

New Music and the Politics of Space: “Patangis-Buwaya” and the Transformation of Landscapes in Philippine Modernity¹

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From the lenses of ethnomusicology, this essay presents critical views including that of the Iraya-Mangyan indigenous group of people—on the very nature of the present discourse of space- music/music-space inter-connections. I intend to show the “politics of space:” here defined by showing on the one hand how the Iraya-Mangyan contest and assert their claims to their ancestral lands, which is similarly the case for many other indigenous people groups in different areas of the Philippines being encroached upon by gigantic multinational mining and logging operations; and on the other hand, by presenting one of my creative works as a mode of advocacy and a rallying call for this group of people, among others in the world who similarly bear the impact of “development aggression.” The work called Patangis-Buwaya has for its trajectories the communities either living amidst the affluence of modern urban spaces, or those living in about the same marginal conditions as with the Iraya- Mangyan.

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From 2002 to 2003, disparate groups of indigenous peoples from the mountains of Mindoro Island in the Philippines left behind their ancestral domain to seek refuge from the presence of military and para-military elements within their living spaces. Among the groups of refugees were an entire community of Iraya-Mangyan people. Coming from the backlands of the Caagutayan settlement at the foothills of Mt. Halcon, which is reachable by means of long mountainous treks from the town of San Teodoro in the eastern part of the island, this whole community decided to leave behind their way of life to escape conditions marked by the fear and terror that characterize “Low-Intensity Conflict” in the rainforests of so-called “developing nations” like the Philippines. The six battalions of soldiers and local civilian “vigilante” (or para-military) elements were conducting clean-up operations that seem to have paved the way for multinational mining and/or logging companies to encroach into the mountains of the island province. As a result, some Non-Governmental Organizations and certain religious sectors assisted those indigenous communities to escape Mindoro and then housed them in refugee camps within urban centers of the bigger, nearby Luzon Island, to remain under guardianship of those concerned organizations. Unfortunately, it is these now all too common instances of “development aggression” which occasion the colluding of state-private interest to efface indigenous people claims to lands then reconceived from being ancestral and thus protected territories to instead be regarded as mere sites of extraction for national economic resource.

Written primarily from the lens of ethnomusicology, the purpose of this paper is to present critical views—given the conditions of this particular indigenous group of people—on the very nature of the present discourse of space-music/music-space inter-connections. What I would like to address is what I would refer to as the “politics of space:” here defined by showing on the one hand how the Iraya-Mangyan contest and assert their claims to their ancestral land,

which is similarly the case for many other indigenous people groups in different areas of the Philippines being encroached upon by gigantic multinational mining and logging operations; and on the other hand, by presenting one of my creative works as a mode of advocacy and a rallying call for this group of people, among others in the world who similarly bear the impact of “development aggression.” In this paper therefore I present two kinds of environmental transformations: first, the transformation brought on by gigantic multinational industries exploiting and subsequently destroying rainforests; and second in the reconfiguring of performance spaces through a sonic-environmental work that creates a potential response to the growing destruction of the rainforests. The work called *Patangis-Buwaya* has for its trajectories the communities either living amidst the affluence of modern urban spaces, or those living in about the same marginal conditions as with the Iraya-Mangyan. By critically focusing on such sites of tension within territories co-claimed by disempowered peoples vis-à-vis the state and private capital, and just as I have described in a recent paper, this kind of work is what I consider as **praxis**. This entails assuming a liminal, in fact an uncomfortable, position in being somewhere between being a composer and in being an ethnomusicologist (Baes, 2019). It is, in a sense both a mapping of discomfort as well as claim versus counterclaims.

From the very start, my engagement with the Iraya-Mangyan exposed me to their struggles to contest their claims over their living spaces. My gaze was on their traditional music but the socio-political backdrop to its existence or non-existence nuanced my subsequent studies (Baes 1987; 1988; 2001; 2007; 2019; Baes and Klein, 2002).² On the very first day I arrived in Mindoro Island in 1982, I encountered the aging Ka-Horhe, who was complaining to an NGO about a

² Subsequent research by the author encompassed the plight of other ethnolinguistic groups such as the Dumagat and Bagobo.

certain influential family in the town of Puerto Galera who has encroached on his ancestral property, using a false cadastral map acquired by this family through a corrupt system of bureaucracy. This condition of land grabbing by the powerful elite, at times in collusion with gigantic multinational corporations was to resonate through all the years of my engagement with this group of people. Many times during that engagement, I did not really know where to place myself in the community. It was clear that I was an “outsider” and my interest in that engagement—traditional music—seems to have been less of a concern for such communities of slash-and-burn horticulturists struggling to assert the conditions for their survival against corporate take-over. No efforts from the state would give the slightest assurance of their genuine incorporation into the national body politic, with state agencies resorting to just resettling the communities in reservations, and with these same state agents allowing the entry of those multinational logging and mining companies to encroach on their ancestral property. In one defining moment, after a very frustrating meeting between the community and representatives of government agencies, my most trusted friend and host Anghel Anias confronted me in Tagalog with this question: “what good could your studies of our songs do in the disputes over our ancestral domain?!” Like them, I too felt so frustrated.

Music to the Iraya-Mangyan—as with other aspects of their lives—is very much conflated with their relationship to the land and the rainforests: “*kung wala nang lupa, wala nang igway*” (if we lose our land all our songs would disappear as well) the elder Juana Edmedio would often say to me when I show signs of regret over loss of certain traditions.

At that time therefore in 2003, after having engaged that particular community of Iraya-Mangyan people in research during the entire decade of the 1980s, I spent days reconnecting with the individuals (a number of whom I had known as

children), listening to harrowing stories of torture, interrogation and other conditions that threatened the lives of members of their community. First, to help them cope with their daily needs for financial support, I gave them about a thousand copies of my then newly produced compact disc of their music, entitled “Nostalgia in a Denuded Rainforest” (Baes, 2001). These could be sold at the refugee center or at public forums on indigenous peoples, with the help of the NGOs; such gesture was seen by the Iraya-Mangyan as one of “returning their music,” an emotionally-driven old Iraya-Mangyan said to me that evening (in Tagalog), “thank you for taking care of our songs, and thank you for giving them back to us.” Music I felt is like land and the forests, that have to be given back to them. That statement induced me to do even more.

I then thought of a second response, this time addressed to their plea that their stories be made known to even more people. It was here that I conceptualized and composed an environmental work that used sound diffused in space. The piece is meant as a rallying call for rainforest advocates and the indigenous communities living there constantly being threatened by the aggressive and destructive movements of mining and logging operations. At the beginning of this paper, I spoke of two kinds of space transformations and in the first transformation, I was highly critical of transnational industry and the peripheral position it confers on countries like the Philippines within the global political economy. This negatively impacts people living in such “out-of-the-way” places like the Iraya-Mangyan. Philippine modernity is really defined in this way: behind the images of affluence and high technology of modern urban places are the backlands of the destitute with denuded rainforests ravaged by multi-national industry, operating within the backdrop of a still strongly feudal social order. In this second transformation, I however explored how urban performance spaces—particularly for the renditions of my new work—might potentially serve as venues of social change, be it a

symbolic kind, as engagement with the audiences through a participatively made sonic piece. This might in turn transform an aesthetic experience into various forms of action: therefore, praxis in the sense of Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Paulo Freire (1971). We might see these then as territorial as well as performative maps that cover both grounds of transformations of living spaces, from the destruction of the rainforests to the symbolic conversion of urban performance sites into soundscapes initially drawn from encountering the Iraya-Mangyan traditional narrative related to the expression *Patangis-Buwaya*.

To the Iraya-Mangyan, *Patangis-Buwaya* meant “music to make even the crocodiles really weep.” The expression connects with the Iraya-Mangyan traditional narrative called *pamuybuyen* where we find *Alitawu*, the great hero of the Iraya-Mangyan clashing with his great enemy, *Baleyayasun*. By the end of that narrative, we find Alitawu’s wife *Diyaga* has been abducted, raped and killed by Baleyayasun. Setting off to avenge the crime, Alitawu calls his dog *Idu*’ by playing on the bangsi, his bamboo flute with “a sound so full of anguish and anger it made even the crocodiles (really) weep.” That expression is also used by the Iraya-Mangyan to describe a very skilled flute player. During an entire afternoon with the community of Iraya-Mangyan Internal Refugees listening to the CD I gave (back) to them, it was not difficult for all of us present to think that what happened to their land was “not very different” from the story of Alitawu and Diyaga. That sparked the idea of composing the new work which I had in mind at that time.

My work *Patangis-Buwaya* might be seen to stem from a practice among composers in Asia who incorporate traditional elements in modern composition to acquire symbolic value; however in this case, I do not appropriate any Mangyan tune or rhythmic pattern or any form of “native” structure given that, I am of the same opinion with the California-based ensemble *WildUp* (who performed the work in 2013), as they see appropriation as tantamount to “claiming their territory

by other means...” (Wild Up 2013). *Patangis-Buwaya* rather takes a metaphor from a local narrative; one that can be well adapted to other contexts, especially among other marginalized people in the world. Like a jazz lead sheet, the score consists of just one page of verbal instructions and a diagram, proposing how four performers on low wind instruments from any culture should alternate between a regular pattern of sound and silence (for one minute) and free improvisation (again for one minute), then go through seven cycles defined by different kinds of sounds to replace the silences. Much of the detail has to be worked out collaboratively by the musicians, in consultation not only with the score, but also with the recordings through which some kind of an oral tradition is being developed no longer within a small community, but globally, through the experience of performances in Tokyo, California, Makassar, Yogyakarta, Singapore, Manila, Kuala Lumpur, Budapest and Ho Chi Minh City (all to be found on YouTube). This changes things for the audience as well. If we are to allude to the musicologist Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht’s notion that “...all music has to be utopian” (Eggebrecht and Spahlinger, 2000; also cited in Petra Music, 2008: 671), I can bank on that thought to direct my work, especially in *Patangis-Buwaya* as it aspires toward an idealized notion of advocacy. I have been building up this manifest hope for years now. In 2013, the use of the audience to extend the sonic gestures of the wind ensemble by playing small bamboo “bird flutes” and pairs of stones not only imbibed a participatory aspect worthy of the term “advocacy,” but also created a semblance of a rainforest, which to the L.A. Times in January 2013, “connects the audience to nature” (Mark Swede LA Times January 15, 2013). This is similar to what has also been said of a performance of this work in Freiburg in 2017 (Rüdigger 2017), in Singapore the following year (Rochester, 2018), and at the Descanso Gardens in California in 2019 (Swed, 2019). Perhaps what might

come across as a rather “hedonistic” experience in the West might turn out to have other meanings elsewhere.

For one, performance spaces may also transcend their utopian nature to generate transformative power for the marginalized. In 2016, I had the opportunity to render a workshop and performances of my works *Patangis-Buwaya* and another one, *Banwa* (1997) in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia as part of the Arts Summit Indonesia 2016, organized and supported by the Indonesian Department of Education and Culture. The workshop-performance involved as participants selected traditional musicians coming from nearby islands from Sulawesi (Kalimantan, Ambon, Sarawak, etc.), as well as local musicians in Makassar. It was held in the Benteng Rotterdam, which used to be a fortress of Dutch colonists who imprisoned and tortured those defiant of colonial rule in this structure. *Patangis-Buwaya* was in fact rendered inside the torture chamber of the fortress, making the performance even more symbolic to the Indonesian listeners. What was even more remarkable from the gaze of the Indonesian participants was the felt sense of “community” generated (Gardika Gigih Pradipta 2016a) and how this was manifested in the use of “iron nail peace chimes” distributed to the audience (Gardika Gihgih Pradipta 2016b) during those performances. The collectively made sound and its spatial diffusion was felt especially as the audience took part in creating a “forest of sound” during that performance. This embodied occupation of contested space indicates the beginnings of acquiring political meaning and impetus for action. This ‘voicing of self’ takes place iteratively in each gesture of defiance, each emanation of vibration, and each transmission of protest even when redounding to retreat (Lontoc, 2019). Now I can echo what I once heard from Anghel Anias who said **“people are the forests!”** And the forests, even in their temporal defeat and violated state will always exceed the contours of maps merely plotted by short-lived desires upon their riches.

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