

***Historical Notes on Japanese Bunkers in
General Santos City, Philippines***

Allan Castino, Mindanao State University-General Santos City, The Philippines
Rebino Batoto, Mindanao State University-General Santos City, The Philippines

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This is a qualitative study employing historical-descriptive methods of research. Key informant interview, ocular investigation, and documentary analysis were used to gather pertinent data. Significantly, this paper is an attempt to revisit the socio-cultural and economic situations in General Santos City, southern Philippines, during the Japanese occupation only by interpreting stories and narratives revolving around the construction of the Japanese bunkers.

This study found out that there was a viable relationship between the Japanese and the Gensanon during the occupation period. Japanese army's de facto authority directed local manpower in the area to build up war defenses especially bunkers in anticipation of American troops' landing in southern Philippines. However, the Japanese contact with the Gensanon created multifaceted socio-economic, intellectual and cultural interactions thereby depicting a different picture of war. Oral accounts tell that Gensanon bunker-workers were compensated in a contractual basis. Likewise, their local materials utilized to supplement imported materials for bunker construction were purchased by the Japanese at certain value. During construction activities, the Gensanon learned from the Japanese the value of hard work and dedication to produce quality crafts. They were also exposed to Japanese sophisticated architectural designs and engineering methods to produce durable structures especially bunkers. The Japanese, on the other hand, familiarized local materials and indigenous methods integrated into their own process of bunker construction. Eventually, both groups had learned, in some ways or another, each other's languages and cultural orientations especially the cuisines they used to eat and share during recess at work.

Keywords: Gensanon, Japanese occupation, General Santos City, bunker, cultural interaction

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Slapping the American face into a challenge of war, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941 (American time). Roaring out the sky with their torpedo planes and dive bombers, the Japanese catastrophic “divine wind” crippled much of the United States’ Pacific fleet and air force, leaving five warships and three cruisers beneath the horribly stirred waters. Besides, three more ships were floating though in wreckage. Moreover, almost 200 American planes, standing in neat rows on the airfield, were smashed violently from air attacks (Perry et.al., 1989). At the end of this spectacle, 2,403 lives perished, while 1,178 were injured (Zaide and Zaide, 2002). It was Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku who, head of the Japanese navy, orchestrated this “day of infamy” (Davidson et.al., 1990).

Rubbing more salts to the wounds of American pride, the Japanese were dropping myriad bombs from the sky to scar further American sovereignty on its overseas territories. Thus the Philippines, a strategic American possession in the Pacific, was overtaken by the Japanese.

Right after the victorious attack at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Kamikaze turned their wings toward the Philippines. On December 8, 1941 (Philippine time), dissecting American resistance into incapacity, the Japanese were raiding from above those military installations from south to north of the country. Before capitulating the capital city of Manila, Davao City in Mindanao region was isolated into chaos, being the first to be stormed with Japanese planes from two aircraft carriers.

On December 20, 1941, the invasion force composed of 5,000 assault troops arrived in Davao. The newly-formed Koronadal Valley Settlement in 1939 (particularly Gen. Santos City today) was just 141 kilometers away downward from Davao, making it more vulnerable to the Japanese penetration. Meanwhile, the Japanese forces arrived at what is now Gen. Santos City (Gensan) via overland from Cotabato City on May 14, 1942 with two Japanese warplanes bombed for two days, and a Japanese warship pounded the shores of Dadiangas (Gensan’s center today) with heavy shellings. Later on, more Japanese troops arrived from Davao (Campado, 1985).

Although the United States Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE, a combined American and Filipino forces) officially surrendered on April 9, 1942, sporadic resistance continued to frustrate Japanese forces, until on May 6, 1942 when Gen. Sharp issued an order for the surrender of all USAFFE units in Mindanao under his command (Campado, 1996).

Realizing this situation at its most precarious circumstances, Gen. Paulino Santos Sr., head of the Koronandal Valley Settlement, decided to deal with the Japanese peacefully. This defining moment by Gen. Santos laid down the foundation of collaboration of the entire settlement with the Japanese. Consequently, the Japanese took over the administration of the settlement and re-appointed Gen. Santos as the manager under tight control and close guard (Campado, 1985).

Despite the onset of the Japanese occupation, cooperation extended by the officials and residents of the settlement led to the cordial relationship between them and the

Japanese forces. Adding to that, there was an absence of active guerrilla unit in the area which may disrupt the amiable interactions.

In January 1944, a 1,200 – hectare airbase was laid down by the Japanese in Buayan, the easternmost part of General Santos City. It functioned as landing base of Japanese warplanes and training ground for their combat pilots. To make it realized, the Japanese summoned the people to work in the construction of the airbase. It was compulsory to send around 500 laborers six days a week continuously until September of the same year when the base was heavily bombed by the American planes (Campado, 1985).

Shortly before the landing in Leyte on October 20, 1944 by Gen. Douglas MacArthur, hastily the Japanese ordered the construction and installation of defense structures, primarily the bunkers. These bunkers strategically scattered to areas wherein the Japanese perceived them to be “decisive points of defense” towards the much anticipated American liberating operations. They largely believed that the eventual American landing to re-take the Philippines would be at the Sarangani Bay in which the Koronadal Valley Settlement was much accessible to (Ramirez Jr., 2010).

The location of these bunkers was usually where there was water supply nearby. The Japanese utilized concrete to a varying degree in the construction of various types of strongpoints. In Saipan, for example, four steel-reinforced concrete defense installations, larger and stronger than any previously encountered, constituted important elements in the defense of the vital Aslito airfield. Flame throwers and light artillery were used to no avail against these structures (MIS-US, 1945)

The Japanese classify concrete defense installations into four categories on the basis of their resistance to shell and bomb hits, as follow: 1) Class A structures have concrete walls with a minimum thickness of 2 feet, 7 and three-fourth inches; 2) Class B structures have walls 19.7 inches thick; 3) Class C structures with walls 11.8 inches thick; and 4) Class D structures with 3.1 inches thick (MIS-US, 1945)

There were Japanese documents set forth a number of principles which govern the erection of concrete defensive structures. For instance, 18.75 pounds of cement are used to every cubic foot of concrete. They proportioned raw materials such as combined gravel and crushed stones when mixed with the cement into one cement: two sand: four gravel/crushed stones. If coral, gravel and sand are used the proportions are 1 cement: 3 coral: 3 gravel: 5 sand (Military Intelligence Service War Department, 1945).



Figure 1. A bunker in Buayan, General Santos City (CEMCDO, 2016)

As of this writing, the local government of General Santos City through its City Economic Management and Cooperative Development Office (CEMCDO) has identified 44 Japanese bunkers scattered in the city's eight barangays (districts) as follow: Buayan, Baluan, Bula, Conel, Labangal, Ligaya, Mabuhay and San Isidro (CEMCDO, 2016).

At the early stage of construction, relationship between the Japanese and the Gensanon (locals of Gen. Santos City) was still viable. This contact between them created multifaceted socio-economic, intellectual and cultural interactions, thereby depicting a different picture of war.

However, this euphoria did not last long.

With the recurrent American bombings of strategic areas, there was a movement of large number of Japanese troops from Davao to Koronadal Valley via Sarangani Bay. This caused hardship to the Gensanon. The war hysteria reached the climax in May 1945 when they began looting the people of their bull carts and work animals, clothing, and especially food supplies. Thus, gone were the days of give-and-take relationship (Campado, 1996).

Koronadal Valley was the last place in the country to be liberated from the Japanese forces. Heavy fighting erupted for several days with the guerrillas joining the American forces. Overpowered and outnumbered, the Japanese suffered heavy losses and retreated to the hills. They established their last stand at the Klaja-Conel hills. The end finally came on August 11, 1945. A number of Japanese surrendered and were sent to Davao as prisoners of war (Ramirez Jr., 2010).

Objectives Of The Study

This paper attempts to revisit the socio-cultural and economic situations of the Gensanon during the Japanese occupation of Mindanao only by interpreting stories and narratives revolving around the construction of the Japanese bunkers. Considering this earlier period of bunker constructions under moments of peace, this study discusses the socio-economic, intellectual and cultural interactions, between Gensanon and the Japanese soldiers, which were considered cordial and viable, based on the oral testimonies and recollections of the eyewitnesses.

This study does not disregard the brutalities or abuses the Japanese forces committed over the inhabitants in the region during the World War II. Significantly, it tries to interpret events that occurred during the construction of the Japanese bunkers in General Santos City areas especially at times considered by the informants peaceful.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study employing historical-descriptive methods of research. Using purposive sampling, the researchers selected the residents in the bunker areas who are eighty (80) years old and up as potential informants to generate pertinent data. They were the eyewitnesses of events during the Japanese occupation in Gensan, southern Mindanao, the Philippines. During the bunker constructions in late 1943 to early 1944, the youngest among the informants would be seven or eight years old by then. They have the firsthand experiences of the interactions between the Gensanon and the Japanese soldiers at the construction of the Japanese bunkers.

The researchers frequented the bunker sites and informants' residences. Following the basic procedures of conducting research, they forwarded a letter at the respective offices of the barangay captains and the chairmen of tourism committee to conduct field study. Having granted the permission to enter the bunker sites, the researchers were escorted by the barangay tourism staff especially during the conduct of ocular investigations and preliminary interviews with the residents around.

Establishing local contacts at subsequent visits, the researchers searched the individual residences of the informants and conducted personal interviews. Through snowball sampling, the recommendations of interviewed informants helped the researchers to locate the residences of other potential informants. Some of the children of those eyewitnesses during Japanese occupation who died already were also interviewed. Discussions in this paper greatly relied on oral historiography.

The researchers also employed documentary analysis of government records such as reports of the City Economic Management and Cooperative Development Office (CEMCO), General Santos City Tourism Council, and the City Planning and Development Office. Books, magazines, journals, and theses from Mindanao State University libraries were also utilized to supplement data.

Stories And Narratives On The Japanese Bunkers

A lot of experiences during Japanese occupation have been recalled by our informants during the interview sessions. Some of them would want their experiences and testimonies be personal. Hence, in order to get rid of unintentional direct disclosure of their identity, the researchers opt to use the term "informant/s" while retelling their stories and narratives which are significant of value and historical substance in contributing scholarly data on the socio-economic and cultural interactions between the local workers and the Japanese soldiers during the construction of the bunkers in General Santos City. Nevertheless, their names have been enlisted on the reference section.

The bunker-workers and the Japanese army needed food. Significant supplier of grains, meat, and especially rice, a staple food especially in the Philippines, were the Japanese companies, such as the Ohta Corporation, which were already established in Mindanao before the onset of war. One respondent told that she and her family were given rice after unchaffing bulk of newly harvested grains of rice for the bunker workers.

One respondent told us that he both worked on the construction of Buayan Airport and the bunkers and revealed that he was compensated with Japanese money on contractual basis. The printing hub of Japanese currency notes was at Buayan Airport itself. He and his co-workers travelled via trucks from the airport to other bunker areas. His relationships with the Japanese employers were in cordial manner

Barter system was also common during economic interactions between the Japanese and the Gensanon (locals). One bunker-worker told us that indigenous materials were used during the construction of the bunkers. Wood, limestones, sand and corals were utilized to reinforce durability on the bunkers. Iron bars, cement, and other reinforced concrete materials were transported via ships from Japan and unloaded at Buayan and Makar seaports.

One experience revealed that Japanese were acquainted with indigenous cuisines. A bunker-worker was catching shrimps at the Buayan river, and he was noticed by a Japanese officer. He was asked to cook the shrimps and the officer tasted the indigenous cuisine. Later, he became the cook for the Japanese barracks. The specialty he cooked were shrimps with coconut milk and spices (*Ginataang hipon*); chicken soup with papaya seasoned with chili leaves and green chili (*tinolang manok*).



Figure 2. *Ginataang hipon*
(www.googleimages.com)

There was a story when the Gensanon and Japanese soldiers socialized during cockfighting and other amusement game after work. They even bet using Japanese money. They enjoyed drinking alcoholic beverages sometime after work with the local wine from fermented coconut sap called “tuba.”



Figure 3. *Tinolang manok*
(www.googleimages.com)



Figure 4. The researchers during their fieldwork in one of the bunkers in Conel, General Santos City (Photo taken on January 28, 2017)

The bunkers were mounted on limestone terrains with surfacing portions of arch framework. The thick walls (2-4 meters) engineered to endure shellings and airstrikes. The bunkers are made of iron bars and reinforced concrete. Houses beside the bunker today also mounted foundation on the rolling limestone terrains. They used reinforced log and concrete.

Conclusion

There was a viable relationship between the Gensanon and the Japanese during the occupation period. The Japanese contact with the Gensanon created multifaceted socio-cultural and intellectual interactions thereby depicting a different picture of war. The Japanese who arrived at Gensan were respectful, friendly and discipline people. However, when Americans were about to liberate the Philippines, “loyalty check” and suspicions led to brutalities and abuses.

Recommendation

1. We hope to gather more data from Japanese archives.
2. We encourage the Japanese scholars to collaborate with the Gensan scholars for an extensive and comparative research undertaking about the impact of the World War II bunkers on the lives of the locals and the Japanese soldiers.
3. Conduct continuing research on all aspects of Japanese-Filipino interactions during the war.

References

- Campado, A. (1985). "General Santos City: The War Years." *Social Science Journal* Vol. 1 No.2. Mindanao State University, General Santos City.
- Campado, A. (1996). "General Santos City in Southern Mindanao, 1939 – 1990: From Frontier to a Booming City in the South." University of the Philippines. Dissertation.
- CEMCDO (2016). "Inventory of Japanese Bunkers in General Santos City." Government Records.
- Davidson, J. et.al. (1990). *Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic*. New York: McGraw – Hill Publishing Company
- MIS – US (1945). *Japanese Defense Against Amphibious Operations Special Series no. 29*. Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office.
- Perry, M. et.al. (1989). *A History of the World*. _____ : Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Ramirez, T. (2010). *Ang Timog: The Southern Heritage Part 1*. General Santos City: RFM Printing Corporation.
- Zaide, G. and Zaide, S. (2002). *World History 5th ed*. Quezon City: All-Nations Publishing Co.,Inc.

Interviewees

- Campado, Andrea. 69 years old. Retired professor. Barangay Fatima, General Santos City. January 30, 2017.
- Casiple, Karen Mae. 57 years old. University professor. Barangay Fatima, General Santos City. March 10, 2017.
- Cuaton, Conchita. 84 years old. Housewife. Barangay Tambler, General Santos City. March 4, 2017.
- Delambaca, Ricardo. 54 years old. University faculty. Barangay Poblacion, Polomolok Municipality. February 13, 2017.
- Gabutan, Honorio. 89 years old. Former USAFFE soldier. Barangay Conel, General Santos City. January 28, 2017.
- Olano, Paquito. 80 years old. Retired employee. Barangay Apopong, General Santos City. March 4, 2017.
- Pedregosa, Corazon. 88 years old. Farmer. Barangay Fatima, General Santos City. February 13, 2017.

Porcelin, Alfredo. 84 years old. Farmer. Barangay Fatima, General Santos City.
February 13, 2017

Racoma, Jose. 82 years old. Farmer. Barangay Conel, General Santos City. February
13, 2017

Ramirez, Teodulo Jr. 60 years old. Local historian. Barangay Lagao, General Santos
City. March 4, 2017.

Contact email: allanbcastino@gmail.com
reb7th.estoria@gmail.com