

Time Spent in Sitio Dayuh, Basilan

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June 11, 2019 was the day I arrived in Basilan as a madrasah volunteer teacher¹ in Sitio Dayuh, Tipo-Tipo, Basilan. Situated on the eastern side of Basilan, Sitio Dayuh is a remote coastal village with no electricity. There are around 300 residents who are closely-related Muslim families of Tausug and Yakan descent, with a sprinkling of Sama people. I stayed at Sitio Dayuh for almost ten long but beautiful months, sheltered by a Tausug family. I came as a total stranger from far away Davao City, but left with vivid, living memories of my days as a member of the community.

My foster family was headed by Mujib and Tating Hayad. Amah Mujib was a construction worker, while Inah Tating was a health worker. I had a foster brother and six foster sisters. Toto, the eldest, worked as the personal driver of Ustadz Haider, the leader of the community whom everybody called “Aba.” Pidang, age twenty-six, was my co-teacher in the madrasah. The rest of the siblings were still studying: Raihana and Norhana in college, Faujiya and Khadija in high school, and Shaira, the youngest, was one of my Grade 4 students.

As a Madaris volunteer, I was expected to execute the duties and responsibilities of a teacher—manage the students, craft my own lesson plan, and contribute to the ongoing operations of the school. Aside from that, I was also expected to integrate with the community as we advocated peace through dialogue, friendship, and education in the Madaris Volunteer Program (MVP).²

This was my daily routine in Sitio Dayuh.

My day began at around 5:00 a.m., when the muezzin chanted the call to prayer for the *Salat al-Fajr*—the dawn prayer. As the male faithful prayed

inside their mosque, I would also pray in the comfort of my room, offering my praises and asking guidance for the entire day and beyond.

Like any other day, Inah Tating was already up and about when I went out of my room. We greeted each other ‘good morning.’ Pidang offered me a delicious cup of *kahawa* or coffee, in the Tausug tongue, and then we sat down for breakfast that consisted of the Tausug delicacies *pitis*³ and *pasung*,⁴

While having our breakfast, Ina Tating talked about how many households they had visited yesterday for the polio vaccination program. Amah Mujib took the opportunity to reminisce about his hard life as a construction worker in Tawi-Tawi. Breaking into a smile, he looked around the table and said, “I am proud I have managed to raise seven children despite our poverty.”

They used to talk to me in Tagalog, but later they talked to me in Tausug mixed with occasional Tagalog words. I had learned Tausug after about two months of stay in Sitio Dayuh. One time, Inah Tating had asked me about my Tausug, and I answered her: “*Nah, Inah. Maingat da isab ako magbissara Bahasa Sug. Makahati da isab bang unu in pagbibissara sin mga murid kuh ha madrasah. Bukkun na madupang in mastal nila.*” (“Nah, Inah. I can already speak Tausug. I can now understand what my students at the madrasah are talking about. They can no longer fool their teacher.”) She was impressed!

After breakfast, Pidang and I hurried to the community hand pump water well, with each of us carrying old paint containers. We fell in line as ten or so women had already queued ahead of us. Some of the women had an amused look on their faces to see me doing a woman’s job. Shalymar, the woman in front of me, complained about how difficult life was these days. We exchanged small talk but we were mindful that we should be quick with our business, otherwise the tides would rush in and turn the water salty. Pidang and I went to the well six times to fill the large pail at home to last us until afternoon.

I took a quick dipper bath in the bathroom at the back of the house. I felt like royalty, and very guilty, that their bathroom was for my exclusive use, while they used the bathroom of Pidang’s grandmother a house away. They could not be persuaded to use it with me. It was their way of showing their hospitality. In fact, a week after my arrival, Amah Mujib renovated

the bathroom, tiling the floor, and installing hooks and a proper doorknob for my privacy.

After my bath, I went to my room to prepare for school. My room was small, just enough to accommodate a bed and a small table. Pidang gave up this room for me, and it was another source of my guilty feelings. At exactly 6:30 a.m., I headed for school. I had been doing it with such regularity that Inah Tating would jokingly say that even without a clock she knew what time it was.

I was the first to be in school, which was just a stone's throw away from the house. I found the wooden swing gate open, and three cows were leisurely grazing on the school grounds. I called the two boys, Jasim and Alkhudrie, to help me drive away the gentle beasts. I also drove away a goat that had strayed into my classroom.

Our school had two concrete buildings and one wooden building. It had seven concrete classrooms, two wooden classrooms, and a small faculty office, serving 120 students. There was no formal library, just a collection of outdated and damaged books. The school fence was made of scrap barbwire and rotten wood which was painted green. The fence was to keep the animals at bay, but cows and goats could get in if somebody forgot to block the swing gate with a fist-sized stone.

At 7:00 a.m., I conducted the flag ceremony. I gave a pep talk about maintaining cleanliness, and encouraged the students to perform well in class as this would help them in the future. This was a recurrent theme in my morning talk, now delivered in the Tausug tongue.

As part of their morning activity, the students weeded the ground, and picked the fallen leaves. I caught two naughty boys trying to skip school, and I immediately sent them to their classrooms to wait for their advisers.

My classroom was made of concrete; the jalousie glass panes were broken in some places and were boarded up with some wood. There were holes in the ceiling and water literally poured when it rained. Fortunately, today we had fair weather.

My multigrade advisory class was composed of Grades 5 to 6 pupils, numbering thirty. Their ages ranged from twelve to sixteen. This morning, two pupils were late. One worked in a nearby bakery, while another had just woken up after a short sleep as he went overnight fishing with his father.

I ended my morning class at around 11:30 a.m. so everybody could prepare for lunch and attend prayers in the nearby mosque. For my own lunch, I went back to the house where Pidang had prepared Malaysian noodles and rice. I ate alone, as the other members of the Hayad family ate elsewhere—Inah Tating at the health center, Amah Mujib at some construction site, and the others at school. Pidang herself had her lunch at her grandmother's house. It was taboo in their culture to see a male and female together unless you were family. I would have liked to cook for myself, but they would not hear of it.

After lunch, I took a thirty-minute idyllic siesta on a string hammock tied between the sampalok⁵ and lansones⁶ trees in the backyard. Several chickens were scratching about, and twittering chicks followed their mother hen. Two goats were chewing some grass. This was the family's source of extra income.

I resumed classes at 1:00 p.m. and ended at 3:00 p.m. so the pupils could have their afternoon prayer in the mosque. At around 3:30 p.m., I gathered twelve pupils who could not read and we did a short reading session where I taught them to identify the vowel and consonant sounds, and to read short words. This lasted until 4:15 p.m., and I had free time before holding an English remedial class for high school students.

I went to see my three co-teachers to invite them for a short walk at the beach, but they were busy finishing some school work. So I went about cleaning the school grounds as a diversion from my everyday work. At around 5 p.m., the community said their evening prayer, the *Mahgrib*.

Reflecting on the community's prayer life, I could not help but be awed by their deep spirituality. As a Christian, I was amazed at how their daily life was governed by prayer, which they did five times a day as a community. Aside from their obligatory prayers, I would often hear children together with some elders chanting verses from the Holy Qur'an in the silence of the evening. Sometimes, the elders would be narrating stories of the wonders and deeds of the prophets. Observing their prayerful life nurtured my own

spiritual life. My once rigid and one-sided view of my faith-tradition was slowly transformed. My heart and mind became a vessel for new insights and learnings from the community. I began to see all things new in God [in Christ], to see this whole experience in a new divine perspective. Indeed, my experience with the community helped me to become a better Christian.

After the Mahgrib, I met nineteen high school students from Grades 7 to 10 for a special reading session. This was not included in my duties but the high school students had requested me to teach them English during my available time. I happily said yes, but we had to do it in the evening since I was fully loaded during daytime.

With no electricity in the sitio, I had to teach in a classroom with no light. I taught them with nothing except a chalk in one hand and a flashlight in the other hand. I had been doing this extra work for more than nine months. Since this was a Monday, we watched a movie on my laptop which I had recharged yesterday in Lamitan City, some 20 kilometers away.

Despite the inconveniences of having no electricity, my students were all eager learners. We usually formed a semicircle round the blackboard to maximize participation. I would review some basic English lessons such as parts of speech and sentence construction using chalk and flashlight. To enliven instruction, we would play games. Their favorite was the “cabbage game.” I would write questions on pieces of paper and crumple them into a ball. As we sang a song, the students would pass the paper cabbage around. If the song stopped, and you had the paper cabbage in your hand, then you had to peel a layer and answer the question written on it. This game elicited a lot of laughter. The room might be dark, but our class discussions, games, and sharing of personal stories always brightened everyone’s mood.

After my session with the high school students, my three co-teachers fetched me and we walked to Mupida’s house on a cloudless night with the full moon above us. Mupida rented an unfurnished house; she had no table nor chairs, no cabinet to keep her belongings, and she slept on the floor.

At her house, we found she had rice, but no viand. And none of us had any money as we had not yet received our allowance. So with flashlights in

hand lest we stepped on something harmful, off we went to the squash plants growing wild in the bushes. No luck. Not even a pingpong-sized squash fruit. So we quickly gathered a basinful of young squash leaves, washed them, and cooked them in water and soy sauce.

Only a single candle on the floor lighted the entire room. Mupida placed the cooked squash leaves on a chipped saucer and arranged the plates. We formed a circle round the food, sitting with our legs crossed. We began supper by intoning *Bismillah* to bless the food. We passed around a bowl of water to wash our hands, and we ate with our right hand following the strict Muslim code for eating.

I felt my legs beginning to cramp, but thankfully we had finished our dinner, and we all said *Alhamdulillah*, thanking the Almighty for the food and company. I stood up on my own without their help, feeling proud of myself. Given my height of 5'11" and weight of 90 kg, I easily developed leg cramps sitting cross-legged during meals, but now I could sit longer before the cramps set in. Several months ago, they would tease me hard when I got leg cramps. They would playfully kick my legs and then laugh. It had annoyed me very much, but I would end up laughing harder than them as they helped me get on my feet. "*Matuto ka ring umupo ng ganyan, sir,*" Mupida had said. "*Katagalan magiging katulad ka na rin naming mga Tausug.*" (You learn how to sit like that, sir. After a while, you will become like us Tausug.)

Indeed, we had become very close friends and we liked bantering with each other, although I was always at the losing end because they would gang up on me. What they liked to mimic was how I cried out frantically for help when one time my left foot fell into a deep hole. They would laugh in unison, and I was simply no match to these spirited Tausug girls.

To take advantage of the full moon, we decided to go to the abandoned wooden fish port. We treaded carefully on the rotting wooden pier which jutted out for 100 meters to the berthing area. On the right side of the pier were the stilt houses of the Sama, and we felt unimaginable envy to smell steamed cassava and rice and fish being grilled on an improvised stove right on the wooden pier itself! We laughed, remembering our pauper's meal of wild squash leaves.

On dark nights, I would never venture into the old fish port, as some sections of the pier had wide gaps, while some were only connected by single rickety wooden planks. A misstep, and you fell into the sharp corals five feet or so below. My three companions were absolutely fearless, negotiating the pier like graceful *singkil*⁷ dancers.

The berthing place had been turned into a shed with improvised benches around it and topped by a tin roof. What should have been the floor was now a big hole, framed with narrow wooden planks. We found four elderly men sitting on the benches and chanting beautiful Arabic surahs. We sat among them, careful to let the women occupy one bench. Some young children were swimming below. The bright moon cast splinters of gold into the sea. At a distance, several fishermen defied the moon with their gas lamps. It was a peaceful, enchanting place, and I felt a tug of regret to be leaving soon.

On the way home, I passed by the house of Aba Ustadz Haider. He was on the veranda with five other elders of the community. We greeted each other and I decided to stay for a while. He asked me about the school, and I told him about my usual activities. He was very appreciative of my work, as it was his vision to have educated youth in their community so they would have better opportunities in the future.

Aba knew that my term as a volunteer teacher at the madrasah was nearly ending. He asked what I would be doing when I got back to Davao, and I gave vague answers. I remembered his last words to me: “*Dumating ka sa amin ng hindi inaasahan, sinamahan at tinanggap kami, at kung ikaw ay aalis na sa amin, lagi mong tandaan na bahagi ka na ng pamilya namin. Nawa’y tumatak iyan sa iyong puso at manatiling buhay saan ka man pumunta.*” (“You came to us unexpectedly, you accompanied us and accepted us, and if you are leaving us, always remember that you are now part of our family. I hope that will be instilled in your heart and will remain alive wherever you are.”)

I felt a chill in my spine hearing those words from Aba. I felt fulfilled. I had come to Sitio Dayuh, Tipo-Tipo, Basilan as a stranger, and now Aba himself had told me I had become a member of their community. “*Naipakita natin sa mundo na hindi pala imposible na tumira sa isang bubungan ang*

isang Kristyano at Muslim,” (“We have shown to the world that it is not impossible for a Christian and a Muslim to live together under one roof,”) he concluded.

It was 9:30 p.m. and I rushed home to help my foster family make delicacies which they would sell the next day. This had also become routine for me every night. I remembered the first time I made pasung and pitis. I was able to form the banana leaf into the distinctive pasung cone, but it was too loose and all the contents squeezed out while being cooked. As for my first pitis, they were very irregular in shape and size, and how they laughed at my clumsiness. But not anymore. My pasung were now perfectly coned, and my pitis were now perfectly shaped. My legs might still cramp from sitting cross-legged for long, but I had mastered wrapping the Tausug delicacies.

Finished with my chore, I went to my room, tired but feeling complete joy and satisfaction. I had become Tausug. I had become a member of the Amah Mujib and Inah Tating family, and I fell asleep to the warm embrace of Sitio Dayuh.

Epilogue

Two years later, in late 2021 when the threat of the pandemic had slowly subsided—I got a chance to visit Sitio Dayuh again. I went back not as a volunteer teacher, but as a program staff of the MVP that had sent me two years earlier to Basilan. The words of Aba till rang true. I was warmly welcomed by my Muslim community and family, as they would surely welcome the next Christian Madaris volunteers to Sitio Dayuh.

Notes

- ¹ Madrash. A school that teaches the Islamic religion, but which is now integrating secular subjects.
- ² The Madaris Volunteer Program (MVP) is an initiative of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP) in partnership with the National Association for Bangsamoro Education, Inc. (NABEL) and implemented by Ateneo de Davao University (ADDU). The MVP aims to promote peace in the Bangsamoro Region through friendship, dialogue, and quality education by sending volunteer teachers to teach in Muslim schools and live in Muslim communities for one school year.
- ³ Pitis. A delicacy made of glutinous rice flour with caramelized coconut meat as filling and wrapped in banana leaves.
- ⁴ Pasung. A mixture of flour, sugar, and coconut milk wrapped in cone-shaped banana leaves.
- ⁵ Sampalok. The tamarind tree, *Tamarindus indica*.
- ⁶ Lansones. The langsat or longkang tree, *Lansium parasiticum*.
- ⁷ *Singkil*. A dance wherein the dancers skillfully avoid getting their legs caught in the bamboo poles set in a crisscrossed fashion and struck together in an increasing pace.