

MSU-Main as Heterotopia: Perspectives and Memories of Retired Meranaw Employees

Mosa-ab Z. Mangurun
Mindanao State University-Main Campus, Philippines
Email: mosab.mangurun@msumain.edu.ph

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Abstract

This study examines Mindanao State University-Main Campus at Marawi through the lens of Foucault's concept of heterotopia, exploring its role as a unique academia within the complex socio-political landscape of the Bangsamoro region. A mixed-methods approach, including document analysis, ethnographic interviews, and autoethnographic reflection, was used to investigate the experiences of retired Meranaw employees and the campus as an emplacement. The study reveals MSU-Main as a multifaceted heterotopic space, simultaneously embodying characteristics of both crisis and deviance heterotopias. It originally functioned as an apparatus of the Philippine Government while serving as a 'social laboratory' for cultural integration. Findings indicate its complex feature as an apparatus of power, as a socio-economic base, with a striking ethnopolitical characteristic, and a tendency to mirror the socio-cultural expectations of its location. Its characteristic as physical territory is shaped by the resistance of indigeneity over the constitutionality of land ownership. It uncovers tensions between the university's mandate for diversity and recent demographic shifts and its perception as a symbol of state power during periods of conflict. Despite challenges, the research reveals MSU-Main as a site of intercultural harmony and mutual support, particularly evident during times of crisis. This study contributes to the understanding of educational institutions in post-colonial contexts, offering insights into the role of universities in shaping cultural identities and navigating complex power dynamics. It provides a foundation for future research on the long-term effects of heterotopic educational spaces and their potential to foster inclusive, culturally sensitive learning environments.

Keywords: Heterotopia, Mindanao State University-Main Campus, Bangsamoro Region, Cultural Identity, Institutional Power Dynamics, Inclusive Learning Environments

1. Introduction

In 1639, the Spanish conquistador and then the Philippine's Governor-General, Sebastian Hurtado de Corcuera, sent Captain Francisco de Atienza and Fray Agustin de San Pedro to conquer one of the native strongholds which consistently frustrated the advancement of the Spanish empire to the southern island of Mindanao. These people who are predominantly Muslims, have been consequentially called the Moros from the Moors of the fallen Islamic Andalusia (Hawkley, 2014). De Atienza and de San Pedro were presumably the first Europeans to lay eyes on the glistening surface of Lanao Lake, surrounded by *phangampong* or the principalities of the indigenous inhabitants called the Meranaws. The mountainous *phangampongs* would have been the next prize for the Spanish Crown had it not been for the persistent and consistent resistance of the tightly-knit people, which

effectively kept the invaders at bay for another 250 years. In the 19th Century, the Spaniards returned with Governor-General Valriano Weyler and Ramon Blanco who personally oversaw the capture of the biggest and most important fort, Kota Marahui. They briefly occupied it, until the Meranaw resistance – now dispersed into smaller but numerous forts - made it impossible to sustain. The Spanish presence in the central town of Dansalan and its surrounding areas had never been significant till their last colonial days (Saber, 1979). During the American occupation in the early 1900s, Dansalan (later renamed Marawi City) faced far more equipped and superior invaders. Captain John J. Pershing led the initial American incursions, opening a new chapter in the struggle of the Meranaw Moros of Marawi (Charbonneau, 2014). This conflict persisted tragically until the newly formed Philippine Government unilaterally decided to incorporate the Moro lands or what would later be called Bangsamoro into its territory, without the knowledge or consent of the inhabitants. The Moros essentially woke up to find themselves as a minority in a new country run by neighboring ethnic groups who viewed them as cultural outsiders. Legal texts, papers, treaties, and maps have been strategically and consistently manufactured to support the governmental rationalities of this annexation. To further institutionalize the domination, the new Philippine government extended its apparatus of power into the social and moral fabric of the Meranaw society. The educational landscape of the territory is the epitome of this control.

This paper is a heterotology of one of the many apparatuses of power used by the Philippine Government in constructing the discourse that made the cultural annexation of the Bangsamoro possible. In particular, this apparatus is an educational institution overlooking the Lanao Lake and the sites of martyrdom of the indigenous people. Established on September 1, 1961, initially as the University of Mindanao under the Republic Act 1387, Mindanao State University-Main Campus at Marawi (MSU-Main) has a unique mandate to “integrate the Muslims and the other cultural minorities into the mainstream of national life” (Mindanao State University System, n.d.) It is a chartered state university patterned closely after the University of the Philippines, the country’s premier higher education institution. Authored and fought for by a Meranaw lawmaker, Sen. Domocao Alonto, Sr., MSU-Main still thrives today as a Peace Institution and has grown into 11 independent campuses. The whole system serves 69,000 students with its 3100 faculty members (Mindanao State University System, 2013).

Drawn from the institutional memories of five Meranaw retired campus employees and the researcher’s own experiences, the data were processed within the framework of Foucauldian heterotopia. At its foundation is the analysis of the heterotopic features of the MSU-Main through a critical reading of its documents. Along with this is an autoethnographic reflection that allows the researcher to use his emic perspective to dialogue with the data that highlighted the convergences and divergences of his experiences as well as those of the respondents. This triangulation method is designed to represent the richness of discussion emanating from this unexplored phenomenon. Two research objectives guide the structure of this work. Firstly, it aimed to describe through textual analysis the features of MSU-Main as an apparatus of power; and secondly, to relate this to the perceptions and experiences of retired employees, along with the autoethnography of the researcher. Aside from collecting and preserving the institutional memory of an instrumental institution within the frame of the longest liberation struggles in Southeast Asia (Buendia, 2005), the study also presented an intimate inspection and introspection of the subjects who have been and are still operating within heterotopias.

The study has been conducted with the following objectives: (1) to deconstruct and analyze the discursive formations that positioned MSU-Main as a heterotopic space within the broader context of Philippine state power and Bangsamoro resistance, (2) To investigate the lived experiences of Meranaw employees within this heterotopic space, highlighting the tensions between state objectives and Indigenous identity, and ultimately, (3) to document and analyze the institution's role in shaping the sociopolitical landscape of the Bangsamoro region through the lens of Foucauldian power relations. With these objectives, the study aims to contribute profoundly to several areas. First, it contributes to the limited body of postcolonial scholarship on educational institutions as sites of power negotiation in Southeast Asia. Employing Foucault's heterotopia concept offers a novel theoretical framework for understanding how educational spaces that originally served as instruments of state power morphed into unique spaces of resistance and difference. Furthermore, The study's timing is crucial with the initial formation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. This provides historical insights that could inform educational policy-making and institutional reforms. This research, also, addresses a significant gap in the literature on the role of higher education institutions in the complex dynamics of minority integration and cultural preservation in postcolonial contexts. Its findings have implications for understanding similar institutions in other regions where indigenous peoples navigate state-sponsored educational systems while maintaining their cultural identity.

2. Heterotopias

Heterotopia is defined by Foucault as a counter-site, in which real sites found within a culture are enacted effectively as a form of utopia, which are then simultaneously represented, or contested, or inverted (Foucault, 1987). In the emergence of nation-states, heterotopias became sites intended to separate deviations (heterotopia of deviation), instead of marking certain stages of life (heterotopia of crisis). These are prisons, hospitals, cemeteries, mental asylum, brothels, but also museums, ships, fairgrounds, cemeteries, and colonies. It is perhaps these diverse examples provided by Foucault that made it quite confusing, debatable, and contradicting for scholars who later tried to expand on the concept. Survivors of the earlier function of heterotopias still exist today in the form of boarding or military schools. These places are sites or emplacements that mirror, reflect, represent, designate, and speak about the sites around them, but also at the same time contradict, suspend, invert, neutralize, or contest them. Like utopias, these emplacements relate to other emplacements but at the same time invert them. In a way, they are ‘both mythical and real’ (Johnson, 2006).

While the debate rages on about the most incomplete and ambiguous concept Foucault put forward, heterotopias from its most basic conception are just “other” places. Places that are different from their surrounding sites, thereby disrupting and challenging the normalcy where they were constructed. In fact, these emplacements have not been even exclusively understood as structural and stationary. In the work of Beckett, et al. (2016) heterotopia is reinterpreted in the context of social movements. This steered the concept away from an identifiable space purposefully constructed for a function defined by the occupation of the people. This conception is closer to seasonal carnivals which Foucault also mentioned in *Des Espace Autres*. They referred to this process as emplacements of ‘physical co-presence’ strategically positioned in certain locations where disruptions become discursive forms of resistance. The works of Beckett, et al. (2016) situate the understanding of heterotopia within the frame of other Foucauldian concepts, particularly on subjectivity and discipline. Earlier works of Foucault concentrated on different emplacements as well (prisons, mental hospitals, clinics) that are constructed by the state to maintain the order of things and to transform the ‘abnormal’ subject into discursive objects through disciplinarity and governmentality. However, heterotopia creates a rupture of these technologies, giving the formation of alternative regimes of truth, allowing for transgression from the norm. Some scholars such as Baillie, et al. (2012) have used the term in more optimistic ways to positively challenge hegemony and allow for the alternatives to proliferate. Foucault’s conception nevertheless does not celebrate it that way. Johnson (2006) argues that heterotopias are not sites of liberation, nor are they instruments to change regimes. They are merely emplacements that are unsettling, that allow for playfulness and experimentation rather than the technology of resistance, rebellion, or liberation. He did not locate this however in the overarching Foucauldian paradigm of Knowledge/Power, which is a mistake since all places are constructed within the discursive formation. Whether they are made merely for the sake of inventiveness, they still inevitably contribute to or against the discourses of power. Returning to a more structurally anchored understanding of the concept, Shane (2005) translated this to urban planning and defined heterotopias as emplacements of exceptions that manage or organize disparate flows as both specialized and hybrid enclaves, distinct from their environment. It is therefore a juxtaposition of seemingly oppositional spaces (culturally, economically, or socially varied) that happen to co-exist simultaneously.

Universities can easily be located in Foucault’s Knowledge/Power paradigm and the relationship of this to the concept of heterotopia. This is in the work of Guan and Blair (2021) that investigated the characteristic of Chinese adult higher education as a crisis heterotopia and the work of Dalglish (2023) that situated the university as a counter-space against the rise of the capitalization of information in the interest of society. Barradell, et al. (2024) view heterotopia as a positive transformative space within a larger setting of a university, particularly the incidental heterotopia that emerged during the pandemic in the form of mentoring spaces. While Read (2023) sees this in a more complex way as a spatial-temporal phenomenon with the potential to reinforce inequality present in its social location. Another work by Rink (2017) looked into this through the lens of mobility, presenting therefore the complex roles of universities in mobilizing both the academic bodies (the staff, the students, and the faculty) and the various bodies of knowledge that are produced and processed within them.

There were a limited number of works on heterotopia that used ethnography. One is a study on aspiring academics that draws in Foucauldian heterotopia in their search to recreate hopeful nurturing academic spaces within the University (Fortune, et al., 2024). Another looks into the experiences of 18 women of Italian and Greek descent who discovered a sense of community and friendship in Australia (Rossetto, 2006). It also includes the work that reimagines drama spaces as heterotopia through the experiences of the drama participants (Szatek, 2020), and the heterotopic quality of play spaces for nursery pupils (Shaw, 2020). Situating this research with this slim but interesting combination of Foucauldian heterotopology and the ethnographic method makes it even more relevant in the effort to understand the complexities and nuances of the Bangsamoro struggle in the southern Philippines.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The qualitative study uses data from the three complementing strategies. Initially, a critical discourse analysis using Foucauldian genealogy was undertaken to look into the features of MSU-Main as a product of a dominating and assimilating discursive formation. Considering its unique position in the still ongoing integrative and unification policies of the Philippines to the Bangsamoro, MSU-Main is a unique emplacement that is full of contradictions. Initial exploration and then description of this phenomenon are necessary in shaping the foundation of the discussion. The core attention however in the paper is on ethnographic interviews with the retired employees of the institution. Their lived experiences and memories would reveal how the university perspectivized by its docile subjects. Another interesting aspect for exploration, too, is the natural contradictions arising from heterotopic spaces, and whether the institution positioned at the core of the apparatus of power complicates the identities and sense of loyalty of the retired employees. Additionally, investigation has also been conducted on how these phenomena are reflected in the memories of those subjected to the government’s discursive rationality, but whose collective identification have been historically shaped by its resistance to it. The semi-structured interview conducted has been structurally influenced by the initial document analysis in the first phase of the study.

Upon, collecting and coding the data from the interviews, the initial results were further enriched by autoethnography, with the researcher reflecting on his own emic experience, as he was once an MSU-Main student and, currently serving as one of its employees. This represents a cumulative period of 22 years. The ethnographic and autoethnographic data are organized

following the Foucauldian principles of heterotopia. The abductive design allows for a blending of the interview responses and the emic observation data, guided further by the documents of the discursive strategy.

3.2. Participants

The study focuses on the memories, perspectives, and subjective projections of five retired MSU-Main employees. Their retired status, means they have exhausted their service years on the campus, creating a rich retrospective view of the many institutional milestones and historical occurrences. Additionally, their long-term career trajectory with the university provided spaces to scrutinize the personal and professional aspects of the subjects within a heterotopic space, which also means their subjectivities were formed by and simultaneously contributed to MSU-Main. Since the research explored the intersectionality of the governmental mentality and Indigenous identity, all the respondents belong to the Meranaw ethnolinguistic groups. This automatically situated them in a 'sub-postcolonial' locality that still culturally resists the Imperial influence and cultural assimilation of a postcolonial state.

The study employed purposive sampling to identify participants who met specific inclusion criteria, resulting in the recruitment of five retired employees from MSU-Main. These participants constitute a rich source of institutional memory and experiential knowledge, having each dedicated over three decades to education and/or service within the institution, with one individual's tenure extending to five decades.

The participants' profiles are characterized by several key attributes that enhance their suitability for this research:

1. Longevity of association: All participants maintained extended affiliations with MSU-Main, spanning multiple decades.
2. Positive institutional relationships: Each participant retired in good standing, indicating sustained positive engagement with the institution.
3. High-level administrative exposure: All have worked in close proximity to various System Presidents, providing insight into the upper echelons of university governance.
4. Dual perspective: Participants possess experience from both administrative and governed standpoints, offering a holistic view of MSU's operational dynamics.
5. Diverse roles: Four participants served as faculty members, while three experienced MSU-Main as students during their college years. One participant's association with the institution dates to his secondary education.

The theoretical framework of "governmentality," as conceptualized by Foucault (1991), provides a robust analytical lens through which to examine the participants' narratives. Their unique positionality offers invaluable insights into the intricate interplay of power dynamics, knowledge production, and subject formation within the institutional context. This multifaceted exposure to the university's "apparatus" - comprising its organizational structures, operational practices, and discursive formations - positions them as critical informants in elucidating the institution's evolving modes of governance and their consequent impact on the university community over time. As an autoethnographic study, the researcher himself serves as the final participant, bringing a deeply embedded perspective to the investigation. His extensive association with MSU-Main, spanning from his formative years as a high school student in an external unit to his current role as a faculty member, provides a longitudinal view of the institution's evolution. The researcher's academic trajectory, including the completion of both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at MSU-Main, coupled with his thirteen-year tenure in various administrative capacities, offers a multidimensional understanding of the university's internal dynamics.

3.3. Data collection Procedure

The study utilized three forms of data: interview responses from retired employees, the researcher's autoethnographic notes, and institutional documents. The initial step involved collecting relevant documents that described the heterotopic features of MSU-Main, such as its philosophy, mission, vision, founding mandates, and the legal documents associated with its formation. The retired employees were identified through professional networking, and interviews were conducted with their informed consent. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews explored themes related to the respondents' personal histories, perceptions of MSU's role in the Bangsamoro region, experiences of cultural negotiation and identity, and observations on the relationship between the Philippine state and the Bangsamoro. These were audio-recorded and the data was securely stored and anonymized. To maintain their anonymity, names adopted here are not the actual names of the respondents.

Simultaneously, the researcher's autoethnographic data was collected through introspection, memory, and interpretation as he reviewed sources and dialogued with respondents. Reflexive journaling was used to record thoughts, emotions, and evolving interpretations, allowing the researcher to explore points of convergence and divergence between the autoethnographic and ethnographic data. The combination of these data collection methods provided a rich, multifaceted analysis of the complex relationships and contradictions that reflect the heterotopic nature of MSU-Main.

4. Features of MSU-Main as an Apparatus of Power

In Foucauldian study, Dispositive of Power (*Dispositif*) is a relational concept that pertains to the complex and varied ensemble of discourse, institutions, architectural designs, code of governance, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, academic prioritization, philosophical propositions, among many other components that allow an institution to operate. It is also the very system that permits these different parts to work together (Raffnsøe, et al., 2016). This includes both discursive (university codes, philosophy statement, legislation, syllabus) and non-discursive (buildings, layout, schedules) elements (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). And being central to the sustenance of power, it usually is strategically formed to respond

to an immediate need seen in a given historical moment (Bussolini, 2010). Since it is a set of strategies of relations, it is always inscribed in a play of power and linked to certain coordinates of knowledge, both conditioning and being conditioned by them (Agamben, 2009). MSU-Main is an apparatus within the dispositive of power that sustains the Philippine government's national interest in the Bangsamoro region.

In 1954 the Philippine Congress used the word "banditry" to describe the situation that gave rise to the so-called "Moro Problem" (eventuality changed to "Mindanao Problem.") It then created a committee headed by Sen. Domocao Alonto, Sr., a prominent Muslim Senator from Lanao to study the utilization of Mindanao. The committee report resulted in the immediate creation of the Commission of National Integration under Republic Act No. 1888, or *An Act to Effectuate in a More Rapid and Complete Manner the Economic, Social, Moral and Political and Advancement of the Non-Christian Filipinos or National Cultural Minorities and to Render Real, Complete and Permanent the Integration of All Said National Cultural Minorities into the Body Politic, Creating the Commission on National Integration Charged with Said Functions*. The expansively titled Act clearly illustrates the hegemonic intention of the lawmakers to make the Cultural Minorities more Filipino through an integration project. This act would not have been that effective on its own, however, it created the condition that gave rise to institutions like MSU-Main. The University is the technology of governmentality with a functional aim to quell the rebellious spirits of the Moros and their desire for independent statehood. This is accomplished through education and cultural transformation as means to create manageable subjects. Governmentality is understood here in strictly Foucauldian terms as that system that allows the exercise of power by modern states to its target population, using the political economy as its knowledge form and various apparatuses to achieve its goals, including the transformation of subjects into self-managing elements of the state (Foucault, 1991).

The rationality used by the government has to explicitly position itself as a necessary move. By positioning the Moro nations as backward, and that education is necessary to uplift their conditions to become like their Christian counterparts, a discourse justifying the exercise of power as a benevolent act has been produced. The first paragraph of the preamble of the Republic Act 1893 expresses this clearly:

Whereas, there has been felt the need for the establishment of learning in the southern part of the Philippines to better implement the policy of the government... especially among the Muslim and others belonging to the national minorities (Republic of the Philippines, 1893, para. 1).

Being the first institution of its kind on the island of Mindanao, it has consequently developed into the base of knowledge dissemination and production of the state. It later provided a structural pattern other institution would follow. Furthermore, the University grew into 11 autonomous campuses across Mindanao. The statement "*to better implement the policy of the government...*" shows how MSU is designed as an apparatus that helps implement national policies, tightening its grip in the Bangsamoro. The second and third paragraphs sustain the discourse's move to culturally influence the place:

Whereas, the need for accelerating the program of education among the peoples of the south, particularly the Muslims and other cultural minorities has been greatly felt; and

Whereas, a more extensive professional and technical training and instruction in Literature, Philosophy, Science, and Arts, particularly the Native Culture, Literature, Philosophy, and Science and more extensive research of the above, especially those relating to Filipino Culture, Literature, Philosophy, Science, and Arts, become necessary to implement the policy of the Government in its desire to integrate the National Minorities into our body politics (Republic of the Philippines, 1957, para. 2-3).

This reveals an emphasis on the dominant group's imperative to provide instruction in subject areas that shape cultural identity, particularly focusing on "Native" elements related to "Filipino Culture, Literature, Philosophy, Sciences, and Art." This linguistic construction implicitly posits a monolithic conception of Filipino identity and nativity, presupposing that Moros and other non-Christian Filipinos must assimilate into this construct for successful integration. It is an assumption rooted in the discursive structure, wherein technical and instructional provision is the purview of the Philippine government as the political macrostructure. These systems of relations perpetuate the definition of Moro identity as a form of deviance, integral to MSU-Main's institutional blueprint and sustained through various mechanisms such as codes, curricula, institutional policies, and programs. Within this discursive formation, Moros (and by extension, Meranaws) are positioned as deviants requiring correction to become manageable subjects of governmentality. Consequently, the University positions itself as a locus of necessary transformation, aimed at effectively controlling national minorities through education. This policy manifests in various ways, including the diversification of ethnic composition in dormitory accommodations.

As an apparatus of governmentality, the institution was designed to create a temporal discontinuity in the local Meranaw community, effecting disruption under the auspices of national integration. Analogous to the Puritan societies established by English settlers in America, MSU-Main constructs a utopia—a space distinct from the colonized communities, meticulously arranged to perfect the surrounding community (Foucault, 1987). Unlike its environs, it is well-regulated, structured, and organized, while simultaneously representing essential aspects of emplacements in Marawi. Its location within a vast military zone at the heart of Bangsamoro adds another layer to its function as an apparatus of power. However, in creating a cultural utopia, a social laboratory of national integration (Mindanao State University, 2013), MSU-Main inadvertently invited contrasting subjects that inevitably disrupted the ordering of the discourse. Situated in a city with a long history of resistance among a population that maintains identities beyond Filipino nationalism, the university, despite being a site of governmental control, assumes characteristics of a heterotopia. The interplay of control and contestation renders it a truly unique space. Within this context, various contradicting and complementing emplacements have proliferated uncontrollably, transforming MSU-

Main into a heterotopia of heterotopias. As Johnson (2006) elucidates, certain heterotopic sites encompass multiple spaces that clash or produce unusual juxtapositions, a phenomenon evident in the complex spatial and social dynamics of MSU-Main.

4.1. MSU-Main as A Heterotopia

Foucault's conceptualization of heterotopia as a universal cultural phenomenon provides a valuable framework for understanding the unique characteristics of MSU-Main. He delineated two primary categories: (a) crisis heterotopias, which are privileged, forbidden, or sacred spaces reserved for individuals in a state of crisis, and (b) deviance heterotopias, which are constructed for subjects whose actions deviate from societal norms (Sudradjat, 2012; Çalışkan, et al., 2020). Interestingly, MSU-Main exhibits qualities of both types, rendering it a complex and multifaceted heterotopic space. As a crisis heterotopia, it functions as a selective enclave for academically privileged youth on the cusp of societal integration. This is evidenced by its rigorous entrance examination process and the exclusive amenities historically provided to its students, who were once designated as "the Nation's Scholars." Prof. Anabelle's testimony corroborates this, noting the exceptional intelligence of early alumni who later assumed influential positions in society. Her positionality as an active member of the academe for decades, and previously as a university student, provided her vast knowledge of the campus alumni.

Concurrently, MSU-Main operates as a deviance heterotopia, given the broader socio-political context in which the Moros are perceived as deviating from the national norm and requiring transformation. The campus thus serves as a 'social laboratory,' designed to facilitate the integration of Moro students with their Christian Filipino counterparts from various ethnic backgrounds. This function is encapsulated in the institution's popular characterization as the 'melting pot of the south,' a sentiment echoed consistently across all respondent interviews. Its efficacy as a heterotopic space is intrinsically linked to its capacity to fulfill this dual role: fostering academic excellence while simultaneously facilitating cultural integration and transformation. This duality underscores the complex interplay between institutional power, collective cultural identity, and individual agency within the unique context of this educational heterotopia.

4.2. MSU-Main as an *Alterego* of the University of the Philippines

The establishment and early development of the Mindanao State University (MSU) System presents a compelling case study in institutional isomorphism within the context of postcolonial educational systems. Founded in 1961, MSU was explicitly modeled after the University of the Philippines (UP), the country's premier national university. This institutional mimicry was not merely superficial but extended to core structural and functional elements, as evidenced by the appointment of Dr. Antonio Isidro, formerly UP's Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, as MSU's inaugural president (Mindanao State University System, n.d.) According to Prof. Adam, a retired administrator with extensive experience in the university's governance, the replication of UP's institutional framework was meticulous and comprehensive. This strict adherence to UP's model led to MSU being perceived as a "southern, 'inferior' alter-ego" of UP. Here, the complex dynamics of center-periphery relations in postcolonial educational landscapes is strikingly revealed, where regional institutions often struggle to establish their unique identities while emulating established national models.

Prof. Adam's personal recollections as a student of MSU-Main's Marawi Preparatory School provide valuable ethnographic insights into the early years of the institution. He notes that the majority of his teachers were UP graduates. In fact, in his opinion, it is this transfer of personnel that facilitated the adoption of UP's 1951 curricula into MSU's academic structure in 1961. A notable situation, that chronologically situates MSU-Main behind UP, setting further the isomorphic relationship that discursively positioned UP as MSU-Main's standard. Furthermore, the influence of American educational models on MSU's early development add another layer of colonial flavor to the matter. In fact, Prof. Adam recalled in particular the American volunteer teachers and the inclusion of an exclusive US history subject in the curriculum, whilst no attempt made to educate the learners about their own local history.

Prof. Dayang, a retired faculty member who previously held the position of University Accountant, drew a compelling parallel between the roles of the UP and MSU in their respective contexts. She posited, "What UP is for the Philippines, must be what MSU is for the Bangsamoro." This analogy extends beyond mere institutional comparison, suggesting a deeper functional equivalence in terms of human capital development and governance support. Elaborating on this comparison, Prof. Dayang highlighted the tendency of the Philippine Presidential Office to recruit UP graduates and faculty as advisors and cabinet members. She argued that the Bangsamoro Parliament should similarly leverage the expertise of MSU alumni, thereby establishing a direct link between academic excellence and regional governance. A significant aspect of this institutional parallel lies in the perceived connection between these universities and their constituents. UP and MSU are seen as emplacements that maintain strong ties to the general populace, suggesting that their graduates may possess a unique understanding of grassroots issues and concerns. However, though MSU's foundational philosophy and objectives have remained relatively constant throughout its history, minor modifications have been implemented in response to global shifts, particularly the rise of extremism worldwide. Heterotopias refashioned their function over time, though their fundamental function remains constant. These modifications and preservations result in a space so vastly incompatible and contradictory (Sudradjat, 2012).

This perspective raises important questions about the relationship between academic institutions and socio-political structures and the potential for universities as heterotopias reflecting the societies around them. Their social landscape dynamically responds to contemporary events. Since the majority of pioneering MSU-Main administrators hailed from its sister campus, exchanges of ideas between the two were very active during its formative year. One example is cited by Prof. Annabel, who entered the university as a college student and exited it officially as a retired faculty member. She also served one time as Dean. According to her, MSU-Main has also extended the student activism of UP in Mindanao during the Marcos dictatorship. She was confident that there was a connection between the liberation movement of Bangsamoro and the Anti-Marcos student

movement. This was later confirmed in an interview with Prof. Dayang. In an attempt to curb any possible rise of militarism, the Marcos dictatorship designated the current military governor of Lanao, Mohammad Ali Dimaporo, as the concurrent president of the University. With both Prof. Anabelle and Prof. Dayang remembering Pres. Dimaporo's "We will crush them!" statement vibrating across the Science Lecture Hall. When asked if this threat amounted to anything, she said it never did. No encounter nor violent repression took place. She attributed this to the strong familial connection among Meranaws, where an offense to a member of a clan is taken as an offense directed to the family. Somehow, the few Meranaws attending the rally protected the Christians. Prof. Dayang added that during this time also, there were student activists from UP wanted by the government who found a safe space on the campus, hiding and living in the dormitories. Prof. Anabelle, however, traced this activism to an earlier post-Martial Law era, as she related her experience joining the rally against the first President of the Campus, Dr. Antonio Isidro. Students gathered to voice their dismay at the ineffective campus administration then. "It started when an engineering student accidentally died from electrocution," Prof. Anabelle said. To keep thieves from stealing their clothes, the students electrified the clothesline, resulting in accidental death. It appears then that this phenomenon is in the institutional DNA of MSU-Main it inherited from its sister campus in the north prior to the rise of student movement during the Martial Law era.

MSU System's establishment as a southern counterpart to UP exemplifies the heterotopic principle of mirroring societal institutions while simultaneously inverting or contesting them. While the university was deliberately patterned after UP in structure and function, it inevitably developed its own distinct identity shaped by the Bangsamoro context. This duality is evident in Prof. Dayang's assertion that "What UP is for the Philippines, must be what MSU is for the Bangsamoro," highlighting MSU's role as both a reflection and an adaptation of the national university model. The parallel yet divergent paths of student activism at MSU and UP further illustrate this heterotopic relationship. The influence of UP's anti-Marcos activism on MSU-Main's student movements, coupled with the unique dynamics of Meranaw familial connections moderating potential conflicts, demonstrates how the university functioned as a heterotopic space where national political currents were refracted through local cultural lenses. Moreover, its role as a haven for UP activists during the Marcos era underscores its function as a heterotopia of deviation, providing refuge for those considered deviant by the authoritarian regime. This dual role - as both a site of potential resistance and a space of protection - exemplifies the complex, often contradictory nature of heterotopias.

However, despite the initial conceptual parallels drawn between MSU and UP, the actualization of governmental support has been markedly deficient since the university's inception. Prof. Adam succinctly articulated this disparity, stating, "MSU has been neglected for so long." This neglect is particularly evident in infrastructure development, where funding for additional facilities to accommodate the expanding student population has been conspicuously minimal, if not absent. The researcher's personal experience corroborates this deficiency. For two consecutive semesters, he was compelled to conduct classes in improvised facilities that were susceptible to flooding during precipitation events and characterized by extreme thermal discomfort during midday sessions. This firsthand account serves as a microcosm of the broader infrastructural challenges facing the institution. It appears then that MSU and UP parallelism is fundamentally overcome by the wider power structure that reorganizes them according to their relationship with the government, and ultimately their position in the dispositive of power, where one is at its center, the other at its marginalized periphery.

4.3. MSU-Main as a Socio-Economic Base

MSU-Main functioned as an educational institution and a significant economic entity, employing a diverse workforce comprising both regular and contractual staff. This economic role was complexly intertwined with the sociocultural fabric of the region, particularly the strong familial loyalties characteristic of Meranaw culture, which frequently exerted considerable influence on institutional governance and administrative processes.

Prof. Adam offered valuable insights into this phenomenon. He was recruited to the university due to his prior experience in the national government, particularly in the Malacañang, the Philippines' seat of executive power. A former System President personally invited him to contribute his expertise to serve his homeland by accepting an important position at MSU-Main. According to him, the early phase of this administration was marked by significant organizational challenges. The institution grappled with widespread featherbedding, primarily driven by nepotistic practices, which resulted in unsustainable organizational bloat. This necessitated a substantial reduction in non-essential personnel. However, the situation was further complicated by the fact that a large proportion of the contractual employees hailed from the municipality associated with the previous President—a region historically known for its resistance against the Americans. To resolve this, the university administration had to use a more traditional approach. They gathered the staff and compensated them before their contracts were canceled. The fund used was the then Philippine President Estrada's social fund given to the campus, as it could not be taken from the campus' general appropriation fund, due to the matter's irreconcilability with the legally acceptable institutional financial practices.

A recent informal dialogue between the researcher and a member of the campus security personnel, the Peacekeeping Force (PKF) provided further insight into the cyclical nature of personnel changes within the institution. This conversation, which occurred in the context of a presidential transition, revealed the persistence of patronage-based employment practices in the administrative offices. The PKF officer wistfully articulated an understanding that staff members associated with the outgoing administration would likely face non-renewal of their contracts. Notably, the officer characterized this process as "natural," implying a normalized perception of such practices within the institutional culture. The officer's statement that "the moment now belongs to the family and kin of the current president" is particularly telling. This anecdotal evidence underscores the functional shift of MSU-Main as an emplacement that corresponds to the second heterotopic principle (Foucault, 1987). Its

utopic feature as a site of governmental control slowly caved into the sociocultural dynamics of the place, and with this emerges that otherness that makes it a space not abiding by the complete dictate of power, absorbing the practices of its locality while at the same time maintaining its traditional functions of instruction, research, and extension.

4.4. *MSU-Main as an Ethnopolitical Space*

The transformation of MSU-Main's ethnopolitical landscape serves as an illustration of its heterotopic character as a site of compensation (Johnson, 2006). Despite its discursive construction as a unifying space for diverse identities, the prevailing ethnopolitical dynamics in Mindanao have disrupted its system, thereby revealing the real spaces that exist in tension with its idealized presentation. In one meeting by high-ranking officials, as reported by Prof. Anabelle, an observation was made that MSU-Main is "becoming a Meranaw University," as there were growing concerns regarding the significant decline in non-Meranaw and Christian student enrollment. But one official retorted: "so what?" This trend has elicited apprehension among stakeholders about the potential erosion of the diversity that is fundamental to the University's mandate for cultural integration. This was also unanimously corroborated by all respondents in the study.

Multiple factors have been identified as contributing to this demographic shift. Primarily, security concerns stemming from events such as the Marawi Siege and the recent bombing during a Catholic Mass within the campus gymnasium are frequently cited as deterrents. However, it is imperative to consider additional systemic factors that may have influenced this trend. One such factor is the implementation of former Philippine President Rodrigo Roa Duterte's free higher education policy, which extended tuition fee privileges previously unique to MSU to all state universities across Mindanao (Gerona & Villaruz, 2023). This policy shift may have inadvertently diminished MSU's competitive advantage in attracting non-local students. Furthermore, the establishment of various MSU satellite campuses throughout Mindanao has reduced the necessity for students to relocate for their tertiary education. The presence of MSU campuses in predominantly Moro regions, such as Tawi-Tawi and Maguindanao, serves as a notable example of this decentralization. Historically, MSU has been particularly attractive to marginalized Moros and Christian settlers, not only due to its affordable tuition fees but also because of the relatively low cost of living in the area. As popularly mentioned by alumni, 25.00 PHP (approximately 00.44 USD) could already give you a good meal. This combination of factors has traditionally fostered a diverse student body, which is now perceived to be at risk.

Prof Aisha, a retired official, currently serves as a consultant in one of the offices. But before this, she worked for several years in administration serving as head of many academic-related offices. After she was absorbed as a faculty upon graduation, she spent most of her years at MSU-Main. In her opinion, the sharp decline of non-Muslim employees and students and the consequent rise of Meranaws admitted, negatively impacted the quality of education. She said, "Whenever there's a Meranaw domination, the quality declines." On the contrary, when Prof Adam mentioned the same phenomenon, he had a rather optimistic view. He said the Meranaws have caught up, taking up the spaces that used to be inaccessible to them due to insufficient academic qualifications. This generation is different, however, as many Meranaw are becoming nationally and globally competitive. Perhaps this is almost a form of ironical development paralleling the earlier days of the campus. Prof Annabel described MSU then as a different space overwhelmingly dominated by Christians in both the student and faculty members. She cited the diversity positively, as students come from different parts of the archipelago creating a culturally dynamic space, though the Meranaws occupied even less than 10 percent of the population. She liked this environment a lot, as she confessed that she was more comfortable with her Christian friends, having spent her youthful days in Manila. There was a hint of regret in her voice, when she said, "We don't even have IPs (indigenous peoples) with us. We used to have IPs." She also related a time when there were many major Muslim ethnicities represented in the population, Maguindanao, and Tausug. There were ethnic gangs and occasionally a small fight flared up among them, between the Tausug and the Meranaw most especially. "It made a life here more exciting (and) colorful." The demographic change, as Prof Anabelle remembers happened in the 1980s, which was right at the end of the Marcos Martial Law era.

While the changing demographics and perceptions of MSU-Main reflect broader sociopolitical trends in the region, they also underscore the university's complex role as a heterotopic space—a site that both mirrors and contests the realities of its surroundings. This multifaceted nature of the emplacements becomes even more apparent when examining individual experiences and the nuanced interactions between different ethnic and religious groups within the campus community. In the perspectives of all the respondents, ethnicities are linked to powerplay, and one ethnic group's share to the overall university population is deemed influential in shaping its direction and progress.

4.5. *MSU-Main as a Socio-Cultural Space*

Prof Anabelle came to Mindanao State University as a fourth-year student. Having grown up in Manila for 18 years, her acclimatizing in Marawi City was difficult. When her father found out about her Christian suitors, he asked her and the rest of the family to move to Marawi. This is out of fear of the possibility of her marrying a Christian man. The conservative and Islamic identity of the surrounding community was seen as culturally healthy to inculcate in her Meranaw values. "There were pressures from the family that we were becoming too modern, Westernized, in other words, our system of values no longer reflects our Meranaw/Muslim cultural background," she said. She also mentioned that she was very much against the idea of coming home but had no choice but to concede.

When inquired about the ethnic tensions commonly associated with Mindanao, Prof. Anabelle, Prof. Dayang, and Prof. Aisah unanimously reported an absence of such issues within the campus environment. While minor, everyday conflicts persist, such as the previously mentioned Tausug-Meranaw rivalry, deep-seated animosity among ethnic groups has not been a significant concern. The campus landscape is characterized by visible manifestations of intercultural harmony. For instance, the sight of a niqab-wearing student and a Christian student walking hand-in-hand along the covered pathways is a common

sight. This microcosm of coexistence that MSU was envisioned to achieve extends beyond the academic sphere, as evidenced by an example of Christian tenants in one private dormitory developing familial bonds with their Muslim landlady, often addressing her as "mommy" due to her nurturing demeanor, and never missing her birthday without surprising her. This spirit was even more evident in times of crisis. During the Marawi Siege, when threats against Christians were reported, the campus community prioritized the safety of Christian members, establishing a secure cordon until their evacuation. A similar response was observed following the recent bombing incident during a Catholic Mass. In the aftermath, when Christian students expressed fear of leaving their residences, their Muslim peers initiated outreach efforts to deliver essential supplies. Notably, despite the institution's historical function as an instrument of integration, which could be perceived as colonial, the community has not exhibited antagonism towards MSU-Main. This dynamic of mutual support extends beyond the campus boundaries, with Christian alumni actively defending Muslims on social media platforms against derogatory comments from other Filipino netizens in the wake of the abovementioned bombing. The concern for MSU-Main's future transcends indigenous boundaries. In a private conversation, a Christian administrative superior encouraged the researcher to pursue higher education and continual achievement. Her rationale was based on the observed trend of non-resident faculty eventually departing the campus upon completion of their graduate studies, while the Meranaw academicians tend to maintain a more permanent presence.

The complex interplay of ethnic relations, institutional loyalty, and demographic shifts reveals MSU-Main's role in fostering intercultural understanding and its ongoing challenges in maintaining diversity within its academic community. As stated in the works of Baillie, et al. (2012), heterotopias can positively provide an alternate status quo significantly dissimilar to situations in many conflict areas of the Philippines, and more seriously Mindanao, where distrust and Islamophobic biases are the discursive norm (Philippine Institute for Developmental Studies, 2006).

4.6. MSU-Main as a Contested Territory

MSU-Main is a territory that is not merely a geographical entity, but a space of contending and competing power structures. The university's heterotopic nature is evident in its historical trajectory, marked by periods of conflict and struggles. In 1972 members of the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) occupied MSU-Main (Lanto, 2017), an event that many historians considered the start of the Mindanao secessionist war. During this three-day siege, the dynamics of power and responsibility within the campus shifted significantly. As Prof Benyamin, a retired key administrator, recounts, "Christians left the place for their safety, and the Meranaws stepped in to keep it intact." When he was asked why the rebels targeted MSU-Main, he said because it represents the Government. He further cited the Nation Grid Corporation, the Amai Pakpak Hospital, and the Capitol Complex among the spaces capitulated by the rebels.

When the 2017 Marawi Siege took place, a five-month-long conflict resulting from an extremist group occupying the city of Marawi (Knight & Theodorakis, 2019), the proposal to relocate the campus sparked a defensive response from predominantly Meranaw administrators, alongside some Christian colleagues. There was then a real fear that MSU-Main would be transferred to a Christian-dominated city, and talks were circulating about its territorial conversion to a military camp. The campus was ideally situated on a hill overlooking the city and the surrounding towns, making it geographically strategic for military defenses and surveillance. It could serve as an ideal panopticon that keeps in check the whole population. With the government finally conceding, the semester resumed as the war unfolded in the adjacent towns. The researcher served then as the college secretary. He clearly remembers how morning classes were interrupted by the loud sound of aerial bombs followed by the clattering of the windowpanes and the vibrations of the walls. The insistence on maintaining the campus's physical presence, even amidst ongoing conflict, shows the deep-rooted connection between the institution and local Meranaw identity. As one campus official passionately expressed, "Imagine what would happen to us (the Meranaws) if MSU is taken away!" After the repopulation of the campus, a committee was immediately convened to restructure the institutional Mission, Vision, Objectives, and Goals, placing the discourse of Peace at the center of the System's direction. The entire MSU system is now being popularized by the current administrators as the National Peace University, a significant shift in the reinvention of its image. This shift underscores the plasticity of heterotopias, and their capacity to absorb, reflect, and engage with the sociopolitical realities. A similar case is in Barradell, et al. (2024)'s conception of incidental heterotopic spaces.

MSU-Main emerges as a quintessential heterotopia within the Mindanao context, embodying Foucault's concept of a space that juxtaposes multiple, often contradictory realities. It functions simultaneously as a site of state power projection, a space of indigenous reclamation, and a nexus of intercultural exchange. The university's evolution from a "wilderness" to a contested symbol of education and opportunity reflects broader historical processes of state formation, indigenous resistance, and cultural negotiation in Mindanao. As such, MSU-Main offers a unique lens through which to examine the complex interplay of power, identity, and space in conflict-affected regions, providing valuable insights into the role of educational institutions in shaping and reflecting societal dynamics.

While the analysis of MSU-Main as a heterotopia emphasizes its role as an apparatus of governmentality, it is essential to consider other significant factors such as local agency, community initiatives, and the intrinsic educational value of the institution. Acknowledging the positive outcomes, such as providing access to higher education for marginalized groups and fostering intercultural understanding, offers a more balanced view of the institution's multifaceted role. Additionally, the complex ethnopolitical dynamics should be explored in greater depth to reveal how MSU-Main serves as a space for negotiation and coexistence, rather than merely a battleground for power struggles. Alternative interpretations could include viewing MSU-Main as a site of hybrid identity formation, where different cultural, religious, and social identities blend to create a unique and dynamic community. It could also be seen as a catalyst for social change, producing graduates who contribute to peace, development, and cultural understanding. Furthermore, MSU-Main can be interpreted as a space where resistance to state power

involves adaptation and negotiation, reflecting the agency of the Meranaw community and other groups in shaping the institution to reflect their values and aspirations. By addressing these counterarguments and incorporating alternative interpretations, the critical analysis of MSU-Main's role as a heterotopia can be enriched, providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of its impact and significance.

5. Conclusion

Central to the function of the MSU-Main is to become the technology of governmentality, where the state imposes the regime of truth to create disciplined bodies that ideally dissolve into the harmonization of the Filipino nation. Such accomplishment would consolidate power over bodies and territories in Mindanao. Unlike the Spanish colonial project, this is not an evangelical mission, but the state's effective way of dismantling identities that challenge the national vision of a what a Filipino is. It was founded mainly on the idea that deviancy in Mindanao, in the form of the Moros, is a crisis that requires management, and the episteme must be weaponized to transform this deviancy through discipline and subjugation. All of these conditions nourish the structural core of MSU-Main, but its location at the heart of the Bangsamoro nation created a strange juxtaposition that gradually developed into a heterotopia. As an apparatus of power, however, it shared the same discursive DNA as the University of the Philippines, its sister campus, and the subject of its isomorphism. Within this active heterotopia emerges diverse subjects who fundamentally reflect the contestation and harmonization, collaboration and competition, the ethno-political struggle, and the geopolitical control, all of which are reflective of the larger and older dynamics between the Moro minority and the predominant Christian majority. But as a heterotopia, MSU is more than that. As shown in the experiences of the retired employees and the researcher, the transformative and redefining consequences of these "other" spaces have the potential to challenge the discursive formation that brought it into existence in the first place.

This study enriches the discussion of Foucauldian subjectivity as it relates to a broader power structure by exploring the deeply personal experiences and perspectives of individuals moving through a structured environment. The analysis reveals the intricate ways in which the subject navigates, negotiates, and sometimes resists the dispositive and the discursive formation shaped by the state. The research also adds to the limited corpus of work that methodologically combines Foucauldian heterotopia with ethnography, consequently offering a nuanced understanding of the Bangsamoro struggle in the Philippines. Ultimately, this work has implications for the decolonization of education. In an effort to collect and preserve the institutional memory of the campus, a critical perspective that may guide future researchers, educational policy designers, and administrative implementers has emerged. Furthermore, by defining the heterotopic features of the campus, a need for reconstruction of the Bangsamoro episteme within academia is recommended. The emphasis is on the importance of Indigenous knowledge and experiences, along with historical facts, and more liberal application of culturally relevant epistemology without too much reliance on nationally crafted policies shaping educational institutions and practices. By doing so, the Moro educators can work towards creating more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and empowering environments that honor the indigenous history deeply rooted in MSU-Main's environment.

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