TRAVELING THROUGH THE ARMM (Acronym Routine of Modern Mindanao) by Margaret Coleman

Sitting in a stuffy classroom in Monterey, we as Monterey – and now Middlebury – Institute for International Studies (MIIS) and California State University at Monterey Bay (CSUMB) students were fairly accustomed to speaking in acronyms. Especially as a MIIS student myself, I’m accustomed to speaking so heavily with acronyms that no one except other MIIS students can understand what I say. My program used to be MA in International Policy Studies, Human Security & Development (MAIPS-HSD), but ever since we converted to the Development Policy and Practice (DPP) department, my program has changed ever so slightly to MA in International Policy and Development (MAIPD-HSD). There were other students in the group on the research trip to Mindanao who studied International Education Management (IEM) or were gaining a Master’s in Public Administration (MPA), and our entire trip to Mindanao (we were participants of the 2015 “Challenges to Peacebuilding” course) was being sponsored by Center for Conflict Studies (CCS), but we could have just as easily gone on a Design, Partnering, Management and Innovation (DPMI) practicum trip or taken an International Professional Service Semester (IPSS).

I understand the use of acronyms: after seeing their abundance in the fields of International Relations – just think of the United Nations and all of its subsidiary organizations – and studying Conflict Resolution, I can appreciate that not only do acronyms save time and help with remembering information, but they also can serve the function of creating an “in” crowd or community. Those who know the acronyms share a certain level of knowledge and trust while those who do not know automatically become outsiders. With an entire Wikipedia page devoted to Acronyms in the Philippines, with no less than 150 acronyms that would be recognized nation-wide, in our pre-departure meetings we could already see how little we knew.

Even with such deft acronym skills, we were very quickly thrown a whole new set of abbreviated vocabulary, where our host organization was Catholic Relief Services (CRS), which took us to visit everything from government agencies like the Mindanao Development Authority (MinDa), to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), such as Alternative Forum for Research in Mindanao (APRIM), Integrated Mindanao Association for Natives (IMAN), Columbio Multi-Sectorial Ecology Movement (CMEM), and Kaduntay Foundation Inc. (KFI).

Soon it became easier for all of us in the group to abbreviate everything, as we traveled through the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and learned more about the negotiation process.
between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Government of the Philippines (GPH), which has included previous agreements such as the Memorandum Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MAO-AD). The current negotiations between the MILF and the GHP are about passing the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), facilitated by the Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC) and supported by the Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society (CBCS).

One of the main concerns expressed by many was on what would happen to the Indigenous Peoples (IPs), because the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA) was not scheduled to be included in the BBL. There was a general hopefulness that the BBL would be a successful step in the peace process, but also an air of caution, because there had been so many previous waves of tensions between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) or MILF, and newer armed groups such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). We also learned of the concurrent peace process between the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) and the National Democratic Front (NDF), the politico-military wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), whose military arm is the New People’s Army (NPA).

Education on acronyms starts young; all the schools we visited had begun implementation of the Department of Education’s (DepEd) mandate...
to include peace education and while in a peace zone called Nabandasan, one ninth-grade girl told us that her favorite subject was MAPEH, which after some blank stares from our group, was explained to be Music, Art, Physical Education, and Health.

Sometimes the excess of acronyms became overwhelming. There seemed to be no way to tell whether an acronym was spoken like a word – for example, with IPRA pronounced like Iprah – or was spelled out – like ARMM, which was A-R-M-M – so we constantly wrote new definitions in our notes to keep up. When learning about local village infrastructure, we heard some acronyms that were hard to keep separated, like the BDS (Barangay Defense System), the BDP (Barangay Development Plan), and BPAT (Barangay Peace Action Team), not to mention that there were some acronyms that we never really figured out how to say, like OMF-IRD (Oblate Missionary Foundation Inter-Religious Dialogue) or GiNaPaLaD TaKa (short for a group of seven barangays that are spaces of peace in Pikit, North Cotabato).

By the end of the trip we were speaking with so many abbreviations that we felt like professionals, fluent in Mindanao acronyms. We had become our own sub-group of acronym-speakers which, studying in the Conflict Resolution field, was easily recognizable as part of our own formation of an “in” group: we all knew that coming back home would mean we’d have under our belts an experience that was particular to our group, and our abbreviated jargon became a visible representation of that. The return back to the States, though, also created a few unexpected glitches. The acronyms we were exposed to like those above are pretty localized in their usage, and have other meanings now back in the U.S. Typing “MILF” into a Google search only brings up a list of X-rated links, while typing in “BIFF” brought up the character by the same name from the movie Back to the Future.