

Film Review

***Music in the Life of Balbalasang:
A Village in the Northern Philippines
and Sounds of Bliss, Echoes of Victory:
A Kalinga Wedding in Northern Philippines***
Documentary Films of Michiyo Yoneno-Reyes
and Yoshitaka Terada

Maria Christine Muyco

University of the Philippines Diliman

Time is perceived relatively in music, and so it is with the pacing of people's lives in a village. This homology is seen in the quiet beginning of the film *Music in the Life of Balbalasang: A Village in the Northern Philippines*, which stands in contrast to the more celebratory and publicly demonstrated music and dance of the Kalinga in *Sounds of Bliss, Echoes of Victory: A Kalinga Wedding in Northern Philippines*.

Both films mirror the so-called "Silence and Sound" dynamism in music. The former dwells on numerous silences broken by the sound of gongs; the latter is initiated with gong-playing to anticipate and announce the coming together of people in the celebration of love, union, and continuity of life.

The approach of using almost-still and slowly moving scenes in the village of Balbalasang reminds me of the Turkish film *Bal* (Honey) directed by Semih Kaplanoglu. This use of the camera gives the viewer a "feel" for the stretching of time in the village, with the nearly static shots producing restful moments for the eye and mind. These act in counterpoint with the slow, patiently moving shots. Time stands still, moves slowly, flows gently, and yet it's all in the same flow and continuum.

Filmmakers Michiyo Yoneno-Reyes and Yoshitaka Terada introduce the viewer to the daily routine of a people as a processual approach to understanding their lifeways, including music and movement traditions. Just as the ensemble music of indigenous peoples in Northern Philippines starts with one instrument and followed by the

next one in graduating sizes, all proceeding one by one toward a cacophony of alternating and interlocking rhythms, this same sequence in the film about *Balbalasang* happens.

So with food preparation; the film shows that before community members eat, they work for it. It's a long process of planting, tending, and harvesting the rice, and then pounding grains to prepare the rice for consumption. In growing coffee, beans have to be planted, but mostly, tended and nurtured (rice requires annual planting while coffee plants endure for years). After harvest, beans are ground and pounded with a mortar. At this step in the process, the cook waits until the pounder hands the powder to her; the film portrays her stillness against a backdrop of ongoing activity. After all this activity, she then boils the ground coffee. Longing, patience, and efficiency dance together in this process.

Food preparation parallels another example in the film: a demonstration of making a jaw's harp. With a sharp knife, the instrument maker works on a bamboo splinter slowly and carefully, crafting a thin layer to be pliant and resonant. Maceda (218) further describes the remaining layer as "a filament that is shaped and thinned out to produce an agreeable vibrating pitch." When the maker is satisfied with the filament's fine layer, he tests the sound of the instrument observing its proper vibration as its supple tip is plucked using the thumb. In the film, a musician lays hands and lips on it, conjuring music from that which had been silent. Silence stands in for stillness, the counterpart between silence and music sounding a contrast for the ear, just as stillness and motion do for the eye.

In comparison, the documentary film *Sounds of Bliss, Echoes of Victory: A Kalinga Wedding in Northern Philippines* has an engaging way of using sound rather than silence. This sound, given form as action, revolves around a "nexus" (Nketia 87), a focal point for analysis and understanding of relationships maintained between music and anything integrally related to it. In *Sounds of Bliss*, the nexus is a wedding where families, relatives, and community members gather and celebrate with music-making and dancing. The union of the 26-year old couple who travelled, worked abroad, and have come back to honor their families and relatives provides the setting to show the mixture of people in a wedding that occurred in a Catholic church in the town of Kalinga. Those in attendance sang Catholic songs and traditional chants as well. Ethnomusicologist Jose Maceda notes that the traditional Cordilleran vocal style is "a rhythmic enunciation of vowels to form syllables, slides, half-speech sounds and frequent pauses." ("The New Grove Dictionary" 633) The chants

in the film, as well as the church songs, feature these elements, bringing together the traditional with the Western and its more precise, fixed, and specific pitches based on equal temperament tuning. The combination of these vocal features produces a distinct sound that identifies the Catholic Kalinga. The vocal styles give the liturgical melodies local color and identity.

Michiyo Yoneno-Reyes and Yoshitaka Terada are both Japanese ethnomusicologists but their work and research draw them to Philippine soil. Yoneno-Reyes is married to a Kankanay whose roots and culture bear similarities to his Cordilleran brothers like the Kalinga. Terada, on the other hand, has travelled back and forth to different parts of the Philippines in the interest of its indigenous musical cultures. As musicologists, both have given talks at conferences and workshops organized by the University of the Philippines (UP) Center for Ethnomusicology. They have entered the circle of the so-called “UP College of Music Family.”

With access to resources and critical input from scholars, activists, and artists, including the elders of communities who participated in their research projects in the Philippines, Terada and Yoneno-Reyes developed an understanding for the formalistic nature of traditional music, particularly among the Northern Cordilleran people. They have shown their *pakapa-kapa*¹ of villages they studied in observance of rites as expressed through music and dance. As majority of scenes in the films show gong-playing in one’s home, there is a subtle and yet strong implication of the filmmakers’ sensibility. This is brought about by years of experience and immersions in the field, which provided them with idea and sensible decisions on what particular music(s) have sacred boundaries to observe.

Both films do not intervene or mediate in the way people present their music ala “performance mode.” First, musicians were provided space for propriety, allowing the demonstration of the ensemble music in their homes. Secondly, they were not required to don their traditional garb unlike most documentary films that feature traditional villages. After all, there is no actual ritual to wear it for. “Performance” according to Bauman (68-71) is a mode of communicative behavior and event; a marked and heightened mode. As the *Kalinga* do not see the context of communicating their music but merely for the information of their guests, there is no actual performance, or a heightened mode to speak of. From the public domain, the film sets the location in one’s home, a private domain. This is a “site” for negotiating outsider’s request and yet not compromising the function of music, which for the Kalinga, serves for the preparation of tribal war or in announcing victory by demonstrating the spoils of war and headhunting.

Music-making is a rite in itself just as a wedding is. Both films weave tradition into modernization, each reflecting the other in song. These reflections encompass globalization, migration, and the effects of enculturation, which are wrapped within the peripheries of playing the *gangsa* (flat gong ensemble) taking place side by side with dancing. Maceda ("Philippine Music" 2-3) uses the term "interlocking rhythms" to refer to the music of the *gangsa*. These flat gongs are played one after another, resulting in melodies from the interlock of rhythms. Movements bring this interlock to another level. As dancers on queue move in linear to circular formations with musicians, a metaphorical "rite of passage" is reflected. Among traditional communities in the Philippines, rituals are embodied by mediums; such mediums perform a spiritual journey in time, transcending space in their relationships and connections with beings beyond the realm of the physical world. Thus, movements in these films are literal and figurative journeys: one that will send the couple after the ceremony back to their work abroad as seen in *Sounds of Bliss, Echoes of Victory: A Kalinga Wedding in Northern Philippines*; and another, a procession back to the everyday rites of the people: farming, food production, consumption (in the film *Music in the Life of Balbalasang*) go on in cycles.

Gender roles are explicit and distinct in the playing of *gangsa* among the Kalinga. Gong players are traditionally all male. This is because playing the gongs is physically demanding; made of bronze with alloys of copper and tin, or brass with mixtures of copper and lead (Maceda 75), these gongs are heavy. When played for a long period of time (as wedding rituals in Cordillera villages usually last for days), male players have to sustain the continued music-making in full strength; sound should reverberate to distant mountains and communicate the communal event. Women, on the other hand, have to stay overnight or at home with their children. They join their men by dancing. They dance as a group or they dance with men as their partners in the context of courtship or reflecting partnership in life cycle events (e.g., wedding, birth, initiation to manhood or womanhood, life and death). Dance also projects seniority and youth. In a particular dance of the Kalinga called *tarok* (eagle dance), there is a cultural gap between the young adults and the more tradition-steeped seniors. In *Sounds of Bliss*, the bride is seen as awkward and uninvolved with the dance. It is disappointing to see that her peers are knowledgeable and skillful in their movements, while she struggles to synchronize her steps with the rhythm of the *gangsa*. However, later in the film, she tries to belong and connect, joining the queue of community dancers in the celebration of her wedding. I see her adjustment as an experience of cultural gap in the way she joins the communal activities of her village after being away for years. The distance between where she lives and works abroad against her home province articulates a space. I see this as both a literal space (as in distance) and a figurative

space (or metaphor) for experiencing culture. Space meets time here: the lack of synchrony shows time to us in yet another form: being out-of-step reflects being out-of-time; and yet there is a resulting “hypothetical unison” in these different time phases (Feld 82).

Just as flat gongs resound from home to distant mountains, the communal celebration echoes past victories from tribal wars long ago concluded; in this memory is a reminder yet of the drive to prepare for future struggles, either communal or individual. Llana (3-10) sees celebration as a process or a vessel that would bring into fruition the community’s hopes and dreams together. Celebration also constitutes positive feelings of victory knowing that the community has survived another year.

From the ensemble playing of the gangsa and bamboo percussions, to the documentation of instrument-making, both films become informative materials to the Museum of Ethnology, giving audio-visual context to musical instruments in the Museum’s collections and exhibits. However, as a documentary is a potent form of historiography, these films serve to capture music in a period when the process of filmmaking happened. These also serve the future as references for cultural transmission, as educational tools for learning about Kalinga culture and music traditions.

ENDNOTE

- ¹ Building on the scholarship of Manuel Enriquez, Zeus Salazar, Prospero Covar, Carmen Santiago, and other local scholars who introduced Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Philippine Psychology) and Pilipinohiya (Philippine Philosophy) pakapa-kapa (literally “groping”) was developed as a field method (Santiago, 1977). It is a sense-orientation of a place and its people, which is experienced as part of the iskala (scales), or stages of knowing one’s research participants. In the context of this critique, it is a form of exploration into a culture’s social, political, and spiritual world, where a researcher abides with the people’s sense of time so information can be revealed and shared. Thus, I perceive this method as a kind of sensibility, not just a form of sense orientation.

WORKS CITED

- Bauman, Richard. ed. *Performance. Folklore, Culture of Performances and Pop Entertainment*. NY: Oxford UP, 1992. 1-150. Print.
- Enriquez, V. ed. *Indigenous Psychology: A Book of Readings*. Quezon City: Akademya ng Sikolohiyang Pilipino, 1990. Print.

- Feld, Steven. Sound Structure as Social Structure. *Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology* 28.3 (September 1984): 383–409. Print.
- . Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style, or “Lift-up-over sounding”: Getting into the Kaluli Groove. *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 20 (1988): 74–113. Print.
- Llana, Jazmin. “The Santa Cruz Dotoc Tradition: Performing Liminality and Hope.” Paper presented at the Religious Festivals in Contemporary Southeast Asia, University of California, Riverside, California, 2007. Print.
- Maceda, Jose. ed. *Gongs and Bamboos. A Panorama of Philippine Music Instruments*. Quezon City: U of the Philippines P, 1998. Print.
- . Philippines (1, 2) *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Stanley Sadie, ed. Vol. 14, Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980. 631-634. Print.
- . n.d. “Philippine Music,” a photocopied handout. Print.
- Nketia, J. H. Kwabena. “Contextual Strategies of Inquiry and Systematization.” *Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology*, (Winter 1990): 75-95. Print.
- Santiago, Carmen. *Pagkapa-kapa: Paglilinaw ng Isang Konsepto sa Nayon* (Pagkapa-kapa: Clarifying a Concept in Rural Setting). R. Pe Pua, ed. *Sikolohiyang Pilipino: Teorya, Metodo at Gamit. (Filipino Psychology: Theory, Method, and Application)*. Quezon City: Surian ng Sikolohiyang Pilipino, 1977. 161-70. Print.

Maria Christine Muyco, Ph.D. <muycochristine@gmail.com> is a music composer, Philippine Studies scholar, ethnomusicologist. She is Associate Professor 5 and chairperson of the Composition and Theory Department, UP College of Music. Her publications include “*Santú*: Synchronizing Speech Rhythm with the Gong and Bamboo Instruments and Dance of Panay Bukidnons,” *Musika Journal* (9), UP Press, 2014; “As Healers Dance: A Processual View of Panay Bukidnons’ *Babaylan* in Motion,” *Back from the Crocodiles Belly*. Sta. Rosa, California, U.S.A.: Center for Babaylan Studies, 2013; “*Mangalimog Ako*: Finding One’s Voice in *Sugidanon* (Epic Chanting),” *Songs of Memory in Islands of Southeast Asia*, edited by Nicole Revel, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013; “(Re)Opening a Cultural Memory: The Bamboo Instruments of the Panay Bukidnons,” *Humanities Diliman*, vol. 5, Nos. 1 and 2, 2008; “Gendering Rhythm in Binanog: Panay Bukidnon’s Categories of Sound and Motion,” *Musika Journal* (7), UP Press, 2009; and “Learning from the Women of Panay Bukidnons: Task-Building as Empowerment in Music, Dance and Other Artforms.” *Acts of the World Music Forum, Los Angeles: Music, Cultural Rights, and Social Change*, edited by Fondazione Adkins-Chiti, *Quaderno* 4. International Music Council, UNESCO and Donne in Musica, Italy, 2007.