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Cultural commercialization to keep indigenous cultures alive in Ifugao society, the Philippines

Anniken Renslo Sandvik

Abstract

This paper argues that commercialization of indigenous cultures may contribute to their continued survival. This is based on the findings from a case study in Ifugao, Philippines. Because of various factors like the conversion to Christianity, the adaptation of national systems of government and education, and the introduction of international mass media, the indigenous Ifugao cultural practices are vanishing. In an attempt to revive these practices, the municipal and provincial governments in Ifugao are arranging annual festivals showcasing indigenous culture. In this process Ifugao culture is commercialized, as the indigenous practices are being performed out of their original contexts as parts of a program created to entertain an audience. By participating in these festivals, Ifugao youth increase their indigenous knowledge, at the same time as they are becoming more interested in Ifugao culture.

Introduction

A vanishing culture of ancient practices

The Ifugao people have inhabited parts of the Cordillera Mountains in northern Luzon in the Philippines for more than 2,000 years (UNESCO, 2010). They are known as the creators of the Ifugao rice terraces, which were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1995 (UNESCO, 2010), and their intangible culture has always been closely connected to the cultivation of rice, as well as to indigenous religious beliefs. To understand this connection it is necessary to
be familiar with the cycle of rice cultivation.

Originally, the rice cycle consisted of five major stages (UNESCO, 2008: 21-22): (1) the weeding stage, taking place in September, when the rice stalks began to rot, (2) the land preparation stage, taking place in October and November, when the land was prepared for a new season of rice growing, (3) the rice planting stage, lasting from December at the earliest to February, (4) the cultivation stage, where the main concern was to protect the crops from pest, and weed the terraces so as to give the rice plants space to grow, lasting from February and until the rice was ready for harvesting, and (5) the harvesting stage in May or June, which also included the selection of prime seeds for the next agricultural year.

Accompanying this cycle of rice cultivation was a similar cycle of ritual events, mainly performed to appease the gods and other unseen beings, so that the rice fields would yield plenty (UNESCO, 2008: 23). According to UNESCO, this cycle consisted of 14 great rituals (UNESCO, 2008: 25-27). It is useful to give an example in form of one of the most important agricultural rituals. Kulpi was usually performed in March, when all the rice fields were planted, with an objective of protecting the newly planted rice from possible diseases (UNESCO, 2008: 25-27). Nowadays the kulpi has become an annual festival in the Ifugao municipality of Lagawe. The kulpi used to begin after the completion of the planting season, and also after the rice field owners had prepared rice wine, called baya (LGU Lagawe, 2010). The ritual would start either at the rice wine granary or at the house of the richest man with the greatest expanse of rice fields in the village, and the villagers and all native priests, called mumbaki, would gather at the chosen location. The gods and goddesses were invited by the mumbaki to come and drink wine, and then chickens were sacrificed. The first chicken would be for the dead ancestors, the second for the gods of prosperity, and the third for the gods of rice and vegetation. When the ritual at the richest man's house or granary was completed, the next household would start the process in his house, and so the ritual performance would move from one household to another, until every household in the village had finished (LGU Lagawe, 2010).

Because the ancient system of belief played such a big role in the traditional Ifugao way of life, the decline of rituals is not only important in terms of religion, but has also to be considered as closely linked
to the decline of other cultural practices. One example is the recitation of myths. According to the anthropologist Roy Franklin Barton who spent many years in Ifugao, myths are part of nearly every Ifugao ritual, telling stories about hero-ancestors, gods, and other supernatural beings, who in the past were confronted with problems similar to those worrying the Ifugaos in the present, and about how they resolved these problems (Barton, 1955: 7). It is necessary to stress that these myths were taken seriously, and never narrated for the sake of entertainment.

Thus, when the performance of rituals vanished, so did the recitation of myths.

The same trend is evident when it comes to hudhud chanting. The hudhud consists of more than 200 chants, each divided into 40 episodes, telling stories about ancestral heroes, customary law, religious beliefs and traditional practices, as well as reflecting the importance of rice cultivation (UNESCO, 2011). According to UNESCO, which inscribed the hudhud chants on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, the chants are believed to have originated before the 7th century, and had traditionally been performed during the rice sowing season, at harvest time, and at funeral wakes and rituals. But, because Christianity has taken over as the major religion, and also because the methods for rice production have been modernized, the hudhud is seldom chanted in the original context anymore (UNESCO, 2011).

In parallel with the conversion to Christianity, Ifugao society has been through other major changes, which also have contributed to the decline of cultural practices. One of the most important changes may be the change in how the society is governed. Traditionally, unwritten laws based on customs and taboos guided the Ifugaos through their lives. In 1919, Barton described this in detail in the book Ifugao Law, where he stated that “the Ifugaos have no form of writing: there is, consequently, no written law. They have no form of political government: there is, therefore, no constitutional or statutory law. Inasmuch as they have no courts or judges, there is no law based on judicial decisions. Ifugao law has two sources of origin: taboo ... and custom” (Barton, 1919: 11).

Thus, in the absence of courts and judges, the Ifugaos needed other ways to enforce their customary laws, and the outcome of
disagreements and quarrels were therefore often decided through duels in various kinds of ethnic sports, for example wrestling. According to Barton, wrestling was an ordeal used throughout Ifugao, mainly "to settle cases of disputed rice-fields boundaries" (Barton, 1919: 97). However, the matches were normally friendly, because the Ifugao believed that the deceased ancestors had already decided the outcome.

Now, however, the Ifugao have adapted to the modern way of life, and are governed by the same form of government as the rest of the Philippines. Thus, activities that used to be practiced to settle disputes have vanished.

Adaptation to the modern way of life also affects other parts of Ifugao culture. With the modern society came television and Internet, and this has led to international popular culture taking over from traditional leisure activities like hudhud chanting, singing of native songs, and native dancing.

When these factors are combined together, it is evident that measures need to be taken to ensure the indigenous Ifugao culture's continued survival. One such measure is the commercialized festivals organized by the provincial and municipal governments in Ifugao.

**Cultural commercialization: two Ifugao festivals**

To help the continued survival of Ifugao culture, provincial and municipal authorities in Ifugao have initiated annual festivals with a main objective of reviving ancient practices about to vanish. Ifugao province is made up of 11 municipalities (NSO, 2009), and during April and May each year, these municipalities arrange their own festivals where ethnic games, dances, songs, and sometimes also rituals, are performed. In June the festivities are held on a provincial level, when the Gotad ad Ifugao is held in the capital town, Lagawe (UNESCO, 2008: 40).

This paper is based on research conducted during two of the municipal festivals in April 2011, namely the Tungoh ad Hungduan in Hungduan and the Kulpi ad Lagawe in Lagawe. Both of the festivals had a program that combined indigenous activities, like native songs, dances and ethnic games, with modern ones, like volleyball and basketball.

It is reasonable to say that these two festivals are commercialized
cultural products, even though none of the organizers report to have any economic benefits to gain from them. Three factors support this argument.

First, the festivals aim to attract more visitors to the respective municipalities, as both are listed as tourist events on various websites for travelers (Local Philippines, 2011). In Hungduan, this goal is more evident than in Lagawe, as increased tourism is one of the expressed core objectives of the Tungoh festival (LGU Hungduan, 1994). It is reasonable to believe that such a goal leads to the cultural performances being presented in such a manner as to interest tourists. More tourists will in turn lead to more money for the municipality, as the tourists will sleep and eat in the municipality, and in many cases, also buy souvenirs. In other words, the culture may be presented in a way that makes more tourists, and thus more money, a possible outcome of the festivals. However, it is necessary to note that both of the municipalities in question still experience a limited degree of tourism. According to the Ifugao Provincial Tourism Profile, 7 percent of the tourists to Ifugao province visited Hungduan municipality in 2006, while only 1 percent visited Lagawe municipality (UNESCO, 2008: 31).

Second, the programs of both festivals included contests, where money was awarded to the best cultural performances. In Lagawe, most of the activities were contests, while in Hungduan a tight budget limited the number of prizes, and activities that used to be staged as contests in earlier festivals were now regular performances only, with no winner or losers. The money awards make it hard to know whether the performers who participate in the contested indigenous cultural events do it because they are interested in the culture, or if they are most concerned about winning the prize. One cannot rule out the possibility that the prizes serve as the main motivation for the participants, and if so, the prospect of earning money may be what keeps the Ifugao culture alive.

Combined together, the wish for more tourists and the money awards make it reasonable to suggest that even though Ifugao culture is not being exchanged for money directly, it is possible that the prospect of gaining profit to some degree is serving as a motivation factor for both organizers and participants during the festivals.

However, more important, is the third factor, namely the fact that the cultural practices performed during the festivals are presented out
of their original contexts, as they are now being performed to entertain an audience instead of being directly related to the process of rice cultivation, religious rituals, conflict solving, and so on. Thus, it can be argued that the original meanings of the performances disappear for the sake of entertainment. Here, the most obvious examples are the names of the two festivals. Traditionally, the term *tungoh* was used to describe an annual non-working holiday, when the inhabitants of a village stayed in their homes, and visitors were considered a taboo. During today’s *tungoh*, however, the organizers wish for as many visitors as possible, and the festival grounds are very much alive, with no tranquility or silence being observed at all.

The same goes for the festival in Lagawe. Instead of being a sacred ritual where gods and ancestor spirits are invoked and asked to protect the rice plants, the term *kulpi* is now reduced to a name for a three-day festival of traditional and modern activities, organized to attract as many people as possible.

Evidently, most of the cultural practices showcased during the festivals are also being presented out of their original contexts, just because of the fact that they are presented as parts of a program, and not in connection with rice cultivation, weddings, religious rituals, and so on. An example is a ritual called *hulin* that was performed during the opening ceremony of the 2011 Tungoh ad Hungduan festival. Traditionally, the *hulin* was performed when rice planting was completed, and the objective was to ensure a bountiful harvest and good health by driving away pest and diseases (LGU Hungduan, 2011). The ritual was performed by male members of the community carrying spears and a red plant called dongle. Starting from one point in the village, they would walk in a single file around the houses, beating the walls and producing as much noise as possible, screaming “go away, go away”. They would continue walking through the rice terraces, simulating that they were driving away an unseen force. The final destination of the ritual’s walking process was the boundaries of the community, where the dongla plants would be planted to prevent evil spirits, pests, and diseases from returning. This would also be a signal for outsiders not to visit the community on this day, as the purposes of the ritual would be disturbed.

It is not hard to imagine that the traditional performance of *hulin* was a time consuming event. During the 2011 festival, however, the
whole process was over after one minute of young men running after one another in a circle on the municipal ground. Thus, the performance gave the impression of being a staged event, performed only for the sake of entertainment, with no original meaning attached.

The festival organizers in Hungduan report that sometimes, they get negative comments regarding this cultural commercialization. Most often, it is the elders of the community who complain that the rituals are not being presented in the right context, underlining that they do not want their culture to be commercialized this way (Bandao, 2011).

The fact that some members of the communities have these opinions gives the festival organizers a dilemma. Because of this dilemma, the organizers have developed a policy regarding what parts of the culture they find acceptable to commercialize, and what they should leave alone. During the 2011 festival this policy led them to banning the use of the traditional percussion bar called bangibang for the first time.

Traditionally, the bangibang was used in a burial dance for a murdered person, and for many of the mumbakis [indigenous priests] and the elders of the community it is important that the instrument should not be used in other activities. (Bandao, 2011)

Apparently, the commercialization policy is working the way the organizers want, as the mainstream belief among the inhabitants during the festivals was that overall the festival performances give a truthful picture of Ifugao culture. In other words, it is believed that the songs are sung the way they used to be sung, the dances danced the way they used to be danced, and the ethnic sports played the way they used to be played. Everything is the same, only the contexts are different.

**Effects of cultural commercialization on Ifugao youth**

As previously shown, commercialized festivals are arranged throughout the Ifugao province as a means to keep the indigenous culture alive. The question now is how the process of cultural commercialization affects local youth, who have to be considered the
key to the continued survival of Ifugao culture. It is essential that the indigenous cultural knowledge is transferred from the elder generations to the young, so that the youth can in turn pass these skills on to the coming generations.

According to the Ifugaos themselves, the main problem facing Ifugao society today is not that youth does not appreciate traditional Ifugao culture, but rather that they seldom perform it, and thus are not given the chance to appreciate it. One of the reasons for the lack of performances is the overall decrease in cultural practices, as outlined above. Another is the fact that many young people leave their village, municipality, and also province to study in a city elsewhere in the Philippines. And when they have left the province, it is reasonable to believe that their fields of interest will concern other things than Ifugao culture, for example their chosen profession. As Gayamo (2011) noted,

＞The youth is thinking about how they can earn money. They are taking their bachelor degrees, and when they are educated, they focus on their work. This is what they are interested in, and therefore, there are so many that don’t know how to dance the Ifugao dances properly, or how to chant the hudhud.

Thus, new arenas for transfer of indigenous knowledge from the elder generations to the younger are necessary, and consequently the commercialized festivals are being arranged. My study found that youth increase their indigenous knowledge during the festivals, and that the festivals make them more interested in Ifugao culture, even though the cultural performances are being presented out of their original contexts during the festivals.

As the cultural performances are seldom performed in their original contexts anymore, these practices no longer occupy the same position in the youth’s lives as they do in the lives of the elders. This is simply a result of times that are changing, with modern lifestyles taking over from ancient practices in most parts of Ifugao life. Therefore, the festivals serve as one of few arenas where youth can witness live performances of their indigenous culture at all. It is of minor importance that the practices have been through a commercialization process before they reach the stage. In fact, the opposite seems closer to the
truth, as young people report that they learn more about traditional Ifugao culture by participating in the festivals.

It may be concluded that the commercialized cultural festivals are successful in keeping the indigenous Ifugao culture alive, as they affect the youth positively. However, there exists a concern that this positive relationship between youth and indigenous culture is a product of the festivals only, and that it might disappear when young people return to their everyday lives.

As a result many Ifugaos were reluctant to hope for too much from the festivals, even though they believed the outcome was positive. They believe the festivals have served as arenas where youth could show other inhabitants of Ifugao what they had learned throughout the year. This way, the festivals become motivational factors for youth to practice in order to be ready for the April and May performances. If so, the festivals can be said to be successful in terms of keeping the indigenous culture alive all year.

To sum up, by participating in these commercialized cultural festivals Ifugao youth increase their indigenous knowledge and become more interested in Ifugao culture. There is a concern that this level of interest lasts for a short time only, but the festivals may still contribute to keep the culture alive throughout the year, as they may motivate the youth to practice for the festival performances.

The findings in a broader context

So far, I have argued that cultural commercialization serves as a way to keep indigenous Ifugao culture alive in the two municipalities Hungduan and Lagawe. Now I will look into whether or not this conclusion is transferable to a larger group—first and foremost Ifugao society as a whole, but also indigenous communities elsewhere.

Can the findings from two of the eleven municipalities in Ifugao be applied to the rest of the province? The fact that the two municipalities in question are so different from each other suggests that they can. While Hungduan is the smallest municipality of the eleven in the province measured by population, Lagawe is the fourth largest (NSO, 2009), and while Hungduan consists of tall mountains covered by steep rice terraces, some of them inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (UNESCO, 2008: 11), Lagawe is located at a lower alti-
tude, and parts are classified as urban, even though there are both mountains and rice terraces here too (NSCB, 2011). In other words, these two municipalities represent two very different parts of Ifugao province, yet the research findings remain similar, suggesting that the findings may be applied to the rest of Ifugao as well.

However, there is one exception, the municipality of Banaue, which is the tourist centre of the province (UNESCO, 2008: 11). In 2005 and 2006, the missionary Carlos Milos R. Bulilan conducted a study on cultural commercialization in Banaue, concluding that the process affected Ifugao culture negatively, because the culture was presented to please the tourists only, and consequently, the original meanings of the practices disappeared. He argued that this led to desacralization of Ifugao culture, which constituted a major threat to its survival (Bulilan, 2007: 28).

This conclusion contradicts the arguments of this paper. Two factors explain why that is. First, Bulilan focuses on the religious aspects of Ifugao culture, and commercialization of religious rituals has other consequences beyond those resulting from commercialization of other cultural practices, such as dances, songs, and sports. This was evident in Hungduan too, where the hulin ritual appeared to be a staged performance only, with no original meaning attached at all.

Second, Bulilan’s study concerns touristy Banaue, which received 85 percent of the tourist arrivals in Ifugao in 2006 (UNESCO, 2008: 31), and thus differs from the situation in the rest of Ifugao province. Thus, Bulilan’s conclusion undoubtedly portrays the reality in Banaue town, but the rest of Ifugao may experience cultural commercialization more positively. The non-governmental organization Save the Ifugao Terraces Movement (SITMO) supports this view, as they argue that the other municipalities of Ifugao have the possibility to learn from Banaue, and not copy what has gone wrong in that town (UNESCO, 2008: 55).

Furthermore, only 12 percent of the inhabitants of Ifugao live in Banaue (NSO 2009), and the great majority lives elsewhere. If the findings from Hungduan and Lagawe may be applied to the rest of Ifugao province except Banaue, then they apply to the majority of the Ifugaos. Consequently, it can be concluded that cultural commercialization may help the survival of indigenous Ifugao culture.

This conclusion is also useful for other parts of the world where
minorities are working to save their indigenous cultures. Other groups may be able to maintain their remembrance of indigenous culture in the same way. Empowerment is key. Menike (1993: 181) advises governments and organizations on how they should work to empower poor people as follows:

If you want to empower the Poor, please first trust the Poor. Have confidence in the people's knowledge and wisdom. The People can teach you—and not the other way around. Please do not come to teach the Poor and impose your values and strategies on us because of your false notion that the Poor are ignorant, lethargic, and need to be shaken up. Don't insult the Poor. Allow the People's Movements to take their own decisions, and to plan and manage their resources. Let the Poor seek solutions to their own problems.

This theory is applicable to the cultural commercialization in Ifugao. The Ifugaos themselves have initiated the cultural festivals, not outsiders trying to do what they believe is best for Ifugao society. The Ifugaos' knowledge and wisdom are the basis for the festivals, and the Ifugaos occupy the role as teachers. No outsiders are imposing their values on the Ifugaos, trying to make them organize the festivals this way or that way. The Ifugaos make the decisions on planning and managing the resources.

According to Menike, this strategy is a recipe for success when it comes to empowering the poor. As this paper shows, it can also be relevant regarding commercialization of indigenous cultures. As long as the indigenous group is in charge of the process, deciding what parts of their culture to include in a festival program and what parts to exclude, the remembrance of the culture remains in focus, and not the wish to entertain, and thus the festivals will contribute to keeping the indigenous cultures alive, instead of being another threat to their survival.

Some studies on cultural commercialization in other parts of the world support this theory. In "Cultural tourism" in Bali: Cultural performances as tourist attractions,' Michel Picard, who undertook research in Bali during 1981 and 1982, found that even though tourists had invaded the island, the inhabitants did not sacrifice their own values "on the altar of monetary profit" (Picard, 1990: 37). According
to Picard, dancing is a central part of Balinese culture, and when tourists first arrived on the island, dancing performances quickly became popular among them. However, the types of dances available in Bali are of great diversity, some existing only for the sake of entertainment, while others are used solely for religious rituals. When dancing performances were first staged for tourists, some confusion arose between ritual and entertainment, but according to Picard, the Balinese authorities decided that they would not tolerate that:

Their reaction consisted of attempting to prevent the risk of 'profanation' (*provanasi*) entailed by the 'commercialization' (*komersialisasi*) of ritual dances, by endeavoring to work out criteria to distinguish between those dance genres which might be commercialized for the tourist market, and those which should not. (Picard, 1990: 62).

Consequently, tourism was no longer accused of degrading Balinese religious values, but instead regarded as a “stimulus for artistic creativity” (Picard, 1990: 62).

Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos (2004: 135-157) argue that the opposite happened to an ethnic minority community in Honduras, precisely because they were not allowed to control the cultural commercialization process themselves when their culture was made available for tourists.

If no attention is paid to how the culture is being commercialized, the consequences of the process might be devastating to the indigenous culture in question. If the Ifugaos had not been in charge of the festivals, the outcome of the case study in this paper might have been different.

**Conclusion**

Commercialization of indigenous cultures may contribute to their continued survival. A case study undertaken in Ifugao province showed that by participating in commercialized cultural festivals, youth increase their indigenous knowledge and become more interested in Ifugao culture, even though the cultural performances are presented out of their original contexts during the festivals. This reflects the decrease in indigenous cultural practices that has taken
place over the last couple of decades in Ifugao. As the cultural performances are seldom performed in their original contexts anymore, they do not occupy the same position in the youth’s lives as they do in the lives of the elders. This is simply a result of times that are changing, with modern lifestyles taking over from ancient practices in most parts of an Ifugao’s life. Therefore, the festivals serve as one of few arenas where youth can witness live performances of their indigenous culture at all. It is of minor importance that the practices have been through a commercialization process before they reach the stage.

The argument that by affecting the youth positively, the commercialized cultural festivals contribute to keeping Ifugao culture alive, reflects the thought that the future lies in the hands of the young generation. For the culture to survive, the cultural performances and the indigenous knowledge linked to these performances must be transferred from the elder generations to youth, so that youth can in turn pass these skills on to coming generations. If cultural commercialization increases the indigenous knowledge of the youth and makes them more interested in their culture, the process contributes to keeping the culture alive.

However, some precautions need to be taken. People’s empowerment plays a central role. As long as the indigenous group is in charge of the commercialization process, deciding what parts of their culture to include in a festival program and what parts to exclude, the remembrance of the culture remains in focus. If this precaution is kept in mind, the findings from Ifugao may be transferred to other indigenous communities worldwide.

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