

On the Return of the Balangiga Bells: A Multifaceted Analysis on its Effect to the Balangigan-on

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Abstract

The three Balangiga Bells, seized by the American troops in 1901 as war trophies during the Philippine-American war were finally returned to the parish church of Balangiga, Eastern Samar, Philippines on December 15, 2018. After 117 years of persistent efforts by the Philippine government, the Catholic Church, private individuals and people of Balangiga, the bells were finally returned by the United States government. This study explored on the experiences of Balangigan-on who witnessed the turn-over ceremony of the bells within the context of socio-cultural, political and economic aspects using thematic analysis which include historical remembrance, emotional reactions, cultural preservation, dynamics of tourism and collaborative governance. The return of the bells made a significant reconnection of the historic past of Balangiga, its local heroes and the Balangigan-on. The bells are living pieces as part of cultural heritage, resilience, bravery and unity espoused by the grandparents of Balangigan-on. Its repatriation provided economic opportunities for Balangigan-on in the tourism industry particularly in the product and service sectors. The Local Government Unit of Balangiga is on its way in coming with a better tourism development plan to assist the heritage tourism industry of the place including the construction of pasalubong center and preservation of Capt. Valeriano Abanador's house. The Balangigan-on fostered pride, unity in the preservation of heritage, cooperation between people in the church and the local government.

Keywords: Balangiga bells, Balangigan-on, cultural heritage tourism, cultural preservation, Balangiga Encounter, Capt. Valeriano S. Abanador

I. INTRODUCTION

The Balangiga Encounter was a significant historical episode during the Philippine-American War, occurred on September 28, 1901, on the island of Samar. The bells rang to signal the attack by the locals led by Captain Valeriano Abanador against American troops using bolos, resulting in the deaths of 48 American soldiers. This victory was marked by the Balangigan-on as the "Balangiga Encounter". In retaliation, enraged American General Jacob Smith ordered his troops to burn houses, destroy properties, and kill those capable of bearing arms. From the American perspective, this was termed the "Balangiga Massacre," resulting in approximately 2,500 deaths among the Balangigan-on and the seizure of three church bells as war trophies.

The Balangiga encounter created a landmark which highlights the bravery and resilience of the Filipinos in their struggle for independence. The encounter exemplifies the strategic and tactical ingenuity of the locals that resulted to a profound impact of colonial conflicts on the Philippines' social and political landscape. In the context of this study, the Balangiga Encounter provides a rich historical backdrop that underscores the themes of resistance, cultural identity, and the consequences of colonial rule. It offers a lens through which to explore the broader implication of the Philippine-American War, including the socio-political dynamics and the enduring legacy of colonialism on Filipino society. By examining this event, the study gains a deeper understanding of the historical context that shapes the current socio-political environment in the Philippines.

Philippines gained independence from the American colony in 1946 but the church bells remained in possession by the United States for over centuries. To the Balangigan-on, the bells are not simply pieces of religious artifacts, but a rich story of the struggle for freedom, not only by the locals of Balangiga but to the Filipinos as a nation. The bells are national heritage, sacred and religious relics and symbolizes Filipino pride and sense of identity.

Due efforts to reclaim the bells started from 1958 to 2016 initiated by the Philippine government, religious organizations, and other concerned groups and individuals for the return of the bells to the Philippines (Migration Standpoint, issue 01,2017). After 117 years, the bells were returned to the rightful place at the Balangiga church in 2018 through a peaceful negotiation between the Philippines and the United States. In a speech during the turn-over ceremony at Balangiga Eastern Samar, President Duterte said:

“The bells are returned and it was really because of the fervent prayers of the entire Filipino nation.”

-Duterte, Dec 15, 2018

Since the return of the Balangiga bells to the Philippines in 2018, little had endeavored in probing its effects to the municipality and its locals. An inquiry delving on the lived experiences of the Balangigan-on, selected government officials, and workers in the church was explored within the context of socio-cultural, political, economic effects.

In a telephone interview with the Balangiga municipal tourism officer by the Philippine News Agency in 2021, she said that: *“tourism-related businesses have popped up, accommodation facilities have been improved while roads leading to upland ecotourism sites have been paved since 2019, owners of lodging house have invested in improving their facilities, a souvenir shop was set up, and locals have invested in opening coffee shops. It also encouraged investors to open motorcycle shops and a home appliance center in our town.”* She further confirmed that the recorded arrival of 2,000 guests in 2017 skyrocketed to 100,000 from December of 2018, the pre-pandemic years to June of 2019 (Campanero, 2021).

Studies on the effects of heritage tourism by Aguda, Tamayo & Barlan, Jr. (2013); Cruz (2017); Castillo et al (2015); and Agnes & Gamueda (2019) were analyzed and yielded the following findings:

1. **Positive Impact on Culture and Community:** Heritage tourism had positive effects on the preservation of culture, heritage, arts, and the environment. It also promoted peace, increased pride in local culture and the area, and facilitated better development planning for the municipality.
2. **Economic Development through Cultural Preservation:** The preservation of cultural heritage served as a catalyst for economic development by creating livelihoods and employment opportunities for residents. It emphasized the importance of stakeholders' interest and participation in heritage conservation.
3. **Socio-cultural Benefits:** Heritage tourism contributed to the preservation of ancestral houses, historical sites, food, and material products, as well as local festivities. It fostered a sense of pride in the community's history and enhanced the oral communication skills of the locals.
4. **Economic Contribution and Tourist Satisfaction:** Cultural sites positively impacted the income of local residents. Tourists expressed satisfaction and appreciation for historical places.

These findings underscore the multifaceted benefits of heritage tourism for communities and highlight the importance of preserving cultural heritage. In the context of the current study, which aims to examine the socio-economic and cultural impact of the return of the Balangiga Bells on the Balangiga community, the insights from heritage tourism studies provide a valuable framework. By understanding how heritage tourism positively affects communities, this study aims to explore how the return of a significant historical artifact, such as the Balangiga Bells, can contribute to cultural preservation, economic development, and community pride. The objective is to assess the broader implications of this event on the community's social cohesion, economic opportunities, and cultural identity.

II. METHODS

The descriptive method was employed using a researcher-developed interview guide with open-ended questions, which were pilot-tested to ensure clarity for the interviewees. Individual interviews and focus group discussion were conducted to gather in-depth insights. Data from both primary and secondary sources were generated to triangulate the respondents' responses. These sources included news reports, articles, annual audit reports, accessed via the internet; photos of guest names in the logbook; and, with the consent of family members, captured pictures of the photographs and memorabilia of Capt. Valeriano Abanador.

Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were utilized to select the respondents. To ensure sectoral representation within the community, the inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) residents and natives of Balangiga who experienced and witnessed the turnover of the Balangiga Bells to the municipality; (2) local government officials, community leaders, and religious/church workers who played a role in the return of the bells; (3) any surviving descendants of veterans or local heroes/heroines of Balangiga; and (4) direct and indirect stakeholders such as vendors, tricycle drivers, and students.

Ethical procedures were rigorously followed, including obtaining written permission and approval for conducting interviews, securing permission for video interview recordings, and serving informed consent forms with signatures. To secure the identity of respondents, responses were transcribed and coded.

III. RESULTS

Interview transcriptions analyzed within the context as historical remembrance, emotional reactions, cultural preservation, dynamics of tourism, and collaborative governance.

Respondents

A total of 18 respondents participated in the study. Thirteen (13) were interviewed individually or in pairs, and five (5) community residents joined the focus group discussion. All respondents witnessed the repatriation of the bells on December 15, 2018. The composition of the respondents included: two (2) descendants of local heroes, two (2) elected officials, a church bells receptionist, a church leader, two (2) college students, two (2) elementary pupils (a boy and a girl), a tricycle driver representing the drivers' association, and a government-assisted souvenir shop owner. The focus group discussion participants were women who were born, are permanent residents, and work in the municipality of Balangiga."

Historical Significance and Commemoration

Every 28th day of September, the municipality of Balangiga in Eastern Samar, Philippines, commemorates 'Encounter Day' to honor the historical significance of the Balangiga Encounter. The celebration includes performances such as re-enactments or dance dramas. Re-enactments were traditionally held at the elementary school, featuring props like houses to be burned and a ship, while dance dramas are performed at the municipal plaza stage. These performances involve local participants of all ages.

Interviewee with AD1 revealed that the strategy during the attack was devised by their Apoy Bale (a nickname for Capt. Valeriano Abanador). He planned the tactics, such as hiding bolos inside a coffin and bamboo tubes, and having men wear dresses to appear as if they were going to church, concealing the bolos around their waists. This story was passed down to them by their father, Juan Abanador.

The words of college students coded as SS1 and SS2: *"Actually, we are interested to know more about the biography of Capt. Valeriano Abanador. As students, we must know his life and accomplishments. For the future generations, we have to preserve his memories and legacy. It has an impact not only to Balangigan-on but to the Filipinos in general. I think we also have to remember and celebrate the birthday of Capt. Valeriano Abanador."*

AD2, a descendant of a lone heroine who played a significant role in the encounter further emphasized that he supports the revival of the annual re-enactment presentation.

WG1 deeply felt the impact of the historical events every time she watches the re-enactment. She found it heart-wrenching to witness the portrayal of burning houses, American soldiers killing the young and old, men and women, and their livestock and pets. The re-enactment also depicted people being shot while trying to row away, capturing the tragedy of the massacre.

The history of the Balangiga Encounter epitomizes a collective effort of bravery and unity among the local heroes. The descendants' memories of their grandfather's heroism, Captain Valeriano S. Abanador, remain unwavering. The Balangiga Encounter has profoundly impacted the Balangigan-on, influencing their sense of self-identity, pride, and aspirations. It empowers and inspires the younger generation to emulate the actions of their predecessors who took part in this historical event. The re-enactments and dance dramas serve as tangible manifestations of the enduring legacy of the Balangiga Encounter, reflecting the community's unwavering commitment to its preservation.

Emotional Responses

Emotions surged among Balangigan-on on the return of the bells, witnessing reenactments/dance drama, and the resonance of historical events were captured in the video.

VM, a government official said: *"No amount of happiness and fulfillment can I ever ask for. During my younger years, my heart grieved as I performed my character in the re-enactment. But now, I feel like I'm whole again. The feeling is different now as we celebrate the commemoration of the Encounter Day because the bells had been returned, and in any way, we will never allow anyone to take it from us again."*

Witnessing the turn-over ceremony, Interviewee AD1 recalled: *"I got mixed feelings...I shed tears especially when the President strung the bell, I remembered his heroism (Capt. Valeriano Abanador on the event that took place."*

From a young generation of Balangigan-on, coded ES1 quoted: *"I am very happy when the bells were returned. Our teachers in our school (Balangiga Elementary School) taught us about the Balangiga Encounter. Now we can see the bells for real, unlike before we only see them in pictures."*

Interviewee MR is a mother, a church worker and a former performer said: *"I felt great happiness. But I cried deeply having the thought of what my mother had experienced during the time of the massacre. Indeed, I am very happy to witness the return of the bells."*

The ceremonial turnover of the Balangiga Bells to the Balangiga Church elicited the community's collective pride, unity, and excitement. These emotions were evident in their expressions and narratives. The return of the Balangiga Bells fostered a joyous reunion, evoking memories and feelings of contentment and wholesomeness. The transcripts demonstrated a profound sense of joy within the community, evidenced by many individuals' inability to suppress their emotions. After a period of one hundred years without hearing the sound, the ringing of the bells became a cause for celebration and a reconnection to the past. The act of President Duterte ringing the bell profoundly heightened the community's sense of collective and momentous joy among those present.

Cultural Preservation and Performance

Commemorative performances in Balangiga take the form of either re-enactments or dance dramas. Re-enactments are performed at the elementary school premises, providing detailed depictions of the events of the Balangiga Encounter and Massacre. These performances feature casts acting through voice-overs and include props such as an American ship, a coffin being carried, and houses being burned. In contrast, dance dramas are staged at the Balangiga plaza, showcasing artistic expressions through choreographed dance and song.

On her view with the dance drama, AD1 expressed, *“Yes, the dance drama was well performed, but I felt something missing especially the ending. Unlike the re-enactment, it was heart taking...I really feel contented.”*

In the focus group discussion (FGD), participants observed that the shift from re-enactments to dance dramas led to a noticeable decline in visitor numbers. Many visitors previously came to Balangiga specifically to watch the re-enactments. Participants also favored the re-enactments as they provided a more vivid reminiscence of the actual historical events of both the encounter and massacre.

VM explained that the shift from re-enactments to dance dramas was primarily due to budget constraints, particularly regarding the props burned during the re-enactments. Another factor was the performers' costumes. To save time on rehearsals, the original cast members are often used. However, over time, these cast members have grown and gained weight, resulting in costumes that are now too tight or unfit.

A descendant of the lone heroine AD2 emphasized that during the re-enactment/dance drama, the role of *“Doday Sana”* was also briefly highlighted. In fact, he is crafting a theatrical script intended solely to further highlight the participation of the late heroine. Additionally, he suggested the inclusion of Doday Sana's memorabilia in the local museum.

Cultural preservation involves a collective effort to maintain and sustain the protection of unique cultural practices and beliefs. The rendition of performances within the framework of the Balangiga Encounter commemoration serves as a compelling testament to the community's unwavering commitment to safeguarding and sustaining their rich heritage. From the perspectives of the participants, the re-enactments were more heart-stirring, symbolic, poignant, and breathtaking.

Tourism and Economic Impact

Interviewee coded as AD1 described the municipality after the return of the bells, saying: *“...business started to flourish, tourists came to Ballangiga buying souvenir items, hotels and resorts with swimming pool were built....”*

Identified as TD, a member of the transport group mentioned that the return of the Balangiga Bells led to an increase in passengers requiring their services. This surge in tourists and visitors, who came to see the bells or swim at the pool, resulted in a significant augmentation of his income.

Interviewee coded as WSS, an owner of a souvenir shop, stated: *‘Many tourists would visit Balangiga, which has become a tourist spot known for the bells. These tourists would purchase our local products, with the most popular items being key chains featuring the bells and wooden carved sets depicting the three bells.’*

Meanwhile, VM shared: *“Currently, with the Sangguniang Bayan (SB), we have proposed to reconstruct the house of our local hero, Valeriano Abanador, due to its potential impact on tourism and, consequently, the income of our municipality. We have also proposed to establish a pasalubong center in our municipality. We have many untapped resources and various groups with unique products that have not been given due attention. Developing these assets could significantly benefit our municipality.”*

VM further stated: *“The Bells' repatriation caused a major change in Balangiga. Previously, the town had few visitors, resulting in little tourism earnings. Balangiga villagers first feared and hopeless that the bells would not be returned. With its return, it drawn more tourist visits which helped improve the income of our locals as well as the municipality.”*

Bells served as a catalyst for the emergence of enhanced well-being and progress within the local populace. The return of the bells made a significant change in the town's economic landscape. The transformation was due to the influx of tourists, as depicted in the transcriptions. The resurgence of the bells has invigorated the production of local products and services leading to a noticeable economic advantage and opportunities felt by the small entrepreneurs and service providers in the municipality.

Collaboration Between the Government and the Church

The transcripts highlighted a strong and mutually beneficial cooperation between the municipal government and the local Catholic church through administrative coordination.

From the interviewees on the collaboration and cooperation between the local government and the church:

“The Balangiga Encounter celebration is an activity of the municipality. The Balangiga Bells on the other hand belongs to the church. But whatever the activities the church may have, we give support.” (MM)

“Actually, even from the time of the encounter, the church was involved in planning for the attack against the Americans. We see to it that every time LGU has activities, we see to it to involve the church. We extend whatever help we can provide them, in same way that church also extend whatever help they can give us.” (VM)

“Yes, I attended a mass where the homily is about the encounter.... and before the start of the program, the local parish would celebrate first with a mass. Also whenever there are special occasions in the municipality, the bells are rang.” (WCL)

The church played a crucial role in the historical triumph during the Balangiga Encounter of 1901. The return of the bells symbolizes unity within the Balangiga community. The collaboration between the government and the church in Balangiga serves as a prime example of harmonious and mutually supportive cooperation. This partnership between the municipal government and the local Catholic church exemplifies their shared determination to preserve and transmit the town's valuable heritage to the present generation and future ones.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The return of the Balangiga Bells was a significant historical event in 2018. It had profound effects on the people of Balangiga and its municipality. This multi-faceted analysis has explored various dimensions, shedding light on its social, cultural, and economic implications for the Balangigan-ons. The following conclusions are drawn:

Historical, Cultural Reconnection and Heritage Preservation

The return of the Balangiga Bells symbolizes a profound reconnection between the Balangigan-ons and their historical and cultural heritage. These bells hold immense historical and emotional significance, and their return has reignited a sense of pride, cultural identity, and wholesomeness among the community members. To ensure the preservation and promotion of Balangiga's rich heritage, prioritizing municipal budget appropriations for investments in pasabulong centers, cultural museums with memorabilia of local heroes and heroines, and artifacts of encounter. Locate and construct other landmarks for more tour sites within the municipality.

Furthermore, effective educational programs, including advertising campaigns, blog creation, and the distribution of informational flyers, will highlight the significance of the bells and the broader history of the region. These initiatives will promote recognition among both local and foreign tourists, fostering a deeper appreciation of Balangiga's historical and cultural legacy.

Economic Effect and Tourism Development

The return of the bells to Balangiga brought an influx of tourists and visitors to the municipality, boosting the local economy along with the craft, food, transport, and entertainment industries. The local government can prioritize budget allocation for human and natural resource development through government-funded livelihood training, preservation and beautification of natural resources, product development and innovation, marketing strategies, and training of local tour guides to provide visitors with better learning and fulfilling experiences. Re-enactment presentations, being more enticing, can attract more tourists to witness these events.

Moreover, the tourism industry can be further enhanced by the Tourism Office through the creation of a comprehensive and efficient Tourism Development Plan. This plan should include a coordinated and systematic flow of activities encompassing transport, historic site visits, food providers, a pasabulong center, and relaxation/entertainment within a day's tour visit. The longer visitors stay, the more money they spend, contributing to the local income.

Community Pride, Engagement and Solidarity

The return of the bells has fostered a profound sense of unity and pride among the Balangigan-ons. This local pride and community involvement are evident in their enthusiastic participation in commemorative presentations, their dedication to maintaining peace and order, fostering a friendly and warm ambiance, and ensuring the beautification and cleanliness of their surroundings. These voluntary civic engagements highlight the community's collective ownership of their local history.

The Balangiga Encounter encapsulates the Filipino desire for freedom and nationalism. Therefore, it is recommended that the historical importance of the bells and the contributions of Balangigan-on heroes and heroines during the Filipino-American War be included in the primary, secondary, and tertiary education curricula in the schools of Region 08. This inclusion will ensure that future generations learn, remember, and understand the significance of these local heroes and artifacts.

Research and Documentation

It is further recommended that future researchers may engage in on the impact of the bells from the experiences of non-Balangigan-on such as visitors or tourists, on the documentation of the bells' history. This will help enrich record of local history of Balangiga and its Bells.

As a final note, the return of the Balangiga Bells has had a transformative impact on the people of Balangiga. This event serves as a reminder of the power of historical artifacts to bring about reconciliation, economic opportunities, and a renewed sense of cultural identity. By preserving and leveraging the significance of the bells, Balangiga can continue to reap the benefits of this historic event in years to come.

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