

Cultural Bureaucracy and the Manufacture of Ifugao Oral Literature

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Oral literature in the digital age

- Oral literature is the product of a world where there was no possibility of recording with any accuracy long or significant texts in any way other than through memory and interpersonal transmission.
- However, literacy and recording technology have penetrated even the remotest parts of the world, so that even where a guardian of oral tradition cannot read or operate a video camera, they are influenced by their knowledge of these technologies.
- Moreover, penetration of rural areas by technology has moved ahead so rapidly since the Second World War that a mode of oral transmission which has persisted for millennia is suddenly confronted with an urban culture for which memory has almost no role at all.
- Elders who do not read and write are suddenly challenged by the demands of their grandchildren to operate a mobile phone, a skill that they may subsequently acquire.

Noli me tangere

- However, apart from these issues, oral literature faces other serious problems, their capture by the metropolitan elite
- Oral genres in a tribal society which was characterised by persistent headhunting as late as the 1940s are inevitably going to be seen as transgressive by the urban middle class
- They are characterised by features which make them unsuitable for 'packaging', including;
- Language: the language of the epics is in an archaic Ifugao not understood by younger people
- And if you do understand the narrative, the events are not in tune with the modern self-image of the Philippines
- Length: these episodic narratives can last as much as 24 hours
- Context: they are sung at funerals and other 'pagan' events
- Musical: they consist of a few melodic phrases repeated many times with no instrumental accompaniment
- Clearly, they need to be fixed up for consumption

Oral literature of the Ifugao

- This paper concerns the oral literature of the Ifugao people in the Cordillera of Northern Luzon, in the Republic of the Philippines.
- The project began in May 2010, was to document representative examples of genres of oral literature.
- Ifugao oral literature has been the focus of considerable previous attention. The famous Philippines ethnomusicologist, Jose Maceda, made a series of field recordings beginning in the 1960s which have never been published.
- One particular epic genre, the *hudhud*, was included by UNESCO in 2001 in its list of 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'.
- The Philippines is rich in comparable epic traditions and even the Ifugao have other narrative genres.
- Members of the nominating committee included *alim*, another Ifugao chant which some scholars believe to be older than *hudhud*, but the endorsement ultimately went to the latter.

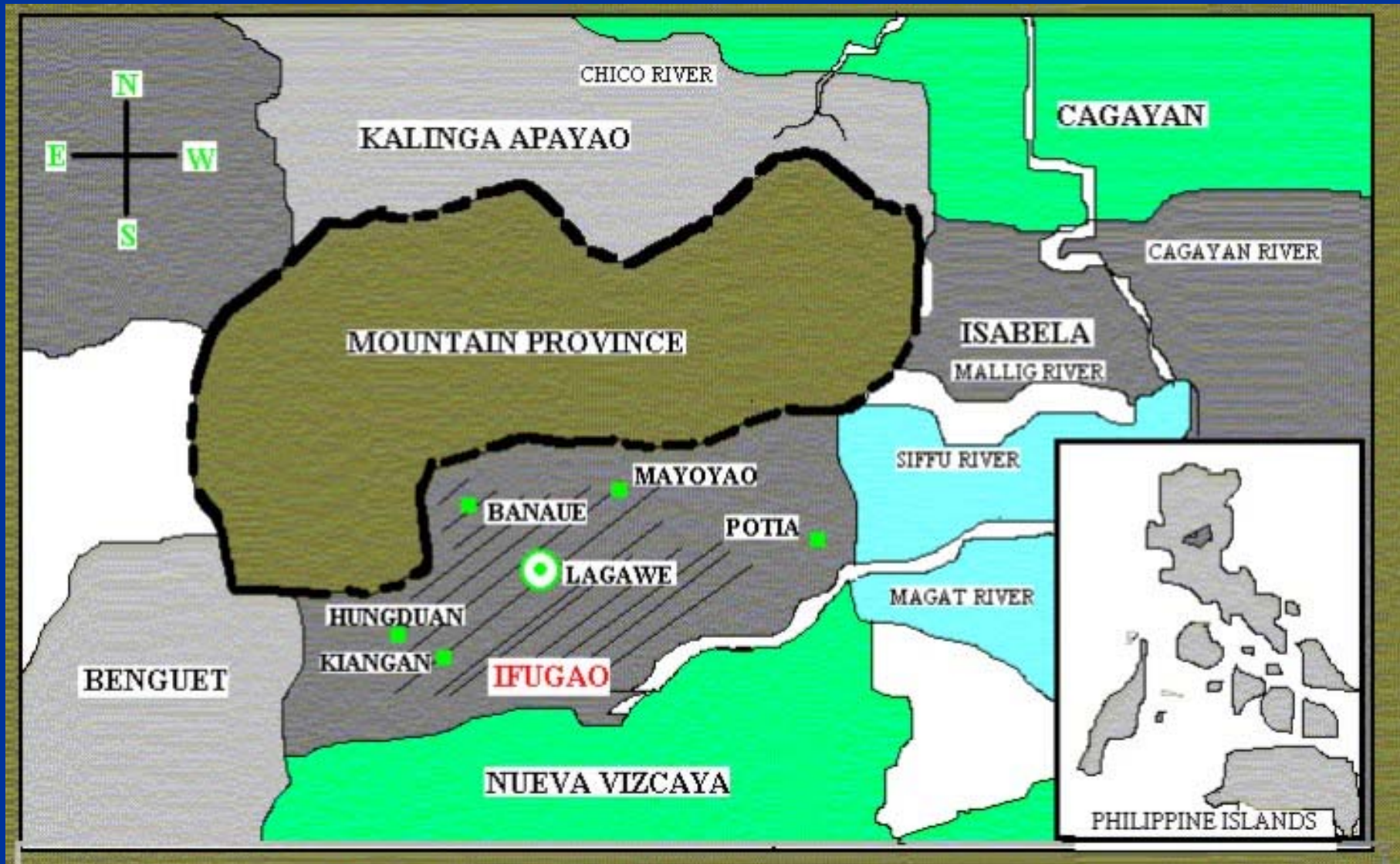
Oral literature of the Ifugao

- It is intended to describe as realistically as possible the contradictions of recording oral literature where its performers are now embedded in contexts very different from those in which this repertoire evolved
- To focus on the problems of recording in the age of noise
- The elusive record of Ifugao
- And the way the agenda has been captured by the cultural bureaucracy in the Philippines with a result almost exactly the opposite of that intended by UNESCO

Background to Ifugao

- 'Ifugao' is a cover term linking six related languages, spoken in the Cordillera of Northern Luzon
- These were acephalous societies, structurally semi-permanently at war with one another and permeated with the ideology of headhunting
- Their subsistence was based on rice and to grow it they created the well-known systems of rice terraces, which dominate the landscape
- The Ifugao region was opened up following the American period in the Philippines (from 1902 onwards) and this has gradually accelerated the flow of traders and officials into the area. At the same time, young men and women have moved out to find work, either seasonally or permanently.
- Catholicism and Protestantism have now driven traditional religion almost underground and many *mumbaki*, once converted, refuse to even discuss their former belief system

The Ifugao region



Typical rice terraces



Rice terraces in disrepair



- The famous rice terraces are also a World Heritage Site and they have acquired a large building and much more bureaucracy than *hudhud*
- However, the reason they are falling down is because the Philippines government simultaneously imports subsidised Vietnamese rice
- And the young men who should be repairing the terraces work outside to buy the sacks of Vietnamese rice

The elusive record I

- One of the more mysterious aspects of documenting Ifugao oral genres is the elusive nature of previous documentation.
- Community members with some concern for these issues are likely to mention about the failure of researchers to return their results to the community. But it would be hard to know where to lodge such materials. None of the three museums in Ifugao territory, at Banaue, Kiangan and the nearby museum in Bontoc, have facilities to store audio-visual materials and two are anyway private foundations.
- Similarly, the function of NCIP does not include archiving schemes of these traditions.
- The collection of Jose Maceda, probably the largest archive of pre-digital ethnomusicology recordings from the Philippines, is now at the University of the Philippines. Until recently, it lay uncatalogued and effectively unusable.

The elusive record II

- Equally worrying is the disappearance or deterioration of the recordings associated with Manuel Dulawan's 2005 synthesis of oral genres. These were made with analogue tapes in the 1980s and they have now either been lost or the tapes have degraded badly.
- The book associated with the recordings was finally published in 2005, a decade after its submission to the NCCA. By this time, more than two decades after the original fieldwork, one might guess that much has changed in both performance and context.
- This book is the most recent publication by NCCA on Ifugao music and so far nothing more up-to-date is projected. Despite a general impression that Ifugao oral genres (for which one may read *hudhud*) have been copiously documented, attempts to lay hands on this material are often as fruitless as the quest for Prester John.

Contested guardians I

- The Philippines has a number of bodies concerned with the culture of its indigenous peoples. The most venerable of these is the National Council for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP). The declared function of the NCIP is to mediate between government and minorities over issues such as human rights and also to authorise research.
- The NCIP has had no discernible impact on any issue which really concerns minorities, such as migration, land rights and environmental destruction, and its procedures for authorising research appear to be vague, to say the least.
- However, the intersection of world bodies such as UNESCO with the remit of the NCIP have caused it to consider that it must 'protect' minorities from exploitative research.

Contested guardians II

- Very different is the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) which was created in 1992 and was mandated to oversee five vital cultural agencies, namely, the National Historical Institute, the National Museum, the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the National Library and the National Archives.
- The NCCA has a main focus on the 'Support to Living Tradition' (SLT) scheme. This scheme, which covers all of the Philippines and is concerned with material culture such as weaving, as well as music and oral literature, licenses groups to be considered for SLT funding.
- This then supports individuals considered to embody a tradition to teach it to a licensed group through the school system, so that it can be transmitted to students. The SLT for Kiangnan was granted for traditional music and dance in 2004.

Performance transmogrified

- The process of 'taking notice' of these traditions has accelerated their monetisation. Performers, even from remote areas, are now convinced that they need 'incentives' to perform and somehow a standard rate has evolved (currently PhP250 or US\$5.50).
- At the same time, they have become convinced that they should wear 'traditional' costume. Modernised traditional costumes, with plastic accoutrements and acrylic-dyed threads, as well as the clear unease with which performers wear them, add to an air of unreality and nervousness.
- Festivals celebrating Ifugao 'tradition' are now a regular occurrence, featuring *hudhud* competitions, gong performances backed by snare drums and other hybrid events.

Hudhud group



Alien instruments



Hudhud in Amganad



Snow

- The peoples of the Northern Philippines have rapidly travelled from a world where the loudest sounds were probably rain falling and the beating of gongs to one where ambient noise is constant, oppressive and unpredictable.
- Mains electricity has reached almost all major settlements even in remote areas. Poorly adjusted motor-tricycles and motor-bikes move along remote country roads at any time of day or night, videoke bars and extremely loud sound systems burst into life unexpectedly.
- An additional factor during the fieldwork described in this paper was the pre-election campaigning, which involves jeepneys and pickups careering along the roads, blaring out sentimental sub-John Denver songs commending individual candidates.
- These musical choices have the additional impact of underlining the marginal nature of traditional music and lyrics in contrast to the globalised dross favoured by the dominant urban culture.

Snow

- As a consequence, it is practically impossible to record performers in any sort of natural context if the recording is to be subsequently analysable. Marriages, wakes and other ceremonies held in villages are constantly interrupted by external noise and may well have the additional disadvantage of microphones and poorly adjusted amplification.
- Obviously it is useful to have a record of 'real' events to understand how they are conducted in a changing social context. But for an analytic recording, the performers have to be gathered and then transported to a (relatively) quiet place such as church grounds or a remote unoccupied space.
- Even so, unexpected noise can be a hazard, and half the work of making a recording is policing interruptions; the recordist becomes so tense that even a burst of birdsong causes a moment of irrational annoyance.
- The transport to a quiet place in turn creates its own tensions; logistics can be more problematic, performers are out of context. As a consequence, they become more enthusiastic for regular supplies of rice-wine and increasingly, gin, to try and mediate what must seem an unnatural experience.

And so

- Ifugao oral traditions are not long for this world in their present form
- This is partly because of globalisation but also because of a strong trend towards Christianisation
- However, they are likely to live on in hybrid forms, manufactured by the urbanised middle-class
- Why? Presumably because domesticated culture is more satisfying in terms of power than its total elimination
- The parallels with the cultural bureaucracy of the former Soviet Union are strong..
- But also with the domestication of English folk-song by the mandarins of Cecil Sharp House

What is endangered, then?

- Ifugao language shows no sign of being under threat, except for increasing borrowing from Ilongot and Tagalog
- Indeed the same Christianity which is playing an important role in eliminating oral genres promotes the language itself
- Illustrating the importance of capturing this type of tradition independently of documenting the language
- But make no mistake, Ifugao traditions will not magically return, because the people who value it are at the exact lowest point of the power hierarchy

DVD for local distribution

DISC 1

BANAUE

- | | | |
|----------------|------|------|
| 1. Hudhud | 1:xx | 1:xx |
| 2. Uyaya | 2. | 2. |
| 3. Flute solos | 3.x | 3.x |

KIANGAN

- | | | |
|--------------|-----|-----|
| 4. Baltung | 4.x | 4.x |
| 5. Hudhud | 5.x | 5.x |
| 6. Liwliwa | 6.x | 6.x |
| 7. Folk song | 7.x | 7.x |
| 8. Folk song | 8.x | 8.x |
| 9. SLT | 9.x | 9.x |

DISC 2

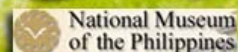
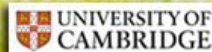
MAYOYAO

- | | | |
|---------------|------|------|
| 10. Ergwad | 10.x | 10.x |
| 11. Partung | 11.x | 11.x |
| 12. Liwliwa | 12.x | 12.x |
| 13. Jews Harp | 13.x | 13.x |

ASIPULO

- | | | |
|-------------------|------|------|
| 14. Baltung | 14.x | 14.x |
| 15. Hudhud | 15.x | 15.x |
| 16. Gong Ensemble | 16.x | 16.x |
| 17. Board zither | 17.x | 17.x |
| 18. Bamboo zither | 18.x | 18.x |
| 19. Folk song | 19.x | 19.x |
| 20. Folk song | 20.x | 20.x |

Documenting IFUGAO Oral Literature Genres



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World Oral Literature Project
voices of vanishing worlds

2010

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