

# PERFORMING THAI AND INDIGENOUS IGOROT AMERICAN FOLKLORE AND IDENTITIES: ETHNIC AND CULTURAL POLITICS REVEALED

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we explore the interplay of performing ethnic culture through folklore, the politics of identity formations, and subjectivities of minoritized Asian Americans and their communities. In Asian American Studies, cultural performance and its relation to identity formation have commonly been viewed as lineal, and positive phenomena, especially among the youth. As marginalized Asian Americans – Thai and indigenous Igorot American folkloric performances reveal conflicts and tensions that question the notion of Asian American pan-ethnic solidarity. These can be situated externally (i.e., inter-ethnic conflicts and tensions between two ethnic groups), as well as internally (intra-ethnic conflicts within one ethnic group).<sup>1</sup> They demonstrate how cultural and folkloric performances can be employed as both a strategy and mechanism for ethnic and cultural hegemony (as in the case of Filipino/Filipino American misappropriation of Igorot/Igorot American folklore and performances), and as a counter narrative to the dominant Asian American narrative of exceptionalism (i.e., the Model Minority). Thai and indigenous Igorot American youths challenge hegemonic cultural groups in their quests for social justice. Thai American Buddhists perform Thai religious identity and rituals to question the misinterpretation of Thai Buddhism by non-Asian Buddhists. Indigenous Igorot Americans challenge mainstream Filipino/Filipino American cultural and narrative hegemony by acting and performing their folklore and customs in their own space as a critique of an invisible interethnic cultural and subversive domination. We offer a critical view of performing Thai and indigenous Igorot American folklore and identities, questioning the meaning of “belonging;” we explore the complexity of the interplay between the emic and etic, revealing uneven relationships of power and struggles for agency as expressed through performing folklore.

## **Introduction**

The perennial question: “Who am I? Asian? American? Asian American?” has preoccupied Asian American subjects, especially the youth, since the Asian American movement unfolded in the late 1960s. Several decades later, identity is still one of the fundamental and foundational issues for Asian American youth. We examine Thai and Igorot American youth’s encounter with identity construction and politics. Both Thai and Igorot American communities are “minority” communities in Asia America in terms of population size and, for the Thais, the length of time in the United States. Additionally they are both easily categorized as “Southeast Asian American,” and as evident from recent scholarship and popular discourses, is a peripheral “emerging” category within Asian America that privileges Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, and Filipino Americans. Thus, we seek to show that identity politics continues to be a viable and critical issue in Asian American Studies, and that it is not just an issue of Asian Americans against white supremacy, but rather, an intra-ethnic issue of Asian Americans in conflict with other Asian Americans, especially minoritized Asian American communities such as Thai and Igorot Americans. In large part, both historically and currently, identity politics within Asian America revolves around racial ideology of white supremacy. Invoking Joseph Cheah, we understand white supremacy to mean “a hegemonic understanding, on the part of both whites and non-whites, that white Euro-American culture, values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices are the norm according to which other cultures and social practices are judged” (2011). The case study of the Berkeley Thai Temple, Wat Mongkolratanaram, illustrates this type of inter-ethnic encounters with Euro-American white supremacy. As such, the small, but vocal Thai American youth were able to mobilize support from within the Asian American community. The indigenous Igorot American community is an example of intra-ethnic conflict: Igorots are from the Philippines, thus they are technically “Filipino;” however Igorot subjects within the Filipino American community are discriminated against in an Orientalist fashion by non-Igorot Filipino Americans who consciously mimic Spanish and white American standards. Identity politics within Asian American communities is still a foundational issue because American and Asian American societies are still constructed on racial ideologies of white supremacy. In the case of Igorot Americans, it is the appropriation and mimicry of white supremacy as expressed by mainstream Filipino Americans. Through identity politics, Thai and Igorot Americans engage in the politics of community consciousness-awakening and individual self-empowerment. Articulating their experiences as Thai and Igorot Americans, they claim their position in American and Asian American societies and express their agency — individually and collectively.

### **Thai American Identity Politics: Temple, Community, and Buddhist Expressions**

The temple, or *wat*, is the central location for the Thai Buddhist community in Thailand and, more so, in the United States, used for religious rituals and faith expressions, and serving as a community center where Thais learn to express their “Thai-ness” in terms of language and cultural performances. Wat Mongkolratanaram, locally referred to as the Berkeley Thai Temple, was established in 1978. For nearly three decades the Berkeley Thai Temple has held Sunday Food Offering (locally called as the Thai Temple Sunday brunch) where members of the temple prepare and serve food to visitors — Buddhists, non-Buddhists, Thais, non-Thais. Thai and Thai American Buddhists who volunteer at the Sunday brunch understand their work as an expression of *thambun*, which means “making merit.” Merit is the counter of *karma*, which Buddhists believe chains all living creatures in endless cycles of reincarnation and suffering. Merit, as the counterweight of karma, may be gained primarily by supporting the community of monks and nuns, assisting the needy, or by meditating on compassion and peace. Merit is also believed to be transferable. Hence, the living may perform rituals and offerings to earn merit, which may then be transferred to their beloved to assist them in the afterlife and in being reborn into the human realm. From a Thai American perspective, volunteers at the Berkeley Thai Temple engage in the religio-cultural practice of *thambun*, which provides for the livelihood of the Thai monks who reside there and sustains the temple for the community as well. Priwan Nanongkam (2011) makes the following observation about Buddhist and Christian Sunday practices:

“Unlike a Christian who is supposed to go to church every Sunday, the Buddhist has no regular schedule for going to temple. One can go whatever day is convenient. That is because, theoretically, practicing Buddhism can be done anywhere, anyplace, and at all times. Most Thai Buddhists, however, regard their religious practice, *thambun* when they go to offer food to monks at the temple.” (p. 105)

We agree with Nanongkam’s 2011 perspective that for Thai Buddhists, *thambun*, is Thai cultural performance because marking merit “. . . embodies cultural content that. . . [reveals] . . . a particularization of how Thai Buddhists practice their religion. On the surface, among common Buddhists *thambun* means ‘correcting good things,’ so that it will bring one to heaven after life ends.” (p. 105)



Berkeley Thai Temple. (Photo by Jonathan H. X. Lee)

The popular Sunday Food Offering came under attack in summer 2008 when the Berkeley Thai Temple applied to the City's Zoning Adjustments Board to build a Buddha hall (*bood*) beyond the size allowed by the municipal code to house Buddhist icons and relics. Nearby residents on Oregon Street gathered to protest the proposed expansion of the temple, citing that the "architecture" will change the character of the residential neighborhood (Sookkasikon, 2010: 118). Additionally, Oregon Street residents used this opportunity to voice their concern about the Sunday Food Offering, after they discovered that the temple's 1993 zoning permit only allowed for food to be served three times a year. They cited it as "detrimental" to the health of the neighborhood, and suggested that the food service be moved away to a different site because it created noise, parking and traffic problems, neighborhood littering, and is the source of "offensive odors" (Sookkasikon, 2010: 122–124). The temple's weekly Sunday Food Offering is well attended by more than 600 visitors. Some Oregon Street residents said, "We believe we have a right to reside in peace, to enjoy our residential neighborhood without a large commercial restaurant in our midst" (Fowler, 2009). After the

initial hearing about the zoning problem, the Berkeley Thai Temple was granted a zoning adjustment: This is good news for them and their supporters. However, at the hearing, there were accusations that the food served at the temple was drugged. Some opponents of the temple's food service suggested that they were forced to live with odors. Others were more focused on their complaints. As recorded in *The Wall Street Journal*: "'We have no opposition to Buddhism,'" says Ms. Shoulders, the neighbor. "We have no problem with Thai culture. We even actually like Thai food." All she is seeking, she says, is changes in the temple's operations." (Fowler 2009)

It appears that the Berkeley Thai Temple became a victim of its own success and popularity. Those who supported the Berkeley Thai Temple and wanted to save the food service argued that there is a direct connection between saving the food service and saving the temple because the majority of its operating funds are derived from the weekly food service. However, local neighbors and homeowners — especially neighborhood residents — had a right to challenge offensive odors, loud early morning noise, and excessive traffic, that they felt had adversely impacted the quality of life in their neighborhood.



Model of proposed Buddha Hall. (Photo by Jonathan H. X. Lee)

### **Thai American Youth and Save the Thai Temple Campaign**

Viewing these claims as a subtle expression of racism (Sookkasikon, 2010: 113–117), Thai American youth activists formed the Save the Thai Temple Campaign, advocating for their parents, grandparents, and community elders who did not have a strong command of English and local codes and politics. The campaign members were primarily youths who had been raised at the Berkeley Thai Temple.

“They launched an awareness campaign to educate the general public on Thai Buddhist practices and the religious significance of merit-making (*thumboon*)” (Chatikul, 2011: 70). On 22 September 2009 the Berkeley City Council voted unanimously (9–0) in favor of the broader land use permits granted by the Zoning Adjustment Board (ZAB) in a decision favoring the Berkeley Thai Temple, Wat Mongkolratanaram.



### Berkeley Thai Temple as Site of Cultural and Political Identity

In their advocacy for the rights of the community, a strong expression of Thai cultural and national identity can be seen among the members of the Berkeley Thai Temple and among Thai American youth who formed the Save the Thai Temple Campaign. The temple serves as a bridge for Thais in America to connect to their homeland through the expressions of religio-cultural and political activities. These cultural practices carry particular cultural codes, which, in this case, are mainly religious and reveal the specific attributes that have led to a new Thai identity among Thai immigrants in America that is politically transnational, yet local. We invoke Milton Singer’s 1972 understanding of “cultural performance” that includes “[p]lays, concerts, and lectures. . .but also prayers, ritual readings and recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals, and all those things we usually classify under religion and ritual rather than with the cultural and artistic” (p. 71). Expressions of Thai and Thai American identity are implicitly, if not explicitly politicized — transnationally and locally — because Thai subjectivity is founded in the parameters of Thai-ness based on the Thai national identity created by King Vajiravudh (r. 1910–1925) (Nanongkam, 2011: 102).

From the demands of nationalism in the early twentieth century, the King created the basic national triad of *chat-satsana-phramahakasat*, “nation-religion-monarch” to promote the unity of the nation. He set up a

national identity for all Thais regardless of their personal and ethnic identities, based on the King's policy, "Thai people should act in ways conducive to the nation's goals" (Wyatt, 1984: 229, cited in Nanongkam, 2011: 102). This old political identity continues as a core value in Thai society today, and Thai immigrants bring it with them to express their Thai-ness in America. It is reproduced as Thai American cultural productions in America in the form of social organizations. Thai language and Buddhism are the two Thai American cultural performances that carry descriptions of how they are related to the creative idea of Thai political identity, the "Thai nation," and the "Thai people" (Nanongkam, 2011: 102).

By maintaining cultural patterns, as expressed in *thambun*, Thai Americans are able to sustain the national identity that is defined by their monarch, which results in linking Thai America to Thailand. Additionally, the Thai American youth express their political identity as "American" through their advocacy to save their temple. They tell the community that they are "here" and that they plan to invoke their Constitutional rights to practice their religion. In so doing, the Thai American youth do not conform to the popular conception of Asian Americans as "model minorities" who do not rock the boat.

### **Performing Ethnic and National Subjectivities: Igorot as Filipino Americans**

We now turn to a second case study of how performing Igorot folk dances are essential to two different identities within Filipino America: mainstream Filipino American and Igorot American identities. Our definition of the Filipino American "mainstream" refers to the dominant Tagalog-speaking, Catholic, and hetero-normative Filipino American community (Espiritu, 1995; Root, 1997). We argue that Igorot folk dances are employed by both communities to authenticate competing ethnic and cultural identities. Performing Igorot folk dances perpetuates the identity politics that privileges mainstream Filipino American subjectivity, which in turn establishes a status *hierarchy* that stratifies ethnic groups within the fictive homogenous Filipino American category. The performance of Igorot folk dance is utilized by both dominant (pan-Filipino American) and subordinate (Igorot American) communities to affirm self, ethnic, cultural, and national subjectivities: Filipino American versus Igorot American. The misappropriation of Igorot folk dance by the pan-Filipino American community *a la* Pilipino Culture Night (PCN) performances at university and college campuses nationwide, give rise to a "paradox of decolonization."

The paradox of decolonization illustrates the complexity of intra-ethnic social stratification and prejudice; it is the process by which one group colonizes—directly or indirectly—another group in an attempt to—explicitly or implicitly—

liberate themselves from their historical experience with colonialism. Among Filipino American college students, decolonization from Spanish and American colonialism is achieved through cultural and folkloric performances at PCN. However, the decolonization agenda are achieved by PCN through colonizing the Filipino natives: liberation and self-empowerment is not completely beneficial for all parties involved — bringing into question the limits and ethics of performing Igorot folk dances. Igorot Americans continue to face prejudice within the Filipino American communities because they are socio-politically perceived as “native.” For instance, on social networks such as Facebook, Igorot Americans post comments or send messages to one another regarding discrimination that is experienced either personally or by someone they know. For example, a Filipina nurse tells her fellow coworker of Igorot heritage that one of the Filipino patients had a very noisy visitor during visitation hours. The Filipina nurse began to describe this noisy Filipino guest as looking “like an Igorot.” When the nurse of Igorot heritage asked the other nurse to describe what an Igorot “looks like” she described the visitor saying, “. . . you know, she got slit eyes, *mukha niya parang*, Native American Indians, *matapang ang mukha.*” Translated, the nurse is suggesting that Igorot’s physical features are similar to Native American Indians, who looked “like noble savages.” The Igorot-heritage nurse revealed she is Igorot, and the other nurse jokingly said, “You do not look like an Igorot.” This response illustrates the way Igorot subjectivity is locked in a colonial imaginary: Igorot is embedded in the image of a pre-colonial savage subject, thus Igorot and Igorot identity do not exist in modernity.

As a person of Igorot heritage, author Mark Leo and his classmate experienced intra-ethnic prejudice while growing up in San Diego, California. While attending high school, they enrolled in a Tagalog class to fulfill a foreign language requirement. One of the assignments was to do a “show and tell” presentation. Together, they presented the Igorot heritage and showed a video of an Igorot performance. Their peers, mainly non-Igorots giggled at them and created an environment that was not socially accepting. The Igorot youth assumed the laughter was due to the immaturity of high school peers. However, the comments by their classmates during Q&A revealed something more sinister. The words “savage” was used to describe Igorots. The description of Igorots as having a “tail” was also brought up: something they learned from their parents. The next day, their teacher, who was a mainstream Filipino showed contrasting images of Igorots: one in traditional attire and setting buttressing one that became “civilized” after attending schools that were established by the United States. Leo recalls being infuriated because his teacher did not acknowledge his Igorot heritage, and felt the contrasting images of the Igorots to be troubling.

The experiences of Leo and of the Igorot nurse are, unfortunately, commonplace. Hence, examining the paradox and contradiction of decolonization



as represented by PCN validates the angst and anxiety that Igorot Americans know, feel, and experience. Examination of PCN cultural productions reveals that Igorot Americans remain relegated to a pre-colonial period as subjects with a pre-colonial identity. This is buttressed against and within a homogenous Filipino American mainstream identity.

### **Performing Self and Other: A Decolonizing Paradox Revealed**

Although not titled as such, PCN can be traced to the 1930s; the first event occurred to promote a Filipino national culture in the diaspora. In his study of PCN in contemporary Filipino America, Theo Gonzalves (2005) argues that these cultural productions consist of two genres, one that uses folkloric forms — dance, song, music, and costumes — and the other consisting of theatrical narration, in the form of a play or skit (pp. 68–69). PCN's mission is twofold: It is a vehicle for the perseveration of a created homogenous Filipino heritage that is naturalized through time and stage performances as uncontested reality. Additionally, PCN acts as a vehicle to transmit Filipino heritage for future generations of Filipino Americans. As such, truth of cultural, ethnic, religious, and regional differences among Filipinos from within their country of origin is ignored. By analyzing the trends of how PCNs are organized and produced we can see how the inclusion of Igorot folk performance is problematic. According to Gonzalves (2005), the PCN narrative follows a protagonist who does not know his/her history or "...culture; as the show progresses the protagonist comes into contact with the culture that is sought in the form of indigenous Igorot folk dance performances, along with many others; the show concludes when the protagonist reaches an epiphany and becomes a 'born-again Filipino'" (p, 70).

Invoking a quasi-religious experience of transformation, Leny Strobel argues that contemporary Filipino American students are "born-again Filipinos." The Filipino American community and identity are produced through the "born-again process" that requires the (mis)appropriation of various indigenous Philippine cultures as a means of affirming a pan-Filipino homogeneity that promotes "diversity" and celebrates various ethno-linguistic and cultural traditions of the Philippines as a singular "Filipino." This obfuscates the heterogenic reality inherent in Filipino America. The Igorot American youth engage in a counter narrative that highlights particular ethnic and cultural communities and identities, in which they "reclaim" and "decolonize" their subjectivity from the homogenous pan-Filipino American umbrella. According to E.J.R. David and Sumie Okazaki (2006), colonial mentality is ". . . characterized by a perception of ethnic or cultural inferiority that is. . . a specific consequence of centuries of colonization under Spain and the U.S. . . and. . . involves an automatic and uncritical preference for anything American" (pp. 241–252). Maria Root's 1997

analysis of the aftermath of colonialism in the Philippines illustrates the colonial mentality well:

“Four hundred years of combined colonization, first by Spain and then by the United States, widened the Filipino gene pool with the possibilities of lighter skin, hair, and eyes. The tools of colonization gave meaning to the variation in physical appearance among Filipinos. Spain introduced colorism . . . . Centuries of this education primed the Filipino for vulnerability to internalize American rules of race. Colorism inculcated the notions “White is beautiful,” “White is intelligent,” and “White is powerful” in the psyches of many brown-hued Filipinos, thus inferiorizing the Filipino.” (p. 81)

As a means to move away from colonial influence in Filipino culture, and to deconstruct the colonial mentality of Filipino subjects, PCN performers and producers invoke Igorot folk dances and clothes to connect with a pre-colonial period. This act of decolonization communicates Igorot folk dances and customs as a representation of “authentic” Filipino culture. It thus claims the “other,” the indigenous, in general, and Igorot, in particular, as part and parcel of a singular Filipino-ness. What the Filipino nation-state identity and Filipino Americans designated as the savage other has now become a hot commodity in the process of decolonization. More specifically, what was considered outside the realm of Filipino identity is now being included to promote what it means to be a Filipino American and to emphasize Filipino-ness. To be Filipino is simply to be from the Philippines. All people from the Philippines are one and the same. We, however, argue that the colonized mentality is taken for granted: The Indigenous is over extended. To be a more “authentic” Filipino replaces the Spanish with the indigenous. Ironically, in this process of decolonization, Spanish-influenced folk dances and cultural practices still play a prevalent role in Filipino and Filipino American identity.

As Gonzalves asserts, the performance of folk dances is consistent with the theme that goes against the assimilation paradigm, and would be seen as a form of the decolonization described by Strobel. According to Anna Alves (2011), “It [PCN] serves as a cultural identity entrance point and rite of passage for its participants, becoming folkloric practice of sorts. . . [that results in the] embrace [of] a larger community, *naturalizing* a notion of what it means to be Filipino in the United States. . .” (pp. 396–398). From the perspective of Filipino Americans who self-identify as such, PCN is viewed positively. However, from the vantage point of the Igorot American community that occupies both the insider and outsider positions within the boundaries of “Filipino America,” PCN performances of Igorot folk dance are problematic. Along with the production of Filipino, the Spanish cultural influence and mentality is normalized as part of the *episteme* of Filipino America. The Filipino American *habitus* is ahistorical and natural: All

Filipinos are from the Philippines, speak Tagalog, and are Catholic. Ironically, although Strobel advocates for a move away from Spanish and American colonial influence, she becomes a victim of the colonial apparatus, whereby she reflects what Homi Bhabha describes as “mimicry” and Frantz Fanon describes as the colonized becoming the inverted image of colonizer (Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 2008). Filipino Americans who unquestionably adopt the pan-Filipino American narrative and perception of self and society are, as Bhabha (1994) describes, part of the ambivalence of their post-colonial condition.

This leads to a paradox of decolonization: PCN is a decolonizing act, but it is only possible through colonizing Igorot and other indigenous Filipino and Filipino American folkways and communities. The Igorot and Igorot American communities thus experience double colonialization: first by the Western colonial forces, and then an internal, intra-ethnic colonization by other Filipinos. Decolonizing PCN requires a deconstruction of its parts and a critique of its larger intent.

### **The Problems with Performing Filipino-ness**

The focus here is on PCN’s (mis)appropriation of indigenous Filipino folk dances. As established above, the performance of Igorot folk dances at PCN is a decolonizing act. It represents what post-colonial scholars describe as a “counter-discursive” activity that is critical of dominant (colonial) discourse. Organizers of PCNs ignore — wittingly or unwittingly — the problematic issues of authenticity of the dances they perform. “On the one hand, PCN organizers rely on folk forms invented by Francisca Reyes Aquino to authenticate their understanding of Filipina/o culture. . . On the other hand, the folk forms also draw from the highly stylized rendition of the Philippine dance theater work popularized since the late 1950s” (Gonzalves, 2005: 72). But the latter, Aquino contends, is “not folkdance” and “therefore does not have a claim on authenticity” (Gonzalves, 2005: 72). According to Alves (1999), students wrestle with this issue every year during the planning stages of the PCN. She notes, “Though I agree with the dangers of its ‘essentializing’ tendencies, as a consistent PCN producer myself, having participated in five shows as a creator and organizer of content in each, there is something that drew me to that particular arena of production, year in and year out” (p. 24). This “something” that Alves briefly mentions is touched upon again when she argues that:

“The “essential Pilipino” as an ambiguous concept is thus standardized, allowing for individual interpretation of meaning. This ambiguity allows for great maneuvering—what you see is an essentialized package; what you get is distinctive and varied. In other words, the effort to “essentialize” culture in one production during one night is actually an

attempt to “socialize” mass numbers of new students into an ideology of “Pilipino is good and valid” in the face of an American society that barely acknowledges their communal existence” (1999: 56–57).

Alves shows a consensus that the end—affirming and creating a baseline Pilipino identity—justifies the means, which (mis)appropriates Igorot folk dances in PCN to essentialize diversity.

PCN performance of Igorot folk dances is, thus, particularly problematic because of its questionable authenticity: the tempo is faster, costume protocols are overlooked, and moreover, the dances are performed out of context and out of sequence. They are learned by counting movements instead of through feeling and intuition (Tolentino and Ramos, 1935). Because PCN performances are all “theatrical,” the contextual authenticity of the dance is never accounted for. This is because the dance is not performed for its original purpose, but instead, is performed for theatrical means to inform an audience of its identity and subjectivity as Filipino. What one sees, hears, smells, and feel is a fictive Filipinoness. We invoke Catherine Bell’s thoughts on the interplay of ritual and performance to reveal the dialectical relationship between performers and audience. Bell (1998) posits that there is a dialectic relationship between the performer and the audience; the performer creates and projects an identity to the audience, which in turn, is informed of and simultaneously affirms the performed identity. In this case, the performed identity is a homogenous Filipino American identity. What happens if the audience does not identify with the pan-Filipino American identity? What happens if s/he identifies with Igorot?²



BIBAK San Diego female youth member dancing the *salidsid*, a Kalinga courtship dance at the 2011 KANA Amung in San Diego. (Photo by Carlene Basallo)

Similar to the PCN productions of Filipino culture that affirm a pan-Filipino American identity and conceptualization of Filipino-ness, young Igorot Americans are also performing their folk dance traditions as a means to decolonize themselves from multiple colonial complexes: Spanish, pan-Filipino American, and American.<sup>3</sup> By learning and performing Igorot folk dances in community organizations such as BIBAK, which represents Bontoc, Ifugao, Benguet, Apayao and Kalinga indigenous communities, Igorot American youth gain knowledge of their distinctive identity that offers a counter narrative to the pan-Filipino American identity and experience.<sup>4</sup> Learning these folk dances provides them with agency and a sense of ethnic and cultural pride that is unique for those that identify with the various Igorot tribes by either blood or culture. Igorot youth learn the folk dances from Igorot elders. The direct result of this transmission is the development of Igorot pride and identity that is not subsumed in the pan-Filipino American umbrella. These dances represent more than just a multicultural event performed once a year for Igorot youth — they reflect a way of life. Although these dances are no longer accompanied with their traditional rituals, they are performed at community celebrations, during rites of passages (i.e., courtship dances are performed at weddings), and to memorialize stages of Igorot life events (i.e., funerals).

The forces of immigration and modernization have compromised Igorot folkways; Igorot folklore has been lost or modernized to adapt to American culture. The BIBAK performance space fuels a consensus and identification with being Igorot and Igorot American. For example, at regional BIBAK gatherings known as *Canyao* — akin to the Native American pow-wow — regional chapters meet to network and celebrate with other tribal members. Simultaneously, the pan-Filipino mainstream community utilizes the performance of Igorot folk dances in the production of their mainstream multicultural identity, reinforcing a romanticized connection to pre-colonial Philippines as a means to naturalize their identity and sense of self as both Filipino and American.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the dance movements are modified, the purpose of the dance is redefined, and the context becomes utilitarian. The transformation in Igorot folk dance is a byproduct of not only transplanting and adapting to Filipino American customs, but also of the wholesale (mis)appropriation of Igorot folk dance to affirm pan-Filipino American Filipino-ness. The problem is not with their being outsiders of the Igorot American community, but rather with how Igorot is portrayed. Moreover, pan-Filipino American (mis)appropriation of Igorot folk dance is problematic because as non-Igorot, the performance is done out of context and primarily as the subject of the pan-Filipino American gaze. More controversial is that it is not inclusive of people from within.<sup>6</sup> The life experiences of pan-Filipino Americans versus Igorot and other indigenous Filipino Americans are different and reveal different processes of ethnic and community formation. Further, it illustrates how identity politics is

problematically an intra-ethnic issue, especially in the case Igorot American identity formation.



BIBAK San Diego youth performing the Kalinga Tadok for the opening ceremony at the 1st Annual Asian Cultural Festival in San Diego, 2010. (Photo by Diane Balitang)

Igorot folk dances performed at *Canyao* or other Igorot events differ from the performances of those dances at PCNs. At PCNs, they are overly choreographed, performed without stylistic flair, and, more importantly, are devoid of “feeling.” Performed on the basis of count, they are rendered emotionless and mechanical. Further, there is a difference in the way the music is played. At PCN performances, dancers beat their gongs differently than when usually performed in Igorot spaces. PCN gong beating follows the theatrical choreography and movement counts—again, rendering it mechanical. Rather, in Igorot performances, the gong beat dictates the dance steps, allowing for spontaneity of movement, sudden changes in tempo, and depth of emotion since there is no official step count dictating the transition to a different movement. Igorot American performance of Igorot folk dances at Igorot community and cultural events is organic and inclusive. The audience and the performer are not separate or removed; rather, the interaction between the two merges and is fluid, resulting in the creation of a shared community. In this way, Igorot American social relationships are forged and affirmed and the Igorot way of life is maintained. For example, during Igorot weddings, it is customary for the bride and the groom to perform a rendition of the Igorot family’s tribal courtship dance at the reception. Simultaneously, family and friends will perform their celebratory

tribal dances. There is a cacophony of sound and an orderly chaos of movement that comes together organically and emotionally.

PCNs' theatrical performance of Igorot folk dance is an unsuspecting act of colonization; in the guise of multiculturalism, it reveals an underlying assumption and colonialist prejudice toward indigenous people. They perpetuate the orientalist image of the romantic savagery of the Igorot people as falling beyond the sphere of civilization. This is especially apparent in PCN performances of Igorot war and courtship dances. These two dances are always depicted as identities of the Filipino pre-colonial encounter — what all Filipinos were supposed to be like before the colonization of the country and its introduction into Western modernity. Since Igorot identity is showcased as an identity of the past, it is assumed that Filipinos of Igorot heritage no longer exist, which is quite the contrary. Igorot identity — an identity that is distinct to a specific region in the Philippines — is being absorbed by the pan-Filipino identity, but is problematically situated in the *past*. There is no acknowledgment of Igorot identity in the *present*. The message is: non-Igorots are the preservers/saviors of Igorot heritage.

The goal of PCN is to decolonize Filipino American subjectivities from Spanish and American colonial *espitemes*. In order to achieve a subjectivity that is decolonized, PCN cultural producers and viewers must colonize Igorot folk and folkway. This unfolds squarely within the dominant *episteme* that is based on a set of fundamental assumptions about Filipino and Filipino American identity that are so basic so as to be invisible to the colonial forces operating within it. Invoking Fanon, we argue that pan-Filipino American subjectivity, as expressed through PCN, creates a negative racial construction of a colonized self: colonized subjects (i.e., Filipinos) become an inverted image of the colonizer (Fanon, 2008). This leads to a paradox of decolonization; PCN is a decolonizing act, but it is only possible through colonizing Igorot and other indigenous Filipino and Filipino American folkways and communities. The Igorot and Igorot American communities thus experience double colonialization — by Western colonial forces as well as by other Filipinos.

When PCN performances showcase pre-colonial Igorot folk dances to enforce the Filipino American community's homogenous conception of Filipino-ness, it engages in an act of domination. In reclaiming their folk dances and transmitting them into the future, Igorot Americans act in resistance to the entire discursive field within which PCN operates in a post-colonial world. Ironically, in an effort to decolonize the self and the community, indigenous Filipino cultures of the Philippines are (mis)appropriated into the homogenous mainstream pan-Filipino American community and, by extension, identity, which is a form of "colonization" in itself because it continues to perpetuate the social hierarchy that originated from the period of Spanish, American, and Christian colonial



formations. For instance, the mainstream Filipino American narrative tells the stories of those immigrants that are defined as Filipino in the Philippines; however the narratives fail to include the narratives of immigrants who are classified as “other” — the indigenous. More importantly, it ignores the intra-ethnic discrimination that they encountered, not just from the dominant white society, but from the dominant mainstream pan-Filipino American community.



BIBAK San Diego youth posing before their performance at the 2008 San Diego Grand Canyao. (Photo by Jonathan Osio)

## **Conclusion**

Thai and Igorot American youth advocating for visibility as sovereign Asian American communities and subjects reflect the legacy of the Asian American movement of the late 1960s. They remind Asian American civil rights activists that their work is not yet completed. Moreover, in addition to addressing inter-ethnic discrimination, Asian American scholars and activists must also consider intra-ethnic social injustices. As a small, yet vocal, community, Thai American youth have effectively managed to utilize community resources to combat the discrimination that attacks a fundamental civil liberty all Americans struggle enjoy: freedom of religious expression. Igorot American youth courageously ask their fellow Filipino Americans: “What about us?” Identity politics is powerful and has real, immediate, and concrete effects. Beyond simply knowing about the self, it is empowering a community.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Although this paper examines Igorot subjects, this process of decolonization also reclaims folk dances from other indigenous minorities in the Philippines, including the Aeta, the Moro, among many others.

<sup>2</sup>Although it is not discussed in this paper, another interesting question: How will the identity of Filipino Americans be perceived by non-Filipinos in the audience?

<sup>3</sup>We utilize Carl G. Jung's concept of "complex" here. According to Jung, a complex is a core pattern based on perceptions, memories, emotions, and wishes in the personal unconscious organized around a common theme, such as status or power. For Jung, complexes may be conscious, partly conscious, or unconscious. Complexes can be positive or negative, resulting in good or bad consequences. There are many kinds of complex, but at the core of any complex is a universal pattern of experience, or the archetype.

See Jung, Carl G. *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, Collected Works, Volume 8, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960, 1969; and Jung, Carl G. *The Essential Jung*. Edited by Antony Storr. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.

<sup>4</sup>BIBAK is a social organization with chapters around the world that represent the five major Igorot tribes—Bontoc, Ifugao, Benguet, Apayao and Kalinga—found throughout the cordillera mountain region of the Luzon. BIBAK teaches and encourages young Igorot Americans to maintain their folk heritage and their way of life.

<sup>5</sup>Both groups rely on body movement and Igorot traditional clothing as expressions of selfhood that is local and transnational.

<sup>6</sup>Interestingly, in New Zealand, the Maori Warrior Dance, a source of national pride, starts off a Rugby game; whereas football teams in the United States coopted Native American symbols disrespectfully and are no longer permitted to do that because it was offensive to Native Americans. These are two cases that demonstrate how folk dance can be appropriated: One that respects another's dignity and becomes the pride of the nation while the other that did not.

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