

Hybridizing Filipino Popular Music Through Ethnomusical Instruments

Aldwynn R. Ancheta

Crisancti L. Macazo

Lyric Institute of Music and Related Arts

Centro Escolar University * University of Makati * St. Paul University

Metro Manila, Philippines

aldwynn10@gmail.com

clmacazo@ceu.edu.ph * cmacazo@umak.edu.ph * cmacazo@spumanila.edu.ph

Abstract

Inspired by some Filipino singers/songwriters, José Íñigo Homer Lacambra Ayala or more popularly known as Joey Ayala, as well as Ethniku, Asin (Salt), and Ang Grupong Pendong (The Group of Pendong) infuse ethnomusical instruments in their musical compositions and performances. These artists popularized their music to many Filipinos by integrating traditional or ethnomusical instruments. Thus, this conceptual paper aims to unravel and rediscover ethnomusical instruments commonly used in the past, revive, and preserve the culture of music among Filipinos. It also aims to provide information to budding Filipino artists of various cultural origins or backgrounds with the hope of providing inspiration and taking pride to repopularize the differing ethnomusic, traditional instruments, and the preservation of the rich Filipino culture in music by creating new forms. Furthermore, this paper utilizes the merging of cultures and elements in accordance with Homi K. Bhabha's *Concept of Hybridity*.

Keywords: *Hybridity, ethnic musical instrument, culture, ethnomusic*

Bio-profiles

Aldwynn R. Ancheta is a graduate of Centro Escolar University–Manila, where he earned a Bachelor of Music in Music Education with an emphasis on Guitar Performance. Throughout his academic journey, he distinguished himself as a promising guitarist and musician, earning invitations to perform in various concerts and musical events. Among his notable engagements, he served as arranger and performer for the Young Voices of the Philippines during its Send-Off Concert on June 16, 2023. He was likewise invited to perform with the Silangan Guitar Chamber Ensemble in its fundraising concert on July 27, 2023, further showcasing his artistry and commitment to promoting classical guitar music. Aldwynn honed his craft under the mentorship of the late Professor Ruben F. Reyes and Professor Mario T.



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Echipare Jr., whose guidance significantly shaped his musical development and performance excellence. After successfully passing the Licensure Examination for Professional Teachers (LEPT), he taught music at Far Eastern University–Manila, where he shared his passion for music and inspired young learners. He currently serves as a guitar instructor at the Lyric Institute of Music and Related Arts and VHV Performing Arts Studio, where he continues to teach, arrange music, and nurture aspiring musicians through quality music education and performance.

Dr. Crisancti L. Macazo is a licensed professional teacher, musicologist, violinist, avid photographer and filmmaker. He recently finished the requirements for the Post-Doctoral Diploma in Quality Management, Centro Escolar University, Manila. He earned his Ph.D. in Music from the University of the Philippines in 2020; Master of Music in Music Education applied in Violin Pedagogy with *Meritissimus (Summa cum laude)* honors in 2012; and Bachelor of Music in Music Education applied in Violin – recipient of Rector’s Award for Academic Excellence for graduating *valedictorian* of his batch in 1999. Currently, he serves as an Associate Professor at the Conservatory of Music, Centro Escolar University, Manila; and He is a member of the Philippine Association for Teachers and Educators (PAFTE), Guild of Educators in TESOL International (GET International) – life member (since 2025), the International Musicological Society (life member since 2019), the International Association for the Study of Popular Music – Southeast Asia (IASPM-SEA), GEO Global Educators; and currently an Executive Board for the Professional and Career Development of the Southeast Asian Directors of Music (SEADOM). He is also an Adjunct Faculty member of the College of Music and the Performing Arts, St. Paul University Manila.

From Pre-Colonial Ancestors to Contemporary Descendants

The Philippines is composed of many diverse ethnic groups that respectively boast of a rich culture and heritage relative to music. Each region or ethnic group has its distinct music and instruments they grew up with. It is something that defines their background and identity and, at the same time, showcases their instruments from crude and basic materials to more developed or complex types of instruments. It also indicates that there are possibilities and representations of each region, which call for framing at certain times, can be distributed to certain genres, artists and even particular songs, that have discernable limits in common practices in which we call the “*urban ethos*” (Krim, 2012, p. 7). Some of the traditional instruments that have been fused with pop music include the *kulintang* (a set of gongs played



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by the Maguindanao people of Mindanao) (National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2015), the *kubing* (a jaw harp from the Visayas region), the *hegalong* or the *kudyapi* (a two-stringed instrument from the Palawan Islands and the Mindanao), and the *tumpong* (a bamboo flute of the Maguindanaon people) (Mercurio, 2007). These instruments add a unique texture to the music, giving it distinct sounds that set it apart from mainstream Western popular music.

The emerging music that is mainstream in the contemporary period is already influenced by the international bodies that cater to the macro audience of music listeners. Following Homi K. Bhabha's "*Concept of Hybridity*" (Mambrol, 2016) in the Philippine setting, culturally speaking, the customs and traditions that are being practiced in the Philippines during the pre-colonial period (*first space*) can be mixed with the growing works of contemporary popular music in the present times (*second space*), giving the production of Ethno-Popular Music (*third space*), which may just be an approximation of how it was done originally but somehow can still significantly help preserve and produce a new product that can contribute to instilling the culture, customs, and traditions of the country. In addition to the preservation of Philippine Popular Music by means of fusing ethnic music instruments, it shows that, "the love of place, of one's neighborhood, city, or nation, liberates us, pleases us, enriches our lives—and may, in many instances, further subordinate our fate to the production of multinational capital." (Krimms, 2007, p. 60) Hence, our patriotism is strengthened to embrace our culture through the production of Philippine Popular Music with infused ethnic instruments for the audience to stream more of what the Philippine Culture treasures. The distinct musical features of Philippine Popular Music imbed aspects of the urban ethos that may function with at least temporary autonomy, much as images imbued with a semiotic value may then function as second-order signs. (Krimms, 2012, p. 7)

Theoretical Framework

The framework that this conceptual paper employs is the Concept of Hybridity as



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articulated by the leading cultural theorist and scholar Homi K. Bhabha (Mambrol, 2016). The concept of hybridity is not just a mere process of combining elements of different cultures but a more complex and dynamic process of negotiation and transformation in which new cultural forms are created through a process of “mimicry” and “difference.” Mimicry, as the authors posit, is “*pangagaya ng isang wika, kultura, kagawian o anumang kasanayan pero di eksakto o lubusang paggaya nito*” (the act of imitating something—language, culture and traditions, and the likes—but not in the same exact form or manner as it was originally done). While difference, the authors postulate, “*ay kaibahang nangyayari na nagmumula sa pagaaral ng isang wika, kultura, kagawian o anumang kasanayan dahil sa iba’t-ibang pananaw ng dahil sa agwat ng henerasyon o pinagmulan*” (the change or variance resulting from the differences of approaches or concepts due to ones’ origin, orientation or generation gaps). It is the same process in which the customs and traditions, particularly in music, that were practiced in the Philippines during the pre-colonial period can be mixed with the growing works of contemporary popular music giving way to the creation of Ethno-Popular Music which can help preserve and produce a new genre that can contribute in some way to instilling the culture, customs, and traditions of the country. Hence, the mutual encoding of music genre and urban geography also works on musical poetics but was never in an unmediated way. Moreover, all of the parameters of ethnomusical instrument infused Philippine Popular Music, may be separated conceptually, but they work together, so that the most adequate approach would try to think them simultaneously. (Krims, 2012, pp. 17–18)

The fusion of traditional instruments and pop music not only preserves the cultural heritage of the Philippines but also creates a platform for the younger generation to appreciate their varied musical roots. This integration has also gained international attention, showcasing the diversity and creativity of Filipino music like what and how it was done in America in the collaborative works of John Denver and other musicians with North American musicians which facilitated the resurgence of folk and country music enhanced with the fusion of instruments of the indigenous groups of North America.



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Although, borrowing a specific ethnic instrument from an indigenous group, artists who consider to use such concepts and ideas where he/she immerses should be wary of the opposing threats of tampering or owning any teachings within the group. Hence, the teachings and customs from the indigenous groups must be kept sacred, and respected and the Filipino Popular Music will originate in real, material social relations and the changing spatial strategies by which cities adjust to accumulate capital. (Krim, 2012)

Magkaugnay (Interconnected): Joey Ayala and the Bagong Lumad (New Native)

One of the prime and current examples of the occurrence of Bhabha's Concept of Hybridity is the works of Joey Ayala and his band, the *Bagong Lumad*. Ayala is a Filipino singer-songwriter known for his unique music style that celebrates the indigenous culture and traditions of the Philippines. Some of his works focus on the ethnicity of music, including *Magkaugnay (Interconnected)*, *Karaniwang Tao (Common People)*, *Haring Ibon (Bird King)*, and *Agila (Eagle)*, in which the instruments he used are ethnic to Hiligaynon and T'boli play such as the *hegalong* or the *kudyapi*, the *agong*, and the *kulintang*. Ayala's music represents a unique blend of contemporary and traditional Filipino culture, and his songs continue to inspire and encourage young Filipino musicians to take pride in their roots and cultural heritage.

Furthermore, in an article published by Kathleen A. Llemit under Philippine Star, Joey Ayala stated why he called his group *Bagong Lumad (New Native)*. Ayala wanted to give a clear-cut identity to his craft and bandmates that is why he coined the term *Bagong Lumad* or New Native (Llemit, 2022). He coined a terminology that Filipinos would remember when they hear the name "Joey Ayala," for his compositions truly paved the way to an identity of Original Pilipino Music (OPM) by infusing ethnic musical instruments into popular music. This is a perfect expression of the "hybridity" concept.

Asin (Salt): The Search for the Babaeng Freddie Aguilar (Female Freddie)

Before Joey Ayala's works, *Asin* was the first group to incorporate Filipino indigenous



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instruments into pop/rock music (Trek, 2025). *Asin* is a band composed of musicians from Mindanao that popularized almost all the songs they composed in the 80s using traditional instruments of the south, such as the *kubing*, *kudyapi*, *kulintang*, and *tumpong*, among others to highlight local flavor (Trek, 2025). Some of their popular works include *Masdan Mo ang Kapaligiran* (Look at the Environment), *Ang Bayan Kong Sinilangan* (My Hometown), *Himig ng Pag-ibig* (Song of Love), *Pagbabalik* (The Return), *Balita* (News), and *Limot na Bayani* (Forgotten Hero) have these common traditional instruments fused and in full exposition. These artists have inspired other musicians to explore the rich musical traditions of the Philippines and to incorporate these traditions into their contemporary music. Their works demonstrate how the fusion of traditional instruments and pop music can produce a unique and dynamic musical style that represents the diverse cultural heritage of the Philippines, which created altogether a hybrid style that not only promoted and preserved the use of ethnic instruments but also paved the enhancement of Filipino popular music with wider acceptance and ownership.

***Pagsambang Bayan* (Communal Worship): *Ang Grupong Pendong's* (The Group of Pendong) Exploration to Sacred and Secular Ethno-Pop Music**

Ang Grupong Pendong is a Filipino band that blends traditional indigenous instruments with contemporary music (Calindas, 2009). Pendong Aban Jr., the band's founder being an original member of ASIN and now performs his compositions with his wife, Chat Coloma-Aban. Their music features the *kulintang*, *kubing*, *hegalong*, *agong*, and other percussive instruments played by indigenous communities across the Philippines. The beats of their songs reflect different seasons of Filipino life from celebrations of harvest to mourning and thanksgiving. The lyrics mirror the feelings and aspirations of their listeners. The band learned to play these instruments by immersing themselves in indigenous communities.

Since forming in 1990, they have performed in 23 European cities, including major World Music Festivals such as the *Sfinks Festival* in Belgium and the *Dunya Festival* in the Netherlands. They were also invited by the Taipei City Government to perform for Filipino migrant workers. *Ang Grupong Pendong* has so far released two albums, *Panahon* (Time) and



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Dito Sa Lupa (Here on Earth), with the latter winning the "Best in World Music Album" award from the association of composers and songwriters in the Philippines. Their upcoming releases include their third album, a Cultural Center of the Philippines-funded recorded musical play called *Apo Sandawa* (Lord Sandawa), and their Filipino liturgical music titled, *Pagsambang Bayan* (Communal Worship). (Trek, 2025)

***Siklab* (Blaze): Burning Beats of Ethniku**

Another most recent example of the use of a fusion of traditional instruments and pop music is *Ethniku*.¹ Filipino music artist, Ethniku, incorporates ethnic instruments into his modern beats. Gaining popularity starting in 2022 is his single track *Siklab* (Blaze) which bridges the sound of Filipino ethnic instruments and modern music genre. The track has since been used and adopted in many plays, TV series, and music streaming apps. Krims states that the “urban ethos has acquired at least a preliminary definition and a range of illustrations, it should be stipulated that it is not an autonomous characteristic of popular music; instead, it is a multimedia phenomenon developed among music, music video, films television, newspapers and magazines, novels, theatre, and recently the Internet.” (Krims, 2012, p. 8)

Synthesis

Various Filipino bands and individual artists saw the need to incorporate what has been diminishing and in danger of a completely eradicated aspect in Filipino culture—the use of ethnomusical instruments in musical performance. From the annals of Filipino culture, these traditional musical instruments have generally been regarded as obsolete or unpopular especially to the younger generations. As an effect, values and traditions can be construed as paramount to the fading ethnomusic preference, or at least the will to listen and pay attention to this sonic entity. (Escabarte, 2023)

Resorting to hybridity has been the solution of the aforementioned artists to address the

¹ There is very limited organized information on *Ethniku* maybe because it's relatively new. But his very popular single track, *Siklab*, is widely streamed and adopted in various platforms. Somehow it is still worthy to mention this work in this paper.



continued decline of ethnomusic familiarity among Filipinos in general. The preference on Western music by the general Filipino public continues to prosper. However, by way of hybridizing themes and instruments (embracing both Western and ethnic) has been re-introducing or reviving what seems to be on the brink of being forgotten. These artists found a niche where they could re-introduce ethnic by intermixing it with the popular or Western for the sonic entity to be noticed and eventually be enjoyed. Though it may sound an injustice to both entities (Western and ethnic), they complement each other for the sake of getting attention and affirmation from the general Filipino audiences.

Conclusion

The integration of ethnomusical instruments in Filipino popular music has contributed to the preservation and re-popularization of the country's traditional music culture. The use of traditional instruments in contemporary music represents a unique blend of past and present, which has gained international attention, showcasing the diversity and creativity of Filipino music. This conceptual work has employed the ideology of Homi K. Bhabha, which is not just a mere process of combining elements of different cultures but a more complex and dynamic process of negotiation and transformation in which new cultural forms are created through a process of "mimicry" and "difference." The fusion of traditional instruments and pop music not only preserves the cultural heritage of the Philippines but also creates a platform for the younger generation to appreciate their musical roots.

In retrospect, Joey Ayala and his band, the *Bagong Lumad*, serve as a prime and current example of the occurrence of hybridity. Ayala's unique music style celebrates the indigenous culture and traditions of the Philippines. His songs continue to inspire and encourage young Filipino musicians to take pride in their roots and cultural heritage. Overall, the integration of traditional instruments in pop music contributes to the country's cultural diversity and preserves the rich musical heritage of the Philippines. As such, budding Filipino artists of different cultural origins or backgrounds like *Ethniku* can continue to gain inspiration



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from the works of Joey Ayala, the *Asin*, the *Ang Grupong Pendong*, and all other artists to create music that fuse differing ethnomusical instruments with contemporary popular music. Thus, paving the way for the preservation of the country's rich culture in music and further enhancing it, in the process, creating new forms and keeping its appeal to the modern generation of audiences.

Although the contentions laid down by this paper has been explicitly expressed, there are a few questions of authenticity regarding the hybridized Western and ethnic music that is gaining popularity in the country. What is the ulterior motive of artists as they hybridize their compositions and performance practices? Is it to genuinely re-introduce the diminishing preference toward ethnic music, or to gain popularity for having an oriental flavor into their craft? Do they look at their works as a ticket for a better market that equates to better royalty? Or is their gaining popularity online and other media commensurate to success both in their career and finances? As this paper was presented in the past international conference and now improved to resonate with the current time, the authors saw these questions needing to be answered. Perhaps, an empirical undertaking on this subject is ripe to answer the previous questions. Thus, hybridity may sound as a genuine popular tool to re-introduce the folk and ethnic to the society but it is not devoid of possible predatory intentions.

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