SEEDS OF VIOLENCE IN THE FOOD SYSTEMS OF MINDANAO

by Corinne Smith

The food in Mindanao tells a unique story of the “Land of Promise.” While being world-renowned for the variety of culinary ingenuity and distinctive flavors, the food culture in Mindanao also expresses the invisible history of cycling periods of bounty and scarcity throughout centuries of conflict.

Hunger and anger are like lighter fluid to armed conflict. Deprivation and its resulting frustration at the lack of rights to land and food fuels an already existing violent ideology that presents armed insurgency as the only option.

Whenever violence broke out in Mindanao, the rural poor were the hardest hit. Homes were burned, property destroyed, and fields and livestock were abandoned when families were forced to flee en masse. Thousands escaped to neighboring communities, where sometimes they were given refuge by the people, and sometimes forced to relocate to sponsored evacuation centers for many months or even years. Deserted lands provided opportunities for land-grabbing anew, compounding the challenges of replanting fields and recovering livestock. Recounting these horrific and terrifying times, a shadow would fall across the speaker's face remembering the hunger. When evacuation centers became overcrowded with the desperate and displaced and government aid and supplies were minimal in meeting the gnawing need of hungry and thirsty bodies, many died. During the fighting, the numbers of victims of starvation, either civilians or combatants, is unquantifiable and the suffering unknowable.

In periods of ongoing fighting and insecurity, people eat what has been stored or what can be foraged from the fields, waters, and fruit trees. Fortunately, the bounty of fruits in Mindanao is of an unparalleled variety and nutritional value. Coconut, guava, jackfruit, mango, papaya, star fruit, avocado, several varieties of banana and the famous durian are all native to Mindanao. Native varieties that are less well known include atis, calamansi, lanzones, and marang, according to Fairfood International (“Indigenous Plants of Mindanao,” 2013). Pineapple is not native to Mindanao, however it is the largest agricultural product grown for export.

Mindanao is an extreme paradox, where poverty persists in such a resource rich land. While simultaneously heralded as the “Philippines’ Food Basket,” Mindanao contributes an estimated 14% to national GDP (2013) but the incidence of poverty in Mindanao is considerably higher than the national average. According to the Mindanao Development Authority (MinDA) in their January 2015
The food culture in Mindanao places great importance on sharing.
presentation, agriculture and forestry make up a fourth of the total island’s economy, with agricultural commodities leading the top five foreign exports that grossed $5.2 billion (USD) in 2013. Indeed, Mindanao feeds much of the global appetite for tropical fruits, coffee and chocolate.

In 2013, MinDA reported that the top exports of Mindanao were banana (including plantain), coconut (copra) oil, followed by prepared or preserved fish and pineapple. Mindanao’s top trading partner is the United States. A competitive player in the global market, much of the food is exported and Mindanao continually fails to be able to feed its own people.

Hunger is felt more profoundly as climate change makes the events of natural disasters more erratically frequent. In particular, the northern provinces of Mindanao have been hit by a flurry of natural disasters causing massive devastation and displacement. Food aid in these circumstances comes in an initial outpouring from international donors, and then tapers off after twelve months. Farmers and industry must organize and start production anew. Infrastructure must be rebuilt and new investments instigated for long term development strategies. Often farmers do not have the financial capital to initiate planting. The challenge of replanting is compounded by generations of inequality and land monopolization by elites and now large corporate investors.

Across Mindanao, multinational corporations harvesting fruits, livestock, and seafood have out-competed many locals for the most fertile lands and fishing grounds. In the northern city of Cagayan de Oro, farmers may have seeds, fertilizers, and the know-how, but cannot access fertile land because of corporatization of agriculture. Many are forced to sell their most valuable asset, their land, in order to survive. With wealth concentrated in the hands of a small group of elite landowners, many farmers are landless and forced to work on large plantations for low wages. The production is characterized by mono cropping for export of rice, maize, coffee, banana, pineapple, fruits and vegetables. Families often subsist on their own household gardens, yet hunger is persistent. The vicious irony is that landless farmers work the land to produce foods exported to global markets, all while poverty and hunger endures.

There is a movement growing in Cagayan de Oro, and many other provinces, to plant organic crops in order to capitalize on the high value products in urban markets. There is an equally growing resistance to dependence on chemical pesticides and fertilizers that are known to sicken the community and contaminate
local waterways. A network of NGOs and parish foundations are supporting training and education about organic production. More communities are opting for organic to promote healthy and safe food production.

However, the campaign faces major political barriers in the growing economy. In a small barangay of Bual, a Peace Zone in the southern province of Sultan Kudarat, we were informed that government programs sometimes supplied seed, however they are most commonly genetically modified. Misinformed farmers accepting the seed donations may unknowingly sacrifice any chances of engaging in the high value organic markets in the Philippines.

The complex and diverse ethnic configuration of Mindanao today has also contributed to contentious land claims. Often ownership depends on the ability to access information and bureaucratic means for law enforcement. Inevitably, poverty and inequality is exacerbated by the complex land conflict.

Many farmers and landowners feel the mounting pressure of the expanding mining industry – permitted to explore for minerals, gold, and oil on contested lands by the federal offices in Manila. Largely unregulated, mining companies initiate activities in rural communities accompanied by slim promises for development – schools, roads, and a wealthier citizenry. Often these are false promises. Mining begins, and soils are drilled, waters polluted, and community environments desecrated. The great promise of wealth disappears and the community is left with only one new school or bridge. A researcher at the Alternative Forum for Research in Mindanao (AFRIM) reported that in one indigenous community in the north, the people decided collectively to stop fighting the mining company and start mining for gold themselves.

The central feature of the ongoing conflict as well as obstruction to the peace process is a concrete system of
Saba has a starchy texture and is often prepared dried, boiled or caramelized.

Occasionally we were lucky enough to try new fruits from a roadside fruit stand. We were introduced to Mangosteen (sweet and tangy), Rambutan (fleshy and sweet, pictured above) and Lazones (succulent but bitter when unripe).

Coconut is another staple, found in everything from coconut shakes, to stews, to desserts.
A classic breakfast with garlic rice and fried egg. In Mindanao, as in the Philippines, rice is an absolute staple. Filipino rice is prepared buhagtag (loose and fluffy) or malate (sticky and gooey) or in between.

Restaurant menus contained extensive lists of meat, chicken, and seafood dishes, including cab, shrimp, scallops, prawns, squid, tuna, mahi mahi, lobster, catfish, and fish served whole.

Black rice is served with fish, typically served whole. Malay (Malaysia and Indonesia) has influenced many dishes in Mindanao, with a variety of spices including garlic, lemon grass, chilies, ginger, and turmeric.
joint access and revenue sharing from natural resources. This issue is not endemic to Mindanao, but the patterns of exclusion and conflict are rewritten again and again across the developing world.

As researchers (of the 2015 “Challenges to Peacebuilding” course) visiting Mindanao for a short time, we were learning about the complexities of the conflict, layer by layer, often through long discussions at meal times. There was a deep underlying tension in having knowledge of the suffering made invisible in the systems that allowed our enjoyable accommodations and delicious meals. We were shown incredible hospitality by our hosts whether it was sharing a meal at a restaurant or in the offices of a community organization. The culinary innovation and variety of choices in Filipino cuisine is truly unparalleled. Yet, we were complicit in the invisibility of who and how our food was grown.

Vegetarianism was a major challenge on this trip. Although the movement may be taking hold in Manila, the prevalence of vegetarian principles and food choices is not at all evident in Mindanao. Many times when we asked about vegetarian options on the menu, we were met with blank stares or smiles and directions toward “Vegetables” which often contained meat or fish sauce.

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