

Fashioning a Culture through Baguio City’s *Ukay-Ukay*

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The term *ukay-ukay* is derived from the Filipino *hukay*, which means to dig up. In Baguio City in the Philippines, *ukay-ukay* describes the thriving secondhand clothing industry that is slowly shifting the city’s image from tourist capital to castoff clothing hub. Below the surface of this image runs a wide gamut of social, cultural and commercial interactions.

I will explore the complex *ukay-ukay* phenomenon within the context of Filipino anthropologist Prospero Covar’s Total Environment Framework and attempt to interpret its facets.

My exploration will cover the evolution of the *ukay-ukay* from the 1980s’ ‘generic street piles’ in the market area to the more upscale ‘selections’ in the city’s business district and on e-bay. I hope to present a coherent portrayal of these and in the process expect to cover the manner in which Baguio City fashion has been democratized and, in a larger sense, how consumers have acquired a global fashion outlook through the trade of goods stuffed in ‘boxes’ from Hong Kong .

In the area of social discourse, I will include the coining of terms that are uniquely applicable to the *ukay-ukay* trade and the connotations of certain figures of speech. Also of relevance are the roles played by the *ukay-ukay* proprietor: as castoff fashion expert dictating trends; as facilitator of brand consciousness; as price tag authority. Also of relevance is the proprietor’s ability to distinguish the seasoned local bargain hunter from the ‘amateur’ out-of-town shopper.

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Baguio in the northern Philippines first earned a reputation as a vacation spot when the Americans, at the turn of the century, established a colonial hill station in a plateau 5,000 feet above sea level. The city became the country's summer capital throughout the U.S. regime until the post-war period, drawing visitors because of its relatively cooler weather, compared to other parts of tropical Philippines. Foreign tourists are attracted to the quaint mountain city and visit to experience the 'ethn icity' of the indigenous culture. Filipinos, on the other hand, go to Baguio to escape the tropical heat and to savor what cannot be found in the lowlands: strawberries and upland vegetables. Recently, however, the thriving secondhand clothing industry has been slowly shifting the city's image from solely a tourist capital to a castoff clothing hub for the Filipino market.

The term *ukay-ukay* is derived from the Filipino *hukay*, which means to dig up. *Ukay-ukay* is synonymous with *wagwag*, which is the act of dusting off a piece of clothing by taking hold of one end and snapping it in the air; and *SM*, meaning *segunda mano* (secondhand), but which is also a pun on the foremost Philippine retail chain Shoemart.

Ukay-ukay can describe an article on sale, the unique venue in which it is bought and the event of buying itself. Used clothing is randomly mixed up regardless of size, color, type and style in huge piles along sidewalk stalls. Buyers dig into the piles from all sides in a 'contest' to choose the 'best' item, adjudged by the keen eye for its relative newness, lack of damage or stains, and its fashion appeal. The choice is often signaled when the article is held up in the air and dusted off in the *wagwag* manner. A quick bargaining episode takes place and money exchanges hands in a rapid flurry of dig, deal and pay involving a multitude of buyers.

In patronizing used clothing, both visitor to and resident of the city have contributed to the contemporary idea of the *ukay-ukay*, which is a far cry from its conceptual beginnings. As the *ukay-ukay* has evolved, so has it contributed to the cultural fabric of the city, and perhaps of the nation.¹

Following Philippine anthropologist Prospero Covar's *Kabuuang Balangkas ng Kapaligiran* (Total Environment Framework), I will concentrate on the *ukay-ukay* from both the diachronic and synchronic perspectives.² I will trace the evolution of the *ukay-ukay*, explain how the business works, briefly depict buyer-seller behavior and the language used in the trade, and attempt to explore in detail the meanings that can be drawn from the whole context.

The Evolution of the Ukay-Ukay

The *ukay-ukay* buyer is actually the end user in a complex commercial network that originates from the international clothing capital of Asia, Hong Kong. Among the insiders in the business, no one in particular wants to take credit as the forerunner of the current *ukay-ukay* trade, but there are at least two versions that point to enterprising Hong Kong-based Filipino domestic helpers as founders of the industry. One version relates how Filipinas working in Hong Kong chanced upon old clothes for disposal, bought these and later resold them in Baguio. Other oral accounts say Filipina domestics in Hong Kong resold in the Baguio market either personal stuff from the *balikbayan* boxes they brought home to their families, or their

1 In this paper, I will concentrate on the *ukay-ukay* trade in Baguio City, which is considered the "*ukay-ukay* capital" of the country. The geographical coverage of the *ukay-ukay*, however, extends to many parts of the Philippines, including Manila (Cubao, Bambang, Baclaran, Kamuning, Quiapo), Iligan, Zamboanga, Davao, Dipolog, Cebu, Bohol, Bacolod, and other parts of Mindanao and the Visayas. See Cadiente, Edgar Dignadice *Galing UK or Made in China*. Available at <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/static/gen/2005/02/07/life/galing.uk.or.made.in.china!.html> (February 7, 2005).

2 Covar, Prospero. *Kabuuang Balangkas ng Kapaligiran* (photocopy, n.p., n.d.).

Salvation Army thrift shop finds.³ Still other oral accounts point to non-government organizations (NGOs), which, in the 1980s started selling donated and tax-free used clothing as a fund-raising activity.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact date when the *ukay-ukay* started, it definitely was not in the 1980s, but could have been roughly forty years earlier. Anthropologist Lynne Milgram notes that “access to secondhand clothing already grew after World War II in Southeast Asia.”⁴ This period coincides with the time wherein the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) provided billions of dollars in relief to Asia between 1943 and 1949, when it ceased operations.⁵

It cannot be discounted that the Protestant Church sects also contributed greatly (and still do) to the distribution of secondhand clothing. The entry of the Americans in the early 1900s resulted in the spread of the Protestant religions, i.e. the Lutherans, Seventh Day Adventists, Methodists and the Baptists. The local churches of these religions were, and still are recipients of regular shipments of boxes of used clothing meant for distribution among their less fortunate members. The excess of these shipments usually end up in rummage sales which are sponsored by the same churches, as part of their fundraising activities to finance projects such as the construction of new buildings.⁶ In addition to these churches, the Red Cross also donates used clothes to victims of calamities; most of these are collected from international donors. Narratives from some of my sources indicate that there Red Cross donations do indeed end up at times in the black market, with unscrupulous persons taking advantage of the confusion that accompanies tragedies.

The concept of the thrift shop as a market for used goods originated around 1865, when Methodist minister William Booths formed the Salvation Army in London, whose purpose was to preach God’s word and also to help those left poor by industrialization.⁷ The idea was to have pairs of women, called sisters, collect people’s unwanted goods which could otherwise be put to good use by others. The collections of these “salvage brigades” ended up in “salvage depots” and were sold at cheap prices to those in need. In America in 1902, a Methodist minister by the name of Edgar Helms also collected unwanted goods from households. Helms trained people to mend these used clothing and appliances; some of these were given free to those who had repaired them and the others were sold at cheap prices in what was called the Goodwill Industries thrift shops.⁸ In 1919, Clara Barton’s American Red Cross took on the concept, where volunteers encouraged people to call for a truck to pick up

3 Cabreza, Vincent. ‘Wagwag’: A Baguio phenomenon’. Available at http://www.inq7.net/bus/2001/aug/12/text/bus_1-1-p.htm (August 12, 2001). See also Edgar Dignadice Cadiente, ‘Galing UK or Made in China!’. Cadiente says the *ukay-ukay* started in the 1960s in Cebu and Baguio, “now the undisputed *ukay-ukay* capital of the Philippines. Cadiente adds, “Back then, OFWs and sellers with overseas contacts would collect whatever second hand items from abroad, send it to the Philippines in balikbayan boxes, and sell them in flea markets.”

Wikipedia describes the balikbayan box as a “cardboard box containing novelty items brought by or sent by a Filipino that is returning to the Philippines from a foreign country. These boxes contain non-perishable food items, canned goods, other food items, toiletries, household and kitchen stuffs, time saving devices, computer parts, electronics, toys, designer clothing, personal items, and hard to find items in the Philippines.” Available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balikbayan_box

4 Cabreza, Vincent ‘*Ukay-ukay*’ shows second hand clothes a culture mix’. Available at http://www.inq7.net/globalnation/sec_new/2005/aug/14-05.htm (August 14, 2005).

5 This may also account for the fact that in some Visayan areas such as Bacolod and Iloilo, *ukay-ukay* is sometimes referred to as “relief” by the older generation, an allusion to the castoffs that were distributed as part of relief efforts after the war.

6 Fong, Jimmy. Interview with author (August 25, 2005).

7 Cave, Damien. ‘*More Than Polyester: the Rediscovery of The Thrift Shop*’ . Available at <http://www.incharacter.org/article.php?article=7> (August 26, 2005).

8 See <http://www.goodwill.org/page/guest/about/whatwedo/ourhistory> (December 5, 2006).

unwanted clothing and household stuff which would be distributed to the needy. During the so-called Great Depression of the United States, the Mormons created its Deseret chain of thrift stores to create jobs and help the poor survive.

What is characteristic of the Filipino thrift shop is that unlike its U.S. or British counterparts, it did not originate out of the religious groups' aim to benefit the needy. The Salvation Army, although established in the country in 1937, has not put up any thrift shop in the Philippines similar to those that can be found in other countries; it only makes its presence felt during the holiday season when its members post themselves outside malls to ask for donations.⁹ In the 1970s, the phrase thrift shop was synonymous with Eloy's, a one-room affair that was established in the Kamuning district in Metro Manila. There were about one or two other similar businesses that set up shop along the same area, but these did not last long. The Bambang used clothing district in Manila, on the other hand, has survived from the 1990s to the present because it has been redefined as a source of vintage clothing appealing to a younger generation that is more open to a cultural loosening in terms of fashion. Known personalities who patronize the district have given it a Harajuku-like appeal that has become the rage.

In tracing the involvement of NGOs in the *ukay-ukay* business, Miriam Go says the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) used to issue permits for these organizations "to receive as 'donations' commercial quantities of second-hand clothes, supposedly for distribution to needy communities." Go describes the permit as a "shield" that prevented the Bureau of Customs from taxing these shipments. In Go's account, the DSWD became suspicious of the large volume of "donations," sometimes "as much as two 40-foot container vans of used clothing every week." It turned out that unscrupulous traders had entered into deals with these NGOs, paying them as much as P120, 000 for a shipment, plus five percent, in kind, of the shipment of clothes, which would be actually donated to the poor. It seems the smuggling operation was protected by highly-placed officials. Go says, "Whenever department of social welfare officials refused to give the customs bureau the go-ahead to release suspicious quantities of 'relief goods' ostensibly for charities, NGOs would threaten the department with the name of some highly placed person or warn that the influential person was upset that his foundation's 'work' was being hampered." By 1999, the Bureau of Customs put an end to the NGOs acting as fronts by stopping the issuance of these permits.¹⁰

The large shipments of castoff clothes may have much to do with a more lenient government policy in the 1980s with regard to importations. Milgram notes that the latter part of the 1980s signaled more liberal importations of clothing. Even up to 2001, Milgram says, "there was an approximately 50-50 split between Philippine marketers who purchased their stock of from suppliers dealing with used clothing from Hong Kong and those who purchased stock from suppliers ...from Europe, the United States, Australia and Japan." Milgram adds that the same year, "a small group of female Baguio City traders... forged an international linkage with Hong Kong suppliers in order to assume more control of this trade."¹¹

9 As of 2004, the Salvation Army had a total of 1,536 thrift stores in the countries it serves. See http://www.salvationarmy.org.sg/ihq%5Cwww_sa.nsf/txt-vwsublinks/D46980EA862CD1FD80256D4F00411840 (December 5, 2006),

10 Go, Miriam Grace. 'Illegal clothing trade costs Philippines dear' Available at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/FA06Ae04.html (6 January 2004).

11 Cabreza, Vincent. 'Ukay-ukay' shows second hand clothes a culture mix."

The Ukay-Ukay as a Business

The present *ukay-ukay* trade originates in a commercial warehouse in Hong Kong, which is stocked with secondhand clothes and other used items from various sources. Also in this lot are quality control rejects from factories, product samples and off-season or old department store material. In comes the Filipina, usually a former domestic helper, who takes a look-see at the goods in the warehouse (termed *bodega* in the *ukay-ukay* trade), and if these are to her liking, gets a wholesale price quote. The deal is forged in Hong Kong dollars, the Filipina sends a container van to the warehouse, loads the loose goods, and brings these to her own *bodega* nearby.

In her own *bodega*, the Filipina has a team of packers waiting to sort out the items and cram these tightly into *balikbayan* boxes to comply with cargo specifications. A *balikbayan* box measures 24 inches wide and 20 inches tall. Only big-bodied males are chosen for the job of packing; the objective being to squeeze in as many items (of the same kind) possible into a box, and maximize the use of space, so to speak. For this job, the obvious choices are the Pakistanis or the male relatives of the Filipina *bodega* owner.¹² This is specialized work where one has to sift through the *mélange* of items, separate the bags from the adults' clothes, stuffed toys from home decors and from the other items that are difficult to classify. What follows would be the difficult process of making 230 big bags or 85 bed sheets fit into a *balikbayan* box.

Once packed, the boxes are loaded into container vans and shipped to the Philippines. Shipments declared as used clothing may consist of 300 to 600 boxes (to fit in 20 or 40-foot containers, respectively), and take two weeks to reach Manila. Almost always, the *ukay-ukay* trade is a family affair, with the *bodega* owner's relatives overseeing the 'Philippine side' of the business. Within the two-week shipping period, immediate family members would have already taken in 'orders' from retailers as to the kind of boxes they want to purchase. The family would also have gotten in touch with the customs broker for the release of the shipment and its delivery to Baguio.

One trying to get an inside view of the trading that commences in Baguio can be amazed by its complexity. Once the boxes reach the family's Baguio *bodega*, there are several ways by which these finally reach the buyer:

1. The *bodega* owner's family, now called the local wholesaler, may opt to sell the boxes "as is" to the retailers. A family member is assigned the task of calling the regular customers or *sukis* who have earlier placed 'orders'. The selling of boxes is over quickly; if a load comes in at night, the warehouse is empty by early morning. Boxes are paid for in cash, with a few IOU concessions made to special *sukis* who have developed 'good credit standing' over the years.
2. The wholesaler may choose to keep a few boxes to sell in her own retail stall. If her stall carries only 'brand name' items, she reopens the boxes and selects the goods one by one. The leftover items are repacked, sealed and passed on to another retailer. If the Hong Kong connection is being run efficiently, the boxes would already have been identified as Class A, B or C. Class A refers to all quality and brand name goods. Class B boxes may contain a mix of quality and so-so items. Class C boxes contain the 'not-

12 The Filipino packers are flown in to Hong Kong at the *bodega* owner's expense. Food and lodging (in the warehouse) are shouldered by the *bodega* owner. A Filipino packer usually stays for a maximum of six months, the period throughout which his tourist visa is valid. The Pakistani is hired as a packer because, compared to the Chinese, he is most likely to seek employment rather than own a business. Packers have to work fast, filling in as many as 300 to 600 boxes daily. Their employers may also 'lend' them to other *bodegas*, where they have to pack boxes within a set period of time. The amount of work they put in is counted by the hour; their income is computed by the hour basis.

so-good' items or the *bulok* (spoiled), *patapon* (cast off) or *basura* (trash). If the identification of boxes is complete, the wholesaler is spared the task of reopening and repacking.

3. For the easy disposal of Class C boxes, the wholesaler may allow retailers to get these on a consignment basis. The retailer who buys a box "as is" first does an item count of the contents, then divides the price of the box by the number of items. This will give her the base cost on which to peg her selling prices. She calls in her first customer, the second-line retailer who sells only brand name items. The second retailer offers a price for every piece of item chosen. If a box contains a large number of brand name items in good condition, the first retailer doubles her capital in this initial sale. The leftover items are sold to special customers at their minimum or markup price, depending on quality. If there are any left, these end up in the first retailer's stall, or are sold to a third-rank retailer who does not own a stall. Since the first retailer will by this time have already earned from her first two sales, she may allow her last buyer to do a 'take-all', meaning all items left sell at the same price – from P5 to P10 to P50 each.

Buyer, Seller and Ukay-Ukay Language

An important element that defines prices in the trade is the brand name attached to goods. In *ukay-ukay* parlance, brand name items are called 'signature' (pronounced sig-nay-tyoor) or 'branded'. Anything else that is not signature is consigned to the generic classifications of adults' mix, 'toppers' (sweaters or loose shirts worn over tank tops), kids' mix, pants, and so on. The term 'selection' may mean branded items, brand new goods that somehow find their way into a box, or chic clothing that are slightly used.

It is not always that a retailer gets lucky enough to end up with a slightly used or brand new selection. She may discover a few dirty or damaged items that can still be sold once repairs are done. Defective zippers are brought to a local shoe and bag repair shop named "Mr. Quicke"; dirt and stains are brushed or washed off; loose buttons resewn; worn out shoes resoled; burls scraped with razor blades. The makeovers often pass unnoticed to the buyer, thus the term '*na-magic*'.

In the same manner that department stores think up of come-on words such as sale, slashed or further reduction, proprietors of the *ukay-ukay* stalls try to outdo each other to attract customers. The signs 'new arrival' or 'newly opened' connote better quality and more expensive clothing. A shopper who tries to haggle half the price of a new arrival is instantly rebuffed, with a warning from the seller: *bagong bukas yan; kaluklukat laeng* (that box has just been opened).

In an emporium that has achieved an aura of respectability, the signature retailer reigns as fashion expert who dictates trends and price ceilings. The role ascribed to her does not come by accident, but is reached after a long process of self-tutelage that starts with lessons learned from the Hong Kong *bodega* owner/wholesaler. Hong Kong being an Asian fashion capital, the *bodega* owner cannot help but familiarize herself with the name brands that residents there wear or use. Her knowledge is passed on to the family in Baguio, who uses the signature sales pitch to justify the price of a box.¹³ The retailer comes third in the learning rung, looking out for name brands the wholesaler has identified. In some cases, the retailer discovers a new name brand because of inquiries from shoppers. In addition, there is the ubiquitous television set, teaching the selection authority the latest in the fashion world. The popular signatures in

13 The current price of a box ranges from P8,000 to P13,000. 'Signature' or Class A boxes top the price range. Boxes containing shoes may go as far as P11,000. *Bulok* boxes go for as low as P6000. Some *bodega* owners no longer repack *bulok* items; there is a Pakistani network that ships these boxes for resale in Baguio.

the selection collection of the retailer are European and U.S. brands. A few Asian brands have landed in this list.

The *ukay-ukay* terms described above are examples of how culture has been assimilated into a language. As Covar says, “Magkalakip ang ugnayan ng wika at kultura. Ang kultura ay likha ng tao. Ang wika ay taal sa tao. Kahit ng nga ito’y taal, ang wika ay likha ng tao, gaya ng kultura.”¹⁴ (There is an inextricable link between culture and language. Culture is man-made. Language is inherent in man. Even if this is inherent, language is created by man, like culture.)

Mapping *Ukay-Ukay* Locations

In the early days of the *ukay-ukay* trade, the sale of used clothing was confined to a small radius slightly off the Baguio market center. Shoppers traversed the sidestreet Kayang, Hilltop, the hangar market, and the area behind the Philippine Rabbit Buslines sinkhole. Beside the *pensionados*’ office, a little farther away from Kayang, there was also a small shop specializing in the sale of used items.

Kayang stood out from among the other areas – and it still does today – because this was, and still is the only place where street piles can be found. There is nothing so apparent as the act of making *ukay* or doing *wagwag* in Kayang. Shoppers elbow each other to find a good spot, then kneel, squat or perpetually bend and stretch in order to sift through piles of clothing that the seller has dumped on cardboard boxes. If there is one phrase that clearly describes the Kayang experience, it is mad frenzy. The shopping hysteria is brought about by several factors, one among which is the limited time in which the selling takes place. The street piles are allowed only on certain times of the day: early morning, noon, and late afternoon towards early evening. The threat of a policeman running after the seller who has breached the time limit for the streetside sale contributes to the haste with which shoppers choose the items they want.

Even while Kayang sold branded items and lesser-known brands at the same price, the risk of getting good finds or damaged stuff was almost equal. Having to contend with time pressure, the shopper would sometimes miss a torn sleeve or a stain on a dress. Unlike in Kayang, the vendors in Hilltop and the hangar market rented stalls offered a less stress-free environment to the buyer. The buyer had more time to choose from the clothing (now sometimes piled on a makeshift table), and check for damaged goods.

Soon after, the old Bayanihan hotel rented out its floors to sellers who invested in racks and hangers. The classification of items followed, with the branded and quality items separated from the not so good. At about the same time, tourists discovered these shops, and Bayanihan became a byword in the castoff-clothing scene. A trend was started and many retailers joined the bandwagon, renting spaces from partly empty office buildings along Harrison Road. The owners of these buildings eventually converted their floors into *wagwag* stalls. On empty lots where the Skyworld shopping center and the Baguio Park Hotel once stood, new structures were built to accommodate the growing number of *ukay-ukay* retailers.¹⁵

Competition has given birth to innovation, with retailers wrapping *na-magic* bags in clear plastic, investing in racks for shoes, or creating displays much so like in the department stores. In some stalls in the downtown business area, proprietors separate the bargain tables from the selection areas, imitating mall come-ons: the bargain tables during Shoemart’s 3-day sales and the standard Surplus Shop bargain corners. The more clever proprietors even resort

14 Covar, Prospero. *Kultura ng Wika* (photocopy, n.p., n.d.).

15 The Skyworld and the Baguio Park Hotel were located on prime lots on Session Road and Harrison Road. Both buildings were damaged during the 1990 earthquake.

to mixing imitation goods with the real ones and customers who cannot differentiate the knockoffs from the originals end up being shortchanged.

Baguio's *Ukay-Ukay* and Beyond

It is not uncommon to see serious ukay-ukay patrons lugging big bags in which to stuff their buys. In one of my ukay-ukay forays, I chanced upon a buyer from Manila who provided an insight on the breadth of the *ukay-ukay* trade. He is one of the many traders from Manila who regularly take a six-hour bus to Baguio. These traders have their own boutiques located in upscale areas such as Makati.

Dresses and pashminas they purchase from the Baguio *ukay-ukay* stalls are sent to the dry cleaners. Bags and shoes are sent to the restorers. Looking new or almost new, these items end up displayed in their boutiques. The finer products are brought to their *suki's* houses or offices. These regular clients are aware that the clothes are castoffs, and the transactions are marked with confidentiality. One can thus keep up with the latest in fashion at a fraction of the price, and pretend to have bought these items from designer houses. In some instances, the seller makes up a story about a mother, an aunt, a sibling or a cousin living abroad, who chanced upon the goods in a bargain. Although both seller and buyer are well aware that the goods originally came from the Baguio *ukay-ukay*, the conversation is a pretense they engage in, and one that can be used when friends ask where a dress was purchased. This is almost like a face-saving device, needed when scripting performances in everyday life.¹⁶

Some *ukay-ukay* stall owners have also started selling goods on *ebay.ph*. Bags, shoes and clothes they display in their stalls are pictured on *ebay* as well. Descriptions of items *ukay-ukay* sellers bid out on *ebay* are more detailed, and may sometimes include serial numbers of designer bags and assurances of an item's authenticity. When a product is sold for a better price at the stall, the seller immediately runs to a nearby internet café to pull the item out of bidding.

Clothes and accessories from the *ukay-ukay* have literally traveled a long way, from the fashion house, to Hong Kong, to the Baguio *bodega* and stall, and finally to other areas in the Philippines. All throughout, these transactions are situated in a context wherein meanings are created.

Fashioning a Culture Through the *Ukay-Ukay*

The *ukay-ukay* – the evolution of the trade, the nature of the business, buyer-seller behavior, the language unique to their transactions and the geographical locations of the ukay-ukay stalls – has to a large extent defined the culture of Baguio City.

Entrepreneurial spirits have transformed a once charitable activity into a large business that impacts on the lives of a big number of Baguio residents and their families. In a city that used to rely solely on tourist income during the summer months and vegetable sales the rest of the year, the *ukay-ukay* trade has become a bonus, so to speak. From the larger perspective, the single most important driver that fuels the *ukay-ukay* trade is the fast turnover rate of fashion in the world's capitals, which unleashes a huge amount of castoffs for the secondary market.

The *ukay-ukay* has democratized fashion in Baguio City. If they lived elsewhere, the locals will not be able to afford keeping up with fashion trends. But because the secondhand industry has made available items to residents at low prices, they are able to keep up with the world. In the Baguio landscape, the blur between the branded and the not so good has been erased; territorial lines between signature and generic are now defined. Retailers of branded

16 Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books. (New York 1959).

items have become connoisseurs of a sort, selling only the best goods that appeal to buyers, choosing locations in the more upscale areas of the city. Their counterparts in the generic trade will forever be relegated to the backstreet areas, catering to the less discriminating *wagwag* crowd.¹⁷ This in some way reflects the geographical mapping of Philippine urban shopping spaces, especially in Metro Manila, wherein upscale and lower-priced stores have been designated certain specific areas (e.g. the Fort, Makati or Ortigas catering to the well-heeled crowd, and Quiapo or Divisoria for the ordinary buyers).

The *ukay-ukay* thrives because the Philippines is a country where so much importance is placed on social rank and its physical and behavioral manifestations. The *ukay-ukay*'s affordability allows people to actually live what they used to fantasize. The cliché goes: "Clothes make the man." Dress is a form of social expression used by individuals to show the world their identity. Moreover, the use of language unique to the trade has also upped the seller's social status as well as delineated the knowledgeable shoppers from the rest. It has become a sort of a leveler, opening doors to sellers and buyers who were once considered as not having the "class" the more privileged were born with.

One may argue that the *ukay-ukay* is a tool through which colonialism is perpetuated, where trends are dictated by the west and the more affluent. Through the *ukay-ukay*, the status that the west proffers seems attainable, an affordable obsession. The identity and the symbols of status that are sold by the west are present in *ukay-ukay* items such as pashminas, coats with fake fur collars and knee-high boots. These are constructs which appeal to the *ukay-ukay* patron, even if these border on the bizarre in a tropical country that experiences temperature highs of up to 36 to 39 degrees. What is ironic, however, is that these same symbols have become open to everyone, obscuring the distinction between those who can and those who cannot afford. Imagine a household helper with a monthly wage of 2500 pesos (roughly USD 50) toting the same Prada bag once in a Hong Kong waiting list. Fashion, then, no longer functions as a tool of distinction, but has transformed into a homogenizing instrument.

Once deemed a small business venture limited to the low-income residents of Baguio City, *ukay-ukay* has become a cultural force that drives popular taste, buying behavior and social symbols from Metro Manila to the Cordillera. It is both individual and part of the larger culture owned by the entire society.

17 It is difficult to give a steady number of street piles or selection stalls; as new stalls mushroom others close down. For purposes of approximation, however, these are the latest figures, tallied January 2007: 'selection' stalls: Skyworld, along Session Road, 3 floors, stalls with a mixture of Class A, B and C goods, including knockoffs - 86; Jollibee, near Prime Hotel, 2 floors - 38; East Park, along Harrison Road, 2 floors - 34; Harrison Road - 26; Malcolm Square, 3 floors - 28; Kayang and Hilltop area - 31 stalls and street piles.