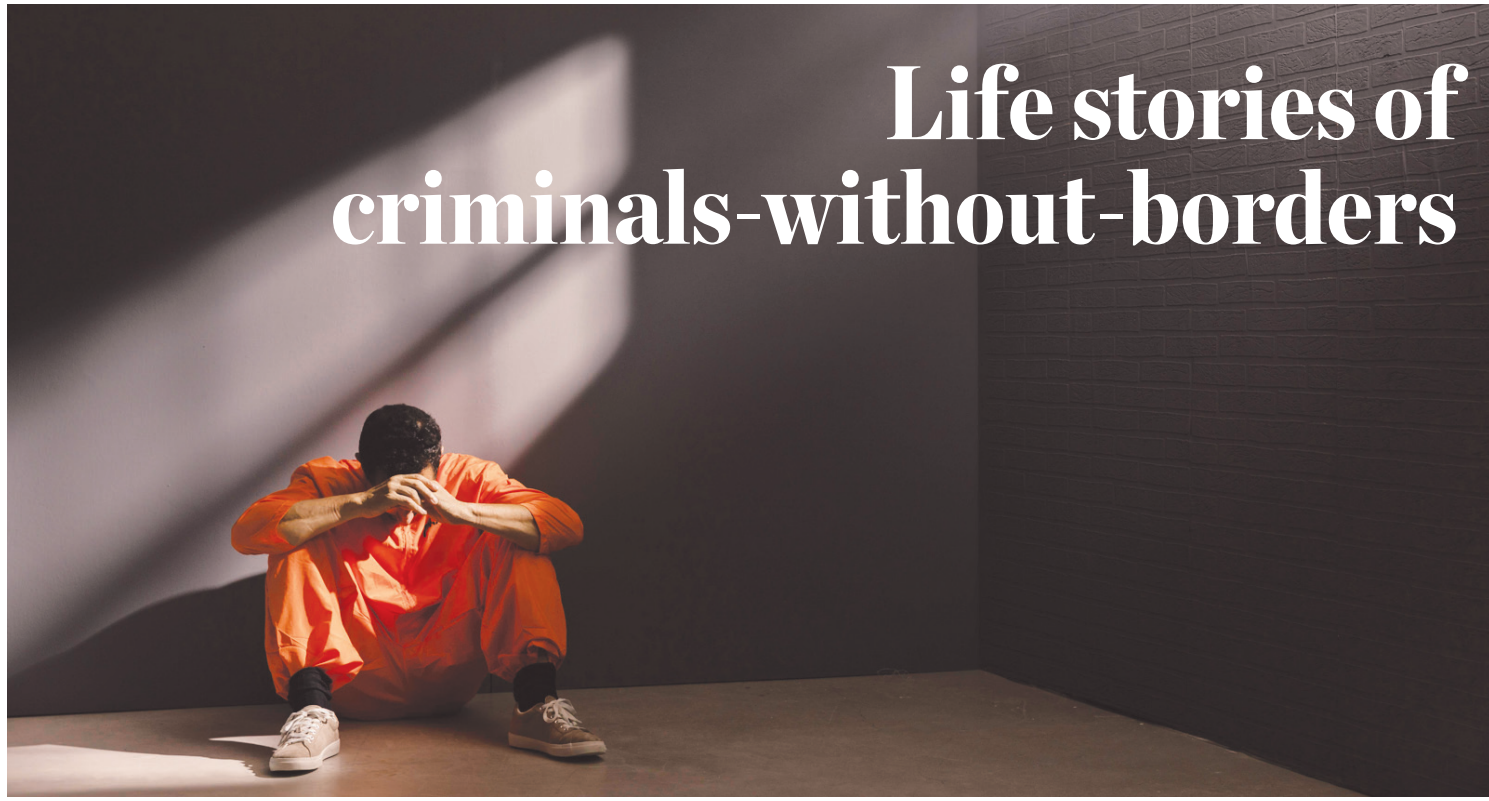


Constructing life stories is an extremely useful technique in investigating messy and often unintelligible social phenomena for which information is typically fragmented, uneven, piecemeal, hidden, and often inconsistent. It was a practice I learned from the Philippine popular education community, particularly the six-week community leadership seminars run for years by the Education for Life Foundation led by Girlie Villariba and Ed de la Torre. A closer examination of life stories not only offers ways of unpacking puzzles but is also a source of rich, localized knowledge needed for developing inferences on how problems can be restated, and solutions may be created and done differently.

Political scientists Kathleen Thelen and Sven Steinmo said that life stories could illuminate on how “branching processes” evolve and get consolidated, like, for example, the points of departure from established patterns that lead to outcomes that are ultimately shaped and mediated, constrained and refracted, though never solely, by institutions designed and chosen by people. To Filipinos, such constrained and refracted outcomes are captured by the phrase “*kapit sa patalim*” (literally, hang tight on the knife) and its implied connotations of unorthodox forms of resilience. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm once used the phrase “the ancient politics of Robin Hood” to illustrate how someone officially regarded as a terrorist or criminal may be some other people’s hero.

I once used life stories to find explanations for the kidnapping phenomenon in southern Philippines from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s. In the chapter I wrote for Pancho Lara’s book on the shadow economies of Mindanao, I pieced together the life stories of Lanao warlord Ali Dimaporo; Cotabato-based Moro rebels Abogado Bago, Faisal Marohombas, and Alonto Tahir; and Basilan-based Moro rebel Julhani Jillang,



FREEPIK

Life stories of criminals-without-borders

YELLOW PAD ERIC D. U. GUTIERREZ

to draw the inferences that kidnappings were used as a political weapon, to build popular Robin Hood images, and as a criminal enterprise. It is uncanny that I found many parallels with these Mindanao cases when I started compiling and comparing the life stories of drug lords in Myanmar, Afghanistan, Bolivia, and Colombia. To illustrate:

Myanmar’s Lo Hsing Han (1934-2013) was an expert in striking deals. His success lay in carefully balancing relationships with state authorities, whether Burmese, Thai, or Chinese. He turned himself into a resource that they needed. A drug lord just making a profit would simply be hunted down. But a drug lord serving a useful political and financial purpose could become an ally and receive protection. Over time, Lo had a huge impact on the local economy in Myanmar’s opium-producing rural northeast. While often seen as

a warlord and armed actor — he was also substantially an agent of capitalism who played a role in monetizing the rural economy and enabling certain rural areas to be connected directly to outside markets. When he died, *The Economist* called him a “heroin king and pillar of the economy.”

Afghanistan’s Lal Jan Ishaqzai found out how the protection that drug lords receive, despite their deep pockets and leverages, is contingent on many issues that can quickly shift in a constantly changing context. Born in Sangin, Helmand, the most strife-torn district, he controlled the district’s bazaar and levied taxes until he was ousted in 2003 by a tribal competitor who was the main American ally. He retreated to Quetta, Pakistan, but eventually moved to Kandahar under the protection of Wali Karzai, the president’s half-brother. But Wali Karzai was assassinated in July 2011, leading to Ishaqzai’s arrest, conviction, and incarceration at the high-security Pul-e-Charkhi prison funded by the Americans. Embarrassingly for Kabul and the US government, Ishaqzai escaped back to Quetta

in June 2013 with the help of his allies in government.

Bolivia’s El Rey de la Cocaína (King of Cocaine), Roberto Suarez Gomez (1932-2000), used his legitimate cattle business and his fleet of small aircraft as the infrastructure for his drug business. Then, he carefully constructed its profitability by being a useful intermediary between key actors while engaging in “ostentatious philanthropy” — he paid for church repairs, paved streets in poor villages, built soccer fields, and sponsored scholars. Suarez’s operations show that the illicit drug trade is much larger than its “big men,” it has vast production, processing, and distribution networks that do not dissolve simply by eliminating those at the top.

The Castaño brothers of northern Colombia — Fidel, Vicente, and Carlos — were the most feared anti-communist vigilantes who not only succeeded in ousting leftist rebels in the Uraba region but started a national paramilitary movement that transformed criminal entrepreneurs into political actors demanding to be heard in peace negotiations. Differences

between Vicente and Carlos ultimately led to their downfall, but they can be collectively credited for playing a key role in the consolidation of agricultural commercialization and land speculation in the northern regions.

Lo Hsing Han’s case reminded me of the Remullas of Cavite and the Duranos of Cebu in John Sidel’s classic study on Capital, Coercion, and Crime — local bosses who become tycoons. Ishaqzai reminded me of Norberto Manero, Jr. (Kumander Bucay), who had many unseen protectors in government and who, after his conviction for a most gruesome killing, went almost in and out of prison at will and settled at the prison of his choice — the Davao Penal Colony. Suarez reminded me of tobacco magnate Lucio Tan and the various licit and illicit means he used to build his vast empire. And the Castaño brothers reminded me of the Alsa Masa vigilantes of Davao City.

Three conclusions may be drawn from the life stories of these drug lords. First, they may be considered pioneers of capital, a narco-bourgeoisie, as scholars

Nazih Richani and Kendra McSweeney call them, because they are the principal enforcers of a model of local capitalist accumulation in a rural setting. They link rural peasantries to market circuits, provide them with credit, sell their products, and are the force that enables local rural economies to transform into principal illicit crop producers.

Second, they are intermediaries, i.e. brokers and middlemen in economic transactions who display a remarkable ability to switch status — for example, from feared outlaw to beloved patron, or from greedy exploiter to generous investor or employer in collapsing local economies.

And third, they are what academics Ariel Ahram and Charles King call “arbitrageurs” who manage politics and order at the margins of the state and market. To quote Braudel, these authors state how arbitrageurs are creatures of the borderlands where states and empires had difficulty extending their own power. They were “uniquely gifted boundary-crossers, conducting both violent and non-violent transactions across political, economic, and cultural dividing lines.

“The most successful ones turned [out] to have something that everyone else wanted: the ability to serve as middlemen across uncertain boundaries while, in the process, reaping some of the profits for themselves.”

Collectively, these men may be called criminals-without-borders. They come in all shapes and life stories from many countries.

The full discussion of the life stories of these drug lords is in the forthcoming book *Rethinking Illicit Economies in Opium and Cocaine: Policy Responses to Drug Crops in the Global South*. ■

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Spratly Islands due to China’s reclamation activities (*Philstar.com*, Sept. 20, 2023).

Early this month, the Philippine military revealed a resurgence of Chinese swarming activity in the West Philippine Sea. The Coast Guard and Armed Forces reported “severe damage inflicted upon the marine environment and coral” at the Iroquois Reef, where it said 33 Chinese vessels had been moored in August and September. China, which has refused to recognize the 2016 ruling and has chafed at repeated mention of the case by Western powers, denied the latest claims of destruction of coral reefs (*Reuters*, Sept. 22, 2023).

Solicitor General Menardo Guevarra is studying the possibility of filing a second legal case before the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague. This is driven “not only by the alleged destruction of reefs but also by other incidents and the overall situation in the West Philippine Sea,” Guevarra told *Reuters*, adding that a report and recommendation would be sent to President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. and the foreign ministry.

Justice Carpio recommends instead that the Philippines submit the conflicting claims in the Spratly Islands to voluntary arbitration in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the principal judicial organ of the United Nations (UN) on international law. “All the other countries involved in the dispute — China, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei — must agree to bring the issue to the ICJ. Brunei usually follows the lead of China,” Justice Carpio said. (*Verafiles.org*, Sept 23, 2023).

God willing, there would be peace at last in the West Philippine Sea. ■

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Vog and health

More than 200 people fell ill from Taal’s volcanic smog or vog, prompting the Department of Health (DoH) to put the medical community under “white alert” in Calabarzon.

Over the weekend, Civil Defense Administrator and National Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council Executive Director Undersecretary Ariel Nepomuceno said that there had been at least 263 health consultations due to the vog.

Volcanic fumes, like vog, can be hazardous to health and can be life threatening. While it is colorless, vog comes with a visible haze and pungent odor similar to fireworks or a burning match.

Volcanic gas emissions can pose environmental and health risks to nearby communities, said the United States Geological Survey (USGS). It is easy to understand why. Like urban, industrial, and other pollution sources, vog contains toxic contaminants, mostly sulfur dioxide (SO₂) and acid particles. It explained that vog is comprised of gas and an aerosol of tiny particles and acidic droplets created when SO₂ and other gases emitted from a volcano chemically interact with sunlight and atmospheric oxygen, moisture, and dust.

Particularly problematic is the PM_{2.5} — particulate matter less than 2.5 micrometers in diameter which can settle deeply in the lungs when inhaled — which in vog is mainly composed of acid and neutral sulfate particles. These particles, that are also found in vehicle exhaust and smoke from fires, are smaller than the width of a human hair, noted the USGS. Meanwhile, SO₂ can irritate the skin and the tissues and mucous membranes of the eyes, nose, and throat.

While sensitivity to vog varies, individuals with pre-existing medical conditions are expected to be at highest risk, depending on the amount of emissions, their distance away from the eruptive vent, and wind direction from day to day. Also with increased sensitivity are children, pregnant women, and the elderly.

As classes were suspended in Metro Manila due to haze, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) said that meteorological conditions resulted



PHILIPPINE STAR/WALTER BOLLOZOS

TOURISTS and residents in Tagaytay wear face masks amid the emission of smog at Taal Volcano in Batangas on Sept. 22.

MEDICINE CABINET TEODORO B. PADILLA

in smog formation, and not vog, in the National Capital Region. Even so, smog also brings with it a number of health hazards. “This (smog) occurs when very small particles get trapped close to the surface due to the presence of a thermal inversion, high humidity, and calm wind conditions. These floating minute particles in the air could be from smoke, pollutants, or volcanic aerosols,” the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology, better known as Phivolcs, said as it explained that the haze the NCR suffered from was not vog.

DEALING WITH VOG

The International Volcanic Health Hazard Network (IVHHN), an umbrella organization for all research and dissemination of information on volcanic health hazards and impacts, provided guidance on how to prepare for and take protective actions to reduce the impact of vog on individuals.

In preparing for vog, the IVHHN said that it is important to understand the

hazard. It is helpful to be familiar with air monitoring sources as well as SO₂ and PM_{2.5} advisory codes/levels. Learning about wind conditions is also key to predicting if and when one might be affected by vog. Since vog can cause illness or exacerbate an existing one, it is important to keep medications handy such as those for asthma or other respiratory conditions. The group added that one can assume that asthma could get worse during periods of high vog, therefore, seek medical assistance as necessary if an individual is having asthma symptoms or other conditions when exposed to vog.

The IVHHN added that it is important not to smoke and to avoid second-hand smoke. Those exposed to vog must also stay hydrated to help loosen congestion. It added that warm or hot liquids may help some people. In managing congestion or irritation, over-the-counter nasal sprays or eye drops can help to reduce symptoms. If symptoms don’t improve, it is advisable to seek immediate medical care.

Other ways by which one could care for themselves and their family is by wearing N95-type particle-filtering respirators/masks as needed. But the IVHHN also said that children should not use N95 masks because they are sized for adults.

Also, outdoor exercise or exertion increases one’s chances of being affected by SO₂ gas and/or PM_{2.5}. So, staying indoors is the prudent action. The group said that, if possible, people should stay indoors and close all outside doors and windows when there is vog. (At the same time, there is a need to beware of becoming overheated.) Additionally, when staying indoors, eliminate other sources of pollutants such as smoking, candles, or incense. Even if the house is not well-sealed, the IVHHN said it may still offer some protection. If a room can be closed up, an appropriate air-cleaning device can help reduce the levels of vog.

However, one may consider moving to indoor areas that are better-sealed. An individual may consider temporarily relocating, if necessary. To minimize air infiltration while inside the vehicle, temporarily close the windows and vents, and turn the fan and air conditioner off.

Finally, staying updated on information coming from the government and official sources is crucial.

“We also remind the public to heed the advisories of the Department of Health (DoH) as well as the warnings being issued by the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology for the safety of everyone. Phivolcs and the DoH have been issuing warnings on the health hazards posed by the volcanic smog. We are amplifying these advisories and warnings for public awareness,” said Undersecretary Nepomuceno.

Teodoro B. Padilla is the executive director of Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Association of the Philippines (PHAP). PHAP represents the biopharmaceutical medicines and vaccines industry in the country. Its members are in the forefront of research and development efforts for COVID-19 and other diseases that affect Filipinos. ■

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