

Depictions of Culture in Filipino Independent Films

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The concept of culture is arguably Anthropology's most important contribution to the popular mind. It had become a staple in taking account of the human condition, both in private discourses and in the public sphere, notably in the various media. While popularization of knowledge and frameworks of an academic discipline should be desirable, anthropologists remain wary about reduction or outright misrepresentation in the transit of their ideas from the specialist to the lay. But the non-specialists who deploy the notion of culture are not of the same sensitivities. Independent filmmakers seem to be quite keener than others. Free of commercial considerations, indie films pose much promise in making good use of the cultural lens as they depict human condition with nuance and depth. This study attempts to verify that hunch by analyzing the films entered in the main competition of the Cinemalaya festival from 2005 to 2011. While all 64 films contained aspects of culture, 23 of them proved substantially cultural in their representations. More specifically, the sort of culture portrayed is in step with contemporary anthropological theorizing, that is notions lumped under the purview of the *practice framework*, wherein culture is held to be dynamic, historically embedded, and largely contingent on human agency. What can explain this hospitality of the indies to practice theory of culture is the fact that feature filmmaking is essentially story-telling, and stories thrive on conflict and change.

Keywords: culture, Filipino independent films, practice theory

The impact of a discipline of study to the rest of society may be indicated by how much of its concepts and way of seeing had filtered into the popular imagination. With anthropology, a discipline devoted to taking systematic account of the human condition, the concept of culture is arguably its singular contribution to popular wisdom (Boggs, 2004). Indeed, it had become commonplace to explain things about one's self and others in terms of "cultural influence," or of regarding lived reality as inescapably "cultural."

The notion of culture, while largely evolved by anthropologists through time, had become a fixture of the popular mind and accordingly naturalized as aspect of the real world. More specifically, culture became useful as analytic lens and narrative frame in accounts and discourses not only in the academe but also in journalism, literature, entertainment, and even in mundane day-to-day exchanges.

Film as discursive genre offers great potential in portraying the human condition in the

anthropological sense, that is, the depiction of culture. This potential appears even larger in the case of so-called independent filmmaking. It would seem that there is something about the anthropological looking glass that warms it up so easily with the “indies.” Essentially, the indie movie is one that is created outside of the studio system of the industry, in order to avoid prohibitive cost of production and the formulaic dictates of commercialism as regards the creative imperatives (for a discussion of what the indies are, please see http://www.gkindiefilm.com/?page_id=57). A decisive factor that favored the proliferation of the indies is the development of digital technology that overly simplified production and post-production processes, and grossly reduced costs. In short, the new technology democratized the filmmaking enterprise. Thus unencumbered and empowered, the new crop of filmmakers were disposed to more personalized artistic expression, and took up materials off the beaten track. It appears that many of these materials were anthropologically keen given that the cultural take at the human condition offers more nuanced representation than the usual two-dimensional and formulaic approach of established film genres.

While independent-minded movie-making had long existed in the Philippines as an alternative to the mainstream, the indies started proliferating in the '90s in the advent of digital technology. From then on, it went on steady rise in inverse proportion to the decline of the established players of the industry. Recognizing its role to the future of film in the country, the public and private sectors moved to boost indie filmmaking, mainly through the holding of film festivals. Foremost among these is the Cinemalaya Film Festival launched in 2004 by the Film Development Board of the Philippines in cooperation with the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Through a yearly competition, it makes available to filmmakers a modest amount of seed money to be able to materialize their filmic visions. The products become the core of films for showcasing in the annual festival being held in July. The yearly crop

includes feature-length and short films, both those who did and did not receive funding grants, which vie for awards in the main competition. Non-competing works however are also shown. Aside from Cinemalaya, there are two other regular indie film fests in the country. But independent filmmaking in the Philippines is much wider than the festivals. There are those indies that are “more independent” than the others, having to exhibit on their own outside of the patronage of festivals. In any case however, because Cinemalaya remains to be the festival that mobilizes much of the energies of the Philippine indie movie industry, produces big number of finished products and musters large viewership, its harvest of films fairly reflect the state-of-the-art in this nascent enterprise.

The hunch goes that there is a lot of common ground between anthropology and independent filmmaking in their aims, aspirations, and ways of doing things; and this study seeks to understand that common ground. It explores into that interface by knowing how much and of what sort of “anthropologizing” finds its way into Filipino indie films by depicting culture. Specifically, it answers the question: What portrayals of culture do the entries to the main competition of the Cinemalaya Film Festival from 2005 to 2011 embody?

Anthropologists however are not entirely happy about the way their core concept had been popularized. The deployment of the concept of culture by the public-at-large is something that has gone way out of the control by the specialist. Culture therefore is being invoked in ways that the anthropologist would cringe about, on account of various forms of misrepresentations through reduction, simplification and essentialization, and the use for vested political agenda. This study therefore, for its more analytical part, looks into the dynamics between specialist conceptions and popular appropriations, specifically by Filipino independent films. How far afield are these indie films, supposedly keen on the nuances and depth of the human condition, in relation to specialist imagining of culture?

FRAMEWORK

The Concept of Culture

While culture remains the core anthropological concept, there is currently no agreement as to its definition, except that it is an extraneous source and that it is acquired by learning. Instead, scholars are divided into broad paradigms such as structural-functionalism, symbolism, and practice. In any case, culture is variously reckoned according to five dimensions, summarized in the following table:

Table 1
Dimensions of Culture

Dimension	Types/Continuum
Components	Non-material/material/practices - Value/belief/knowledge system
Structure	High integration - Thin coherence
Functionality	Utilitarian/adaptive - Expressive/symbolic
Determination of behavior	Very powerful - Not so powerful
Dynamism	Stable/static - Contingent/changing

Components. So what is it that constitutes culture? There are two main strands of answers to this question. The first is the classic formulation initially proposed by Edward Tylor wherein culture includes anything and everything acquired by humans as member of a society which come in various forms: material, non-material, and practices (Peacock, 2002; Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2007). The second is the mentalist view that culture is made up of things that exist only in the mind such as precepts, ideologies, and so forth (Watson, 1995). A variation of the second notion holds that culture is a collection of symbols that come as both actions and things, which serve as bearers of the meanings that people create and recreate as they make sense of their world (Geertz, 1973; Sewell, 2009).

Structure. The various ways of imagining culture's structure may be laid out within a continuum. On the one end is the idea of high

integration wherein parts come together in neat and robust coherence that brings about a clearly bounded whole (Barrett, 1997). This view is held by structural-functionalists. On the other end is the view that culture can manage only "thin coherence" as it is always fraught with fissures and contradictions between parts. Espoused by the conflict, processual and practice frameworks in social theorizing, this is quite a dynamic and fluid view of culture wherein no clear boundaries can be established as cultures interact, overlap, and impact on each other (Hannerz, 1986).

Functionality. Another question that theorists grapple with has to do with what culture does. Broadly, the mentalist view sees culture as the ideological basis for action and the making sense of experience (Sewell, 2009; Linger, 1994). On the other hand, the Tylorean view considers culture as people's tool-kit for dealing with the exigencies of everyday life (Ember et al., 2007). One important variety of this view known as functionalism, was developed in the 1950's in the hands of neo-evolutionists such as Leslie White. Here, culture is the extrasomatic or non-genetic know-how in adapting with the environment (Barrett, 1997; Watson, 1995). More specifically, it sees the mobilization of resources for survival, duly mediated by culture, at the core of the human enterprise. In contrast, the mentalist view, inclined more to the ideational faculties, looks at meaning-making as the overarching human project. But surely, any complete accounting of culture's function would always include both the pragmatic and symbolic, the only difference being on the question of which one takes precedence.

Determination of behavior. Related to the issue of culture's usefulness is the question of its deterministic power on behavior. In this regard, the high-integration view of structural-functionalism considers culture as a superorganic entity that bears heavily on people (Barrett, 1997). Culture is hugely powerful; actors do things mostly by its promptings. For its part, the more dynamic and fluid view of "thin coherence" assigns no such absolute determinism on culture (Sewell, 2009). *Practice theory* for example

recognizes that people exercise their agency and would select aspects of culture to adopt, revise, or innovate depending upon the obtaining circumstances (Ortner, 1989).

Dynamism. Finally, there is the question of culture's development, or the whole issue of origin, stability, and change. While there is agreement about culture being a human artifice and that it is subject to change through time, there are great differences as to (1) the ease and rate of change, and (2) its directionality and motive force. In the first, those who attribute high integration and strong determinism on culture would see it also as robustly stable and difficult to change (Barrett, 1997; Rosaldo, 1989). Views of loose integration and not-so-strong determinism on the other hand—mindful of culture's being the creature of human agents—assume its precarious nature and would expect constant transformations through history (Sewell, 2009). But does culture proceed along a pattern of change? Persuasions on this aspect are likewise divided on two broad strands. First, there are those who insist on the almost infinite contingency of the human way of life, refusing to see any predictable direction of change. But there are those who argue that some motive force govern culture's movement along history. It may be according to some cyclical pattern of "history repeating itself" or of "rise and fall" or along a linear path progressively towards some point of higher order. In reckoning with change, ideas are liable to become value-laden, bringing about varying attitudes towards the past and the future.

Film and the Depiction of Culture

It is no coincidence that the technology for creating "moving pictures" on which film art would be based developed almost side by side with that of the discipline of anthropology in the second half of the 19th century. Both movie-making and anthropology were means to pursue the same modernist project of apprehending objective reality: the movie camera to capture

visually the exact unfolding of events, the anthropologist to describe the enactment of the human way of life as it really is. In fact, this common ground resulted to direct engagement between the two quite early in their histories (Marks, 1995). Franz Boas, father of American anthropology, immediately saw the potential of the nascent movie technology for his discipline and made use of it as a way to record rituals, dances, and other cultural practices. Later on, further developments in the film medium allowed the telling of entire stories, making it a stand-alone narrative genre. Here, two broad types emerged, the documentary and fiction film. Between the two, anthropology easily warmed up with the former, creating for film and anthropology a new level of engagement. Documentary filmmaking became a way to present (1) the anthropologist at work and (2) the anthropologist's work as particular ethnographies either as complement or substitute to the traditional written form. Film therefore became a medium with which to communicate to the public both the discipline of anthropology and the "truths" it generates.

But it is not to say that anthropology and fiction film do not cross paths. When they do, it becomes yet another level of engagement. While film technology is made to serve the purposes of anthropology in the first two forms of engagement (filming as data-gathering means, and film as means for ethnographic presentation), there is a turn-around of relationship in this third sort of cross over. It becomes a fictionalization of anthropological reality where anthropology becomes subservient to the fictive conceit of film art. There are at least two possibilities along this line. The first is a direct and explicit interface where a film created as work of fiction is largely based on an anthropological material. A good example is described by Ann Fienup-Riordan (1988) in the article "Robert Redford, Apanuupak, and the Invention of Tradition." It told how a film director established a tie-up with a native Inuit community in Alaska to do a feature film based on the life and adventures of the local hero Apanuupak.

The other possibility of anthropologizing in fiction filmmaking is rather indirect and latent where there is no necessary involvement of anthropological specialists. A filmmaker, possessing a minimum of anthropological imagination, creates a film that is patently fictional but with strong anthropological sensibility. The flow of anthropological content from film to audience is not necessarily purposeful as indeed the filmmaker, much less the viewer, may not even be aware of it. It is this sort of engagement that this study of independent feature length films in the Philippines is interested in. It takes place outside of the properly anthropological orbit but is reflective of how much of the anthropological core concept of culture has been imbibed by the public sphere.

Whether in the documentary or fiction genres, what facilitates the transport of the concept of culture into films is the fact that film is a descriptive, narrative, and discursive medium all at once, which makes it a good substitute, or at least a complement to the traditional written medium of anthropological presentation. Fiction film, in order to be effective, must induce a "suspension of disbelief" where the audience is temporarily transported to a made-up but compelling reality. Other genres of fiction such as prose literature also thrive on the suspension of disbelief but film medium is quite adept at this by virtue of its specific attributes. The photographic quality of the moving images and the sound can approximate almost completely what the human eyes and ears can apprehend. The boundaries between actual and represented reality virtually disappear. As film technology improves, it offers more and more a one-to-one correspondence to real time, place, people, and events.

More than sheer audio-visual bytes however, what makes a film convincingly real is its gestalt, or the aspects that brings it together as one of a piece. What binds the movie is the story composed of the interrelated elements of plot, characters, and setting. Even the most fantastic story can appear plausible real so long as there are things in these narrative elements with which audience sees as

familiar. Moreover, this plausibility increases according to the particular genre. Movies made under the purview of "social realism" or cinema verite offer the most promise along this line. This genre presents the human condition in its gritty details, without attempts to glamorize or sanitize. The audience is confronted with the unsettling realities of life.

But films, whether documentary or fictive, and just as it is with all other discursive practices, are mere constructions and therefore never free of the subjective prerogatives of the author. Even the most "realistic" of films are at best specific versions or interpretations of reality. Films being such cannot be objective representations of real world but become statements on the quality of reality or judgments on the conditions and aspirations of the human enterprise. When opting to be keen on culture, a film then is not simply a matter-of-factly descriptive of a group's way of life but also a discourse on the more conceptual aspects, on the very nature of culture, what it can be and do.

The depiction of culture in films is mostly achieved thru the narrative elements of plot, characters, and setting. The plot is conjured up by a series of actions engaged in by characters enmeshed with each other and acting in a particular historical context. The unfolding of plot is such that actions do not happen arbitrarily but relate as causes and effects and move through a process of mounting conflict and its resolution. Characters are packaged in specific biographies, invested with motives, capacities, and weaknesses. The setting contributes its part by providing the milieu of action through a prevailing social and cultural givens. Culture is contained in the narrative elements through (1) specific nuances of the setting, characterizations, and actions, and the (2) summative aspects conjured such as themes, issues raised, basic premise, and conclusive statements about human condition or nature, or of life itself. Specifics of setting reveal culture of the community involved. Characters become bearers of culture depicted through personal habits, tastes, preferences, beliefs, and

values. Actions demonstrate cultural practices. All these take mostly descriptive function of what are the defining elements of a particular culture. The summative aspects however contribute the more analytic part through the emphasis on issues and themes that are supposed to matter and have bearing on culture, and by making explicit or implicit statements on culture's role in the affairs of people, its power to influence behavior, and its process of formation and transformation.

METHODS

This study answered the research question through a qualitative content analysis of films selected from among the entries in the main competition category of the Cinemalaya Film Festival from 2005 to 2011. Data-gathering and processing involved three stages: (1) selection of sample, (2) content analysis, and (3) interpretation.

Selection of Sample

Firstly, the researcher viewed all the entries kept at the film archives of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and determined which of them will be included in the line-up that shall be subjected to more rigorous content analysis. A film was selected if (a) it establishes its setting through the portrayal of the way of life of a specific cultural community or communities; and (b) it tackles as one of its important themes/issues the beliefs/values and practices, in short the culture, of persons and groups portrayed. Table 2 shows that of the 64 entries for the seven years covered, 23 films qualified according to the set criteria.

Content Analysis

The selected films were then viewed again and described in details, using a content analysis guide, and done on three levels. On the first, the narrative aspects of setting, characters, and plot were established. For each film, the sequence treatment was reconstructed, with each sequence

Table 2

Distribution of Sample Films

Year	Title	f
2005	Barayoke, Isnats, Laspongcols, Pepot Artista	4
2006	Batad	1
2007	Pisay, Tribu	2
2008	Brutus, Engkwentro, Jay, My Fake American Accent, Namets, Ranchero, 24K	7
2009	Mangatyanan	1
2010	Halaw, Libmunan, Mayohan, Sampaguita, The Leaving, VoxPopuli	6
2011	Bahay Bata, I –Libings	2
Total		23

described in terms of the main action that took place. With the sequence treatment as basic guide, three aspects were drawn, namely: (a) a description of the over-all socio-cultural milieu of the film, taking considerations of historical and geographical particularities; (b) an outline of the plot progression, specifying the main plot points; and (c) a line-up of major characters, who were elaborated in terms of their central motive and how they achieved/failed to achieve such at the end of the film. These sets of data were then the basis for the second level of content analysis, which was to establish the (a) summative aspects of themes and premise; and (b) the role that culture played on both the characters and plot. As a third level of processing, the first two sets were scanned to derive the broad depictions/statements on culture.

Interpretation of Data

Results of the content analysis were then examined for patterns and interpreted in terms of the theoretical framework described above. Analysis and interpretation revolved around the following questions: What cultural issues and themes are dominant? How did culture figure out as determinant of characters, their actions, and in

the flow of plot? How did these considerations reflect particular ways of looking at culture, its role and power in society, and its process of formation and transformation? How do such views compare to current conceptualizations by anthropologists?

RESULTS

Themes

To start with, what are these indie films, keen on the depiction of culture, all about? Table 3 below indicates the over-all themes of the films clustered according to broad types. It appears that the basic themes hinge for the most part on tradition in general, or else they depict specific sub-cultures or particular social issues or problems.

Tradition is a major issue of the films as nine of the sample mulled on the old way of life, specifically in juxtaposition with the new. This is not surprising since the contest about tradition brings to the fore the issue of culture. A culture in the throes of change sheds off its appearance of taken-for-grantedness and therefore commands notice. The attitude on tradition sported by the films varies from a clear preference for it over the new one, to a neutral or mixed stance. None however made outright rejection of it in favor of the new way of doing things. In any case, there is an assigning of premium to the old way. On the whole, the films on indigenous communities were strongest in their clinging to tradition.

“Batad”, a film set in an Ifugao community, is a case in point of one that unabashedly rejects the new. It is about Ag-ap, an Ifugao lad who got attracted to the lifestyles of the lowlanders who

Table 3

General Themes of the Films

Type of theme	Specific theme
Tradition	Various outside threats on the native way of life (Brutus) Preserving tradition (Batad) The vain attempt to bring back tradition (Mangatyanan) The sustenance of tradition according to current givens (Mayohan, I-Libings) Entry of new technology that undermines the old ways (Baryoke) Upholding local culture but repackaging it to contemporary standards (Namets) Conflict between the traditional and the modern; between the personal and the social (The Leaving) Arranged marriage among the Muslims (Libmunan) Education (growing up) of smart teens in times of political turmoil (Pisay)
Portrayal of a sub-culture	Life of Manila’s small-time crime groups (Isnats) The prison as total institution (Ranchero) Violence among gangs (Tribu) Life of the call center agent (My Fake American Accent) A life of violence and lawlessness (Engkwentro)
Social problem/issue	Media sensationalism and manipulation (Jay) Treasure hunting (24K) Human trafficking (Halaw) Commercial filmmaking (Laspongols) Escapist culture of the movie industry (Pepot Artista) Traditional politics (Vox Popoli) Child-bearing (Bahay Bata) Life of street children of Manila (Sampaguita)

came to their place as tourists visiting the famous rice terraces. His new set of aspirations was represented in his vain and sometimes ridiculous attempt to acquire a pair of shoes. His rejection of the old ways became acute when he refused to take after his father as a rice terrace farmer. The film ended with Ag-ap reconciling with his parents and with the prospect of taking care of the terraces. Two other films set in indigenous communities, namely "Brutus" (Mangyan) and "Libmunan" (Maranao) similarly favored the traditional. "Mangatyanan" however, another one on the indigenous, deviated. It is about the vain attempts of the leader of an unidentified community in the North to revitalize their indigenous essence by reviving an ancient ritual. While it did not take the opposite option of embracing the new, it evokes the dark prospect about the old as something irretrievably lost.

Other films that mainly tackled tradition were set in mainstream communities. "Baryoke" depicts the effects of a modern contraption, the videoke machine, on a remote and idyllic village. Although subtly put, the film concludes with a preferential option for the old. But there were those more accepting of the challenges to tradition. "Pisay" tells of the story of an entire batch of scholars at the Philippine Science High School caught in the throes of the EDSA revolution. They were faced with the option of taking things according to the old framework, which is to study hard to become scientists, or do their part in the making of history by participating in the politics of social change besetting Philippine society. The film ended by proposing a departure from the established norm: these young scholars preparing to become scientists must exercise their political roles. Another film, "Namets", wholeheartedly embraced the new while remaining to appreciate the value of the old. It told of the story of how two chefs of different persuasions and personality found common ground in trying to create a cuisine that will build on native Negrense cooking, but duly updated to cater to contemporary and more cosmopolitan tastes.

Aside from the old vs. new theme, culture is also substantially represented in the portrayal of

sub-cultures. In this study, there are five such films namely "Engkwentro," "Tribu," "Isnats," "Ranchero" and "My Fake American Accent." The first two are about urban poor youth gangs practicing a life of violence pursued in the name of brotherhood. Both chronicle rivalry between gangs that invariably is resolved through bloody confrontation. They showed how violence is made the basic moral operating principle in these groups that thrive in the context of poverty and brute survival in the urban setting. "Isnats" is very similar to the first two, except that it is about groups engaged in petty criminality in the city, specifically snatching. As such, it also delved on the use of violence, but this time in the service of such an illegal economic enterprise. Similarly, "Ranchero" takes issue on the use of violence, but this time in a setting known as a *total institution*, a prison facility in this particular case.

It deserves remark that the four films described above on sub-cultures are about the use of violence as a matter of approach to life. It offers glaring contrast to mainstream culture that typically abhors violence, making for a distinctive boundary of the particular lifestyle involved. As for "Ranchero," the boundary even becomes more well-defined because the total institution setting reinforces this separation by sheer physical divide of the prison walls to mark off the sub-culture from the rest of society. In "My Fake American Accent" however, the boundary is barely noticeable as the sub-culture involved appears almost mainstream. The film is about call center agents, the work force of a relatively new industry called business process outsourcing (BPO), who lead lives quite different from those of the more traditional industries.

Finally, specific social issues and problems also proved handy in projecting culture in the narratives of eight films. The issues and problems focused on are highly varied, including treasure hunting, media, politics, street children, human trafficking, and child-bearing. It is remarkable that a number of them took issue on the effects of media (film, television) on people, something which becomes almost an exercise of self-

reflexivity of the film industry: film being critical of itself as medium. “Pepot Artista” and “Laspongols” both questioned how the movies serve as escapist means for the masses of ordinary people, giving them false aspirations for fame, wealth, and glory. “Jay” for its part exposed the manipulative representational practices of television. In all cases, the films took to task unbridled commercialism in the media industry.

Representations of Culture

Effects of culture on characters. Characters are agents who have the capacity to act and make things happen and thereby reinforce or change the situation. They are bundles of traits and dispositions, and are invested with motives and self-project. They are bearers of culture which frames motives and self-goals and prescribe ways of doing things. Culture, whether it is about a new element entering the cultural formation or an old, pre-existing one, impacts on people in two ways as indicated in Tables 4 and 5. First is as challenges that bring potential or actual change to one’s character. Secondly is as a reinforcement of the character’s prevailing sense of self given particular expression as habits, needs and wants, aspirations, beliefs and values. In addition, such impact can be positive or negative as seen in the point of view of respective characters.

New material cultural elements entering an existing cultural formation bring immediate and concrete impacts that pose challenge and change on characters. This is exemplified in “Baryoke.” In said film, a videoke machine found its way into a remote village. In the immediate, it provided the villagers a new and easy way of giving vent to a favorite pastime, which is singing. The immediate effects however crept on further into the social fabric and rearranged the relationship of the people and eventually made dents into their values and aspirations. But surely, other than the material, non-material cultural introductions also bring important impacts on characters. In “Brutus”, the two young lead characters Adag and Payang, as they travel to town, were exposed to various

notions and values that were in conflict with their own Mangyan ways and served to challenge their sense of self, identity, and aspirations.

It is not always the new that provides impetus for change in character. A particular culture, with its prescriptions of how to regard and do things, is surely a set of challenges that can alter personal constitution as one gets increasingly engaged with it. In “Ranchero”, harsh life inside the prison becomes the overpowering motivation for an inmate to aspire for freedom and change his behavior. Typically, a culture’s stringent expectations motivate people to change one’s circumstances, either in pursuit of said expectations, or in defiance of it. In “Namets” the old tradition became the very framework for the couple of lead characters to reinvent themselves and pursue their more upbeat aspirations. In “VoxPopoli” on the other hand, the main protagonist, Connie, with her lofty ideals of changing the prevailing corrupt system in local politics, was the one who slowly got appropriated by the logic of the traditional as she went through the motions of campaigning for mayor of a rural town.

The other half of effects of culture on characters is the reinforcement of a person’s prerogatives. Here, even new cultural elements can function as reinforcement rather than a challenge. In “Isnats”, the cellphone offered petty thieves plying the streets a new object for their illegal enterprise, while it also facilitated their operations. However, reinforcement being a conservative function is supplied mostly by old, already existing elements. Considering a culture’s compelling power to impose on practitioners, characters do not have much choice but to concede. In “Tribu” and “Engkwentro” the practice of violence for brotherhood got so imbibed among the young. The culture is perpetuated even as it led to death in the case of the initiate Mon in “Engkwentro.” In Libmunan, the young bride-to-be Ayesha went through a period of questioning the wisdom of the old way, but ended up embracing it as an assertion of identity and selfhood.

Table 4*Culture Serving as Challenge or Source of Change on Characters*

Effects of culture on characters
<p><u>New elements:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – new technology provided new ways of doing things; of novelty in the routines of every-day-life – new technology threatens traditional beliefs, values – new technology becomes the bane for one’s preoccupations – new technology led to changes in relations – alternative and more authentic cultural expression led to resolve for change – values and aspirations for the glamour of showbiz provide ordinary people with prospects for escape from poverty and mediocrity – exposure to “modern” aspirations created new desires and the questioning of tradition – provides alternative aspirations that shape decisions that bear on the future – exposure to various persuasions of respective groups developed maturity and wisdom – new ways of doing create in the practitioners a sense of alienation
<p><u>Old elements/status quo:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – provides the practitioners with challenges to pursue – provides aspirations for freedom – creates frustration; corrupts one’s ideals; becomes hindrance to one’s aspiration and happiness – culture can lead to one’s hardships and destruction – leads to failure to fulfil family obligation

Table 5*Culture Serving as Reinforcement on Characters*

Effects of culture on characters
<p><u>New elements:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – technology provides new object of criminal activity – technology facilitates criminal operations
<p><u>Old elements/status quo:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – provides the venue for expression and empowerment – provides opportunity for self-fulfilment, for finding identity, for maturation – provides opportunities to reinvent self – provides a means to deal with loss – brings together people of various backgrounds – provides opportunities for learning corruption – provides means to survive – provides a way out of a fix – serves as context for realizations on self and the reality out there

Role of culture on plot. The plot starts off from a given situation or a confluence of circumstances that connect characters. This set of situational givens is the premise of a story or the “What if?” conditionality. Fueled by the conflict that arises from the situation, a chain of events is triggered as characters involved try to resolve such conflict. Culture serves an important function in the premise of a film when it becomes a given according to which the characters act. The films in this study were specifically chosen because culture plays a major role in the plot. In Tables 6 and 7, the 23 films are described in terms of how culture figures out in their plot’s basic premise. In this regard, the films are grouped into two. On the

one hand are 10 films (Table 6) where the conflict between the old and the new ways of life is the central issue. In these films, the story grinds when the traditional is engaged by a competing and new way of seeing and doing. The 13 other films (Table 7) however have no such arrangement. Instead, characters go about their business within the same cultural configuration. Conflict is created as characters are confronted with several options for action from which they must choose.

The two types identified here as to culture’s role in plot correspond to the aspect of a culture as being one of a piece. When compared to each other, as in the first type, a culture appears to be an integrated whole with its own logic so that two

Table 6

Role of Culture on Plot as Providing the Central Conflict of Story (new vs. old)

Title	Basic premise of film
2005- Baryoke	– What if a videoke machine is introduced in a remote and idyllic community?
2005 – Lapinggols	– What if a fake movie crew accidentally stumbles into a remote and idyllic community and engages the folk with the escapist and commercial values of show business?
2006 – Batad	– What if an Ifugao lad, being groomed to take after his father as rice terrace farmer, becomes attracted to the life of lowlanders?
2007 –Pisay	– What if a generation of scholars at the premiere science high schools starts to question the values and practices of the school as they try to heed the call for active political involvement in the larger society ripe for massive social change?
2008 – Brutus	– What if two Mangyan teeners leave their mountain abode and travel to the lowlands to do urgent errands and in the process are exposed to alternative values and practices that challenge their old ways?
2008 – Namets	– What if two Negrense chefs, trained in international cuisine, try to rediscover local culinary traditions and update it to more cosmopolitan tastes?
2009 – Mangatyanan	– What if a fast disappearing indigenous community tries in vain to revitalize itself by reviving an old ritual?
2010 – Libmunan	– What if a young Maranao lass arranged for marriage is exposed to various alternatives to her impending life as a traditional Muslim wife in the course of her preparations for wedding?
2010 - The Leaving	– What if a man and a woman enduring unhappy relationships imposed by tradition (Chinese) meet and find happiness in each other and took justifications from the same tradition?
2010 – Vox Popoli	– What if a woman tries to enter local politics in order to change what she believes as a corrupt system, becomes slowly appropriated by it?

Table 7*Role of Culture on Plot as Providing Framework for Characters' Pursuit*

Title	Basic premise of film
2005- Isnats	– What if a snatched cellphone did not only mean added income for the snatcher but also became the cause of unintended and untold complications in his life?
2005 – Pepot Artista	– What if a boy from a poor family, so enamoured by the glamor and glitter of show business, aspires to become an actor in the movies?
2007 – Tribu	– What if a very young boy gets close-up exposure to the violence that govern gangs, picks up a gun used in a riot, and uses it to kill his mother's lover who he hates?
2008 - My Fake American Accent	– What if the employees of a call center get to imbibe its values, ideologies, and lifestyles, including the contradictions involved, and thus become the framework for both their aspirations and troubles?
2008 – Jay	– What if a gay TV reporter in the process of documenting the murder of a gay teacher, uses invasive and manipulative strategies just to be able to create a high-rating episode and move on in the competitive world of the industry?
2008 – Ranchero	– What if the impending parole of an inmate who had tried hard to maintain good behaviour becomes compromised because of a minor overlook in doing his task which caused a major disruption of order in the prison facility?
2008 - 24K	– What if a group of treasure hunters relentlessly pursues supposed treasure buried in a remote place and in the end miserably fails as they are consumed by forces both of their own making and beyond their control?
2008 – Engkwentro	– What if a gang old-timer tries to escape his situation but is prevented by the very system of violence in which he had entrenched himself so deeply?
2010 – Halaw	– What if a collection of individuals, motivated to escape dire poverty in Mindanao, find themselves in the same boat that will illegally ferry them to Sabah, suffer the formidable ordeals of the trip, and face uncertain fate in their destination?
2010 –Mayohan	– What if an adolescent from Manila visits the province for summer vacation and in the process is initiated into the traditions of May festival that too becomes the setting by which he is confronted with issues on relationship with the opposite sex?
2010 – Sampaquita	– What if children, variously confronted with difficult living conditions in their families, ends up in the streets and forced to fend for themselves by selling sampaguita?
2011 - Bahay-bata	– What if a nurse in a government maternity hospital, whose daily job is to help countless mothers deliver their children into the world, is confronted with her own personal issues regarding motherhood and family life?
2011 – I-Libings	– What if a communication arts student does practicum work in funeral services and in the process learn more that the practice of her profession but also about life as a whole and gain self-acceptance?

different systems can only relate in conflict. In “Brutus” for example, the Mangyan way figures out in diametric opposition to the lowlander’s. But when seen from within, a culture starts to appear as loosely integrated at best. It may present a menu of options, or else it may actually harbor contradictions. In any case, the actor is not exactly compelled to take the one and only route but can make choices. In “My Fake American Accent” the cultural subsystem called call center industry features values that both become alienating to its practitioners but also offers opportunity for attaining their economic aspirations.

Characterizations of culture. By the time a film ends, it would have amply made a statement about the human condition based on the combined effects of all its elements of both content and form, that is plot, characters, and setting and how these are put together through filmic language. For their part, films keen on the anthropological imagination would package their statements on human condition in terms of the role of culture. Table 8 summarizes the films’ characterizations of culture based on three dimensions, namely, determinism (culture’s capacity to shape human behavior), integration (culture’s capacity to unite people), and exploitation (culture’s potential for use in exploiting people by other people). Table 9 on the other hand lays out the basic statements on culture made by the indie films selected for this study.

Going through the figures on Table 8, it appears that the films are divided in their portrayal of culture, although they are leaning more on the benign side, namely seeing culture as more contingent than outright powerful and as both integrative and divisive at the same time. However, 13 films depicted culture as more exploitative compared to 10 that saw it as neutral. This may be interpreted as representing indie films’ humanist and progressive tendency, many of them being anti-commercialist and with strongly implied advocacies. This is exemplified by the film “Halaw” and “Engkwentro.” The first clearly took the cause against human trafficking between Tawi-tawi and Sabah by exposing the

exploitative practices and dire results of such illegal enterprise. The second is an illustration of how poverty begets violence among the youth in an urban poor community, and that there is no escaping it once you are trapped within its grasp.

Notwithstanding the indies’ strong stand about culture and exploitation, the films remain to depict culture in less absolutist light (contingent, both integrative and divisive), which is in step with current notions in anthropological theorizing. Up to the sixties, culture had been thought to be a stable, well-integrated, and clearly bounded system that prevails over a community and is powerfully deterministic of the behavior of its members. But this hard-core view had been duly scaled down, in favor of a less powerful, more fluid regard for culture where the actor’s agency is well recognized. Culture, it has been realized, is contingent, socially constructed, and is at the mercy of the vagaries of historical forces. It would appear that the authors of the indie films in this study were duly cognizant of this view. The next set of data on the films’ statement on culture will further bear this analysis.

Table 8
Films’ Characterizations of Culture

Characteristic of culture	F
Determinism	
Powerful	9
Contingent	14
Integration	
Integrative	5
Divisive	0
Both	18
Exploitation	
Exploitative	13
Neutral	10

n: 23

Considering that tradition is a recurring theme among the films, it follows that such films involved implicate tradition as they make their statements on culture. In Table 9 below, it shows

that of the nine basic statements identified, four are about tradition. Of these, three give preferential option for the old way, while one (“The old way will persist”) acknowledges its power regardless of whether it is good or not. One film that posed affirmation of tradition in quite strong terms is “Baryoke.” After the series of adventures and misadventures of an entire village as they romance the videoke machine, Munding, the lead character who lost his wife in the course of a drunken and violent confrontation, ended up throwing away into the river the implement he thought was culprit of all their woes. The film finished with Munding

and his friend Direk manning the village store, just as they used to do, an intimation of the persistence of the old way. A postman came to deliver a letter to Direk, which he had been waiting for all these time. The postman stayed a while to rest. He saw a guitar in the store, borrowed it, and started to play an old tune. They sang which burst spontaneously into dancing, doing steps that hinted of pre-colonial natives. The postman was played by Gary Granada, a well-known singer who makes his music using ethnic motifs and instruments. The message is clear: going back to the basics provides simple but authentic bliss.

Table 9*Films' Statements on Culture*

Basic statement on culture	Specific statements on culture
“The old way is better”	– The old way is better; back to the basics
“The old way will persist”	– Tradition will have its way
“The old way can be useful to the present”	– Tradition remains useful for contemporary goals but will have to be reconfigured – The old must not be abandoned; it can be updated to address contemporary pursuits
“Tradition must be respected”	– The old way must not be used for bad intentions; it will reap bad results
“Culture is useful”	– Culture provides the setting for personal development – Culture supports life, even in difficult circumstances – Escapist culture will persist so long as there are poor people who need it – new technology can be used to uphold tradition
“Culture can be a burden”	– People will continue to observe an exploitative culture if it offers a means for survival – Poverty and exploitation are reinforced by culture
“Culture is double-edged”	– New technology is neither good or bad, it depends on how people make use of it – Culture while it empowers, also destroys – Culture, even if it is alienating, becomes a framework for pursuit of fulfilment – Opt for the more authentic culture over the escapist and commercialist
“Culture is bound to change”	– Tradition will come to pass; there is no point in insisting on it
“Culture is contingent”	– Tradition, even if it is alienating, also provides a way out

Affirming tradition however need not be reckoned in an either/or arrangement. In both “Namets” and “Mayohan” the message is that “The old way can be useful to the present.” In “Namets”, a couple of young chefs (he and she) of cosmopolitan outlook find their mettle in provincial Negros by upgrading local cuisine to international standards of taste, while also resolving their personal differences. They end up becoming partners in life and in vocation, finding fulfillment and hold of self by the fusion of the old and new. In “Mayohan” the long-running traditional observance of the May festival in a rural town is assured continuity as the young generation takes over in overseeing the practice, but only by updating it to suit their contemporary prerogatives. It has become a means for giving vent to the energy and exuberance of youth, and a convenient venue to meet each other and make prospects for relationships.

Two other statements on tradition are cautious rather than plainly positive. In “24K”, a group of treasure hunters invaded the remote territory of an ethnic community to pursue a lead that treasures are buried there. In their operations, they relied on old animistic beliefs and practices, steeped in notions about the involvement of spirits in hidden treasures. They end up however in dismal failure, some of them meeting their end through mysterious accidents. The film clearly was saying that “Tradition must be respected” and using it for bad intentions will reap bad results. “VoxPopoli” opened as Connie, an idealistic and successful woman but neophyte in politics, starts a day of campaigning through town as a candidate for mayor. She was out to change the old corrupt system. At the end of the day and of the movie, her idealism had all fizzled out as it proved no match to the power of the prevailing norms of patronage politics. It was a tacit, cold caution that “The old way will persist.”

Two statements have to do with what culture does to humans, one positively and the other is the opposite. First is that “Culture is useful.” People bother with it because it is functional in pursuing goals and aspirations. A number of

films support this thesis. The story of “I-Libings” revolves around a funeral parlor that makes use of modern representational and communication technology, video and internet respectively, for the various services it offers, all intended to fulfill Filipino family-oriented practices and values in treating the dead. It was really about modern technology in the service of tradition. “Pisay” which chronicled the four years of going through secondary education at the Philippine Science High School during the turbulent first half of the ’80s, is a case illustration of how culture, the “Pisay” culture that is, provides the setting for personal development. “Bahay-bata” for its part is set in a government maternity hospital and the narrative happened during Christmas Eve. Its clientele are the poor people of Manila. Despite difficulties brought about by congestion and lack of resources, the hospital is a bustling and jovial venue for bringing new life into this world. This is so, courtesy of the Filipino love for children and value for family, duly underscored by the happy mood of the holidays.

Three other films depicted the function of culture but setting it in difficult circumstances of poverty and in less bright outlook. In “Pepot Artista” the lead character Pepot is a young boy whose dreams of becoming an actor in the movies served as his escape from the harsh realities of life. In the movie, he tries to live out his dream, but with dismal results. The movie ended with the narrator saying that Pepot lives on in every form of escapist undertakings (movies, telenovelas, videoke, etc.) so long as there are poor people. Escapist expressive culture will persist to serve its purpose especially in societies suffering from economic deprivation. The two other films in this mold have altogether dark view about culture, indeed considering it as having become a burden. “Halaw” depicted a kind of culture that allows survival but through exploitation of the weak by the strong. The movie chronicled a typical boat trip from Tawi-tawi to ferry a batch of illegal migrants out to look for work in Sabah. They have to face the ordeal of harsh transit conditions at sea, agree to grossly unfair terms offered by

recruiters and employers, and leave the comfort of family and home country. Human trafficking has created and maintained for itself a culture of deceit and exploitation which the poor who do not have much option patronize for gut-level survival. Another movie, “Sampaguita”, spoke similarly about how culture becomes a burden but this time to street children selling sampaguita garlands. It demonstrated how a set of practices and notions served to bring vulnerable children to live a life of danger and suffering on the streets.

Some other films did not take sides as to the usefulness of culture but rather showed its being double-edged. Technology can be useful or harmful depending on how people make use of it. This was illustrated in “Baryoke.” While the videoke machine eventually undermined the equilibrium of the community, the villagers found many utilities of the videoke machine, even as an aide to the protest action they mounted against the mining company destroying their environment. In “Isnats”, the cellphone became both boon and bane for criminal operations. Similarly in “Laspongols”, movie-making can serve both escapist and authentic expression. But the old way can likewise be double-faced. In “Mayohan”, the May festival tradition became the venue for the youth to exercise empowerment, but also the means for their early introduction to corruption. In “My Fake American Accent”, taking a job as call center agent is alienating but also allows self-fulfillment.

The last two statements in Table 10 are expressive of culture’s less absolutist character, namely that “Culture is bound to change” and that “Culture is contingent.” Actually, to the credit of the indie films included in this study, none of them represented culture as something pure and absolute. Each of them embodied culture that is grounded in reality and lived out by human actors, particularized and made complex by a confluence of countless givens and circumstantial accidents. When culture is articulated in filmic stories, it is always in mixed-up versions, always in the throes of change. But certain films projected this fluidity more strongly than the others. “Mangatyanan”

is a narrative illustration of the argument that “Culture is bound to change.” It told of an attempt to bring back tradition that miserably failed. Laya is a professional photographer who travels to a far village in the north to document the revival of an ancient ritual that is supposed to sustain the vitality of the tribe. This is being done in the hope to restore community spirit and bring back the old way of life in the face of imminent transformation that will bring the village well into the modern mainstream. But the whole attempt is busted as the main participant, the one who was to do the symbolic sacrifice, runs off in the middle of the ritual to pursue his own aspirations. On the other hand, “The Leaving” told of a man and a woman who strayed into each other as they tried to move away from impositions of their traditional Chinese upbringing. Paradoxically, they find affirmation of their pursuit of personal freedom and true love in the very culture that was source of their woes. At the film’s end, the two submitted to the ritual of divination at the Buddhist temple, bulwark of Chinese tradition, where they got to know that fate has decreed that they be together. The point is that there is no culture so stringent as not to allow space for human agency to operate.

Summary

Overall, of the 64 films entered in the main competition category of the Cinemalaya Film Festival from 2005 to 2011, 23 of them proved substantially keen in depicting culture. In such films, some established patterned way of life, known as culture, loomed large in their portrayal of the human condition. Embedded in the settings, characterizations, and plots, culture played crucial role in the way the films put across their summative points to the audience. In this study, such summative points were identified through the themes tackled, culture’s impact on the characters, and culture’s role in the dynamics of plot.

Clustering around three thematic types, the films demonstrated that it is best to call attention to culture by tackling the “old vs. new” question, by focusing on a sub-culture, or on a particular

social issue or problem. When seen according to culture's role in the lives of the characters in the films, culture either posed as challenges to deal with as these characters journey through, or else as basis for their pursuits both for goal setting and providing the means to achieve them. As regards to plot trajectory, culture figured out in two basic ways: as the source of the very conflict itself, specifically concretized in the "old vs. new" dilemma, or else as the given context that determines how characters pursue their fates.

Finally, how is culture pictured in the films? While the imagery varies, a more benign representation of culture is offered: as being more contingent than powerfully deterministic, as something that can both bring people together and divide them. However, more films represented culture as more burdensome on people than not. On the whole, while an entire spectrum of attitudes towards culture is contained in the collection of films, they all concede to its big role in the affairs of humans.

DISCUSSION

Given the findings, it goes to show that culture provides such a wide field of materials for story-telling in film. When such materials are appropriated by the indie filmmakers, it results not just simply to the culturally nuanced telling of a slice of the human condition. The film too manages, wittingly or unwittingly, to make statements on the nature of culture itself. Considering the crop of films included in this study, how do their depictions figure out vis-à-vis anthropology's own current conceptualizations?

On the whole, the indie films exhibited a large measure of being abreast with state-of-the-art anthropological theorizing on culture. Far from projecting culture according to outdated frameworks such as structural-functionalism, the films represented realities that bespeak of the dynamic and contingent character of culture. Rather than portray stable and coherent wholes of social set-ups populated by people in harmonious engagement with each other, the narratives of the indies bothered with tension-filled arrangements

and trajectories. More specifically, the statements implied by the films are more akin to the current anthropological notions lumped under the purview of practice theory as evidenced by the following broad statements implied in the film.

Culture as Being Dynamic and Historically Embedded

None of the films offered the ideal picture of a culture that is wholly integrated, clearly-bounded and stable, or something that is self-contained, timeless, and unique by itself. Depicted rather is the more raw and grounded reality of ways of life that are in the throes of change and beset with tensions and contradictions. Culture may be about established and patterned ways of seeing and doing, but since it is always implicated in the lives of people who deal with historical forces as they try to make sense of their situations, such patterns are perennially battered with challenges. Culture therefore cannot operate unhampered by itself but is always undermined by larger contexts. Culture is dynamic and the collection of indie films in this study are exemplary illustrations of this.

Notwithstanding this recognition of the inevitability of change, many of the films manifested a guarded caution for the new and a lingering premium, at the least, for tradition. This may be construed as a stance critical of the supposedly alienating and dehumanizing effects of unhampered modernization. This is comparable to anthropology's long-time disciplinal bias. The original mandate that the discipline assumed was the study of pre-industrial society. Even in the advent of the anthropology of contemporary society, many anthropologists dedicate their energies on the exotic and the "native"; they take it as their advocacy the preservation of diversity of the human way of life: their worst terror is a homogenized world.

Culture as Being Contingent

Culture is indeed a force weighing in on people's lives, as the films amply showed. But such power is not absolute. In the films, the

characters are not passive followers of culture's promptings. They deal with culture accordingly as it gets on the way in their pursuit of respective agenda, either busily resisting it or appropriating selectively one or the other of its elements for their purposes. In the process, they actively participate in the reproduction and transformation of culture. It goes to show then that culture is not so much a reality out there looming large and deterministic, but is people's own handiwork.

This study started out with a hunch that there must be some common ground between the anthropological enterprise and indie filmmaking. While the long-running engagement between film and anthropology can be historically established, results of this study reveal that contemporary independent filmmaking and current anthropology demonstrate substantial convergence in the ways they depict culture. This may be readily explained by assuming that anthropology's discourse have seeped into the popular mind, including indie filmmakers, enough to make impact on their craft. But what needs more explaining is the fact that indie filmmaking as represented in this study exhibited keenness on the latest in the discipline's conceptualizations of culture, given that a lag is liable between the avant-garde of a specialized discipline and the popular mind.

Two reasons might be offered for this homology. First is the nature of feature-filmmaking in general, and second has to do with the particular disposition of independent filmmaking itself. Regarding the first, it must be noted that films are essentially stories, and story-telling as a whole thrives on conflict and change. Narratives move through along the path of change and the engine of change is conflict. A story is about characters that go about encountering all sorts of adversaries: themselves, others, the physical milieu itself, and even their God. In grappling with these challenges they are met with options as to what to do. Indeed, a good story is said to be one where the actor is faced with an open system of courses of action, wherein the choice among options is a real dilemma. A story is thus compelling if the actor, beset with the contradiction of personal and

other considerations, exercises agency and causes change to take place. Fluid as it seems, this is deemed to be the "formula" of lived reality and the good story must reflect such. When culture is implicated, it must serve the formula. It will have to be culture that is malleable, processual, and one that can take form only on uneasy basis. Therefore, the dynamic practice theorizing in current anthropology appears thoroughly compatible with the story-telling enterprise in film.

But more than mere story-telling, indie films are sensitive to issues besetting contemporary society, adopting therefore story materials that touch on social concerns of urgent currency. All films covered in the study depict one or the other social problem arising out of the precarious conditions obtaining in contemporary Philippine society. Plots are personal troubles of characters intimately implicated with the complexity, dynamism, and contradictions of the social milieu. Being so, it comes naturally with the package that such narratives are exemplary illustrations of culture's contingent and dynamic character.

What does this imply to anthropology's project of popularization? Simply put, it means that indie filmmaking is an ally of anthropology in communicating its core concept to the larger public. It is such a prized ally because (1) it is able to depict culture in the nuanced, non-essentialized, or simplistic package, just as the anthropologist would like it to be; and (2) it is such an efficient popularizer because everybody likes a good story, especially when told in sensually and intellectually gratifying audio-visual medium.

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