

José S. Buenconsejo's *Music-Cultural Flows and Exchanges in Pulangi River, Maguindanao: The Making and Circulation of Gongs and Bamboo Music and Verbal Arts Along the Pulangi-Cotabato River*

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Music-Cultural Flows and Exchanges in Pulangi River, Maguindanao: The Making and Circulation of Gongs and Bamboo Music and Verbal Arts along the Pulangi-Cotabato River by Dr. José S. Buenconsejo explores the interconnections of cultural expressions practiced by selected indigenous communities living along the Pulangi River, a major tributary of the Rio Grande de Mindanao. It consists of a set of four discs in DVD format, namely: Disc 1—"Si Tokan: Ang Mangagawa ng Kulintang sa Maguindanao Raya" (Tokan, Kulintang Maker of Upriver Maguindanao); Disc 2—"Ang Kapitana: Teduray Women in Music and Ritual, Upi, Maguindanao"; Disc 3—"Water of the Mountains: Traditional Music of the Manobo Dulangan"; and Disc 4—"Karatuan: Kudyapi sa Lumang Maguindanao." In addition, the set of four discs is accompanied by a pamphlet which provides the author's research insights and analysis including a brief literature review. In summary, the three ethnolinguistic groups represented in the set are the Maguindanaon (Discs 1 and 4), Teduray (Disc 2), and Manobo Dulangan (Disc 3).

Overall, the four videos present interviews with culture bearers, and narration of scripts written and delivered by Buenconsejo himself either in English (Disc 1), Filipino (Disc 2 and 4), or in his native tongue of Cebuano (Disc 3). Short performances of selected musical instruments, dances, chanting, and storytelling of myths with some dramatization highlight the documentaries for the viewers to appreciate local beliefs and practices. Images of the communities' environs and activities like farming, weaving baskets, and trading enhance the presentation with a running time from forty-three minutes (Disc 2) to about one hour (Disc 1, 3, and 4). All four videos have English subtitles.

Although I am more a music researcher than a film maker, there are aspects of the videos that need technical improvement such as better lighting and editing. For example, some sections of the videos especially the interviews were filmed inside a

house with inadequate lights resulting in low quality of images of the interviewees (Disc 1). Likewise, the overlapping of English subtitles with “Chapter” markers in all the four videos could have been corrected as they distract the viewer when reading the more important texts.

As of this writing, the four video documentaries have been given the Best Educational Film award by various indie film festivals: “Si Tokan” (Disc 1) from the New Wave International Script and Film Festival in Berlin (2024); “Ang Kapitana” (Disc 2) from Reel Harmony Film Script Festival (RHFSF) in London (2024); “Water of the Mountains” (Disc 3) from New Lotus International Film and Script Festival in Athens (2023), and “Karatuan” (Disc 4) from the French International Modern Film and Script Festival in Paris (2023). It is fitting to commend Buenconsejo for this achievement.

Buenconsejo's insights and analysis in the DVD set's accompanying pamphlet highlights commonalities of musical instrument types and tuning system among and/or between groups as indicative of cultural flows and exchange in music. He points out that the *kulintang* and its bamboo, wood, and iron versions share the same anhemitonic pentatonic scale (five-tone scale without semitone) among the Maguindanaon, Teduray, and Manobo Dulangan (19). Likewise, there is the presence of two-stringed lute (*kudyapi* and *faglong*) among the three groups, while the jaw's harp (*kubing*) and polychordal zither (*togo*) are found among the Manobo Dulangan, and Teduray; the two-stringed zither (*takemba* and *tanggunggo*) with the Maguindanaon and Teduray; and the notched flute (*palendag*) among the Maguindanaon and Manobo Dulangan (8). In contrast, vocal genres and styles of singing are not shared by the three communities but “the purposes to which vocal music are performed are generally shared” (28).

Of interest is the research documentation of Maguindanaon *kulintang*-making which provides a glimpse of current practice in the twenty-first century, particularly the innovative use of iron sheets that are pounded and molded into *kulintang*, *saronay*, and hanging gongs being an alternative method to the traditional lost-wax process using brass. Brass today is low in supply and difficult to acquire. In addition, Buenconsejo's interview on indigenous concepts like *anon*, *apad*, *balikata*, and *binalig* expound our understanding of the Maguindanaon view and reinforce their varied meanings discussed in earlier studies of the late Maguindanaon artist Danungan Kalanduyan (1996) as well as in the dissertation of Kristina Benitez (2005). The demonstration of four distinct *Tagunggo* pieces is revealing for *kulintang* scholars and performers as well.

However, there are points in the study that need rethinking. For example, Buenconsejo's assertion that Maguindanaon kulintang tuning with gaps between 2 and 3 and 5 and 6 (1 2-gap-3 4 5-gap-6 7 8) is similar to the Indonesian slendro which features gaps between 3 and 5 and 6 and i (1 2 3-gap-5 6-gap-i), needs re-examination through listening. Although both are theoretically anhemitonic pentatonic tuning, the gaps in the Maguindanaon kulintang and Indonesian slendro are positioned differently, which are aurally distinguishable and not "very similar" contrary to Buenconsejo's statement:

We shall see below that kulintang music has roots in the hanging logs *luntang* and its wooden version *kulintang a kayu*, which is tuned in anhemitonic pentatonic scale. This is very similar to the Indonesian slendro scale. (13)

In addition, it is prudent to re-think the "roots" of kulintang music, particularly that *kulintang a kayu* is older than the bronze and/or brass kulintang. This finding is inconclusive, in my opinion, especially since the study is preliminary.

Likewise, Buenconsejo's statement that the *kudyapi* tuning is similar to the Indonesian slendro could be re-examined:

Binalig is the default tuning with a pitch gap between fret-bridges 2 and 3, and 5 and 6. The tuning more or less resembles the pattern of pitches that a musicologist would term as "anhemitonic pentatonic tuning" and which is similar, as mentioned already, to the Indonesian five-tone scale slendro. (16)

I also refer to the variety of gong tunings recorded from seventy sets of kulintang, saronay, and iron type gongs with narrow rim called *inubab* tending towards gaps between 2 and 3 and 5 and 6 (Benitez *The Maguindanaon* 158–63) and its relation to *luntang* tuning whereby the hanging logs marked 1 and 2 and 4 and 5 are gapped in congruence with the kulintang tuning (Benitez "Insights" 245). The variety and fluidity of pitch distances in each set of gongs or staves make kulintang music unique and vibrant at every performance.

Another point that needs clarification relates to the designation of numbers to the instrument's musical parts, whether gongs or staves. For example, the Teduray "serunay" consisting of five staves being the wooden version of the five hand-held gongs (*sagagong*) logically uses the same number arrangements, wherein number 1 is assigned to the highest pitch and number 5 to the lowest pitch.

However, Buenconsejo's illustration (19) shows the reverse, which means that the lowest pitch is number 1, and the highest, number 5, which is not Teduray practice and therefore needs correction.

The role of women among indigenous communities of Mindanao adds significance to the research documentaries. "Kapitana" exemplifies a Teduray community leader who narrates the cultural practices and challenges of daily life as farmer, basket weaver, and trader of their products (Disc 2). Teduray women play hand-held gongs (*sagagong*) at wedding rituals participated in by relatives of the wife-taker and wife-giver. The storytellers of myth and featured singers of *duyoy* among the Manobo Dulangan are women as well (Disc 3). A Maguindanaon kulintang player in the opening of "Si Tokan" (Disc 1) is a woman who is the traditional culture bearer of kulintang until recently when men like Tokan also took hold of the instrument.

Finally, the set of video documentaries is a welcome contribution to the limited audio-visual materials focusing on Philippine music made by ethnomusicologists themselves, such as Robert Garfias (1966), Felicidad A. Prudente (1980), Yoshitaka Terada (2013), and Jose Buenconsejo (2008 and 2017). It is hoped, however, that the DVD videos will be more accessible to students, teachers, and cultural workers in a popular format used today, for wider viewership of the Best Educational Film in 2023 and 2024.

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