

Uprooted from their homeland: Lived experiences of Marawi siege ‘Bakwits’ in General Santos City

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Abstract: The increasing prevalence of forced displacement due to armed conflict remains a critical global concern. In the Philippine context, the 2017 Marawi Siege led to the internal displacement of thousands of Maranao families. Despite extensive discourse on forced migration, limited studies have explored the lived experiences of Marawi ‘bakwits’ who resettled in urban centers like General Santos City. Addressing this gap, the study aimed to explore the adversities, coping strategies, and resilience of Maranao internally displaced persons (IDPs) in a multicultural urban environment. Guided by the socio-ecological framework and resilience theory, this qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach. Ten Maranao bakwits residing in General Santos City were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were gathered using in-depth interviews and thematically analyzed. Findings revealed that displacement was largely driven by threats to safety, loss of livelihood, and destruction of infrastructure. Participants encountered socio-economic hardships, cultural displacement, and limited access to support services. Despite these challenges, they demonstrated remarkable resilience through adaptive strategies rooted in faith, familial support, community solidarity, and strong resolve to move forward. Informal networks, religious practices, and livelihood initiatives were critical to their recovery and social integration. The study emphasizes the importance of context-sensitive support systems and inclusive policies in helping displaced populations rebuild their lives. It further contributes to peacebuilding and social cohesion efforts by amplifying the voices of the displaced.

Keywords: Internally Displaced Persons, Marawi Siege, Bakwits, Resilience, Coping Strategies, General Santos City

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict has been a persistent feature of human history. People have fought throughout history. Civil wars have been fought for similar reasons, whether between two nations or within a single country. There is a widespread notion that the presence of diverse ethnic groups in a country, known as multiculturalism, increases the chance of civil wars. Conflict has been rampant throughout society and history. It is believed that the root cause is disagreements or clashes over interests, beliefs, values, and practices among individuals, groups, or nations. The never-ending

economic inequality, state discrimination against minorities, religion, territorial disputes, and social injustices are just a few of the causes of such dissatisfaction.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has labeled the 21st century as 'the century of displacement', seeing more displaced people than in any earlier period of history because forced migration has become pervasive in forms and patterns. By the end of 2023, around 117.3 million individuals globally have been displaced against their will as a result of conflict, persecution, violence, human rights violations, and events that significantly disrupted social unity (UNHCR Report, 2024). These people have not crossed international borders and stayed within their own country, where they most often forget their struggles.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that the rise in conflicts, both ongoing, has resulted in widespread forced displacement worldwide. One of the world's largest humanitarian and displacement crises happened in Sudan in April 2023, resulting in more than 6 million people being displaced within the country. The preceding events included the 2021 military takeover in Myanmar and the 2023 conflict in the Gaza Strip. This shows that forced displacement has become a global issue.

The Philippines has a history marked by conflicts and wars. The struggle for independence was marked by wars against the invaders: the Spaniards, Americans, and Japanese. Its quest for full-pledged sovereignty and self-determination has been pervasive throughout its history. Through these, since the beginning, conflict has already been part of our history. These conflicts and wars have resulted in total displacements, the loss of lives, devastation in economic areas, and longstanding scars among communities and individuals (Abinales & Amoroso, 2017).

Looking back to the year 2017, the city of Marawi has become the representation of forced migration and resilience in the Philippines. In May 2017, the second-largest city in the Philippines, the city of Marawi, which is located near Lake Lanao in Lanao del Sur province, then fell into the hands of insurgents allied with the Islamic State, commonly known as ISIS. About 350,000 people were estimated to have been forced to leave their homes (Franco, 2023). This movement of thousands of evacuees brought into focus the multilevel challenges of forced migration, cultural disruption, and social dislocation in the Philippines, compelling a massive humanitarian crisis (Dagalangit-Pundato & Wapaño, 2023).

The plight of Marawi siege 'bakwits' - displaced persons from the Maranao ethnic group in Marawi City - has attracted considerable attention in recent years, especially after the catastrophic siege of Marawi City in 2017. This conflict resulted in extensive devastation and compelled thousands of families to evacuate their residences, seeking asylum in different regions of Mindanao, including General Santos City. As these 'bakwits' adjust to their new lives away from their ancestral territories, they encounter numerous challenges that assess their resilience and adaptability. Their unique culture of peace became a significant source of hope for its people. It demonstrates how cultural solidarity and resilience play a critical role in times of crisis (Rivera et al.; Eliota, 2023).

In line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, which promotes peace, justice, and strong institutions, the research sheds light on the lived experiences of Marawi siege evacuees or 'bakwits' in General Santos City. It highlights how conflict-induced displacement affects individuals and communities, while also emphasizing their resilience, adaptation strategies, and efforts to preserve cultural identity. By documenting these experiences, the study contributes to ongoing conversations on inclusive peacebuilding, social integration, and institutional responsiveness to the needs of internally displaced persons.

Statement of the problem

This study explores the narratives of adaptation, coping, and resilience of the Marawi siege ‘bakwits’ in the city of General Santos. The study seeks to address the following questions:

1. What influenced the decision of the Marawi siege ‘bakwits’ or evacuees to leave their homes and settle in General Santos City?
2. What socio-economic and cultural adversities do the Marawi siege ‘bakwits’ encounter in their new environment?
3. How do the Marawi siege ‘bakwits’ adapt to and cope with adversities in their new community?
4. What support systems and networks do the Marawi siege ‘bakwits’ establish and receive in the host community?
5. How do ‘bakwits’ describe their resilience amidst displacement?

Theoretical framework

Exploring the experiences of internally displaced persons (IDPs), especially those affected by the Marawi siege, necessitates a theoretical lens or perspective that addresses the intricate and diverse aspects of displacement. Displacement encompasses not only a physical phenomenon but also social, socio-economic, and cultural elements. This study employs the socio-ecological perspective and resilience theory to examine how the Marawi siege ‘bakwits’, managed the challenges they faced and demonstrated resilience in their new surroundings.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory provides the theoretical lens for this study. It is useful in making a thorough analysis of the interactions between individual experiences and wider socio-cultural and environmental factors. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the influence of internal and external forces on displaced individuals' decision-making, coping strategies, and adaptation processes. This study utilizes the framework to elucidate the complex challenges and support systems influencing the lives of Marawi siege ‘bakwits’ in General Santos City.

In addition, Garmezy’s (1991) resilience theory emphasizes how individuals maintain psychological well-being and functional adaptation despite exposure to adverse conditions. This theory highlights the role of protective factors such as family support, cultural identity, and personal strength in fostering resilience among displaced populations. This theory supports an in-depth examination of how the bakwits are able to withstand and recover from socio-economic and cultural challenges of displacement, focusing on their capacity to adapt, cope, and rebuild their lives amid uncertainty.

These theories are pertinent to the core research questions of the study, which investigate the factors influencing ‘bakwits' decisions to leave Marawi City, the socio-economic and cultural challenges they encountered, the coping strategies they utilized, and the resilience they exhibit amid displacement.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

In this study, the researcher adopted the qualitative phenomenological research design. Qualitative research examines an essential phenomenon and gathers participants’ in-depth opinions through texts or images (Creswell, 2014). It permits comprehension of an experience and seeks to characterize a phenomenon through the participants' eyes. Qualitative data sources

include observation and participation with the people being studied, in-depth interviews, documents, texts relevant to the study, and the researcher's accurate impressions and reactions. Phenomenological research is a method of inquiry or investigation in which the researcher explores individuals' lived experiences to understand their essence and meaning (Riessman, 2008). The research mainly focuses on individuals' perceptions and feelings; hence, a qualitative method is favored in gaining deep insights and capturing the subjective realities of participants.

Research locale and participants of the study

In the SOCCSKSARGEN region, General Santos City, formerly known as Dadiangas, is a highly urbanized coastal city. Despite being highly urbanized and administratively independent, General Santos is frequently included in discussions about the province of South Cotabato.

The study participants are the Maranao 'bakwits' or evacuees from Marawi City who, to date, are currently residing in General Santos City. These people have been considered displaced from their usual residence due to the 2017 Marawi siege and have since then transferred to General Santos City. The subjects were selected with variations in demographic variables such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and length of displacement. The researcher used quota and purposive snowball sampling to identify and select participants. Ten (10) participants were interviewed for this study. This number is considered sufficient to answer the qualitative questions. For the purposive snowball sampling, the researcher looked for one participant in the community with the assistance of Purok or Barangay officials. The first identified participant will assist the researcher in looking for other participants through the referral system. The participants were be purposively selected on the basis of the depth of their knowledge and experiences. They, either the husband or the wife, shall come from different families of households.

Research instrument

The researcher used the instruments mentioned in the following paragraph to gather the data in the study.

Interview Guide Question. The Interview Guide Question is the major instrument for obtaining information from the research participants. The participants answered the semi-structured guide questions verbally during the one-on-one interview sessions. This interview guide question is subject to validation by the experts to gather data from the Marawi siege 'bakwits' who are currently residing in General Santos City. Through this, the researcher asked questions to generate information on the factors, adversities, adaptation, and resilience of the participants.

Field Notes. Note-taking is essential to document the participants observation and important details during interviews.

Cellular Phone. The cell phone was used in order to document the whole research process, including taking photos and voice recordings of the interview process.

Data gathering procedure

Prior to conducting the study, the researcher requested the participants' approval to administer the interview through formal written communication. Upon approval of the request, the researcher sent another letter to the study's target participants to conduct interviews that took an hour or two of their time.

The researcher used snowball sampling to identify all ten (10) research participants. Snowball sampling was a chain method in which the initial research participant referred to another prospective participant with the same characteristics of interest (Johnson, 2014).

The researcher informed and assured the research participants that all answers gathered would be treated with utmost confidentiality and used for educational purposes only.

Data analysis

The researcher utilized and analyzed previous data relevant to the subject concerns. The qualitative data were analyzed and interpreted using thematic analysis. The researcher examined patterns, relationships, and comparisons obtained from the in-depth interviews to link the individual stories of the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Factors that influenced the decision of the Marawi siege 'bakwits' or evacuees to leave their homes and settle in General Santos City

The plight of the Maranao 'bakwits,' displaced individuals from the Maranao ethnic group, has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly following the devastating siege of Marawi City in 2017. This conflict not only led to widespread destruction but also forced thousands of families to flee their homes, seeking refuge in various parts of Mindanao, including the city of General Santos.

Figure 4 presents the major themes that emerged as primary reasons for the decision of Maranao 'bakwits' to leave their hometown and resettle in General Santos City. These themes were identified through participant responses, reflecting the most pressing concerns and motivations during and after the Marawi siege. The themes include threat to safety, displacement, loss, and destruction of infrastructures, which acted as push factors, driving people out of Marawi due to unsafe and unlivable conditions in the area. On the other hand, pull factors like family support and economic survival came up as a moderately common reason. As evacuees became accustomed to their new environment, survival became the top priority. The situation illustrates various dimensions of forced displacement, including the key factors that influenced decisions regarding resettlement and the selection of safer locations.

According to UNHCR (2020), families may opt to relocate to areas beyond the conflict's reach as part of risk mitigation strategies. This decision may be perceived as either coerced or an exercise of personal volition. Displacement of individuals leads to the forfeiture of assets, diminished opportunities for employment, and reduced consumption (UNHCR, 2020). Displacement often meant more than leaving behind a home; it was the painful loss of a lifetime's worth of work and memories. Not just the physical space, but everything that had once defined their lives was left behind. According to the accounts shared by Participant 1, their home was located at the very center of Marawi City, also known as ground zero, which is the focal point of the siege.

The profound changes caused by acts of violence compel individuals to flee. It describes how push factors, like the "threat of violence and destruction of homes and infrastructures, force the entire communities to abandon their livelihoods and social connections. When war breaks out, these people are forcibly removed from their homes and communities, leaving them with no idea what the future holds (Canuday, 2009).

The economic effects of displacement resulted in the loss of income-generating opportunities. The displaced people frequently lose access to their primary sources of income and are forced to work in precarious, low-wage jobs in host communities (Lopez & Vaughn, 2020). This echoes the journey of the bakwits, seeking economic stability as they navigate the opportunities the city of General Santos has to offer.

Socio-economic and cultural adversities do the Marawi siege 'bakwits' encounter in their new environment

In the aftermath of the Marawi siege, displaced residents, scattered across various nearby host communities, found themselves grappling not only with the trauma of war but also with the harsh realities of starting over in unfamiliar environments. Stripped from their homeland, livelihoods, and sense of stability, they faced a new chapter marked by profound socio-economic adversity. Displaced individuals frequently face long-term displacement with no prospect of returning home. This enduring instability creates significant challenges, particularly in areas such as communication, education, and employment, which hinder their ability to rebuild their lives (Ferris, 2019).

These themes will highlight the emerging struggles of the bakwits in their host communities as their voices were often lost in translation, caught in a communication barrier that made even the simplest needs hard to express. With little to no resources, financial stress weighed heavily, forcing families to depend on aid or take on unstable, low-paying jobs just to get by. The discomfiting environment of cramped evacuation centers offered little relief, replacing the terror of war with the exhaustion of uncertainty. These interconnected struggles highlight the layered hardships that bakwits must endure as they attempt to rebuild their lives far from home.

The coping strategies of Marawi siege 'bakwits' amidst adversities in their new community

Displaced populations face numerous challenges, but many demonstrate remarkable resilience, rebuilding their lives with internal and external resources. The dynamic process of resilience includes adaptive behavior in the face of severe adversity (Panter-Brick, 2020). Adaptive coping strategies are individuals' conscious actions and mental processes to manage stressful situations effectively (Miller, 2013). Despite social rejection, economic hardships, and cultural adversities, the bakwits have shown remarkable resilience. Their ability to adapt to these challenges is guided by various coping mechanisms that help them navigate the complexities of their new environment.

These mechanisms include individual and collective strategies, such as adapting to a new language, securing livelihoods, and adjusting to unfamiliar climatic conditions. As they slowly integrate into their new community, they draw strength from their devotion and faith in Allah, a source of hope and endurance. Understanding how bakwits cope with these adversities reveals broader themes of resilience, identity preservation, and the pursuit of belonging in the face of displacement.

Support systems and networks do the Marawi siege 'bakwits' establish and receive in the host community

The displacement of communities due to armed conflict often compels individuals to seek refuge in host areas, where the formation of support systems and networks becomes essential for survival and adaptation. According to Perez and Malicdem (2021), strong familial and social ties helped evacuees maintain a sense of normalcy, even under challenging circumstances. The social and emotional resilience of Marawi evacuees focuses on community bonding in coping with displacement.

Displaced populations worldwide utilize diverse coping mechanisms, including dependence on community assistance, establishing informal economies, and deriving resilience from cultural and religious customs. Displaced communities frequently establish informal networks that provide emotional and material assistance, aiding them in overcoming the difficulties of displacement (Wessells, 2019). The experience of Maranao bakwits will unravel the different support systems that play a critical role in facilitating their adjustment and recovery in their new community. Within the host communities, displaced individuals establish networks based on kinship ties, religious affiliations, community organizations, and humanitarian assistance from government and non-government entities.

Resilience amidst displacement

Resilience has received increased academic attention in the context of forced displacement. It refers to an individual's or community's ability to withstand, adapt, and recover from crises like displacement. Displaced populations face numerous challenges, but many demonstrate remarkable resilience, rebuilding their lives with internal and external resources. The dynamic process of resilience includes adaptive behavior in the face of severe adversity (Panter-Brick, 2020).

Resilience is deeply embedded in the cultural identity of the Maranao people, who are known for their strong sense of perseverance, adaptability, and communal solidarity in the face of adversity. In the context of displacement brought about by the Marawi siege, this resilience is manifested through the everyday experiences and survival strategies of bakwits. Rather than viewing themselves solely as victims of conflict, many Maranao emphasize their capacity to endure hardship, rebuild their lives, and support one another through familial, social, and cultural networks.

Resilience is more than just an individual trait; it is a community-based response to trauma and displacement. They observe that resilient communities typically have strong social networks and a sense of shared identity, which helps mitigate the adverse effects of displacement (Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2020). Amid the challenges brought about by displacement, the experiences of the Maranao bakwits revealed not only hardship but also strength and resilience. From their stories emerged key themes that characterized their response to adversity: fortitude and perseverance, patience and sacrifice, faith and trust in Allah, and a strong resolve to move forward. These themes serve as a testament to their enduring spirit in the face of uncertainty and loss.

The road ahead may be uncertain, but the footsteps of the resilient remain steady. In every act of courage, such as waking early to work, guiding their children to school, or rebuilding with whatever is available, there is a quiet defiance against despair. Their resolve is not loud, but it is

firm. It lives in every sacrifice made, every dream guarded, and every moment they choose to rise again. Moving forward is no longer just a decision but a way of living. Furthermore, through that movement, they do more than survive. They begin to shape a future filled with strength, purpose, and hope.

CONCLUSIONS

The Maranao bakwit people decided to leave Marawi City due to several key reasons. First, the threat to their safety during the armed conflict made it impossible to remain in their communities. Displacement and loss of homes and properties further pushed them out, along with the widespread destruction of infrastructure that crippled access to essential services. Some bakwits decide to settle in General Santos City, seeking stability due to the strong social support offered by their family, friends, and relatives already living there. In addition, economic survival played a crucial role since the host community provided better livelihood opportunities that allowed them to rebuild their lives.

After their displacement, the Maranao bakwits faced a complex web of challenges that tested their resilience. First, socio-economic adversities pushed many into low-paying or informal work, often unstable and insufficient to support their families. Then, financial stress became a daily reality, forcing some to set aside long-term goals such as education in favor of survival. Next, they endured the discomfiting environment of temporary shelters, where lack of privacy, overcrowding, and inadequate facilities created constant physical and emotional strain. Afterward, communication barriers further deepened their isolation, making it difficult to express needs, seek help, or build relationships within host communities. Finally, cultural adversities arose as the displaced Maranaos adjusted to unfamiliar norms while preserving their identity. Stereotyping and subtle forms of exclusion fueled feelings of alienation and made social integration a slow and painful process.

As the bakwits settled into their new environment, they underwent key adjustments to survive and thrive. First, they learned the local language to bridge communication gaps. Then, they worked to build harmonious relationships within the community, fostering trust and acceptance. Next, they adapted to the unfamiliar surroundings and social norms, finding ways to belong. Finally, they embraced self-reliance by adjusting their livelihoods to the new economic realities, paving the way for a fresh start and hope for the future.

Throughout their adjustment and recovery in General Santos City, the bakwits drew strength from vital support systems. Family and relatives provided emotional stability and a foundation of unity during difficult times. Fellow Maranaos and Muslims offered cultural solidarity and a shared sense of identity that eased social integration. Meanwhile, government agencies and community organizations played crucial roles by providing aid, basic needs, and opportunities for participation. Together, these support systems became essential pillars that helped the bakwits overcome displacement and gradually rebuild their lives in a new community.

The resilience of the Maranao bakwits is rooted in their fortitude and perseverance amid displacement. Their patience and willingness to sacrifice reflect a deep commitment to overcoming hardships for the sake of their families and future. Central to their strength is an unwavering faith and trust in Allah, which provides spiritual guidance and comfort throughout their journey. With a strong resolve to move forward, they continue to rebuild their lives, driven by hope and determination despite the challenges they face.

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