

Quiet Resonances of an Emergent Indigeneity: Sound, Silence, and Igorot Protest Performances in the Philippines

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Abstract

Soundscapes of piercing *gangsa* (flat gong) rhythmic patterns, political speeches blared on loudspeakers, and call-and-response chants that envelop renditions of traditional celebratory dances characterise street protests led by Igorot left-wing activists. Upholding militant activism as foundational to Igorot identity, these spectacular displays signify an Igorot sense of value for collectivism, sovereignty, and territorial defense, echoing long-established practices that have sounded community resistance to corporate aggression since the 1970s. Despite this history, many Igorots reject the practice. Performances by leftist Igorots in 2017 aggravated internal debates about politicising Igorot identity. This troubled many Igorot activists, particularly an elder who, since his teenage years, had witnessed Igorots confront corporate intrusion into their ancestral lands through deployments of traditional practices. In an existential crisis, he distanced himself from the normative “noise” of protests, staging a solo act that reaffirmed his identity as an Igorot activist yet also promised his acceptance by the broader Igorot public. Drawing from ethnographic evidence and adaptations of Abe’s (2016) insights on sound-silence relationalities and Tsing’s (2007) notion of “friction”—the traction and slippage of divergent indigenities—I examine this duality, amplifying the weighty “silence” of the said activist’s militancy and its emergent meanings. Through this exercise of individual creativity, Indigeneity manifests as a contradictory phenomenon that transcends conventional associations about identity and its expression. This paper seeks to disrupt the tendency to homogenise Indigenous experience by unveiling its radical possibilities. I voice often-ignored musical lives that forge new trajectories of identity.

Keywords: *gangsa*, Igorot, Indigeneity, left-wing activism, Philippine Indigenous music

Introduction

The *patpong* is a defining gong-and-dance expression of the Igorot people, a population of various ethnic minorities who have historically lived in the Cordillera region of northern Philippines. At a large gathering of Igorots held in Baguio City, the regional centre of the Cordilleras, a performance began as an elder, garbed in *bahag* (g-string) and a feathered headdress, entered the stage area. Leading the rendition, he picked up the largest of the graduated *gangs* (flat gong) that lay on the floor and struck it with a mallet multiple times, setting a moderate, stately tempo that signaled the start to his fellow players. Five other similarly dressed men followed suit, sounding their gongs to match the initial strikes. All six achieved unison before breaking into interlocking rhythms. They danced as they played, at times hunched while shuffling their feet as they propelled themselves forward to the cue of the lead player. Other people joined in, one by one, by twos, threes, and more. Executing the footwork along with arm and hand movements, they followed a lead dancer this time, who trailed the *gangs* players. Soon, audience seats emptied as the ensemble grew into a hundreds-strong communion, coursing through space in snaky lines and swirls amid the customary, spontaneous and unspoken switching of lead performers. Rather than edge toward chaos, the congregation pulsed together in duple rhythm to a metallic ostinato of hypnotic constancy. A visceral evocation of unity, the *patpong* embodied a sense of collectivism that spoke to a shared Cordillera identity.

Waking, as it were, from this enthralling exercise of *communitas*, one would inevitably notice a surrounding context imbued with overt political meaning. Colourful flags and banners, on which phrases like “Unite to Resist Tyranny!”, “Save Our Rivers!”, and “Stop the Killings!” were written, filled the venue. Far into an elevated stage sat guests of the event, which included famous political figures and government officials affiliated with progressive organisations. The speeches of these guests—as do the event’s many *patpong* performances—began and ended with flourishes of call-and-response chants, many of which were deafening as befits a sonic avowal of indignation. Indeed, the event’s participants were activists or, in some way, engaged with political movements, and the gathering served to strengthen their ties and consolidate their grievances. But were these grievances “heard”? The event was tucked away in a gated school campus about a 30-minute drive from the busiest parts of the city. When, to culminate the event, participants performed a *patpong* as they led a protest march through the city’s central town, they drew little interest and engagement. Indeed, the demonstrators relied on traffic enforcers to clear paths as they walked against the indifferent, mechanical flow of people and motorists. The performance of a ritual sacrifice¹ by elderly participants where a chicken was struck to its death in an uncustomary, violent manner did not appear to convey the protest’s sacred urgency to its surrounding audiences—not even to the armed local riot policemen, noticeably Cordilleran in their physical features, who were tasked to control the protesters. Upset by the policemen’s valour, an Igorot elder recited a prayer, invoking the supreme deity Kabunian to punish them. Yet, the policemen stood squarely against the rallyists; some of them smirked, seemingly unfazed by the curse cast upon them.

Such performances are atypical, less visible, less popular, and less celebrated than other stagings common in events such as private community gatherings and state-sponsored festivals. In fact, Igorot left-wing activists had received severe criticism from other Igorots who believe that such appropriations are sacrilegious. However, Igorot activists find this deeply offensive, staunch in their belief that what they do finds root in foundational Cordillera histories. Unwavering in their convictions, thus, they devise cunning strategies, which, when read carefully, reveal self-representations that are transcendent, if not deeply imaginative.

This paper unpacks these representations by attending to Indigenous music as an intricate undertaking that unsettles—but in the process, also remakes—“authenticities.” Rooted in Cordillera history, yet ideologically underpinned by leftist political thought, spectacular, noise-driven musical practices in protests are vulnerable to disputes about cultural propriety within the larger Igorot community. Troubled by such disputes, in response, an Igorot activist staged a performance that served as an exercise of quietude as much as a reaffirmation of his politics, albeit articulated in an emergent terrain. Engaging recent scholarship on sound studies, affect theory, and Indigeneity, I examine his performance in relation to a shifting dynamic between sound and silence that foregrounds Indigenous practice as a processual, inescapably contradictory phenomenon, invoking immemorial tradition, yet inflected by human creativity and various social and historical contingencies. Through this exercise of individual creativity, Indigeneity manifests as a complex condition that transcends conventional associations about identity and its expression. This paper rejects the tendency to homogenise Indigenous experience by unveiling its hidden, radical possibilities. I voice often-ignored subjectivities that resound dynamic trajectories of identity.

Resonances of a Frictious Indigeneity

Plural forms of Indigenous self-determination have figured centrally in recent conversations about Indigeneity, but this is hardly the case in the Philippine context. Perhaps the gravity of colonial violence in the country has instilled a steadfast concern for decolonisation, driving scholarly and institutional attachment toward a sense of postcolonial nationalism that tends to essentialise, formalise, and even romanticise Indigenous lives. This concern may be valid but by no means absolved from inflictions of symbolic violence. As Stephanie Nohelani Teves (2018) and Brendan Hokowhitu (2014) have similarly argued, the relentless inclusion of Indigenous people into formalising discourses on nationalism and ethnicity can be binding and harmful for Indigenous persons. Bearing this in mind, I portray Indigenous people as creative, complex, and at times resistant to categorisation.

My work unveils internal disagreements that fracture Indigenous representation. Urgent and compelling, yet plural and contradictory, discourses of Indigeneity may empower and inspire advocacy but also cause tension. Refracted through various social, cultural realities across geography and history, Indigenous politics create “frictions,” as Anna Tsing (2007) calls it, progressing and flourishing in one context, yet abrasive, even damaging, in others, forging alliances while

prompting refusal. Through missions and dialogues on policy and governance in the 1970s, for instance, Indigenous populations in Canada and New Zealand achieved transnational consensus on sovereignty. Conversely, Latin America, propelled by the United States Red Power Movement in the prior decade, called for “pluriethnic autonomy” against a tendency toward national acculturation (Tsing, 2007). Tsing takes on a global perspective, but I write about frictions at a more local level: at cultural-political junctures within the Igorot community of northern Philippines that divide non-activists and activists and those at interstitial spaces of discord within these divisions.

At the same time, I look at how these frictions carve uncharted paths for individual expression through a departure from conventional forms of music-making and the consequent pursuit of alternative ones. Marié Abe (2016) examines how the flamboyant advertisement practice *chindon-ya* transformed into a medium of protest through which Japanese people raucously sounded their anxieties against the Daichii nuclear plant disaster of 2011 when they staged it against the silence of a *jishuku*, a practice of national mourning, frugality, and energy conservation that was socially mandated in light of the nuclear crisis. *Chindon-ya* sounded what Abe (2016) calls a “resonance,” a kind of affective and musical labour that pushed the practice toward new possibilities of meaning. Like Abe (2016), I explore sound-silence relationalities, yet I am drawn to *a diversion from sound toward silence*, where the latter arises as an “active auditory condition of quiet” (p. 235). This article sheds light on how an elderly Igorot activist, for whom I provide the alias “Tomas Abrera” for security reasons, quietly resonated a latent Igorot-ness through a performance that possesses an ambivalent relationship with the conventional noise-filled musical practices of the Philippine Leftist movement. This shift toward silence as a medium of protest is a symptom of a larger issue of Igorot representation that prompts a critique of established musical practices. An act of self-affirmation as much as an appeal to the broader Igorot community, the performance promised to resolve the ideological conflict between Igorot activists and non-activists.

The Multivalent “Igorot”

Arguing for this complex relationship between identity and performance requires a nuanced understanding of the term “Igorot.” Scholars and outsiders have generally used it to refer to people who live in the Cordillera Administrative Region of Northern Philippines, but this meaning is changeable, depending on context, ranging from plainly descriptive to varying degrees of politicisation by opposing sides of history. The term may signify place-based identification, built from “*i-*,” a prefix that translates to “people of,” and “*golot*,” a pan-Philippine word for “mountain.” In other contexts, “Igorot” marks cultural distinction. Possibly derived from “*gerret*,” an Ilocano word that means “to cut off or slice,” it may have been deployed to distinguish Cordillera peoples from others based on their practice of headhunting (Prill-Brett in Finin, 2005). The term’s use as a collective designation was officialised during the colonial eras. Motivated in part by religious faith, Spanish colonisers called upland northern Luzon peoples “Igorot” (“*Ygorrotes*” and later “*Igorrotes*”), distinguishing them from the already proselytised lowlanders. Partly

because of limited access and knowledge about the mountainous parts of the Philippines, the Spanish were not attentive to internal diversity and political divisions among Cordillera groups. In consequence, many Cordillera communities were mistakenly targeted by violent incursions that the Spanish intended for others. This created animosity among people in the region, causing internal disputes and tribal wars, and thus may explain why many Cordillerans based in Kalinga, Apayao, and Ifugao refuse the Igorot label (McKay, 2006).²

The colonial designation “Igorot” would remain well in use upon the US American conquest of the Philippines, but it was through US imperial policy that it began to take on new, ambivalent meanings. While the new colonisers adapted Spanish documentation of Philippine groups, they were more systematic and thorough. Not unlike their predecessors, however, they were misguided by racial prejudice. Founded on Social Darwinist discourses that argued for a hierarchical correlation between the human body and moral character, extensive early-20th century ethnological surveys and census projects, like those overseen by zoologist Dean C. Worcester, helped authenticate Igorots as ethnic and racial Others. Predicated on the paternalistic ideology of “benevolent assimilation,” this perceived inferiority justified American tutelage purportedly believed as necessary to usher Philippine natives toward progress.

Positioned for social mobility through integration into capitalist labour networks, American education, and Protestant teachings, Cordillerans would soon pursue professions in local governments, businesses, and other sectors that the new colonial order deemed noble and reputable. But amid their rise came an awareness of a shared identity that empowered them to forge a pan-Cordilleran Indigeneity of an emancipatory orientation in the Philippines and beyond. Thus, Igorot-ness has evolved from an imperial imagination to an expression of Cordillera agency.

“Ti daga ket biag”

It is not surprising that some Igorot communities align their Indigeneity with Philippine left-wing activism. To put it broadly, the Philippine Left’s core principles of political and economic self-subsistence, social justice, and the primacy of the collective over the individual, can be seen in Indigenous knowledge, practices, and social relationships that stem from Igorots’ foundational regard for land.³ Perhaps the Ilocano⁴ phrase “*Ti daga ket biag*,” which translates to “land is life,” ubiquitously deployed in protest contexts and paraphernalia, best conveys a Cordillera sense of militancy. To many Igorots, land is vital to survival and identity-making. It must be celebrated and protected for all that it can give.

Briefly examining the concept of “*ili*” is helpful in understanding the importance of land among Igorots and the value they place on territorial defense. In everyday parlance, it may refer to a house, a village, or a bounded territory inhabited by a population of common ancestry and citizenship (McKay, 2006). However, its social dimension reveals the interconnections between Indigenous Cordillera ecology, economy, and political systems. As McKay (2007) observes, “affective, social, and economic interdependence” and the communal attachments they form are reinforced among people confined in historically territorialised spaces (p. 149).

More than an occupied physical space, then, the *ili* is a self-sustaining community that roots its inhabitants on the land on which it exists. Life in the *ili* attests to the indispensable role of land in defining Igorot identity.

Igorot traditional practices are founded on a reciprocal relationship with the *ili*. Fulfilling the divine obligation to care for oneself, for others, and the environment, *ili* inhabitants subsist and survive on land, investing time and labour on it for their basic needs. Macliing Dulag, a revered Kalinga tribal leader who led territorial defense actions in the region in the 1970s and 1980s, evoked the spiritual leanings of agricultural labour in the *ili*: “*Apo Kabunian*,⁵ the Lord of us all, gave us this land. It is sacred, nourished by our sweat. It shall become even more sacred when it is nourished by our blood” (cited in Doyo, 2015, p. 19). *Ili* inhabitants routinely plant and harvest; agricultural rituals like the *begnas* (for harvest) are focal points within the *ili*. In addition, Igorots employ resource management practices to take care of land. They practise *mananum*, working together to maintain and rehabilitate water resources. They fallow and declare land as under *lapat* at the time of a death in the community, helping to restore and replenish its biodiversity. These practices characterise a sociality that lies at the core of an Igorot ontology. Indeed, transgression of these practices are punishable by *ili* laws.

Igorots’ ties to land are further strengthened by other customs that pertain to land rights and privileges and that foster a sense of collective belonging. Based on a *prima occupantis* system, those first to occupy, access, and use land are the ones who effectively own it (Prill-Brett, 2001). Land is typically owned by clans or families, inherited through progeniture (regardless of sex) or marriage, and valued as among the most precious heirlooms. Igorots generally admire *baknang*, individuals and families of a high social class who often leave the *ili* in pursuit of mainstream professions and social mobility (Solang, 2017). Yet many choose to stay to fulfill the shared aim of nurturing and strengthening the *ili*, placing utmost importance on the community’s welfare over their own. An *ili*’s strength relies on the cooperation of its inhabitants. In the Kankana-ey language, this finds expression in concepts like *ob-obbu*, which refers to a collective ethos;⁶ *ipeyas nan gawis*, a phrase for wishing others well in their work, health, relationships, and overall welfare; and *betad*, which pertains to collective action in territorial defense, tribal welfare, and in mitigating disasters (Solang, 2017). Leadership within the *ili* reflects this value of collectivism. Matters of community governance, safety, and others are overseen by a council of elders called *lallakay*. The *lallakay* organise and preside over peace pacts called *bodong*, through which issues like crimes and territorial disputes are discussed toward resolution. Because of these and other practices, Igorot collective identity tends to be more dominant than individual repute. June Prill-Brett (1987) describes that among the Bontoc people of Mountain Province, for instance, aggrieved persons exclaim “*nilayusan cha chatako!*” (“they have taken advantage of us!”), accusing the offender’s entire home community.

Many of these traditions have been altered or have altogether vanished. Yet others endure, still rooting Igorots’ sense of self to long-established means of subsistence founded on respect for the environment. Thus, it is unimaginable for Igorots to be deprived of their land. “If you take land from us, we cease to exist,” said one of my Igorot collaborators. Such deprivation is seen as hostile.

The Cordillera Land Problem

Still, many have attempted to take Cordillera land for their own, as told in a large body of literature on the Cordillera land problem.⁷ Although I will not explain in detail, it is crucial to provide sufficient context to explain why some Igorots turned to militant activism. Encroachment into Cordillera land has involved systemic forms of outsider abuse and violence that have prompted Igorots to engage local, regional, and national politics in order to defend their territories and their sovereign identities.

Cordillera land expropriation began alongside colonial attempts to take control of the Philippines. Operating through the Regalian doctrine—a legal fiction—Spanish forces imposed land title laws that justified land expropriation. Although initially able to resist colonial intrusion despite existing as smaller divided units by the late 16th century, Cordillera communities remained vulnerable to Spanish invaders' punitive tactics. Toward the turn of the 20th century, the colonial government established nine military outposts surrounding the Cordilleras, enabling it to control the region, further divide its inhabitants, and enforce legal policies that exercised its ownership of Cordillera land. The more divisive and systematic strategies of US colonisers further fractured Cordillera resistance, allowing even more land expropriation. Reinforcing Spanish-initiated land ownership policies, the Americans imposed new laws that entitled them to deprive locals of land use and ownership, if not make it increasingly difficult for them to do so (Chaloping-March, 2011). Literacy issues, the lack of money, and an adherence to tribal customs made it hard for Igorots to adapt to these impositions. In consequence, they were subjected to exploitation and land-grabbing even by their fellow tribespeople. Colonial land policies attracted the *baknang* class, however, who pursued American-initiated business ventures to further their commercial interests. Yet these pursuits weakened Igorot community ties. Further, the colonial government established agricultural and resettlement programmes that displaced Igorots, catalysing division and conflict that stemmed from forced integration with lowlanders and other Indigenous groups.

Colonial policies created the conditions for the continued aggravation of the Cordillera land problem after the US occupation. From the 1950s onward, the Philippine government implemented laws that opened Cordillera ancestral lands to local and foreign businessmen, landlords, and the state's political and military entities. Increased commercial activity in the region boomed the agricultural industry, yet also endangered communities to further exploitation and environmental damage. The Philippine government, which in 1972 had been placed under martial law by president and dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., would support these ventures. In an effort to control intrusions, the government introduced new farming programmes to supposedly regulate land use, but these either hindered Cordillerans from continuing their practices or demoted them to land lessees. In relation, the changing agricultural industry enticed private entities, who converted their acquired land into real estate against regulations on the planting of crops. The resource extraction caused by encroachment in the Cordilleras led to depleted forests, dried watersheds, rivers polluted with mineral waste; alongside environmental devastation, conflicts between outsiders and Igorots intensified.

Perhaps the most infamous of these projects were the Chico River Basin Development Project (CRBDP) and the Cellophil Resources Corporation (CRC) operations. Though derailed by various forms of organised community opposition, these projects demonstrate the severity of outsider encroachment into Cordillera territory. In 1965, the Philippine government under Marcos proposed the construction of four large dams along the Chico River, one of the major river systems in the Cordillera region that promised to be a profitable energy source. Amid increasing oil prices, dams of the CRBDP would provide 1,010 megawatts of hydroelectricity. Through the financial backing of Philippine and international firms and the World Bank, it would not take long for the project to commence. To be sure, the construction of four “megadams” connected to the Chico River posed catastrophic danger to Igorots who lived along its banks and supplied water from it for their homes and rice fields (Doyo, 2015). Meanwhile, the CRC was an industrial-capacity logging company devoted to the production of pine tree pulp, then a popular commodity for export. It was funded by European banks and overseen by the Philippine government. Through the Timber and Pulpwood License Agreement No. 261, the government granted the corporation almost 200,000 hectares of pine tree forests located in the Cordilleras.

Bent on pursuing their interests, proponents of both CRC and the CRBDP applied various repressive measures against Igorot communities. They never initiated consultations with Igorots who lived within the vicinity of targeted sites, bribing them instead with money and relocation while belittling their attachment to land. Figureheads of the CRC and the CRBDP only held meetings with community members in response to growing opposition. Still, both parties achieved neither compromise nor consensus. The projects’ proponents deceived the Igorot people in these meetings, concealing the exploitative nature of their ventures; some were even conducted without the knowledge of tribal elders. Aiding corporations, the national government resorted to compensatory measures by establishing organisations like the Presidential Assistance on National Minorities and the Kalinga Special Development Region and a Community Relations Office in Abra that feigned assistance to affected communities.

Increasingly aware of their disadvantaged position, some Igorot communities came together to unite against the projects. They organised *bodong*, peace pact conferences where tribespeople discuss issues and build resolutions that foster amicable and civil relationships. Though traditionally enacted between two communities, Cordillerans expanded the *bodong’s* scope to cover multilateral participation that involved communities outside the region. Through these meetings, which were held from 1975 to the 1980s, various Igorot groups formed resolutions in protest of the CRBDP and CRC. As contexts that helped consolidate collective action in response to the projects, these gatherings demonstrate how Cordillerans have innovated ancestral traditions through an engagement of social and political issues on a national scale. While the *bodong* helped unify Cordillera communities, it did not succeed in immediately halting the operations. The project’s proponents would reassert their dominance, ignoring Cordillerans’ position, at times exercising military strength. Thus, succeeding demonstrations by the community were met with retaliation. Villages were burned, people were arrested, tortured, and

summarily executed, and women were raped. Dulag was shot and killed. These acts of mass violence in various parts of the region would only fuel uprisings on Cordillera's unique, yet shared, struggles as ethnic minorities.⁸

The Revolutionary “Kaigorotan”

Not coincidentally, an influx of knowledge about similar situations outside the region invigorated Igorots' increasing awareness about the systemic character of the Cordillera land problem. William Henry Scott, who wrote expansive accounts of Cordillera history, contributed to this development. His writings on colonial and Philippine government policies that legitimised encroachment into the region provided an impetus for Cordillera resistance.⁹ Additionally, militant political activism proved to be a vital influence. Small movements that began as working-class labour groups in the 1920s evolved and gained traction as revolutionary organisations from the 1960s onward. Drawing from the revolutionary theories of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, these organisations recognised that imperialism, bureaucrat capitalism, and feudalist land practices supported political-economic exploitation by ruling classes in the country. Simultaneously, they regarded grassroots-led collective action as its prime mover. From these currents emerged the so-called “Philippine Left.” Internal ideological developments in the succeeding years gave rise to a new group of activists who would soon adapt the ideas of Mao Zedong in their leftist framework, privileging the interest of the working class and countryside peasantry and advocating for radical forms of political struggle. In the early 1970s, student actions culminated in the First Quarter Storm Movement, a period of numerous protests, violent demonstrations, and civil unrest in the Philippines from January to March, 1970 against the national government.

Many Igorot students who at the time had been studying in Manila's universities brought with them ideas that they encountered from the Philippine capital's long-fermenting activism. Seeing parallels and connections between the struggles of oppressed sectors there and experiences of institutional aggression at home, they understood that outsider encroachment into ancestral lands is a national concern. Upon returning home, they espoused the view that these circumstances stemmed from systemic issues, which at the time were caused by the enabling conditions in the government that had been exploited by the political-economic machinations of the Marcos regime. Emboldened by these new understandings, these Cordillera activists began to adopt the ideology and practices of the Philippine Left. Projecting themselves as a solid, unified entity, they identified as members of a national minority, a group of people with unique circumstances but whose struggles cannot be separated from the national body politic.

Redefining the colonial, previously misrepresentative designation of upland peoples of northern Luzon, Cordillerans engaged in this movement adapted the label “Kaigorotan” (roughly, “The Igorot Community”), projecting their shared struggles and interests as people who live in the Cordillera region. Further, they sought alliances with other groups, forming the Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA) in 1984, a coalition of organisers that represent various sectors across the region, and soon pursued membership in the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (“New Nationalist

Alliance”), the largest collective of leftist organisations in the Philippines. Nevertheless, core facets of Indigenous cultural traditions remained foundational to the political lives of Igorot activists. Speaking about these parallels in a couple of his speeches, the late Igorot leftist Benedict Solang argued that Philippine left-wing activism merely reinforced Igorots’ regard for sovereignty, territorial defense, sustainability, and community well-being, which find expression in many native concepts that I previously discussed, and in practices like *lakay* leadership and the *bodong*.¹⁰ As Kalinga elder and left-wing activist Davidson Agulin said to me, “We actually were ahead of them!” Collaboration with leftist groups is unquestionably logical to these Igorots, yet it also empowers them to represent themselves *as* Indigenous Cordillera people.

Sounding Igorot Left-Wing Activism

The Philippine Left’s programmes on art have also allowed Igorots to draw from their ancestral traditions. Taking from the teachings of Mao Zedong, the Philippine Left advocates for art that is refractory of grassroots hardships and that inspires a desire for social change. For Igorot activists who anchor their grievances on cultural sovereignty, employing these views does not simply mean writing music that resemble popular guitar-accompanied protest songs (though these also form part of their dynamic musical experiences). If revolutionary art should represent grassroots struggles and ways of life, then expressive traditions that mediate Cordillera practices, beliefs, and experiences must be included in protest repertoire. Thus, repertoires of Igorot activists syncretise revolutionary theory and Indigenous knowledge.

Student activists based in Baguio, Benguet Province initiated these efforts. They spent time in rural Cordillera communities amid ongoing development aggression, took note of the traditional musics in the area and wrote their own, mostly in Tagalog and Ilocano.¹¹ The result was a repertoire of tonal protest songs whose duple rhythms, melodies built on five notes, instrumental accompaniment, and vocal approaches are traceable to traditional expressive cultures in the region. Soon, these students would form a cultural organisation and ensemble called *Salidummay*. The name is apt, Michiyo Yoneno-Reyes (2011) suggests. A genre of widely known celebratory vocal music in the Cordilleras whose simplicity, familiarity, and prominence in congregational singing, “*salidummay*” serves as a metaphor for the kind of inspirational populist cultural work that leftist revolutionaries embrace. Amid the escalating operations of the CRBDP and CRC in 1981, members of *Salidummay*, together with other Cordillera cultural groups, formed an alliance called *Dap-ayan ti Kultura iti Kordilyera* (“Convergence of Cordillera Cultures”; DKK), which would serve as the culture and arts division of the CPA.

Igorot leftists believe that the *gangsa* ensemble (Fig. 1) is indispensable in sounding activism. Although less commonly at present, *gangsa* are profoundly regarded objects. Cordillerans treat the instrument as a family heirloom and believe it to be sacred because of its capacity to summon spirits. Cordillerans tend to be cautious when using these objects outside of proper contexts so as not to disturb

these entities. Moreover, *gangsa* are highly prominent in the region. As early as the turn of the 20th century, travelogues and ethnological writings by European and US Americans often mention them (though they wrote about the instrument in a way that exposed their racial prejudice).¹² Today, the *gangsa* is a constant presence in community gatherings held for weddings, harvest, and death, as well as school graduations and other important events, hardly ever absent in occasions where Cordillera identity is represented for a mainstream public.



Figure 1. A set of ten graduated *gangsa* (flat gongs), 2017. Photo by author.

Of all the gong traditions that Cordillerans perform, the *pattong*, a gong-and-dance expression, is the most widely practised and as mentioned, the most distinctive. The *pattong* involves a give-and-take among participants that signifies unity and cooperation. Indeed, it was performed to mark the multilateral *bodong* that consolidated Cordillera resistance to development aggression in the 1970s and 1980s. Continuing this history, the *pattong* has been integral to protest gatherings, and more so, to street demonstrations led by Cordillera left-wing activists (Fig. 2). *Pattong* in these settings tend to be different from those performed in private community occasions. Twice the usual number of *gangsa* players—around 12 in the protests that I have seen—produce metallic ostinatos easily heard from a considerable distance. Strategically positioned at the head of the contingent, the gong ensemble demands attention, while signaling the arrival of hundreds of protesters. Enhancing these piercing rhythms are flourishes of call-and-response chants, rhythmic clapping, and constant commentary on mobile loudspeakers about the dire state of regional and national politics, many of which are emblazoned, often in bright red ink, on protest props. This clamorous soundscape disrupts the mundane routines in main thoroughfares of cities where the dominant social order finds vivid expression.



Figure 2. Igorot activists perform the *pattong* at a demonstration, 2018. Photo by author.

A “Quiet” Igorot Indigeneity

A signature element of *pattong* in protest gatherings is what has been called the “war dance.”¹³ Igorot activists have adopted the dance since the 1980s, staging it amid resistance to corporate and state intrusion in their territories. In street demonstrations, the war dance appears as a kind of variation on the *pattong*. A dancer executes *pattong* footwork while brandishing a *kalasag* (shield) on one hand and a *kayang* (spear) on the other as they propel themselves forward along with other protesters. These renditions draw from traditional practices where the war dance was performed to avenge a tribe member who perished from intertribal conflict. Thus, adaptations of the war dance in present-day protest gatherings embody a combative footing.

Through the rendition of Tomas Abrera, a now 70-year-old Cordillera elder from Bontoc, Mountain Province who often leads *pattong* in protests and the CPA’s other gatherings, the war dance conjures histories of grave significance. Still agile in his old age, Abrera radiates an unpretentious yet unwavering gravitas, which perhaps stems from an irrefutable understanding of Igorot struggles. Abrera’s performance harkens back to past experiences where, as a teenager, he witnessed confrontations between Igorots and state entities. His occasional use of a *lagtep*, a plain white g-string, references these experiences. Borrowing from funeral customs, men from some Cordillera provinces wore the traditional clothing to brace themselves for battle, signifying self-sacrifice and a willingness to die. Evoking these narratives as the most visible performer in protests, Abrera’s dance commanded an even greater authenticity. In 2017, Abrera performed the war dance

in a large-scale protest march in the Philippine capital of Manila. A display of indignation, the event commemorated the 45th anniversary of the declaration of martial law by President Marcos. Abrera danced in front of a hundreds-strong congregation bathed by a soundscape of *gangsa* and the thunderous calls of dissenters behind him. Like never before, Abrera's performance was broadly publicised by the media, lending near-iconic status to his image. Effectively asserting the legitimacy of Igorot political activism, Igorot left-wing activists hailed it as a milestone for Igorot representation.

What seemed like an earnest affirmation was, it turned out, beleaguered with internal conflicts. Abrera was implicated in a long-standing debate about politicising Igorot-ness. A Facebook video of CPA chairperson Windel Bolinget speaking against the Duterte government in full Igorot garb posted on September 16, 2017—at the time of the Manila protests—magnified this internal dispute.¹⁴ As the footage showed, Bolinget anchored his ethnic identity on militant activism: the camera zoomed into his headshot, panned across his traditionally clad body and the “*Kaigorotan Lumaban!*” banner behind him as he spoke about issues concerning the reportedly punitive policies of the national government and its potential for abuse. In an Internet-dominated era of compulsive online commenting, the post went viral, generating more than 5,000 responses. Bolinget received backlash from Igorots who disapproved of equating Igorot-ness with political activism. Many argued that Igorots should not wear traditional attire in protests. Others reproached Bolinget by invoking the term “*kababain*,” an Igorot concept that translates to “shameful” or “condemnable,” claiming that Bolinget and his colleagues violated core Igorot values about the performance of tradition (Fig. 3).

A colleague of Bolinget's and as a conspicuous performer in protests, Abrera, too, met disapproval, but not only from the general Igorot public. Members of his family, especially his grandchildren, criticised his impropriety as depicted in the newspapers that featured him. “*Yung mga apo ko nga eh, sabi nila, ‘O, ikaw, Lolo, bakit ka ganito?’*” (“My grandchildren asked me, ‘Grandfather, why did you do this?’”) he recounted. The antagonistic flaws of revolutionary movements in the Philippines that have scarred many Filipinos and Philippine history is perhaps one reason for this confrontation. Another would be the generational gap between Igorot youth who aspire for a better life outside rural Cordillera and elderly Igorots who have direct experiences with development aggression. The Igorot activists I spoke with believe that elderly Igorots neglected to educate the younger generation about their first-hand experiences of territorial defense and the urgent, logical decision of allying with the Left, which people like Abrera have internalised as unassailably integral to Igorot practice. To him, therefore, any implication about the impropriety of politicising Igorot-ness is hurtful.



Figure 3. Screen-grab of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance Facebook page showing a video of Chairperson Windel Bolinget and commentary by the page's followers, 2017.

Faced with an existential crisis, Abrera staged a solo performance, wearing his *lagtep* in public as he went about his daily activities in Baguio from February to May 2018. Abrera removed himself from the context of conventional protest settings that are saturated with chanting demonstrators, overt rhetoric, and gong-and-dance displays. As he walked through the city, Abrera rejected requests for photos and ignored strangers who prodded him about his clothes, refusing any belittlement or pressure to explain himself. He proceeded quietly, effacing his perceived Otherness into an everyday norm. Considered in relation to the conventional musical practices of Igorot leftists, I contend that Abrera's actions convey a deeper significance. His performance served as an act of "cleansing," as his colleagues put it in our private conversations, that allowed him to heal and reaffirm his politics. Provisional in its concealment of his activism, Abrera's solo performance was neither separate from, nor less political than, his usual displays. While a stark contrast to the scale and noise, as it were, of street demonstrations, this exercise of quietude sounded emergent political meanings that cut through the rigid identity categories on which criticisms against him were founded. In an oblique manner, Abrera's performance critiqued an established musical practice among Igorot left-wing activists while offering a strategy for inviting acceptance and trust from the broader Igorot public. His solo act situated sound and silence in a dialectic that could reframe the politicised traditions from a perceived impropriety to a transcendent Igorot expression.

Conclusion: Sonic Frictions and an Igorot Emergence

Abrera's actions invite us to shed the tendency to fix identities on people who have earned recognition through strategic essentialism, despite the formidable histories that have shaped them. Abrera is one of many Igorots who believe in the

unquestionable value of land. Because of this belief and violent experiences of outsider encroachment that extend well into the present, these Igorots have expanded their Indigenous socio-political structures before eventually subscribing to a political ideology, whose comprehensive framing of the Cordillera land problem purportedly aims to address its root causes. While it has yet to bring drastic changes that could genuinely benefit Indigenous lives, Igorot left-wing activism has thrived through the decades, and in its development gave rise to practices that speak to the interests of oppressed Cordillera peoples. Music-making that involves *gangsa*, along with its complementary bodily and social expressions, are central to the cultural work that symbolises and upholds leftist politics in the region.

Of course, siding with a revolutionary movement poses its own risks. Ancestral beliefs, which Indigenous people have learned to preserve and protect especially in a postcolonial age, are exposed to external forces not unlike those that have historically marginalised Indigenous communities. In relation, Igorot activists face the stigma of identifying as such regardless of their justifiable claims to authenticity. Yet, driven by faith in the legitimacy of their actions, they reframe their identities in ways that strengthen their beliefs, even if it involves temporarily emphasising facets of themselves that may be less threatening to their critics. Abrera musically espoused Igorot activism according to long-established practices, but also deviated from these through a silent, veiled de-emphasis of his convictions that enabled a holistic expression of his rooted Igorot self. This performance transpired, to use Abe's words, through the "acoustic and affective work" (2016, p. 236) of an Igorot ontology that may be ideologically promising yet practically rendered ambivalent and contradictory by the burden of essentialised self-representation.

There are more frictions within the Igorot community to unpack, like tensions that have conditioned an active refusal of Igorot left-wing activism on individual, community, and institutional levels. But the present paper readily prompts difficult conversations that pit the relentless urgency of celebrating difference against the reality that Indigenous people struggle to be recognised beyond the identities that they are expected to perform. This essay addresses the need to look beyond canonical knowledges and epistemological biases that hinder consideration of Indigeneity as an ever-evolving phenomenon.

¹ Animals like chickens and pigs are traditionally slaughtered in ritual sacrifices to appease spirits, either for celebration, healing, divination, to ward off negative forces, or to bring good fortune.

² In pursuit of gold in 1620, the Spanish raided a highland area now known as the province of Benguet, wrongly involving the foothill provinces of Apayao, Kalinga, and Ifugao. Displaced from these incursions and cut off from their local means of survival, people from Ifugao Province relocated to the uplands where they had to negotiate with and fight other groups for access to resources, which had been scarce due to the increasing influx of migrants.

³ Although the term "Left" in the Philippines technically comprises several ideologies and organisations, it has been frequently used to refer to what is more accurately known as the far left, that is, legal non-governmental organisations and those in the underground affiliated

with the Communist Party of the Philippines. My use of “Philippine Left” in this present paper follows this acquired definition.

Further, I characterise the Philippine Left in this limited fashion due to constraints in the paper’s scope and length. I do not deny that the Philippine Left has been plagued with many flaws and problems that have negatively affected various sectors of the Philippines. These include various internal issues that have been dividing the interests of progressive revolutionary movements as early as the 1920s and 1930s: US relations after World War II, decision making, ideology, student leadership, and armed struggle, among many others. This limitation stems from my intention to highlight the agency of Igorot left-wing activists and their ongoing struggle with espousing leftist ideas in relation to a desire to be recognised as Indigenous people, regardless of these issues. Yet, and perhaps extending the argument for complexity and contradiction, implicit in this essay is the notion that political convictions are far from perfect.

⁴ One of the prevalent languages spoken in the Philippines out of 130 that is also spoken by a Philippine lowland Christian ethnolinguistic group of the same name. Ilocano is also the *lingua franca* of Indigenous groups from the Cordillera Administrative Region.

⁵ *Kabunian* (sometimes spelled “*Kabunyan*”) is a Kankana-ey term that pertains to a supreme being or deity that controls natural and human fortunes.

⁶ An equivalent of *bayanihan* in the Filipino language.

⁷ I found that these resources are useful for a nuanced understanding of the issue: Scott’s *The Discovery of the Igorots: Spanish Contacts with the Pagans of Northern Luzon* (1974); Bagamaspad and Hamada-Pawid’s *The People’s History of Benguet* (1985), Solang’s *Dap-ay Discourse Uno: Activist Perspective of Cordillera History and Social Change* (2017); Prill-Brett’s “Indigenous Land Rights and Legal Pluralism among Philippine Highlanders” (1994) and “Concepts of Ancestral Domain in the Cordillera Region from Indigenous Perspectives” (2001); Molintas’s “The Philippine Indigenous Peoples’ Struggle for Land and Life: Challenging Legal Texts” (2004); Schippers’s “Securing Land Rights Through Indigenousness: A Case from the Philippine Cordillera Highlands” (2010); Chaloping-March’s “The Trail of a Mining Law: ‘Resource Nationalism’ in the Philippines” (2011); and Doyo’s *Macliing Dulag: Kalinga Chief, Defender of the Cordillera* (2015).

⁸ In “Indigenous Land Rights and Legal Pluralism among Philippine Highlanders,” Prill-Brett (1994) discusses how Cordillerans invoked laws of various relevant jurisdictions as a tactic to advance their land struggles. These include discourses within customary, national, international, and human rights laws applicable to their identities as people belonging to a particular tribe, as Igorots residing in the CAR, and as Filipino citizens.

⁹ See William Henry Scott’s *The Igorot Struggle for Independence* (1972?) and *The Discovery of the Igorots: Spanish Contacts with the Pagans of Northern Luzon* (1974).

¹⁰ Based on interviews I conducted with elders affiliated with the CPA and elders and community members of the municipality of Sagada in Mountain Province, the *lallakay* remains independent of left-wing politics in some communities. It has the authority to allow or reject activist intervention, especially in matters pertinent to the community, as it sees fit.

¹¹ Another major language in the Philippines, also spoken by a Philippine lowland Christian ethnolinguistic group of the same name. Officially designated as the country’s national language, it is also called Filipino.

¹² See Buenaventura’s *Etnografía Filipina: Los Mayóyaos y la raza Ifugao* (1984).

¹³ Based on my field research, there appears to be a lack of knowledge about the local term for “war dance.” The prominence of the English term indicates local adoption of how the dance has been labelled by those who use the language in describing Cordillera practices—possibly researchers and others trained to write in English.

¹⁴ Cordillera People's Alliance. 2017. "Never Forget." Video, 00:01:39. September 10, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/cpaphils/videos/1587845247918997/UzpfSTeWMDAwMjU2ODQ0NzI3MToyMzUwNDc4NjMxNzE0Mzk1/>

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Biography

Lisa Decenteceo is an ethnomusicologist who studies the cultural politics of Philippine Indigenous music. Her dissertation *From Being to Becoming: Protests, Festivals, and Musical Mediations of Igorot Indigeneity* won the University of Michigan Judith Becker Award for Outstanding Graduate Student Research in Southeast Asia. Lisa has presented at conferences hosted by the International Council for Traditional Music, Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies, British Forum for Ethnomusicology, and the Society for Ethnomusicology, and was selected as a research fellow of the Philippine Studies/Digital Humanities Working Colloquium, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She is also a contributor to the forthcoming book *Indigeneity in the Philippines: Studies on Knowledge, Identity, and Rights* published by the University of Hawai'i Press. Presently, Lisa serves as associate editor of the peer-reviewed *Musika Jornal* and as assistant professor of ethnomusicology at the University of the Philippines College of Music.