

Reflections on Traditional Philippine Music

By the Chair of the Subcommittee on Traditional Southeast Asian Music in SEADOM,

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28 March 2015, 11AM

Abelardo Hall Auditorium, Quezon City, Philippines

It is impossible to speak about the traditional music of Southeast Asia in the singular. Because of its geography, Continental and Insular Southeast Asia have always been at the crossroads of Asian, European, and American cultures, encounters of which have resulted to both internally-and externally-induced cultural changes. An awareness of the histories of these cross-cultural encounters makes us realize that traditions have not always been received from the past as if pure and fixed but have come about as varied creative responses to culture changes in particular time periods that inevitably affected those traditions. Traditional court music of Southeast Asia, e.g., have tended to be resilient and conservative as if timeless traditions because its adherents have believed in their enduring music essences and have therefore maintained them as such, i.e., permanent and unchanging. But at some point in the past, that timeless tradition must have been constructed as the courts in Southeast Asia had consolidated their power. We know, e.g., that the gamelan of Central Java had roots in village communities and that it was later appropriated by the sultans of Yogyakarta and Surakarta as musical symbols of their power, i.e., as a divine manifestation in a socially constructed cosmology (as discussed for example in Judith Becker's first book). The same is also true of Hindu-Balinese gamelan, which continues to be practiced by villagers today even after the courts are gone (see Geertz).

Yet traditional court music of Southeast Asia cannot speak for the whole region. At the fringes of court cultures are village cultures, which, as just mentioned, were the sources from which court music traditions had evolved from. The villages and courts had interdependent cultural relationships with each other. In the villages, among the majority of the populations, there were varied forms of music making that were based on musical interlock multipart music as a symbol of social cooperation. For me, this interlock is a shared musical principle that governs many musical systems in the region and it would be good to investigate this closely at a later symposium.

In the Philippines, except the lesser sultanates of Sulu, Maguindanao, and Lanao areas, there has been no court music to speak of nor a history of elaborate codification of music tradition so that it becomes fixed and unchanging. Indigenous Philippine music has always existed in the plural for it is a heterogenous cultural practice of interdependent villages. When the Spaniards colonized the Philippines in 16th century, owing to both economic and religious reasons, the political rise of the town, centered in the poblacion or town center, was what contrasted with the space of the village called barangay (or barrio). In both spaces, town and village, culture was centered on Catholic religion because the priests in the evolution of the dominant Philippine lowland culture were very important in maintaining the hold of Spanish empire in the islands. Religious feasts and devotions were strictly observed and music making was a representation to this political edifice. Each year, communal efforts have been focused on the fiesta where loud brass band music is heard. [I'm reminded of the concert last night. More than half of our students, mostly from the working class, come from this brass band culture.]

When the towns evolved into port cities, which exported the agricultural products of the country in 19th century, many European nationals established merchant houses in Manila, Cebu, and Iloilo and therefore government bureaucracy also became more complex, prompting Spanish diaspora in Philippine cities. Along with them were also European writers who wrote travelogues, which did not fail to mention the brass bands as well as local song-dance musical genres that were described to be symbols of national identity like the kundiman, kumintang, and balitao. The travelogues had music transcriptions of these popular music kundiman, comintang, and balitao that became tradition in the course of time. The transcription of kundiman comes from this 1847 album preserved in an illuminated manuscript commissioned by a Spanish journalist Gervacio Centerenolla. The second is a transcription of comintang by the French traveller Jean Baptiste Mallat in 1848 that the English journeyman John Bowring reprinted 1858. There was another book in 1860 that printed the kundiman and of course one more in 1892 by Manuel Walls. What is fascinating with these materials is that they constructed 19th century popular music in the Philippines, which are actually limited to specific regions in the archipelago, into the national, i.e., for the whole of the Philippine archipelago. My hypothesis is that the transcriptions writing music did influence the status of the genres, i.e., they became elevated as a result because a value was added to them such as patriotism and the like. In the case of the kundiman, this genre lost its dance component in

20th century and became a serious type of music for voice alone. The song Bayan Ko sung in the 1986 People Power Revolution is a good kundiman.

To look closely, this ubiquitous song-dance genre in the Philippines is not tied in to the national political for it is simply entertainment music in village festivities, especially during meetings between wife-givers and wife-takers. The song-dance genres I just mentioned are reminiscent of indigenous types of music still cultivated in remote parts of the Philippine Islands today. As a music that alternates song between man and woman, it is very similar to the Malay pantun or Laotian molam. But the Philippine types were fused with Western element such as lute accompaniment and harmony and are therefore hybrid or mestizaje music.

What do we learn from this? First, the examples given point to the fact that music tradition is not fixed but something that is made to appear as such as part of a political process in history. Second, we can understand tradition if we explore in depth its context, by which I mean the material conditions that enable the tradition to be fixed. In this short paper, I pointed out the technology of writing. Third, tradition is a response to present circumstances, especially the new or the modern. When the Europeans encountered local culture in the Philippines, they saw a local song-dance as a marker of a place that is different from Europe. While presumably they wrote about it as a *costumbre* or local custom of the place (hiding the fact that half of it is of Western origin), readers of their travelogues later used the same attention for local custom but added the sentiment of patriotism into the text. Thus, if we do not reflect on the important role that cultural context plays in the construction of tradition, then it will be difficult for us to comprehend that tradition cannot be separated from the new or the modern by which traditions had to adjust.

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