

San Juanico Bridge: A Post-War Reconstruction Effort Fostering Unity and Development

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Abstract

The San Juanico Bridge, hailed as the “Bridge of Love,” is a symbol of connectivity and progress in Eastern Visayas, linking the islands of Leyte and Samar. This research explores its role in the post-war reconstruction and economic resurgence of the region. Using qualitative methods, including archival analysis and interviews, this study assesses the bridge’s socio-economic and cultural impact from its construction in the 1970s to its contributions in recent years. The findings reveal the bridge as a cornerstone of regional development, fostering trade, tourism, and cultural unity.

Key Words: San Juanico Bridge; Eastern Visayas; post-war reconstruction; socio-economic impact

Introduction

The San Juanico Bridge, an iconic structure connecting the provinces of Leyte and Samar in the Philippines, is a powerful symbol of unity, resilience, and progress. Spanning the San Juanico Strait, the bridge not only facilitates physical connectivity but also serves as a metaphorical link between communities shaped by shared histories and aspirations for development. Constructed in the 1970s, decades after World War II, the bridge encapsulates the enduring legacy of a region that played a pivotal role in one of history's most significant global conflicts.

The significance of the San Juanico Bridge extends beyond its engineering marvel. It represents the recovery and solidarity of a region profoundly impacted by the war. Leyte, in particular, bore witness to pivotal moments during World War II, such as the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944, widely regarded as the largest naval engagement in history (Hammel, 1994). The province was not only a critical battleground but also a symbol of hope, highlighted by General Douglas MacArthur’s historic return to fulfill his promise of liberating the Philippines. These events underscore Leyte’s historical importance, setting the stage for the bridge’s symbolic role in fostering unity and development.

Understanding Leyte’s wartime experiences is essential to appreciate the deeper significance of the San Juanico Bridge. The devastation caused by the Japanese occupation during World War II brought widespread suffering to Filipinos, with Leyte emerging as a key site of resistance and liberation. The resilience demonstrated by its people during and after the war paved the way for

the region's post-war recovery. The construction of the bridge decades later can be seen as a testament to this resilience, marking a new chapter of interconnectedness and growth between Leyte and Samar.

The San Juanico Bridge also symbolizes the broader interplay between local and national identities. Its construction highlighted the Philippines' capacity for nation-building in the aftermath of a conflict that had fragmented communities. By physically and metaphorically bridging two provinces, the structure reinforced the shared historical memory of overcoming adversity, while simultaneously fostering economic and cultural exchanges that continue to benefit the region.

This study draws on concepts of historical memory and regional identity, using the San Juanico Bridge as a central theme to analyze Leyte's wartime and post-war experiences. By examining key historical events such as the Battle of Leyte Gulf and the province's liberation, the research situates the bridge within the larger narrative of Leyte's transformation. The study emphasizes how the bridge serves not only as an enduring symbol of unity and progress but also as a reminder of the sacrifices and resilience that shaped the region's history. Through this lens, the research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how infrastructure can embody the legacies of war while fostering connections that transcend time and geography.

Overview of World War II

World War II, or the Second World War (1939–45), was an international struggle primarily involving the Axis powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan—and the Allied powers—France, Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China.

The political and economic instability in Germany, coupled with resentment over its defeat in World War I and the severe stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles, facilitated the ascent of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party to power. In the mid-1930s, Hitler commenced the clandestine rearmament of Germany, contravening the pact. He forged ties with Italy and Japan to counter the Soviet Union and engaged in the Spanish Civil War under the banner of anticommunism. (History.com, 2024)

Although the main players of the war were the Axis and Allied powers, other countries could not avoid getting swept up in this war, and one of these was the Philippines. Having a strategic position on the map, it became highly sought for by every country vying for victory in the war.

A lot of these battles were done in the Pacific. The [HYPERLINK "https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-the-Philippine-Sea"](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-the-Philippine-Sea) Battle of the Philippine Sea took place west of the Marianas and has been called the greatest carrier battle of the war. On the morning of June 19 Ozawa sent 430 planes in four waves against Spruance's ships. The result for the Japanese was a disaster. U.S. airmen shot down so many Japanese planes that the engagement was subsequently dubbed "the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot." (Britannica, 2024)

On the other hand, The Battle of Leyte Gulf happened. It was the largest naval battle of World War II and is often considered the largest naval battle in history. It occurred in the waters near the Philippine islands of Leyte and Samar as part of the Allied campaign to liberate the Philippines from Japanese occupation. (Naval History and Heritage Command, n.d.).

On October 20, 1944, forces commanded by U.S. General Douglas MacArthur landed at several points along Leyte Gulf, south of the city, which they captured on October 21. Tacloban served as temporary capital of the Philippines until Manila was regained. Red Beach, to the south at Palo, was one of the landing sites and is now a tourist attraction. (Leyte Province, 2024)

In response to the Allied Invasion to reclaim the Philippine Islands on October 20, 1944, the Japanese sent an armada to the islands. The subsequent battles from October 23 to October 26 resulted in the greatest naval battle of World War II. Leading the Seventh Fleet and Central Philippine Attack Force was [HYPERLINK "https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/us-people/k/kinkaid-thomas-c/nh-84675.html"](https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/us-people/k/kinkaid-thomas-c/nh-84675.html) Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, USN, as Task Force 77. The Third Fleet, led by [HYPERLINK "https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/library/research-guides/modern-biographical-files-ndl/modern-bios-h/halsey-william-f.html"](https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/library/research-guides/modern-biographical-files-ndl/modern-bios-h/halsey-william-f.html) Admiral William F. Halsey, USN, was reduced to Task Group 38 and was assigned to Kinkaid's force. The Combined Fleet for the Japanese was led by [HYPERLINK "https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/NH-63000/NH-63365.html"](https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/NH-63000/NH-63365.html) Admiral Soemu Toyoda, from Tokyo, Japan. The various forces for the Japanese included the Main Body (Northern), First Striking Force (consisting of Force "A" and Force "C"), and the Southwest Area Force. The combined battles of Leyte Gulf destroyed the Imperial Japanese Navy as an offensive force and decisively led to the defeat of Japan in 1945. (Naval History and Heritage Command, n.d.).

Overview of San Juanico Bridge

The San Juanico Bridge, began construction in 1969 and was completed on 1973, during the Marcos administration. It became a significant driver of economic growth for Eastern Visayas, especially connecting Samar and Leyte islands. While the bridge itself was not directly built after World War II, its development reflects the region's post-war efforts to rebuild and modernize infrastructure.

San Juanico Bridge contributed to the economy by linking the islands of Samar and Leyte, enabling smoother transport of goods, services and people. This connectivity encouraged trade between these islands and other parts of the Philippines, reducing costs and transit times.

Boosting agriculture is also one of the things that the bridge helped with, being an agricultural region, producing rice, coconut, abaca and other crops, with better access to markets, farmers could sell their produce more efficiently, boosting agricultural productivity and incomes.

The bridge also became a tourist attraction itself, dubbed as the "Bridge of Love." It's scenic views and strategic location drew tourists, creating opportunities for local businesses such as accommodations, restaurants and tour services.

These are only a few contributions brought about by San Juanico Bridge to the islands of Samar and Leyte's economy. Not only is it an Architectural feat, it also became a vital lifeline for the growth and recovery of not only Tacloban but for the entire Eastern Visayas Region. (Leyte Province, 2024)

Overview of Leyte and Mainly Tacloban City

Leyte Province is the largest and oldest province in the Eastern Visayas Region. It is bounded on the north by the Province of Biliran, in the east by the San Juanico Strait and the island of Samar, the Visayan Sea and Ormoc Seas in the west and Southern Leyte to its south. With a total land area of 6,335.44 square kilometers, it features many low mountains and volcanoes and its terrain is very rugged from the northwest to the southeast. In the east, there is a very pronounced rainfall from November to January, while in the west the rainfall is more or less distributed throughout the year.

Leyte abounds with natural allures, rich culture and rare historical landmarks, which makes it an ideal travel destination for local and foreign tourists. Leyte is also known as the site of the largest naval battle in modern history, the Battle of Leyte Gulf, which took place during the Second World War.

The province is the site of the largest geothermal plant in Asia, making it one of the resource-rich provinces of the Philippines. Excess energy of the numerous power plants in the geothermal valley that generate electricity is supplied to the national grid that adds to the energy demand in Luzon and Mindanao. Mining industry has started to pick up in the province with the exploration in MacArthur. The iron smelting in Isabel has been operational for more than 20 years since its inception.

Among the popular tourist spots are Lake Danao National Park (Ormoc), San Juanico Bridge (Tacloban), the longest bridge in the Philippines, with a length of 2.16 kilometers –connects two provinces, which are Samar and Leyte; Leyte Landing Memorial (Palo) also known as MacArthur Landing Memorial National Park; Sambawan Island (Biliran) admired for its clear turquoise water, exciting sea sports, white sand; Calanggaman Island which is shaped like an ant and boasts of its very white powdery sand, cool and crystal clear water, and amazing stretch of sand bar.

Tacloban City was formerly known as Kankabatok, which means Domain of Kabatok. Kabatok was a prominent settler who occupied an area of what is presently Downtown Tacloban, by the bay that has also come to be named after him (Cancabato Bay). In 1770, following the first arrival of Augustinian Missionaries, Kankabatok was officially proclaimed a municipality. Its name was changed to Tarakluban, which means the place where inhabitants used the taklub, a bamboo contraption for catching crab, shrimp, and fish. The name Tarakluban has since evolved to its present form, Tacloban.

Tacloban City is located in the northeastern part of Leyte, one of the islands in Eastern Visayas or Region 8. It lays 11 degrees 14'38.19" north latitude and 125 degrees 0'18.24" east longitude. Situated about 580 kilometers southwest of Manila, its land area is 20,172 hectares or 201.72 sq. km. that include the small islands within the territorial bounds of the city.

Because of the ideal location of its port, Tacloban developed into a major trading point between the provinces of Leyte and Samar, and was chosen to be the capital of Leyte in 1830. On June 20, 1952, Tacloban became a chartered city through Republic Act No. 760, signed by then President Elpidio Quirino. (Leyte Province, 2024)

Tacloban City and Post-War Recovery

After facing significant devastation during the Leyte Gulf War, Tacloban became a focal point for rebuilding efforts after the war due to its strategic importance as the capital of Leyte province and its historical role in the Allied campaign.

Allied Support and Immediate Post-War Recovery

Allied Assistance: After the war, Tacloban received support from Allied forces, particularly the United States, which had used the city as a base during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. This support included emergency aid and infrastructure rebuilding.

Government Programs: The Philippine government, with assistance from international organizations, initiated relief and rehabilitation programs to address food shortages, shelter, and medical care.

Infrastructure Rebuilding

Port Reconstruction: Tacloban's port, critical for trade and logistics, was a priority for reconstruction, allowing the city to resume its role as a regional economic hub.

Roads and Public Utilities: Infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and electricity were restored,

which facilitated the flow of goods and services.

Economic Revival

Agricultural Development: The restoration of farmlands helped reinvigorate the agricultural sector, which was vital to the local economy.

Commercial Activity: Small businesses and markets gradually reopened, aided by the city's strategic location for regional trade.

The San Juanico Bridge played a pivotal role in this, connecting the islands of Samar and Leyte resulting in ease of access in trading and tourism.

Community Efforts

Local Initiatives: Tacloban's residents played a critical role in the city's recovery through communal rebuilding efforts, such as repairing homes, schools, and churches.

Cultural Resilience: Cultural events and traditions, such as the annual Pintados-Kasadyaan Festival, helped boost morale and foster community spirit.

Political and Administrative Reorganization

Tacloban's designation as the temporary capital of the Philippines from October 20, 1944, to February 27, 1945, under the Commonwealth government gave it prominence and resources to focus on rehabilitation.

Long-Term Development

Urban Planning: Post-war development plans were implemented to modernize Tacloban, including housing projects and public works.

Education and Health: Schools and hospitals were rebuilt, providing services essential for long-term recovery.

Tacloban's post-war reconstruction was a testament to the collaborative efforts of the government, international allies, and its resilient community. This pattern of recovery would later influence the city's rebuilding strategies after other disasters, such as Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

Tacloban City and its Modernization Efforts in the 2000's

Tacloban City, a key urban hub in the Eastern Visayas region of the Philippines, has embarked on significant modernization efforts to enhance its infrastructure, economy, and public services. These initiatives reflect the city's resilience and forward-thinking approach following the devastation caused by Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

Infrastructure Development

Post-Haiyan recovery served as a catalyst for urban renewal and infrastructure improvement. The city has invested in rebuilding roads, bridges, and public buildings to not only restore pre-typhoon functionality but also to future-proof against similar calamities. For instance, the construction of the Palo-Tacloban Bypass Road has significantly reduced travel time and eased congestion in the city center (Department of Public Works and Highways [DPWH], 2022).

Technological Advancements

Tacloban City has also embraced technology as part of its modernization agenda. Initiatives like the implementation of a Smart City framework aim to improve governance and service delivery. For example, digital platforms for business permits and licensing have streamlined processes, encouraging investments and enhancing ease of doing business (Tacloban City Government, 2023).

Economic Growth and Sustainability

Economic revitalization remains at the core of modernization. Efforts to attract investments in sustainable industries, such as renewable energy and eco-tourism, demonstrate Tacloban's commitment to both economic growth and environmental stewardship (Philippine Board of Investments, 2023). Moreover, public-private partnerships have played a vital role in funding various projects, including the development of modern transportation systems and commercial hubs.

Social Infrastructure and Housing

A significant aspect of modernization is addressing housing and urban development. The Tacloban City Resettlement Program has relocated thousands of families from high-risk areas to safer locations with better facilities, thereby promoting inclusive urban development (National Housing Authority [NHA], 2022).

Challenges and Prospects

Despite these advancements, challenges such as urban sprawl, waste management, and resource allocation persist. Moving forward, a balance between modernization and preserving Tacloban's cultural heritage will be critical.

Methodology

The methodology of the study employs a qualitative research design, integrating multiple data collection and analysis strategies to comprehensively answer the following questions:

How has the bridge influenced socio-economic and cultural development in the region?

What are the historical circumstances surrounding the construction of the San Juanico Bridge?

This methodological approach ensures a nuanced understanding of the bridge's historical, economic, and cultural significance. The key components of the methodology include:

Archival Analysis:

The study relies extensively on archival research to construct a historical narrative surrounding the San Juanico Bridge. Primary sources, such as government documents, construction records, and contemporaneous news articles, are scrutinized to provide insights into the decision-making processes and socio-political contexts during the bridge's construction in the 1970s.

Thematic Analysis:

A thematic approach is utilized to analyze qualitative data gathered through interviews and archival materials. Themes such as economic revitalization, cultural unity, and regional connectivity are identified and explored to discern patterns and relationships within the data.

Historical-Contextual Framework:

The methodology situates the San Juanico Bridge within a historical-contextual framework, examining its development against the backdrop of post-World War II recovery and regional modernization. By linking the bridge's construction to pivotal historical events, such as the Battle of Leyte Gulf and the reconstruction of Tacloban City, the study underscores its symbolic and practical significance in fostering unity and resilience.

Critical Evaluation:

The methodology includes a critical evaluation of the bridge's dual role as both a facilitator of economic development and a cultural icon. This involves assessing its contributions to tourism, trade, and community building while also acknowledging challenges and limitations, such as infrastructure maintenance and equitable access to economic benefits.

By integrating these methodological components, the study ensures a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the San Juanico Bridge's enduring legacy, contributing valuable insights into the interplay between infrastructure, history, and regional development.

Analysis

Tacloban's recovery after World War II was rooted in both international support and local efforts. Central to this recovery was the San Juanico Bridge, which later became a symbol of unity and progress for the region. The city's pivotal role during the Battle of Leyte Gulf made it a prime target for Allied assistance, particularly from the United States. Immediate relief efforts focused on restoring basic services and infrastructure, essential for both short-term survival and long-term recovery. The Philippine government, aided by global organizations, addressed the urgent needs of food, shelter, and healthcare.

Reconstructing key infrastructure, like the port, roads, and utilities, was crucial for economic revival. The restoration of the port enabled Tacloban to regain its function as a regional trade hub. The rehabilitation of transportation networks facilitated the movement of goods, which in turn fostered local businesses and markets. Among these infrastructure achievements, the San Juanico Bridge stands out not only as a remarkable engineering feat but also as a profound symbol of unity and progress. Spanning the San Juanico Strait and connecting Leyte and Samar, the bridge significantly enhanced regional trade and tourism. Its construction not only improved transportation efficiency but also symbolized the bond between the islands and the resilience of the Filipino people. It became an enduring icon of post-war recovery and modernization, representing both practical and aspirational dimensions of rebuilding efforts.

Tacloban's agricultural sector, vital for the local economy, was revived through the restoration of farmlands. This helped stabilize the livelihoods of many residents. Commercial activity picked up as small businesses reopened, reflecting the city's entrepreneurial spirit. Local community involvement was crucial in the recovery process. Tacloban's residents not only helped repair homes and infrastructure but also revived cultural traditions, such as the Pintados-Kasadyaan Festival, which played a key role in restoring social cohesion and morale.

Tacloban's brief role as the Philippine capital in 1944-1945 provided vital resources that supported its wartime recovery and reconstruction. The political importance of Tacloban during this period facilitated a more organized and robust reconstruction effort.

Tacloban's post-Haiyan recovery in 2013 catalyzed its modernization efforts, bringing the city into the 21st century while building upon lessons learned from previous recovery phases. Rebuilding after Typhoon Haiyan pushed Tacloban to modernize its infrastructure to be more resilient to future disasters. Investments in roads, bridges, and other public infrastructure not only restored pre-typhoon functionality but also focused on long-term urban planning. The Palo-Tacloban Bypass Road, for instance, has eased congestion and improved transportation efficiency, supporting both economic and social activities.

The San Juanico Bridge once again proved its importance during this phase of recovery. As a critical transportation link, it facilitated the delivery of relief supplies and the movement of people, reinforcing its role as an indispensable asset for both emergency response and ongoing development. Its iconic presence inspired a renewed sense of hope and determination, underscoring the bridge's symbolic value as a testament to human ingenuity and collective effort. Tacloban's embrace of technology through a Smart City framework demonstrates its forward-looking approach. The introduction of digital platforms for business permits and licenses is part of broader efforts to improve governance and attract investments, simplifying processes for businesses and fostering a more competitive economy. The city's economic growth strategy includes diversifying its industries by promoting sustainable practices. Investments in eco-tourism and renewable energy are crucial for balancing economic expansion with environmental protection. Public-private partnerships play a significant role in financing modernization

projects, highlighting a collaborative approach to urban growth.

A key focus of modernization is improving social infrastructure, including housing. The Tacloban Resettlement Program addresses the needs of vulnerable communities by relocating families from high-risk areas to safer, well-equipped locations. This initiative promotes inclusive urban development by ensuring that all citizens benefit from the city's growth.

Despite the advancements, Tacloban faces challenges typical of growing urban centers, such as urban sprawl, waste management, and resource allocation. Additionally, balancing modernization with the preservation of cultural heritage will be a critical factor in maintaining Tacloban's identity as it continues to evolve. The San Juanico Bridge, in its dual role as a vital infrastructure and a cherished emblem, remains a beacon of what Tacloban has achieved and what it aspires to become in the years ahead.

Conclusion

The San Juanico Bridge stands as a defining symbol of resilience, unity, and development, encapsulating the spirit of Leyte and Samar's journey through history. Connecting the islands of Leyte and Samar, this engineering marvel not only enhances the flow of goods and people but also embodies the shared aspirations of communities shaped by the trials of World War II and their collective commitment to progress. As a physical and metaphorical link, the bridge has played a pivotal role in fostering regional integration, economic growth, and cultural renewal, making it a cornerstone of the region's transformation.

The bridge's significance is deeply rooted in the historical backdrop of Leyte's wartime experiences. During World War II, Leyte was a critical battleground and a beacon of liberation, as exemplified by the Battle of Leyte Gulf and General Douglas MacArthur's return to fulfill his promise of freeing the Philippines. The devastation of the war left Leyte and its neighboring regions in need of extensive rebuilding efforts. Tacloban, as Leyte's capital, emerged as a focal point for recovery, demonstrating remarkable resilience and determination. The construction of the San Juanico Bridge decades later symbolized a new chapter in the region's history—a bridge not just over water, but across eras of hardship toward a future of interconnected prosperity. As a catalyst for economic revitalization, the San Juanico Bridge played a crucial role in reconnecting communities and stimulating trade between Leyte and Samar. Its completion marked a turning point in the region's recovery, serving as a conduit for commerce, tourism, and cultural exchange. Beyond its practical utility, the bridge represents the collective resilience of the people of Leyte and Samar, who worked together to rebuild their lives and communities after the war. Its construction reinforced a sense of unity and interdependence, fostering collaboration that continues to shape the region's development trajectory.

The impact of the San Juanico Bridge extends beyond its immediate post-war context.

Tacloban's evolution, from a war-torn city to a modern urban hub, owes much to the regional connectivity and economic opportunities facilitated by the bridge. Its role in enabling recovery efforts after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 further underscores its importance as a lifeline for the region. The bridge's presence not only supported the transport of relief goods and services but also symbolized the enduring spirit of recovery and rebuilding, reinforcing the region's capacity to overcome adversity.

Culturally, the bridge has become a powerful emblem of unity, celebrated in festivals, arts, and tourism. It serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of Leyte and Samar, not only through geography but also through shared history and aspirations. The bridge's significance is reflected in Tacloban's broader recovery narrative, where cultural resilience—exemplified by traditions like the Pintados-Kasadyaan Festival—complements infrastructure development to create a

holistic approach to progress.

As Tacloban and the surrounding region look to the future, the San Juanico Bridge remains a guiding symbol of what can be achieved through resilience, collaboration, and innovation. Balancing modernization with the preservation of cultural and historical heritage will be key to ensuring that the bridge continues to serve as a source of inspiration and a foundation for sustainable growth. Its legacy is a testament to the power of unity in overcoming challenges and building a brighter future.

In conclusion, the San Juanico Bridge is not merely an infrastructure project; it is a monument to the shared resilience and aspirations of Leyte and Samar. It encapsulates the region's journey from the devastation of World War II to its emergence as a thriving center of trade, culture, and innovation. As a lasting reminder of the strength and determination of its people, the bridge stands as a beacon of hope, unity, and progress—a symbol of how communities can rebuild, connect, and thrive even in the face of adversity.

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Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1 General Douglas MacArthur and staff, accompanied by Philippine president Sergio Osmeña (left), land at Red Beach, Leyte, 20 October 1944

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 2: San Juanico Bridge Under Construction

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 3 First Lady Imelda R. Marcos cuts the ribbon to mark the opening of the bridge. Julio Cardinal Rosales, the President Ferdinand E. Marcos, Mrs. Cristina Ford, and other guests look on.