

Staging Culture: Igorot “Photogra-feeing” in Baguio City, Philippines

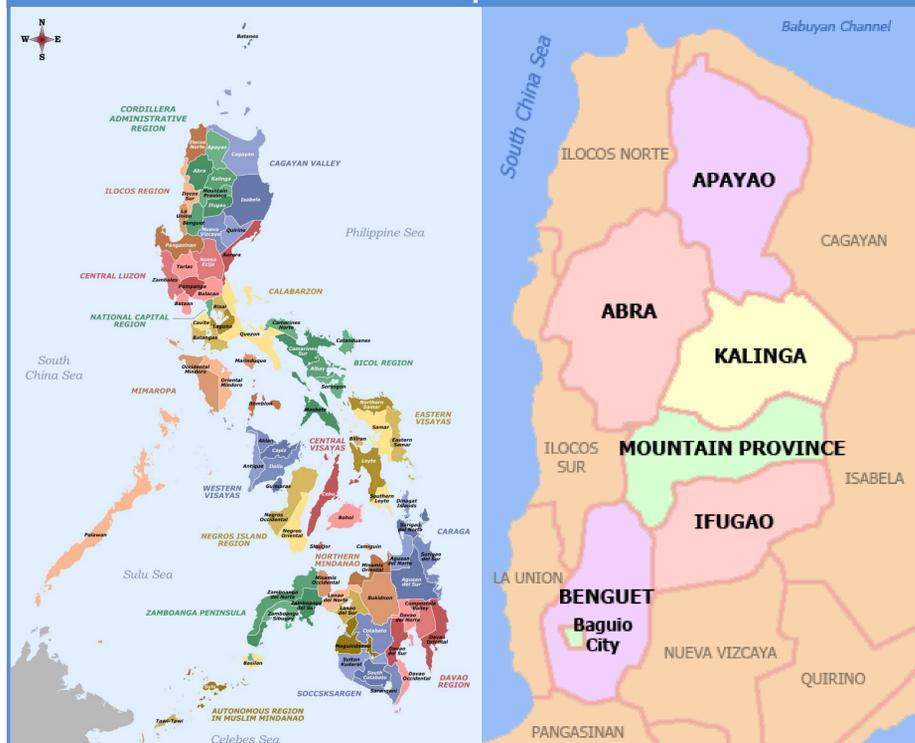
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Abstract

The exonym 'Igorot' refers to a collection of several indigenous ethnic groups residing in the mountains of central and northern Luzon. The City of Baguio, commonly known as the "Summer Capital of the Philippines", is the economic and educational center of the Cordillera Administrative Region, which encompasses most of the mountain range traditionally inhabited by 'Igorots'. The city has a large influx of local and international tourists, many of whom visit the Baguio Botanical Garden. Our research focuses on a group of Igorot elders that gather outside this popular tourist area. Here they pose, in exchange for money, for photographs while wearing "traditional" costumes. This practice of "photogra-fee" is embedded in problematic power inequalities between the people in front vis-a-vis behind the camera. Alternatively, this practice could be considered as an example of "staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1973) in that the elders earn an income (and agency) through posing in Igorot "uniforms." We produced a short ethnographic film to investigate this photogra-fee vs. staged authenticity dilemma. In the process we conducted life history interviews, visited homes and observed tourist-elder interactions. We suggest that the elders posing for photographs reflects a "paradox of primitivism" (Prins, 1997) in that the practice gives agency to the elders, while conflicting with the younger generation's notion of Igorot identity (Igorotak). We pose a series of questions regarding the effects of "photogra-fee" as it relates to power, agency, representation, cultural revitalization and generational divides.

Maps



Map of the Philippines and the Cordillera Administrative Region. Curtesy of Sanglahi86 and Scorpion Prinz.

Methods

2 summers spent in the Philippines
A total of 8 weeks in spent Baguio

Ethnographic Film
Life History Interviews of Elders
Interviews of Tourists
Participant Observation
Observation of Tourist-Elder Interactions
Home visits

Background

- The Philippines has a long **colonial history** originating with the arrival of the **Spanish in 1521**. The Spanish were a oppressive force in most of the Philippine lowlands, but lost their claim to the colony when the American defeated them in **the Spanish-American War of 1898**. The Philippines remained under American control until the United States formally recognized the **independence of the republic of the Philippines on the 4th of July, 1946**. The Philippines are home to an estimated 14-17 million indigenous peoples with 110 ethnolinguistic groups (UN Development Programme, 2015).
- The **City of Baguio** is the economic and educational center of the Cordillera Administrative Region, and was officially founded on the 1st of September 1909. The Cordillera Administrative Region encompasses most of the mountain range traditionally inhabited by 'Igorots'.
- '**Igorot**' refers to a collection of different indigenous groups. The colonial history of the Philippines has entailed a view of Igorots as backwards and uncivilized.



Elders from the Baguio City Botanical Garden



Domestic Tourist Posing as an Igorot Warrior

- Igorots have historically been **depicted as barbaric and uncivilized headhunters**. Dean C. Worcester, an American Colonial official is largely responsible for this depiction, as he created of a collection of more than 18,000 photographs and produced two films about the non-Christian tribes of the Northern Luzon. Worcester was opposed to Philippine self-determination and used his photographs as proof of the nation's unreadiness for independence (Capozzola, 2012).
- Baguio is a popular **tourist destination** and the city has many different stalls and attractions focusing on Igorot culture. Many of these stalls allows for the tourists to dress up in **Igorot Costumes** and pretend to be Igorot warriors.
- At the **Baguio Botanical Garden**, elders from different Igorot ethnic groups gather to **pose for photographs** for tourist. Rumors say that the elders are **allegedly rich** and do not need the money. The academic community in Baguio generally agrees that the elders gather at the garden because they want to, rather than because they have to.

“Photogra-feeing”



Photogra-feeing outside the Baguio City Botanical Garden



The house of an elder, occupied by 4 family members.

Conclusions

- The elders come from many different ethnolinguistic groups.
- Many have kinship ties in the group, and the elders report good group cohesion.
- The elders share their earnings. Usually around 80-200 pesos a day per person.
- The majority of the elders have very little income and support other relatives.
- The elders complain about being cheated by tourists who does not want to pay for taking photographs.
- The Igorot dress worn at the botanical garden is considered a 'costume' or 'uniform' by themselves.
- The elders gain an income and agency through posing, and the practice can be considered as a form of 'staged authenticity' (MacCannell, 1973).
- "photogra-feeing" is embedded in power inequalities between tourists and elders.
- The younger Igorot generation are against the "negative" representation of Igorot cultures by the elders.
- There is an inter-generational 'paradox of primitivism' at play (Prins, 1997).

References

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