

Traditional Music in Philippine Cultures

In an environment of modern, technological materialism, Philippine musical traditions remain rooted in spirituality and ancient wisdom about life and nature. They provide valuable, alternative perspectives on Philippine life, history, and culture. Even a fleeting survey of these musical traditions reveals a multisided prism that reflects Philippine society and culture as a complex amalgam of forms in time and space. These forms present striking varieties and nuances, and delineate not only distinct regional and cultural borders and social structures, but also connections to peoples and cultures outside the Philippines.

The kaleidoscopic variety of indigenous musical traditions is easily seen in their instruments, performance techniques, repertoires, and languages. Flat gongs, from the uplands of northern Luzon, are played in a variety of styles and in groups ranging from five to six musicians among the Kalinga, Bontoc, Bago, and Gaddang communities, to an ensemble of three among the Ifugao, accompanied by a single conical drum among the Applay, and an ensemble of two gongs and two drums among the Ibaloi of Benguet.

Such an abundance of musical styles also can be found for bossed (knobbed) gongs, which cover a much wider area from Palawan to the southern islands of Mindanao and Sulu. Among the Bagobo, Manobo, and Bla'an in eastern Mindanao, sets of graduated gongs called

kulintang are suspended in pyramid formation from the lowest drone gong (*bandil*) to the highest of the melodic gongs called *tagungguan*. The gongs of the *kulintang* from western Mindanao are laid in a row. In the ensembles of the Maguindanao, Maranao, Tausug, Sama, Yakan, and Subanen, the *kulintang* is

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musically complemented by larger gongs with varying resonance and tone colors. On the other hand, aerophones (flutes and trumpets), idiophones (buzzers, stamping tubes, log and bamboo slit drums), and chordophones (lutes and zithers), mostly made of bamboo and local timber, also represent specific language groups and communities through their physical and musical characteristics. Melodic drones from these instruments usually combine with kinetic movements in physical and metaphysical space to create an intense, integrated form of expression. This integration is characteristic of *pagipat* healing rites of the Maguindanao and the death ceremonies of *mattala'tam* among the Aetas from Kalinga Apayao and *himmung* among the Ifugao.

Vocal repertoires offer an even more intriguing variety of forms and styles, from epics such as the Ifugao's *Hudhud* and the Mansaka's *Manggob* to forms of lyrical poetry and recitation, e.g., the

Musicians from the Manobo community in Malaybalay, Bukidnon Province, Mindanao, perform on the tangkol (bamboo zither) and kudyapi (stringed lute). Instruments like these are found throughout the Philippines. Photo by E. Caballero, courtesy Cultural Center of the Philippines





Musicians on harp and guitar play lively balitaw songs based on the Spanish jota and sequidilla, on the island of Cebu. Stringed instruments introduced by the Spanish in the 17th century remain popular today in traditional Philippine music.

Photo by Rey S. Rastrollo, courtesy Cultural Center of the Philippines

Ibaloi *badiw*, Maranao *bayok*, and Kalinga *dango*.

Another type of oral repertoire evolved in Christian communities across the archipelago in four centuries of cultural encounter between East and West. These musical expressions took their present hybrid forms through aesthetic assimilation, selective synthesis, and cultural cross-breeding. The varying degrees of acculturation mirrored in these forms indicate the people's resiliency and creative response to change while preserving fundamental aesthetic values.

In Christian population centers, indigenous practices such as epics and rituals gave way to musical resources introduced by Spain. One of these is the long romance narrative later known as *awit* and *kurido*. The genius of local literary composers easily assimilated this form, creating highly imaginative stories that combine characters and events from medieval Europe with local heroes and familiar places. Although initially dissem-

inated as written literature, the *awit* and *kurido* in time became committed to oral memory and were easily quoted in formal and informal discourse. Related genres from Spain also became part of the musico-literary and theatrical experience of the early Christian Filipinos, including the *komedya* and its subgenre *moro-moro*, named for its perennial plot of Christian-Moorish conflict, and the *sarswela*, romantic comedies featuring members of the Philippine upper class at the turn of the 20th century.

In these communities, gongs and bamboo instruments were replaced by the guitar; by the *rondalla*, a plucked string ensemble that evolved from the Spanish *estudiantina*; by the *comparza*, the brass band, and its local versions, the *musikong bumbong* and *banda boca*; and by a variety of instrumental groupings that accompany other vocal and theatrical performances.

The impact of Christianity can also be seen in the hybridization of religious practices in rural communities. The *sanghiyang* in Cavite province is still a trance ceremony, but its practitioners now invoke the names of saints and use rosary beads and scapulars. In Batangas, the *subli*, a secular folk dance propagated since the 1930s, is now being rediscovered as a complex religious ritual of semi-improvised dances, chanting, and drum playing in honor of the Holy Cross and the Holy Child (Santo Niño).

Locally created musical activities are mostly related to the liturgical cycle of Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Santacrusan, the May commemoration of the finding of the Holy Cross by Constantine and Helena. The spiritual depth of rural Christian Filipinos comes to the surface during Lent, when people perform paraliturgical rituals and acts of self-abnegation and penitence. The chanting of the life and Passion of Christ, *pabasa* and *pasyon*, and their theatrical reenactment, *senakulo*, are almost synonymous with

popular Filipino religious worship, whether they are expressed in Tagalog, Kapampangan, Ilonggo, Sebuano, or Bicol and whether they use ancient regional airs or rock 'n' roll tunes.

The dynamic kaleidoscope of musical life in Philippine cultures has assumed a significant role in nation-building over the last 100 years. From their virtual isolation and derogated status in the emerging Christian society of the 19th century, these musical practices have gained new strength in the present century.

Indigenous and folk artists are now closing ranks with their urban counterparts to form their own cultural troupes, creating their own choreographies, and sometimes performing Western-derived tunes on gongs and bamboo instruments. As contributors of new structural forms and aesthetic meanings to contemporary musical expression, traditional musical cultures have been selectively adapting to the artistic norms of mainstream society, not only to survive, but also to continuously enrich and expand the techniques and repertoires of their unique musical heritage.

Suggested Listening

Folk Songs of the Philippines. Folkways 8791.

Hanunoo Music from the Philippines. Folkways 4466.

Music of the Magindanao in the Philippines, vols. 1 and 2. Folkways 4536.

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