

Historicity of City and Town Names in the Province of Cebu

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ABSTRACT

Place names are an important part of social life as they signify the collective identity of the inhabitants. Since place names signify social identity, it is important to determine the historicity of the narrative that trace their etymologies and origins. This study examined the historicity of the existing name narratives of the cities and towns of the province of Cebu contained in the fifty-five volumes comprising the histories of Cebu Province, Cebu Provincial Capitol together with 9 cities and 44 towns. The name narratives are categorized as either *historical*, *most likely historical*, *most likely not historical*, and *not historical*. Since bear certain characteristic features, they are classified into types. The examination and typification of the narratives yielded the following findings: 2 city and 20 town names are considered *historical*; 6 city and 14 town names are deemed *most likely historical*; 6 town names are adjudged *most likely not historical*; whereas, 1 city and 7 town names are regarded *not historical*. Moreover, 5 cities and 9 towns are named after flora and fauna; 2 cities and 5 towns are named after geographical features; 12 towns are named after customs, festivals, and events; 1 city and 4 towns are named after people; and, 1 city and 14 towns are named after Catholic saints, places in Spanish and Latin America. About 79% of cities and towns which are classified as *fourth* and *third types* are found to be *historical* and *most likely historical*. Several pre-colonial place names were replaced with Spanish names which usually consisted of names of Catholic saints or names of places in Spain and Spanish territories.

Key words: *historicity, narrative typification, town/city name, reference, origin*

INTRODUCTION

Names are signifiers of being. A name distinguishes a person, thing, place, or event from another. Tom Savage (2007) makes a case for the importance of names, “*Without a name, a person loses its identity, a community becomes a mere shadow, and there is no way of communicating social, political, economic, religious or philosophical ideas.*” No less than Confucius (551-479 BCE) recognizes the paramount importance of the correct appropriation of names in the public sphere as it is central to political stability and social

harmony. Public officials must act according to the true *name* of their mandate (Son, 2016). True to their names, leaders must be leaders, fathers must be fathers, and teachers must be teachers in the strictest sense of the word. On names, propounds Plutschow who made extensive studies on Japanese name culture, is ensconced the religious, political and social consciousness of the people (1995).

The scientific study of place names, their origin, etymology, meaning, use, and

typology is properly called toponymy (Hough, 2008). Place names are linked not only to the language of the community but also to its geography, culture, and norms. Arguing for the importance of names, Graham and Howard (2008) pointed out that the process of naming a place is an important aspect of the social construction of space. This view is supported by the fact that most place names are descriptive of physical and social characteristics (Hough & Izdebska, 2016). For instance, the land mass of Italy appears like a boot. “*Italus*,” in fact is a Latin word which means “boot.” Another example is the word “*qazaq*” from which Kazakhstan is derived means “*free man, independent, adventurer, wanderer*,” so that the word “Kazakhstan” signifies the “*land of free, and independent wanderers*” (Lee, 2015). These examples illustrate the correspondence between names and the physical or social attributes they signify. Concerning place name narratives, Redmonds (2004) remarked that local historians play an important role in understanding their meanings and their historical value.

In 2014, the Cebu Provincial Government published a fifty-five volume set comprising the histories of Cebu Province, the Cebu Provincial Capitol as well as the 9 cities and 44 towns. Each city or town was assigned a volume which was written by select local historians who worked under close supervision of cluster editors. Contained in these volumes are accounts on how these cities and towns got their names. The historical status of these narratives can be problematic not only to historians but also to people who are interested in history.

Hence, this paper examines the historicity of the place name narratives of the cities and towns of the province of Cebu. The province of Cebu is a relatively long and

narrow stretch of land and islands. Bordered by Negros Island to the southwest and flanked on the southeast and northeast by Bohol and Leyte, respectively, Cebu is the richest province in the country (Mojares, 2014). Cebu City, the provincial capital, lies at the center of the metropolitan area which nestles on the province’s mid-eastern section. The province is politically divided into 7 congressional districts comprising 9 cities, and 44 municipalities.

Methodology: Historicity and Narrative Typification

The study on place names is quite complex and difficult. Even more challenging is the process of producing their historical account. Most place names are derived from local or foreign languages, geographical features, fauna and flora, and cultural or religious festivals or practices some of which may have ceased to exist, lost, or not preserved. This case applies to the existing narratives on the origin of the names of towns and cities of Cebu.

To determine the historicity of these city and town name narratives, a researcher-made framework of analysis is developed. This framework is based on the historiographical concepts and principles found in the works Margolis (2016), Colautti (2008), and Jayapalan (2004). This framework assigns specific degrees of historicity, namely, ***Historical***, ***Most Likely Historical***, ***Most Likely Not Historical***, and ***Not Historical***. An account is considered ***historical*** with respect to its certainty founded on documentary and other related pieces of evidence indicated therein, referred to, or cited by the historian. A narrative is regarded ***most likely historical if***, in the absence of a direct documentary evidence, the author refers to past or existing practices and geographical features that

existed in the past or are still existing in the present. A narrative is deemed *most likely not historical* if it is based myths and legends whose correspondence to facts or historical past are impossible, if not extremely difficult to establish. Lastly, an account is adjudged not historical if a supposed historical event not only obviously defies logic but also contradicts the general and natural occurrence of human affairs through a theatric, incredulous and implausible depiction of a supposed historical event.

Furthermore, the place name narratives are typified, that is, classified according to shared typical features so that they are marked as *First*, *Second*, *Third*, or *Fourth* type. The *first type narrative* typically traces the origin of the city and town names to the linguistic misunderstanding between the Spanish colonizers who are depicted to have no knowledge of the Cebuano Visayan language and the natives who are characterized as totally clueless about the Spanish language. The *second type narrative* usually involves some raw or superficially woven myths and legends. The *third type narrative* generally points to certain geographical features, fauna and flora, customs, festivals and unusual events. The *fourth type narrative* cites existing documentary and other verifiable empirical pieces of evidence.

Within this framework, the narratives' historicity status and their particular types can be matched such that the *fourth type narratives* are *historical*; the *third type narratives* are *most likely historical*; the *second type narratives* are *most likely not historical*; and the *first type narrative* are *not historical*. The principle and concept of historicity and typification serve as the unified criterion

for examining the place name narratives of the towns and cities of the province of Cebu. Given that the selection and the formulation of the framework involves some measure of arbitrariness, this paper does not claim definitiveness of the result. It is to be noted however, that this aspect of arbitrariness does not in any way render the framework and the resulting analysis impaired in terms of objectivity and validity. Non-definitiveness simply means that other framework may be developed to produce new understanding and analysis of the same narratives. Just like any work of history, toponymy and related endeavors, the admission of arbitrariness and non-definitiveness is no more than an intellectual modesty.

Historicity and Typification

Due to the large number of towns and cities, it is impractical to treat each of the place name narratives at full length. However, to achieve the present objective, certain narratives which typify each of the four aforementioned types and are judged according to their degree of historicity are selected for exposition to illustrate how the framework of analysis is done. Nevertheless, all place name narratives of 9 cities and 44 towns have been subjected to historicity analysis and typification. For spatial considerations, towns are grouped together according to their generic locations, south and north, and presented in separated tables. The cities are also presented separately. For all tables, the second column indicates the current names of towns or cities; the third column briefly states the name reference and/or origin; and the third column indicates the status of historicity.

The First Type: Not Historical

The first type narratives are typically a product of a Spanish-native

linguistic misunderstanding. These accounts are characterized by a common scenario featuring a group of Spaniards who would visit a locality and ask the bewildered natives “What is the name of this place?” The natives who are usually portrayed as confused characters would mistake the foreigners’ question for an inquiry on what they are doing or the name of some nearby objects. One of the best examples of this type of narrative is the story about how the town of Oslob got its name (Benitez, 2014). Accordingly, a group of Spaniards chanced upon a native couple who was eating boiled bananas under a tree on the shore. The natives dipped (*tuslob*) their bananas in a bowl filled with salt. The curious Spaniards asked them “What is the name of this place?” Mistaking the Spaniards’ query for an inquiry on what they were currently doing, the couple answered, “*Tuslob!*” Similarly, the Spaniards mistook the answer for the name of the place and

began referring to the town as “*Tuslob*,” which, in the passage of time became “Oslob.” According to Kennedy (2008), these fabled interactions between colonizers or foreigners and natives are common.

The narrative rests on some erroneous assumptions. Firstly, it is assumed that the Spaniards and the natives believed they understand each other. Secondly, it is assumed that the Spaniards never bothered to verify what they had heard while the natives never protested against the new name of their place compliment of the foreigners whose language they never understood. Lastly, the narrative disregards the fact that the place always had name. The account is not only bizarre but it also defies logic and the usual order of events. Hence, it is adjudged *not historical*. Aside from Oslob, the placename narratives of the towns of Carmen, Aloguinsan, Argao, Ronda, and Sibonga and the city of Danao are a result of this common *epic* linguistic misunderstanding.

Table 1. Cities of Cebu

Names	Reference / Origin	Historicity Status
1 Bogo City	After “Bogo” tree (<i>Garuga floribunda</i>)	Most likely historical
2 Carcar City	From “ <i>kabkaban</i> ” or “ <i>kaban-kaban</i> ” a hardy parasitic fern (<i>Drynaria quercifolia linn</i>) (Noel, 2014)	Most likely historical
3 Cebu City	“ <i>Sugbo</i> ,” “ <i>Zubu</i> ,” “ <i>Subuth</i> ,” “ <i>Cubu</i> ,” (to walk in the water) (Mojares, 2014)	Most likely historical
4 City of Naga	From “Narra” tree (<i>Pterocarpus indicus</i>) (Mongaya, 2014)	Most likely historical
5 Danao City	From “ <i>danaw</i> ” or “ <i>danawan</i> ” a muddy pond (http://danaocity.gov.ph September 12, 2017).	Not historical
6 Lapu-Lapu City	From “ <i>Cilapula</i> ” or <i>Lupalupa</i> (Lapulapu) hero of Mactan (Cuizon, 2014)	Historical
7 Mandaue City	From “ <i>mantawi</i> ” (lake), “ <i>Mangdawi</i> (name of fisherman), or <i>mantawi</i> (vine) (Bagares, 2014).	Most likely historical
8 Talisay City	From “ <i>magtalisay</i> ” (<i>Terminalia catappa</i>) (Patalingjug, 2014)	Most likely historical
9 Toledo City	After Toledo, Spain (Palakar, 2014)	Historical

The Second Type: Most Likely Not Historical

This type of narrative feeds on the mythical and magical. Myths and legends may have some historical value, yet the difficulty of ascertaining their truth or falsity

makes it impossible to establish their historicity (Martin, 2009). However, in cases where myths and legends surround historical figures, historicity may be carefully and sparingly inferred. Unfortunately, this is hardly the case for the three towns.

The place name narratives involving the towns of Pilar, San Remigio, and Dumanjug fall on this category. The bravery of Remigio Multon, the alleged warrior who led the local residents against Moro raiders (Cabellon, 2014), could not plausibly be considered “saintly” to entitle him the accolade “San Remigio.” Such would have readily gained the condemnation of the Spanish friars. Pilar, the wife of the town’s first captain (Borlasa, 2014), may have been a historical figure but the naming of the town after her for her supposed exemplary kindness and graciousness is very unlikely. Besides, there had already been places similarly named. The town could have been named after “*Nuestra Señora del Pilar*” (Our Lady of Peace). The historical status of

Duman or Roman, from whom Dumanjug got its name (Tan, 2014), is as doubtful as the tale about him. The circumstances surrounding these individuals would hardly stand historical scrutiny. These narratives are thus considered *most likely not historical*.

Admittedly, there is no universal logic and law that dictate the emergence and evolution of place names. Some very superficial event, individual, or thing can be randomly used to signify the name of a place. Nonetheless, it is but plausible to label this type of narrative *most likely not historical*. Place names that trace their origins to some mythical accounts are prevalent in ancient Greece and Rome (Piccardi & Masse, 2007).

Table 2. Northern Towns of Cebu

	Names	Reference / Origin	Historicity Status
1	Asturias	After Asturias, Spain (Manuel, 2014)	Historical
2	Balamban	From “ <i>balang-balang</i> ” (natives’ practice of linking arms to carry the Spaniards across the river) (Arnoco, 2014)	Most likely historical
3	Bantayan	Place for watching associated with Moro raids (Roperos, 2014)	Historical
4	Borbon	After “Bourbon dynasty” of Spain (Sollano, 2014)	Historical
5	Carmen	After a necklace of the “ <i>Birhen sa Carmen</i> ” (Lariosa, 2014)	Not historical
6	Catmon	Catmon tree (<i>Dilleniaceae philippinensis</i>) (Manticajon, 2014)	Most likely historical
7	Compostela	After Compostela, Spain (Malinao, 2014)	Historical
8	Consolacion	After the Spanish governor’s daughter Consolacion (Lavilles, 1965)	Historical
9	Cordova	After City of Cordoba, Spain (Sitoy, 2014)	Historical
10	Daanbantayan	Old watching place associated with Moro raids (Isles, 2014)	Historical
11	Liloan	From “ <i>lilo</i> ” (whirlpool)	Historical
12	Madridejos	After Madridejos, Spain (Suan, 2014)	Historical
13	Medellin	After Medellin, a city in Columbia (Montesclaros, 2014)	Historical
14	Pilar	After Pilar, kind and gracious wife of the town’s second chieftain, Martin Borinaga (Borlasa, 2014)	Most likely historical
15	Poro	From “puro” or “pulo” (island) (Reyes, 2014)	Historical
16	San Francisco	After San Francisco de Asis or St. Francis of Assisi (Murcia, 2014)	Historical
17	San Remegio	From “Remigio Multon” who led the town defense against Moro pirates (Cabellon, 2014)	Most likely not historical
18	Santa Fe	Spanish for holy faith (Yap, 2014)	Historical
19	Sogod	“ <i>Panagsogod</i> festival” in honor of St. James, the Apostle (Montebon, 2014)	Most likely historical
20	Tabogon	From “ <i>tabog-tabogon</i> ” (driven away by Moro raiders or by <i>revolucionarios</i> driven away by Spanish <i>cazadores</i>) (Rubia, 2014)	Most likely historical
21	Tabuelan	Corruption of “ <i>Tabukan</i> ,” “ <i>sa tabok lang</i> ,” “ <i>sa taboy lang</i> ” (across the river) (Cardones, 2014)	Most likely historical
22	Tuburan	Place of springs; from “ <i>tubod</i> ” (springs) (Echica, 2014)	Historical
23	Tudela	After Tudela, Spain (Wenceslao, 2014)	Historical

The Third Type: Most Likely Historical

Places named after geographical features including existing or formerly prominent or prevalent fauna and flora are common not only in the Philippines but all over the world as well (Richardson & Galloway, 2011). Across the country, some provinces are named after land and water forms. Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte provinces are named after Lanao Lake, a water feature. It is ironic that “lanao” or “lanaw” already means “lake” thus Lanao Lake is “Lake” Lake, a redundancy that is not obvious to many. Bukidnon which means “highlander” is a landlocked province that got its name after a landform.

Most of the cities and towns of Cebu are named after land and water features and plants that used to be or are still prevalent or prominent in the locality. Cities and towns named after certain *flora* include Bogo City (tree), Carcar City (fern), Naga (tree), Mandaue City (vine), Talisay City (tree), Catmon (tree), Argao (plant), Badian (plant),

Barili (grass), Dalaguete (tree), Pinamungajan and Sibunga (fruit). Those named after water features are the city of Cebu (water/sea), and the towns of Liloan (whirlpool), Tuburan (springs), and Moalboal (Bubbling spring). The towns of Poro (island) and Boljoon (subsided land) got their names from landforms. Some towns are named after native customs or festivals such as Balamban (river crossing), Bantayan and Daanbantayan (watching place), Tabogon (driven away), Sogod and Samboan (festival), Alegria (merriment), Balamban (river crossing), and Ginatilan (catered). With the exceptions of Pinamungajan and Sibunga whose narratives are not historical and therefore fall under the first type, the place name narratives of the above-mentioned towns and cities are considered *most likely historical*. Sarmah (2017) who conducted toponymic studies explained that local people tend to use existing geographical features as well as flora and fauna to designate particular place names.

Table 3. Southern Towns of Cebu

	Names	Reference / Origin	Historicity
1	Alcantara	After Alcantara, Spain (Llenos, 2014)	Historical
2	Alcoy	After town of Alcoy in Alicanto, Spain (Damayo, 2014)	Historical
3	Alegria	<i>Alegria!</i> (merriment) (Tabada & Tabada, 2014)	Most likely historical
4	Aloguinsan	From “ <i>olokinsan</i> ,” “ <i>olo</i> ” (head) “ <i>kinsan</i> ” (fish) (Tsaluna, 2014)	Not historical
5	Argao	From “Sali-argaw” or “Sali-abgaw” (<i>Premma adorata</i> and <i>Premma vestita</i>) (Sales & Gerschwiler, 2014)	Not historical
6	Badian	From “ <i>badyang</i> ” plant (Tabada, 2014)	Most likely historical
7	Barili	From “ <i>balili</i> ” a kind of grass (Maghanoy & Moreño, 2014)	Not historical
	Boljo-on	From “ <i>nabulho</i> ” (subsided land) or “ <i>bolho</i> ” (water surge) (Rigor, 2014)	Most likely historical
8			
9	Dalaguete	From “ <i>dalakit</i> ” (<i>Ficus benjamin</i> linn.) or baleta tree (Osorio, 2014)	Most likely historical
10	Dumanjug	From “ <i>Ka Doman Dahunog</i> ” (loud shout of Doman) or “ <i>Duman nahulog</i> ” (Duman fell) (Tan, 2014)	Most likely not historical
11	Ginatilan	From “ <i>hinatdan</i> ” (being catered) (Jumao-as, 2014)	Most likely historical
12	Malabuyoc	From Spanish “ <i>mala</i> ” (bad) and “ <i>buyoc</i> ” (tree branch laden with many fruits (Labana, 2014)	Most likely not historical
13	Minglanilla	After Minglanilla, Valencia Spain (Mongaya, 2014)	Historical
14	Moalboal	From “ <i>mual</i> ” (spring or well) and “ <i>bual</i> ” (bubbling up like aerated water) (Gabales, 2014)	Most likely historical
15	Oslob	From “ <i>uslob</i> ” (to dip boiled bananas in a bowl of salt) (Benitez, 2014)	Not historical
16	Pinamungajan	From “ <i>pamuhuan</i> ” (worker’s share in farm harvest) or “ <i>bunga</i> ” (betel fruit) (Beltran, 2014)	Most likely historical
17	Ronda	“ <i>Nahadlok sa ronda</i> ,” Spanish for “raid” (Tiempo, 2014)	Not historical
18	Samboan	From “ <i>Sinamboang Festival</i> ” a ritual dance (Zablan, 2014)	Most likely historical
19	San Fernando	After San Fernando or St. Ferdinand (Lariosa, 2014)	Historical
20	Santander	After Santander, Cantabria, Spain (Amper, 2014)	Historical
		From “ <i>si</i> ” Spanish for “yes” and “ <i>bunga</i> ”	Not historical
21	Sibonga	(betel palm fruit) (Ponce, 2014)	

The Fourth Type: Historical

Given the verifiability of their historical status by virtue of existing pieces of documentary and other related empirical evidence, place name narratives of the following towns and cities are considered historical. Most of these towns and cities are named after historical figures, saints, Spanish phrases, as well as places in Spain and in other Spanish territories. These include the towns and cities of Lapu-Lapu, Toledo, Asturias, Borbon, Compostela, Consolacion, Cordova, Madridejos, Medellin, San Francisco, Santa Fe, Tudela, Alcantara, Alcoy, Minglanilla, San Fernando, and Santander. Accounts of these places are deemed *historical*.

It is a common practice among Spanish colonizers in the Philippines and in

Latin America to alter the names of places given by the native inhabitants (Castillo & Schweitzer, 2008). It comes as no surprise that former colonies around the world bear foreign place names. American and other western colonizers imposed the same measures in their colonies.

Table 4. Historicity Status of Cities and Towns

Historicity & Narrative Typification	Cities n=9	Towns n= 44	TOTAL
Historical / Fourth Type	2 (22.2%)	20 (45.4%)	22
Most likely historical / Third Type	6 (66.7%)	14 (31.8%)	20
Most likely not historical / Second Type	0	3 (6.8%)	3
Not historical / First Type	1 (11.1%)	7 (15.9%)	8
TOTAL	9	44	53

As shown in Table 4, there are 22 out of 44 town names and 2 out of 9 city names that are *historical* while there are 14 and 6 town and city names, respectively, that are

considered *most likely historical*. Only 1 city name and 7 town names are considered *not historical*. Whereas no city name is deemed *most likely historical*, there are 3 town names counted in the same category. Generally, most city and town names are *historical* and *most likely historical*. This shows is that most city and town names and the manner by which these names have been appropriated and later evolved are open to historical and critical reflection. Further, the historical status of the narratives support the cultural and social significance of these places so that the members of the community find historical and factual basis behind the stories about how their towns and cities got their names.

Table 5. City and Town Names according to Origin

Narrative Typification	Cities n=9	Towns n=44	TOTAL
First Type	5 (55.6%)	9 (20.5%)	14
Land and Water Forms	2 (22.2%)	5 (11.4%)	7
Customs, Festivals, Events	0	12 (27.3%)	12
People	1 (11.1%)	4 (9.1%)	5
Saints, Places in Spain and Latin America	1 (11.1%)	14 (31.8%)	15
TOTAL	9	44	53

The table shows that 1 city and 14 towns are named after saints and places in Spain and Latin America. This reveals a deliberate effort on the part of the Spanish to replace existing native names with the ones they preferred. This is both a mark of Christianization, on the one hand and colonization on the other hand. Most of the towns and cities are named after geographical features, fauna, flora as well as customs, festivals, and events. This means that several town and cities names are reflective of the local social and natural identities and features. These findings are consistent with toponymic literature (Room, 2003; Graham, 2005).

CONCLUSION

A good number of place name narratives of the towns and cities of Cebu are reflective of the historical, natural, social, and

cultural attributes of the place and the people the live therein. It is by virtue of the signifying power of place names that people take the associative reference of either honor and pride, or their opposite. Towns and cities whose place name narratives are considered historical or most likely historical usually enjoy pride, honor, and persuasion. Towns and cities whose place name accounts are deemed not historical or most likely not historical face a greater challenge of probing into their past and present if only to craft a believable and realistic story which the people can proudly and confidently narrate.

Moreover, it is remarkable that some old place names that refer to existing geographical features, flora or cultural practices that have been preserved. It is somehow unfortunate that many of the old native place names that had been there even before there were towns and cities are irrecoverably gone. Most of the old native place names had disappeared or replaced with foreign names. While some of these names pertain to holy places or saints, they also bear the imprint of a long history of Spanish colonization. Narratives that are too good to be historical, -those sorts of shams that strain the mind- are salient reminders that in the continuing history of this nation there are moments of absurdity or ignorance wrought by none other than the Filipinos themselves or in connivance with foreign entities. Historicity aside, the narratives reveal that there is more to a placeman that we can ever imagine.

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