
REVIEW

F I L M

Resilient Music at the Margins Video Series (2017)
by José S. Buenconsejo

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Buenconsejo's video series, *Resilient Music at the Margins (2017)*, includes three documentary films, namely, *Nature's Presences. Music in Manobo Dulangan, T'boli, Obo, and Tagakaolo Communities in Southern Mindanao, Philippines*; *Sound Tenderness: Music of the Non-violent Palawanun Society in Southern Philippines*; and *Seven Dances of Life: Pledges to Others (Janji) in Two Sama Communities in Tawi-Tawi Islands, Southern Philippines*. These films are about music in societies living in the margins of larger centers and present views and interviews of communities largely unknown, even to specialists. The length of each film—80 minutes, 87 minutes, and 112 minutes, respectively—may have been intended to fully draw the viewer into the time-world of these rural enclaves, an effect that certainly distinguishes these films from the earlier generation of ethnomusicological documentaries, such as Jeremy Marré's 1988 film *The Nature of Music*. In the 1980s and 1990s, films of this type were generally made for broadcast—the only way to get funding at the time—and thus were limited to episodes of about 50 minutes each. Also, an omniscient narrator spoke almost continually, often over as well as between performances, and was a constant off-screen presence, not only explaining but also to some extent directing the viewer's reactions. Here in the three films under review, Buenconsejo, a professor from the College of Music, University of the Philippines, is an almost-invisible presence, appearing for only a few minutes in the whole collection and otherwise heard only in the occasional interviews that dot the narrative. The idea seems to be to let people and their music and other traditions

speak for themselves as much as possible. This requires more of the viewer—what linguistic specialists call “the recipient’s share” in the experience—but the end result enhances the sense of being transported from one’s surroundings to a different place.

“Margins” in the series title may have been intended to be plural. It may or may not have been accidental that all three locations—two in southern Mindanao, one in Palawan—were part of the old Sultanate of Sulu. The Tawi-Tawi islands in particular are not only marginal in terms of distance from the population centers of the Philippines; they are also closer, in more ways than simple physical distance, to northern Borneo and thus experience, more than other places, the consequences of overlapping margins, as reflected in the markedly different musical traditions found there. (The complexities of the political claims and counterclaims in connection with Sulu and its sultanate are mind-blowing to a visitor such as myself, and I don’t propose to rehearse them here.)

Ethnomusicological documentary cannot be only about music because in most traditional societies, music is not a discrete art form. It has to be considered in connection with other arts, with daily life and routines, with its role in binding communities together emotionally and temporally, and above all, with traditions and ancestors. A theme running quietly through all three films is the extent to which documentation is taking place in the midst of ongoing disruptions to traditional life. In the first film, *Nature’s Presences*, for example, we are made aware early on of the effects of tourism and the migration of people from Western Visayas. These two factors have brought in wet-rice cultivation, fresh water tilapia farming, and duck farming to the Manobo Dulangan, T’boli, Obo, and Tagakalolo communities, and have unfortunately degraded the area’s diverse aquatic life. At the same time, the first film shows us how the traditional distinction between hill people and plains people is becoming effaced and how traditions and even musical instruments are being exchanged.

The first film is the most traditional in music-cinematic terms, for it places music very much at the forefront of the narrative. Much of the film has no narration, letting music, image, and environmental sounds drive home the point of the film to the viewer. Typically we hear a song, followed by an interview often assisted by an interpreter. But in the second segment, “Madal Tahu: Mimesis of the T’boli Creation Myth in Dance,” we see the dancers walking down a country lane, and as they approach the camera, they are overtaken by a noisy motorcyclist who clearly is surprised to find himself being filmed. Thus do the sounds of the modern world overtake the sound of the percussive instruments and the performance of the dance that represents pre-Islamic creation myths.

In the “From Work to Play” segment, wood chopping, a daily necessity, is followed by what I call “the human xylophone”: a performer with five pieces of wood or bars lying on his legs, playing an ostinato. In the “Lullabies” segment, we see another of Buenconsejo’s favorite devices: a cinematic enactment of the songs. Other times, we see only a single fixed shot—a close-up on the performer and the performance—followed by an explanation of the meaning of the music played. Sometimes the music is heard over a black screen as though we were Pythagoras’s *akousmatikoi*, and throughout all three films, intertitles are used in place of narration. The final segment of *Nature’s Presences* features the Obo *flendag*, a long flute played throughout the intrusion of ambient environmental sounds, and shows music’s power as an imitation or response to nature. Both the performers’ and the filmmakers’ techniques also showcase music’s own narrative and descriptive powers to enhance memory, collectively as well as personally.

The second film, *Sound Tenderness*, is a good example of how musicology today is often a springboard for exploring areas other than music. The dark tone of the film is due to its main object of inquiry: the prevalence of suicide in Palawanun society. And this topic either takes up or lies in the background of a good part of the documentary. The sense of alienation felt by a member of the community is treated as “destiny” or even something “hereditary” within families. This makes the subtitle, “Music of the Non-Violent Society” somewhat enigmatic.

Suicide is seen in many cultures, aside from Western ones, as an act of violence in itself: violence against the self, against society and the state, against the deity. Buenconsejo does interrogate his interviewees on this matter, but the answers he gets are vague. Marital problems seem to be at the root of most of this. Supposedly, conflicts are settled by village chiefs, but the informants admit that this kind of conflict resolution does not work on an emotional level, and there is a reluctance to accept and move on. “We have too much emotion,” says one member of the community, but it is clear that there is in fact an under-expression of emotion. The film is ultimately more about Palawanun society than about its music, which is somewhat relegated to the background. How then does music ameliorate, if at all, the crisis that the film reports and presents?

Music, it is often proposed, offers us what the rest of life denies us. As Buenconsejo says, “For a society who values working in groups, alienation from society is the most painful human experience. Rather than [enhancing] forgetfulness, music accentuates the feeling for togetherness, the absence of which means death or embracing the opposite of society, which is nature.” The segments in *Sound Tenderness* inquire into a wide variety of cultural practices (or “group effects” in the language of this study). In the “Music of Nature” segment, a young mother plays the boat lute, unimpeded by the sleeping infant strapped to

her chest. The *taruk*, a celebratory dance held over three consecutive nights, is shown in detail, filmed in low light, creating a chiaroscuro effect—the result of cinematic atmosphere rather than poor photography. A long wedding segment follows the theme of equal but differentiated gender roles in the society. At the same time, the modern world intrudes, as it does in southern Mindanao. During one night of the *taruk*, a boy films the *agung* or large gong with an old Nokia mobile phone. As people file into a house for the wedding, they pass a wall plastered with election posters of local politicians. The final segments of the film return to a record of musical practices, but it is not clear how these serve to eradicate pain. The total effect is rather troubling. There seems to be no cultural equivalent for the idea that—to summarize a position taken by Carl Jung—if we were happy all the time we would never really know happiness, and that we sometimes need sadness to throw our happiness into relief; and that we should accept both with equanimity. Perhaps this is the downside of a society such as the Palawanun that is considered to be nonviolent. As a British artist I spoke to in the 1980s put it succinctly, the light needs the dark to become articulate.

The third and final film, *Seven Dances of Life*, is more affirmative of life in spite of surrounding realities. According to the DVD liner notes, this was filmed between 5 and 13 March 2017 in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, and Tabawan Island. Anyone familiar with events in this region at the time knows that it was a very tense period, and filming must have been done under nerve-wracking conditions.

The geographical position of these Sama-speaking islands throws into high relief the concept of multiple centers and multiple peripheries and as a consequence of this, the overlapping margins mentioned earlier. Some of these overlaps can be apprehended very easily: the relationship of the musical ensembles to various types of gamelan, the child dancers, the graveyard island, and a syncretic form of Islam that is mixed with prominent pre-Islamic taboos and rituals. The subtitle focuses on *janji* or “pledges to others,” and amongst these “others,” ancestors count above all. “One is always pulled back,” says one informant, “by the ancestors.”

Structurally the film sandwiches the said seven dances between ethnographic inquiries and covers some remarkable practices such as the shark sistrum, a giant garden-rake shaped object strung with large shells, violently agitated in the water to the accompaniment of a chant to tame the sharks and make fishing more productive. From this sound world we pass through the graveyard island for the *kambo-an* or ceremony for the ancestors. Here, traditional tales and accounts of prehistory and the later Islamization of the island by seven wise men are recounted amidst the ringing of mobile phones, showing that even at this outermost of

margins the modern world still intrudes. The distance between oral history and academic study is perceptible in the varying accounts of how this conversion to Islam happened, and whether it happened in 14 CE or as early as 9 CE. Indeed, some of the confusion appears to originate from a traditional reluctance to commit sacred history to writing.

The seven dances do not occupy much of the film and are only sections of the whole performance or ritual. Different forms of the *igal*, the basic dance movement of the Sama, are filmed, most accompanied by ostinato rhythmic patterns on drums and gongs featuring the colotomic structure common in gamelan music, though here less melodically-oriented. Music and dance invoke the *jinn* (“djinn” in many Western languages) or nature-spirits, although the term also seems to refer to the spirit-mediums whose advice and healing powers are actively sought. A substantial part of the film just focuses on daily life, and as one segment prosaically puts it, “Making a Living.” The means of making a living at the margins include the fashioning of elaborate and beautiful pandan leaf mats, boat building, and fishing.

There is a long discussion with a group of sailors about how to navigate by the stars. This segment could have been vastly shortened or even cut, and better editing of the whole film could remove about twenty minutes, making the project tighter and more convincing as a cinematic experience. The equalization of the sound levels is also not as good in this film as in the other two, again probably due to the difficulties in filming on location at that time.

Seven Dances of Life shows another wedding, perhaps to contrast with the traditions seen in the second film, and features a fragmentary dance episode. Held in the rain, Prof. Buenconsejo adopts the *cinéma vérité* approach, much like reality TV. A room is illuminated by a mobile phone’s flashlight, and everything is filmed simultaneously by the wedding guests on their own phones and tablets. Children in Angry Birds T-shirts imitate the drumming in the dance sequence.

Finally we reach the last two segments, which bring music and dance back to the foreground as means of recreation. These recreational activities include an expressive male dancer whose movements are reminiscent of the seated dances of Bali, more active dances, songs honoring the guests, and a performance of a song accompanied by completely nonindigenous six-string guitar with a capo, showing again how the integration of a global space even in remote societies is an inexorable force. In the final segment, “Beings in the World,” the theme returns to metaphysics, not music, with a discussion of twin souls, and a tantalizing but unexplained appearance of a spirit boat (such as those found across southern hemisphere fishing cultures as far west as Madagascar).

Of the three films, this is one that is least about music and more an inquiry into “salient socio-religious practices of two Sama speaking communities” such as “the veneration of the saints in sacred shrines” and “the guardian spirits of nature that provide them with fresh water and fish from the seas,” as well as the pacification of the *jin*. Moreover, the Sama are “oriented to Others in nature and society and these relationships reveal a sophisticated indigenous thinking about connections about individual lives (*inyawa*) being ‘thrown into’ the web of invisible connections with other beings in the cosmos: the *jin* . . . *umagad* (souls of the dead), *ombo* (ancestors) and *kembal* (twin-spirits).”

Viewing the three films is an intense experience, and for someone not familiar with these people, places, and cultures it is quite overwhelming to take it all in at once. Knowing the backstory will provide a richer and more intellectually cogent experience. From a European or North American perspective, a lot of what is happening is tied up with a history that is very much submerged from the Eurocentric vantage point. Nineteenth-century mapmaker’s lines and their obsession with two-dimensional neatness are partly a source of the developing world’s present-day ills, and the anomalies and disruption of centuries of changing colonial and national jurisdictions have influenced the music and societies presented in these three compelling films. But in this complex historical environment, Buenconsejo has found resilience, especially in the music traditions of these remote margins and islands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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