

**“BENDUM: IN THE HEART OF MINDANAO”**  
**A 29-minute Documentary Video about**  
**the Management of Tropical Forestlands**  
**by an Indigenous Tribal Community**

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*Abstract. “BENDUM: In the Heart of Mindanao” is a 30 minute documentary video about a “Lumad” community that is located near the headwaters of the Pulangi River, in the upland forests of central Mindanao. The community in Bendum has successfully struggled to sustain itself in the substantially destructive wake of commercialized logging that escalated in Mindanao after WWII and peaked during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Lumad community in Bendum has struck a very difficult balance between its immediate, market-driven needs for livelihood, and the longer-term need for sustainable forests to which its cultural and economic fate is bound.*

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION: Content and Issues

The title of a documentary film or video is an important “frame” that benefits an audience, providing a starting point for discernment of the film’s context, locale, and intended purpose of the program. Therefore, it is significant that the title of the documentary that I produced, directed and edited, “Bendum: In the Heart of Mindanao”, does specify two particular places, “Bendum” and “Mindanao”, where an indigenous, tribal community living in the tropical upland forests has struggled to re-take control of the “ancestral forestlands” surrounding their community. It is also significant that the film’s title makes no reference to the nation or country the “Lumad” inhabit—namely, the Philippines<sup>1</sup>.

The choice in titling of this film, made by the filmmaker (myself), defers to the increasingly vocal “Mindanawan” resentment of Manila-based elites who, in conjunction with local lowland politicians, who have bequeathed uneven political rule, aggressive exploitation of resources, and heavy militarization within this second largest island of the Philippines. It also reflects my choice and desire to give

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<sup>1</sup> In the Philippines, tribal peoples who are living in the upland forests are commonly and generically referred to as “Lumad”. See: Coeli Barry’s and Donna Amaroso’s “Books of Note” @ [http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue1/article\\_223.html](http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue1/article_223.html)

comparatively greater weight to “local” dimensions of the community’s problems and solutions regarding questions that concern reforestation of degraded upland forests, and cultural, economic, and political self-strengthening by indigenous tribal communities. I came to the realization that such choices were essential, not whimsical, and entirely consistent with truth, after an intuitive process of grounded action research methodology was employed in the field, prior to and during the creative and technical processes that are required for the production of a documentary.

The purpose of this paper, to be considered as a portion of my Comprehensive Examination, is to demonstrate my understanding of leadership, action research, participatory action research, systems theory, and structural inequality, through an analysis of my own experiences as a documentary filmmaker working in the Philippines. I intend to demonstrate the process of participatory action research and “praxis” that I experienced, and to generate a theory for grounded action research in documentary filmmaking that has emerged from my own experience.

Prior to my work in the Educational Leadership and Change program at Fielding Graduate University, I had no actual or practical knowledge of grounded theory, action research, participatory action, critical approaches to leadership theory, systems thinking, or most other aspects of aspects of learning, knowing or reflection in the vast reaches of Educational theory. Far from being an “expert” at this point in any of these important areas for knowledge-building, now, at least, I am able to reconstruct, interpret, understand, and perhaps more fully appreciate the meaning of my own actions during the multi-year process of developing and producing the documentary, “BENDUM”. Now, having achieved completion on the creative and technical aspects of the media production process, I have reached a point where public presentation and ongoing self-assessment and reflection are my primary concerns, while the chaos of developing, producing and managing my work in the field is over. Through reflection, critical analysis and through the emergence of theory, perhaps I can more positively know myself, discern better ways for

moving forward in the future as a producer of media documentary, and be more able to contribute meaningfully to someone else who may be struggling and sharing a similar aspiration for filmmaking.

I didn't know what to call it when it was happening, but now I can name it "systems thinking". I did know, from my own experience and from observing what was happening to those others who were struggling to survive in similar ways as I, that being a "professional" meant that one project would lead to the next and to the next, and so on. A random and chance discovery would lead to an unexpected opportunity, hopefully and sometimes. The big problem and the continuing struggle would be to be at the right place at the right time, and to keep the phone open and ringing. That is how the "career" of an independent filmmaker can be summed up---having skills that are marketable, knowing the process of how to do your specialized work, making new and better contacts continuously, keeping the phone nearby and hoping for good luck. Once the opportunity came, then it was essential to not screw up. It was imperative and non-negotiable that a "job well done" was unconditionally required. It was getting the chance to do the work that was the first and most trying challenge.

There is no job description that conveniently narrows and clarifies what is a "filmmaker", nor is there an organized method for plying such a career path, nor is there any existing blueprint that can help one to manage a career in this field. Mostly, choices are made, some good ones and too many bad ones (known only in hindsight), and consistent employment and survival are only to be achieved through preparatory training, hard work, luck and the ability to make connections with ideas that others might not discern. The constant quest is to encounter people, situations and opportunities that otherwise might go unnoticed, under-developed, or untapped. This is how it happened for me.

The tiny village of Bendum is located in northern Mindanao's Pantaron mountain range, in the upper Pulangi river basin, at the headwaters of the largest river in Mindanao. From the 1990s until the present time, the Lumad community in Bendum has been implementing strategies for community-managed re-

forestation, in response to deterioration, degradation and destruction of forestlands in the aftermath of commercialized logging. Massive deforestation and related activities that denuded the tropical upland forests did escalate and expand throughout the Philippines and tropical world, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reaching its peak in Mindanao and most other areas of the Philippines during the late 1970s and early 1980s. At this stage, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more than 90% of the primary dipterocarp and almasiga forestlands in the Philippines have been cleared and degraded. During the time of commercialized logging in the area of Bendum (like in all other ancestral forestlands throughout the Philippines), Lumad had no legal or socio-political power to stop or direct the momentum of commercialized logging within their ancestral forests in the uplands. Inevitably, Lumad were compelled to suffer the pressures and consequences of pervasive, unsustainable logging practices that characterize the present-day situation throughout the Philippines, some foreseen and some unforeseen. Specifically, Bendum, as in most other parts of Mindanao and the Philippines, has experienced substantial environmental degradation of ancestral upland forests, random road building throughout ancestral forestlands, in-migration of poor lowlanders from other parts of the Philippines to the newly-cleared upland areas of Mindanao, out-migration by displaced Lumad to more urbanized urban areas including Cebu and Manila, and the introduction of a cash economy. In the documentary there are various community members—young and old, male and female—who appear on camera to articulate in their own language (Binukid, with English voice over) about cultural and economic changes wrought by this government-backed logging, and the effect these changes have made upon their daily lives.

In response to deforestation--and in an effort to sustain their families, traditional community, ancestral forestlands and basic livelihood survival—the community in Bendum has taken positive steps to revive itself and re-establish itself. The women and men in Bendum now cultivate “sudsud”, which provides reeds for woven mats, and “abaca”, from which clothing, rope, and bags can be made. These items continue to be used within the community as they have been for countless generations, but now the hand-made products which used to be given away are now sometimes sold to outsiders for money. . The

weaving of these products for commercial sale helps the Lumad find some level of balance between “tradition and survival” in context of the cash economy, while the abaca is particularly useful because its cultivation helps to regenerate secondary forest areas because it can be effectively grown in the cleared areas where logging previously occurred. In contrast, migrants from lowland areas rely upon the cultivation of cash crops such as corn and coffee for their subsistence, thus exacerbating their need and interest to secure and control larger and larger tracts of cleared (deforested) lands that are to be converted to cash crop farming. Further, the Lumad in Bendum have been forced to change their long-held attitudes toward land “ownership” in the aftermath of commercialized logging, road building, in-migration and other forms of intrusion. Today, in contrast to previous times when land was not privately owned by Lumad in Mindanao, some land tracts within the Bendum community are owned, bought, sold, and traded by individual community members. Despite these changes and adaptations, the Lumad in Bendum still subsist at a very basic level on the outer fringes of the cash economy, but there is evidence that the socio-cultural and environmental integrity of the tribal community will be sustainable in the future. Their objective is clear: to improve their own situation in daily life while regenerating and protecting the ancestral forest that surrounds them. The documentary attempts to clarify and demonstrate the complex relationship of culture and the environment, in the context of the tribal community in Bendum through on camera interviews and live-action sequences of daily life.

To some extent, the documentary localizes this story by keeping the narrative firmly linked to the actions and voices of the people of Bendum. In other ways, the range of issues are globalized in the film by featuring outside commentators—environmentalists, “experts,” and advocates of the Lumad—who are critical of mainstream development from historical and other perspectives. The story of “degradation and development” in Bendum is similar, sometimes identical, to many other areas worldwide.

The culminating message of the film is surprisingly upbeat: specifically, in Bendum there is a marginalized upland community that has remained relatively intact, resisting disintegration and

subsequent out-migration to semi-urban and urban areas in the Philippines, and has taken tangible steps to improve its condition by cultivating specific forest crops which can help to sustain the natural environment while enabling itself to produce commercially-valued goods. The Lumad community in Bendum has struck the very difficult balance between its immediate, market-driven needs and the longer-term need for sustainable forests to which its cultural and economic fate is bound. Though the issue of legal title to the land is pressing and remains largely unresolved by the national government in Manila, the film suggests that the Lumad have proceeded to empower themselves in ways that are within their own control, without waiting for the slow-paced government to issue titles.

The longer-term consequences of living and working in a legally ambiguous condition are unexplored in the documentary. The filmmaker establishes the real possibility that Bendum's successes will accrue into a *de-facto* claim to ownership. However, the mired history of land disputes and land titling in Mindanao call for a more clearer exploration of this issue in a subsequent film. Mindanao's frontier-style development in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s resulted in frequent conflicts over land between indigenous populations, new settlers, and corporate agriculture. Changes in land-use and land-ownership (or lack thereof) lay at the root of disputes which have escalated into communal divisions between Muslims and other minorities and the expanding Christian-settler majority throughout the Southern Philippines, including Mindanao. Toward the end of the film, acclaimed investigative journalist Marites Vitug refers to animosities that result in rebellion and migration to crowded urban areas. But for the most part, the film contextualizes and frames the land-use issue in Bendum in terms of de- and re-forestation.

By locating the people of Bendum, not in reference to the Philippines but in relation to their forest and the island of Mindanao, the film evades or downplays the role of central state power. This seems very much in keeping with the current trend of treating environmental issues as both transnational and supra-national. Indeed, environmental problems very often do extend beyond a particular modern-day nation's

borders, and concern the resources which, in their original forms in nature, transcend the nations and states which are of recent making.

#### PROGRAM BACKGROUND: Methodology for the Production

In 1997, with positive support and guidance from many scholars and advocates, and after several years of previous experience as a filmmaker in various parts of the Philippines, I received a Ford Foundation Grant and a Fulbright Senior Scholar Research Grant for the purpose of developing and producing a documentary television program about the tribal community in Bendum, a community that is located at the headwaters of the Pulangi River in the primary, upland forests of central Mindanao, Philippines. As a filmmaker and in accord with the terms of the Grant(s), it was essential that I collaborate with persons affiliated with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who could effectively lead, guide and facilitate my understanding of the media program's content---a documentary TV program about "community management of upland forest resources. I was fortunate to have formed such a team of scholars, advocates and friends in the Philippines and abroad, so that I could confidently move forward with the huge task of developing, producing and completing the documentary as planned.

Once I received the Grant(s), I was able to resign from my job in California as a Producer and Editor of instructional and commercial media programs about dentistry and dental products. I packed up my complete system of professional equipment for film and video production (cameras, recorders, microphones, and computer-based non-linear editing workstation) and moved with my family to Cagayan de Oro City, Mindanao with the sole intention of successfully completing my work that I planned to do. We moved to the Philippines and were not sure when we would come back to the USA, if ever.

My family and I rented house on the coast of Mindanao, in Cagayan de Oro City, where my children could go to school and my family could live in reasonable comfort while I would travel and work in the mountains for weeks at a time. Cagayan de Oro City is south of Manila, about 2 hours by jet aircraft or

1.5 days by sea. To reach the tiny village of Bendum from Cagayan de Oro, I had to first reach the municipality of Malaybalay which require a 3 hour drive on semi-paved road. The winding and dangerous road from Cagayan de Oro to Malaybalay was not unpleasant, but it was dangerous, unnerving, and the scenery was always spectacular and instructive. Lots of deadly accidents can be seen on that road each day, yet one can also see panoramic views of geological history, the struggle of impoverished migrants living on the roadside, and the ever-present lush green that pervades the tropical world. From Malaybalay, the road is entirely unpaved and requires at least a four hour drive (depending on rain and other conditions) to reach the end of the dirt road, at the base of the mountains where Bendum is located . After off-loading my travel-ready and entirely portable system of production equipment I would hopefully meet the tribal members who were supposed to meet me at the “river crossing” with a carabao and “tartanilla” (cart). After each visit to Bendum I would make arrangements with the villagers to meet me at a specific time on a specific date, when I would return for more work on location. Most of the time there was no glitch and I usually never was stranded while waiting for portage. We would load my gear and proceed up the mountain, by foot and with my gear being pulled by a carabao and a tartanilla, uphill to Bendum. The walk through the forest was tranquil and invigorating, yet, at first, a quiet reminder of how out of shape I was. The walk was also sometimes scary for me because of irrational fear of cobras, communists or other unknowns. It was always spectacular to see and liberating to know that I was where I was, in the mountains of Mindanao!

Once I would reach Bendum, I would live in wooden hut that was clean and comfortable, with no running water, except for the nearby stream, and only a few amenities of modern life like a lantern, table and a wood stove. I would transport my own basic food and try not to be a burden upon my hosts for any of my daily needs.

I have personally learned much about “peaceful co-existence” in Bendum---for example, I co-existed peacefully with a huge spider that lived quietly in the corner of the room where I would stay, about 3 feet



from my head each night. I did not disturb the spider and it did not disturb me. I also learned that my setbacks were not caused by “the big things” that I feared such as cobras, disease, or guns. Instead, it was the tiny, harmless looking things that caused the greatest measures of grief---the tiny blood-sucker cockroach that visited the top of innocent and shiny head one night causing me to become incredibly delirious and ill, or it might be the pretty dark clouds on the horizon that quickly turned into a monsoon, killing my planned weekly schedule for shooting and forcing a total shutdown situation for days and days. I loved every minute of my time in Bendum and I found the people, young and old, to be good, intelligent, generous, honest, and peaceful. I learned so much and I hope that I have given something meaningful in return.

My initial motivation in deciding to push forward with the production of this documentary and with the major adjustment that was required for my family and I (leaving the professional-personal security of southern California for the rigors and insecurity of life as an independent documentary filmmaker in the Philippines) and my continuing intention throughout the project was unique in the context of documentary filmmaking practice and methods. I wanted to develop, write, shoot and edit this documentary on location, and I wanted to test myself in a creative, technical and film-business sense by working mostly alone throughout all phases of production. I transported my AVID Media Composer workstation for post production editing and all the necessary technical tools for production from California to the location in the Philippines (Betacam SP camera and accessories, analog and digital audio recording equipment, portable lights, a complete set of Audio-Visual peripherals that were rack-mounted in three shock mounted cases, with a total weight of 800 pounds). Until now, it is most common for a producer to “post-produce” (edit and finalize the completed program) all of the footage acquired in the field on location in a some comfortable, well-equipped studio in Los Angeles, Hong Kong or London. In Mindanao, I would be very far from any technical (or creative) support while making this documentary, and I would have to rely upon my own experience, intuition, and resources whenever problems would arise---and in the southern Philippines it was sure that problems were inevitably going to arise! Perhaps a

very adventurous producer-director-editor might shoot a documentary in a provincial area of the Philippines and perhaps might also allow some of the post production to happen in an urbanized area like Cebu or Manila, but it would absolutely NEVER be considered by any rational-minded filmmaker to transport expensive, complicated and cumbersome post production equipment to the location, especially an under-developed and sometimes unstable place like Mindanao. I was going to be on my own on this project, with Ford and Fulbright funds at stake, and with my reputation and self-esteem held in the balance. I had my mind set on the idea that I would self-reliantly arrive in Mindanao (Cagayan de Oro City, northern Mindanao) like a self-contained 1990s-Louis B. Mayer, with my camera and a complete yet portable set of professional equipment for all aspects of the media production process, work by myself on location to research and understand the program's content and story, visualize the film's content for location production, train at least a few English-speaking students (women and men) from the local universities and colleges who might have an interest in some aspect of the media production process, and somehow complete my work at a standard of excellence and quality that could be considered "international". The completed work speaks for itself and I hope it demonstrates that I was successful in some ways.

The grant period was initially and optimistically scheduled to extend for 7-12 months in total. This was to include all of the pre-production research, consultation, field work, on-site visits and location production in Bendum and surrounding forest areas, and the completion of the post production for the documentary (editing, animation, mixing of audio, and completion). Some of my US-based teachers, friends and colleagues called me "heroic", while others called me "stubborn and crazy". I had no doubt that the risk was obvious and huge, but I had no reservations about taking the challenge of relocating my family (wife and two young children), my precious assets in the form of professional (and expensive) media production equipment, and my foreseeable future to the distant island of Mindanao, primarily so that I could self-sufficiently realize and work through the creative, technical and business aspects of media production, while trying to achieve a "broadcast-quality" completed work.

“BENDUM: In the Heart of Mindanao”

Color. English. 29 min.

Produced, Directed and Edited by Anthony Collins

IE Film and Video Company, 2002

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