Connecting Indigenous Peoples: Mobile Phone Culture among Selected Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines

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Introduction

Philippine indigenous peoples (IP), officially known as indigenous cultural communities or ICC (Rodil 2004), refer to more than 40 ethnolinguistic groups, who despite the country’s centuries of colonization, have remained largely un-Hispanized and un-Westernized. There are an estimated eight to 10 million Philippine indigenous peoples or about 10% of the estimated total national population of 85M. They comprise seven major groupings as follows:

a) Lumad: refers to all non-Muslim hill tribes of Mindanao composed of 18 ethnic groups;

b) Cordillera Peoples: these are eight ethnic groups inhabiting the Cordillera mountain ranges, covering five provinces in Northern Luzon, namely, Ifugao, Benguet, Kalinga-Apayao, Mt. Province and Abra;

c) Caraballo Tribes: these are five ethnic groups inhabiting the Caraballo mountain ranges in Eastern Central Luzon, which connects the provinces of Nueva Vizcaya, Quirino, Nueva Ecija and parts of Rizal and Quezon;

d) Agta and Aeta: considered the country’s original inhabitants, they are the most widely distributed group;
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e) Mangyan: refers to the six ethnic groups inhabiting the mountains and foothills of the two Mindoro provinces, Occidental and Oriental;

f) Palawan hill tribes: refer to the four indigenous peoples of the province of Palawan, and

g) Muslim Filipinos: refer to various ethnolinguistic groups in Southern and Western Mindanao whose dominant religion is Islam. The major ethnic groups are the Tausug, Maguindanao, Maranao, Samal, and Yakan, comprising five percent (5%) of Filipinos.

More often than not, indigenous peoples live in remote rural areas and the hinterlands and away from the urban centers and mainstream Filipino society. A confluence of geographical, economic, social and political factors excludes the country’s indigenous peoples from accessing and receiving benefits from the government and other social service institutions’ programs and services.

Rodil (2004) describes their condition as (11):

> Once the masters of their own lives, now, the majority of them are poor and landless. In the old days, many of them lived in the plains. But as a result of population pressures and resettlement programs from among the majority, they have moved to the forest areas. Now, their forests are devastated and their culture is threatened.

A low level of literacy - 45 to 57% - characterizes most indigenous peoples.

In the field of communications, indigenous peoples lag behind by several years. Landline telephone use is a rarity in their areas because telecommunication companies have limited slots. Access to the landline and mobile phone technologies is consequently very minimal.

For instance, in a study conducted by Cureg (2004) among the indigenous peoples of the town of Cabagan, Isabela in Northern Luzon, she finds out that only a few persons actually owned mobile phones and that they were mostly professionals. They belonged to the middle- and high-income bracket and/or had relatives abroad, more popularly known as overseas foreign workers (OFWs). After all, mobile phone ownership entails an additional expense.

Rationale of the Study

Although there exists a corpus of knowledge on Philippine indigenous peoples, there is nonetheless a dearth of studies on how they acquire and utilize information and communication technology (ICT), particularly the mobile phone.
A certain study by Isis International–Manila states that the country’s level of economic development and political economy as well as its rough terrain and geographical features have had an impact on the acquisition of the new technology and its diffusion. The large number of the Philippines’ islands makes communication difficult (2002: 14). Furthermore, the study cites certain factors that hinder access and use of ICT in women's organizations, such as urban bias; limited access; collaboration and networking; under-utilization of ICT; social exclusion due to non-usage of English; inadequate skills; gender and psychological barriers, and a serious lack and disparity of resources.

Isis reports (Isis International-Manila 2002: 5):

The persistent structural, systemic, and ideological barriers constitute obstacles to increasing women's participation in the ICT arena. It has been pointed out that the IT (information technology) is managed globally and locally by an elite system of managers, which is unlikely to include a critical mass of women. As access to resources is generally easier for the privileged, Gilkim emphasizes that factors such as race, gender, and class will limit ICT access to marginalized groups. In Asian countries where factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, caste, and geographical location play a major part in access to and content of resources in general, ICT access and use will also be necessarily shaped and influenced by similar factors.

Cognizant of the potential role that ICTs play in the development and inclusion of the marginalized and poverty groups in the social, cultural and economic affairs of society, this study probes the extent to which they, i.e., the indigenous peoples (as a sector), have connected with the rest of Philippine society through the ICTs, particularly the mobile phone.

Moreover, it inquires into the indigenous peoples’ perception, use and relationship with the mobile phone. Thus, this study contributes to the discourse and knowledge-generation related to indigenous peoples, culture and technology, citing as it does the social, economic, geographical and cultural barriers that may possibly hinder the diffusion of, and access to, the mobile phone.

Furthermore, it describes how these obstacles shape the content and mode of mobile phone consumption; how the use of technologies includes or excludes the indigenous peoples from enjoying the benefits of the mobile phone technology, and how these effectively allow or prevent them from participating in the social, cultural and economic affairs of society.
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The study explores the negotiations and adjustments vis-à-vis the rest of the world that indigenous peoples experience in using the mobile phone. It depicts various cultural expressions of the indigenous peoples as they acquire, use and interpret the mobile phone.

Finally, the study looks into other factors such as, the urban bias, English language proficiency and literacy, and cultural practices that may have led either to the connection or non-connection of indigenous peoples to other members of Philippine society as well as the global community.

RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIVES

Given the above rationale, the study asks: To what extent and in what manner have some selected Filipino indigenous peoples connected themselves to the mainstream Filipino society through the use of the mobile phone? It further inquires: What types of changes in cultural experience has the mobile phone afforded these indigenous groups?

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. To explore the factors and context for mobile phone awareness, acquisition use, and skills among selected indigenous peoples, considering their geographical location and, socio-economic status;
2. To identify and describe the experiences of the informants in using the mobile phone, and
3. To identify and assess the changes (brought about by the mobile phone) in the daily lives of the informants.

RESEARCH METHODS

In 2005, this researcher conducted the necessary fieldwork and focus interviews among the Sinama-speaking Tausugs, a Muslim ethnic group in Zamboanga del Sur in Southern Philippines or Mindanao, and the Aetas of Barangay Cadmang in the town of Cabagan in Zambales, one of the country’s Central Luzon provinces. She also utilized a number of Key Informant Interviews (KII) and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving some representatives of the Dumagat and Remontado tribes of Tanay, Rizal.
RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Profile of Informants

The study utilized a total of 23 informants, eight (8) of whom are Dumagats, 13, Aetas and two (2), Sinama-Tausugs. Majority of them falls under the age range 18-30 years old. Only five are male, while the rest are female. Majority are married, with six of them married to non-natives, or lowlanders, with an average of four children each.

Two of the informants have reached the college level; another two, the high school level, and 11, the elementary level, with only five of the latter finishing grade one. Another eight did not have any schooling at all.

Thus, the informants fall within the general literacy rate of 45-50% of the country’s indigenous peoples.

As far occupation is concerned, the married women-informants were laundry women, plain housewives, kaingeros and wood gatherers. The single or unmarried women, on the other hand, worked as housemaids of some rich families in the town or the city. They usually went home to their families in the villages on weekends.

Meanwhile, the men folks worked as farm help, wood gatherers or irregular construction workers.

The study’s informants come from three (3) groups of indigenous peoples- the Sinama-Tausugs, Aetas and Dumagats. These informants can further be subdivided into two categories: a) those who reside in far-flung communities and b) those who have moved to the town proper or urban centers because of marriage, educational attainment and economic opportunities and thereby acquired some of the ways and lifestyle of the urbanites.

Awareness and Modes of Mobile Phone Acquisition

New information and communication technologies are now being used by most, if not all, sectors of Filipino society, including the marginalized and uneducated indigenous peoples of Mindanao, Rizal and Central Luzon. Among these technologies, the most widely used one is the mobile phone.
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Majority of the Dumagat-informants, having been married to lowlanders, are now called Remontados or half-breeds. Table I below shows that, due to their exposure to the lifestyle of the lowlanders, including the use of technologies, they are now familiar with the mobile phone. In fact, they have been users of the mobile phone for five years now. Three of them have had three to five mobile phones each already.

Meanwhile, the Aeta informants may not have actually owned a mobile phone, but they are aware of the gadget. They experienced using a rented mobile phone that belonged to a neighbor, who had acquired it a year ago.

It will be noted that no one among the informants have bought a first-hand mobile phone in cash--reflective of their lack of capacity to do so because of their economic status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Years Acquired</th>
<th>No. of Mobile Phones Acquired So Far</th>
<th>Manner of Acquisition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dumagats</td>
<td>3-5 years ago</td>
<td>3-5 units</td>
<td>- Hand-me-down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 FGD participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Bought in Manila as second-hand units</td>
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<td>4 FI informants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Pawned / unredeemed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aetas (Canduli Family)</td>
<td>less than a year to a year ago</td>
<td>none (renting) 1 unit</td>
<td>- Hand-me-down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 FI informants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Bought from a friend as second-hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinama Tribe</td>
<td>1-2 years ago</td>
<td>none (renting) 1 unit</td>
<td>- Bought as second-hand in Olongapo City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 FI informants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim-Tausug</td>
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Below is an account of an Aeta on how she was initiated into the mobile phone culture in the mountain:

**The Case of Estella Santos**

An informant, Estella Santos, 35, is an Aeta residing in Barangay Cadmang and married to a lowlander. She does not have a mobile phone. However, she cannot be called a mobile phone illiterate because she has an awareness of mobile phones and mobile phone brands. Her knowledge of mobile phones, however, is limited to Motorola and the old models of Nokia, such as, the 5110 and 3233.

Estella first saw a mobile phone that belonged to a lowlander visiting their barangay. In fact, she was able to hold one when a neighbor pawned his unit to her. For her, it was like holding a delicate thing.

In the beginning, Estella did not know how to use the phone and was not familiar with the symbols on the keypad. Later, she learned how to use the mobile phone after a friend had taught her how to press the keys explaining to her the meanings of the symbols or icons.

Estella felt a tinge of envy whenever neighbors displayed their mobile phones. The gadgets seemed mysterious, but when someone pawned a mobile phone to Estella, she said: “Ganito lang pala” (So, this is it!).

The next time someone pawned her a mobile phone, Estella refrained from using it despite knowing how to operate it. She felt that she might get “hooked” to it. She did not want to feel bad when its owner eventually retrieved it.

The Sinama-Tausug informants are in a situation similar to that of the Aetas’. Although they are poor, and live in remote areas and can neither read nor write, the Sinama-Tausugs, surprisingly, have some awareness about the mobile phone. In using the mobile phone, the uninitiated tribal elders usually request the younger – and literate – members of the Sinama-Tausug and Aeta families to do the text-ing for them.

The informants, who own mobile phones, acquired these through gifts or hand-me-downs from well-off relatives, or purchases of second-hand phones, or from bargain sales in the urban centers.
Meanwhile, the Dumagat informants disclosed that they had bought their mobile phones in cash from stores in Manila. Some said that rich relatives had given them their mobile phones considered as hand-me-downs. One of the interviewees acquired a mobile phone when the phone owner pawned it to him, but eventually failed to redeem it. Still others had to scrimp and tighten their belts in order to buy their mobile phones. A Mirroring their changing values, these poor people give up a meal or some other basic necessities in order to save money to purchase a mobile phone.

The above modes of acquisition by indigenous peoples are not much different from the ways their urban poor counterparts have obtained their own mobile phones. Common among the poor, whether indigenous or not, are the hand-me downs and the pawned or unredeemed mobile phones.

Understandably, the mobile phone brands of the study’s informants are not top-of-the-line, but merely the old and almost obsolete ones. These brands are bulky and worn-out, featuring the visible antennae.

There were varied reactions or types of behavior noted among the owners of old models. Those who did not have television sets and seldom visited the town or city did not seem to mind the outmoded mobile phones. They were not even aware that there were new models, i.e., mobile phones without the visible antennae, or with a camera, or slim cases, or the phones that one could fold up.

One of the informants said, “Hindi kasi kami nakakakita ng mga bago.” (That’s because we do not usually see the new models.)

Significantly, those who had seen the latest models of mobile phones through TV-viewing now felt embarrassed in showing their outmoded mobile phones whenever they went to town. They would simply hide their obsolete mobile phones in their bags.

**Mobile-Phone-for-Rent: A Community Tool**

The Sinama-Tausug and Aeta informants revealed that there were only one to two individuals in their communities who possessed mobile phones. These owners allowed community members to use their mobile phones for a fee: P2.00 – P4.00 (US$0.04 to US$0.08) per text message, or P10 to P12 (US$0.20 to US$0.24) per one-minute call.
The indigenous peoples’ innovative use of the mobile phone as a community communication tool, along with their growing awareness and their aptitude in its use, has greatly enhanced their access to communication. And, since the study’s fieldwork and interviews were conducted a year ago, there is a distinct possibility that more residents may have acquired mobile phones by this time, thus changing the mobile phone technology landscape of the indigenous peoples.

This study has discovered the capacity of the mobile phone to become a community tool. The original telephone landline may have been intended mainly for individual households to communicate, but enterprising owners later used it to generate income. Likewise, the mobile phone serves as a center of communication in the indigenous peoples’ communities, responding to the public’s communication needs, while providing extra income to its owners.

This study thus unveils an alternative use of the mobile phone--the gadget has evolved from one that is personal or individual to that of a community communication tool. This socio-cultural development underscores the native ability of the tribal communities concerned to adapt to the (technological) environment, but, more significantly, it reinforces the traditional custom or generous practice of sharing one’s godsend or windfall with the rest of the community.

Paradoxically, it also seems to have occurred in combination with the subtle assimilation of acquisitive values inherent in capitalistic behavior. Mobile phone rental also suggests or signifies the entry of consumerist values and commercial orientation among cultural communities. While sharing involves use of the unit by all, text messages and calls have to be paid, making the mobile phone owners generate profit from this practice.

The convergence of these two cultural practices – sharing or collective consumption of goods on one hand and selling text messages can be both gleaned in the context and manner by which cultural communities consume the mobile phone.

**The Case of Barangay Cadmang**

The residents of Barangay Cadmang lived in huts together with their extended families. They all used or shared a single mobile phone. Thus, before the advent of the mobile phone in Barangay Cadmang, residents would go to the RCPI office in town to make a call. But, now, with the mobile phone, calling
became much easier. This time, too, the residents were able to save on transportation cost and also on their time.

Despite the slow pace of development in Barangay Cadmang, a significant number of the residents possessed mobile phones. Of course, almost all of these mobile phones were old and not the top-of-the-line models being used by affluent residents in the urban centers.

The very poor did not have mobile phones despite the relatively low cost of second-hand mobile phones. These individuals, however, would dearly like to own mobile phones. They stated that, as soon as they were able to save or accumulate funds, they would definitely buy mobile phones for themselves.

Due to some enterprising individuals among them, residents without mobile phones no longer had to suffer walking to the town for more than an hour, or spend precious money for a call at the RCPI office. These enterprising residents allowed others to use their mobile phones for a fee. For every text message that was sent, the phone owners would get two pesos (P2.00).

One of these entrepreneurs said that his earnings for selling “text messages” were substantial, having financed some of his family’s needs, such as, food and repair of houses. The rate was cheaper compared to a PLDT call charge of five to ten pesos (P5.00 – P10.00) per call, not to mention the additional transportation cost in going to the RCPI office in town.

Meanwhile, even the illiterate users managed to send messages because others did it for them – either the children or the mobile phone owner himself.

Those who did not speak Filipino or English, but used only the Zambal or Tausug dialects still succeeded in communicating with others through a borrowed mobile phone with the owner translating.

No one among the Aeta- or Tausug-informants could afford to buy a P300-load for their mobile phones. According to the informants, a majority of them usually availed of the electronic load costing P10-30 pesos, courtesy of relatively well-off residents in Barangay Cadmang.

Others would avail of the “pasa-load” despite the additional charge of five pesos (P5.00) for a P15-worth load. So, if someone were given a P15-pasa-load, he would actually have to pay P20.00. At times, those who did not own mobile phones would offer to pay for the load of the mobile phone owned by another in order to make calls or send text messages.
An enterprising member of the Aeta community advertised the availability of his mobile phone-for-rent. Anyone could send a text message through his phone for a fee of two pesos (P2.00).

Other enterprising community members regarded the mobile phone as a business tool due to its usefulness in getting purchase orders. There were Aetas, mostly women, who sold or distributed beauty and perfume products as their livelihood activity.

The majority, who were without their own mobile phones, would pay two pesos (P2.00) or US$.04 to phone owners to send their text messages for them. To a certain extent, these mobile phone owners regarded this as a way of generating income, since a text message would cost only a peso (P1.00) or US$.02.

An informant confirmed:

_Oo, ay! Hindi naman lahat… meron. Like this Tampalan, ang meron lang d’yan ay dalawa lang sa pagkalaki-laki ng community na ’yan. Itong sa Sanggli, isa lang sa 70 households n’yan._

_Lahat nagte-text doon. Itong sa Tampalan nga, si Jul ’yung teacher – ’yun siya na parang bakla. Siya ang taga-text sa mga taga-Maynila._

(Oh, yes! Not all have these. For instance, here in Tampalan, only two persons in this rather large community have these. Here in Sanggli, only one out of 70 households.

All who live there do send text messages. Here in Tampalan, it’s Jul, the teacher – the one who acts like a gay – he does the text-ing for residents in Manila.)

**A Sign of Prestige**

Mobile phones bring prestige and “high” status to owners or users. Those among the indigenous peoples (whether Dumagat, Sinama or Aeta) who purchased their mobile phones from distant places like Manila, Olongapo City, Zambales and Zamboanga City, did so due to the prestige of traveling to centers of commerce, far from their mountainous habitat.

Those who had married lowlanders acquired some of the latter’s ways, including making frequent trips to the city to shop for food, furniture, appliances and goods, such as, mobile phone gadgets. Notably, the low prices of mobile phones, particularly the old models and the second-hand ones, enhanced the indigenous people’s ability to buy mobile phones in cash.
In the case of the Dumagats, the stature that the mobile phone bestowed depended on the place where the mobile phone was used. In the community, among their fellow Dumagats, the informants revealed that there were only a handful of mobile phone owners and these did not have any inhibitions showing-off their mobile phones. However, in town, amidst strangers who had better models, they would feel embarrassed in using their mobile phones in public.

Prestige is also linked to political position. Many entertained the belief that community leaders should be the very first ones to own mobile phones in their communities. Thus, two barangay chairpersons (also informants in this study) were actually the first ones in their communities to buy mobile phones.

One of the barangay officials thought that, being a barangay chair, she should not only be the first one to own a mobile phone, but that she should also have a better model, similar to the ones in town. She thought that this would surely enhance her status as a barangay chair. In her own words, it should not be an ordinary one like those owned by her constituents, “Para ‘di ako mapahiya” (So that I don’t get embarrassed).

Barangay Chair Eliza explained:


(When I acquired a mobile phone, I kept it close to myself because I had a cheap one. I’d hide it in my bag because I felt embarrassed with it after having seen the more expensive ones. My mobile phone is no longer appropriate for a barangay chair. It is so ordinary.)

Neighbors and community members of barangay chair-informants also believed that community leaders should acquire mobile phones since these would help in facilitating community activities. They likewise believed that these leaders’ mobile phones should be the better models compared to those owned by the ordinary residents of their barangay.

Leaders of tribal communities confessed that the mobile phone was a necessary and helpful tool for the effective performance of their functions, such as calling meetings. Instead of traveling far from one place to another in their mountainous territory, all that they would have to do was send a text message about the meeting to the participants.
Among the Aetas, the mobile phone also brought honor and prestige to the owner, whether one was a leader or not. In fact, it served to thwart the usual discrimination and ridicule being experienced by the natives from lowlanders. Some Aetas, with their characteristic dark skin, kinky hair and short height, were now shown respect when they started brandishing their own mobile phones. The humiliation and discrimination would somehow diminish whenever the lowlanders saw the Aetas in possession of mobile phones.

This social bias against persons based on what they possess and not on who they are, seems to have crept into the indigenous peoples’ belief system, what with the constant exposure to lowlanders. Material possession is thus used in valuing people and in rendering an assessment of a person’s character.

Breaking Physical and Social Barriers

In citing the reasons for acquiring a mobile phone, the informants revealed the need to connect because of geographical location: “Para magkaroon kami ng communication sa kabayanan… kinakailangang magkaroon kami ng kontak sa munisipyo.” (So that we could have some means of communication in our town… we need to establish contact with the municipality.)

This is true, in particular, with the barangay chair—informants who need to be connected to the town’s seat of government to be able to avail of services that are almost non-existent in the mountains or rural areas. The mobile phone has afforded the indigenous peoples a connection to the town – making them aware about happenings in the town and around the nation.

The mobile phone has solved the problem of fare money, particularly for people residing outside the center of commercial and social activities (e.g., Barangay Cadmang and the town Tanay). “Kahit walang pamasaha” (Even without fare money), they claim, since they don’t need it since the mobile phone owners are able to deliver or send messages on their behalf to relatives or friends staying in the town proper.

The mobile phone has thus broken down physical and social barriers.

One respondent said that despite being “taga-bundok,” most of them owned mobile phones. For the indigenous peoples, they say:

. . . napakahalaga ng ating mobile phone sa kasalukuyan dahil kahit kami ang nandito sa bundok, ora mismo nagkaroon kami ng connection sa mga pulis. Andi-diyan yong Office of the Mayor. So, hindi kami makuwi, maalala, nagkaroon kami kaagad ng komunikasyon. Parang nagkaroon ng kaunting problema dito, nakakaabot sa kanila.
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(...the mobile phone is very important at this time for us people who live in the mountains, since we are immediately connected to the police when there are crimes in the area. There within reach is the Office of the Mayor. So, if we can’t go home due to heavy rains, we can immediately communicate home. If there’s any problem at all over here, they’ll know about it.)

The remote locations of the indigenous peoples render communication very difficult, especially where there are no telephone lines. But, with the mobile phone around, a call for help due to any untoward incident is now only a text away.

Cell sites have been constructed even in mountainous areas. The mobile phone users have become more innovative or creative. Whenever they find the mobile phone’s signal rather low, they would climb tall trees or water tanks from where they could send a message. They would also move around holding the mobile phone over their heads to locate the signal, at the same time vigorously shaking their mobile phone until it successfully registered: “Message sent.”

Ownership of a mobile phone brings feelings of comfort and confidence to the indigenous peoples – knowing that they are connected. This also translates to the ability to obtain help when it is needed.

Mobile Phone as Burden

The adverse effects of the mobile phone were evident among the women-informants who regarded the mobile phone as a distraction from their household chores. Among the Dumagats, housewives cited delays in their household activities because they had to stop and read text messages. Responding to these messages further hindered them in whatever they were doing.

The women in particular took a longer time to finish their laundry now that they owned and used mobile phones than when they did not have these. They would finish text-ing their friends first before finishing their laundry or cooking. An informant described the disruption as: “Text muna bago laba; Pag may ginagawa ka, titigil ka, maiistorbo.” (Text first, before the laundry, when you are doing something, you’ve got to stop. Mobile phones are distractions.)

A Dumagat informant shared that:

Para sa akin, ang pangkaraniwang nabago sa akin ay ‘yong bang ako’y bago matulog, mobile phone muna. Mga 12, titingnan ko, baka may nagtext sa akin. Imbes na ako’y tulog na, ako’y bumabangon. ‘Yon pala, nagpapadala lang sa akin ng ringtone.
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(For me, the change in my lifestyle is that, before I go to sleep, I’m on my mobile phone. At around midnight, I check my mobile phone for possible messages. Instead of being sound asleep, I would get up only to discover that someone had sent me a ringtone.)

Another informant, Seling, added:

Parang nagkaroon ako ng self... kahit may gagawin kang ano, pag may magti-text sa yo, parang hindi mo na napapansin 'yong mga ibang ginagawa mo. Parang naka-focus ka lang sa mobile phone, ganon.

(It’s like I’m having a new self. . . even if I wanted to do something, once a text message came, I would be able to focus on the things that I’m doing. It seems like my full attention is on the mobile phone.)

Mobile phone messages come anytime of the day, from dusk to dawn, during the late night hours or even very early in the morning. One would get up even when about to sleep, or still half-awake in the morning, just to read text messages.

The mystery of the message, preceded by a ring tone, induces the mobile phone owner to immediately view the unknown message. The thought of an emerging or an untoward event excites mobile phone users, who cannot postpone viewing the message, no matter what he/she may be doing.

Majority of the informants claimed that mobile phones were an added burden on their already tight budget. A mobile phone load costing 30 pesos ($0.60) would be given priority over the purchase of rice or viand or soup.

Displaying a critical attitude towards the mobile phone, an informant gave a different perspective on the adverse effects of the mobile phone. She argued:

‘Yung exposure to outside world, nagko-cause din siya ng potential conflict, kasi nagwa-voiden ang gap sa older generation at younger generation.

(The exposure to the outside world . . . it causes a potential conflict because the generation gap between the young and the old widens.)

The informant was referring to the quick manner in which the young learn to operate the mobile phone. Apparently, the youth know more about the features and functions of the mobile phone; they text fast, and they are exposed to more updates and new models.
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Some informants added that the difference did not only apply to the young and the old, but much more so, to the rich and the poor. Surprisingly, the informants revealed that there were many more women (than men) who used the mobile phone.

This revelation can be attributed to the fact that the women usually remain at home and are frequently exposed to numerous TV ads featuring popular actors and celebrities promoting new mobile phone models. Such images stimulate the viewers’ curiosity and generate a desire to acquire and use the mobile phone, too.

Class Difference

Indigenous peoples certainly make utilization of the mobile phone widely different from the utilization of the mobile phone by other sectors of society, particularly the affluent ones. A discussant revealed that:

> Eh, sa amin di tulad ng iba, halimbawa, katulad sa amin yong paggamit ng mobile phone, may mga time na sa paggamit namin non ay inilalagay namin sa, una sa lahat, wala kaming pambili ng... inaano namin yong aming, yong bulsa namin baka wala kaming pambili kay limit kami sa pagti-text kumbaga. Gusto lang namin receive kami ng receive, ganon.

(We differ from others in using the mobile phone. First of all, we don’t have money to buy mobile phones in cash; we have to save. And then we cannot regularly buy mobile phone loads, so as much as possible, we avoid sending text messages. We just want to receive and receive messages).

Their general lack education does not deter the indigenous peoples from learning how to send text messages. Their children, who have reached at least the high school level, have been teaching them how to press the keypad and understand the functions of notations, symbols and the Filipino translation of English terms or instructions.

Jenelyn confessed:

> At saka, tinittingnan namin ang menu. Doon kasi tinuturuan din kami ng anak namin, eh, kono sila mga sanay sa mobile phone. Kaya ako, dalawang linggong nagsasanay, tinagalog ko na`t lahat-lahat...Hindi ko pa rin mainindihan. Pag naka-English na sa manual, di ko na mainindihan.

(And, we look at the menu. Our children use it also in teaching us, since they are familiar with the mobile phone. And so, I’ve been training for two weeks. I’ve been translating everything in Tagalog. But I still do not understand. When it’s in English in the manual, I no longer understand.)
Session 6: Extension of Mobile Media

Changes Wrought by the Mobile Phone

The informants attested to certain changes in their lives due to the mobile phone. Foremost among these changes was the facility in communication. They realized the advantages of contacting relatives and friends at a much shorter time and at a minimal cost.

However, the trade-off for this convenience involved partially giving up face-to-face interaction with relatives and friends as well as visits to the pleasant sights in the town or city that were vastly different from what they normally encountered in their remote environments. The informants felt that saving on cost or time was not sufficient for them to ignore the value of personal and direct communication and to disregard the lure of the town or city. Some admitted that they went to the city, not only to make calls, but also, due to their desire to relax in the cinemas, parks, malls and the like.

The most obvious change that the informants experienced was the added financial burden of having to buy cell cards, buy a load or rent a mobile phone. However, despite their lack of money, they would still proceed with their rather perplexing behavior of renting mobile phones or buying P5- to P30-peso ($0.10 – 0.60) loads.

Attitudinal changes were evident among some informants. As a result of envy, they regarded those with mobile phones as boastful without realizing that, when it was their turn to have a mobile phone, they would feel the same way.

Sa akin, yong nagbago sa akin, no'ng ako'y walang mobile phone, ako'y ang tingin ko don sa may mga mobile phone, ako'y ang napakayabang. Pinagaganyan-ganyan ba, kayayabang. Pero nung nagkaroon ako, ganoon pala. Pero naramdaman ko ang tuwa at parang proud ako.

(For me, what changed in me, when I had no mobile phone yet, I regarded those owners or users of mobile phones as show-offs. When I had one, I realized how it felt to be proud and happy.)

The most significant change felt by the informants was the prestige and recognition that they received from their peers among the indigenous peoples, but more importantly, from the lowlanders.

CONCLUSIONS
1. This study reveals how the mobile phone connects the three selected groupings of indigenous peoples, not only to relatives and friends, but also, to government institutions and/or services as well as to the outside world.

2. The data suggest that the extent and manner of communication or technological connection are dependent on two major constraints:
   
a) Ability of indigenous peoples to access the mobile phone:
   The location of the study’s three selected sites is far from urban centers where satellite-oriented communication cell sites are usually established. Thus, posing the biggest problem to the informants and/or their peers in using their mobile phones or sending text messages is the weak signal to and from the mobile phones in the remote and rugged terrain of the indigenous peoples’ setting.

b) Access to the mobile phone, as defined, not only physically or technologically, but also, as a socio-economic function:
   Majority of the members of indigenous peoples does not have mobile or cell phones, which they find prohibitive considering their poor purchasing power. Nonetheless, this particular constraint does not deter them from using the mobile phone as the indigenous peoples adapt to their physical and technological milieu.

3. The concept and operation of the mobile-phone-for-rent as a communication facility in the community reflect the native intelligence and ingenuity of the indigenous peoples. Truly, this may have emerged out of sheer necessity, but it also mirrors a historical and cultural tradition of the indigenous peoples to share with the rest of their peers whatever they may have (acquired) in the course of daily living. Undeniably, the mobile phone technology presents itself as a case in point.

4. The study illustrates how cultural communities achieve elevated status because of the mobile phone. Discrimination and ridicule disappear once indigenous peoples acquire mobile phones.

5. Mobile phones continuously connect the cultural communities to the outside world – a bit slow, for sure, but getting there – and enable them to access government programs and services.
6. There are adverse effects of the mobile phone on indigenous peoples, such as, a distraction, financial burden and consumerist values.

REFERENCES


Dr. Portus is a faculty member and the College Secretary of the College of Mass Communication at the University of the Philippines. She has published a book entitled, “Streetwalkers of Cubao” and some articles on mobile phones, communication education, and gay language in refereed journals. Dr. Portus has presented academic papers in various local and international conferences in Malaysia, Mexico, Thailand, China, Korea and Vietnam. She also serves as consultant in various Government and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs).