Sabokahan Means Unity of Lumad Women: Amplifying the Voices of Indigenous Women and Girls Through Narrative Poetry and Media Creation

MISSION: To amplify the voices of Lumad (indigenous) women and girls living in an evacuation school in Manila, Philippines through spoken word poetry workshops, skill building, and the creation of a self-sustaining media creation infrastructure.

NEED/RATIONALE: The Philippines is one of the poorest and most unequal countries in Asia, with 1 in 5 people living below the poverty line. 1 4 out of the 5 of the poorest provinces in the country are located on the island of Mindanao, also home to the largest population of indigenous people in the Philippines. Lumad (indigenous) communities are disproportionately affected by this poverty and inequality, and suffer extreme discrimination and prejudice from non-Lumad society. The effects of poverty and marginalization are acutely exacerbated for women within Lumad communities. The buya system, a common practice of marrying off young women and girls as young as 8 years old, is one of the most pervasive practices affecting younger generations of Lumad women today. In extreme cases, it has resulted in the killing of young girls who refused to be child brides. As a result of this practice, there is a high rate of maternal and infant mortality within Lumad communities. When they try to stand up against these practices, the voices of Lumad women are often silenced, and although they are the ones who carry the weight of caring for and sustaining their communities, they are rarely in positions of power or leadership.

Because of ongoing conflict in rural areas of Mindanao, Lumad communities are increasingly being displaced from their lands and forced to find safety in non-conflict zones, such as an evacuation camp (Bakwit School) hosted by the University of the Philippines in Manila. These evacuation camps bring together people from different Lumad tribes across Mindanao, and permit youth to continue their education away from the dangers of conflict zones. They also bring with them difficult living conditions for the Lumad, such as: sharing space inter-tribally, struggling to meet their basic needs, and the loss of trust and cultural knowledge. These conditions combined with the patriarchal structures embedded in many communities, produce particularly harsh situations for Lumad women in evacuation.

Women and girls’ stories of displacement are unheard of in the media, both within Lumad communities and in local and international media. 2 The lack of coverage and adequate representation perpetuates the general unawareness in the larger Philippines and the world when it comes to the difficulties that Lumad women face, which allows for these problems to go unaddressed. Self-directed media creation is shown to preserve cultural values across generations. In addition, such projects empower participants to share their stories with the national and international community, which can plant seeds of empathy and camaraderie. Lumad people have sought to engage with the media through interviews and press releases, but through my ongoing advocacy work for Lumad communities, I have learned that there is an expressed desire for indigenous communities to have access to media-creation technology and skills. In this project, I hope to meet this need through empowering young Lumad women to take control of their own stories, and to create materials to share their stories internationally through digital and other formats.

OBJECTIVES: This project is informed by my understanding of peace as the ability to bridge differences in lived realities and foster mutual understanding through the creation of art and sharing of stories. It addresses the root causes of the compounding situation of Lumad women by allowing them to control the narrative of their own lives, thus challenging patriarchal attitudes in their communities, tensions between different tribes, and prejudice against Lumad in the broader society. The aim of the project is to empower young Lumad women to tell and document their own stories, by leading a series of workshops over the course of 8.5 weeks about narrative poetry and creative writing, as well as techniques for digital media production and dissemination. The project seeks to promote peace on multiple scales. In the short term, I aim to uplift and center the narratives of women and girls who face undue violence and harassment, as well as conditions of poverty and forced marriage. Through the writing and sharing of poetry, this project promotes communication and fruitful exchange between members of different ethnolinguistic tribes living in evacuation together. In the long term, the short videos and poetry produced will be used as materials in advocacy work to allow Lumad girls and women to control how their stories are being represented, and foster understanding of the situation of the Lumad generally and Lumad women specifically on a national and international scale. Media production skills and the acquisition of materials such as laptops, cameras, and microphones, coupled with adequate training of volunteers and community partners, will empower these communities to continue documenting and sharing their experiences locally and globally.

This project was motivated by my desire to apply my skills as a poet and community educator in order to uplift the work of Lumad communities, as I have been active in fundraising and advocacy work in support of Lumad

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1 https://www.adb.org/countries/philippines/poverty
2 Personal Communications with community partners, 2018-2019.
communities since the fall of 2018. In the past, I have designed and facilitated arts and writing curricula with students of all ages, including as an environmental educator with youth in Belize and in my role supporting underrepresented students in Springfield, MA. I have also been a judge for NPS (National Poetry Slam), participated in Youth Speaks poetry workshops, volunteered at BNV (Brave New Voices) international slam, competed in CUPSI (College Union Poetry Slam Invitational), and volunteered at FEMs (Feminine Empowerment Movement).

**PRIMARY COMMUNITY PARTNER:** The primary community partner I have collaborated with to develop this plan, and who will support the implementation of the project, is Sabokahan Unity of Lumad Women. Sabokahan is an organization comprised of Lumad (indigenous) women that was created to address specific needs of indigenous women and girls, including the right to life, land, and power over their own bodies. Through the creation of literacy programs, capacity-building trainings and reproductive health education, Sabokahan aims to empower young women to take back control of their bodies and minds. Sabokahan envisions a society of genuine peace, where the political, socio-economic, and cultural roots of patriarchy cease to hold power over women’s happiness and livelihoods.

**TIMELINE:** My anticipated program dates are June 3 to August 13. Prior to arrival, I will acquire the media equipment necessary to complete the project, and review and compile the workshop curriculum in close collaboration with a group of Manila-based volunteers, who work at the evacuation center on a weekly basis, and have established relationships with the communities living there. Through Sabokahan, I will also work with local media specialists to implement the media portion of the workshops. Together with Theresa Endoso, my main point of contact with the organization, I will make a thorough plan for the curriculum and implementation of the workshops between March and June of 2020.

From June 3-13, I will partner with Sabokahan in conducting and participating in a 10-day pre-workshop orientation, which will be attended by myself, representatives from our community partners (including Sabokahan and Save Our Schools Network, a secondary community partner), two media specialists, and a dedicated team of 5 volunteers chosen by Sabokahan. During this orientation, we will be briefed by Sabokahan as well as the Save Our Schools Network regarding the current conditions at the evacuation center. We will all review our previously drafted objectives, goals and schedule for the project and make adjustments as needed. Finally, we will conduct skill sharing trainings: I will lead a sample poetry workshop and one on basic trauma-informed facilitation practices. I will begin living in the teenage girls’ dorm of the evacuation center, where I will be hosted for the duration of the project, to begin to build relationships with them before the programming begins.

From June 14-August 9, I will conduct a series of writing and media skills workshops with young women in high school and their early 20s. These women have developed advanced literacy and orature skills through Lumad schooling. I will be constructing syllabi for workshops on: different ways to construct narratives to represent the self and community; skills and techniques for performance; the technical aspects of digital media production; and the steps to completing a multimedia narrative project from concept to publication. These efforts will involve close collaboration with, and informed feedback from, local media groups, Lumad school teachers, and Sabokahan volunteers. These workshops will give participants the skills to narrate their own experiences through poetry and spoken word, as well as document the stories of their communities through video production, editing and online distribution. Each week, we aim to have two creative writing/performing workshops and two media workshops, although there is flexibility built into the design, given the changing conditions of the evacuation center and other potential unforeseeable circumstances. Most participants have an intermediate to advanced understanding of the English language, but each workshop will be facilitated by myself and at least one bilingual co-facilitator fluent in English and Bisaya, the regional language of Mindanao. This will likely be Theresa. At the end of each week we will conduct an assessment of the week’s progress, and plan accordingly for the following week. These assessments will be collective and discussion based, as this is the most responsive style of assessment to the Lumad culture, according to my conversations with Sabokahan.

Between August 9-13, we will host a culminating performance celebration at the evacuation center, where we will showcase the video and poetry projects. During this time frame, we will also have a two day closing retreat with the facilitation team, where we will assess the project as a whole and solidify logistics for the implementation of further media skills training, and the dissemination of video materials internationally and online. The media equipment will be stored on-site and maintained by trusted community partner volunteers, to be used for future media creation projects and workshops. Sabokahan will implement a continuous narrative writing and media creation curriculum into the existing program at the evacuation school, and continue building a relationship with the media specialists. Theresa and I will remain in communication upon my return to the US, where I will complete my final year of college and continue to work with student advocates in my region to draw attention to the stories of Lumad women and girls, using the materials that they produced in the workshops and will continue to produce in their classes. I hope to extend into my network of artists and creators in order to recruit individuals to return to the Philippines with me in the summer of 2021 to continue working with the women of Sabokahan.