

## **(Re)Opening a Cultural Memory: The Bamboo Instruments of the Panay Bukidnon**

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### **ABSTRACT**

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*Various communal issues and narratives emerge when the Panay Bukidnon express themselves in traditional songs, dances, epics, and the playing of musical instruments. In the use of bamboo instruments, particularly, Panay Bukidnons recall their experiences of pains and joys. They share these experiences through sugid (telling), singing, and music-making via the tulali (flute), suganggang (bugzer), tikumbo (zither-percussion), subing (jaw's harp), and litgit (bowed instrument). There are specific pieces in these bamboo instruments that trigger their feeling of resentment and shame as they have been criticized by lowlanders or the people in their nearest town areas. They are tagged as buki, which means "outmoded" or having ways of mountain people. On the other hand, the playing of instruments brings to mind folk stories, humor, and other interesting tales that enliven community members. Researching the Panay Bukidnon's knowledge of music is not merely about collecting data but also immersing in the experience of re-opening a memory. My study has applied the local research method of pakikiramdam (sensing) espoused by Enriquez, Santiago, and other Filipino scholars (1975). This method has assisted me to know the right timing and process to approach my research participants. The quality and quantity of data in this study are dependent on the research participants' recall as well as to their confidence to articulate within the communal bounds of trust. Cultural memory is open-ended and yet selective to process a wide range of experiences. The former reinforces the study's understanding of the Panay Bukidnon culture, further broadening the discussion of musical instruments aside from the usual focus on music's elements – pitch, rhythm, timbre, intensity, and texture.*

Keywords: *musical instruments, memory, culture, Panay, indigenous, bamboo*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Every research locus or area of study presents a challenge in the maneuvering of time and process so as to achieve a desired objective. My way to open the avenues for communication among my research participants is by instinctive sensing (*pakikiramdam*).<sup>1</sup> This has navigated my steps in the process of research – for instance, when to find the right time to approach them, how to develop friendships, and build trust. The process is important as it opens people to impart and exchange knowledge. The objectives in obtaining quality and quantity of data, faithful analyses, among others, become obtainable as a result of the established precedence.

In this study, I have been confronted with the issue of how significant data can be in the limits of field research or on the contrary, the expanse of it. The process of getting information is important as much as the acquisition of it; inevitably, the research participant's memory is a crucial part of this process. "Cultural memory" is defined in this context as a dynamic storehouse of traditional information, beliefs, and principles. It involves psychological and emotional states, among others. Kwabena (1990) considers "memory" as one of the contextual frames of reference, which is open-ended (just as social, cultural, ritual aspects, etc. are). It absorbs or selects influences from institutional and change agencies, audiences, or with people working closely with each other. Such influences constitute the body of thought and concepts of a "memory" in individual or collective scale.

In my discussion of the Panay Bukidnon's bamboo instruments, I would like to establish that my research data are but partial results of fieldwork. These are segments of moments when cultural memory is recalled with the establishment of trust. One's cultural memory consists of multifarious experiences that can be articulated but also kept silent in the deterrence of negative associations. Encouraging a research participant to play a musical instrument is one of the ways to unravel the deep recesses of his/her emotions and mental states; this unraveling, in a broader sense, enriches the musical aspects of researched data.

## THE PANAY BUKIDNON AND THEIR BAMBOO INSTRUMENTS

The Panay Bukidnon are collectively a group of people living in the highlands of Panay in Western Visayas. These highlands include the areas of Tapaz and Jamindan of Capiz; Janiuay, Lambunao, and Calinog of Iloilo and some parts of Antique and Aklan. In particular, my research areas are the highlands of Lambunao, Calinog, and Tapaz.

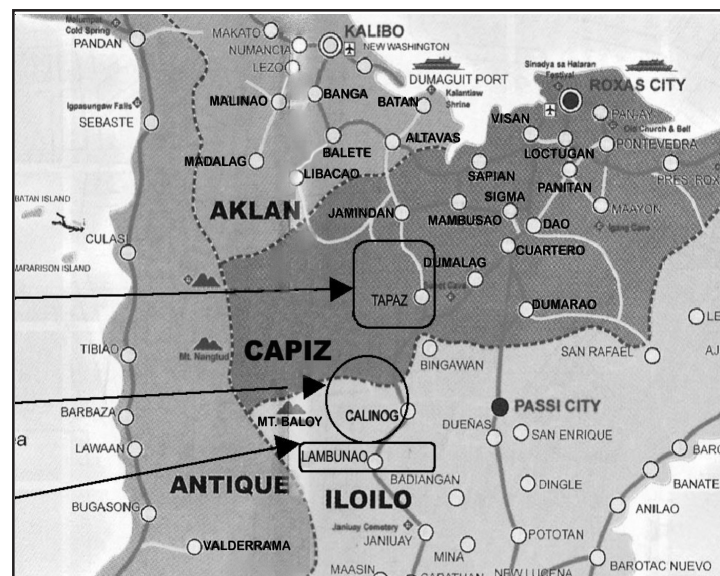


Figure 1. Map of Research Areas

Most bamboo instruments of the Panay Bukidnon are played by individual players. Sometimes, these are played with an ensemble consisting of a gong and drum particularly used for their *binanog* music-dance tradition. Hearing a bamboo instrument mixed with the said ensemble is interesting as it enriches the sound colors of other instruments.

The social aspect is worth noting. I noticed that when a bamboo instrument is played together with an ensemble, the person holding the instrument displays the eagerness to join the group and thus wants to belong with those involved in music-making. This is one form of assertion to socialization, which in the scope of their music tradition being communal and participatory, is allowed.

Bamboo-made instruments are useful to train children in rhythm as well as in varying indefinite pitches. Bamboo percussions, in particular, are preparatory devices for children before they are allowed to play the *agung* and *tambur*, which traditionally are assigned to master players. Introduced as a form of “fun and play” (in contrast to the seriousness of music-making in rituals), bamboo instruments to children are exciting tools and sometimes used as toys in experimenting with sound and the instruments’ timbral qualities. These tools or toys provide room for their sense of curiosity and an entry point to their creative expressions.

The Panay Bukidnon bamboo instruments are the following:

1. *Tikumbo* is a percussion and chordophone made of *kawayan* (a bamboo plant variety characterized by having node needles) This is played by tapping one or two fingers on the bamboo lid. This is alternated by strumming the string, which was etched out from the body of the bamboo. *Pang-midya* (dampening the sound) is done by closing the hole on one side of the bamboo to vary low and high pitches. (Figure 2)

2. *Suganggang* is a buzzer struck on the palm of a hand. This is made of *bulo* (a bamboo plant variety relatively smaller than *kawayan*; this one does not have node needles). The hole on one end is where *pang-midya* is done using the thumb so as to vary low/high relative pitches. (Figure 3)

3. *Litgit* is a two-stringed bowed instrument made of *bulo*. Abaca hemp finely braided is used as strings. It is mainly a melodic instrument although rhythmic patterns from words/phrases are also employed. (Figure 4)

4. *Tulali* is a bamboo flute made of *bagakay* (one of the smallest bamboo varieties). Air is blown through a bamboo opening encircled by a banana leaf. It is tuned according to a pentatonic scale played on four holes, one found below and three on top of the bamboo tube. The gap between two holes is measured by the maker’s two fingers. (Figure 5)

5. *Subing* is a Jaw’s harp. According to Panay Bukidnons, the bamboo used for this instrument is well-selected. It should be located at the topmost part of the plant and should have the liveliest sway when the wind passes so as to prove that it is very pliant and therefore

can produce the ideal sound of the *subing*. So before it is cut-off from the plant, it should be observed for sometime. This is the reason why there are a few Panay Bukidnon who own the *subing*. For them, it is the most difficult instrument to make and requires a good observer and a craftsman, not to mention having the proper tools such as a very sharp blade. A *subing* is an aerophone, chordophone, and idiophone at the same time because to play it entails “inhaling and exhaling air” (aerophone). By repeatedly moving the bamboo’s pointed edge, the instrument’s tongue or bamboo string is vibrated (chordophone) and a percussive effect (idiophone) is produced from the rhythm.(Figure 6)

### **THE LIMITS AND EXPANSE OF MUSIC-MAKING**

The Panay Bukidnon are particular with time, place, what instrument or music piece to use, and to whom is it addressed. Certain conditions have to be considered before an action is initiated. For instance, some of them are cautious of playing a musical instrument for a *pangayaw* (foreigner; visitor; non-bukidnon) as this means exposing themselves to certain perceptions, favorable or not. Panay Bukidnons are aware of unfavorable consequences that may occur as a result of displaying or demonstrating traditional knowledge. They are criticized for being “backward” or not in trend with the ways of the masses or the majority of townspeople. Sometimes, to avoid the consequences, they resort to silence or say that they do not know anything. Familiarizing themselves with the person who is listening and studying his/her character is important to gauge whether it is safe to display tradition or not. They also have to sense whether the person has a tendency to ill-judge the quality of Panay Bukidnons’ music. This is the reason why a sense of suspicion is usually drawn on their faces whenever they are asked about the musical instruments that they know. In their reactions, it is observed that memory of tradition and culture is colored by the many shades of emotional and psychological constraints.

Panay Bukidnons fear ridicule. They resent being called *buki*, which means “outmoded or having ways of the mountain people.” This resentment is deeply seated as the identity they believe they have (as a culturally rich/endowed people) is laughed at. Moreso,

such an identity is dismissed as insignificant. In effect, most of them resort to suppressing cultural knowledge so they can be accepted. According to Panay Bukidnon, it is the *taga-banwa* or the ones living in the town area or the lowlanders who call them *buki*. This name-calling establishes, in effect, a notion of class and segregation as though they are lower in status from those living in the lowlands. National agencies like the National Commission of Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, cultural workers, researchers, among others, are working toward changing this “othering” perspective by empowering the Panay Bukidnon and bringing back their cultural pride.

The Panay Bukidnon’s disappointments and grief are connected to the playing of *litgit* (two-string bowed instrument). Grief may be expressed via the *litgit*. One music entitled *haya* means “weeping.” This instrumental music is related to the song genre also called by the same title. There is also another music that tells of enchanted beings in Panay highlands. Feliza Castor tells of an enchanted woman whose cries are heard through the wailing sound of the *litgit* heard from the delta of the *Pan-ay* River in Nayawan. She cries because she has lost her child whom she cradles to sleep at night. Even though the woman is unseen, the music of the *litgit* makes her presence and weight of emotions felt in the darkness of some moonlit nights.

On a positive note, the playing of musical instruments brings to mind folk stories, humor, and other interesting tales that enliven community members. One is a story about the turtle teased by forest animals. It also includes the *panday* or craftsman Don Juan, and the playful aspects of *panubing* (playing of *subing*, a jaw’s harp). Federico Caballero told this story:

One day, Don Juan was playing the *subing*, which he himself made. The turtle saw him and wanted it. Don Juan agreed on the condition that the turtle would make his clothes smell good. The turtle was successful in this attempt and brought home the *subing*. The monitor lizard saw the turtle playing the *subing* and also wanted one but Don Juan refused the monitor lizard as it had spread bad odor over

his clothes. So the monitor lizard borrowed the turtle's. The monitor lizard played the rhythm of “*Kurubingbing Kurubamban, isugiban ko'ng bubo, isulod sa Balighang.*” Literally, it meant “I would hide the *subing* inside the hole of the Balighang tree” but with a joking tone as “*Kurubingbing Kurubamban,*” an onomatopoeia or sound imitation of the Jaw's harp has an underlying suggestion of sarcasm. (Translated from field notes, November 2002)

“*Kurubingbing Kurubamban*” is repeated along the story as the *subing* is passed on from one animal to another. This repeated phrase is helpful for the Panay Bukidnon as its sound structure guides them in remembering rhythms and in applying them on instruments. The story functions as entertainment and at the same time, as a memory aid. Steven Feld (1982) has proven that the concept of music theory need not be confined to the formal theory of the literate class. Steven Feld studied the Kalulis of Papua New Guinea and realized that their creative and aesthetic experiences serve as foundation to formulations of musical ideas. Similarly, Panay Bukidnon who have close affinity with nature source out ideas from nature for their oral lores and hence incorporate nature's sound-images for music-making.

The richest tales are told with the playing of *tulali* (bamboo flute). With the tales are information about the spirit-world. There is the existence of enchanted beings who become part of the lives of humans. The Panay Bukidnon believe that playing the *tulali* would invite the *tamawo* (the enchanted beings) to respond by playing the flute, as well. A story is told by Concepcion Diaz about a woman who once played the *tulali* by their *tambi* (a balcony):

On a clear night, a woman played the *tulali* and wondered why everytime she stopped playing, the sound would go on. She was surprised to learn from the *katigulangans* or the elders of the community that a *tamawo* was responding to her playing. A *tamawo* is an unseen being with mystical powers. She was later courted by the *tamawo* and she disappeared from their house, later to be found under a tree known to be inhabited by spirits. (Translated from field notes, April 2004)

In separate interviews, I was told by Alunsia Castor, Conchita Gilbaliga, and Feliza Castor that the *tulali* is the favorite instrument of lovers in communicating plans of elopement, expressing love, and sending other messages. A flute piece entitled *Harga Taro* is meant to convey a man's invitation for a rendezvous; in response, a woman answers back to confirm her decision via playing the flute, as well.

Lising Jimenez of barangay Siya has a piece on the *tulali* entitled "*gutom*" (hunger; starvation). According to her, there are particular periods of the year when their community suffers from widespread hunger. This happens when agricultural produce has gone out or when climate affects the quantity and quality of crops (particularly when there is prolonged dryness of land), and other factors that cause food shortage. Music becomes a vehicle to record their past economic depressions. Some of them would not want to recall such moments of suffering; however, some are open to reveal what they went through via the expressive power of bamboo instruments.

The open-ended quality of "memory" according to Kwabena (1990) consists of ethnographic characteristics having references to settings, patronage, institutions, presentations, music makers and audiences. I enhance further this idea by positing that memory, or more specifically "cultural memory," can be flexible to acquire inspirations from a wide range of experiences. It has a filtering mechanism that selects and records grave conditions or its counterpart, positive or elating emotions. The myriad aspects to memory processing embody what can be considered as the current musical practice of the Panay Bukidnon.

## **CONCLUSION**

A bamboo musical instrument is a good source of sound as well as a channel for learning the many narratives reflective of the Panay Bukidnon' lives, pains, and joys. The stories and concepts discussed here are but snapshots of the realities that constitute their memory. Cultural memory was earlier defined as a dynamic storehouse and therefore transforms in the course of time. This makes the very nature of the Panay Bukidnon music interesting and



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open to more ideas. Music and narratives are interdependent, in fact, co-existing. As explicated earlier, rhythms are drawn from words used in folklores. This can also be viewed inversely – folklores are remembered by the words read from sound structures used by musical instruments. Thus, literal and figurative devices are both significant materials to their music and folklore.

Re-opening a cultural memory may evoke resentments and ill-feelings to Panay Bukidnon. However, it can be viewed as a form of healing, of releasing suppressions. It can also be strategic in raising the consciousness of empowered individuals and national agencies to assist in building their dwindling “selfhood” (as well as a sense of community). Through the years, many have responded to this challenge. The National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), cultural workers, researchers, among others, are working toward changing this “othering” perspective by funding programs and being actively involved in their cultural lives. The process is gradual, but yes, it has begun and continues to work.

## **NOTE**

<sup>1</sup>*Pakikiramdam* is one of the first scales of research processes espoused by Filipino anthropologists Enriquez and Santiago (1975), among others. These scales constitute a culturally-grounded method of fieldwork in the Philippines that employ local concepts and practice in field inquiry.

## **The Bamboo Instruments of the Panay Bukidnon**



Figure 2. Lolita Castor plays the *tikumbo*



Figure 3. Feliza Castor plays the *suganggang*



Figure 4. Lucia Caballero plays the *litgit*



Figure 5. Conchita Gilbaliga plays the *tulali*.



Figure 6. A *subing* taken from a bamboo case

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**Research Participants**

1. Lucia Caballero, 68 years old, Barangay Garangan, Calinog, Iloilo.
2. Federico Caballero, 63 years old, Barangay Garangan, Calinog, Iloilo.
2. Feliza Castor, 100 years old, Nayawan, Tapaz, Capiz.
3. Lolita Castor, around 48 years old (her estimated age), Barangay Daan Sur, Tapaz, Capiz.
4. Concepcion Diaz, 46 years old, Barangay Tacayan, Tapaz, Capiz.
5. Lising Jimenez, about 60 years old (her estimated age), Barangay Siya, Tapaz, Capiz.
6. Larry "Iting" Gilbaliga, 10 years old, Barangay Nayawan, Tapaz, Capiz.
7. Conchita Gilbaliga, more than 85 years old (her estimated age), boundary of Barangay Daan Sur and Nayawan, Tapaz, Capiz.

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**Maria Christine M. Muyco** obtained her degrees in PhD Philippine Studies and Bachelor of Music in Composition at the University of the Philippines Diliman. She earned her Master of Music degree from the University of British Columbia. She was a grantee of the UP Faculty Development Program and this enabled her to take non-degree ethnomusicology and dance courses at the University of California in Los Angeles, U.S.A. (UCLA) from school year 2006 to 2007.