Mabini Review
Volume XVI, No. 2, 2026

Polytechnic University of the Philippines



On the Discourse of Indigenous Capital and Cultural Commodification in Media and Performance

John A. Amtalao
Assistant Professorial Lecturer
De La Salle University-Manila
Saint Louis University, Baguio City
john.amtalao@dlsu.edu.ph

DOI: https://doi.org/10.70922/vjctvx95

Copyeditor: ANA MARIE J. BAUTISTA

Submit to this journal
Other related articles
Announcements
Other PUP Journals

Article History:

Received: September 2, 2025
Accepted: May 12, 2026
Revised: May 16, 2026

Other citation formats:

APA MLA

How to Cite this paper:

Amtalao, John A. "On the Discourse of Indigenous Capital and Cultural Commodification in Media and Performance." *Mabini Review* 16, no. 2 (2026): 267–287. https://doi.org/10.70922/vjctvx95.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at mabinireview@pup.edu.ph.

Copyright © 2026

CC BY-NC 4.0

On the Discourse of Indigenous Capital and Cultural Commodification in Media and Performance

John A. Amtalao
Assistant Professorial Lecturer
De La Salle University-Manila
Saint Louis University, Baguio City
john.amtalao@dlsu.edu.ph

Abstract

This paper explores the possibility of Indigenous culture in the Philippines being often turned into a commodity by the media, reducing meaningful traditions and practices into marketable images or symbols. By analyzing news articles from accessible platforms, the author examines how Indigenous materials and rituals are used in media to fit certain narratives, often reflecting patterns of cultural commodification. This conceptual paper applies Pierre Bourdieu's capital theory, which identifies four types of capital: economic (money and property), cultural (education, language, traditions), social (networks and relationships), and symbolic (honor and recognition). These forms of capital influence power structures and access to opportunities within society. The author highlights how Bourdieu's framework explains the media's role in reinforcing social divisions by using Indigenous culture as a tool for influence and prestige. Instead of portraying Indigenous communities as dynamic and living, media often reduces their identity to consumable content. To address this issue, the author introduces the concept of Indigenous capital as a proposed fifth form of capital. This idea emphasizes that Indigenous materials and cultural expressions carry inherent value, not just economically, but symbolically and culturally. The author outlines five signs of Indigenous capital: first, it is shaped by cultural commodification; second, it is connected to multiple interpretations and worldviews; third, it is often misrepresented or misunderstood in public discourse; fourth, when outsiders study Indigenous culture without proper context, they risk ignoring its historical, artistic, spiritual, and social depth; and fifth, the materials and rituals featured in media actually hold deep cultural values that represent the identity of ethnolinguistic groups. In conclusion, the author argues that Indigenous capital deserves recognition alongside Bourdieu's original four forms,

© 2026 Amtalao, J. A. | ISSN: 2012-2144 (Print) | ISSN: 2546-0757(Online)

especially when analyzing the power that operates in media and modern society.

Keywords: *Indigenous capital, material culture commodification, Indigenous Peoples, Pierre Bourdieu's capital theory*

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Peoples have widely experienced discrimination and misinterpretation by early anthropologists and scholars.[1] Their beliefs and rituals were intentionally described as barbaric and characterized as belonging to a backward civilization.[2] In the Philippines, numerous scholars emerged during the American colonization period, producing questionable writings about the lives, work, and identity of Indigenous Peoples.[3] For example, at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition, Indigenous Peoples, primarily from the Cordillera region, were exhibited for viewing rather than for genuine cultural understanding. In 1899, American artist Frank D. Millet lamented that unlike Hawai'i and other tropical imperial acquisitions, the Philippines was unfamiliar to Americans and "remained outside the 'Kodak zone'" during the American colonization. Several photographs mocking the way of life of Indigenous Peoples, especially those from the Cordillera region, were published worldwide. Through photography, US imperialism brought the Cordilleras and other IPs in the country from relative obscurity into popular visibility. Commissioners photographed Igorots (the collective term for groups living in the highlands of Northern Luzon) for documentation, classification, and commodification. Across the Pacific, American viewers became enamored by photographs of their new "head-hunting, dog-eating, little brown brothers."[4]

The Igorots were displaced and treated as human exhibits in so-called "human zoos." Their communities were replicated, and they were forced to perform acts such as eating dogs to capture the attention of Western spectators and white audiences. In the context of religion, as mentioned by Adonis and Couch, between 1907 and 1933, missionaries reported that they

1 Amnesty International, "Indigenous Peoples' Rights," accessed October 24, 2025, www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/indigenous-peoples/.

2 Francis H. Lambrecht, "Tribal Religion and Welfare Among the Ifugaw," *Central Blatt and Social Justice* 22, (December 1929–January 1930).

3 Roberto González, Héctor Carvacho, and Gloria Jiménez-Moya, "Psychology and Indigenous People," *Annual Review of Psychology* 73, no. 1 (2022): 431–432, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-012921-045304.

4 Adrian De Leon. "Working the Kodak Zone: The Labor Relations of Race and Photography in the Philippine Cordilleras 1887–1914," *Radical History Review* 2018, no. 132 (2018): 68–91, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-6942403.

had Christianized around 370,000 Igorot people, a process that significantly altered traditional cultural structures.[5] In contrast, Igorot scholars have strongly criticized the impact of colonization, arguing that it left them "misinformed, miseducated, misrepresented, marginalized, left confused and forlorn. [6] This proves that during the colonial era, Indigenous Peoples were commodified through photographs and documents that brought some scholars into the hype of their name as researchers. They engaged actively in negotiating, contesting, and even protesting these dynamics in their roles as workers, rather than passive subjects. The visual records that emerged from these interactions bear the imprint of such struggles and resistances, leaving discernible traces throughout the photographic archives of the Philippine–American colonial era.[7] This is further explored in Benito Vergara's book *Displaying Filipinos*, which exposes the choreographed and manipulated photographs circulated globally that aimed to promote the reputation of these scholars.[8] The book critically discusses how such images perpetuated stereotypes and colonial narratives about Indigenous Peoples. This, in a way, led to a lot of misconceptions regarding Igorot character and identity.

Whereas capitalism is a system of profit-making through labor and commodification. Capitalism is a common economic system where individuals or businesses, not the government, own and control factories, machines, and other ways of producing goods.[9] In most modern capitalist countries, the prices of goods, how much is produced, and how much people earn are mostly decided by supply and demand—based on the choices and actions of businesses and consumers—rather than by government planning. The system is founded on key principles such as private property, the pursuit of profit, and competition within the market. But in the contemporary context of capitalism, it is used for the commodification and objectification for an institution's profit, with issues on

5 Digna Adonis and Jen Couch, "'The Trails to Get There': Experiences of Attaining Higher Education for Igorot Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines," *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 57, no. 2 (2017): 208-214, files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1148625.pdf; Carlos R. Medina, *Missionaries and Development* (Baguio City, Philippines: Saint Louis University Cordillera Research and Development Foundation, Inc, 2004), 18-22.

6 Adonis and Couch, "'The Trails to Get There.'"

7 Adrian De Leon, "Working the Kodak Zone: The Labor Relations of Race and Photography in the Philippine Cordilleras, 1887–1914," *Radical History Review* 2018, no. 132 (2018): 87, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-6942403.

8 Benito Vergara, *Displaying Filipinos: Photography and Colonialism in Early 20th Century Philippines* (University of the Philippines Press, 1995), 25–66, https://archive.org/details/displayingfilipi0000verg.

9 Robert L. Heilbroner and Peter J. Boettke, "Capitalism," *Britannica*, accessed October 24, 2025, www.britannica.com/money/capitalism.

labor, and in the current situation, it has expanded its commodification through body and material culture.

This is not new to the discussion of capitalism in the discussion of popular culture. For instance, Pinoy Big Brother is a global show that tends to present stories of daily life. In the Philippines, it is dubbed to be "kuwento ng totoong buhay," in which they ask intended audiences to audition and series of activities before they will be qualified to enter and stay in "bahay ni kuya" or house of brother. The house is armored with cameras, which are used for the daily streaming of the show on different platforms such as YouTube and national television for public viewing. Inside the house, different rules and tasks are given by Big Brother, which will merit those who are successful in accomplishing them. Though this may just seem to be an ordinary show as it reflects the struggles and success of housemates, the show becomes enticing as some of the tasks may create drama or bring out the personality/sexuality of the housemates. Even more exciting when there are disagreements and loveteams. At the end of the day, whether they win in the said show, PBB becomes a stepping stone for those who want to win a grand prize, and that includes fame and being a part of a management in the show business. Using their stories as commodities in the public audience. Using stories as commodities is also the same in the format of different noontime shows such as Eat Bulaga, Showtime, and Wowowillie. In Eat Bulaga's segment of *Juan for All, All for Juan* (Sugod Bahay), Showtime's *Expecially For You* for Ex-Lovers segment, and Wowowillie's *Willie of Fortune* segment, participants are asked to tell stories of struggles and reasons for joining such an event or show. This also calls for their willingness to be open to the public regarding their personal stories. Giving the audience inspiration and at the same time, helping these different shows to be trending on social media platforms. In this regard, capitalism is not just bound by its usual economical structure in society, but also by the discussion of commodification in different forms; in this context, body and life stories are material objectification for certain media purposes.

It is in this context that the author wants to construct the linkage between materialism and the discussion of material culture. Thus, connecting body commodification, language, and tangible culture as part of material culture in the wide range and spectrum of capitalism. As perceived in the different shows on different platforms, it is indeed proven that capitalism draws in different contexts and forms. Such as what is perceived in media (broadcast, print, digital, etc.). In this article, Indigenous' culture leads to cultural commodification that impacts identity creation and tangible culture's inappropriate usage presentation that somehow promotes misinterpretation of its value. The following paragraphs present a brief timeline of Indigenous Peoples' experiences in the Philippines as colonized by the Spaniards and Americans. Thus, proving the long-term conduct of Indigenous Peoples' cultural commodification.

This study is situated within Philippine cultural studies and postcolonial media scholarship, engaging critical perspectives on media representations that shape and mediate cultural meaning, identity, and power relations in the Philippine context. It also draws on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological philosophy, particularly his theory of capital and symbolic power, which explains how cultural practices and meanings are produced, circulated, and legitimized through structures of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital, in order to develop and propose the concept of Indigenous capital as introduced by the author. Building on this framework, the main goal of the paper is to examine the commodification of Indigenous culture in the Philippines, focusing on the ways media representations transform meaningful traditions, practices, and cultural expressions into marketable images or symbols. It investigates the role of media narratives in this process and applies Bourdieu's theory to interpret the circulation and valuation of Indigenous culture within discourse, offering both a critique of contemporary media practices and an analytical account of cultural commodification.

INDIGENOUS MISIDENTIFICATION IN NARRATIVES DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The colonization of the Philippines, first by Spain and later by the United States, profoundly shaped the ways Indigenous Peoples were viewed and treated. Under Spanish colonial rule, Indigenous groups, especially those in remote upland areas like the Cordillera Mountains, were often deemed "pagans," marginalized by the dominant Catholic colonial society. The American colonial period (1898–1946) brought new forms of racial and cultural classification that sought to scientifically categorize the population, frequently reinforcing hierarchical distinctions between the "civilized" lowland Filipinos and the so-called "primitive" Indigenous tribes.[10]

A prominent figure in this process was Dean Worcester, an American zoologist turned colonial official, who orchestrated the 1903 census of the Philippines. His categorization excluded many Indigenous groups from Filipino identity, labeling them as "non-Christian tribes" or "wild tribes." This official erasure had significant implications: Indigenous Peoples were not only marginalized socially but also excluded from political participation and national

10 Analyn Salvador-Amores, "Re-Examining Igorot Representation: Issues of Commodification and Cultural Appropriation, "*South East Asia Research* 28, no. 4 (2020): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828x.2020.1843369.

narratives.[11] Such events set the tone for the visual and narrative framing of Indigenous Filipinos for much of the 20th century, as analyzed in Benito Vergara's *Displaying Filipinos: Photography and Colonialism in Early 20th Century Philippines*. Vergara's work unveils the ways in which photography, exhibitions, and colonial documentation were used as tools of power to perpetuate racialized hierarchies and dehumanize Indigenous communities.[12]

Indigenous Misrepresentation in Photography during the Colonial Period: Insights from *Displaying Filipinos* by Benito Vergara

The 1904 St. Louis World's Fair epitomizes this strategy of colonial display. Hundreds of Indigenous Filipinos were transported to the United States and placed in a recreated village environment, not as participants in cultural exchange but as objects of curiosity and amusement. They were photographed and described in ways that emphasized difference and inferiority, often with gross inaccuracies and exaggerations. This spectacle, Vergara argues, was central to American imperialism's cultural justification in the Philippines.

Dean Worcester, a key figure in this colonial project, used photography not merely for scientific study but as propaganda. By contrasting images of the "wild tribes" with those of the "Christianized lowland Filipinos," Worcester visually constructed a racial and cultural hierarchy. This dichotomy supported policies aimed at controlling Indigenous populations through assimilation or containment.[13]

Vergara's critical analysis exposes the complicity of scholars, photographers, and colonial administrators in perpetuating stereotypes that denied Indigenous Filipinos full humanity and political rights. His work invites reflection on how these colonial visual regimes continue to influence contemporary representations and attitudes toward Indigenous Peoples.

A striking case from 1925 demonstrates that the phenomenon of strange, manipulated images circulating as fact predates the internet, though the digital

11 Oliver Charbonneau, "Civilizational Imperatives: American Colonial Culture in the Islamic Philippines, 1899–1942" (PhD diss., University of Western Ontario, 2016), https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/3508.

12 Benito Vergara, *Displaying Filipinos: Photography and Colonialism in Early 20th Century Philippine,* (University of the Philippines Press, 1995), 25-66, https://archive.org/details/displayingfilipi0000verg.

13 Mark Rice, "Dean Worcester's Photographs and American Perceptions of the Philippines," *Education About Asia* 16, no. 2 (2011): 29-33, www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/dean-worcesters-photographs-and-american-perceptions-of-the-philippines/.

age has certainly amplified its reach. In the fourth edition of *I Believe in God and in Evolution*, William Keen included a section titled "Human Beings with Tails," where he referenced an array of global reports—citing experts like Virchow and Sir Arthur Keith—of people allegedly born with tails, some with rudimentary vertebrae and muscle fibers capable of movement. To support this, Keen published a photograph of an Igorot man from Bontoc Province in the Philippines, claiming the image had been taken by his grandson, John Freeman, and showing what appeared to be a five-inch tail. However, in a 1926 correction to *Science*, Keen admitted that the photo was a fake after being alerted by Dr. Hrdlička of the Smithsonian and Mrs. Grove, who had both seen the original image at the Bureau of Science in Manila, revealing that the tail had been added later—most likely as a joke. Keen acknowledged his misinterpretation of his grandson's letter and took full responsibility, reiterating that while he still believed in the existence of human tails as evidence of evolutionary ancestry, the photo he used was unfortunately fraudulent. This incident not only exposed early scientific gullibility toward manipulated images but also highlighted how racist stereotypes—such as the persistent claim that the Igorot people have tails—were reinforced through fabricated "evidence," further contributing to their historical marginalization and discrimination in the Philippines.[14]

In its essence, Indigenous commodification builds its pillars on misidentification and misrepresentation. This comes from an intended act to sustain hype from someone's writings and publications and thus invites curiosity among its readers, leading to inappropriate and unjust judgment of Indigenous Peoples. In the case of Filipino IPs, it has been a long fight against inaccurate information that justifies numerous scholars' investigations in trying to debunk the solidified myth regarding Filipino IPs. Not to mention other issues such as ancestral land rights, cultural preservation, and ongoing human rights violations.

The Tasaday Phenomenon: Romanticism and Controversy in Indigenous Identity and Representation

In the 1970s, the discovery of the Tasaday tribe in Mindanao captivated global attention and sparked intense debate within anthropology and popular media. Presented as a "lost tribe" living in Stone Age conditions, the Tasadays were portrayed as a unique Indigenous community isolated from modern society and untainted by contemporary influences. The Philippine government, under President Ferdinand Marcos Sr., leveraged this narrative for national

14 Vergara, *Displaying Filipinos*, 25–37.

prestige and tourism promotion, framing the Tasaday as living embodiments of the country's primordial heritage.

Media reports romanticized their lifestyle as harmonious with nature and simple in its purity. However, skepticism soon emerged. Critics argued that the Tasaday's isolation had been exaggerated or staged for political purposes. Anthropologists suggested the tribe had been coached to maintain a particular image, and that their "primitive" status was more a product of enforced isolation than an enduring cultural state. This controversy exposed ethical issues around ethnographic research, the role of state interests in shaping Indigenous representation, and the problematic tendency to romanticize Indigenous communities without appreciating their complexity.[15] Despite the debate, the Tasaday story drew much-needed attention to the diversity of Indigenous cultures in the Philippines and raised important questions about cultural appropriation, authenticity, and the politics of Indigenous identity.

The misidentification and misrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples during the colonial period, and later in events like the Tasaday incident, are clear reflections of Indigenous commodification, the exploitation of Indigenous identities for external gain. In colonial times, Indigenous communities were portrayed as primitive or exotic to justify domination and captivate foreign audiences. This pattern persisted in the 1970s with the Tasaday, a group in the Philippines falsely presented as a "stone-age" tribe living in isolation. Their image was sensationalized for political and media attention, allegedly manipulated under the Marcos regime, turning their existence into a spectacle. Like earlier colonial practices, the Tasaday narrative denied the group's agency, distorted their reality, and served external interests rather than truth. Such incidents reveal how Indigenous cultures continue to be commodified—used for attention, profit, or control—while reinforcing harmful stereotypes and undermining authentic Indigenous representation.[16]

The Tasaday incident reflects Indigenous commodification in several interconnected ways. First, the group was exoticized for profit and attention, marketed as a "living fossil" of human history whose supposedly untouched way of life fascinated the public and scientific community, ultimately turning their existence into a commodity for political gain and media sensationalism. Second, their identity was denied; rather than being allowed to represent themselves,

15 GMA Public Affairs, "'Tasaday,' Dokumentaryo ni Kara David (Full Episode) | I-Witness," documentary, June 22, 2009, posted April 8, 2025, YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTX17daUcUM.

16 Thomas N. Headland, ed., The Tasaday Controversy: Assessing the Evidence (American Anthropological Association, 1992), 45-88.

the Tasaday were spoken for, with their context and reality manipulated to fit a more appealing narrative, an approach that echoes colonial practices of silencing Indigenous voices. Third, the incident continued the long history of misrepresentation, as their story was crafted to meet external expectations rather than reflect their actual lived experiences. This perpetuated harmful stereotypes and undermined efforts toward genuine understanding and respect. Collectively, these aspects reveal how Indigenous cultures are often used as tools for storytelling, profit, or control, rather than being recognized and respected as complex, autonomous societies. The Tasaday case, far from being an anomaly, illustrates a broader and ongoing pattern of Indigenous commodification that persists beyond colonial times.

ON PIERRE BOURDIEU'S CULTURAL CAPITAL AND INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

Bourdieu's framework serves as a valuable tool in sociology for exploring the social structures' influence on individual behavior. It centers on three key ideas: habitus, field, and capital**.** *Habitus* refers to the deeply rooted ways people think and act, shaped by their experiences. *Fields* are social spaces where individuals compete and interact, using different types of *capital*—such as economic resources, knowledge, social connections, and recognition—to achieve influence or status. This approach helps explain how social inequalities are reproduced, showing how both personal dispositions and social environments affect people's actions and opportunities.[17]

To deepen this analysis, the researcher would like to connect this discussion to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Cultural capital comprises the non-financial social assets that influence social mobility and power. It includes education, cultural knowledge, language, and symbolic goods that confer social status. Pierre Bourdieu identifies three types of cultural capital. The first is embodied cultural capital, which refers to the internalized dispositions, mannerisms, and competencies that individuals acquire over time. The second is objectified cultural capital, which includes tangible cultural goods such as artworks or traditional artifacts. Lastly, institutionalized cultural capital pertains to formal recognition of cultural competence, such as educational qualifications or credentials.

In line with this, the Indigenous capital framework may be positioned as a critical refinement that aligns with Demeterio's reading of Bourdieu, where

17 F.P.A. Demeterio III and Leslie Anne L. Liwanag, "Ang Pilosopiya ni Pierre Bourdieu bilang Batayang Teoretikal sa Araling Pilipino," *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2014): 19–46, https://doi.org/10.25138/8.2.a.2.

power relations embedded in cultural production and representation become central analytical concerns. It underscores that Indigenous cultural expressions, when represented in media and institutional spaces, are not neutral artifacts but are embedded within structures of symbolic domination and recognition. Thus, scholarly engagement with Indigenous capital extends Demeterio's application of Bourdieu by reinforcing the need to account for Indigenous epistemologies and lived realities in the analysis of cultural capital circulation, especially within Philippine media, education, and cultural industries.

In the context of Indigenous Peoples, cultural capital is deeply connected to their identity and heritage. However, when Indigenous cultural elements are appropriated or commodified without proper recognition or control, Indigenous communities lose not only economic value but also cultural sovereignty. This process can reinforce existing power imbalances and social hierarchies. By applying Bourdieu's framework, we can better understand the process of Indigenous cultural materials' function within capitalist economies.

Indigenous Capitalism: A Framework for Economic Self-Determination

The concept of Indigenous capital provides an alternative framework for understanding Indigenous engagement in economic activities. Rooted in Indigenous worldviews, Indigenous capital emphasizes economic self-determination and resilience. Indigenous communities leverage their unique cultural knowledge, natural resources, and social structures to create businesses and economic opportunities that respect ancestral lands and cultural heritage. For example, Indigenous tourism initiatives that are community-led and culturally grounded aim to share cultural knowledge on Indigenous Peoples' terms while generating income. Similarly, Indigenous-owned enterprises in crafts, agriculture, and natural resource management prioritize sustainable practices and equitable benefit distribution. Indigenous capitalism challenges dominant economic paradigms by insisting that economic success must be measured not only in monetary terms but also in terms of social well-being, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship.

However, in this case and series of discussions from the time of colonization to the 1970s, capitalism of Indigenous practices was rooted and perpetuated as a culturally exhaustive approach resulting to indigenous commodification of culture, whether tangible or intangible.

CONTEMPORARY CASES OF CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

In this segment, recent controversies are being presented involving Indigenous cultural representation in media and popular events that illustrate the ongoing challenges Indigenous communities face in protecting their cultural heritage:

The Bagani Series of ABS-CBN

The Bagani controversy also gained prominence with the release of ABS-CBN's television series *Bagani* in 2018. The show, a fantasy drama inspired by various Indigenous warrior traditions, particularly those of the Lumad peoples in Mindanao, sought to portray heroic figures called *Bagani*, drawing from the rich cultural symbolism of Indigenous Filipino warrior classes. While the series was praised for spotlighting Indigenous-inspired narratives in mainstream media, it also sparked debate and criticism concerning the authenticity and accuracy of its representations.

The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, or NCIP, expressed concern that *Bagani* fictionalized sacred Indigenous concepts, stripping them from their original cultural, historical, and spiritual contexts. The show's blending of fantasy elements and creative liberties led to accusations that it perpetuated stereotypes and diluted the complex realities of Indigenous identities and traditions.[18] Also, in the March 5 premier in which there is an inclusion of artists that does not reflect the pre-colonial era of the country presenting mestiza and mestizo characters. Critics pointed out that the series failed to engage sufficiently with Indigenous voices and cultural experts during its production, raising questions about cultural appropriation and misrepresentation. Although, in the March 10 issue of Rappler in 2010, it wrote that ABS-CBN, Commission on Higher Education, and IP groups agreed that the use of "Bagani" as a title of the series was not misused as according to the network-"the show is a work of fiction and that they are not disrespecting the culture and beliefs of the Indigenous Peoples."[19] In March 21 episode of 2018, the character "Gloria" as Babaylan (Shamman) also used the ritual- "Mekeni, mekeni, dugdug do-re-mi, mekeni, mekeni, dugdug, do-re-mi" in order to heal a certain comrade has become a trending part of the show. It also earned attention from netizens as it adds flavor

18 Juzel Danganan, "NCIP Warns of Legal Action vs. ABS-CBN over 'Bagani,'" *Philippine News Agency*, March 6, 2018, www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1027588.

19 Alexa Villano, "ABS-CBN, CHED, IP Groups Reach Agreement on the Use of the Word 'Bagani,'" *Rappler*, March 14, 2018, https://www.rappler.com/entertainment/198135-abs-cbn-ched-discussion-bagani-show/.

to the ritualistic characteristic of the group being portrayed. Although it was a hit on different social media platforms, Kapampangans believe that it was a foul act as it opposes its real meaning in their language. One teacher and a Kapampangan even suggested the use of tud-om (oral chants) of the Manobo that reflects the struggles of the tribes; maybe it could even help in the daily struggles of the Lumads.[20]

The controversy around ABS-CBN's *Bagani* is emblematic of a larger issue within Philippine media and popular culture: the challenge of balancing creative storytelling with respectful and accurate portrayals of Indigenous Peoples. While media platforms have the power to raise awareness and celebrate Indigenous cultures, without careful consultation and sensitivity, such portrayals risk reinforcing misconceptions and contributing to cultural commodification.

This situation underscores the importance of Indigenous participation and agency in cultural production. Indigenous Peoples must be recognized as the primary custodians of their heritage, with authority over how their stories, symbols, and identities are shared and interpreted. The *Bagani* debate thus highlights ongoing struggles over cultural authenticity, respect, and the politics of representation in contemporary Philippine society.

The Metropolitan Theater show of the Ifugaos

In the year 2022, the Metropolitan Theater became the center of a significant cultural controversy involving the performance of the Ifugao dance, a traditional dance from the Cordillera region. The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) strongly condemned the production for its misrepresentation and cultural insensitivity. One of the main points of contention was the inappropriate use of traditional garments: women dancers wore the bahag, a loincloth that is traditionally reserved exclusively for Igorot men. This breach of cultural protocol not only distorted the authentic representation of Cordilleran customs but also trivialized deeply symbolic attire that holds specific cultural and social significance within Indigenous communities.[21] The controversy was further intensified by the failure of the organizers to consult Indigenous elders or recognized cultural authorities prior to the performance. Such consultation is crucial in respecting Indigenous cultural heritage, ensuring

20 Cody Cepeda, "Babaylan Chant in "Bagani" Offends Some Kapampangans," *INQUIRER.net*, March 27, 2018, https://entertainment.inquirer.net/267529/baganis-babaylan-chant-offends-some-kapampangans.

21 Alfred P. Dizon. "NCIP on MET Lady Dancers Wearing Bahag," *Northern Philippine Times*, November 5, 2022, https://northphiltimes.blogspot.com/2022/11/ncip-on-met-lady-dancers-wearing-bahag.html.

accurate representation, and preventing cultural appropriation. By neglecting to engage with the community, the production demonstrated a lack of respect and understanding of the cultural context, which the NCIP highlighted as a serious oversight. As stated by the NCIP regional director, "the culture and traditions of the Igorots should be presented in the view of the Indigenous Peoples and not on the perception of the artists to avoid the adulteration and misrepresentation of the same. He claimed that despite the aggressive campaign of the agency and the Indigenous Peoples on the appropriate portrayal of the Igorot culture and traditions, there are still individuals and groups who continue to repeat similar mistakes, which in the past had been the subject of condemnation by the Indigenous Peoples, and it is as if people refuse to learn from these lessons."[22]

This incident served as a reminder of the ongoing challenges Indigenous Peoples face in protecting their cultural identities from misrepresentation and commodification in mainstream media and entertainment. The NCIP's condemnation called for greater sensitivity, respect, and formal protocols when incorporating Indigenous cultural expressions into public performances, emphasizing that traditional attire is not merely a costume but an embodiment of history, identity, and community values.

Man of the World Pageant Swimwear Segment (2021)

In 2021, the swimwear segment of the Man of the World pageant drew widespread criticism when several contestants wore the bahag, the traditional loincloth of the Cordilleran Indigenous Peoples. This choice sparked a heated debate about cultural appropriation and the sexualization of sacred Indigenous attire.

As written by Cabreza in the Philippine Star, while the recognition these garments receive for their intricate beauty and cultural significance is well-deserved, Indigenous Peoples (IPs) are quick to call out the use of their cultural pieces when it crosses the line from cultural appreciation to bastardization.[23] This was the case when candidates of the international "Man of the World" pageant in June strutted the bahag (male Igorot loincloth) in the swimwear segment. The event came under fire after making Cordilleran IPs feel that an important

22 Dexter A. See, "Baguio Joins Condemnation of Metropolitan Theater," *Herald Express*, November 6, 2022, https://baguioheraldexpressonline.com/baguio-joins-condemnation-of-metropolitan-theater/.

23 Vincent Cabreza, "NCIP Calls out Pageant Organizers over Supposed Misuse of 'Bahag,'" *INQUIRER.net*, June 15, 2022, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1610912/ncip-calls-out-pageant-organizers-over-supposed-misuse-of-bahag.

piece of their Igorot identity was not only erroneously presented but was also disrespected.

Marcos Mangallay, a researcher and member of the Applai people in Mountain Province, was one of those who raised an eyebrow at the pageant's misuse of the bahag. "[It was] very disturbing to see the bahag worn that way," Mangallay told Philstar.com. "It is not just that they disrespected our culture, but at the same time, it showed the world that we sometimes act out of ignorance."[24]

In defense of the organizers, the use of bahag is generating the kind of buzz that the pageant organizers did not anticipate, said pageant chair Jennylyn Floresca in a telephone interview. "We wanted the Cordillera culture to be a serious subject of discussion when we promoted the bahag at the pageant, and it is intended to contribute to the country's tourism recovery initiative now that the economy has reopened," she said.

The controversy highlighted a broader tension within Indigenous cultural expressions today: on one hand, there is a desire among some community members to see their traditions evolve and be celebrated on global stages; on the other hand, there is the real risk that such portrayals, when done without proper context or respect, can lead to commodification and misrepresentation. Different personalities, such as former Ifugao Congressman Teddy Baguilat, voiced concerns that the pageant trivialized the sacredness of Indigenous garments, while some Indigenous individuals offered nuanced views, suggesting that culture is not static and can adapt over time. Nevertheless, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) reaffirmed the need for careful community consultation and cultural sensitivity to ensure that Indigenous symbols like the bahag are honored appropriately and not exploited for spectacle.[25]

Social Media Incident: Deo "Diwata" Balbuena in La Trinidad Benguet (2025)

A popular social media influencer, "Diwata," recently sparked widespread criticism after posting a video in which he wore traditional Igorot attire, referring to it as a "costume," and performed gestures that Indigenous communities and

24 Jap Tobias, "Cordillera IPs Assert Ownership of Bahag, Indigenous Culture against Misuse," *The Philippine Star*, August 9, 2022, https://www.philstar.com/nation/2022/08/09/2201145/cordillera-ips-assert-ownership-bahag-indigenous-culture-against-misuse.

25 ABS-CBN News, "Teddy Baguilat Calls out Male Pageant for Misuse of Traditional Bahag," *ABS-CBN*, June 16, 2022, https://www.abs-cbn.com/life/06/16/22/baguilat-calls-out-male-pageant-for-misuse-of-bahag.

the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) found demeaning and disrespectful.[26] The incident quickly drew sharp condemnation from the NCIP and various Indigenous groups, who emphasized that such actions trivialize sacred cultural symbols and perpetuate harmful stereotypes. The influencer's portrayal was seen not only as a misappropriation of Indigenous cultural heritage but also as a reflection of persistent gaps in public understanding regarding cultural sensitivity and respect. This episode underscored the urgent need for broader educational efforts to promote awareness of Indigenous cultural significance and the importance of community consent in sharing and representing traditional practices. It also highlighted how influential figures on social media can either contribute to the preservation and respectful celebration of Indigenous identities or, conversely, to their commodification and distortion.

Together with other controversies involving the misrepresentation and commercialization of Indigenous culture—such as the misuse of traditional attire in public performances and pageants—this incident points to a broader, systemic pattern of Indigenous cultural commodification. These patterns raise critical questions about how Indigenous Peoples can reclaim authority and agency over their cultural narratives, ensuring that their heritage is shared on their own terms rather than being exploited for entertainment or profit. The challenge remains for society, media, and commerce to recognize and respect Indigenous peoples not as mere symbols or spectacles but as living communities with rich traditions deserving of dignity and self-determination.

Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, these media cases, such as the Bagani Series of ABS-CBN, the Metropolitan Theater show featuring the Ifugaos, the Man of the World Pageant Swimwear Segment (2021), and the social media incident involving Deo "Diwata" Balbuena in La Trinidad, Benguet (2025), can be seen as examples of how Indigenous cultural capital circulates within broader cultural and economic systems. Each instance demonstrates the conversion of Indigenous heritage into symbolic or economic capital, whether through entertainment, performance, fashion, or digital media. While these processes may provide visibility and recognition, they also highlight the shifting control over cultural narratives, as institutions and audiences reinterpret Indigenous practices in new contexts. Bourdieu's framework helps us understand these dynamics as part of the ongoing negotiation between cultural, symbolic, and economic capital, showing that appropriation and representation are not only matters of loss but also of transformation and recontextualization within capitalist structures.

26 Vincent Cabreza, "Vlogger 'Diwata' Hit for Mocking Cordillera Culture," *INQUIRER.net*, February 28, 2025, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/2038865/diwata-hit-for-mocking-cordillera-culture.

INSIGHTS ON INDIGENOUS CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION IN INDIGENOUS CAPITAL

Indigenous capital is manifested using tangible and intangible culture. Many individuals and institutions advocate appropriate Indigenous presentations on different media platforms that aim to eradicate stereotypes and biases. Tangible and intangible culture are still framed differently for the purpose of marketability and impact for entertainment purposes, adding to the economic and social value of the media platforms. If I am to map it with Bourdieu's framework on cultural capital, I would admit that Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is perceived to be a positive outlook regarding using cultural capital for one's personal gain and success in society; however, I would like to delve into cultural capital as a pillar for Indigenous capital through these aforementioned manifestations: material commodification, identity perception, cultural misinterpretation and misrepresentation, outsider's perspective, and commodification of norms and values.

A. Indigenous capital is embedded in cultural commodification. In order to be categorized as Indigenous commodification, there should be a clear manifestation of material profit involved, whether in the process of presentation on different media platforms or in publication that obviously represent misrepresentation. This is present from the usage of "bahag" from the Metropolitan performance and Diwata's inappropriate usage of such material culture that captured numerous reactions from netizens and IPs in Cordillera. As such, subject appropriation is a must-consideration. MET and "Diwata" are influential in their own field and industry; they hold the power to create perception in their audience. In the case of MET, though it has amazingly gone out of the box to showcase a contemporary show, the locals and ethnolinguistic groups also share the power to own the meaning of their material culture's usage and representation. As for "Diwata's" issue on representation, there must be a thin line separating entertainment and respect for material culture, as this is not just worn for the purpose of causing trendy views on the internet but also signifies one's respect for ethnolinguistic groups' attire and should not be treated as costumes.

B. Indigenous capital is interrelated with diverse lenses. Identity is created through oral and written literature. Biases from different lenses are incurred in the writing, as it creates a misrepresentation of identity. As per the context of colonization, the "Kodak Zone" has had a tremendous impact on the perception of Western people regarding the Indigenous Peoples and the citizens of the Philippines in general. In the case of the Bagani series, though there is a debate regarding creative license versus authenticity in the discussion of the mentioned ethnolinguistic group, Indigenous capital

is manifested through its presentation in the media itself. With this, it could be concluded that media plays a powerful role in shaping the audience/ peoples perspective of IPs in the Philippines and even in the international arena. In this case, an Indigenous approach and lens should be used whether in the discussion of research publication and/or media representation.

C. Indigenous capital covers a wide coverage of misinterpretation and misrepresentation, from the Tasaday's presentation in documents and media; its history and existence as an identity has been questioned from the current time. This has led to the group's exploitative misrepresentation. Whereas the usage of bahag and own version of Ifugao dance of dancers in Metropolitan theater, this creates a debate on the dynamics of creativity presented for the purpose of representing certain ethnolinguistic groups. Thus, in this case, misrepresentation and misinterpretation are clearly manifested, as it challenges the NCIP's stand regarding authenticity and identity presentation.

D. The outsider's perspective, or an individual who does not belong to any ethnolinguistic group, studies an Indigenous culture and neglects research scrutiny regarding their physical, historical, artistic, spiritual, and social representation. Thus, leading to the application of malpractice in doing research hence affects its representation in media. This emphasizes the essence of observation and immersion. In Filipino Psychology, pakikipagkapuwa and pakikipagkuwentuhan are critical methodologies in reaching out to the main goal of writing research with and concerning Indigenous Peoples.

E. Materials and rituals used in media presentations hold norms and values that represent an ethnolinguistic group. With this, if any material or ritual used with modification for the purpose of entertainment and/or frenzy purposes, its value evaporates and thus it becomes non-representational hence destructive to the identity of Indigenous Peoples. Material culture and rituals hold a certain degree of affiliation to their rightful owners. Its value is a heritage passed on from generation to generation. In this regard, the rightful use of material culture and rituals should always be a prime priority whenever it is exhibited for public consumption. This helps not just the NCIP and Indigenous Peoples in transferring knowledge regarding their identity but also leaves a mark to create a community where there is proper understanding and appreciation of diversity in the country.

F. The author would like to end this insight by discussing the integration of the fifth capital in Bourdieu's capital theory, which is Indigenous capital. Although the author understands that Bourdieu's theory is not directly

advantageous to his four types of capital in the dynamics of hierarchies in society, the author would like to lean on the commodification practices of different media regarding Indigenous Peoples' culture and practices. Recognizing Indigenous capital invites a broader conversation about how the cultural wealth of Indigenous communities is not only exploited but also how it could be repositioned as a legitimate source of power and social influence within contemporary discourse. By thinking of these traditions and objects as a form of 'Indigenous capital,' we can start to see them as valuable and powerful—not just as something old or interesting, but as a living part of Indigenous identity and strength. This idea helps us move away from treating Indigenous culture as something to be used or sold, and instead respect it as an important part of society. It also challenges the old ways that pushed Indigenous voices aside and creates space for these communities to be recognized and valued in today's world.

CONCLUSION

Through critical engagement with historical and contemporary cases, this essay highlights the urgent need for respectful, community-led representation and economic participation that honors Indigenous Peoples' rights and identities. Only through such efforts can Indigenous cultures be preserved and celebrated on their own terms, rather than exploited for profit or spectacle. On the inclusion of Indigenous capital on the four kinds of capital theory of Bourdieu, Indigenous capital gives more emphasis on the dominant use of material culture and commodification through its different representation. It is indeed acknowledged that culture is shared, but limitations and boundaries are essential considerations in its usage. The framework may therefore be utilized in future studies concerning the commodification of both material and intangible Indigenous cultures in media and other forms of representation, demonstrating that the commodification of Indigenous culture is not limited to tourism, entertainment, or commercial production alone, but also extends into digital media, academic discourse, branding, and institutional cultural performances. Furthermore, future researchers are encouraged to employ the Indigenous capital framework alongside sound scholarly studies on Indigenous media representation, cultural commodification, symbolic power, and cultural ownership to critically examine the transformation, negotiation, and valuation of Indigenous identities, traditions, and knowledge systems within contemporary media and cultural industries.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ABS-CBN News. "Teddy Baguilat Calls out Male Pageant for Misuse of Traditional Bahag." June 16, 2022. https://www.abs-cbn.com/life/06/16/22/baguilat-calls-out-male-pageant-for-misuse-of-bahag.

Adonis, Digna, and Jen Couch. "'The Trails to Get There': Experiences of Attaining Higher Education for Igorot Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines." *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 57, no. 2 (2017): 197-216. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1148625.pdf.

Amnesty International. "Indigenous Peoples' Rights." Accessed October 24, 2025. https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/indigenous-peoples/.

Britannica, s.v. "Capitalism." by Robert L. Heilbroner and Peter J. Boettke. Accessed October 24, 2025. www.britannica.com/money/capitalism.

Cabreza, Vincent. "Vlogger 'Diwata' Hit for Mocking Cordillera Culture." *INQUIRER.net*. February 28 2025. https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/2038865/diwata-hit-for-mocking-cordillera-culture.

Cabreza, Vincent. "NCIP Calls out Pageant Organizers over Supposed Misuse of 'Bahag.'" *INQUIRER.net*, June 15, 2022. https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1610912/ncip-calls-out-pageant-organizers-over-supposed-misuse-of-bahag.

Cepeda, Cody. "Babaylan Chant in "Bagani" Offends Some Kapampangans." *INQUIRER.net*. March 27, 2018. https://entertainment.inquirer.net/267529/baganis-babaylan-chant-offends-some-kapampangans.

Charboneu, Oliver. "Civilizational Imperatives: American Colonial Culture in the Islamic Philippines,1899-1942." PhD diss., University of Western Ontario, 2016. https://www.proquest.com/openview/2ef5bba15f8ce69871ad8b017ed7e584/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y.

Danganan, Juzel. "NCIP Warns of Legal Action vs. ABS-CBN over 'Bagani.'" *Philippine News Agency*. March 6, 2018. www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1027588.

De Leon, Adrian. "Working the Kodak Zone: The Labor Relations of Race and Photography in the Philippine Cordilleras, 1887–1914." *Radical History Review* 2018, no. 132 (2018): 68–95. https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-6942403.

Demeterio III, F.P.A., and Leslie Anne L. Liwanag. "Ang Pilosopiya ni Pierre Bourdieu bilang Batayang Teoretikal sa Araling Pilipino." *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2014): 19–46. https://doi.org/10.25138/8.2.a.2.

Dizon, Alfred P. "NCIP on MET Lady Dancers Wearing Bahag." *Northern Philippine Times*, November 5, 2025. https://northphiltimes.blogspot.com/2022/11/ncip-on-met-lady-dancers-wearing-bahag.html.

GMA Public Affairs, "'Tasaday,' Dokumentaryo ni Kara David (Full Episode) | I-Witness." Documentary, June 22, 2009. Posted April 8, 2025. YouTube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTX17daUcUM.

González, Roberto, Héctor Carvacho, and Gloria Jiménez-Moya. "Psychology and Indigenous People." *Annual Review of Psychology* 73, no. 1 (2022): 431–459. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-012921-045304.

Headland, Thomas N. *The Tasaday Controversy: Assessing the Evidence*. American Anthropological Association, 1992.

Heilbroner, Robert L., and Peter J. Boettke. "Capitalism." *Britannica*. Accessed October 24, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/money/capitalism.

Lambrecht, Francis. "Tribal Religion and Welfare Among the Ifugaw." *Central Blatt and Social Justice* 22, (December 1929–January 1930): 273–274, 313–315.

Medina, Carlos R. *Missionaries and Development*. Baguio City, Philippines: Saint Louis University Cordillera Research and Development Foundation, Inc, 2004.

Rice, Mark. "Dean Worcester's Photographs and American Perceptions of the Philippines." *Education About Asia* 16, no.2 (2011): 29–38. www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/dean-worcesters-photographs-and-american-perceptions-of-the-philippines/.

Salvador-Amores, Analyn. "Re-Examining Igorot Representation: Issues of Commodification and Cultural Appropriation." *South East Asia Research* 28, no. 4 (2020): 380–396. https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828x.2020.1843369.

Tobias, Jap. ". Cordillera IPs assert ownership of bahag, indigenous culture against misuse." Philippine Star. August 9, 2022. https://www.philstar.com/nation/2022/08/09/2201145/cordillera-ips-assert-ownership-bahag-indigenous-culture-against-misuse.

See, Dexter A. "Baguio Joins Condemnation of Metropolitan Theater." *Herald Express.* November 6, 2022. https://baguioheraldexpressonline.com/baguio-joins-condemnation-of-metropolitan-theater/.

Vergara, Benito. *Displaying Filipinos: photography and colonialism in early 20th century Philippines*. University of the Philippines Press, 1995. https://archive.org/details/displayingfilipi0000verg.

Villano, Alexa. "ABS-CBN, CHED, IP Groups Reach Agreement on the Use of the Word 'Bagani'." *Rappler*, March 14, 2018. www.rappler.com/entertainment/198135-abs-cbn-ched-discussion-bagani-show/.