

Pangkat: Inmate Gangs at the New Bilibid Prison Maximum Security Compound

This is a study of inmate gangs (*pangkats*) at the New Bilibid Prison Maximum Security Compound. Through focus group discussions (FGDs) with pangkatmembers and review of documents, the study found that *pangkats* formed around the 1950s around ethno-linguistic divisions between Tagalog (Sigue Sigue) and non-Tagalog speaking inmates (OXO). Inadequate provisions, strained inmate-guard relationship and restrictive visiting policies incited escapes and violent riots between rival gangs in those years.

Since the 1980s the pangkats transitioned into units of local self-governance with mechanisms for leadership, dispute arbitration, control of antisocial behavior, and cooperation with other pangkats and the Bureau of Corrections. The combination of relaxed visiting policies, including conjugal visits and family stay-ins, and the increased entry of civil society groups (CSGs) boosted a local economy, "normalized" the all-male population and presented opportunities for inmates to regain lost "moral status" by occupying respected positions.

When the barriers that isolated the compound were lowered, the pangkat society increased its social capital, expanded its social network, bridged gaps between other gangs, the Bureau of Corrections and the free society (taga-laya) and functioned less as parochial defense and conflict groups and more as organizations of self-local governance.

Key words: inmate gangs, New Bilibid Prison, incarceration, self-governance, social capital



A satellite view of the Maximum Security Compound of the New Bilbid Prison in Muntinlupa City. (Source: Google Earth)

INTRODUCTION

Public Perception of Prisons

The confinement of criminal offenders in a well supervised yet Spartan prison that enables them to ponder on past mistakes and change encapsulates the rehabilitative discourse of modern penology. The mandate of the Philippine Bureau of Corrections “to provide humane treatment by supplying the inmates’ basic needs and implementing a variety of rehabilitation programs” (<http://www.bucor.gov.ph/about.htm> 2012) resounds this ideal. Its contrast, the image of inmates in miserable, congested conditions exposed to imminent danger in the company of other “criminals”, tacitly permeates as expressive justice, that suffering is justifiable punishment for crime.

Yet another "reality" of incarceration occasionally exposed in media generates public outrage. In June 2011 news reports broke out that prison gangs are "lording it over at the National (sic) Bilibid Prison as they control amenities and resources within" (Yap, Inquirer News 2011). The exposé prompted Department of Justice (DOJ) officials to investigate into alleged preferential treatment of affluent inmates, privatization of quarters, contraband proliferation and other corruptions at the New Bilibid Prison (NBP). The DOJ denounced the situation as “not acceptable ... (for) various gangs and leaders to have *absolute control* of everything” whilst recognizing that gangs “instill(ing) discipline among the ranks” (Dizon 2011). Nevertheless, the DOJ promptly authorized an investigation to address prison congestion, alleged underground criminal syndicates, illegal activities, and 'the gang culture' at the NBP (Dedace 2011).

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Dismay over the “discovery” of well-organized inmate gangs at the NBP contradicts what studies have found about the inevitability of inmates at creating their own social order within prison (Sykes 1958), and of inmate gangs providing the extra-legal governance within their community (Skarbek 2012). Thus, it is important to systematically study prison realities such as the proliferation of inmate gangs in Philippine prisons to effectively evaluate where reality stands against public perception.

The Literature on Prison Society and Inmate Gangs

Sociologists problematize the responses of incarcerated individuals to the stresses of isolation from “normal” society where the *self* restructures in order to adapt to and build new social conditions. Notably, Goffman (1961) regards prison as a *total institution* sealed off from conventional society where inmates, stripped of previous possessions and statuses, undergo a *self-mortification* process. More to the point, Sykes (1958) proposes that inmates are compelled to create a *society within a society* to cope with the *pains of imprisonment* which entail deprivation of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security and moral rejection by society. This society holds moral authority over their conduct where “real men”, inmates who “pull their own time,” demonstrate integrity before prison authority. These inmate leaders generate respect and social cohesion among inmates. As inmates work, eat and sleep together for years on end in a compacted prison, they form a *social order* produced as they interact and confront the problems of their day-to-day life, one that is distinct from the system issued by their custodians (Sykes 1958).

Since Sykes's pioneering proposition, prison studies affirm that inmates will predictably form groups and inmate subculture (Edwards 1970; Jacobs 1974). Studies such as those of Camp and Camp (1985) and Fong (1990) look into the organizational structure, leadership style, and recruitment processes of gangs and their impact on prisons in the United States. Other studies delve into how gangs were formed. For example, Hunt, Riegel, Morales, and Waldorf (1993) propose that gangs originated as "defense groups" to insulate themselves from

threatening behavior posed by other inmates in the highly unpredictable prison setting.

Other studies deal with the antisocial features of inmate gangs (see Klein and Maxson 1989; and Hunt, Riegel, Morales, and Waldorf 1993). Inmate gangs are known to control contraband goods within the prison black market economy (Davidson 1974). In the United States, inmate gangs are labeled *security threat groups* (STGs) and are monitored for engaging in crime inside prison and for activities that threaten the safety and security of the public, the correctional employees, visitors and other inmates (Carlson 2001). Prison gangs are known to engage in criminal enterprises such as contraband distribution, increase inter-group tension and violence in the inmate population, undermine rehabilitation programs, and hinder community reintegration (Wynterdick and Ruddell 2010). These studies often highlight the antagonism between inmates and prison authorities. Moreover, studies found that efforts to contain inmate gangs counter-productively lead to new vacuums that only create new and even stronger generations of inmate gangs (Hunt, Riegel, Morales, and Waldorf 1993).

The notion of inmates actively resisting the social order imposed by custodians and dominating the prison setting was challenged by other studies. Notably, DiIulio (1987) asserts that prison studies have been biased toward the inmate population and overlook the staff world, and that more balanced study of prisons will reveal that correction officers remain key actors and authorities in the prison setting (also Western 2007).

Given that prison officers simply cannot monitor inmates round-the-clock nor intervene spontaneously when conflict erupts among them, inmate organizations often fill this social and political vacuum. Studies on such direction look into the *extralegal governance* that inmate gangs provide to the inmate population akin to the governance employed by organized crime groups, marginalized neighbor ghettos and youth gangs to their communities (see Skaperdas 1992; and Venkatesh and Murphy 2007). Such alternative governance arbitrate disputes, protect property rights, enforce contracts, and settle conflicts between members owing to the unavailability or inadequacy of state

agencies' response (Kennedy 1990; Skaperdas 1992; Venkatesh and Murphy 2007; Skarbek 2012;). Moreover, inmate gangs are also known for building networks to extract resources, extort, and exchange contraband within and outside prison (Koehler 2000; Skarbek 2008).

Literature on Philippine Inmate Gangs

Although there are no academic publications on inmate gangs in Philippine prisons, state reports, magazine and broadsheet features, weblogs, and television documentaries circulate about inmate gangs in Philippine jails and prisons. Narag's work (2005) uncovers the structural and cultural organization of the *pangkat* society and comes closest to what can be considered a social scientific understanding of Philippine inmate gangs. Inmate gangs have gained enough access to prison control "where inmates play a prominent role in the Jail's administration" (Narag 2005: xviii). The alternative structure of *panunungkulan* (duty positions) maintained by the *pangkat* authorizes inmates to have authority over other inmates to carry out the *batas ng bilanguan* (prison code) is argued to be a response to persistently unmet problems of congestion, lack of facilities and personnel, unmet medical conditions, and overall squalid physical conditions of jails (Narag 2005: xvii).

Apart from Narag's pioneering work, there is a lack of objective and systematic studies of inmate gangs in the Philippines, a paucity that this study attempts to fill.

Research Objectives and Theoretical Inquiries

This study investigated the features of the *pangkat* as a social group and of the *pangkat* society, or the collectivity of co-existing gangs, through the analysis of inmate gangs at the Maximum Security Compound of the NBP in Muntinlupa City. I sought to answer basic questions about social groups: what are the bases for the organization of the *pangkat*, how it evolves over time and how it generates legitimacy. I revisited the concept of *society within a society* proposed by sociologist Gresham Sykes (1958), that to overcome the *pains of*

imprisonment inmates gravitate toward the informal social order built on day-to-day interaction.

Emerging data from the field prompted me to pursue two more theoretical concepts. First, the concept of *self-governance*, which consists of extra-legal mechanisms and informal justice systems deployed by communities given the state's inability to effectively deliver those needs (Kennedy 1990; Skaperdas 1992; Skaperdas 2001; Venkatesh 2007; Skarbek, 2011; Skarbek 2012) became useful. This led me to further inquire into the *pangkat*'s self-governance that is recognized by the inmates and which the Bureau, as it turns out, increasingly accommodated.

Second, the widely applied concept of *social capital* helped explain how the *pangkat* features of solidarity and trust when engaged with networks from free society increased the inmates' human capital, bridged gaps between groups, and coordinated actions to achieve community objectives (see Bourdieu 1986; Putnam 1995; and Lin 1999). The study examined how the inmates, a morally disenfranchised collectivity, participated in the production of social capital that fostered peace between warring gangs, brought individual and collective advantages, and empowered inmates to reclaim their moral status as constructive agents.

Focus and Limitations

I viewed the *pangkat* as a social group engaged in reciprocal roles and integrative ties. Following the lead of inmates, I use the term *pangkat*, a Filipino word referring to a group bound by common experience and interests and by the pledge to protect and contribute to the group. In this case, long-term incarceration and society's moral rejection as convicted criminals are their common experience while survival, safety and making life meaningful in prison are common interests.

The "biases" of this study include my presentation of the *pangkat* as a functional group that aims for the inmates' well being and de-emphasis of its dysfunctional features as a "conflict gang" or "criminal gang" committed to an antisocial subculture oriented to criminal

offending. The “dark side” of inmate gangs such as corruption, violence and predation, I believe, are best problematized in a separate study. The study is also limited to “views from the top” because my sources were leaders and senior members of the gangs. Thus, views of new members, members of marginal position or participation and non-gang inmates (*querna*) are hardly represented.

Research Methods

My study relied mainly on the narratives of inmates gathered through focus group discussions with four out of the twelve known gangs at the Bilibid Maximum. I requested inmates who have spent *at least* fifteen years in the compound to participate in a discussion with seven to ten inmates per group within the same *pangkat*. I encouraged them to openly discuss the topics I presented to understand *pangkat* society in the compound and to feel free to include topics they feel are important. The inmates called my research method, *kuro-kuro* (gathering or caucus). Many of the participants had experience being a *mayor* (head of the *brigada* or dormitory) while others are considered *agurangs*, elders who have had previous convictions and are considered seniors.

Two gangs were tapped from each of the two main factions of the *pangkat* society in the compound: rival gangs Sigue Sigue (Tagalog-speaking inmates) and OXO (non-Tagalog speaking inmates) who formed trunks that determined *pangkat* alliances in the compound. Out of the four gangs from the Sigue Sigue side, Sigue Sigue Commando (Commando) and Bahala na Gang (BNG) were chosen. Out of the 8 gangs from the OXO side, the gangs Batang City Jail (BCJ) and Batang Cebu (BC) were selected. The rationale behind this sampling scheme was to capture the roots of *pangkat* society’s division between two main factions. In addition, it somehow represents the gangs’ diversity in terms of population size and social status, i.e. levels of relative wealth, power and prestige within the compound. Thus, I interviewed two gangs that are relatively more populous, influential, “prosperous and developed” (Sigue Sigue Commando and Batang City Jail), and on the other hand, two gangs who are relatively less populous, influential, “prosperous or developed” (Bahala Na Gang and Batang Cebu).

The youngest participant was 35 and the oldest was 74 years old but most of the participants were in their late early 40s forties to late 50s. The men were convicted of murder, homicide, robbery with homicide, rape, kidnap for ransom or drug trafficking. Some of them were former death row inmates whose sentences were commuted to life imprisonment when capital punishment was abolished in 2006. Their jobs prior to incarceration ranged widely. Some were farmers, construction laborers, and traders. Others were businessmen, government employees, private corporation employees, military personnel, policemen, and security guards. One was an accountant and another was training consultant. A few were students before incarceration.

The participants came from various parts of the country with the majority having resided in Manila for most of their lives while others came from cities and provinces in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. Of the 4 gangs, BC was the only *pangkat* whose members came from Cebu or Cebuano-speaking provinces in the Visayas and Mindanao. Members of BCJ consisted of a mix of inmates from the Visayas and Luzon but those from Luzon typically had at least one parent from the Visayas. Participants from Commando were mostly from Metro Manila or Luzon provinces. Some who may have grown up in the Visayan provinces have spent years in Metro Manila and were convicted in Metro Manila courts. Bahala Na Gang members on the other hand, were mostly from Metro Manila, Olongapo, and Bicol.

I obtained permission to conduct research, including the use of a voice recorder, from the Bureau of Corrections and the Department of Justice. I also obtained permission for such interviews from the leaders of the *pangkats* in the sample. The interviews were conducted at the gangs' respective hangouts such as a quiet area outside the *tindahan* (food stall) or in their respective home offices in the compound.

My prior contact with former University of the Philippines Diliman students serving sentence at the compound, the "UP Boys" as they are popularly called, helped me link with different *pangkat* leaders. With the UP Boys introducing me as "a UP professor" and guaranteeing my good intentions as researcher I was given some kind of diplomatic reception in the compound. In addition, the Bureau sent an employee

as my escort who waited nearby but beyond hearing range of the discussions.

I was apprehensive about my safety and my research assistant's in a compound full of "convicted criminals". My sense of security rested on my being the guest (*bisita*) of several authority groups: the Bureau, the UP Boys, and upon reaching the *pangkat* territories, the commander or the *mayores* (Spanish plural of *mayor*). My trust also hinged on my experience of past visits where inmates strongly adhered to the norm of respecting visitors at all costs: *sagrado ang dalaw* (visits are sacred).

To supplement the discussions, I reviewed documents pertaining to the *pangkat* including court cases on gang riots, Bureau reports and government publications on the NBP, published views of Bureau employees, as well as documents written and furnished by the inmates.

Ethical Concerns

Research ethics involving prison population are more problematized in biomedical studies (see Hornblum 1999). As a "vulnerable population" convicted inmates' marginalized status restricts their autonomy and may pressure them to yield when authority compels them to participate as research subjects, thus there must be additional safeguards to protect their rights and welfare during research (see Ruof 2002 and Grudzinskas and Clayfield 2005)

Although I did not conduct experiments, I kept these ethical considerations in mind. I was apprehensive about potential repercussions from prison authorities, rival gangs and other inmates that can arise from the participants' disclosures. Thus, I took care to obscure their identities with pseudonyms and blur distinguishing characteristics so statements cannot be traced to particular participants.

I informed the inmates of the purpose of the study and that I also interviewed other gangs and Bureau employees. I made clear the voluntary nature of the study and promised no benefit in return for participation.

I felt that the inmates understood the research and were keen on "letting the free society know" of their condition, and what "they

have accomplished". At the same time I was also mindful of previous researchers' caution about the tendency of inmates to embellish, if not fabricate, information and to exaggerate abilities and accomplishments (see, for example, Jacobs 1974).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The Bilibid Maximum Compound As Gang Enclaves

The research site is the Maximum Security Compound, a 10-hectare diamond-shaped compound at the center of the sprawling 300-hectare New Bilibid Prison area in Muntinlupa City. The main building at the foreground of the compound houses not only by the compound's Superintendent's office which oversees the compound, but also the national head office of the Bureau of Corrections.

The miniature model of the compound displayed at the entrance reflects the division of the compound into two areas: *carcel* (jail, in Spanish) and *presidio* (prison, in Spanish). The labels were likely appropriated from the design of the Old Bilibid Prison established by Spain in 1865 in which the *carcel* jailed crime suspects awaiting sentencing were separated from the *presidio* where sentenced convicts were confined (Gutierrez 2010: 349). The thick dividing wall in the compound was placed to prevent riots between rival gangs. The Sigue Sigue allied gangs mainly occupy the *presidio* side and the OXO allied gangs the *carcel* side, although some spaces overlap.

The prevailing sense is that the compound is organized according to the *pangkat* society: buildings are apportioned to enclaves of 12 gangs and a few marginal non-gang groups. The hospital, kitchen, educational and training centers, churches, civic foundation offices, sports facilities, recreational facilities, *talipapas* (wet market), and food stalls give a sense of shared spaces.

As of July 2012, the compound is home to 12,669 inmates where an overwhelming 95 percent are *pangkat* members. Sigue Sigue Sputnik is the most populated at 2,505. On the other hand, the least populated gang now is OXO, which dwindled to a marginal 168 when over the decades, the original name-bearing OXO gave rise to now bigger gangs

such as BCJ (1,746), recognized to be the ascendant gang in the *carcel* side, and Genuine Ilocano Group (GIG), the most populous at 1,808 in the *carcel* side.

Walking through the grounds, inmates would point out the territories of certain *pangkats*. The buildings are partitioned into several dormitories (*brigadas*) where small rooms (*butas*), depending on their size, are shared between two or more inmates. Some dormitories are assigned to non-gang inmates (referred to as *querna*), former military or police inmates, former CPP-NPA rebels and two religious groups, Iglesia ni Cristo and the Christian Brigade who declared themselves

Table 1. Gangs (pangkat) and groupings at the Maximum Security Compound of the New Bilibid Prison (Total population as of July 2012 = 12,669)

SIGUE SIGUE ALLIED GANGS (PRESIDIO SIDE)	F
1. Sputnik	2,505
2. Commando	1,030
3. Happy Go Lucky Gang (HGL)	857
4. Bahala Na Gang (BNG)	770
OXO ALLIED-GANGS (CARCEL SIDE)	
1. Genuine Ilocano Group (GIG)	1,808
2. Batang City Jail (BCJ)	1,746
3. Batang Cebu (BC)	836
4. Batang Samar Leyte (BSL)	458
5. Bicol Region Masbate (BRM)	402
6. Batang Mindanao (BM)	534
7. Batang Mananalo (Batman)	904
8. OXO	168
NON-GANG GROUPS	
1. Cuerna	151
2. Iglesia Ni Cristo (INC)	157
3. Christian Brigade	39
4. Former military/ police personnel	no data
5. CPP-NPA*** (dormitories further divided for Reaffirmists and Rejectionists)	no data
6. Inmates under disciplinary order	no data
7. Infirm inmates at the NBP hospital	no data

independent groups. Refer to table 1 below for the list of the gangs and groups and their population as of July 2012.

The compound houses inmates sentenced to at least 20 years imprisonment, formerly on death row, serving multiple convictions and having cases on appeal. With three layers of high fences and strategically located surveillance towers the compound confines “high security risk inmates who require a high degree of control and supervision” (Bureau of Corrections Operating Manual 2000: 7).

Their long-sentence implies inmates can expect to live with a relatively stable cohort of inmates for some length of time, a factor that explains the stronger influence of the *pangkat* in the compound, relative to its reported “weaker presence” in the Medium and Minimum Security compounds of the NBP.

Ambivalence Toward the *Pangkat*

The discourses on inmate gangs within the Philippine criminal justice system can be described as ambivalent and conflicted. The gangs are rejected for their violent features and its undermining effect on the authority of the state to enforce prison order. However, gangs are also accommodated for their pragmatic function, often expressed in the phrase, “they police their own ranks”. The country report to an international conference of correctional administrators acquiesced to their “good use” as follows:

“Though unorthodox in some jurisdictions that prohibit inmates from enlisting in gangs, the set-up actually helps prison officials maintain order in prison and put relatively unofficial organizations into good use. (Asian and Pacific Conference of Correctional Administrators 2003: 14)

Narag’s exposé (2005) on the *pangkat system* in jails is published by no less than the Supreme Court of the Philippines and acknowledged by the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) as among the few but much needed studies on Philippine jails. The Bureau makes no qualms in recognizing the co-management role of the *pangkat* in the Bilibid Maximum compound before the media.

The office of the compound guards displays the utilitarian vicinity map labeled by *pangkat* dormitory designations. The Bilibid Maximum administration qualifies the gang situation as unavoidable (*hindi maiiwasan*). Turning down the help of gangs can result to logistical strain in managing the population. As of 2011, the NBP is reported to be 122 percent congested with 19,960 inmates living in facilities meant to accommodate only 9,000 inmates (DOJ 2011); the estimated ratio is 1 guard to 64 inmates (Bureau of Corrections 2012: np) not counting three guard shifts.

In 1968, a Senate Committee Report listed twelve gangs in the New Bilibid Prison (See Table 2 below). The legislative report explained the reason, “for this policy is that inmates belonging to the different gangs almost always quarrel when confined in the same cell...(and that) the cause of the gang situation in Muntinlupa may be traced to congestion” (Laurel 1969: 58-59).

Table 2. Gangs at the New Bilibid Prison Maximum Security Compound of the New Bilibid Prison (January 1969)

NAME OF GANG	NO. OF MEMBERS
1. Sigie Sigie Sputnik	261
2. Sigie Sigie Commando	232
3. Bahala Na Gang	137
4. Sigie Sigie Puso	27
5. Gestapo (Affiliated to OXO)	26
6. R.M. (Ranger Masbate)	6
7. OXO Original	81
8. G.I.G. (Genuine Ilocano Gang)	24
9. Happy Go Lucky Gang (Affiliated to OXO)	135
10 B.C.J. (Batang City Jail -- Affiliated to OXO)	167
11. B.S.L (Batang Samar and Leyte -- Affiliated to OXO)	159
12. B.M. (Batang Mindanao -- Affiliated to OXO)	134
Total	1,339

Source: (Laurel 1969: 58)

The judiciary has also long noted the existence of inmate gangs and linked their origin to the failure of the state to provide for its prisons.

A Supreme Court decision commuted to life imprisonment the death sentence of fourteen Sigue Sigue members found guilty of killing and injuring many of their OXO rivals in the notorious riot of 1958. The court declared that “it (was) impossible to ignore the contributory role played by the inhuman condition” in prison (People of the Philippines vs. De Los Santos et al 1965). It further recognized a report of a trial judge, Andres Reyes, on the gangs:

“Hardened criminals were mixed with light offenders. Extortions and all sorts of crimes were being committed sometimes right under the very noses of the guards who... were so outnumbered and themselves afraid... helpless inmates by reason of their physical build have been abused... All these contributed to augment the growing feeling of the inmates that they are living in a world of outcasts where only the mighty and the strong survive... like all humans with little sense of order left in their mind, they formed themselves into bands or into groups and finally into big organizations upon which each and every member looked for protection, security and, most important of all, for food and means of survival. (People of the Philippines vs. De Los Santos et al. 1965)

The Operating Manual of the Bureau, in fact, does not explicitly outlaw the organization of gangs. It actually “allow(s) inmates to participate in approved inmate organizations for recreational, social, civic, and benevolent purposes... so long as (it) does not operate in opposition to the security, good order, or discipline” (Bureau of Corrections 2000: 27). Therefore, the *pangkat* can be considered as an inmate organization within the Bureau.

Simultaneously, the Bureau condemns the violent, corrupt and exploitive practices of the gangs. Riots were attributed to the “pernicious influence of the gang system which has existed for thirty years since 1958” (Bureau of Corrections 1988: 23). It also reported as accomplishment in 1988 the regain of control of the handicraft industry “from the hands of a few inmate gang leaders... who often get the lion’s share of the income.” (Bureau of Corrections 1988: 7)

On its official webpage, the Bureau reported that in 2004, the Reception and Diagnostic Center has “started erasing gang marks of all newly committed prisoners in an effort to eradicate the gang system” (<http://www.bucor.gov.ph/history/index-History.html>). Admission to the Bureau’s college program require inmates to renounce gang membership by erasing their gang tattoos (*magpapabura*), the administrators told me during a class visit with my students from UP Diliman at the Medium Security Compound.

Agonizing between enlisting the participation of the *pangkats* and the potential problems the practice would bring, the Bureau compromised to “a dual policy”. In Bureau reported that,

“To reduce the prevailing tension among inmates caused by gang wars and conflict, a dual policy of fair and equal treatment of inmates and promoting constructive responsibility among the inmate gang leaders have been pursued... (G)ang leaders who exercise destructive leadership or cause trouble were transferred to the penal colonies or other prison compounds...” (Bureau of Corrections 1987: 6-7)

Tesoro (2011a), a long-term official of the Bureau, analyzes the duality of the inmate gangs’ character in a personal weblog:

“in brokering peaceful co-existence with prison authorities, it is also in the middle of self-imposed exploitation... (Gangs) represent basic and common rights, which a prisoner seeks from penal administration, but for lack of funds or policy, the gang complements.... Gangs, in effect, as an organized crime vehicle has two fronts -- the legitimate side, which is in accordance with its sworn brotherhood mission and, the illegal side, since most of its members, leaders even, and connections lay underground. (Tesoro 2011a).

The *Pangkat* from the Inmates’ Perspective

What is the *pangkat*, and what does it stand for? These were straightforward questions I asked the inmates in our *kuro-kuro*. Agurang Lorenzo who had spent time in Bilibid in the late 1950s and,

at 74 years old, was the oldest participant answered, “*pagkakaibigan, barkada*” (for friendship, peer group). A few other inmates mentioned, “*para proteksyon*” (for protection). “*May uuwian ka*” (a place to go home to), volunteered Agurang Donato. Membership in a *pangkat* determines which dormitory an inmate will bunk in. Inmates alternately referred to the *pangkat* as *a family*, and the *pangkat* commander, the top leader, as *the father*. The term *kapatiran* (brotherhood) also came up in describing the *pangkat*.

The inmates used the English word “gang” interchangeably with *pangkat*. “*Parang ang sama kaagad ng dating ng ‘gang’, hindi ganon*” (‘Gang’ comes off as something bad but that is not the case), qualified Jason. “*Nag-evolve na ang Bilibid*” (Bilibid has evolved) the inmates unanimously reiterated. Inmates from all four participating gangs emphasized how different and more peaceful (*mas mapayapa*) the current situation is than the past era where violent riots between gangs were common.

Ethno-linguistic identity divided inmates into two *pangkat* trunks approximately since the 1950s. Inmates from Manila and nearby Tagalog-speaking provinces formed the Sigue Sigue (from the Spanish *seguir*, meaning, “to pursue”) while those from Visayan-speaking southern provinces such as Cebu, Samar, Leyte, Masbate and Iloilo as well as Mindanao formed the OXO (Original Ex-convict Organization).

Based on their own written history the Bahala Gang (BNG), originally consisting of inmates from Manila (Manila Boys), later joined by inmates from Olongapo City and the Bicol Region, formed with other BNGs, who identified themselves as BNG 1, BNG 2, and so on, to band together in 1956 due to the increasing tensions between Sigue Sigue and OXO (Bahala Na Gang no date: 1). Although allied with the Sigue Sigue trunk, the BNG considers itself independent from other gangs and takes pride in the fact that they did not rise from other gangs.

The predominance of Tagalog, the base-language of Filipino used in the capital city of Manila and the former province of Rizal where NBP is located in Muntinlupa (now part of Metro Manila) elicited a

reaction from the non-Tagalog speaking inmates who felt marginalized, reflecting the tension that often arises in center-periphery relations. Inmates transferred from the provincial jails from the southern islands of the archipelago were referred to as *tawid-dagat* (literally, “cross the sea) and, alternately, as *taga-probinsiya* (from the province) or *promdi*, its derogatory short-speak.

On the language factor, Batang Cebu (BC) leader Arnold explained, “*Siguro yung mga Tagalog napipikon kung di nila naiintihdihan yung naririnig sa mga Bisaya.*” (Probably the Tagalogs get irritated when they do not understand what they hear from the Visayans.) BC inmates added that their “lifestyle” is distinct from the urbanized “Manila Boys” through statements such as:

“Iba ang lifestyle namin, gusto namin tahimik. Sila maingay. Sa pagkain, gusto namin gulay at isda. Yung mga taga-Bicol naman gusto ng mga maaanghang. Sinasabi naman namin ang mga Manila Boys... gusto niyan lagi barbecue, fried chicken.” (We have a different lifestyle. We like being quiet; they are loud. For food, we like vegetables and fish. Those from Bicol want spicy food. We think that the Manila Boys always like barbecue, fried chicken.)

The gang trunks evolved into various gangs over time as shown in Table 2 earlier. The Sigue Sigue trunk broke off into Commando, Sputnik and the now defunct Sigue Sigue Puso in the 1960s. Although considered allies, Commando and Sputnik are known to have differences and conflicts. On the other hand, the OXO trunk branched out to smaller language-based provincial gangs but retained alliance with the OXO trunk. These include BCJ, the frontrunner gang in the *carcel* side, which originated in Manila City Jail in the 1960s and consists of non-Tagalog-speaking inmates, and other province-based gangs from the Visayas such as Batang Cebu, Batang Mindanao, Batang Samar Leyte, and Batang Mananalo (BatMan). Interestingly, inmates from the Ilocos Region of Northern Luzon who formed the Genuine Ilocano Group (GIG) allied themselves with OXO, and those from the Bicol provinces in Southern Luzon coalesced with the earlier

Masbate Ranger to consolidate as the Bicol Region Masbate (BRM) gang.

The current list of gangs reflects the demise of gang such as Sigue Sigue Puso and Gestapo, the expansion of Masbate Ranger to Bicol Region Masbate (BRM), and more notably, the defection of Happy Go Lucky gang (HGL), consisting of Ilonggo-speaking inmates to the Sigue Sigue trunk, making it the only Visayan-language gang to ally with the largely Tagalog-speaking gangs. OXO-descended gangs recounted that years ago the HGL was “ejected to the other side” (*tinakwil sa kabila*) because “they betrayed us in past riots” (*tinaraydor kami noon sa mga riot*). With Cebuano as the dominant language in the Visayas and parts of Mindanao, Ilonggo speaking inmates may have felt their marginalization, reflecting center-periphery conflict within the larger Visayan identity.

The increase in inmate population in the compound since the 1950s could not cope with the slow expansion of dormitories. When asked how OXO became their archenemy, Sigue Sigue allied Commando members point to the encroaching increase of *tawid-dagat* inmates into their territory. They recalled their elders as saying, “*dumadami na sila dito*” (their numbers have been rising).

The language divide and the differences in backgrounds generated animosity, interpersonal conflict and, eventually, violence. OXO-descended BCJ inmates mentioned that their elders banded together to protect themselves from predatory inmates. “*Sabi ng mga nakatatanda, api-apihan daw dati dito. Ninanakawan sila, nire-rape, sinasaktan kaya sila nagbuo ng BCJ*” (The older batch of members told us there was victimization here. They were robbed, raped, and beaten so they formed the BCJ), Dennis reported.

Ethno-linguistic identity ceased to be the defining factor in membership over time. “*Katulad ng mga isda, malaya nang lumangoy ang mga bilanggo kung saan gustong pumunta*” (Like fish, inmates can now freely swim wherever they want), Luis explained. Membership now follows pragmatic logic: inmates seek out gangs advantageous to them, and vice versa. The UP Boys, for example, were said to be keen on staying together that they all became BCJ members in jail so

that they will not be segregated upon moving to Bilibid Maximum. Moreover, upon clearance from gangs concerned, inmates can opt to change membership to join a more influential family relative or protector in another gang. But on renounced memberships in view of qualifying for the college program Agurang Lorenzo tapped the heart spot on his chest and said, “*dito ang tatak hindi nabubura*” (in here, the mark is never erased) to underscore that loyalties remain.

While one can see that certain *pangkats* are economically better off than others, i.e., have more facilities and better kept living spaces, it is unclear to me how exactly social class plays into membership, except perhaps that moneyed or influential inmates, e.g. politicians, known drug dealers and kidnap-for-ransom convicts, rich Chinese and foreign nationals tend to join already prominent and prosperous gangs because they can offer better amenities and stronger organization. There were also reports that gangs compete over rich and influential inmates or inmates who can bring in resources, and that some kind of “bidding” for their membership takes place among gangs as rich and/or influential inmates can bring in more resources.

A Harsh Life in the Past Bilibid

The inmates recalled memories, some first hand, others passed on from elders, of the past NBP. A sense of abandonment by the state and free society loomed over inmates. Memories include periodic gang conflicts and riots, fighting among individual inmates, severely restricted visiting policies, dormitory congestion, and inedible meal rations described by Luis as “*mas masahol pa kaysa suka ng pusa*” (worse than cat’s vomit). Inmate-guard relationship was strained. “*Ang guwardiya abusado, ang preso agresibo*” (Guards were abusive and inmates were aggressive), the inmates described the mutual antagonism between inmates and guards that hindered the orderly management of inmate behavior by the Bureau.

But more than the material impact of unpalatable meals, inmates resented more the lack of visiting family members and their dwindling over time. Ignacio related feeling “*wala nang nagmamahal sa amin*” (no one cared for us anymore). Worse, until the late 1980s, families

were limited only to designated visiting areas. Agurang Donato recalled, “*Makikita mo ‘pag hapon na ng linggo, nag-aakapan at nag-iiyakan sa pasilyo* (There you can see families clinging to each other crying in the hallway by late Sunday afternoon). Manuel recalled that at some point even stricter rules were imposed on visiting conduct, “*ang dalaw dati hindi mo mahawakan*” (back then you could not touch your visiting family).

Inmates refer to visiting outsiders, guests of the Bureau such as tourists or students on a field trip, as *bisita*, and their family members and friends as *dalaw*, the kind of visits they really long for. Anger flared from Agurang Donato when he recalled occasions when guests (*bisita*) peered into the compound from a view deck on the main building in the 1970s. “*Hahagis sila ng pera o pagkain. Para kaming mga hayop na pinanonood sa zoo. Bakit hindi sila pumasok dito at kausapin kami? Tao rin naman kami!*” (They threw in food or money. We were displayed like animals in a zoo. Why don’t they come inside and talk to us? We’re also human beings!), he said bitterly.

Gladiatorial Arena: Riots in the Compound

For decades since the 1950s rivalry violence between the Sigue Sigue and OXO and later between other gangs ruled the compound. Periodic escapes and riots resulted in many brutal fatalities and injuries, according to the older inmates, guards and Bureau records. “*Umuusok daw ang lupa dati dito kapag may riot, pagkatapos, ang daming patay*” (Smoke rose from the ground during the riots, after that, the dead are many), Ignacio recalled the narrative of older inmates. These episodes were referred to as *buhos* (downpour) of combatants from each side of the warring gangs that converted the compound into a virtual gladiatorial arena.

Agurang Lorenzo added that, on top of the riots, assassinations, referred to as *tira* (hit) were aimed at certain inmates. Younger BCJ Dennis proudly informed me that Agurang Lorenzo was a known *tirador* (hit man) in the compound. Commando members also recounted, that “*ang sikat dati dito ay ‘yung siga, yung matapang at magaling sa tira*” (those who were tough, fearless and expert hit men were popular back then).

A series of riots in February 1958 broke out between Sigue Sigue and OXO where nine inmates brutally died -- one was decapitated; corpses were either burned or mutilated. Court records described that:

“pandemonium broke loose in the penitentiary ... Sunday morning of 16 February 1958, when the Sigue Sigues staged a riot against their enemies... A mass of about 150 prisoners, many of whom were armed with improvised weapons, forcibly opened the door to the cell house, liberated their companions from their individual cells and then opened the cells where the OXOs were, took them out by force or deception, and then clubbed and stabbed them to death one after the other. Five (5) died when the riot was quelled. At about the same time on the following day, 17 February 1958, another riot, carried out in the same fashion as the day before, accounted for four (4) more deaths... The findings of the medical officers of the Bureau of Prisons on the corpses of the nine (9) victims portray eloquently the shocking extent of the carnage, brutality, and cannibalism of these riots.” (People of the Philippines vs. De Los Santos, et al. 1965).

Agurang Lorenzo affirmed taking part in this two-day bloodbath. His younger gang mates added that the episode is referenced by many in the compound as *dalawang araw na walang Diyos* (two days without God). Many other violent riots broke afterwards. A melee broke out in December of 1969 between BRM and Sputnik that resulted in the death of 2 and injury of 6 inmates (People of the Philippines vs. Pajarillo and Rodriguez). On Good Friday in April 1979, a series of incidents took place resulting in the killings of four OXO members by seven members of Sputnik (People of the Philippines vs. Garcia et al. 1980). The following Good Friday in March 1980, OXO and HGL members joined forces to avenge this deaths and attacked members of Sputnik resulting in 2 deaths and one serious injury (People of the Philippines vs. Pinlacin et al. 1981)

The riots dwindled by the early 1980s. The last noted gang riot took place in 1989 between Bahala Na Gang (BNG) and Happy Go Lucky (HGL) resulting in 2 deaths and 1 injury; the same year saw the death

of 1 guard and the injury of 4 guards and 7 inmates resulting from the mass escape of BNG members (Bureau of Corrections 1989: 17).

The inmates viewed the hesitation of correctional officials to interfere in riots as abandonment, as if to say, “*Bahala kayo sa buhay niyo, mag-away kayo, mag-patayan kayo, mauubos kayo dyan!*” (You’re on your own, you may fight and kill one another, and none of you will survive!), Manuel bitterly said. To them, some administrators “did not care about us” (*walang pakialam sa amin*). But some showed the inmates compassion (*malasakit*).

Allowing inmates to “police their ranks” endows them autonomous functions that contradicts the public expectations of authorities “getting tough” on criminals. However, correctional employees maintain a “keeper’s philosophy,” which is “a non-punitive outlook on convicted criminals that is often contrasted with the punishment-centered “catcher philosophy” attributed by correctional workers to other law enforcement officers, lawmakers, and the public at large” (DiIulio 1987: 6). For correctional workers, success is achieved when at the end each day, order prevailed and nothing untoward happened.

Unlike priests in seminaries or soldiers in barracks, inmates did not volunteer for prison and cannot be expected to morally internalize the codes of behavior imposed by the correctional bureaucracy (Sykes 1958; Goffman 1961). Instead, inmates legitimize their own norms and organize a social order that makes sense to their particular conditions (Sykes 1958, Skarbek 2012). Grouping inmates based on rehabilitation principles for them to be closely supervised by correctional employees is rational but untenable. The *pangkat* society is the inmates’ organic response to this asocial formula. They craft a social order that enforces norms of conduct, which makes prison life, the round-the-clock inmate interactions, predictable (Sykes 1958; Bottoms 1999; Skarbek, 2012). Despite Foucault’s notion (1995) of the panoptic surveillance of authority in modern prisons, inmate discipline matters more than official discipline because inmates are never “beyond the scrutiny of inmate eyes” (Lowman 1986).

The unpredictable shifts of an increasing population from different parts of the country exacerbate the meager resources of a prison nestled in a poor developing country. Thus, inmates gravitate to the familiar and similar. As expected, ethno-linguistic identity determined the basis for *pangkat* origins. Correctional authorities in other countries typically avoid housing inmates of different race or ethnicity in the same dormitories (Trulson, Marquart, Hemmens and Carroll 2008). Inmates themselves are known to self-segregate by race, ethnicity and gang affiliation in common spaces to prevent violent confrontations (Blatchford 2008).

The *pangkat* first functioned as a primary group, an alternative family suffused with expressive solidarity and bound by behavioral norms based on assessments of safety and survival and on local morality. The home *pangkat* answered inmates' need to feel safe, secure and understood in the context of recognizably common language, dispositions, traditions, habits, food preferences associated with the of being a Tagalog, Bisaya, Cebuano, Illonggo, Ilocano, Manila Boy, etc.

Competition and tension over dominance and usurpation typical in center-periphery relations fueled the rivalry between the Sigue Sigue Tagalogs and the OXO non-Tagalogs. Mutual accusations of predation escalated into rivalry riots in the 1950s until the 1980s. Riots not only fed the momentum for expressive solidarity and identity, they also bolstered the rationale for inmate gangs as “conflict groups” or “defense groups” (Hunt, Riegel, Morales, and Waldorf 1993); Useem and Reisig 1999; Skarbek 2011).

While inmates have protested against correctional administration through noise barrages, riots were usually directed against rival gangs. Although guards and employees have been injured in the course of planned escapes and personal vendetta, riots directed *en masse* against Bureau employees were hardly reported. Thus, it is difficult to consider here riots as collective violence mobilized to effect disturbances of the prison routine to protest policy, e.g., the authorities' curtailment of previous privileges or “crackdowns” on contraband and illegal activities (Useem and Reisig 1999).

***Pangkat* as Governance**

“*Magulo kapag walang mumuno*“ (There will be chaos when there’s no governance), Ernesto explained. The *pangkat* operates mechanisms of management of day-to-day life but also sees though some long-range plans in the compound. With minimal supervision from Bureau employees, *pangkat* officers facilitate regular head counts, carry out security and peacekeeping duties, guide visitors, monitor inmate activities, and maintain dormitories. They initiate and supervise the construction of dormitory extensions and other facilities. They liaise with the administration and various civil society groups (CSGs) such as religious, non-government, private and volunteer organizations involved in the compound.

The *Pangkat Magna Carta*

Written and centrally displayed in every *brigada*, the *Magna Carta*, or the law of the *pangkat*, commands orderly and constructive behavior among inmates within and outside their gang. It demands respect to Bureau employees and visitors and guests. Inmates could not recall when they were promulgated but said already they existed before they came, i.e., more than 20 years ago.

The BNG qualified that the laws of the *pangkat* instill self-discipline (*disiplina sa sarili*), respect for others, for fellow inmates and Bureau employees (*pagrespeto sa kapwa... kakosa at empleyado*), and protection and love for one’s fellow inmates (*protektahan at mahalín ang mga kakosa*) (Bahala Na Gang No date: 2-3). Although each gang has its distinct law, they share common themes on good behavior, respect for Bureau employees, property of fellow inmates, the leaders and officers of the *pangkat*, and contribution to the *pangkat* fund. They admonish against conflict and violence with fellow inmates, adultery or a romantic relationship with another inmate’s wife, and use of illegal drugs. Refer to Appendix A for the *magna carta* of BCJ.

***Pangkat* Justice and Punishment**

Respect of the rights and property of inmates from other gangs is emphasized. “*Mas mahirap at magkakagulo na magkasala ka sa*

miyembro ng ibang pangkat” (It is more difficult and dangerous if one offends members of another *pangkat*), Ignacio qualified. These violations generate stronger consternation because it brings on inter-gang conflict that only a serious conference among *pangkat* leaders can resolve. After an inter-gang inquiry proves that an inmate was guilty of a serious offense (for example, adultery or brutal death) his *pangkat* is called to discipline him, often through retributive justice.

The gang can physically punish the offender with a *takal*, whipping by paddle while he lies prone on a bench. In order to deter others, it is carried out publicly before an audience of his *pangkat* or the *pangkat* of the aggrieved party. Gangs believe this to be “a necessary final recourse” to put in line stubbornly delinquent (*sobrang pasaway*) inmates.

Sensing my disapproval, one commander asked my opinion on disciplining incorrigible delinquents. “Let’s say, in a case where an inmate from another gang killed and mutilated your member, who should feel like a son to you. Wouldn’t you require a severe punishment to prevent an imminent riot if the issue remains unresolved between the gangs?” At that point, I could not ask whether the example was hypothetical or real. I answered, “If he is killed as punishment, it will not bring my son’s life back anyway”. The inmates pointed out that my logic does not apply to prison reality. “*Hindi yan pi-pwede rito.*” (That does not apply here.) They reasoned that if nothing is done, enmity and war would erupt. Thus, the swift response of force is effective. Retribution averts impending violence.

***Pangkat* Leadership**

The head executive of a *pangkat* is the commander, also called, though less frequently, *bosyo*. He represents his *pangkat* in meetings with the Bureau and with commanders of other *pangkat*. “I am their spokesperson,” declares one commander. “*Parang ama ng pamilya,*” (Like a father of a family) another commander declared. The commander functions like a municipality or city mayor, and the *mayores* function like barangay chairpersons as local executives. Commanders consult the *pangkat* elders consisting of the *agurangs* and selected advisers

when necessary. Other officers (*nanunungkulan*) hold positions with corresponding duties in the *pangkat*. Notably, a busy officer is the *kulturero* who monitors the brigada: where everyone is and what he is doing at all times.

Leaders see their positions as a duty with serious responsibilities. “They generate headaches” (*sakit ng ulo*), they said, as they need to address arising crises in the *pangkat* or *brigada*. They are expected to develop their locality, augment facilities and provisions, and raise funds for community activities and festivities. The BNG Commander wrote that leaders look for “sources of funds for the well-being of the *pangkat* and for the personal needs of inmates who do not receive visits” (*pwedeng pagkakitaan ng pera para sa kapakanan ng pangkat pati na ang mga pansariling pangangailangan lalo na doon sa walang dalaw*) (Bahala Na Gang [No Date]: 3).

A leader is expected to know his members well, spot human capital in them, and identify their skills for collective good. “*Kung kailangan ng karpintero, meron. Kung kailangan ng ganito, meron. Kung saan magaling ang inmate doon sya ilalagay*” (If a carpenter is needed, we have somebody. If another skill is needed, we have somebody), the inmates explained. A good leader, they said, assigns the person where he excels.

The *pangkat* seeks the consensus of members to decide important matters such as appointment of positions, key projects, resolving conflicts, and dealing with changes in the Bureau. Vote counting on issues hardly occur. Instead, they rely on small group caucuses (*kuro-kuro*) among members.

A leader must have stayed long enough to have deep a sense of prison life and no longer “thinks like a free person” (*utak-laya*). One must have deep concern for fellow inmates (*malasakit sa kapwa-inmate*), know how to deal with fellow inmates (*makisama*) and coordinate (*makipag-usap*) with the Bureau smoothly and effectively. Over the years, being educated is valued in leaders as communicating with the Bureau through writing, preferably in English, became increasingly important. Although gangs may communicate in Filipino with the Bureau, gang leaders deploy the use of English as a claim to cultural

capital, a demonstration of their high educational status. Moreover, with English remaining the official medium of communication in the Bureau and Philippine state bureaucracy the use of English seems to enhance the chances that the request will be promptly attended.

Pangkat commanders meet regularly and are expected to confer with one another to quell any brewing tension, agree on common projects, if any, and negotiate to stake the best for their respective gang. Gang leaders and influential inmates, e.g., ranking politicians or respected affluent inmates, have developed expressive ties with one another as well. During one of my visits, a christening of a commander's child was held at the main chapel where commanders and VIPs of different gangs stood as *ninong sa binyag* (godfathers), a ceremony that made them *magkumpare* (compadres or co-parents).

Leaders hold their post so long as they are "effective" and under normal circumstances vacate the position only upon release or transfer. They are relieved from duty (*pinapahiyang*) when they "botch up big time" (*may malaking bulilyaso*), unable to resolve trouble with other gangs or the Bureau, or become too selfish (*naging makasarili*), the inmates explained. *Hiyang* in Filipino means, "accustomed to" but in this case, the word distinctly means, unseating a leader. Leaders are replaced by consensus through caucuses with the *agurangs* and *pangkat* members. Sometimes, the inmates appeal directly to the Bureau to "throw out" disgraced leaders to the penal colonies (*ipatatapon sa kolonya*).

The *pangkats* exists so that "*may pwera kaming inmates*" (to have power as inmates). This bid to participate and be represented in major decisions in the compound is ever present in the inmates' narratives and actions. In the compound one can sense that inmates are abuzz with a sense of direction, know what to do, what not to do, who to listen to, and what to say when asked. There is also a sense of order, safety and organization vis-a-vis the felt lack of guards in the compound interiors.

The headquarters of the *pangkat* typically houses the work and residential quarters of the commander. Gangs form partnerships with civil society groups (CSGs): foundations, non-government and private

organizations for religious, educational, civic, sports and similar rehabilitation-oriented programs.

The high inmate-guard ratio, the physical set-up of shared dormitories rather than single cells, inmates' access to "straits" and "nooks" in the compound hinder the Bureau employees from spontaneously intervening when disputes erupt. Thus, "community self-policing" occurs so that orderly behavior, enforcement of basic sanitary measures, and routine activities can proceed. Where there is the inadequacy of authorized agencies to deliver the needs of the community, an informal, local organization develops local governance and arbitration (Skaperdas 1992; Venkatesh and Murphy 2007; Skarbek 2012).

The gangs in U.S. prisons are viewed as forms of extra-legal governance that fills the power vacuum that state agencies cannot adequately provide (Skarbek 2012). Similarly, street gangs, organized criminal groups, marginalized and racially-segregated ghettos need to have their operations, activities and transactions monitored, their transactions fulfilled and disputes settled without access to formal state agencies (Levitt and Venkatesh, 2000; Skaperdas 2001; Venkatesh 2007). The *pangkats* with their hierarchy of *panunungkulan* (duty positions) augment the inmates' provisions, and deliver informal justice given the inadequacy of BJMP resources (Narag 2005). The *pangkat* evolved as *de facto* government of the inmate population, not officially recognized but sanctioned in practice by the Bureau. It has gone far as promulgating a *magna carta*, a body of laws that codified collectively agreed upon norms representing inmate autonomy alongside the Bureau's authority.

That *pangkat* governance that stands as resistance or opposition to prison authority is questionable. The Bureau itself may have contributed to the rise of inmate governance. During the early American period, in the Penal farms of San Ramon in Zamboanga "a merit system was devised" for inmates who "showed respect and loyalty to their supervisors" where they were ranked, "corporal, sergeant, 2nd lieutenant, 1st lieutenant, captain and finally, major" (Laurel 1969: 38). The word *mayor*, the title given to the *brigada* leader, likely was derived from the inmate rank of major.

Outside state-sanctioned mechanisms, responsive and effective “indigenous justice systems” often arise to attend to delinquent behavior to restore order, prevent instability, and offer redress (Venkatesh 2007: 132). Violation penalties, including the harsh punishment of *takal* may be regarded as this kind of “indigenous justice”. As to how far this justice is alienated from the Bureau’s official recourse to discipline needs further examination. In 1915 the Bureau of Prisons established the prisoners’ court where inmates acted as judges, prosecution, defense, and witnesses to adjudicate cases of inmate misbehavior (The Philippine Commission 1916: 230). Current operating practice allots seats for inmate representatives in the Inmate Council, an advisory body to the Prison Superintendent on matters affecting their population (Bureau of Corrections 2000: 19). Moreover, the *pangkat*’s recent practice of stripping extremely delinquent inmates (*sobrang pasaway*) of membership aligns with the Bureau’s disciplinary order for such inmates to be removed from the *pangkat brigada* and transferred to isolation dormitories (*bartolina*) incommunicado from rest of the population.

Transition Toward Peace and Development

Inmates contend that the compound is now peaceful, and opportunities to reform” (*pagkakataong magbago*) through religious, educational and vocational training activities, and to engage in livelihood programs, sports and other positive interests abound. They jointly explained, “*Pag marunong kang dumiskarte, masipag ka, aasenso ka... dati merong payat lang dito, dahil sa lugaw, yumaman na, ang taba na... dati naranasan kong wala talaga ako, rasyon lang, walang pang-kape... ngayon maraming pwedeng pagkakitaan dito.*” (If you use your wits, if you work hard, you can improve your lot... someone used to be thin, his porridge (business) made him rich, he’s fat now... I used to have nothing, just prison rations, nothing even for coffee... there are many income sources now.)

I pointed out that some inmates seem to enjoy privileges more than others, Elmer explained, “*ang mga preso mismo ang nag-allow*

ng VIP¹, gusto mong may magsisilbi sa yo? Magbayad ka. Gusto mo, maluwig ang tulugan mo? Bilhin mo yung nagbebenta ng lugar niya. Walang pilitan.” (The inmates are the ones who allow VIPs. You want someone to serve you? Pay. You want more sleeping space? Buy space from someone who sells his. Nobody gets forced.)

They proudly showed me various “developments” in the compound such as the multi-purpose gym where popular bands, movie stars, and celebrities have performed. They pointed out newly built chapels, learning halls, and arts studio filled with artworks by inmates. They escorted me to basketball and tennis courts where “any inmate can play”. They qualified that most of these facilities were “inmate-initiated”, meaning funds, resources, and labor to build them were raised, pooled together or facilitated through inmate efforts. My BCJ escort showed off the tile flooring in the BC quarters and said, “*Sila ang unang nagpa-tiles dito, ginaya ng lahat.*” (They were first to install tiles in dormitories, everyone followed”).

Despite limited space, most *brigadas* had the ambiance of a functional and well-attended home, decorated with items that pleased homeowners and visitors. Fish aquariums, decorative crafts and framed paintings by inmates give a reassuring atmosphere. Sports trophies, award certificates, and framed photos of *pangkat* and community activities, visiting celebrities, family and friends are displayed. The symbol of the *pangkat*, names of officers are painted on walls. A strong sense of pride in the *pangkat*, its quarters, members’ decorum, and achievements is palpable.

Some areas resemble slums, others reminiscent of middle class quarters. Open areas were converted to small parks and gardens or allocated to wet markets, food stalls, and sari-sari stores; a mini animal zoo in one area delights the inmates’ children. Thus, the Bilibid Maximum appears more like a compacted Philippine society with different autonomous provinces, municipalities and barangays than a prison of warring gangs.

1 In prison argot, inmates derisively refer to a VIP as *Very Important Preso* denoting that regardless of how “important”, i.e. powerful, wealthy or influential, an inmate is, he is still a *preso* (prisoner).

Visiting Policies and Entry Of CSGs

The first factor that influenced the *pangkat* society's transformation from defense groups or conflict gang to local community government is the more relaxed entry of visiting family and friends into the compound (*pagpasok ng mga dalaw sa loob*).

Family and friends can now join inmates in their common areas and dormitories up to four or five days a week. Moreover, an inmate's wife (legal or common-law) can stay overnight with the inmate for conjugal visits and their children below 10 years of age can stay in as well, approximating the set-up granted to colonists where inmates' families can live inside the penal farm.

The inmates collectively express their relief:

“Napakalaking bagay po na nakapasok ang aming pamilya dito sa loob... nabibigyan kami ng pag-asa... hindi panay lalaki lang ang nakikita mo, may mga babae na, may mga batang naglalaro sa paligid... Ang walang mga dalaw. pag nakikita yung dalaw ng iba, nagiging masaya na rin sila.... nagiging normal ang pakiramdam.” (It made a very big difference that our families can visit us inside... this gives us hope... we now see not just men but women, and children play around... those with no visitors also become happy to see other inmates' visitors... there is a sense of normalcy.)

The proximity of family and friends bring in tremendous psycho-emotional support. The influx of visits bring in the extra food, amenities and cash, which stimulate a local economy of handicrafts, wet and dry goods market and food stalls. The presence of women and children “normalizes” the tense all-male population. Conjugal visits naturally relieve the emotional and sexual tension of legally, or common-law, married inmates. The female presence relaxes the strain of an all-male population and presents the slight possibility of a romantic relationship that enables inmates to project their heterosexual masculine identities. Stories abound of inmates who were single or abandoned by wives finding new partners from the kin and friends who tagged along with other inmates' *dalaw*.

According to the Bureau these relaxed visiting privileges were granted when the approach shifted “from punitive approach to rehabilitative” under the New Administrative Code of 1987 and Proclamation no. 495 under Pres. Corazon Aquino. Another hypothesis claims that the political prisoners from the Marcos regime in the 1970s and 1980s influenced the inmates to lobby for more rights including visitation privileges such as conjugal visits (Tesoro 2011b).

Inmates recalled the help of religious groups in the 1970s to intervene in the wake of worsening prison conditions and violence and in lobbying for visitation privileges. They mentioned the efforts of Msgr. Ernesto Espiridion through the office of the Bilibid chaplaincy in petitioning to the Philippine Catholic Church to intervene for prison welfare. Responding to the appeal of the Inmate Cursillo in 1975, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) formed the Episcopal Commission on Prisoners Welfare (ECOPRIW), which later became known as the Episcopal Commission for Prison Pastoral Care (ECPPC). These initiatives gave way to a series of far-reaching Church-related interventions in Philippine jails and prisons (htm)

Various religious groups, Catholic, Protestant, Born-Again and other religions, started to become active in the compound. Inmates claimed they felt that people from free society “still cared for us” (*nagmamalasakit pa pala sa amin*). Soon an agreement was forged between the inmates and the Bureau that so long as inmates end the riots and behave peacefully and orderly, visitors can enter the compound.

The second factor of the transition is the entry of CSGs such as religious organizations, non-government organizations, people’s organizations, advocacy groups, private organizations and other volunteer groups. Over the last two decades or so, the involvement of CSGs in the compound increased. Inmates participated mostly in “moral and spiritual programs” facilitated by various religious groups through the Chaplaincy Office of the Bureau with the participation of 80 to 89 per cent of NBP inmates. Sports and recreation programs trailed as the next most popular with 44 to 53 percent participation while livelihood and educational programs trail behind with an average participation of

27 per cent and 11 percent respectively. (Bureau of Corrections 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011).

The combined effect of regular and purposeful physical, mental and spiritual activities and the fresh energy brought in by the *taga-laya* combatted what inmates famously call *buryong*, a pathological mental state attended by a combination of boredom, despair, and anxiety due to inactivity associated with incarceration. Inmates including those who hardly received family visits found connection with CSG volunteers. For example, an inmate told my students, "*Para na rin po kaming nadalaw pag nandito kayo*" (It's like receiving family visits with you around)," during an interaction program held by an education NGO at the compound.

Beyond spiritual care through prayer meetings, fellowship services, pastoral care and sacramental services, religious groups also provide inmates assistance for their physical needs. These include medical and dental missions, supplemental feeding, "gift-giving", peer counseling, psycho-spiritual counseling, education, literacy and values formation training. Some have also offered paralegal aid to inmates. (Bureau of Corrections 2004: 8)

The popularity of religious activities among inmates prompted the Bureau to "recognize(d) the powerful influence of religion on the rehabilitation of prisoners... and (to) encourage(d) the involvement of religious volunteers and NGOs" (Bureau of Corrections 1997: 8). Increasingly, "different religious organizations, and civic volunteers were encouraged to continue catering to the spiritual needs of prisoners" (Bureau of Corrections 2010: 12).

The Bureau's programs were also recognized as "augmented by the assistance of volunteers and donations coming from other GOs and NGOs" (Bureau of Corrections 2011: 18). Filling certain provisions that the state is not likely to provide, the Bureau welcomed the "active involvement of private groups and other NGOs who give donations in kind such as prisoners' athletic supplies and uniforms" (Bureau of Corrections 2007: 12).

The steady flow of family, friends, and CSG volunteers and their projects created opportunities for inmates to establish a local economy

of goods and services and participate in it as agents who earn income and contribute to family and fellow inmates. They can now gain status as economic agents or leaders in the different programs. Inmates can now be program coordinators, peacekeeping officers, pastors, facilitators and church laymen, work supervisors, etc. More importantly this flow attenuated the tendency of *pangkats* to become exclusive as a group as other “ties” developed outside the confines of the gang. “*Hindi na nag-aaway kasi yung mga miyembro ng magkakaibang gang, magkakaklase na, or magkakasama na sa simbahan*” (No one fights anymore as members of different gangs have become classmates or members of the same church).

Over the past two decades or more, “peace and order generally prevailed in the prison compounds” (Bureau of Corrections, 2006: 7, 2007: 4). The Bureau proudly declared that it “monitors the welfare of inmates taking into consideration their needs as human beings” (Bureau of Corrections 2006: 7), and that the inmates “continued to engage in livelihood programs and enjoying family visits” (Bureau of Corrections 2009: 6).

Pangkat solidarity provides “social capital” as access to “a durable network of more or less institutional relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu 1986: 248). It fortifies the inmate identity through some “credential certification” with a *pangkat* who “stands behind” him. The *pangkat* “represented resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions” (Lin 1999: 35). But while strong ties build local cohesion they can potentially lead to fragmentation (Granovetter 1973), which made *pangkats* into parochial enclaves susceptible to rivalry riots. The intense solidarity alienates them from other gangs. Moreover, it fabricates mutual distrust between *pangkat* society, the Bureau, and free society groups that isolated the former leading to “an erosion of social capital” experienced by racially segregated American ghettos (Putnam 1995).

Before the compound’s barriers were “brought down” to visitors and CSGs, social capital was limited to physical protection, slightly better sustenance, some emotional support and an assurance to

sociability from intra-*pangkat* camaraderie. Social capital increases in value when it moves beyond bonding similar people to bridging gaps between diverse people through norms of reciprocity (Putnam 1995). Such value increased when different *pangkats* cooperated in creating a peaceful environment that to attract more of such incursions of the *taga-laya*. Thus, the “strength of weak ties” developed the *pangkat* bridged with other *pangkats*, the Bureau, and CSGs networks, thereby widening the net in polling contacts and resources (Granovetter 1973). Networks to free society open to a plethora of possibilities. They offer a fresh dose of sociability to the compound, engage inmates in fresh non-government styled rehabilitation approaches, and offer new statuses.

Caveats on the *Pangkat*

As mentioned, this study did not delve deeply into the “dark side” of the gangs. But it is important to somehow outline a few possible problems that can escalate when there are no *checks and balances*. The *pangkats*’ orientation as conflict or defense gangs has diminished, partially due to the “development” from the burgeoning local economy, but dealing with the generated economic surplus can be a problem. The emerging “free market” of basic goods and labor in the compound can lead to further economic, and eventually social and political inequality where affluent inmates, those with visitors who bring in funds, or those well connected with CSGs are privileged more than others. How would the *pangkat* society, with its sizeable authority on the local population, manage the growing inequality?

“There are good governments and bad governments,” an inmate warned when I mentioned I was looking at self-governance as an emerging research theme. There are talks of individual inmates enriching themselves, bribing officials or employees, and engaging in illegal activities in the compound, and that ordinary or “less important” inmates simply “go with the flow” (*sumusunod lang sa agos*).

Some departures from official operating procedures, I believe, remedy problems stemming from the lack of state-provisions. Small

infractions to these rules provide basic comfort and allow some sense of autonomy beneficial to both the inmates and the Bureau. Within the local morality, the concessions granted by the guards to inmates who breach minor rules, e.g. bringing in of some contraband items, consensual privatization of space by inmates, authority of inmates over fellow inmates in view of order, constitute innovative solutions to unmet needs. But aggressive competition over economic opportunities and markets, positions of influence, and links to the authority channels and to CSGs that bring in resources, if unchecked, can generate systematic corruption and exploitation that eventually corrode the social order of trust, norms and constructive networks achieved in the compound. The collective memory of gang wars and the militia capabilities of most, if not all, gangs can potentially revive the cycle of violence when large-scale corruption and political competition can no longer be resolved through constructive social network processes.

I doubt that the *pangkat* is currently organized to systematically accomplish high-risk, serious and high-profit predatory crimes. But it is possible that individual inmates can tap into its network to collude with other individual inmates for such criminal profit. Further study can be pursued to explore how far the social capital or networks that generate constructive cooperation can be utilized for criminal purposes. Naturally, recruitment for and organizing crimes such as drug trafficking, extortion and kidnap for ransom within and outside prison can be easier accomplished given access to a large assembly of individuals presumably with skills in criminal perpetration. Previous works on the link between social networks and organized crime (for example, Felson 2004; Von Lampe and Johansen 2004; Felson 2006; Morselli and Giguere 2006; Morselli 2009; and Venkatesh 2007) can guide such researches on the “amorphous, unbounded and unstable” network of gangs and organizations and the setting where they interact (Felson 2004: 156).

CONCLUSIONS

Through the *pangkat* the inmates create a *society within a society*, a primary social group that serves as family and home that helped them cope with the “*pains of imprisonment*” (Sykes 1958). Formed at first

along ethno-linguistic identity, its membership evolved along a variety of pragmatic criteria. It provides them security, predictability, and access to better goods and services. It insulates inmates from predatory inmates and the population from the breaking into the Hobbesian state of “war of all against all” with rival gangs.

The *pangkat* society’s transition into a peaceful community came when barriers from the outside world were lowered. The inmates thus “made a home” out of the compound akin to what Goffman (1961) has classically framed as *colonization*, manufacturing a version of the outside world by making life in prison agreeable and pleasant. Invigorated by the influx, the *pangkat* network of social ties moved toward constructive local self-governance that enabled inmates to partner with external organizations to ameliorate state rehabilitation programs.

The influx of *taga-laya* reintegrates convicts even before their release into free society giving them a chance to prove their capability for pro-social values beyond the antisocial subculture of an isolated criminal population. Inmates can now challenge their moral rejection, the most “painful” consequence of incarceration. They could “prove themselves” as autonomous economic agents, achievers of respected positions, and participants in meaningful social exchange as moral human beings who live everyday life with some purpose.

The public rejection of and the Bureau’s ambivalence about officially acknowledging the *pangkat* society stems from the distrust in extra-legal governance and informal justice mechanisms in favor of the formal state-sanctioned procedures. But the authorization of community-based governance and justice such as inmate courts and the inmate police since the American period and the policy of allowing families to join inmates in the country’s penal colonies suggest such practices have historical precedence and were probably sanctioned by the state.

Their history of violence, and names reminiscent of anti-social gang subculture incongruously represent the gangs’ constructive posturing. However, “neutralizing” gang names or reorganizing them “from outside” through Bureau-sanctioned initiatives will only undermine the identity exclusively formed by the shared experience of a past of

violence, and economic and moral disenfranchisement that with which no *taga-laya* can empathize.

A wide range of aspects need to be studied other than corruption in the compound. First, a further inquiry on the dynamics of leadership and governance among inmates will yield tremendous insights into the basis of Philippine social and political organization. Do inmate elites share similar characteristics with Filipino political elites, for example? Does the Weberian classification of rational, traditional, and charismatic leadership apply in the *pangkat*? Is consensus building among inmates a form of democratic deliberation?

Second, there is need to study *pangkat* society in other prison compounds. With variables such as design and layout of dormitories, population size and composition, leadership personalities, visiting policies, CSG involvement, and shifts in administration affecting the inmate society, the replicability of my findings in Bilibid Maximum elsewhere remains to be seen.

Third, the possibility of deeper historical understanding of the origins of inmate society earlier than the 1950s needs to be further pursued.

Fourth, the influence of CSGs, particularly religious organizations on the norms and organizations in the compound -- the constitution of the Iglesia ni Cristo and the Christian Brigade as *brigadas*, for example —should rethink whether the *pangkat* society is the only inmate *society within a society* that can flourish in prison.

Fifth, views from less prominent, newer members of the *pangkat*, members of non-*pangkat* and employees of the Bureau can only complete the partial picture that this study has offered on social life in a prison compound.

Finally, it would be useful to further look into the implications of the kind of social organization suggested by the *pangkat*, with its social division based on security, common experiences, ethno-linguistic identity and social capital engagements, on broader structures of social control and divisions in Philippine society.

Appendix A.

MAGNA CARTA OF BATANG CITY JAIL (Translated from Filipino)

1. Respect and obey the employees and officers of the national penitentiary.
2. Respect and obey the leaders and officers of brigade or gang.
3. Respect the protectors and the elders of the gang.
4. Avoid criticisms and gossips towards fellow inmates that may lead to misunderstanding.
5. Do not harm fellow inmates but rather be helpful to them at all times.
6. Respect all fellow inmates' visitors, whether they are also inmates or from the free society.
7. Avoid creating factions within the gang (*barrio-barrio* system).
8. Adultery with the wife of a fellow inmate is strictly prohibited.
9. Do not steal and swindle fellow inmates especially those who are from other gangs.
10. Avoid being selfish that may cause rift within our gang.
11. Do not betray your fellow inmates especially members of our gang.
12. Any problem should first be conveyed with the *mayor* before speaking of it with other inmates.
13. Each one of us has the obligation to give something to the fund that will strengthen and improve our gang.
14. Selling and using prohibited drugs are strictly forbidden.
15. Any problem with fellow inmate should not cause you to draw a bladed weapon that can kill your fellow inmate.

Whoever disobeys or violates these rules of our gang shall receive punishment determined by our gang.

Source: Batang City Jail. No Date

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