

## Indigenous Music in the Philippines and the Politics of Cultural Difference

**This study explores how the state defines “indigenous people” and determines their position in the Philippine society. Through cultural productions by indigenous performing troupes, cultural difference is established which also results to cultural brokerage. (Audio links are available).**

Although Philippine music is an expression of a Southeast Asian indigenous culture that has been superceded by Spanish and later American elements, it has evolved into a unique cultural expression. Today, one roughly delineates traditional, or “indigenous” music from those with various degrees of Western influences. But we ask on the other hand, how do indigenous musical and cultural traditions contend with modernity and persevere despite drastic changes in the lives of its bearers and practitioners?

A music professor at University of the Philippines Diliman analyzes the productive aspects of rendering culture and difference in what has been aptly categorized as “indigenous music.” Dr. Jonas Baes, in his dissertation *Modes of Appropriation in Philippine Indigenous Music: The Politics of the Production of Cultural Difference* (2004), uses Abaya’s definition of cultural politics (1994) as springboard for discussion: “the encounters of power-laden cultural schemas taking place in contestations over definitions of, and responses to social realities.” Initially, Baes problematizes how the state defines “indigenous peoples” and the resultant schema that have located those who have resisted colonization as mere repositories of pre-Hispanic cultures and traditions, instead of incorporating indigenous peoples within the broader struggles of Philippine society in the global political economy. According to Baes, it is the locus of power that determines and locates those people’s positions in Philippine society, positions categorized and known to us as the “pre-Hispanic,” the “indigenous,” or the “ethno-linguistic.”

From those initial assumptions, Baes problematizes the production of “cultural difference” by seeing this as a political act—or, as one that contests and/or negotiates authenticity and the stakes of significance in a field of cultural production made up of festivals, training programs and recording productions, and run by what can be termed as a ‘culture industry.’ Baes sees that the stakes may be beneficial to both parties—the culture industry and those who participate in it. This is seen in light of material and symbolic benefits that result from production. The culture industry has in fact created a “backyard industry” for a growing number of performing troupes in many regions of the country.

Baes sees mediations between the culture industry and the culture bearers (or “indigenous” performing troupes) as acts of cultural brokerage. “Indigenous” performing troupes have sprouted like mushrooms in the various regions of the country in the last ten to fifteen years and their leaders have learned the trade of negotiating the cultures they have claimed as their own.

Cultural brokerage in the production of cultural difference can be witnessed in four case studies presented by Dr. Baes. These present various modes of appropriation: Bennicio Sokkong, founder of the Cordillera Music Tutorial and Research Center (CMTRC) based in Baguio City; Kanapia Kalanduyan and the Kulintang Training Program at the University of the Philippines College of Music; Baes himself as researcher and recordist in the “Mindanao Highlands Music” compact disc (CD) recording project; and the National Music Competitions for Young Artists (NAMCYA) Festival of Traditional Music.

Bennicio Sokkong is from a family who originated from Tabuk, Kalinga in Northern Philippines.

He learned to fully appreciate his native culture when he was invited to teach at the University of the Philippines' (UP) College of Music. At UP, he had the chance to attend international conferences and received many invitations to perform traditional music in festivals, thus making him realize the importance of his culture. His intention to impart Kalinga music to the Philippine society and his willingness to blend traditional music with the popular soundscape led him to establish the CMTRC. Through this institution, he has been able to coordinate with other cultural organizations within the Cordillera Region and teach traditional music to people inside and outside the culture. Sokkong's engagement with sponsoring institutions, especially with those from the government reveals the various levels by which he negotiates his authenticity and the tensions of creating his own institution and its alignments and dis-alignments with local and national cultural agencies. Such struggles hurdled by Bennicio Sokkong highlights the conditions of cultural patronage in the country.

In another chapter, Baes analyzes is the Maguindanao Kulintang Program at the University of the Philippines College of Music. The kulintang is a set of gongs laid in a row, traditionally taught and practiced within an oral tradition by the Maguindanao people. Mr. Kanapia Kalanduyan, a faculty member at the College of Music's Department of Music Research, learned the traditional kulintang in his locality in Datu Piang, Maguindanao at an early age. This chapter discloses the tensions that arise when modern notation and pedagogical systems are applied, or rather imposed, on a musical system with an oral tradition. For Kanapia Kalanduyan, according to Baes, "the differences in pedagogical methods strongly impact on the system of performing and/or improvising." The structure of the pedagogical system at the college makes necessary the use of those musical notations, instead of the oral mode of transmission. Such modifications impact on the traditional pedagogical system, and the modes of performance and learning. Kalanduyan expressed his regret that because of the teaching method imposed by the academic institution, the students only become mimics of other people's performances, instead of developing their own styles of performance. Kalanduyan also laments that since kulintang playing by the great masters such as Ahmal Lumuntod is now reproduceable through notation, people outside the tradition gain access to the kulintang even without the rigours of traditional learning systems. This to him is a threat to the integrity of the tradition on the instrument.

In the next two chapters, one on the "Mindanao Highlands Music" CD recording project and another on the annual organization of the NAMCYA Festival of Traditional Music present the dynamics of negotiation between culture bearers and the academe, as well as institutions of the culture industry.

The chapter on the "Mindanao Highlands Music" CD describes the dynamics of cultural appropriation, as indigenous musicians now living within the fringes of urban centers in Davao del Sur help ethnomusicologists re-create the conditions and sound environment of traditional landscapes in the mountains for a CD recording project. This chapter also highlights the tensions and negotiations in the appropriation of indigenous music for recording productions and the inequity experienced by performing troupes with the institutions that utilize their performances of traditional culture.

Similar situations are highlighted in the next chapter, which deals with the annual "Traditional Music Festival" organized by National Music Competitions for Young Artists (NAMCYA). The NAMCYA is an annual event sponsored by the Philippine government in cooperation with various private institutions and held in Metro Manila. One of the highlights of the NAMCYA is this festival of traditional music, which features performances by indigenous troupes from the various regions of the country. Tensions arise when adjudicators from the National Capital Region come to Mindanao or the Cordillera Mountains to "select" or "judge" performing troupes who have mounted productions that highlight their traditions, and reconstruct these traditions on stage within a limited

period of time. Such tensions further illuminate the deeper tensions of accommodation and modification of traditions and the performance of such in altered landscapes in Metro Manila.

In the subsequent chapter, Baes ties up the running themes in the four case studies presented and highlights what he calls the “aesthetic moments” in relation to the question of the politics of the production of cultural difference.

Dr. Jonas Baes’ study on the various modes of appropriation in Philippine indigenous music is an elaborate exploration on how cultural difference is reconstructed within the context of social marginality. We ask then: what kind of negotiations has taken place whenever Philippine bamboo instruments or gongs are being tapped in recordings, or when costumed performing troupes render their music in festivals?

By MMRParreño

Dr. Jonas Baes is a composer and ethnomusicologist who studied at the UP College of Music [1977-1982] and at the Freiburg Musikhochschule in Germany [1992-1994]. In 2004, he graduated with a PhD in Philippine Studies from the University of the Philippines. His papers on the Iraya-Mangyan of Mindoro and on topics such as cultural politics, hegemony and marginality have been published in internationally refereed journals. His music compositions have been performed in various international festivals in Asia, Europe and the United States. He is presently the Chair of the Department of Composition and Theory at the UP College of Music.

### Associated links

- [Research Folio, The Electronic Newsletter of UP-OVCRD](#)
- [AUDIO 1: “DALUY BY BAES AS PERFORMED BY SOKKONG”](#)
- [AUDIO 2: “THE PHILIPPINE NATIONAL ANTHEM AS RENDERED BY BAGOBO”](#)
- [AUDIO 3: “MATALLATAM AETA MUSIC”](#)

### Journal information

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