

An ethnographic study on the spatial and symbolic narratives of Shilan-Beckel road users

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Vehicular traffic along the Shilan-Beckel road (Photo by Putri Layla Wadi)

Introduction

Infrastructures are not just literal physical structures. They are material culture, and a mirror of the interaction of different actors—be it human and nonhuman. They impose a set of rules that are both written and unwritten. More specifically they can be a show of control and dominance of a certain government body revealing which members of the community are the most and least prioritized.¹ The experience of space is dependent on factors like the physical infrastructures, audio and visual components, and symbolic meanings attached to it. Availability and access to certain infrastructures reflect one's social class.² Actors shape spaces and spaces shape actors.

Shilan-Beckel Road which stretches 5.51 km is located in Barangay Beckel, La Trinidad, Benguet. It is considered a national road. Strolling along Shilan-Beckel Road, I was met with fog, smoke and sounds of vehicles and machines. There were a few signs saying "Slow down! Strong Igorot men working ahead" and "Equipments ahead". A number of development works and men in hard hats could be observed. Men in longsleeves and jeans were working on riprap walls. A number of trucks were parked in a warehouse with men moving styrofoam boxes filled with flowers to be transported to Dangwa, a popular market in Metro Manila.

While I was walking along the road, I thought, "This Is not for the inattentive and careless." Going to Shilan, huge trucks passed by me with labels on them such as DPWH (Department of Public Works and Highways), Valley Bread, Logistics Napintas & Distribution, and DJY Construction. Private vehicles such as Toyota Innova, D-4D cars, L300 vehicles, motorcycles, and public ones like tricycles and taxis used the road, too. On the opposite side, similar vehicles passed by such as trucks carrying products like vegetables, soft drinks in cases, and styrofoam boxes. An armored vehicle, a BENECO (Benguet Electric Cooperative, Inc) vehicle, and Tamaraw FX are some of the privately-owned automobiles that traversed the road as well. I walked opposite the traffic.

Every time a vehicle passed by, I had no choice but to move to the side as much as I could and fan the smoke away. This was not always the case since some sidewalks are present in areas beside concrete houses. When it was raining, drivers were considerate enough to slow down even if there were no bumps and humps. But not everyone did as there was no infrastructure, like road signs, that would moderate behavior. A few steps before Lamut Daycare Center, a sign that says "Slow down, school zone" was positioned. It did not matter where I crossed the road because there were no pedestrian lanes and authorities who would call me out. This was all interesting to me because I grew up in a middle class-neighborhood where there are enough sidewalks and street lights. We got to walk to school safely. People from different places would even go there for sports and recreation. I also believe that communities and people will thrive better if cities are walkable and not car-centric.

People give meaning to their experiences in the social world.³ Meanings produced are different from each other.⁴ Cities are not limited to their physical structures, but are also experienced psychologically and reflect the customs and traditions of a community.⁵ With all this, I wanted to know how these users experience the road. How do they perceive it? Why do they pass through it? How do they see it in terms of safety? Who do they think has the responsibility to maintain it? How do they negotiate with and adapt to the road? How does it affect their lives?

This study makes use of the framework of Ingold's Correspondence. In another work, Ingold maintains that anthropology should not be equivalent to ethnography. Ethnographies are a representation of one place during a certain period and everything it contains are bound to change. Anthropology is similar to art in the sense that a painter sitting in front of a landscape will produce work largely influenced by where he is positioned.⁶ Correspondence is how different actors—human and nonhuman respond to each other. In the existence of these actors, they will inevitably connect and intersect with each other. It is founded on three

concepts: habit, agencing, and intentionality.⁷ Ingold compares the lives of the actors to a bunch of lines and their intersections to a knot. The meshwork is to a choir whose vocal actors involved must feel with each other to be in harmony. When unknotted, the lines go back to what they were before. In their relationships, the emphasis is placed on their bond and not on how they add up to each other. With this, I aimed to look into the network of some of the users of Shilan-Beckel Road and how they 'answer' to each other and their activities in everyday life.

To learn about the stories of Shilan-Beckel Road users, I employed the method of participant-observation which is participating in the activities of informants and making observations about them.⁸ This method was appropriate for this study because it allowed me to fully immerse myself in the community by seeing how people used and adapted to the road. I got to experience how to navigate the road. In addition to this, I took part in the activities they were working on while making observations about them and the environment they were living in. I tagged along with Noah, a 32-year old taho vendor when he went into the alleys of the barangay. I would stop asking questions every time he shouted "taho!" I reflected on his interactions with the buyers, how he has memorized their names, how he knows about a part of their lives, and how they joke around with each other. I stayed outside the sari-sari store of Julia, 38, and observed what residents and passersby usually bought. In completion of our Anthropology Field School, we stayed at the community of Barangay Beckel from June 24 to July 10.

To look into their perspectives, I conducted semi-structured interviews which differed depending on their demographic. This is best used when the researcher will not get another chance to interview a particular informant.⁹ I inquired about their daily routine, their history of living in Barangay Beckel, the types of public transportation they know about in the community, their relationship with other road users, and their experiences regarding the infrastructures.

Finally, I used photographic documentation which can provide real-time data.¹⁰ I took photos of my perspective while walking along the road and inside settlements to record and show the point of view of the community members. Snowball sampling was used to select some of the participants.

This study can be of benefit to the residents of Barangay Beckel and users of Shilan-Beckel Road. One resident mentioned that she requested for sidewalks from the barangay, but was informed that only the national government can provide it. The narratives of different users of the road are evidence of its conditions which the local and national governments can use to improve the infrastructure and ensure the safety of the residents and users.

Looking into the spatial and symbolic narratives of road users

The road as a source of life

Shilan-Beckel Road is not just a road. It does not only allow tourists and locals to go to Mountain Province, Isabela, Acop, Kapangan, Nueva Vizcaya, and Bugyas. It is more than a road to avoid traffic in La Trinidad and is not just a shortcut from Baguio and Shilan. By allowing street vendors, sari-sari store owners, and eatery sellers, and drivers to earn and provide for their loved ones it is also a road to progress.

I met Noah when my batchmates and I bought taho from him. He is a vendor who peddles taho and other soy products to members of the community since 2019. He took part in construction work during the pandemic when they were not allowed to peddle their products. Every morning, at around 9:30, he would leave Baguio. His route starts in Tarakki Cafe in Barangay Beckel, then he would filter through every alley and street yelling out "Taho!" which is a signal for kids and adults alike to prepare their cups and coins. Carrying fifty kilograms under the scorching heat, he would offer taho to residents, salon workers, and passersby. With a capital of PhP 600 every day, he earns PhP 400 - PhP 500. He says it's hard to tell which are

sunny and which are rainy days in terms of profit, but during church on Sundays is usually a good day.

The road helps him and his family, “*Sa hanapbuhay diba, nakatulong sa amin. Nakayanan kong masurvive pamilya ko. Nakayanan kong pag-aralin. Malaking bagay yung pagtitinda ko dito.*” (The road helps us in our livelihoods. My family and I were able to survive. I was able to send my children to school. My peddling on this road is a big thing for us), he said.

Another eatery seller in Beckel is Mags, 62, who owns a pizza place and also serves pastries, coffee, and other snacks. She opens the store at six to seven in the morning. She has been living in the barangay for 46 years where she settled because of her husband. In front of her store, passersby would park to grab some snacks before going on with their trip. During our conversation, a young boy went back more than once to purchase some siomai. He was doing this for the men playing in the newly-built billiard hall. I paused our chat a few times and asked if there was anything I could do to help her. Perfect for the rainy weather, two drivers were having coffee at the corner table. She thinks her spot is advantageous because this lets her serve more customers, especially those who are just passing by. “*Yan ang bentahe na nasa daanan ako eh. Meron iyong hindi niya balak bumili ng pizza pero noong napadaan, may pizza, uutangin yan*” (That’s the advantage of selling by the roadside. Some passersby who were not planning on buying pizza end up getting some and pay for it the following day), she narrated.

Her shop serves as a stopover for travelers on long trips as they can buy hot beverages and pastries to warm them up early in the morning. Beside her shop, a public restroom can be used. Aside from these, pasalubong items such as blueberry wine and pizza can be taken home. Farmers who are on their way home can grab some pizza for their families. Aside from the passersby, residents themselves also patronize her shop. Three bikers who removed their tops took some rest in her shop while eating and playing a mobile game on their smartphones. Teenagers would also ask if they could get food and pay for it next time.

Loss

Shilan-Beckel Road does not discriminate. On an unregulated road with no authorities and not enough infrastructure, there are always risks. During a rainy night, two people went inside Mags’ shop and took a metal stand worth PhP 4,800. It was the night before she was supposed to officially open her shop. In the morning, she saw two pairs of muddy footsteps inside. She was sure those who took it had a vehicle since it would be hard to manually transport a five-foot metal stand during a typhoon at night. When asked if there were any regrets in selling by the road, she answered, “*Sino ba naman ang hindi magsisi? Syempre ano ba yan, walang magawa, ikaw ang nasa kalsada*” (Who wouldn’t have regrets? Of course, there is nothing I can do, I was the one selling by the road) .

A source of pride

The road is a manifestation of the hard work of the laborers. It reminds them of their accomplishments. Their struggle and pride are engraved in the road. It was raining when I approached Luigi, a construction worker. He was in an open area where trucks were parked and walls were being built. Because of the rain, we proceeded to talk under a makeshift shed. I asked him what they were working on. He informed me they were building riprap walls. I learned that they were the ones responsible for the barriers with rocks in it. He is a proud Igorot who lives in the area. While we were walking, he told me that work is difficult in Benguet compared to Manila. Workers from Manila can’t do what the Igorot can, he proudly said. According to him, it takes patience to build riprap walls. It is not just merely placing rocks on top of each other. It is intriguing how he compared those from Manila to those in Benguet even when my questions didn’t touch on this. Our conversation was cut short because he had to leave early.

Kai, a 42-year old truck driver, is also proud of the work they did on Shilan-Beckel Road. In front of our transient place, construction was going on. Inside the huge parked truck, I noticed a man on his phone,

resting. My friend and I looked up to the window. He opened the window and asked what we were after. From then on, our conversation started. He was warm and welcoming. Kai has been driving for 24 years. Before driving for the truck company, he used to drive buses. He has gone to different parts of the country because of his work. I learned that they are the ones tasked to cement and widen the road. Every time he passes by the road, he is reminded of what they accomplished on the road.

Making and remaking of relationships

Personal relationships are also built and strengthened on the road. A thoroughfare like Shilan-Beckel Road can be a place of reunion among loved ones. It is also where *utang* and *suki* (borrowing and exchange) relationships are created. Similar to an airport, it is a temporary stop and is a space where people with different destinations and objectives in life meet. The road allows for the flourishing of relationships that are not just limited to economic transactions.

Aside from the pizza place that Mags owns, she also has a store beside it which has products that other stores don't have in the area such as clothes, skincare products, and footwear. One day, when Mags was arranging her products, she suddenly heard her name. She was intrigued as she couldn't recognize who was calling her because of the face mask. It was her Aunt Pearl who she had not seen in four decades. It was not the first time that her aunt passed by the road. At that moment, Mags was not wearing her face mask which could have been the reason why her Aunt Pearl was able to identify her. Her aunt did not know that she lived in the area. What her aunt only knew is that she married in Lamut, Ifugao so she had no idea that her niece was living in Lamut, Beckel all this time.

Anton, a 32-year old tricycle driver and farmer, also got to build relationships because of his work. During our interview, I was expecting that he would continue driving, but he parked in an area near the barangay while I asked questions from the passenger seat. Originally from Apayao, he agreed to live in Lamut

because of his wife. He gets to decide whenever he wants to drive the tricycle. His family mainly depends on the greenhouse farm and driving is just his side hustle. Affected by the recent increase of gasoline prices, he can bring home PhP 500 - PhP 700. He mentioned how gas prices in Beckel are more expensive than the one in "baba" (down below). When asked about his relationships with people in the community, he gave a positive answer. Whenever he sees a street vendor while driving, he gives them a free ride. They have developed a connection because of this. "*Pag naglalakad sila diyan, tapos wala kaming karga, edi kinakarga na namin [sila]*" (When I don't have a passenger and I see street vendors, I offer them a ride), he said. There is also one particular student-seller that he gives free rides to whenever he bumps into them. In return, the seller would give him ice cream or ice buko.

Aside from the personal relationships built, financial relationships are also created. Sellers have *suki* from the community, drivers fetch and drop off passengers constantly that they know them well already, and buyers would request if they could temporarily *utang* (loan) the products. Mags, the 63-year old eatery seller would often get requests from her customers if they could take some food and pay for it the following day.

"*May mga dalaga o binata papasok kakain ng siomai. Auntie, utangin namin ito. 'Sige lang. Basta wag kalimutan ang utang.' Di naman problema ang mangutang, basta yung may utang, alam nyang may utang siya*" (Some teenagers would come in to eat siomai, and tell me, 'Auntie we'll pay for this tomorrow'. 'No problem, just don't forget that you owe me.' It is not a problem as long as they don't forget they have a debt), she recounted. Farmers on the way home from their farms would also do the same. Besides the residents, workers on the road who are from Mountain Province also engage in this loaning practice. Mags would agree, but this time she takes note of their personal information such as their names, numbers, and asks if she can take a look at their identification cards. It is interesting that she does this to buyers who are not from the area.

Noah also allows his customers to do the same. During his rest at Tarakki Cafe, he started a conversation with one of the staff by jokingly reminding him of what he owes him. Noah informed him that he owes him five bottles worth of soy milk. There are also times that he is the one who offers that they take some and pay for it tomorrow. In front of a school, I spotted Jaime, a 52-year old meat vendor. There was a program going on inside and he was waiting for customers by the school gate. It was a challenge to talk to him because of the noise from the event. I learned that he wakes up at four in the morning to wait for the truck from Dagupan that will come by in Baguio. This truck brings the products he sells in Barangay Beckel. He carries on his shoulder two buckets balanced on a wooden stick. In his 20 years of selling in the community, he would usually bring home PhP 1,000 - PhP 1,500 depending if it's a good day or not. Before becoming a street vendor, he was a construction worker, but eventually left because peddling meat allowed him to earn more and work for a shorter time.

He is already used to the *utang* taken by residents. *"Syempre sa araw-araw, kilala na ako dito eh kaya inuutang din nila"* (They know me by now since I pass by here everyday, so they also regularly take out some loans from me), he told me. Even Kai, the truck driver in Sitio Lamut would request for a loan from the fish vendor that usually passes by in the area.

Forgotten by the state

Most informants believe that the road is not safe. Anton believes that the lack of streetlights contributed to the unfortunate rape of three children in Barangay Beckel. A security guard was jailed after taking advantage of three girls. *"Kasi may pinuntahan sila dyan, tapos sumilong ata. Nakisilong. Yun ang problema dito, streetlights sana."* (The young girls took shelter where a security guard was assigned. The lack of streetlights is a problem here), he retold. Noah, the taho vendor, admitted that there are still times he gets scared walking on the roads. He has developed personal strategies to survive the road. This was our conversation:

"Kaya tulad nun, nakahinto, punta na lang ako sa harap. Di baleng iaabot ko na lang sa kanya." (When the vehicle is at a stop, I would rather go in front of it. I don't mind that I still have to hand it over [the taho] to the customer.)

"Para at least nakikita po kayo?" (So that they can at least see you?)

"Oo. Di na yung mismong itututok ko dun sa pinto niya para pagkatakal ko, abot lang. Di baleng maglakad ako para iabot ko sa kanya." (Yes. Instead of scooping the taho by the door, I would rather do it in front of the vehicle. I don't mind that I have to walk to the customer.)

He maintains that the safety of the pedestrians is entirely up to them or the drivers and that their fate is already written.

"Na sa'yo rin kasi eh. O kaya nasa driver rin. Yun nga tulad nun, kung hindi man ikaw yung nagseselpon maaari yung driver o edi kung dadating yung disgrasya, sa'yo, dadating." (It's up to you or the driver. If it is not you who is distracted by your phone, it can be the driver. If accidents are bound to happen to you, they will.)

Lance, a middle-aged motorist, expressed similar sentiments. Lance is a middle-aged man I saw resting and standing by the junction with a motorcycle nearby and a car in front of him. He lives in Pacdal, Baguio City and decided to meet up with his brother on Suyoc-Beckel Road. When asked why they chose that spot to meet, he answered that they are not allowed to do it in the checkpoint in Ambuklao Road while emphasizing that they don't want to be a cause of interruption. When I saw them, they were standing on

the side of the road talking to each other.

According to Lance, when the driver knows that the road is bumpy, it should be obvious that he must slow down. One should also know how to adapt to the roads and follow traffic protocols. Don't be distracted by your phone, he said. It is interesting to note that he used the word "adapt" a few times. He also added that for the residents to get around, they can "adjust" by walking and commuting.

When asked about why there are still parts of Cordillera that are not cemented, Anton answered that it could have something to do with the number of people living in the area. *"May iba na kunti lang ang residente kaya walang masyadong daanan na sementado. Pag unti yung residente doon, alangan naman na gastusan pa ng gobyerno. Pag nag-iisa kang residente, alangan palagyan pa ng daanan yun. Ikaw na muna ang mag-diskarte. Dito sa Cordillera, madiskarte yung mga tao dito"* (There are areas where there are just few residents so there are less cemented roads. If there are only a few people who reside there, why would the government spend on them? If you're the only resident, obviously they won't build a road just for you. You must make ways. Here in Cordillera, people are strategic), he said.

Three participants know someone who has gotten into accidents on the road involving vehicles. Mags wished that there were streetlights, sidewalks, signages, and CCTV in the area. During a foggy night, a truck skidded in front of her store because of the lack of bright lights. Whenever Julia is at her sari-sari store, she can't help but be worried for the children crossing in front of it, especially since she is located near a curve. Even her buyers would also get worried for the children. Julia, a mother of three, moved to Lamut from La Union because of her husband. Passersby and residents would also get their needs from a nearby sari-sari store which is owned by Julia. Our conversation was held at her sari-sari store. During the interview, I noticed that there were also locals who bought shampoo in sachets, canned food, chips, bread, and sugary beverages. Passersby such as one van driver went down his vehicle for *momma*, cigarettes, and drinks such as Cobra and

Vita Milk. Momma which consists of betel leaf, lime and areca nut is consumed by many such as drivers to help them stay awake during the trip.

She recounted, *"Pag galing yung mga bata dyan, tinitignan mo pag mag-cross sila. Naano ka kasi pag biglang may sasakyan. Hindi lang ako, pati yung mga nagtatambay dito na mga lola. Sigaw din sila nang sigaw. 'Ay maha-highblood pala tayo dito pag dito tayo nagtambay."* (If the kids are coming from here, you look at them when they cross the road. You get (scared) when there is a vehicle. It's not only me who gets worried. Old ladies who come here would also shout and say 'We can't relax whenever we're here.')

Julia has asked for sidewalks from the barangay but was told that it should be requested of the national government. She also asked for a hump on the road.

One effect of living by a thoroughfare is pollution. Julia recounted how, back then, there was not much smoke and dust until the roads got cemented. The blares from the huge vehicles like trucks also bother her. They can literally feel the ground tremble underfoot.

Conclusion

Shilan-Beckel Road offers a lot to its users. It helps sellers earn and provide for their families. It witnesses how they traverse it for their future. The road is a medium for the transfer of products such as coffee, bread, taho, and meat. It is a source of both life and loss.

Connections, be it personal or work-related, materialize here. Because of the constant interaction between sellers and buyers, they develop a friendly relationship. This was proven by how their conversations were not only limited to their transactions, but also revolved around each other's personal lives. Small talk, jokes, and memorized names are all proof that associations are not just related to transactional matters. Occurrences of *utang* and *suki* relationships are evidence that both buyers and sellers have trust and long-term relationships with each other. Not only are new connections made, but old ones are renewed and strengthened. It is a place for reunion.

Not only is it a place of transience, but is also a lasting reminder of their accomplishments. People who have built the road are proud of it.

Many of them recognize the danger on it, such as accidents involving vehicles and abominable crimes like rape. It also has negative effects on the residents such as pollution in the form of smoke and loud noises. Despite this, people still pass through it because it is a shortcut, a bypass road, or simply because it is the only choice. Some have come up with their own adaptation strategies. On the other hand, there are those who demand for their rights and have made requests to the local government units for more infrastructure. Evident in this is the lack of government response and how people are forced to cope on their own.

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Endnotes

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