationships were forged over generations through shared ancestry, oral histories, intermarriage, and parallel historical experiences. Ultimately, Ibrahim challenges the notion of rigid identity, arguing that being "Meranaw" or "Higaonon" isn't mutually exclusive. Instead, identity in Mindanao is deeply interconnected, often woven together by family ties and shared historical narratives including a common lineage tracing back to Sharief Alawi. Her insights beautifully illustrate that ethnicity is fluid, and that local, indigenous memories are crucial for truly grasping Mindanao's complex history [14].

Ibrahim's research also supports the claim that Mindanao's intellectual movement was formed through the use of an indigenous peoples' tradition or knowledge system (oral histories), and their shared history. In other words, his research clearly shows that there is a common ancestral origin with respect to both the Meranaw and Higaonon people, and that these two groups are connected in terms of their past experiences. Thus, this research will show how knowledge systems have been used to counteract current understandings of separate ethnicities in Mindanao. Consequently, this will be very important in showing the changes in identity over time, from before colonialism to the present.

Another literature reviewed that has great relevance to the study **was the literature of Amaryllis T. Torres "Kinship and Social Relations in Filipino Culture"**, she examines how the kinship system of the Philippines, builds networks to meet the needs of personal commitments, reciprocal associations, cooperative endeavors, and other forms of interdependence. It is indeed an accurate assessment by Torres when she states that "family ties are at the core of both the cultural values and social organization of Filipinos". Family ties and relationships shape what we do or do not do in terms of reciprocity, cooperative activities, social obligations, and our ability to connect with others (pakikipagkapwa). Torres demonstrates how Filipino social connections develop based on bilateral kinship (both paternal and maternal side), while explaining that this development came from their ancestors who lived in agricultural/communal settings, which were dependent upon their ability to work cooperatively with relatives and neighbors to survive [15].

Ma. Elizabeth J. Macapagal, Cristina J. Montiel, and Jose Jowel P. Canuday titled **"The Unifying and Divisive Effects of Social Identities: Religious and Ethnopolitical Identities Among Mindanao Muslims in the Philippines"** also contributed to this paper. They examined how religious and ethnopolitical identities affected Muslims social cohesion and division in Mindanao. Compared to ethnolinguistic identities like Tausug, Maranao, or Maguindanaoan, Macapagal discovered that Muslim identification was far more unifying. They also recognized the growing Bangsamoro identity as a superordinate identity that fosters interethnic harmony and solidarity. However, they also acknowledged that historical battles for power and political goals might lead to divisions based on ethno-political identity [16]. Furthermore, Macapagal showed how identity is flexible and influenced by politics, religion, history, and culture. These results thus lend credence to the idea that ongoing intellectual advancements in Mindanao influence people's perceptions of themselves and their society. Additionally, this literature greatly advances our understanding of how, in modern Mindanao, specific ethno-linguistic identities give way to broader regional and political identities.

Furthermore, **Oona Paredes' work titled research "Rivers of Memory and Oceans of Difference in the Lumad World of Mindanao,"** was crucial in creating this research which asserts that the Lumad people's identity is relational and shifts depending on how they interact with other groups, including Islamized people, colonial regimes, and contemporary state structures. She claims in her work that the intellectual instrument for preserving social cohesiveness and native identity is shared ancestral and oral storytelling. Through shared memory systems in oral traditions, rivers, ancestral lands, and social bonds, pre-colonial and indigenous Mindanao groups preserved their identities. The study shows that collective story systems permitted ongoing cultural continuity despite colonialism's disruption [17].

Oona Paredes' work titled **“A Mountain of Difference: The Lumad in Early Colonial Mindanao: The Lumad in the Early Colonial** provides substantial information for this paper. As her work illustrated a number of ways the Lumad peoples were able to maintain their own identities throughout the early colonial era. She contests the prevailing colonialist narrative which has depicted the Lumad peoples as being either completely disconnected from other cultures or as culturally impoverished. Instead she depicts the Lumad peoples as powerful actors within history who have possessed an abundance of intellectuality and cultural tradition. Paredes states that the identity of the individual people in each Lumad community is related to ancestral heritage, ritualism and sacred geography Reference [18]. Paredes stated that for the individuals in Mindanao, their sense of identity as Lumad was based upon their familial connections; their spiritual authority through rituals and their relationship with the sacredness of the natural world. This study also demonstrates the colonial interpretations by focusing on Indigenous agency and the intellectuality of the Indigenous Peoples.

Lastly, this work of **F. Landa Jocano, titled “Philippine Prehistory: An Anthropological Overview of the Beginnings of Filipino Society and Culture”** has contributed a lot in this study. Jocano provides an anthropological survey of early Philippine communities, looking at kinship systems, migration, pre-colonial cultural processes, and belief systems [19]. He explains that pre-colonial societies in the Philippines had developed sophisticated cultures based upon kinship, oral traditions and beliefs about spirits. The indigenous cognitive processes used to define these traditional cultures shaped communal identity/social organization for thousands of years prior to colonialism.

A significant observation in these was that Oona Paredes' research on pre-colonial Mindanao identity emphasized the role of indigenous epistemology in forming communal consciousness. She demonstrated that Lumad identity formed through oral memory, kinship networks and sacred relationships to their environments maintained historical continuity during colonial dislocations. In addition, her work demonstrates that genealogy awareness and rituals were central indicators of community identity among indigenous peoples. As did also by Jocano, he explained that pre-colonial Philippine societies developed complex social and spiritual systems based upon oral tradition, ancestral belief systems and clan organizations. Together, both bodies of literature suggest that identities within pre-colonial Mindanao were built upon indigenous epistemologies, communal memories and cosmological world views.

2. Methodology

The study employed a historical research design, wherein researchers used relevant published books, articles, and journals to contextualize the data. There were primary sources utilized such as archival for government documents to analyze the policies imposed by the state in Mindanao, specifically about land ownership.

In the first part of the analysis, the researchers reviewed credible books and journal articles from renowned Mindanao historians to explore the concept of identity in pre-colonial Mindanao through indigenous practices. While the second part analyzed the kinship structures, community governance, and land ownerships that shaped collective identity in pre-colonial Mindanao. It highlighted the commonalities between the groups in the region. The lineage is traced through genealogies which are often through oral traditions. Despite the claimed differences,

the way of community governance and intermarriages to expand territory showed connections between these groups. In the latter part of the analysis, it provided answers to the third research query. Utilizing published books and journal articles, including government documents from the American regime up to the post-colonial era that executed policies in Mindanao. This revealed a discourse on the context of homeland claims between the Lumads, moro groups, and the migrant settlers under the support of the state. A narrative that affected the identity of existing groups in the Southern Philippines.

3. Discussion

3.1 The Pre-colonial Mindanao Communities

3.1.1 Indigenous ways of knowing identity

Unlike how the colonizers described the groups in the Philippines, who were uncivilized and spreading chaos on purpose. The existing manuscripts highlighted how the ancient people of Mindanao already knew who they were in terms of identity. On how they recognized their connection with their environment (riverine orientation), [20] the roles they had within their local communities, their oral traditions, and their spiritual beliefs. Each community had their own set of interpretations with those mentioned aspects, but they also shared commonalities with each other.

Before the 16th century, people of Mindanao perceived who they were different from the concept of nationality or citizenship in modern times, but through their own indigenous ways of thinking and living. They conceptualized identity through place-based belonging, especially the relational ethics to the bodies of water like rivers and landscapes—an emphasis to their ecological embeddedness. Among the Lumad groups such as Higaunon, the idea of identity was not abstract, but rather geographically anchored in river systems, which structured social, political, and moral relationships. Rivers functioned as both spatial markers and epistemological frameworks, organizing memory, genealogy, and authority. Oral traditions traced ancestral movement along river systems, where proximity to these waterways symbolized cultural legitimacy and “civilization.” [21]

Furthermore, riverine identity created moral boundaries between groups. Communities associated with inland freshwater systems were seen as culturally authentic, while outsiders (e.g., coastal “dumagat”) were positioned beyond the moral universe of Lumad society. Somehow, it’s less about fixed labels (like “Filipino”) and more about relationships, beliefs, and roles within their communities. This is the reason why existing groups in Mindanao who are either indigenous or natives have a strong ancestral domain claim, because their identity model was fluid, situational, and ecologically integrated.

Table 1: below summarizes the key contrasts between pre-colonial and modern frameworks identity in Mindanao. It highlights that the modernity claims on ancestral domains are not just economic and political, rather those were epistemological struggles on their knowledge systems that shaped their identity

Aspects:	Pre-colonial identity:	Modern concept of identity:
Basis	Place (river/mountains)	Legal citizenship (Fixed category)
Authority Source/ Knowledge System	Oral Tradition (genealogies/ Salsila, epics, chants) Datu/ Sultan	State legal frameworks, and formal education
Flexibility	Fluid, relational (Context-dependent)	Institutionalized
Relationship	Sacred and ancestral	Property based on Regalian Doctrine

3.1.2 Oral Epistemologies

Pre-colonial Mindanao societies relied heavily on oral traditions as their primary epistemological system. Knowledge—including history, law, cosmology, and social norms—was transmitted through genealogies, epics, myths, and ritual narratives. In pre-colonial Mindanao, communities like the Meranaw, Maguindanao, and Lumads were relying on epics (e.g., the Darangen epic) [22], genealogies (Salsila), [23] ritual chants, myths, and folktales. These were not just stories but also authoritative sources of truth and knowledge.

Oral traditions were dynamic and continuously reinterpreted and there were various interpretations of the culture of different communities in Mindanao. But there were limited written documents or manuscripts from these indigenous groups due to displacement, resettlement, and war. This is one of the reasons why scholars encourage a representation from these groups to write their own narrative, which is highly anticipated, because the discourse about the rich tradition in Mindanao is often overlooked and there is limited documented data, aside from the popular Darangen which was considered the longest epic in Asia. It is crucial to allow communities to reconstruct identity across generations, to introduce practices that inculcate values and reinforce collective memory, serving as a living repository of identity and worldview.

For instance, oral tradition that somehow highlights the shared connection of the Lumad groups with the Moro. (e.g., their ancestors *Mamalu* and *Tagbanuway*) Accordingly, these two brothers had different ideals when it came to their religion. *Tagbanuway*, the ancestor of the Moro, embraced the Islamic faith while *Mamalu*, the ancestor of the Lumad, went to the interior upland and retained his ancestral religion. However, these brothers made a pact of peace to protect each other in dire need [24]. This explains why despite the differences between the two groups, they still shared common historical ideals based on the oral epistemology of genealogy, culture, and geographical origins [25]. Based on this initial finding, identity was constructed through oral epistemologies, where storytelling functioned as a system of knowledge production, preserving collective memory and legitimizing social structures.

3.1.3 Spiritual beliefs and cosmology

The idea of faith in ancient Mindanao and how it evolved in modern times is quite fascinating. It is like a story one can read in a fantasy book. This states that Pre-colonial Mindanao cosmologies were largely animistic and relational, emphasizing the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. They believed that doing good brings blessings and doing bad brings karma. A simple logic of cosmology on the dynamics between the universe, spirits, gods, and human beings. Hence, the concept of "Babaylan" plays a significant role within the communities in Mindanao. They were the navigator of faith, and the one who holds one of the highest positions beside the datu. Although the word "babaylan" is a Visayan word, the origin of the term came from the Malay "balian". "Babaylan" as a figure was rampant in ancient Mindanao. Their role includes custodian of customary laws of their communities, the advisor for different circumstances such as: land disputes, intermarriages, and conflicts, ritual specialists, and political figures [26]. Since they stood as someone who was generally known as an expert in cosmology, the indigenous people at that time put them on a high pedestal. It was highly considered as animism because they worshipped different entities (e.g. sun, moon, nature spirits, animal spirits, fire, and more.) but with "babaylan" as the one leading the worship ritual. As for the "babaylan" figure, they were called specific names in various communities [27], such as Walian/Balian by the Mandaya or Mansaka, Baylan/Babaylan by the Manobo, Mabalian/Balian by the Bagobo, Tau Mulung by the T'boli, Balyan by the Subanen, Baylan by the Higaonon and the Bukidnon, and Pendarpaan/Pamomolong by the Meranaw/ Maguindanao and Tausug which eventually shifted to Imam/Pandita when the Islamic ideology came in.

In Lumad belief systems spirits inhabit natural elements such as trees, rivers, rocks, air, and more [28]. Power is understood as a diffuse, immanent force in nature, and the self is inseparable from both community and environment. In other words, this said cosmology rejects the Western separation of subject/object or human/nature. Instead, identity is understood as embedded within a wider ecological and spiritual network, where humans are co-participants in a living cosmos. This amplifies that identity was cosmological and relational, shaped by an integrated worldview where the self, community, nature, and the spiritual realm were internally connected.

These spiritual beliefs incorporate their myths, heroic narratives, and cultural ideas into identity. It further explains that oral narratives about folk heroes and mythic figures served as models of ideal behavior and cultural values Reference [29]. These stories transmitted into moral codes; social expectations; collective aspirations, and folk heroes embodied traits valued by the community and were seen as carriers of indigenous knowledge systems, reinforcing identity through narrative exemplars (e.g., The Darangen epic in Meranaw, Salsila as genealogical narratives of sultanates, Lumad origins myths) emphasizing that identity was also narratively constructed, with myths and heroic traditions shaping cultural ideals and reinforcing shared values.

The diverse term for spiritual specialists (*baylan*, *tau mulung*, *pendarpaan*, and more) are not mere variations on their language. It suggests a distinct but overlapping framework on their cosmology. In the case of Meranaw, their *pendarpaan* functioned within the hierarchy of the usual concept of spiritual experts, though it later shifted to Imam roles because of how they embraced the Islamic faith. For other groups such as Higaonon, they retained their nature-based authority. This lexical variation shows that pre-colonial Mindanao functioned on a spectrum of intellectual traditions which shared common relational otherworldly beliefs; the self is intertwined and cannot be

separated from the community, nature, and spirit. Clearly, not on a single "indigenous" pillar of knowledge. The colonial advent did not introduce the concept of an Almighty being—it reconstructed the relationship between nature, human, and the divine which often nullifies the interceding role of indigenous spiritual specialists.

3.2 Kinship Structures, Community Governance, and Land Rights

In pre-colonial Mindanao, the essence of genealogy was crucial for groups to trace their lineage, clan, and extended family group because it was the core of their sense of belonging. In Moro groups, they used Salsila (genealogy) to acknowledge the lineage of certain families. Especially if they came from prominent ancestral clans [30]. This was evident when Najeeb Saleeby, a Lebanese-American translated the genealogy of Maguindanao and Sulu in the early 1900s [31].

Another important factor of genealogy is in the case of intermarriages, where they choose the families who were close to their specific network in political status, influential in a community, and where they can implement their obligation and loyalty. It was also a way to recognize boundaries between outsiders and insiders, strengthening their collective identity. It can be understood primarily through modern categories like nationality or legal identity. This further explains that “Kinship was central to how individuals and groups defined themselves. Pre-colonial Mindanao identity was deeply tied to genealogical descent and clan affiliation, often preserved and validated through oral narratives.” Founding families (e.g., *ininay daw inamay* among Higaunon) held legitimacy because their ancestry was tied to the original settlement of a place, reinforcing the connection between kinship, land, and authority [32]. Therefore, the identity was relational and genealogical, grounded in kinship systems that connected individuals to ancestors, territory, and political legitimacy.

Communities’ systems of governance were also different, *Datu/Rajah* were the recognized supreme rulers of the *barangays*, which were situated with coastal settlements, found at the mouths of bank rivers, or were simply lowland communities. While the Islamized communities acknowledged the Sultan, the ruler of a Sultanate. Between *Barangays* and Sultanates, the latter was considered the most developed community in the entire archipelago, perhaps because of the level of their organization [33]. The *Datu* and *Sultan* like leaders combined their political power with ritual roles to represent the community’s identity.

3.3 Colonial Encounters

3.3.1 Colonial Religion

Early indigenous groups had a strong bond and beliefs when it came to the spiritual realm. They respected the boundaries between the human and the divine world. There were pagans, animists, and Muslims. However, when the Spaniards came, they forced other groups into their religion, because they could not summon them in a mass invitation in embracing christianity. Wherein, active domination would be the best choice for them. Some groups fled to the remote mountains, or forests to protect their beliefs. Some engaged with this religion. The reason—was the doctrine they were spreading.

It should also be understood that this religion would counter the religion introduced by the Arab missionaries who

came to Mindanao before the conquest of the Spaniards. Hence, when the Spaniards spread Christianity, they also had animosity towards the Islamic faith [34]. Why do they have this negative belief towards Muslim? Spaniards fought the "Maurus" in Europe, and the term was westernized by Americans into "Moors." [35]. These were the Muslim warriors who dominated Europe before Spain and other European nations rose to power. When the Spaniards came and saw the influence of Islam in Mindanao, they attached the name "Moro" to these Islamized natives [36]. After Spain handed the authority of the Philippines to the American power through the Treaty of Paris in 1898 they also included the territories in Mindanao and Sulu which were never officially conquered by the Spaniards [37]. Then, they imposed their rules and laws, including the religion that they also brought—protestantism. This progression of introduced religions from the colonizers made local communities in Mindanao act on two; embrace the religion or reject the faith. Those who embraced the faith followed suit with the traditions and practices such as Sunday masses, Holy week, the celebration of Jesus Christ's birthday, respecting Saint Mary, and so on. While those who rejected the religion they brought were also classified into two groups. Either they were the groups who fled to the mountains to preserve their indigenous faith, or those groups who converted to Islam. Those latter were the ones who consistently refused the Christianity and Protestantism invitation. They upheld that these religions were deeply against their faith. They resort to multiple Jihad "Holy War" to defend not just their faith, but also their people [38].

The factors that marked the refusal of these people into the colonial religion were the reasons that strengthened their core identity as "Indigenous groups" who protected their faith despite the circumstances of being minority groups. They did not just protect their faith but also the laws and traditions that were considered the foundation of their identity. As for Islamic groups, the teachings of the Islamic faith became their sword in going against Western imperialism [39]. People in power may say that these groups do not like peace and development which were offered by the imperial power. But peace and development do not equate to human integrity. It is a game of power played by powerful nations. Protecting one's beliefs is an integral part of identity. They were not warmongers who spread wars and battles as much as they wanted. The need to fight was to protect their community, because during the American regime, they were also imposing resettlement programs which took a toll on the indigenous groups, and the Moro [40]. Again, it should be analyzed that their ancestral domain claim was always tied to their identity, and removing them from their territory was like taking a slice of their whole identity. Thus, the colonial regime up to the present era became a huge struggle for self-determination for IPs and Moros.

3.3.2 Policy and New Categories of Belonging

There were areas in Mindanao where Spaniards succeeded through Missionary efforts. In the book "The Minoritization Of The Indigenous Communities Of Mindanao And The Sulu Archipelago," it was stated that in the early half of the 17th century, Spain set their footholds in the eastern, northern, and western parts of Mindanao Reference [41]. This became the sole reason why Spain established their bases in Mindanao where the Moros' presence was weak. However, the Moro group became a serious competition for the Spaniards. As they cannot be influenced to convert to Christianity. But this was also why they insisted on including the jurisdiction of Maguindanao and Sulu into the Treaty of Paris in 1898. They claimed that the entire archipelago would be handed to the United States as they had controlled the jurisdictions of all the regions [42].

With the new imperial power, they initiated resettlement programs to subjugate the areas and control the resisting groups. They also forged agreements with the Sultan in Sulu to assert their power where they would benefit. People in Luzon and Visayas with no areas to cultivate were ordered to resettle in Mindanao. This made the Lumads and Moros displaced from their ancestral domains, with multiple massacres happening to the Moro communities. A chaotic turn of events caused by these policies.

Now, why was it difficult for the natives or the indigenous? Because the state constitutes the core of the Philippine land property system which is still enshrined in the Philippine Constitutions of 1935, 1973, and 1987 [43]. It is the Regalian doctrine, and this was inherited from Spain, which emphasizes that only the state can declare the proper disposition of properties to the citizens. Thus, private owners needed to register their lands or else they would be under the state's control. Within this context, it highly threatens the rights to ancestral domains.

Aside from administrative segregation and military rule imposed by the American regime wherein they monopolized the community power of Sultans and Datus, and the engineered resettlement policy to give way for Christianized Filipinos from Luzon and Visayas. They fused it with discriminatory provisions of Public Land Laws and other policies affecting land ownership by the natives [44]. For instance, the Philippine Commission's land laws or Public Land Act of 1903 (Act No. 718) [45], Public Act No. 926 [46], and Commonwealth Act No. 41 [47]. It was clear that the Western powers' goal was to establish their presence in the Southern part of the Philippines, because they waged a military campaign when they could not assimilate the natives, in particular the Islamized ones.

After World War II, the United States handed the "autonomy" to the Philippines in 1946. This was the reception that "Filipino" leaders will lead the country onwards. Including the programs by the American regime in the Southern part of the archipelago that go against the indigenous groups and Moros [48]. Unfortunately, they continued the policy without taking into consideration the impact on the people who were not included in the Filipino identity, because they did not get subjugated and assimilated to the national premise of identity.

As the identity was being questioned for not integrating themselves into the majority which embraced the policies and administration of the Western power. They became outcasts by their own people living in the same archipelago. They were the cultural minorities who resided in their ancestral territory uninterrupted for generations. One should understand that they were the indigenous communities and their lineage has been living in their territory for centuries. Yet, they were the ones who received unjust treatment from the government. The fact that the government proposed and implemented programs that deteriorated the environment these people lived in [49], It highlighted how the state does not see the grave impact it caused to the cultural minorities.

The minority groups, the "moro" as an identifier for Muslims in Mindanao became a name that transitioned from a word that connotes "barbaric" to people who fought for self-determination [50]. These groups strive to bring their voice to the forefront of social conversation on territorial claims, despite being labeled as rebels by the mainstream Filipino. Aside from the Moro groups, there are also Lumad groups. "Lumad" is a Visayan term which means "indigenous" or "native." [51]. Lumad groups are also often neglected in the narrative of "homeland." These minority groups are not different from their fellow Filipinos. But since they have different beliefs from the

Christian majority, they were ostracized. A discourse raised by Mindanao scholars, and a problem that keeps on resurfacing even in the present era because these minority groups are not “outsiders,” yet their struggle for self-identity was being questioned.

3.3.3 Intellectual Resistance

While this section discusses the colonial and state laws, it is also important to analyze how Lumad and Moro groups responded through intellectual resistance to these implementations and legalized dispossessions. For instance, the Moro groups utilized the Salsila to contest the land registration requirements by the state, arguing that their occupancy were based on the ancestry validated through their oral traditions. Similarly, Lumad groups catalyzed shared origin myths and blood compact narratives to invoke their moral and legal claims to their territories. These reactions illuminated that identity was not plainly diminished by policy, but was defensively re-articulated by fused contestations that mixed indigenous knowledge with colonial legal concept.

3.3.4 Education, Writing, and New Forms of Discourse

Colonizers' writing would always show their dominance and justify conquest within their narrative, as they were educated, enlightened, and morally grounded. Thus, they need to spread these to the communities that are "barbaric" and have no knowledge about ethics. This narrative has been sensationalized in the Mindanao region Reference [52]. Problematizing the local communities, and insisting on their perceptions of how uncivilized the people in the country are. When the Americans set their hold in Mindanao, they prioritized education as a tool for pacification [53]. They believed that it would be a way for them to maintain their power by utilizing education. This process of educating the people of Mindanao through westernized schools and books, together with printing presses and newspapers that brought Latin-based alphabets, became a way to rival the existing intellectual practice of Moro groups such as the *kirim* and *jawi* which were influenced by the Islamic scholars. For the context of this intellectual practice, ancient people in Mindanao were not "uneducated" as the colonizers claim. They just had different forms of writing, literature, and they had their own oral traditions. An example of this was how Moro utilized the pen in writing. They structured *kirim/batang-arab* to record events, names, numbers, laws, folklores, and more. It was inspired by the Arabic alphabet and they modified it to suit their own local language [54]. This case emphasized that they were educated, and they had different forms of knowledge compared to what they wanted to diffuse.

The rise of new literate elites, educators, journalists, clerks, and nationalists who wrote their interpretive discourse about Mindanao identity collating local oral histories, with Western ideas of nation, race and progress. Construct their narrative about autonomy and integration. Some scholars utilized the existing indigenous knowledge from the people of Mindanao and provided a comprehensive discourse. Aside from that, in the present era, there are various authors who wrote about Mindanao in the context of the homeland (e.g., Majul, Tan, McKenna, Rodil, Paredes, and more.) As it is the most contested context between the Indigenous groups, the Moro groups, the migrant settlers and the government. These produced split identity frameworks: where people saw themselves as both Filipino and Moro, or Lumad and Filipino, illustrating that colonialism reshaped identity not by eradicating local beliefs, but by imposing new conversations with foreign ideals.

3.3.5 Literacy and Authority Competition

The introduction of the Americans of the Latin-based alphabet, educational system, and print media cannot be considered as neutral educational reconfiguration. It was a direct challenge against the existing indigenous knowledge systems, specifically the *kirim* and *jawi* scripts used by the Moro communities. To be precise, these Arabic modified scripts were not just writing tools by these groups, they were embedded in their Islamic judicial system, *Salsila*, and literary pieces. The colonial state had modified the epistemological-based authority tradition of these communities into bureaucratic documentation because of the English-Language print prioritization. An aftermath that is still visible up to this day. For instance, the Moro and Lumad claims to their identity requires state-recognized documents (e.g. Birth certificates, and Land registration title) compared to their pre-colonial era wherein oral testimony and sacred rituals sufficed. Thus, this section argues that colonialism reshaped the concept of identity not by abolishing local beliefs—rather by imposing new sets of criteria for acknowledging lawful knowledge for who one is.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights that the intellectual currents of identity in Mindanao evolved not as a single linear trajectory of idea, rather—it progressed as a layered, contested, and adaptive process where pre-colonial foundations did not vanish nor was it fully conserved, but was modified through colonial intervention and post-colonial politics. The conceptualization of identity in pre-colonial Mindanao was rooted in indigenous epistemologies. It showed that people defined themselves based on their environment and the rivers around them, rather than through modern categories like nationality or citizenship. They categorized their group based on specific places, nature, and the communities they were in, like how the *Higaunon* associated the rivers as the center of their way of life, serving as the foundation for their history, daily living, and even their spiritual beliefs. Being close to these waterways was seen as a sign of being true to their society. The identity of the ancient Mindanao people was formed through their intimate connection with their environment and their relationships with one another.

For the oral epistemologies, it served as the foundation of their historical consciousness and identity. The epics, genealogical records, myths, and folktales were passed down from one generation to the next. These spoken traditions served as the main source of knowledge and history. Stories that did not just entertain but also strengthened the bonds within the community and kept their collective memories alive. Kinship systems and genealogical consciousness as core Identity markers are considered the most important basis of identity. One's status and belongingness were defined by one's family clan and one's connection to one's ancestors. The system was what held their societies together and determined political authority and power. Moreover, myths and stories about heroes served as models for the culture and behavior. Narrative provides them with moral guidance and reinforces their shared identity by highlighting the values and traits that the community holds in high regard.

This rich indigenous knowledge broke through colonial encounters. The Spanish and American policies did not just impose foreign rule; they also systematically deteriorated the epistemologies by delegitimizing the traditions. Particularly the land ownership system affected their territory-based identity. This drove a defensive rearticulation of identity by the Moro and Lumad groups. Wherein they had to exert their rights in their ancestral land, but

oftentimes misunderstood.

The present intellectual currents in Mindanao remain dual. Apparently, moro-centric is the dominant narrative, where it is centered on their sovereignty and self-determination. While the Lumad narrative struggles for recognition within the Philippine state and the Bangsamoro project. A point that there is no single trajectory of intellectual current in Mindanao, but an overlapping and sometimes conflicted identity-thinking.

Finally, this paper challenges the conventional narrative of Philippine historiography that sees Mindanao as the “problem” because of how groups assert their rights over their ancestral domains. Instead, the study reveals how pre-colonial epistemologies were sophisticated systems of identity. Enriched by various indigenous intellectual traditions, but was shaped and apprehended by influence from external forces. Perceiving it collectively gives us an important view on the history and identity of Mindanao, which continues to serve as a strong foundation of discourse about the region up to the present time.

5. Recommendations

Based on the discussions and conclusions of the study, the researchers humbly recommend the following; first, students should be encouraged to recognize the values of Indigenous people's intellectual traditions of Mindanao identity. With understanding, we can learn how our ancestors defined the identity of Mindanao's peoples based on their homeland and kinship. Second, educators should include the concepts related to Indigenous identity in the curriculum and discussion in their classes. This will help other students to understand the origins of identity and the history of Mindanao identity. Third, recovering Lumad intellectual histories, because some of the existing studies focused on Moro narrative. This is essential in drafting policies that respect both groups. Third, School administrators and cultural officials should organize programs, seminars, and cultural celebrations that showcase the shaping of people's identities in Mindanao. It can help students understand the ancestral identities of Mindanao, as well as foster respect and unity. Fourth, Government and cultural agencies should give support and resources to the documentation of oral traditions, epics, and traditional knowledge systems in Mindanao. The aim is to preserve the intellectual legacy of the people of Mindanao and transmit it to future generations.

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