

Film Review

Jose Buenconsejo. *The River of Exchange: Music of Agusan Manobo and Visayan Relations in Caraga, Mindanao, Philippines (2008)*
78 mins. DVD Documentary. Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development/Office of the Chancellor, UP Diliman.

By Augusto Gatmaytan

Jose Buenconsejo's *The River of Exchange* explores the role of the musical forms of the minority Umayam River Manobo in negotiating their relations with the majority Visayan settlers in Loreto, Agusan del Sur province, in Mindanao. The film examines contemporary Manobo and Visayan relations in this "far away place" and argues that music—particularly the *tud-om* song form—channels intense emotions into positive relations, thereby deflecting the possibility of violence.

When seen in relation to Buenconsejo's other works, the film represents a positive shift away from the limitations of the Levi-Straussian approach he used in previous essays, toward the study of Manobo music in the context of the cultural dynamics between Manobo and Visayan peoples. In this endeavor, he draws on Manobo myth and deploys the metaphor of the river as a mediatory link between the Manobo hinterland and the coastal or lowland Visayans. The film then looks at various nexus of inter-group interaction—marriage, religion and ritual, relations with the state, among others—to reveal how each group has assimilated elements of the other's culture (hence the film's title). The viewer is shown Manobo youth singing pop songs and dancing to Western music, and the enrichment of town festivities by its use of (what are imagined to be) Manobo costumes, music and dance, and ritual forms. Thus, even as the film shares fragments of valuable recordings of Manobo music, dance, and ritual, its greatest success is in illustrating the cultural hybridization that marks frontier societies such as those of Loreto and the other so-called "river towns" of Agusan del Sur province.

The terms of exchange between the Manobo and the Visaya, however, are unequal; they reflect the state of power relations between the dominant Visayan center and the dominated Manobo periphery. This has been the pattern since at least the 1950s and 1960s, when the logging boom saw the intensive

extraction of timber that built Butuan City, where logs were sawn or exported outright, but which left Loreto on the economic periphery, its population struggling with marginal livelihoods—glimpses of which are afforded by the film but which, however, the film does not sufficiently emphasize.

In Loreto itself, the town center is dominated by Visayan settlers and their descendants; symbolized by the prevalence of the wet-rice fields they introduced and the looming presence of Christian churches and rituals which, we are told, have—in the form of the sign of the cross—infiltrated a Manobo spirit-medium's ritual performance. On the other hand, the Manobos' traditional swidden farms have been displaced to the town's fringes, where, as Buenconsejo tantalizingly notes, they become sites for the realization of Manobo identity or culture. In the same way, traditional Manobo songs and dances are now rarely performed in the town center—banished, like the swidden farms, to the cultural periphery and allowed in the center only when torn from their original cultural context and appropriated into the structure of Visayan civic rituals.

Given this light, the film's sequences of Manobo youth softly strumming guitars and soulfully singing pop songs produce disturbing echoes. While they are learning the music associated with the Visaya, the Visayan and all too many Manobo youth are *not* learning Manobo music or song forms. The dread possibility of Manobo cultural “cosmopolitanism,” as the film describes Manobo cultural attitudes, shading off into cultural assimilation, underscores the historical and cultural value of Buenconsejo's collection of Manobo songs, the building of which was one of his original academic projects.

In this light, Buenconsejo's attempt to paint Loreto as a “far away place” à la Anna Tsing is not particularly persuasive. While Loreto's setting and the limited modes of travel available certainly pose difficulties, the film simply features too many sights of, or references to, people readying timber for rafting and sale downriver, enjoying pop music, buying and wearing imported *ukay-ukay* clothes, participating in Church and state or civic rituals, or simply using the Visayan language in their interviews to make such a claim credible. Loreto itself is named after the Spanish hometown of Fr. Saturnino Urios, a 19th-century Jesuit missionary active in the Agusan and Surigao region. Perhaps this concern for remoteness, and hence authenticity, is a relic of Buenconsejo's earlier projects. In any case, it would seem more productive to think of Loreto not as an isolated “far away place” but as a frontier of the still-expanding and ever-consolidating Philippine state, where Manobo culture is in the process of being assigned its proper place within the dominant, national political and cultural framework; mainly as (survivals of, and thus) symbols of the past and as “local color” for state and even Church festivities.

What emerges in the film is a more-or-less equal, largely depoliticized exchange, rather than a process of negotiation between a powerful political and cultural mainstream represented by the Visayan, and a less powerful Manobo minority. This results in its unfortunate neglect of the very possibility of political and cultural resistance. The film's emphasis is always on reconciliation and accommodation, whether it is in the form of Esmeraldo Miel's on-screen meditation on the relations between Christianity and Manobo healing ritual, or the establishment of a local Manobo council of leaders within the municipal local government. The notion of Manobo "cosmopolitanism" thus deflects scholarly attention away from the tensions and resistances that no doubt exist in a setting scarred by significant political, economic, and cultural differences and which could have led us to a deeper understanding of just what is happening in this frontier town.

This brings us to the thesis of the film; i.e., Manobo music's alleged role in preventing violence. It ought to be remembered that the songs studied by Buenconsejo are themselves a product of history. A history, once more, shaped by unequal, exploitative relations between the Manobo minority and the Visaya majority. Perhaps the songs he studied and used as the foundation of this film are those of people who are already largely—but not, it should be emphasized, completely—resigned to their subaltern place in the national political and cultural community. In other words, and at the risk of sounding somewhat overdramatic, these are the songs of a defeated people, their placatory nature intended to reconcile themselves—rather like the rabbits of Cowslip's warren in Richard Adams' *Watership Down*—with their marginal place in contemporary society. This makes the film's remarkable presentation of a *tud-om* sung to appease a Buenconsejo frustrated by the singer's failure to stage a ritual for the former particularly, if ironically, apt.

This is to suggest that the character of Manobo music and, by extension, Manobo culture, differed in the past, has evolved since then to what it is today, and is not a cultural relic that has remained essentially unchanged. It is, in fact, rather difficult to reconcile Buenconsejo's analysis of the *tud-om* with the Manobos' violent history which, according to historical sources, was marked by frequent slave-raiding and deadly feuding that later necessitated the establishment of an American military camp at Waloe (a barangay of Loreto named after an American Constabulary officer), all during a time when the *tud-om* would presumably have been more widely practiced. Likewise, the predatory ethos of the *talagbusow* cult of many Umayamnon Manobo warrior-families, which still survives in the form of the *binuwaya* crocodile-carvings sometimes seen in rituals today, and the very existence of the *sa-ot* or war dance, are also difficult to reconcile with the thesis.

This is not to deny that it is at least plausible that Manobo music is instrumental in relieving tensions, particularly between relative intimates: between family members; in ritual contexts, between a family and its hereditary spirits; or, in Buenconsejo's case, between an angry scholar of music and his embarrassed singer-informant. It does not follow, however, that Manobo music is equally effective in defusing tension in other social contexts, particularly between larger numbers of relative strangers; i.e., at a societal scale beyond that of actual or constructive kin. It is quite telling that no evidence of the *tud-om*'s effectiveness in this latter context is presented by the film.

This highlights the problem in arguing daring conclusions from a limited evidentiary base, as exemplified by Buenconsejo's claim that *sangga* rituals—featuring guitar music and offerings of beer or soft drinks, cigarettes, and cookies, among other markers of Visayan identity—are performed only in communities with significant Visayan populations (they are, in fact, practiced in comparatively more remote Manobo communities), or that datanship is alien to the Manobo (a point that is contested by a reading of the available historical material, and would likely be questioned by many contemporary Manobo leaders). Likewise, the film's thesis is weakened by the failure to consider Manobo music in the light of the available scholarly literature.

The challenge, perhaps, is for Buenconsejo to fully transcend the limitations of an apparent political, historical, and ethnographic naïveté, and thus better engage his material, and the intellectual dialogue over the meaning of Agusan Manobo music that he began with such passion and insight.

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