

philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Living with the Promise of Violence: The State and Indigenous People in a Militarized Frontier

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Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints
vol. 66 no. 2 (2018): 219–44

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Living with the Promise of Violence

The State and Indigenous People in a Militarized Frontier

Despite its significance in postwar Philippine history and its continuing relevance today, scholars have largely neglected militarization, especially as experienced by indigenous peoples. Drawing on fieldwork data from 2009 to 2010, this article outlines a phenomenology of the terror experienced by an indigenous community in Agusan del Sur province at the hands of state paramilitary forces involving their own datu. Neil Whitehead's "poetics of violence" is applied to the analysis of the community's understanding of the state and its violence. It ends with reflections on the relevance of the community's experience in relation to issues of continuing "Lumad killings" and the rise in extrajudicial killings.

**KEYWORDS: BANWAON • INDIGENOUS PEOPLE • MILITARIZATION •
PHILIPPINE STATE • VIOLENCE**

It was a hot Sunday morning, and I was sitting in the Catholic chapel of the Banwaon village of Salay after attending a religious service (*kasaulogan*) led by their lay minister. The worshipers remained seated on the benches, discussing parish matters. Bored, I watched a boy pick up a plastic bag littering the ground, blow it full of air, and pop it between his hands. The bag burst with a loud sound. One woman exclaimed, in English, “In Jesus’s name!” Then there was complete silence and stillness. After a long time, people broke out in nervous laughter, then began asking what had happened, muttering about children and their mischief, and resuming their discussion.

I was struck by that long silence and wondered why it took everybody so long to react, until I realized that in their surprise the people had mistaken the sound of the bursting bag for that of an assassin’s gun. In that space of silence and stillness, they had been waiting for someone to fall, dead or wounded, to the ground. Only when it was clear that no one had been hurt and there was no danger did sound, movement, and life resume. Those extra seconds of silence testified to the terror that haunted the people of Salay.

The data presented here are drawn from ethnographic fieldwork I conducted for my dissertation from October 2008 to July 2010, investigating the responses of the Banwaon indigenous people to militarization. This research work entailed my extended residence in two field sites, the Banwaon villages of Salay and Mindulyan, which allowed me to conduct daily observation of and to interact with most village residents over multiple, successive data-gathering periods consisting of many weeks each. This article focuses on the specific time from early August 2009 to May 2010, when Salay villagers lived through a virtual siege and feared that armed enemies awaited them at the margins of their village. It should be noted that most Banwaon have lived under conditions of insecurity for almost four decades because of the Philippine state’s long-standing counterinsurgency operations in Agusan del Sur province, where Salay is located. The period under consideration, however, was a time of particularly intense anxiety for them, as suggested by the opening vignette. I acknowledge that the violence described here does not compare with the scale or intensity of other conflicts (cf. Daniel 1996; Green 1994; Nordstrom 1995), but the fear, frustration, and confusion I witnessed are no less real for that. Because this article explores the experience of terror under militarized conditions, the material it presents can have very real consequences for the safety and security of my

respondents in the field. For their protection, all the names of individuals, villages, and organizations used in this article are pseudonyms.

I am interested in what the experience of the people of Salay can tell us about local understandings of the Philippine state. To that end, I consider how they framed and interpreted the violence and intimidation they suffered at the hands of military, paramilitary, and other agents of the state during the period under consideration. The discussion in this article periodically shifts in perspective, from ethnographic description of villagers’ responses to the violence and threats of a local paramilitary leader to a more theoretical exploration of the meanings and implications of that violence for them. In this project, I draw on Neil Whitehead’s (2004a, 8) view that violence is not an absence of order and meaning. Rather, he says:

Violent actions, no less than any other kind of behavioral expression, are deeply infused with cultural meaning and are the moment for individual agency within historically embedded patterns of behavior. Individual agency, utilizing extant cultural forms, symbols, and icons, may thus be considered “poetic” for the rule-governed substrate that underlies it, and for how this substrate is deployed, through which new meanings and forms of cultural expression emerge. (ibid., 9–10)

Whitehead (ibid., 5) goes on to argue for the need to approach and interpret violence as a discursive practice (cf. Weiss and Six-Hohenbalken 2011, 3–4), thus drawing attention to the “imaginaries of violence,” which provide “models of appropriate action” in the execution of violent acts. Similarly, Ellis (2004, 108) cites Anton Blok to the effect that violence must be considered as “a changing form of interaction and communication, as a historically developed cultural form of *meaningful* action.” Applied to the study of indigenous groups’ experience of militarization, this perspective enables us to see the state from the periphery, perhaps allowing fresh insights into the Philippine state and politics.

This article hopes to contribute to the literature on indigenous peoples, violence, and the state in the “tribal zone” (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992; cf. Enloe 1980), the “violent edge” of the political frontier, where the state-making project comes up against indigenous peoples and communities struggling to maintain their autonomy (Li 1999, 11–12; Poole 2004, 40–41; Nelson 2004, 121–22). Although there are published materials on the

lives of Philippine indigenous peoples under conditions of militarization or conflict, these works have been limited largely to Islamic groups in Mindanao (Kiefer 1968; McKenna 1998, 2000; Cagoco-Guam and Schoofs 2013; Gutierrez 2013; Lara 2014; the studies in Torres 2007) and, to a lesser extent, the northern Cordilleras (Anti-Slavery Society 1983; Finin 2005, 2008; Kwiatkowski 2008; Hilhorst 2008). Except for Oona Paredes (1997) and Ronald Edgerton (2008), and perhaps Irina Wenk-Bruehlmann (2012), few scholars have given attention to the experience of militarization of non-Islamic indigenous groups in Mindanao, such as the Banwaon.

Of the studies cited here, only Thomas McKenna (1998, 2000) has attempted to understand the experience of militarization through the lens of local interpretations of violence. In so doing, he uncovers significant differences in perspective between, on the one hand, the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) leadership and, on the other hand, its rank-and-file and civilian supporters, who fought not so much for Islam or secession as for community and social standing (McKenna 1998, 186–91). Even more remarkably, his studies emphasize Moro civilians' agency in terms of their evaluation of MNLF commanders and of the armed rebellion itself, through a local discourse of *limu a Kadenan* or “divine mercy” (McKenna 1998, 191–94; 2000, 194–98).

This study hopes to emulate McKenna's approach, but this time applied to a non-Islamic indigenous group in Mindanao. In doing so, this study seeks to contribute to the anthropology of violence and of militarization in the Philippines, which, despite its historical significance and continuing relevance, has been largely neglected by local scholars. Finally, the material presented here may offer insights into the current situation in the Philippines. In particular, the Banwaon experience may provide perspective on the issue of the “Lumad killings,” the marked surge in murders of leaders and members of Lumad or Mindanao indigenous groups or organizations allegedly by covert military agents from around 2013 to 2016 (cf. *Rappler* 2015; Carvajal 2015; NCCA 2015), and of the more recent rise in extrajudicial killings in the wake of the current administration's war on drugs.¹

Context

In the 1980s the hinterlands of Agusan del Sur became a battleground between the authoritarian Marcos regime—which deployed government troops as well as paramilitary forces (Civilian Home Defense Forces or CHDF, later renamed as the Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units

or CAFGU) to assert the Philippine state's authority over the area (Sales 1992, 216–17; cf. Hedman 2000)—and the insurgent New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the outlawed Communist Party of the Philippines. Community organizing work in support of both the legal and underground opposition to the government began in the area then. Many Banwaon were radicalized by their experience of human rights abuses perpetrated by government troops and paramilitaries. After Marcos's ouster in 1986, organizing work in the area continued in the face of the intensified militarization that followed (Hedman 2000, 137–39), culminating in the establishment of Sulong Salay, a village-level peoples' organization. Sulong Salay was part of successful campaigns to block the entry of industrial tree plantations and mining companies into Banwaon ancestral territory, and it exposed human rights abuses by the government's military and paramilitary personnel. Its leaders also helped organize the Samahan sa mga Banwaon sa Agusan (Sabansag), an alliance of Banwaon villages and organizations, with which Sulong Salay was affiliated. Salay thus acquired a reputation for outspoken activism, and many Banwaon communities in the hinterland looked to it for leadership or guidance.

Due to the Philippine state's continuing concern over NPA presence in the area surrounding Salay, the military has classified it as a “red zone” and keeps it highly militarized. In the local town center, soldiers in full battle gear are often seen patrolling or even practicing maneuvers; there are fortified camps with checkpoints along the hinterland roads; and troop movements are the stuff of daily conversation in the villages. The military presence has been so constant and routinized that some of its jargon have filtered into the everyday language of both indigenous and nonindigenous residents. To note, relations between the Banwaon and migrant settlers from the Visayan islands—“Bisaya”—are relatively friendly. In part, these good relations are due to how the Bisaya are concentrated in the low-lying barangays around the town center, with little interest in the remote, more unsafe, and less fertile lands of the Banwaon. Moreover, government troops in the area, coming mostly from other provinces, have tended to treat both resident Bisaya and Banwaon communities and individuals with suspicion and occasional hostility, providing them common cause against a distant state represented locally by armed aliens. Indeed, for many years, the NPA units in this region were composed mostly of Bisaya rather than indigenous recruits.

In the late 1990s or early 2000s, the military recruited the *katangkawan*—very loosely translated as Supreme Datu—of the Banwaon and made him a paramilitary organizer and leader. Unlike the many Banwaon village-based datu or headmen, the *katangkawan*'s authority traditionally covered most of Banwaon territory. His role within the Banwaon leadership system used to be very specific, being focused on settling feuds (*lido*) and the prosecution of retaliatory raids against other indigenous groups. When I first met him in 1992, he functioned as a symbolic figurehead for Banwaon culture and autonomy and was intent on upholding his traditional role of maintaining peace among Banwaon families and communities.

After his recruitment by the military, however, the *katangkawan* and his paramilitary unit were widely held responsible for many cases of harassment, displacement of villages, and killings, all conducted in support of the government's anti-insurgency campaign, OPLAN Bantay-Laya II. Some Banwaon thus began referring to him derisively not as their "Supreme Datu" but as the "Supreme CAFGU." Such aspersions suggest that the Banwaon questioned how the *katangkawan* had become an underling of the state, seeing it as a symbolic surrender of their indigenous autonomy to the state. More importantly, they saw him as abandoning his traditional role as a keeper of the peace among Banwaon families and communities to become an instrument of the state's counterinsurgent violence, which all too often was directed toward his fellow Banwaon.

When I began my fieldwork in 2008, however, there was relative peace in the area, perhaps because the *katangkawan* was then trying to seek public support for his plan to have Banwaon ancestral territory titled. This peace ended on the morning of 16 July 2009, when NPA rebels set off an improvised explosive device, which blasted a passing military truck, killing one soldier. In an apparent reprisal, a group of soldiers and paramilitaries surrounded and killed Ben Liganio, a Banwaon former rebel, on 23 July, at his farmhouse near Mindulyan village. Then on 13 August, a brother of the *katangkawan*, who was also a paramilitary leader, was ambushed and killed, along with his young bodyguard, on the road leading to the town center. Anxiety in the town was already high by then, but it rose dramatically after the *katangkawan* was reported to have promised to avenge his brother. He was quoted as saying: "They started [it, but] we will finish [it]" (*Gisugdan naman nila, kita ang mohuman*). People thus expected more violence to follow.

I was in remote Mindulyan village when, in the evening of 28 September, I received a text message reporting that Reygan Mandugsuan, a Sabansag official, had been ambushed and killed while riding his motorcycle home to Salay. His wife, Adelfa, then seven months pregnant and also a Sabansag official, had been with him and was wounded in the left shoulder. More calls and messages came, advising me to leave Mindulyan, as my work with Sulong Salay and Sabansag might also make me a target. Two anxious days passed before a motorcycle driver could be found to come up the mountain to fetch me. The long ride down to the town center was extremely tense because there were many possible ambush sites along the route, and the driver and I expected to be attacked at any moment.

On arriving in Salay, I was brought to Jobert Mandugsuan, a local leader who narrated how his cousin Reygan had been killed by "those wearing bonnets" (*mga nag-bonnet* or *naka-bonnet*) in fulfillment of the *katangkawan*'s vow of vengeance. Afterwards, he directed me to Reygan's wake at the village Social Hall. There I found the bandaged Adelfa sitting by her husband's coffin. After offering my condolences and listening to her account of the ambush, I turned to look at Reygan. Through the coffin's glass top, I could see the ugly web of stitches with which the mortician had tried and failed to conceal the gunshot wound that was now his left eye. His mouth was partially open, another bullet having shattered the jaw, making it impossible to close the mouth without a further insult of clumsy stitching.

I was then summoned before Datu Pasak, another village leader. He informed me that one of his contacts had given him a copy of the *listahan* or hit list used by the killers, which contained the names of community leaders and organizers, mostly from Salay. I asked if I was on the list. He said "no," but advised me to leave immediately and to return only when calm had been restored. I took his advice and so missed Reygan's burial the next day.

After the *katangkawan*'s promise of retaliatory violence was fulfilled in Reygan Mandugsuan's murder, the people of Salay acted as if they were under siege by the *nag-bonnet*, who were said to lie in ambush outside the village. They believed, and the existence of the list seemed to underscore, that the *katangkawan* would kill again. They were both right and wrong; the *katangkawan* did strike again, but not in Salay. On the morning of 24 November 2008, Jeymar Mandugsuan was shot and killed by two men in Mindulyan village. People again blamed the killing on the *nag-bonnet*.

Men in Bonnets

The nag-bonnet or naka-bonnet is the local term for the “death squad” (Campbell 2000, 1–2) said to be operating in this area. “Bonnet” is the local term for the knitted ski mask, so for the Banwaon the term “nag-bonnet” has the sinister sense of “the masked ones.” There was frequent speculation as to the identities of these men, and indeed the members of the death squad were also referred to as “those who are unknown” or “the unrecognizable” (*mga wala ma-ilhi*). Still, most people in Salay and beyond were convinced that, as a unit, the nag-bonnet were a mix of soldiers and paramilitaries from the local, state-organized CAFGU. The men in bonnets were also believed to have been organized and supported by the military, to operate semi-clandestinely in support of the government’s anti-insurgency operations. My informants could not decide on when this death squad began operating in the area; at the time of my fieldwork, it was already a fixture in the local political and security landscape.

Because the katangkawan was a leader of the local CAFGU unit—in which his younger brothers were enlisted—he was seen as controlling the nag-bonnet and their activities. Some spoke of the nag-bonnet as if they were under his command. In support of this claim, they cited how at least one of his brothers was supposedly part of the death squad. Moreover, Adelfa Mandugsuan later named as among the six nag-bonnet who were responsible for her husband’s murder paramilitaries from the katangkawan’s home village. The alleged involvement of these paramilitaries with kinship or other links to the katangkawan affirmed the villagers’ conviction that he controlled the death squad, since they were “his people.” In the same way, the purported role of the katangkawan’s son-in-law in the Military Intelligence Bureau (MIB; see below)—by some accounts, he was its principal intelligence officer—was considered as another indication of the katangkawan’s control over the nag-bonnet. Because of the strong influence of fathers-in-law over their sons-in-law in traditional Banwaon social relations, the katangkawan’s son-in-law was regarded as another of “his people,” this time in the MIB. Adelfa Mandugsuan also named two soldiers among the six men who ambushed them. Their alleged participation convinced people that the nag-bonnet were organized and supported by the military.

I myself found no clear evidence of government support for the nag-bonnet and their activities, but most Banwaon believed so, adding that the

death squad was directed by the military through the MIB. One community leader described the MIB’s function as follows:

They are the ones who decide who will be [the nag-bonnet’s] targets. It is like they have a list, which they look at [and ask], “Is this person still active [against the government]?” If, say, a relative is heard to say, “not anymore,” then they remove [that person’s name from the list]. . . . But if they say, “This [person], has anyone [monitored] him/her?” and someone says, “That one, she/he deserves to be [killed], well.” They’ll put an ‘X’ [next to her/his name]. Then you’ll be targeted. They’re like a committee. And whatever their decision, the death squad will implement it. It’s like they help each other. [In this] system, if your name [stays] on the list, they will place a bounty on your head.

Datu Pasak, on a separate occasion, explained the mechanics of this bounty system:

In that system, they’ll give 50,000 [pesos] to their people to kill [someone]. If that person cannot do so because of the way circumstances seem to him, he’ll hire another person to do the killing, at the price of 30,000. So, he already has 20 [thousand]. This person who agreed to do the killing for 30,000, he’ll look for someone else who’ll do it for 10,000. And this [last man], he’ll look for someone who’ll agree [to do it] for 5,000. That’s why it is difficult to trace who is behind a killing.

If so, then alongside the soldiers and paramilitaries in the death squad are outright criminals, hired guns with purely mercenary motives for participating in nag-bonnet operations. The distinction between criminals and agents of the state is blurred, however. This reality emerged when, on 1 August 2009, two masked men robbed a trucker carrying P30,000 for a local trader’s purchases. Later that day police captured one of the men, who was identified as Lt. Roel Hengania of the Fourth Infantry Division.² According to a contact with connections in the military, Hengania was one of those who organized the death squad. This incident affirmed many people’s belief in the connections between government personnel and criminal activities, be it robbery or political murder (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Tilly 1985).

For most Banwaon then, the nag-bonnet represent a threatening netherworld where soldiers and spies, kinship and militarism, robbers and guns-for-hire are interwoven with counterinsurgency, vengeance, and a literally subcontracted violence, all under the direction of the katangkawan and his military handlers. To note, the Banwaon could have referred to the death squad and its members as “the armed ones” or simply “the death squad.” Most people however refer to them as the nag-bonnet, choosing to mark them by their use of ski masks. This term, I suggest, is not merely a descriptive reference, since few have actually seen them, but reflects a deeper anxiety over identity. There is, of course, the practical aspect of trying to identify these masked men, which has a clear bearing on people’s search for security. But beyond that, I believe that people are struck by the act of masking, of how by putting on ski masks members of the death squad take off their faces or identities and thus remove themselves from the Banwaon—or indeed human—domains of kinship, community, and ethnicity and become something utterly alien. The nag-bonnet are thus doubly sinister, in their impunity from legal action and as the perfect embodiment of the dangerous “other.” It is unsurprising then that the villagers of Salay imagined these faceless creatures as lurking at the edges of their community of mask-less kin and neighbors.

The State and the *Katangkawan*

I now turn from the ethnography of local peoples’ perceptions or understandings of the death squad to consider it in relation to the theoretical literature on the state. The data thus far suggest a perceived collaboration between a local leader and his followers and the Philippine state. But why should the state work with the likes of the katangkawan? Many scholars have noted that state building is a perpetual work-in-progress (Mitchell 1999; Althusser 2006 [1971]; Abrams 1988). It includes the processes of “territorialization” (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995)—of ordering what the state construes as wild, lawless, hence “illegible” spaces and peoples into “legible” (Scott 1998) places within its national territory and polity. Violence with which to subdue this imputed wildness or savagery (Das and Poole 2004, 6; Tsing 1993, 75, 90) and a “pedagogy of conversion” (Das and Poole 2004, 9) with which to discipline new, unruly subjects are key to this ordering function of the state. In this project, however, the state inevitably encounters limits to its political and military ability to maintain control

at its frontiers, the fluid, often fraught edge along which a centralizing state authority encounters local autonomy. Here the state is compelled to compromise with those who Tsing (1993, 72) calls “leaders,” those who “are ambitious enough to tell the government that they represent the community and their neighbors that they represent the state” and who “do not draw their models of power from a cultural space outside state rule” but “within that space,” pulling people together into communities which thus “emerge in the shadow of the state” (ibid., 4). Poole (2004, 43–44) asserts that such leaders represent “both the state and the principal forms of private, extrajudicial, and even criminal power that the state purportedly seeks to displace through law, citizenship and public administration.” She thus locates the frontier—the margin of the state—in the person of the “leader,” who “embodies the state, yet . . . also marks the spot where the state’s rationality and jurisdiction fade into the uncontrollable . . . dominions of extrajudicial force and violence” (ibid., 45).

This broad framework can be applied to the Philippine state’s struggle to assert its political and administrative authority across what it considers its territory, a project challenged in certain areas by the NPA. In response, the government has maintained anti-insurgency operations in such regions, sometimes for decades. Those same disputed areas form “the tribal zone” (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992), where the ancestral territories of indigenous peoples are located, so that, like the Banwaon, they are all too often caught up in the violence of insurgency and counterinsurgency. As noted, the government—represented here principally by the military—works with local or indigenous “leaders” like the katangkawan in its efforts to win control of these zones. This raises the question of why indigenous leaders like the katangkawan collaborate with the state. We have heard Tsing (1993, 72) speak of “ambition” in her conceptualization of these “leaders,” which I understand as political opportunism, the occupation of the strategic mediatory role between a state in search of individuals that can help with its centralizing political agenda (Scott 2009, 211–16) and a people in need of someone to represent their interests to the powerful political, economic, and cultural nexus that is the state. This crucial position can provide its holder with the political resources for reshaping his or her power and authority vis-à-vis his or her coethnics and opportunities as well for capitalizing on this refashioned political authority. Unfortunately for the Banwaon, this seems to be what has happened to the katangkawan, whose power was thereby

amplified by the paramilitary forces that he organized and commanded on behalf of the state and in support of its anti-insurgency program.³

Recall that the role of the katangkawan as an institution within the traditional Banwaon political system was a figure who stood outside the state. However, as a paramilitary leader armed, paid, and supervised by the military, he now also represents the state. He thus embodies both “private power and the supposedly impersonal or neutral authority of the state,” allowing him “to move across—and thus muddy—the seemingly clear divide between legal and extralegal forms of punishment and enforcement” (Das and Poole 2004, 14). Thus, for the Banwaon of Salay and other villages, the katangkawan himself *is* the state, and his acts are those of government. Yet, even as the katangkawan attempts to organize a Banwaon polity “in the shadow of the state,” his efforts are resisted by many of his own people. In some cases, this resistance is rooted in their tradition of political and cultural autonomy, which many still value; in others, in their appreciation of the right to self-determination as advocated by local and international activists; and, in still other cases, in their adoption of the radical left’s critique of the state as an instrument of the elite.

The katangkawan’s conflation of public and private identities, interests, and violence is reflected in the hit list. On the one hand, it names the people who the military and its intelligence apparatus mark as subversives. In this way, it evidences how community organizing and leadership outside the control or framework of the state have been criminalized by the military. On the other hand, the list can be read as that of individuals who are critical of the katangkawan and his abuses and who advocate a political imaginary based on autonomy from his patron and handler, the Philippine state. As Datu Pasak said:

Those who object to [the katangkawan’s] plans are those he accuses of being rebels or NPA supporters. [Unfortunately,] he is the only one the government trusts here. So of course they believe him. Especially with [the katangkawan’s son-in-law] being part of the [military’s] intelligence [service]. [The katangkawan’s group] can then be sure that those to be targeted by the government are their [personal] enemies [rather than actual insurgents].

In short, my interlocutors assert that the leaders and organizers of Salay and Sabansag on the hit list are not opposed to the government *per se* but to

the katangkawan and his ambitions. This is a crucial distinction that can carve out a space for asserting a legitimate right to dissent and practicing indigenous self-determination. The katangkawan, however, obscures this distinction through his monopoly in shaping the state’s understanding of the local context. In this way, the katangkawan’s personal interests are inscribed onto the state’s intelligence and counterinsurgency work, turning his private rivals for leadership into the government’s public enemies (cf. Canuday 2007). By thus deconstructing the listahan, the people of Salay challenge its authority, reducing this supposed product of military intelligence work to little more than village gossip and petty jealousy.

Living with the Promise of Violence

We have seen how the katangkawan’s promise of violence engendered a sense of menace and circumscription within Salay. It added to the stress of already insecure lives and laid further constraints on marginal livelihoods. Some residents even considered leaving Salay but were dissuaded by their neighbors. Yet the villagers adapted, doing their best to continue their daily round of activities even as they improved their security preparations. It suggests, to my mind, a stubborn, almost heroic, determination to survive despite the threats facing them.

The atmosphere of fear I describe here was not experienced evenly, however. There were villagers who did not feel threatened by the killings, because, as one of them said, “I am not under suspicion” (*di naman ‘ko initado*). Others pointed out that their names were not on the dreaded list. It is safe to say, however, that most people in Salay lived in fear of the nag-bonnet. A Bisaya man who had settled in the village said, “[E]ven if we can say we have done no wrong, we still have to be cautious,” stressing the need for prudence. One elderly Banwaon woman called for solidarity between those who were and were not on the list: “[I]t cannot be that we have no regard for our neighbors. . . . We are a community after all.” Most residents thus worried constantly about security. They discussed the significance of motorcycles passing through the village at night or of dogs barking in the early morning darkness. They shared rumors, scrutinizing their details like intelligence analysts. Some elders turned to the spirits, seeking their guidance during rituals or making a habit of consulting omens (*pagbala*) before stepping outside their doors.

They also took practical precautions: Residents avoided high-risk areas, such as distant farms or forests; some families even abandoned their farmsteads in the bush to move toward the village center. Some men shifted from farming or logging work to woodcutting.⁴ People visited and worked their farms in groups and made sure to be home before dark. Houses were enclosed with high wooden fences; some put up security lights; and more residents began keeping dogs. At night, people barricaded themselves in their homes, and a few kept their home-made shotguns (*surit*)⁵ ever ready. They monitored their neighbors' movements, counseling those adjudged lax in their security and mirroring thereby the surveillance the nag-bonnet was thought to be conducting on them.

The sense of being encompassed by danger was eased somewhat by villagers' attempts at humor. For example, there was this exchange between a local schoolteacher (ST) and myself (AG):

ST: There are 28 names on the [death-]list.

AG: I'm not on the list.

ST: True! Were you dropped [from the rolls]?

AG: (I laugh.) Ah, I didn't even get to enroll. I had no [money] for tuition.

ST: (She laughs.) Well, then you won't get taught your lessons!

AG: (I laugh.) That's OK, [I heard] the teacher is very strict anyway.

ST: (Laughs.) . . .

Here, the teacher drew a parallel between Salay's situation and the workings of a school, hence our references to tuition and lessons. It suggests that, for her and other villagers I heard repeating variants of this joke, the state is a school where threats and violence are the pedagogical means of inculcating in stubborn Banwaon "students" the disciplines of citizenship. This refers us to the ideological content and function of what Althusser (2006 [1971], 92) refers to as the "repressive state apparatuses," which function by violence.

Seeking Outside Assistance

The people of Salay also sought help from beyond their village. Some of them reached out to local government officials, especially at the municipal level. Most officials, however, were seen as more concerned with their individual rackets (cf. Sidel 1999)—principally illegal logging—than with

their constituents' security. The mayor at that time promised to bring Salay's plight to the governor's attention, but nothing came of it. Indeed, he was heard to say that at night he too shuts himself in his home in the town center for fear of the nag-bonnet. Two or three councilors genuinely sympathized with the people of Salay, but felt powerless against a death squad backed by the military and the government of which they were a part. Still, barangay officials and village leaders did raise their concerns at the Municipal Peace and Order Council and the Provincial Peace and Order Council, in which the police and the military were represented. Predictably, the military denied they had anything to do with the nag-bonnet, drawing a distinction between the latter and the CAFGU they supervised. Their promise to investigate the matter went unfulfilled.

One community leader explored a possible legal response to the crisis. The plan was to file a criminal complaint for murder against the killers of Reygan Mandugsuan that his wife Adelfa had identified. The case would supposedly alienate the nag-bonnet from their military handlers, leaving them vulnerable to attack by the NPA in the highlands and to arrest by the police in the lowlands. However, a police contact said that, although a case could be filed on the strength of Adelfa's eyewitness account, it would be better if a second witness could corroborate her testimony. Knowing that no one else had witnessed the ambush, the leader tried to find someone willing to falsely testify in support of Adelfa's testimony. Rather than reflecting faith in the law and its processes, the project was a somewhat cynical attempt to manipulate legal procedures for survival's sake. However, no one came forward to bear false witness, and the plan was shelved.

I did suggest to a number of people that they contact the media and get their story publicized. Most residents said they had no media contacts. Activists among them said they had already informed Karapatan—a human rights advocacy institution—whom they trusted to approach the media for them. Unfortunately, Karapatan, at that time, had limited media contacts, in part because they had credibility problems with the media and with the public in general. The plight of the Banwaon thus received little media attention.

Finally, those with contacts in the NGO community sought help from this sector as well. Three organizations responded by coorganizing a human rights conference in Salay in October 2009. Initially there was great public interest in the proceedings; however, as speaker after speaker

merely catalogued for the audience their various human rights, interest and attendance waned, and frustration set in. I believe the people already knew their rights, if not by article, section, and paragraph of the law, then at least in substance; their problem was what to do when the state itself violated those rights. By evening, the audience consisted only of leaders and activists. One of them asked: “What should we do when our rights are not respected [by the government]?” Sadly, none of the speakers could give an answer that was meaningful in Salay’s context. One youth shouted, “Let us just buy guns!” — in effect questioning the relevance of the conference. One of the speakers tried to emphasize the need to document human rights violations. Datu Pasak tiredly replied, “Na, you write [the reports], I will do the fighting.” Later, an elder shared her fears and confusion, ending with the rhetorical question: “What is the solution [to our problems]?” (*Unsay kasulbaran?*). By then it was late, and the conference adjourned without resolving the core issue: How does one enforce one’s rights against a state seemingly intent on one’s destruction?

The Poetics of Vendetta

Here again I pivot from the phenomenology of terror in a militarized hinterland to consider my ethnographic material in light of the anthropological literature on violence. Whitehead (2004a, 9–10; 2004b) has spoken of violence as “poetic” for the way an actor utilizes cultural forms, symbols, and icons to articulate an underlying rule-governed substrate and for the way this substrate is deployed.⁶ I argue that the relevant substrate in this case is *lido* or vendetta. This is clear from the katangkawan’s declaration of intent to avenge his brother, and from the subsequent actions of the nag-bonnet, allegedly pursuant to his commands.

This vengeance draws on a set of traditional or indigenous notions and practices of vendetta, described by nineteenth-century Jesuit missionaries working in the Agusan region (Arcilla 1990) and by John Garvan (1929), an early-twentieth-century American anthropologist who conducted fieldwork in this area.⁷ Garvan (*ibid.*, 146) considered vengeance as one of only two motives for local warriors to go to “war” (cf. Ellis 2004, 123; Turney-High 1991 [1949], 149). It is clear from these sources, as well as my own informants, that the notion of avenging the killing of a kin has historical and contemporary resonance for the Banwaon: the katangkawan promised and pursued it. Reygan Mandugsuan’s kin are said to have contemplated

attacking the katangkawan in revenge for Reygan’s death, but were dissuaded by village elders.

On another occasion Datu Pasak speculated that “[i]t would be better . . . to just let the families [involved] wipe each other out,” reasoning that at most the katangkawan’s family and supporters made up only 10 percent of the Banwaon population; by this grim calculus, the odds were in favor of the people of Salay and other villages. Some informants interpreted the situation as Datu Pasak did, as a conflict between, on the one hand, the katangkawan and his supporters and, on the other hand, the rest of the Banwaon people. Others saw it as being between Salay village and the katangkawan’s home village (or, in one version, the paramilitary camp at Km. 24). Still others saw it as between the family of the katangkawan and the Mandugsuan family (since both of the katangkawan’s victims belonged to this family). The point is that the katangkawan invoked local notions of vendetta, and the people of Salay and other villages understood him to have done so, reading his actions through the lens of feuding, although this feud was framed variably at the level of rival families or villages or of the entire Banwaon population. Moreover, they acted defensively, precisely as if vendetta was being waged against them. For many Banwaon, the katangkawan’s failure to rise above his own personal desire for revenge and thus uphold his traditional role of maintaining peace among his people underlined his loss of authority as katangkawan. This led to continuing and inconclusive debates over the unprecedented problem of whether it is possible under indigenous law to replace him or to install a second katangkawan.

I now consider how the katangkawan invoked and reinterpreted local notions of vendetta. I believe that his “performance” of feuding is broadly true to traditional notions and practices or enough, at any rate, to be understood as such. The killing of a close kin that serves as motivation, the vow of vengeance, the tactics employed (secrecy, surveillance, and ambush), mutilation of the victim’s body (both victims were shot in the head and/or the genitals at close range after they were killed), and even the use of nonkin or “hired” killers are all in accord with traditional practice (Garvan 1929, 146–55). Still, the katangkawan’s performance of vendetta does vary from traditional practice in important respects.

First is the katangkawan’s way of designating his enemies. My informants state that in traditional feuding one attacks either those responsible for killing one’s kin or their family members. In this case, the katangkawan did not attack

the NPA, who were widely credited with his brother's killing. Rather, he targeted two civilian villages—both of which had questioned his leadership and opposed his plans—and authorized the murder of a member of the Mandugsuan family in both, even though there was no clear link between his victims and his brother's killing. It appears that villages not aligned *with* him were simply considered as *against* him. As a community organizer put it: “[T]he government no longer allows people to [remain neutral]; you [now] have to choose which side you are on”; for “government,” read “*katangkawan*.” This suggests that the praxis of vendetta has been mapped onto a polarized political landscape, with the state and the *katangkawan* on one side and the NPA and whoever else was not with the *katangkawan* on the other. This polarity helps explain why, after Reygan Mandugsuan's murder, some Salay residents suggested that the entire village “surrender” to the *katangkawan*, although no one had committed any offense against him or the state. The idea was simply to realign the village *with* the *katangkawan*.

Second is the massive asymmetry between the forces involved. In traditional vendetta, kin groups are relatively equal to each other in strength. In the present case, there is a grotesque disparity in military power between, on one side, the *katangkawan* and his supporters and, on the other, his enemies, whether defined at the level of the Banwaon people, Salay village or the Mandugsuan family. Whereas the latter can deploy at best a dozen farmers armed with surit, the *katangkawan* has trained and hardened men with assault rifles under his command. And although Datu Pasak places the *katangkawan*'s following at only 10 percent of the Banwaon population, they have the backing of the death squad, the CAFGU, and the Philippine army and air force, with their armored cars and helicopter gunships. The *katangkawan*, in other words, can draw from beyond his family's military resources, upon those of the state. The resulting asymmetry in military resources helps explain the pleas for help in purchasing firearms at the human rights conference as well as the general sense of frustration among many Banwaon. What can one do in such circumstances? Traditionally, one should retaliate, but here the difference in military capability is such that attacking the *katangkawan* would be unwise, even suicidal. Thus, the *katangkawan* can declare and pursue vendetta, but his opponents are effectively denied the traditional recourse to retaliation.

This observation leads to a third difference in the *katangkawan*'s performance of vendetta. Traditionally, feuding was a matter between

autonomous kin groups, operating outside or even in defiance of the state. Here, the state has been implicated, not only in the sense that it is seen standing behind the *katangkawan*, but also in that—as I have argued—the *katangkawan* himself *is* the state. Here the full complexity of the questions posed by the people of Salay emerge: Who is the *katangkawan*? Is he a Banwaon avenging his brother or is he an agent of the state? Are the *katangkawan*'s attacks part of a family feud or of the government's counterinsurgency program? Can they retaliate against him, as they traditionally would, to avenge the deaths he caused, or would such an attack be an act of rebellion, since he is an agent of the state? If the state backs him, can a feud be waged legitimately against the state as well? Conversely, can the state legitimately go on vendetta alongside the *katangkawan* and against the Banwaon? And, again, what is one to do when one is attacked by the state in the figure of the *katangkawan*; what do you do when the state wages vendetta against you? These are questions raised by the reinterpretation of vendetta, through its appropriation as a technique of counterinsurgency and state making.

The Philippine state cannot be bracketed out of this discussion of local violence (Whitehead 2004a, 14), given how its presence, interests, and actions have positioned the *katangkawan* and structured his performance of violence on its behalf. Thus, the negotiation of political relations between the state and the Banwaon during this time was conducted in the violent idiom of vendetta. The resulting conflation of private vengeance and public counterinsurgency confused and frustrated the Banwaon. They never did find answers to their questions. Instead, they simply endured, bearing with the threat of violence until the onset of the 2010 elections brought with it the easing of all counterinsurgency activities. It seemed that no one, not even the military handlers of the *katangkawan*, wanted to jeopardize the elections.

Unfortunately, the violence continues, even though the *katangkawan* has since died of an illness. On 22 December 2015, unidentified gunmen killed the respected barangay captain of Salay while en route to the town center. His death was followed weeks later by the largest Banwaon evacuation from the hinterlands since the 1980s (*Mindanews* 2015). Such incidents of violence and displacement are the price perhaps of continuing to assert political and cultural autonomy from the state, in a context where that state remains insecure about its control and relies on violent men and means to assert itself.

Conclusion: From Agusan to the Cities

What do the experiences of the Banwaon of Salay offer us today? In relation to the issue of “Lumad killings,” this case illustrates the political and cultural complexities of life in militarized hinterland areas and the often-fraught contexts within which the extrajudicial killing of indigenous leaders, organizers, and community members may occur. It is not to say that the experiences and responses of the people of Salay and other Banwaon villages to militarization are representative of all life in militarized zones. I imagine, for example, that the events reported here would look very different from the perspective of the katangkawan and his followers. Similarly, those who side with insurgents or those trying to steer between the two armed forces would also have different experiences. But Salay’s experience—unique as it is in certain respects—challenges us to ask how other indigenous groups or communities have addressed the problem of militarization, enabling us to learn from local understandings of the state and its violence. Here we have seen the state “tribalized” (cf. Scott 2009, 28) in the sense of it being recast in the person of an indigenous “leader” and, more importantly, in its pursuit of the state-building project through his personal vengeance. Seeing the state this way, from the viewpoint of Salay, allows us to look beyond the veneer of constitutionalism, electoral democracy, and modernity of the Philippine state to reveal a netherworld where the state readily engages with shadowy figures in a politics of violence (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Nordstrom 2004; Lara and Schoofs 2013). This netherworld may mark the limits of the state’s overt discourses of power, but it also testifies to its ultimate adaptability, which has so unsettled the Banwaon, leaving them unable to find a workable solution to their plight. Further exploration of these complex issues is urged.

This study thus warns us of the importance of careful analysis in understanding the relations between the state and indigenous peoples and communities. There is a need to always consider the impact of the political interests and military power of the state (and its opponents) on local communities and their agency, to be aware of the historic role of violence in the continuing state-building project, and to reflect on the terrible toll these may have on indigenous populations. When we assess the state’s historical relations with indigenous peoples, we need to acknowledge its legacy of death and destruction, division and disruption. Unfortunately, this legacy lives on. In the recent Jesuit-convened Indigenous Peoples’ Summit

held at the Finster Auditorium, Ateneo de Davao University, on 11–12 July 2016, delegates were asked to describe the state of their communities. Many responded by reciting the names of their many dead who had been caught up in the contest between state and insurgent forces—a simple, powerful reminder that, in the lands of many indigenous peoples, change has not come.

In relation to the rise in extrajudicial killings across the country, the Banwaon’s experience from 2009 to 2010 is striking in its parallels with the experience of many urban communities today. There is the reliance on the “list” made by state agents, from the president down to police station commanders. There is the reported use of teams of state agents and hired guns. There is the pervasive “othering” discourse that defines who the enemies of the state are—in the one case, communist insurgency and terrorism (Duncan 2004, 8; Nagengast 1994, 120–21); in the other, drug lords, pushers, and users. There is the same with-us-or-against-us attitude of the government. And, of course, there is the reliance on lethal violence in addressing those whose allegiance is unclear to the agents of the state. And so the Banwaon’s question retains its resonance, even as it has come to be rephrased: Who do you call when the murderer wears a badge?

The terrifying ease with which the state accelerated its antidrug operations—and the killings that accompany them—shortly after the newly elected president took over the reins of state power indicates that the machinery of state violence was already in place, its methods tested, perhaps perfected, through its counterinsurgency operations in the hinterlands. What is new is the shift we noted from insurgency to drugs in its discourse; in the scale, intensity, and partly in the overtness of operations; and its expansion from the hinterlands to city streets. In this setting, what cultural substrate (Whitehead 2004a) do the prosecutors of the war on drugs draw on? What are the poetics of their violence? If the message of terror is being communicated to the public successfully, it suggests that there already is a culturally shared set of meanings around the practice of extrajudicial killings, which goes back to Marcos-era “salvagings” (McCoy 2011, 398), if not earlier. And what does all this say about our society?

There seems to be a dark seam that runs through the Philippine state. It speaks of the supremacy of civilian over military power; yet, as the case of the beleaguered Banwaon shows, the state is not averse to using military power on its own civilian citizens, in this case, at the word of a “leader”

who blurs the distinction between civilian and military. The state insists on its sovereign power, refusing to countenance any challenges to its central authority, yet delegates the power over life and death—the supreme sign of sovereignty—to soldiers and “leaders” like the *katangkawan* in the hinterlands and police operatives in the cities. It celebrates elections and the popular vote, yet betrays those voters, especially those whose allegiance—whether in counterinsurgency or in the war against drugs—is questioned. It aspires for modernity, but retains the atavistic idiom of corpses on pavements, faces masked with tape. The president knows this darkness existing alongside—and autonomous from—the constitution and the formal state structures and processes. And he has chosen to ride it, more openly than most of his predecessors. The question is whether he can keep it in rein, and what happens if he fails. The case of the Banwaon of Salay then and of inner city streets now underline the need to understand Philippine politics in a manner that accounts for and enables an exploration of this dark seam. Only with the acknowledgment and understanding of this violent aspect of contemporary Philippine politics—which the Banwaon have long been aware of, but with which many of us are coming to grips only now—can we hope to address the unfolding human rights crisis that is among the political and moral challenges of our times.

Abbreviations Used

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| CAFGU | Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Unit |
| CHDF | Civilian Home Defense Forces |
| MIB | Military Intelligence Bureau |
| MNLF | Moro National Liberation Front |
| NPA | New People's Army |
| Sabansag | Samahan sa mga Banwaon sa Agusan |

Notes

- 1 The *Washington Post*, citing Philippine police records, recently reported that, three months into the new administration, 3,300 people have been killed; 1,239 of them by the police and 2,150—two-thirds of the victims—killed by unidentified assailants (Rauhala 2016).
- 2 See *Periodico Agsur* 2009, 2. Hengania was charged with robbery, but made bail. The victimized trader—Hengania's godmother by marriage—refused to press charges for fear of reprisal.
- 3 Note the underlying similarities between the case of the *katangkawan* and, on a somewhat grander scale, that of the Ampatuan clan in the Cotabato region (Lara 2014, 252–54).

- 4 Woodcutting or *raha* (etymology unknown) is explicitly described in Salay as a livelihood that developed in response to security problems. When men could no longer work as loggers in the farther forests for fear of attack, they shifted to felling trees near the village for firewood. Farming means prolonged labor in a specific location, raising the risk of being targeted. Woodcutting makes men more mobile and unpredictable in their movements, as work can be conducted in short, irregularly spaced intervals.
- 5 The *surit* is a single-shot firearm made from a length of steel pipe set in a hand-carved wooden stock.
- 6 In contrast, Hinton (2004, 161–62) sees violence as following a local “vernacular,” while Ellis (2004, 109) speaks of “grammars” that govern violent action.
- 7 The Jesuit missionaries referred to the indigenous people of the Agusan region as Manobo, but a reading of their collected letters shows that they knew of the Banwaon, whom they considered a subgroup of the Manobo. Garvan's ethnography is on the Manobo rather than the Banwaon, but there are very strong cultural similarities between the two groups.

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