

Review: Websites

Mediatized Ethnicity and the Politics of Complicity as Told From the City of Pines

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This review article examines two Internet texts about Baguio City in northern Philippines that bear on tradition, land, and performed ethnicities, which implicate the state's policy on the environment and ancestral domain claims. These texts are: (a) screen capture of the mayor of Baguio City from the website of his office; and (b) screen capture of an online post of the virtual persona of user "Grace Bandoy" on Facebook, using an assemblage of photographs and text.

The theoretical elaborations of Booth (2008) on how a virtual persona can assemble texts and rework them for a specific purpose inspired this paper. The human body figures as a site of contentious assertions in the dynamics of personalities performing ethnicities as active agents in establishing vested forms of power. What resonates is "the role of exotic appearances as markers of indigenous authenticity" (Conklin, 1997, p. 36) as bodies are captured by the lens of the camera and circulated in the virtual world of the Web. Ritualized gesture, garments, and objects are turned into emblems of "performed identity" (De Certeau, 1984, cited in Booth, 2008, p. 527) that are appropriated to serve one's political-economic agenda of complicity with empire, mediatized by virtual personas within a "narrativized dialogue" (p. 521) and directly addressed in a "simulated world" (p. 525). The notion of empire is aligned with that of Calhoun, Cooper, Moore, and SSRC (2006) and Maier (2006). Complicity is used in the sense of being an accomplice, whether unwitting, unwilling, or not.

The complexity of land and ancestral domain claims in Baguio City is a long and contentious one (Bagamaspad & Pawid, 1985; Boquiren, 1994; Cariño, 1981; Gatmaytan, 1992; Prill-Brett, 1994; Reed, 1976; Rood, 1992; Tapang, 1982). The terms that I highlight here cannot reduce the debate to the romantic nodes of the so-called *old family* or *old resident* versus who is *dayo* (settler or foreign), the essentialist tradition-versus-progress dichotomy, or the framing of development in terms of infrastructural progress vis-à-vis notions of heritage. Among many aspects, the debate involves the political delineation of customary law versus state policy and the enactments—and gaps—of local governance, all of which partly emanate from the interlocking grid of notions of private property, the residual effects of

colonial intrusion, environmental sustainability, and social relationships founded on a patron-client orientation.

“MAURICIO DOMOGAN”: VISUALIZING ANCESTRY AND REVISIONING “ONE GREEN CORDILLERA”

The first screen capture is a photograph of Baguio City Mayor Mauricio Domogan (Figure 1), juxtaposed with his message during the closing ceremonies of Cordillera Month on July 26, 2013 held at the Saint Louis University. I argue in this section that ancestry, land, and identity claims (Resurreccion, 1998) can also be constructed in virtual media.

Domogan has been on a round-robin of political positions, several times occupying the official seat either as a member of the Lower House or as mayor of Baguio since he rose to power in the 1990s. In the screen capture, the body poses for the camera.



Figure 1. A computer screen capture showing Mayor Mauricio Domogan during the Cordillera Month closing ceremony at Saint Louis University in Baguio City. (Source: <http://mauriciodomogan.com/images/stories/pdf/MGDspeech.pdf>).

Following the theoretical elaborations of Booth (2008), this paper is interested not in Domogan the person but “Domogan” the virtual persona whose image is constructed through statecraft, reified through the performative, and circulated across media. Both photograph and speech are remediated in an official government

website. It is a virtual platform for the image construction and presentation of one's self to audiences of the virtual community.

The screen capture from a Web site emphasizes the political persona dressed in traditional garments, performing what appears to be a ritual. Sacrificial animals are framed at the center of the scene and closer to the foreground. The participants at middle-ground (with the exception of a few to Domogan's left and near the background of the scene space) are dressed in traditional garments as well.

The Web site includes excerpts from a speech delivered by the mayor at the closing ceremony of Cordillera Month. Key ideas of the speech carried the theme "Bringing One Green Cordillera," played up by an image of a "Cordillera Unity Gong" that symbolizes the solidarity of the diverse cultures of the people of the region. Interestingly, the speech highlights one contentious point about the region's autonomy: "While it is true that for two occasions Autonomy was not ratified or rejected by our people, I believe it did not mean Autonomy has failed... rather, I suppose, that regional autonomy has only not succeeded yet...."

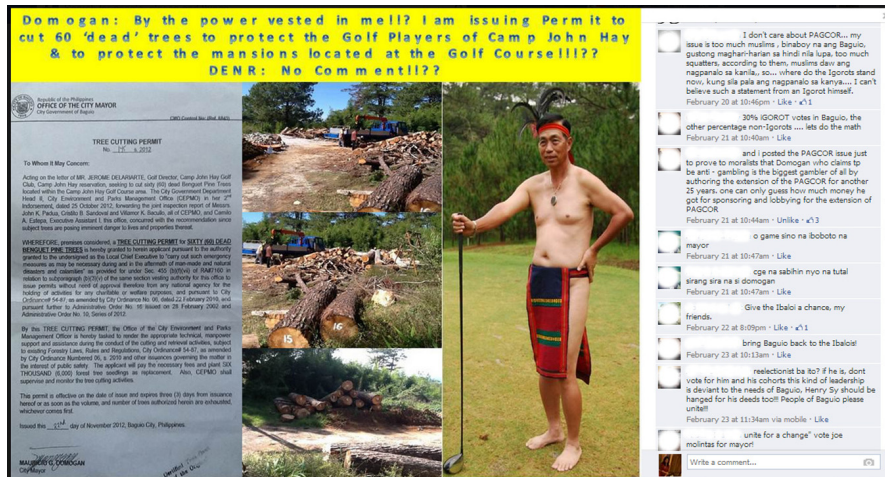
The theme, "Bringing One Green Cordillera," is dubious. First, the message is articulated in relation to an imagined Cordillera identity and the insistence on regional autonomy, dramatically symbolized (unity gong) and performed (the ritual in the photograph). Second, the assertion is framed in relation to progress (the need to "catch up with the rest of the country in terms of development"). Third, the Cordillera is positioned as an environmental asset ("watershed cradle"). Fourth, the Cordillera's political autonomy is articulated as on its way to success, which, for some scholars, is considered problematic (Prill-Brett, 1989; Rood, 1989) or a failure (Casambre, 2010).

It is striking how ethnicity is imagined, imaged, and mediatized in the Web page. The virtual persona of "Domogan" asserts "his" authenticity. The biography section narrates that he is "a true Igorot Cordilleran who traces his roots from Sitio Babasig, Patiacan, Quirino (formerly Angaki), Ilocos Sur, within the tri-boundaries of Besao, Mountain Province and Tubo, Abra." An article in *Travelsmart* (Malanes, 2000) and another in the *Northphiltimes* web site (See, n.d.) mention that Domogan is a Bago and share anecdotes on Domogan's role in their self-determination. The National Commission for Indigenous Peoples identifies the Bag-bago (new settler), or those who consider themselves Bago, as those from the intermarriages of Ilocano and Cordillera groups, or those who resettled in areas peripheral to Benguet. They grew in number by the late eighteenth century as they joined the diaspora toward Baguio (Bagamaspad & Pawid, 1985).

Domogan's construction as a representative of an ethnic group and with a family that has long been residing in Baguio City is crucial. In a section ("The Man Called Morris") of the Mauricio Domogan Web site (<http://mauriciodomogan.com/>), the line "from humble beginning to a respected and famous elder and leader" is seen with a charcoal illustration of a man's face with a headdress and feathers.¹

"GRACE BANDOY": REVISIONING STRUGGLES

The second screen capture is from an online post of the virtual persona "Grace Bandy" on Facebook (Fig. 2) made on January 29, 2013. Sixty allegedly dead trees (infested by pests) in Camp John Hay were cut, with the full consent of the Office



Feb 20 – by 'C.L'
 "I don't care about PAGCOR . . . my issue is too much Muslims. *Binaboy na ang Baguio, gustong maghari-harian sa hindi nila lupa*, too much squatters, according to them *Muslims daw ang nagpanalo sa kanila*, so where do the Igorots stand now *kung sila pala ang nagpanalo sakanya*. I can't believe such a statement from an Igorot himself."

Feb 21 – by 'B.G'
 "30% Igorot votes in Baguio. The other percentage non-Igorots. Let's do the math."

Feb 23 - by 'B.G'
 "Bring baguio back to the Ibaloi's"

June 13 – by 'T.G'
 "The G-string will at some point in time will fall or be blown away. Just imagine what it will look like! If I were him, I would opt to change for the better. Listen to the people and reform the G-string as it clearly represents the true native spirit. Wear it with pride and not to deprive!"

Figure 2. Photograph of Domogan juxtaposed with photographs of cut trees and a scanned permit from the city government, from the Facebook page of "Grace Bandy." (Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php>, used with permission.)

of the Mayor, only a few days before the start of the 63rd Philippine American Golf Tournament at Camp John Hay.

Figure 2 consists of photographs that have been reworked through what Booth (2008) calls “creative assemblage” (p. 514): Domogan in traditional garments, a scanned image of the permit to cut pine trees in Camp John Hay duly signed by Domogan who had claimed in some documents that these “dead” trees posed danger to the participants of the golf tournament, pine trees that had long been cut, and Facebook comments that articulate protests over the incident.

“Bandy” explained how the permit being referred to in the assemblage of images is provocative for several reasons. First, the cease-and-desist order of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to John Hay Management Corporation (JHMC) against the cutting of trees was issued on January 27, 2012 but was never enforced. Second, the Community Environment and Natural Resources Office (CENRO) of DENR-Baguio claims in a letter (February 1, 2013) to JHMC that no representatives from its office were present when the trees were felled. Third, and according to the same CENRO letter, there was no concrete study by the DENR indicating that the trees were indeed infested; and if there was any scientific validity to this claim, measures to prevent the spread of infestation were not undertaken. Inspection reports of JHMC were not coursed through the CENRO and the regional executive director of DENR. To date, there has been no clearance from DENR. Fourth, the mayor’s office can only be authorized to issue a permit to cut trees under conditions that they pose a danger to human lives or properties; this claim, however, lacks solid evidence. JHMC, through its golf club, applied for a tree-cutting permit to DENR-CAR in October 2012. To allegedly go past bureaucratic red tape, the JHMC then requested for an emergency cutting permit from the Office of the City Mayor on November 22, 2012. The permit to cut 60 trees was issued to them on the same day by the mayor’s office, just in time for the golf tournament.

Through bricolage, “Grace Bandy” poaches on the mediatized image construction of Mauricio Domogan and subverts it to articulate “her” dissension. The entire media text includes what is seen on screen—to what extent virtual personas have shared the image on their own virtual spaces in social media (68 distinct shares), how virtual personas expressed approval of the subversion made by “Bandy” (93 likes), and how conversations transpired (267 exchanges in the comments section) and dismantled how the local government, through the mayor’s office, imaged a persona who claims to be a protector of the people and a guardian of Baguio traditions.

A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF IMAGES

The images presented above and the conversations that transpired are loaded with discourses that have been circulating at the height of social media attention concerning environmental protests that transcend the virtual and the real concerning pine trees in Baguio. This dates back to the first quarter of 2012, centered on how the Baguio City government is allegedly complicit with the giant retail store, ShoeMart, or more popularly known as SM, which operates several retail stores spread across the Philippines. SM's mall franchise is only a part of a multimillion corporation with multiple interests in retail, real estate, banking, and commerce, including hotels and tourism.

SM-Baguio sits on Luneta Hill, the highest point of Upper Session Road. The public outburst against SM-Baguio erupted when social networking sites (SNS) began circulating information that 182 pine trees in Baguio's Luneta Hill would allegedly be cut to give way to mall expansion plans by SM. Based on my participation and close observation of SNS from February 2012 to September 2013, some examples of these sites are *A Tree A Day* or ATAD, *Kafagwayan Park Capital of the Philippines*, *Open Spaces*, and *Stop the Cutting/Uprooting of Trees*. A citizen named Michael Bengwayan wrote a petition titled "Stop the Cutting and Uprooting of Trees in SM Baguio" (Bengwayan, 2012) that then spread in social media. Protests in social media as well as the city's public spaces eventually led to the formation of the movement called Project Save 182 Movement or PS182.

Save 182 is only one among several multisectoral movements in Baguio City. Some have long been formed in the past to launch different types of protests and mass actions in Baguio City that are aimed at pursuing human rights, environmental protection, and justice. I remember the protest march in the 1990s from Lower Session Road up to the Sacred Heart rotunda to protest SM's acquisition of land over other land claimants. There were other reasons for the opposition: the huge architectural structure several floors high was to be built on unstable ground, the mall was being constructed beside educational institutions (the University of the Philippines-Baguio and the Baguio City National High School), and small and microenterprises of local residents would be at a major disadvantage.

Current evidence pertaining to the state-endorsed disposition of Luneta Hill in favor of SM-Baguio is eerily reminiscent of Resurreccion's essay on the appropriation of land for the state's interest as a residual practice of colonial policy (1998). Similar incidents occur in several areas in Baguio where public lands are being sold or leased to various real estate developers. Where much of what is now public land—the site of pine trees included—is part of what is asserted as heritage, the

local government (as seen in and converging through the mediatized persona of “Domogan”) declares the need for economic development made visible through infrastructures, commercial consumption, and the generation of job opportunities for the citizens of Baguio as contractual sales personnel in SM-Baguio.

The range of discourses that circulated in social media is therefore not reduced to saving the pine trees on Luneta Hill alone, but a call to monitor and censure the activities of the city government that could cause potential negative impacts on the environment. It must be emphasized that the increased vigilance of the body politic in social media is not attributed solely to or originates from a loose coalition that challenged SM-Baguio a decade earlier or even to the Save 182 Movement (against the planned earth-balling of 180 pine trees on Luneta Hill in early 2012). On the contrary, Figure 2 shows another facet of the environmental protest in social media—that challenging SM-Baguio is not the only important cause for the battle over pine trees. The struggle over the environment also covers public lands in the city including whose rights must prevail – tourists and unregulated settlers, or those with affective ties to the land and its pine-clad beauty.

The increased social media interaction had trans-active effects. The images in Figure 2 that circulated in social networking sites (and appeared in several news feeds) generated a lot of commentary not only against the local government—what Booth calls “narrativized dialogue” (2008, p. 521). The conversations that transpired between January 29 and June 16, 2013 centered on problems that contradict the idea of “One Green Cordillera.” Aside from problems concerning the cutting of pine trees, fractures concerning ethnicity (Igorots versus Others) are implicated in the conversation.

FRACTURING ETHNICITIES

Those who identify themselves with an “Igorot” identity are differentiated from “non-Igorots” in terms of varying degrees of concern for Baguio’s well-being, a nostalgic allegiance to an old generation or an imagined past (Gans, 1996), and discerned degrees of topophilia (Gibson, 2009) visualized through pine trees on panoramic landscapes. In Baguio, as elsewhere, leaders of civil society are a motley group who come from varied economic sectors with differential access to wealth, property, education, and symbolic power as a result of their belonging to families aligned with particular claims to ethnicity, land ownership, and land use (Cariño, 1981; Tapang, 1982). This is another instance in which groups with diverse levels of access to legitimization and ethnicities are internally differentiated from an “Other” (Eriksen, 1997).

Baguio is a tapestry of groups from all over the Cordilleras, which includes people identified as: (a) “Igorot” (Prill-Brett, 1990) or an ethnic label strategically invoked during several moments of conflict resulting from issues of land and resource access (Perez, 2007; Prill-Brett, 1997); (b) Chinese Filipinos (also called “Tsinoy”) whose families have settled in Baguio for over a century now (Cheng & Bersamira, 1997); (c) settlers from the lowlands; and (d) faith-based identities like the Muslims (Millalos & Balmores, 2009), among many.

Over the years, it has become increasingly difficult to pinpoint who is “authentic,” particularly if one simplistically goes by phenotypic markers or ethnic origins. The quest for authenticity may no longer be a crucial question when indigenous knowledge becomes disembedded or restructured “across indefinite spans of time-space” (Giddens, 1987, p. 21 in Mendoza, 2007). Authenticity, however, remains a significant marker particularly in certain contexts, such as in the defense of the land and resource access and control, as discussed by Prill-Brett in several essays (1993, 1994, 1995, 2000). This kind of authenticity is negotiated from celebrations particular to specific locales in the Cordillera (Russell, 2007), to “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm, 1983) such as the Cordillera Month, and casual conversations in the virtual world. Then there are expressions of solidarity across place-based local settings by those who affiliate themselves as people from the Cordillera (McKay, 2007).

Beyond the glitter of the American colonial period and post-World War II reconstruction, to save the pine trees implicates the struggle over the environment. Ethnicity, authenticity, tradition, and similar categories are nestled in environmental discourses that are as much about resources as they are about benefits (Conklin, 1997; Resurreccion, 1998).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The reviewed texts demonstrate how invocations of the so-called “ethnic” are visibly iterated through several contradictory streams in social media messaging. The performative assertion of identity is achieved through the visual spectacle of garments, objects, gestures, and the aural iteration of the *gangsa* (gong) sounded during occasions of both touristic celebrations and protests. Virtual personas invoke a sense of an ethnic past to create strategic alliances or engage in conversations in social media. The weapons for identity assertion vary and often compete because of how vested interests are implicated in the discourses that intersect in the politics of the body, identity, and the environment.

While the mediated/virtual persona or personas in power invoke notions of ethnic solidarity and perceived struggles for self-determination in their mediatized “green messaging,” the interactive nature of social media offers opportunities to clash with these ideas. Strategies of resistance and dramatized dissent are configured in everyday practices of the virtual. Virtual spaces allow opportunities for claims to indigeneity to be remediated as much as they allow tensions along ethnic lines to be experienced offline and online. Whereas a certain sense of unity can be forged under the banner of regional autonomy, virtual personas can in turn create, ironically, both unity and fractures through social media.

ENDNOTE

¹ The page was accessed on September 9, 2013 from http://mauriciodomogan.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=55&Itemid=62. The fine print at the bottom of the page indicates that the article first came out in *Baguio Midland Courier* in its August 31, 2008 issue as the 99th Baguio Day supplement.

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