

Original Article

Echoes of the Nabontogan Bell: Folklore, Cultural Memory, and Identity in Catamlangan

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Abstract. While folklore studies in the Philippines often focus on well-documented epics, myths, and legends from widely recognized cultural groups, many localized narratives remain underexplored—especially those rooted in small, rural communities. The scarcity of scholarly attention to these micro-level oral traditions creates a gap in understanding how they function as living repositories of cultural memory and identity. In particular, the tales of the Nabontogan Bell—passed down quietly within the community of Catamlangan—have yet to be systematically studied despite their deep resonance in local consciousness. Addressing this gap, this study examines the Nabontogan Bell as a key element of Catamlangan’s cultural memory and identity. Rooted in the researcher’s personal journey and oral traditions passed down by family, the study examines how folklore preserves intergenerational memory and reflects shared values through a qualitative-ethnographic approach grounded in Sikolohiyang Pilipino—narratives from Brgy. Catamlangan, Pilar, Sorsogon, were gathered through observation and interviews. Using Covar’s Pilipinohiya and the banga (jar) metaphor of Filipino personhood—*labas* (outer self), *loob* (inner self), and *lalim* (spiritual depth)—the study analyzes the cultural and social meanings embedded in the stories. Bascom’s classification of folk narratives also guided the identification of their functions within the community. Findings reveal that Spanish colonial influences and indigenous spirituality shape the legends surrounding the Nabontogan Bell. These oral traditions serve as forms of entertainment and as tools for moral instruction, cultural affirmation, and social cohesion. They embody core Filipino values, including *kapwa*, *bayanihan*, reverence for elders, environmental stewardship, and strong spiritual faith. Transmitted across generations, the narratives help sustain cultural identity and continuity. The study also highlights the potential of integrating folklore into educational materials to enhance literacy and cultural awareness. Ultimately, the Nabontogan Bell narrative preserves a vital piece of local heritage and contributes to the formation of community identity and cultural education.

Keywords: Cultural identity; Ethnography; Folklore; Nabontogan bell; Oral tradition; Sikolohiyang Pilipino.

The construction and development of astilleros (shipyards) during the Spanish colonial period significantly shaped the settlement patterns and cultural identity of coastal communities in the Philippines. According to Schurz (1939), the Spanish government leveraged Filipino shipbuilding expertise by establishing astilleros in strategic coastal and riverside locations, including Donsol and Pilar in Sorsogon. These settlements grew around shipyards, which became hubs of economic and administrative activity. Archaeological work by Bolunia (2014) revealed that these shipyards were typically located at river mouths or sheltered coves, with

evidence of specialized functions: Donsol for construction, repair, and smelting; Binanuahan as an administrative site; and Panlatuan for shipbuilding and smelting. Artifacts such as slag, metal nails, and ceramics further confirm the historical significance of these sites.

However, the Spanish-Moro Wars severely disrupted the flourishing shipbuilding activity. These long-standing conflicts led to widespread destruction of shipyards and the displacement of communities (Dery, 1989). In response to frequent raids, Filipinos built fortified enclosures and tall church bell towers that served as watchtowers. The raids, often timed to coincide with seasonal monsoons, instilled fear and forced many coastal inhabitants to move inland. As a result, the physical and cultural traces of these once-thriving communities began to fade from memory. Despite the richness of this history, many residents today, including the researcher, remain unaware of the legacy embedded in their communities. The researcher's interest in the folklore surrounding the Nabontogan bell in Catamlangan, Pilar, Sorsogon, prompted a deeper exploration of this cultural heritage. This golden bell, believed to be submerged in the Nabontogan River, is central to local folklore but lacks formal documentation. As Bascom (1965) asserted, Folklore serves as a mirror to a society's values, thoughts, and actions. By studying such stories, individuals can connect with their cultural roots and gain insights into community identity and worldview.

Amali (2014) emphasized that stories reflect lived experience, embodying people's values, fears, and aspirations. These narratives are not merely entertainment—they play significant roles in education, cultural preservation, and the transmission of societal norms. Amali's study of Idoma folktales also demonstrated how folklore can serve as an educational tool for child development and moral formation. Folklore continues to play a relevant role in modern contexts. Vicerra and Javier (2013) showed that ghost stories shared online by Filipinos function as forms of social control, reinforcing respect for the environment and caution despite modernization. Dundes (2007) further described folklore as "autobiographical ethnography," reflecting how communities define themselves from within. He argued that studying folklore allows for a deeper, more authentic understanding of a group's cultural psyche.

In the Philippines, such narratives are deeply tied to identity. The folklore of Catamlangan, including the tale of the Nabontogan bell, offers a unique opportunity to uncover the community's cultural dimensions—*labas* (outer self), *loob* (inner emotional world), and *lalim* (spiritual depth). The river's name, "Nabontogan," derived from the Bikol word "bontog" (to submerge), symbolizes both the literal and the metaphorical submersion of a vital part of local history. Located in the southeastern part of the Bicol Peninsula, Pilar is a coastal municipality in Sorsogon, with a population of over 75,000 as of the 2020 census (PhilAtlas, 2022). Barangay Catamlangan, with 1,132 residents and 274 households, borders communities in both Sorsogon and Albay. Historical records indicate that Pilar was once part of the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade network but was abandoned due to frequent attacks (Dery, 1989). Spanish missionaries, beginning their mission in Gibalon, eventually reached Catamlangan and included it in the Abucay-Catamlangan mission (Our Lady of the Pillar Parish Pastoral Council, 2008).

Although Philippine folklore has been the subject of various ethnographic and literary studies, much of the focus has been on widely known epics, myths, and legends from major ethnolinguistic groups, leaving localized narratives underrepresented in academic research. This absence limits our understanding of how small, rural communities use oral traditions to preserve historical memory, navigate cultural change, and reinforce identity. The tale of the Nabontogan bell, though deeply ingrained in Catamlangan's oral history, has yet to be systematically documented, analyzed, and situated within the broader context of Filipino cultural psychology. Addressing this gap is crucial not only for safeguarding intangible heritage but also for providing a richer, community-grounded perspective on the interplay between folklore, history, and identity formation.

Hence, this study seeks to document and analyze the tale of the Nabontogan bell as an essential part of Catamlangan's cultural memory. The researcher's journey of discovery, rooted in oral storytelling passed down by his father and grandparents, serves as a deeper exploration of identity, heritage, and belonging. The purpose of this study is to preserve this folklore and examine its significance in shaping cultural identity, intergenerational memory, and the community's collective consciousness. In doing so, the research aims to highlight the broader relevance of folklore in understanding historical and contemporary Filipino life.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative-ethnographic research design, rooted in the principles of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*, to explore the rich cultural heritage of the Philippines, with a specific focus on the community of Brgy. Catamlangan in Pilar, Sorsogon. Through observation and in-depth interviews, narratives were collected and analyzed using Covar's concept of *Pilipinohiya*, which provides a culturally grounded understanding of Filipino culture and social realities (2016). Bascom also classified folk narratives to categorize and analyze the collected stories, identifying their forms and functions within the community. This framework was used alongside the *banga* (jar) metaphor to describe Filipino personhood, culture, beliefs, and traditions, ensuring a cohesive and comprehensive interpretation. By integrating folklore, the study examined how these narratives contribute to cultural preservation, community identity, and social cohesion. This approach allowed for a deeper exploration of the interplay between individual and collective experiences within the cultural context of Brgy. Catamlangan.

Research Participants

According to the 2020 PSA census, Sorsogon has over 800,000 residents (PhilAtlas, 2022). One of its municipalities is Pilar. Pilar is a first-class coastal municipality with a population of more than 75,000 according to the 2020 census. Catamlangan, as one of its barangays, has a population of 132 (2020) and 274 households (2015). PSA noted a decline in the population growth rate. Catamlangan shares a common border with the San Vicente Daraga, Albay; De Vera, Donsol, Sorsogon; Ibaugan, Daraga, Albay; San Antonio, Cabilagan, and Leona, Pilar, Sorsogon (PhilAtlas, 2022). To document the narrative of the golden bell, the researcher employed "*pagtatanong-tanong*" (querying) to identify key informants and "*pakikipagkwentuhan*" (sharing stories) to gather their accounts. Although the story is not widely known, many Catamlangan residents are familiar with it. The researcher continued querying until data saturation was reached, ensuring the collected data was rich and comprehensive. Participants were selected for their ability to provide thorough, culturally significant narratives about the Golden Bell. Long-time residents, those with familial ties, and individuals who moved to Catamlangan upon marriage were selected as they were likely to have a deeper understanding of the tale. This diverse pool of informants provided valuable insights and unique perspectives, enriching the narrative.

Research Instruments

This qualitative study employed a semi-structured interview guide as the primary research instrument. This approach allowed for flexibility in data collection while ensuring consistent coverage of key themes. The interview guide incorporated open-ended questions designed to elicit rich narrative data from informants, focusing on their biographical information, including length of residence, the context in which they learned the narratives, and their reflections on the significance of these narratives. This multifaceted approach aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the informants' experiences and perspectives. To further enhance data collection and provide a visual record of the research process, the interviews were also recorded on a mobile phone. This supplementary method provided a richer contextual understanding of the interview setting and the informants' nonverbal cues, potentially enhancing the qualitative data analysis. Video recording, however, was conducted with the informed consent of all participants, ensuring that ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the data collection phase.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher obtained verbal and written permission from the barangay and key informants in Catamlangan to conduct a study using *pakikipagkwentuhan* (storytelling) and site visits to the location where the bell was believed to be submerged. With assistance from one of the participants, the researcher identified and located informants, primarily senior citizens, using a list provided by the senior citizen president. A semi-structured interview guide, reviewed by a thesis committee, probed the origin, events, and meaning behind the golden bell narrative. Data collection took more than three months and included audio or video recordings, photographic documentation, handwritten notes, and field reflections. Afterward, interviews were transcribed in the vernacular, translated into English, and analyzed using structural and textual coding. The narratives were categorized using William Bascom's classification of prose narratives to identify themes, patterns, and variations in the folklore. Lastly, the researcher analyzed the cultural roles of the tales using Bascom's Functions of Folklore and interpreted deeper meanings through Covar's *Teorya ng Banga* (Covar, 2016), focusing on collective memory, identity, and worldview.

Data Analysis

To analyze the transcripts, the researcher followed the qualitative coding procedures of Saldaña, Miles, and

Huberman (2014), treating codes as labels that capture the essence of data. Manual coding was applied due to the unavailability of electronic tools to identify recurring themes, commonalities, and variations across narratives. The process began with organizing and labeling printed transcripts, followed by applying preset and emergent codes. Axial coding was used to relate codes and form categories, which were repeatedly reviewed alongside field notes and memos to refine themes. New codes emerged, helping to classify tale typology, distinguish metafolklore, and identify narrative variants. These categories supported a deeper analysis of the narratives' functions and structure using Bascom's and Covar's frameworks. Secondary sources such as historical records and research journals were consulted to strengthen the findings.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for qualitative ethnographic research. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, the elders of Brgy. Catamlangan were fully informed of the study's purpose and procedures, including the use of audio and video recordings. Participation was voluntary, and those who declined to be recorded were respected without consequence. To ensure data privacy and confidentiality, all personal and sensitive information shared during interviews was treated as strictly confidential. Identifiable information was anonymized or excluded, and all data were securely stored to prevent unauthorized access. No physical, psychological, or emotional harm was inflicted upon participants during the study. Cultural sensitivity was evident throughout the interviews, with recognition of the importance of oral tradition and participants' lived experiences. The research followed the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and non-maleficence to uphold the dignity, rights, and welfare of all participants.

Results and Discussion

Exploring Narrative Structures and Types in the Tales

Based on Bascom's classification of prose narratives, the informants' tales can be categorized as legends. Bascom defines legends as stories believed to be true but set in a more recent past than myths. These secular tales often feature elements like buried treasures, ghosts, and saints (Bascom, 1965). Despite some skepticism, the people of Catamlangan regard the golden bell, believed to be a buried treasure submerged in the Nabontogan River, as a genuine relic of the Moro raid on Catamlangan.

Table 1. *Bascom's Guide to Distinguishing Narratives*

Forms of Prose Narrative	Myth	Legend	Folktale
1. Conventional Opening	None	None	Usually
2. Told After Dark	No Restrictions	No Restrictions	
3. Belief	Fact	Fact	Fiction
4. Setting	Some Time and Some Place	Some Time and Some Place	Timeless, Placeless
5a. Time	Remote Past	Recent Past	Any Time
5b. Place	Earlier or Another World	World as it is Today	Any Place
6. Attitude	Scared	Sacred or Secular	Secular
7. Principal Character	Nonhuman	Human	Human or Nonhuman
8. Formal Features	Prose Narratives	Prose Narratives	Prose Narratives

The narratives reveal the animistic beliefs of pre-colonial Filipinos, who believed in unseen beings and nature spirits, blended with Christian teachings introduced by the Spaniards (Vicerra & Javier, 2013; Estrada, 2020). The story's setting during the Spanish colonial era provides historical authenticity and situates the legend within a specific cultural milieu. Narrative perspective plays a pivotal role in shaping readers' or listeners' understanding of events, characters, and themes. Whether through first-person immersion, third-person objectivity, or multiple perspectives, viewpoint influences engagement, empathy, and interpretation. Appreciating narrative perspectives enriches understanding of literary works and deepens analysis of character development, plot intricacies, and thematic exploration.

Observer Narrative

The narrative "Pagbontog sa Bagtingang Bulawan" is told from a third-person perspective, with the narrator recounting events as an external witness not directly involved in the plot. This viewpoint, passed down from elders to informants, adds depth to the storytelling by offering an objective lens for exploring characters, themes, and events. It allows the audience to draw their conclusions and make independent interpretations. According to Barthes (as cited in Thomas, 2016), this narrativizing process helps shape perceptions of both the self (loob) and the external world (labas). In the tale, the Moros are depicted negatively as opportunistic and disruptive, while

the Spaniards are portrayed positively as peaceful saviors who brought the golden bell to Catamlangan. This binary portrayal reinforces societal stereotypes, with the term “may pagka-moros” evolving to imply disrespectful and merciless behavior. As a result, the narrative influences how people perceive identity and character within the community.

The observer narrative shows how folklore is passed down through generations, preserving cultural heritage and personal interpretations. Informants such as Nanay Eny and Nanay Suring recounted that they inherited the tale from their parents and elders. Nanay Malyn credited retired teacher Pacencia Marifosque-Malle for helping preserve and spread the story. This process of oral transmission allows key themes to endure while less meaningful details may disappear over time. As MacNeill (2013) noted, such variations enrich the community's cultural fabric. In one variant shared by Nanay Suring (P1), the tale is set during the Japanese Occupation and presents a unique perspective that does not refer to the Moros. The story focuses on an individual interacting with the bell in the church belfry, adding depth to the narrative.

“I learned the story as a child during the Japanese era. The bell was submerged in the river because someone had played with it. When attempts were made to recover it, the river’s water rose, heavy rain fell, and the river flooded. The golden bell had come to be owned by theengkanto.”

This variant shifts the focus to the Japanese Occupation, offering a distinct cultural and temporal lens for the narrative. A different storyline emerges in another version of the narrative shared by Nanay Linda, aged 74. According to her account, the bell mysteriously disappeared during the Spanish colonial period and was rumored to have been submerged in the river. This narrative, distinct from other versions, omits references to the Moros and focuses instead on the historical context of Spanish rule. The mystery surrounding the bell’s disappearance and its supposed submersion adds depth and intrigue to the evolving folklore.

Character Narrative

This narrative exemplifies metafolklore, in which narrators are also participants, allowing them to share personal experiences and offer deeper insights into events. Informants like Tatay Walter emphasize their direct involvement, making the narrative intimate and reflective of their inner thoughts and emotions. Although the story failed Manuel’s vertical test due to its basis, it passed the horizontal test because multiple versions of the recovery attempt circulated in the community. Metafolklore enables readers and listeners to connect with the character’s *isip* (thoughts), *loob* (emotions), and *labas* (actions), creating a deeper engagement with the narrative. Through this lens, the story reveals the individual’s psyche and societal norms, values, and moral dilemmas, as shown in Tatay Casiong’s account of community disagreements during the bell’s recovery. Tatay Casiong’s story illustrates the conflict between personal desires (*loob*) and community values (*labas*). While some residents hoped to recover the bell for financial gain, the community ultimately chose peace over materialism. Similar sentiments were echoed in Tatay Winning’s (P2) account.

We persevered in drying up the river. We were flooded twice. Those who wanted to leave, left.

Despite repeated failures, the community opted to preserve harmony rather than risk inner conflict. These character-driven narratives enrich the storytelling tradition by incorporating personal experiences, societal norms, and moral dilemmas, offering a multidimensional view of the Nabontogan Bell tale. Metafolklore plays a vital role in shaping how narrators respond emotionally (*loob*) and act externally (*labas*), as Barthes explains in Thomas (2016). These narratives allow individuals to express their inner thoughts and feelings, as seen in Tatay Willy, who earned respect from elders for his insights into the drying of the Nabontogan River. This topic had never been addressed. Similarly, Tatay Casiong and Tatay Walter expressed deep disappointment over the failed bell recovery, underscoring their emotional attachment to the tale. The narratives offer meaningful insights into the cultural, historical, and supernatural importance of the golden bell of Catamlangan. They frequently mention the ruins of the old church and the Spanish occupation, grounding the stories in local history and community values. Stories of church construction and neighborhood watch systems reflect the collective spirit and unity of Catamlangan’s residents. Submerging the golden bell to protect it from Moros exemplifies bayanihan, reinforcing cultural values, animist-Christian beliefs, and the preservation of heritage, peace, and faith through shared traditions.

Categorization of Narratives

The narratives surrounding the golden bell can be classified into two typologies: historical legends and cultural legends. This classification is primarily based on the characters' actions, the stories' timeline, and recurring motifs.

Historical Legend

Solaberrietta (2025) defines historical legends as narratives that merge factual and fictional elements within specific historical and geographical contexts. Despite their supernatural components, communities often accept these tales as accurate (Jason, 1968; Jason, 1971). Marks (2004) adds that these stories evolve to reflect the values of the narrators and their communities. Using this framework, Pag-bontog sa Bagtingang Bulawan qualifies as a historical legend. It recounts how a golden bell was submerged during the Spanish colonial period, blending historical facts—such as the presence of Spaniards and Moros—with fictional claims, like its sound reaching distant places. Though informants lack direct knowledge of the bell or Pilar's early history, their belief is rooted in ancestral oral tradition, reflecting reverence for elders and heritage (*loob* dimension). Historical accounts of Moro raids in the Bikol region (Dery, 1989; Mallari, 1989) enrich the context, though these were unfamiliar to informants. The legend is a microcosm of Pilar's identity, carrying cultural memory (*lalim* dimension) and lived or shared stories (*labas* dimension). Today, local history is untaught mainly, yet the tale of the bell continues to echo across generations as a symbol of Pilar's past. Informants linked the bell's origins to early Spanish priests or local elites.

"I thought the Spaniards brought it."

"A wealthy family, the Manjares, donated it."

"Its sound, they say, could be heard as far as Kamomorosan."

"Its sound is said to be truly exceptional."

Informants believe that the bell attracted Moro's interest not just because of its gold but also because it symbolized Christian identity. Belfries once served spiritual and strategic purposes, alerting towns of impending attacks. Possessing such a bell could have given raiders an advantage. During conflicts, people used bells and instruments such as balalong and bodiong to signal danger (Mallari, 1989; Dery, 1989). In response to these threats, military officer Jose Ma. Peñaranda later established the telegrafo, a network of signal posts that mirrored the bell's function as a warning system (Mallari, 1989). To protect it, the people of Catamlangan submerged the bell in the Nabontogan River, meaning "where the bell was submerged."

"Several residents of the barangay helped carry the massive bell into the river."

This act parallels legends like Myanmar's Dhammazedi bell (Fisher, 2014; Htay, 2014) and the golden bell of Buhi, Camarines Sur. While Buhi's story names Don Silverio Arcilla as the bell's donor, Pilar's version relies on stories passed down through generations. Such similarities across legends may reflect shared cultural motifs or historical influence. Kelly (2016) notes many bell legends across the Philippines, often emerging during colonial resistance. "The rescue and concealment of the bell is a recursive metaphor of native self-determination and resistance" (Kelly, 2016, p. 2). Though some are skeptical, others firmly believe unseen forces protect the bell.

"There are indeed unseen beings there."

"They said it was enchanted. That is why the river could not be dried up."

These beliefs and memories surrounding the Nabontogan bell highlight the community's enduring connection to their cultural heritage, expressing resistance, spirituality, and the sacredness of ancestral narratives.

Cultural Legends

Cultural legends preserve a community's identity, transmitting values, moral beliefs, and historical experiences (Harini et al., 2024). These stories—such as Pag-anap sa Kampanang Ginto—are not just tales of the past but evolving narratives shaped by both tradition and modernity. They connect generations through symbols, characters, and shared experiences (Agocuk & Çiftçi, 2021), and they become especially significant amid cultural erosion (Moll, 2002). Many residents of Catamlangan were driven by a collective longing to validate the legend and perhaps to gain prosperity by discovering the golden bell. This desire stems from their cultural framework's *loob* (inner self or intent) dimension, reflecting emotional and spiritual investment in the legend.

"We were arguing over gold we had never seen."

"Different individuals visited the place and dived into the river to find out if indeed there was a golden bell."

These statements show that despite the bell's unseen and mythical nature, people still deeply believe in its existence and cultural value. Although locals employed modern search techniques, they did not abandon ancient practices. The presence of spirit mediums, rituals, and offerings to appease unseen entities reveals how animistic and precolonial beliefs remain integral.

"They brought a medium who could talk with the unseen spirits. The medium recited prayers while offering a slaughtered chicken."

Such actions reflect the *lalim* (depth or spiritual dimension) in Filipino culture, where nature spirits and ritual sacrifices are believed to influence real-world events. Modernity is blended with tradition in lighting, electricity, and machinery. These efforts, though laborious, indicate a serious commitment from the community.

"How many times have there been attempts to dry up the river. They temporarily installed electrical service to install lights. They attempted to dry up the river using machines. The work was arduous."

Despite lacking formal resources, the community organized multiple expeditions—evidence of strong collective memory and cooperation in pursuit of their shared cultural symbol. Several informants reported mysterious events during recovery efforts, reinforcing the belief that supernatural forces guard the bell. Reports of sudden storms and physical harm contributed to a growing mystique around the legend.

"When the river was being dried up and when the handle of the bell could be seen, suddenly there would be heavy rains, thunderstorms, and flooding. The people ran away out of fear."

"They could not retrieve it because their hands would develop wounds."

These accounts suggest a spiritual protective mechanism surrounding the bell, consistent with the animistic belief that nature spirits defend sacred objects. Protectiveness over the bell extended beyond the spiritual realm. Locals physically intervened against outsiders who attempted recovery efforts without proper consent, using weapons to assert their authority.

"The problem was not only the barangay officials but also the residents, who brought bolos to confront the outsiders. So, the outsiders had to leave."

"We wondered, because they said that before, when someone tried to recover the bell, there would be heavy rains, thunderstorms...However, this time, none of it happened."

"The barangay captain permitted recovering the bell, but the residents objected, claiming it should be preserved as a remembrance."

These episodes highlight how the legend has become a symbol of communal identity, not just a mystical story. The resistance demonstrates the community's *labas* (external behavior)—protective, cautious, and loyal to their cultural heritage. The community's actions embody a complex character: united, respectful of tradition, and committed to heritage, yet also wary and at times aggressive toward external intervention. These contrasting behaviors reflect both deep-rooted loyalty and a fear of cultural disruption. Such multi-dimensional responses emphasize the community's value of oral histories and shared symbols.

The Nabontogan legend finds echoes in stories from other cultures, such as Myanmar's Dhammazedi bell. Both feature attempts to retrieve sacred bells protected by supernatural forces and accessed only through spiritual intermediaries. However, differences arise in religious context—Myanmar's rooted in Buddhism and the Philippines in a blend of precolonial animism and Christian belief. In Myanmar, workers reportedly consulted astrologers and dragon spirits during recovery efforts. In Buhi, another Filipino tale states that the golden bell will reveal itself only to someone who truly loves. These comparisons highlight how similar legends reflect distinct spiritual and cultural traditions shaped by history and geography.

Folklore Essential Role in Shaping Communities and Lives

The researcher applied the functions of folklore, as defined by Bascom, as cited in McNeill (2013), to analyze the legend of the golden bell in the Nabontogan River. Bascom emphasized that folklore fulfills four primary functions: entertains, validates cultural practices, teaches moral lessons, and imposes social control. McNeill (2013) added a fifth: folklore also helps individuals cope with anxiety and uncertainty. Although the golden bell stories are not strictly urban legends, they serve similar functions, particularly as cautionary tales that continue to shape communal beliefs and behaviors. The legend primarily serves as captivating storytelling that entertains and preserves local identity. Narratives passed down orally from elders, such as those told by the late teacher Pacencia “Manay Chang” Malle Marifosque, captivated audiences, especially youth. These tales contained descriptions that invoked amazement, especially the sound of the bell.

“The bell sounded so good.”

“I cannot believe it! Its sound is far-reaching.”

Listeners were equally fascinated by environmental cues, such as thunderstorms and the river’s sudden swelling, that accompanied the bell’s stories.

“They said there was a downpour when the river was about to dry. Hence, they could no longer recover the bell. Oh my God!”

These sensory elements helped make the narrative a community-wide spectacle, performed during fiestas or school activities. The bell’s mystique persists, much as Norshahila Ibrahim (2015) observed that traditional stories are adaptable to youth-oriented multimedia. Beyond entertainment, the tale serves as a warning against danger. The river’s depth and mystery generated fear among locals, discouraging children from playing near it.

“This is called Nabontogan because no matter how much they tried, they could not dry the river. It is really dangerous.”

“The place was scary because of the golden bell. There were lots of things to fear there.”

“When we went there, I just looked at the river and felt scared. They said still water is deep water. The water was silent. I did not touch it. I told my children the river was deep...”

This echoes the findings of Vicerra and Javier (2013) and Amador (2011), who showed that supernatural stories often serve as a form of social control by embedding fear in everyday spaces. Another key function is promoting respect for nature. Several informants believed that retrieving the bell would bring destruction.

“If that (bell) were recovered, the place would suffer. It would be devastated.”

“Catamlangan’s environment will be destroyed if the bell is recovered.”

These comments illustrate a liminal, ethical stance—leaving the bell untouched to preserve ecological balance, aligning with Ahi et al.’s (2014) assertion that folktales reflect humanity’s impact on nature. Folkloric attempts to dry the river and retrieve the bell metaphorically suggest humanity’s disruptive behavior toward the environment. The story also preserves animistic practices from precolonial times. Belief in unseen beings (“*mga taw na indi nakikita*”) echoes indigenous spirituality:

“Someone is hindering the recovery of the bell. Perhaps a tawong lipod (unseen being).”

Such beings were believed to block the bell’s recovery unless properly appeased through mediums or “*para-saro*”:

“They brought with them a medium who was an expert in communicating with the unseen beings.”

“They spoke with the spirits, appealing for permission to recover the bell.”

Offerings of chickens further show the blend of animistic rituals with Christian practices.

“They have to appeal to the spirits first to dry up the river. Others do this through blood offerings.”

"Many chickens were slaughtered – white chickens, black chickens – as offerings."

Alegre (2022) observed that such practices point to the continuity of babaylan traditions in modern-day storytelling. The golden bell narrative embeds historical memory and fosters behavioral norms rooted in religious conversion and colonial experiences. The blending of pre-Hispanic and Christian elements creates a culturally syncretic identity.

"That is why Catamlangan has a rich history. The church was built during the Spanish colonization."

Stories explaining the town's name provide cultural anchoring. One tale involves a carpenter *"naga-katam,"* misheard by a Spaniard who thought it was the place's name. Another version attributes the name to the *"langan"* tree, known for its fine wood, illustrating how oral tradition links community identity to natural and colonial elements, as also noted by Gilbas (2018). Finally, stories about the Catamlangan church reinforce Spanish colonial influence. It was built in the style of Cagsawa Church and served as a spiritual and political hub.

"The original church wall resembled those of Cagsawa. The Spaniards inhabited this place."

"The church here was ancient. Catamlangan was once the heart of Pilar."

Its bell, possibly hidden during Moro raids or the Filipino-American War, echoes the fate of other historical bells, such as Balangiga's.

"If the story is not true, it will not surface."

As Scalice (2018) noted regarding other cultural artifacts, the golden bell of Catamlangan may symbolize hope, memory, and resistance.

The People of Catamlangan and Their Golden Bell

"Labas" Dimension: Exploring Human Personality and Expression

In the legend of the golden bell at Nabontogan, community members rely on sensory cues, such as physical appearance and behavior, to judge character, often labeling outsiders as *"ibang lahi"* or *"dayuhan,"* particularly those associated with the attempted theft of the bell, such as the *"Kastila"*. Those who used mediums to locate the bell were referred to as *"mga bisaya daa ito,"* or foreigners, reinforcing their outsider status. Individuals drawn to the bell's sound were called *"mga moros,"* a term carrying historical trauma due to violent Moro raids in Sorsogon (Dery, 1989). These narratives tend to cast Muslims negatively, which, according to Bobis (1994), reveals the need to question imposed identities and explore self and other through deeper, internal reflection. The contrasting labels *"ibang lahi," "dayuhan,"* and *"mga moros"* versus *"kapwa," "taga-loob,"* and *"habitantes"* highlight how colonization shaped cultural notions of identity, belonging, and community.

Preserving the golden bell legend in Nabontogan relies heavily on the wisdom and storytelling of the community's elders, or *gurang*, who are seen as cultural bearers.

"The elders, when they were still alive, would share these stories."

"How come that I would be asked, when he was more expert than I? It is because I was the first to dry up the Nabontogan river."

The narrative also reflects Covar's concept of *labas*, in which natural phenomena such as lightning and river swelling are interpreted as signs from unseen beings, whose presence is acknowledged through rituals involving a *para-saro* (medium) and sacrificial offerings, such as chicken blood. These rituals serve as an outward (*labas*) expression of inner spirituality (*loob*), signifying deep respect and harmony with unseen forces, and persist today in practices such as saying *"tabi-tabi po"* when crossing sacred spaces. Despite this strong spiritual framework, the community values empirical evidence, as Tatay Walter expresses. This demonstrates the tension between belief, personal longing, and cultural constraints.

"I grew up here, so I want to see it also. However, they will not allow recovering the bell."

"Loob" Dimension: Understanding the Depths of Human Personality

Covar's concept of "loob" in his "banga" metaphor highlights the internal aspects of Filipino personhood, including thoughts, emotions, and attitudes. "Loob" refers to what lies within, shaping outward actions ("labas"). The narratives surrounding the golden bell at Nabontogan reflect this "loob" dimension, emphasizing emotional and psychological responses that shape the informants' perceptions of their community and its history. The "loob" dimension is vividly reflected in the emotional responses of the informants, spanning joy, curiosity, fear, mystery, pride, and even greed. These emotions intertwine with the narratives, enriching the storytelling experience and deepening its impact. Expressions of joy in the golden bell narratives are tied to community recognition, tourism, and heritage pride, as Nanay Eny described.

"Many curious people visited the place to find out if there was a bell made of gold... now with cottages."

Nanay Nida echoed this pride with her plans to develop the site.

"After the road widening, we will develop the area."

"That is why Catamlangan is historical; Spaniards lived here."

Curiosity remains strong as people continue to wonder about the bell's existence.

"Until now, people want to find out if there is a golden bell."

"One hundred thousand was already a substantial sum. I would have agreed to recover the bell."

"Every time someone attempted to retrieve the bell, the rains began... Perhaps the bell belongs to nature spirits."

The motivations (*loob*) behind recovering the bell vary, including the desire for wealth, as expressed by Tatay Casiong. Others feared political misuse and therefore preferred to leave the bell undisturbed to preserve communal harmony. As Nanay Suring recounted, fear and awe also surface in the narratives, where natural events are interpreted as signs of resistance from unseen beings. These stories convey deep respect for nature and unseen forces, reinforcing Covar's *loob* dimension in spiritual awareness and community belief. Pride also runs through the stories, particularly in those of individuals like Tatay Wining.

"That's why we're famous – because we dried the Nabontogan River."

"Lalim" Dimension: An Exploration of the Interplay Between Human Personality and Spirituality

The narrative of the golden bell at Nabontogan exemplifies Covar's metaphor of the banga, specifically the concept of *lalim* (depth), which includes beliefs about the soul (*kaluluwa*), conscience (*buddhi*), and Filipino spirituality. This spirituality emphasizes harmonious relationships with spirits, rooted in precolonial animism – an understanding that spirits inhabit natural entities such as rivers and mountains. Similar to cosmological themes discussed by Pontemayor, Lagnason, and Dacillo (2020), the bell's story reflects a close relationship between people and nature. Natural disturbances such as thunderstorms and floods accompany attempts to retrieve the bell, phenomena understood as warnings from unseen guardians.

"According to my grandfather, when the river was being dried up, and when the handle of the bell could be seen, suddenly it would rain heavily with thunderstorms, the river would swell, and the people ran away because of fear."

"They said there was a downpour when the river was about to dry, so they could no longer recover the bell. Oh my God!"

These manifestations are understood as *abo-itugot* (it will not allow), referring to the resistance of *tawong lipod* – unseen beings believed to punish disrespect with illness, or *masino*.

"Someone is hindering the recovery of the bell. Perhaps a tawong lipod."

To appease these spirits, rituals like *magasaro* (a form of spirit negotiation) involving mediums and animal sacrifices are practiced.

“Many chickens were offered – white and black chickens as offerings”

“They brought a medium to talk with those that cannot be seen (spirits or elementals). She recited a prayer while offering a slaughtered chicken”

“Will talk with the spirits, asking their favour to permit them to get the golden bell,”

These practices reflect enduring indigenous beliefs and the reverence for the *babaylan*, the traditional female shaman (Imran, 2017). However, these indigenous beliefs now coexist with Catholic expressions. Exclamations such as “Oh my God!” or “*Esus Maryosep*” during supernatural occurrences reflect the integration of Christian motifs into animistic frameworks. Historically, Catamlangan was central to Spanish missionary efforts, as evidenced by the ruins of a 300-year-old church, according to informants, built during the Spanish era. The golden bell, seen as a Catholic artifact, symbolizes the historical fusion of indigenous and colonial belief systems. Despite missionary efforts to eliminate animistic rituals, these continue, now interwoven with Christian practices and vocabulary. The bell’s story, therefore, illustrates the layered and syncretic nature of Filipino spirituality – deep (*lalim*), enduring, and shaped by centuries of cultural amalgamation. It is a living testament to Filipino identity, as Covar likens it to the *banga*, a vessel with overlapping meanings across historical and spiritual realms.

Beyond the River’s Depth: A Legacy of Filipino Values in Catamlangan

The narratives from Catamlangan, Pilar, Sorsogon, reveal how Filipino values – such as *pakikipagkapwa*, *bayanihan*, *environmental respect*, *resilience*, and *religiosity* – are embodied through Prospero Covar’s *Teorya ng Banga*, which frames Filipino personhood through *labas* (outward actions), *loob* (inner self), and *lalim* (deep-rooted spirituality). The concept of *kapwa* is evident in how residents unite to protect the golden bell, contrasting themselves from outsiders labeled *dayuhan* or *ibang taw*, who are portrayed as threats to communal harmony. These outsiders are depicted as selfish and disrespectful of sacred spaces, such as the Nabontogan River, which is home to guardian spirits. In contrast, the inhabitants show selflessness and unity, protecting their shared heritage and reinforcing their spiritual depth (*lalim*). This communal solidarity is also demonstrated in their collaborative projects, such as the construction of the stone church and efforts to dry the river – acts driven by shared faith, trust, and cultural continuity. Their outward expressions (*labas*) derive from their inner values (*loob*) and spiritual consciousness (*lalim*), thereby highlighting the layered nature of their cultural identity.

Beyond communal unity, the narratives highlight other deeply rooted values. Respect for elders, for example, is demonstrated when community members turn to *gurangan* for wisdom, reflecting *loob* through reverence and *labas* through respectful actions. Likewise, the people’s choice to leave the bell undisturbed in the river shows a profound environmental ethic, prioritizing long-term communal well-being over short-term gain. This decision reveals their inner conscience (*loob*) and deep cultural understanding (*lalim*) of their link to nature and future generations. The community’s resilience also emerges as they draw strength and hope from their stories and history, especially in the face of hardships such as the Moro raids. Moreover, their faith fuses pre-colonial beliefs with Catholic practices, demonstrating a unique syncretism within their spiritual identity. However, the narratives also expose negative traits, such as greed and materialism, as evidenced by a secret plot by some barangay officials to recover the bell for profit. This betrayal of shared values illustrates the tension between self-interest and communal ethics, underscoring how *labas*, *loob*, and *lalim* are continually negotiated in the community’s moral life.

Cultural Journey Through Children’s Story of the Legend of the Golden Bell

The narratives of the Golden Bell at Nabontogan River offer rich content for developing various instructional materials, such as storybooks, comics, interactive games, and multimedia tools. Among these, the researcher created a contextualized storybook for children aged 6 to 12. This storybook promotes a love for reading while helping young learners explore Prospero Covar’s *labas*, *loob*, and *lalim* through creative classroom activities. For instance, teachers may guide students in drawing their *banga* metaphors, connecting story elements to values and reflections on community life. This localized approach makes learning more meaningful and engaging, especially in culturally relevant contexts. The storybook serves as both a learning resource and a tool for value formation, enabling children to understand Filipino identity and traditions better through storytelling.

Despite the rise of digital access, there remains a concerning decline in students' proficiency in core subjects such as English, Math, and Science. This learning gap underscores the urgent need to rekindle young learners' interest in reading. In response, the researcher advocates early literacy development through a storybook project to be printed and distributed as part of a school extension program. Copies will be donated to the elementary school library in Catamlangan and integrated into reading programs for struggling junior high school students. The goal is to provide accessible and enjoyable reading materials that enhance literacy and comprehension. Ultimately, the project seeks to instill a lifelong love of reading, strengthen foundational learning, and support academic success through culturally rooted educational resources.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the narratives of the Nabontogan Bell are recognized as historical and cultural legends, shaped by the dual influences of Spanish colonialism and indigenous spiritual traditions. Told through both third-person and first-person accounts, these stories highlight the enduring role of oral tradition in preserving lived experiences. They serve key functions in the community – not only as entertainment and folklore but also as moral instruction, cultural validation, and tools for reinforcing social norms. Through the lens of Prospero Covar's *Teorya ng Banga*, the narratives reflect Filipino personhood by emphasizing *labas* (external expression), *loob* (inner self), and *lalim* (spiritual depth). The stories encapsulate essential Filipino values, including *kapwa*, *bayanihan*, resilience, reverence for elders, environmental stewardship, and strong spiritual faith. These values are transmitted intergenerationally through storytelling, ensuring cultural continuity. Moreover, the legend's potential for educational integration is significant, as it can be adapted into instructional materials that foster literacy and cultural awareness. The findings of this study also contribute to folklore studies in the Philippines by documenting a lesser-known local narrative, thereby expanding scholarly understanding beyond widely recognized epics and legends and deepening insights into the cultural psyche of rural communities. In this way, the Nabontogan Bell narrative preserves heritage and actively contributes to community identity and learning.

Contributions of Authors

Author: conceptualization, data gathering, data analysis, and writing the research paper

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Conflict of Interests

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